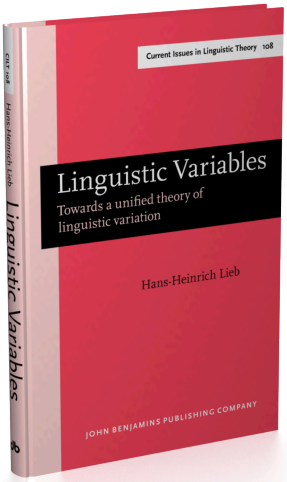
On this book

https://doi.org/10.1075/cilt.108.010nt



Pages v–viii of
Linguistic Variables: Towards a unified theory of linguistic variation
Hans-Heinrich Lieb
[Current Issues in Linguistic Theory, 108]
1993. xiv, 261 pp.

On This Book

The present book is an essay in the original sense: an attempt. It is an attempt at conceptualization — is it possible to develop a conceptual structure, preferably a theory, that can do justice to the more important approaches currently followed or proposed in the study of linguistic variation?

Variation research offers a confusing picture. There are a number of competing approaches distributed over different fields of linguistics, in particular, historical linguistics, dialectology, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, language typology, and contrastive linguistics. It is hard to see what if anything is shared by, say, Chomsky's notion of parameter (Chomsky 1981), implicational scale analysis (see Dittmar and Schlobinski 1988), Klein's variety grammars (Klein 1988), and Coseriu's conception of dialects and styles (Coseriu 1988/1981).

Variation research is heterogeneous. Comparing its different orientations requires a conceptual framework that is both sufficiently general and non-trivial. After a lot of experimentation I finally came up with a frame of reference that centers around the concept of a *linguistic variable*, in a sense that crucially differs from Labov's intuitive notion. Major approaches to linguistic variation can be distinguished by the types of linguistic variables emphasized by each.

Such a distinction is not yet a *theory*. Struggling for conceptual clarity, I found myself more and more strongly pushed towards taking the notion of theory seriously: nothing much could be achieved without formally defining key terms, without distinguishing definitions from assumptions and both from their consequences. In fact, it would be easy to disengage from the present essay a theory — however incomplete — that is axiomatized. This is so not because I treasure precision and clarity, which I do; rather, there was no other way to

achieve my primary aim, adequate conceptualization in the area of linguistic variation.

I consider such conceptualization as a matter of urgency. By a current estimate, "the coming century will see either the death or the doom of 90% of mankind's languages" (Krauss 1992:7). Hopefully, this estimate will prove too pessimistic; even so a huge descriptive effort will be required of the community of linguists. There is, however, a real danger that descriptions of different languages may continue to turn out non-comparable: so far there is no clear answer to the question *in terms of what* languages — or language varieties, for that matter — may differ; notions like 'parameter' await explication. The situation is harmful to the descriptive attempt itself: the field linguist can only grope for relevance in his descriptions if there is no clear account of linguistic variation per se. My second aim in writing this essay has therefore been a practical one, contribute, as a theorist, to the descriptive attempt that is demanded of linguistics. Adopting the proposed theory of linguistic variation should make it easier to develop a format for linguistic descriptions that are variation-sensitive, a point to be taken up in the last two chapters of this essay.

From the very beginning I had a third aim in mind: simply, orientation. Indeed, the present essay originated from an attempt to write a handbook article on "Syntax and Language Varieties" (now Lieb forthc. b, largely identical to Secs 1 to 3, below). A lot of spadework for such an article had been done in three recent handbooks (Besch et al. (eds) 1982/1983; Besch et al. (eds) 1984/1985; Ammon et al. (eds) 1987/1988). The third, in particular, contains excellent overviews of the literature on most variation aspects; I continue to draw on it and its predecessors in this essay. Still, I found it impossible to write the article as planned since there was no obvious coherence to the field of variation research in general, and research on syntactic variation in particular. In deciding on an essay devoted entirely to theory I did, however, keep an emphasis on informativeness: my essay is meant to provide orientation by characterizing major approaches and showing their interrelations.

Equal coverage of all forms of variation research has not been attempted. In particular, short shrift has been given to creole and pidgin studies (for a recent overview, see Holm 1988/1989) and to research

on variation and language acquisition. Both language acquisition and creoles and pidgins will be briefly considered, though, to make sure that the proposed theory can account for them.

There are two other features that can be traced back to the essay's origins: it pays special attention to syntax, and it emphasizes language-internal variation. These limitations are no matter of principle; the theory of language varieties to be outlined is conceived as part of a larger theory that also covers variation *among* languages, and the emphasis on syntax is largely a matter of exemplification. Most of the theoretical tools provided in this essay apply to interlanguage as well as language-internal variation, and an attempt to cover language typology is made in the concluding Part V of this book.

Any linguistic theory should require a backdrop of heuristic assumptions on language and linguistics that are not part of the theory itself. Such assumptions are drawn in this essay from the framework of Integrational Linguistics (cf. Lieb 1983), whose knowledge is, however, not presupposed. (Lieb's 'Integrational Linguistics' is entirely unrelated to 'integrational linguistics' as proposed by Roy Harris, e.g. (1981); for critical remarks on the latter, see Borsley 1991.)

The present book is intended to be an essay also in the modern sense. Given the intended coverage, it is relatively brief. It concentrates on essential ideas, which are to stand out clearly rather than be smothered by lots of learned detail. Mostly, I have been satisfied with establishing main points, rather than supporting them from every possible angle. Also, a sharp selection is made from the relevant literature (which was systematically checked till the end of 1990, and in a more cursory manner since). References are to be informative by strategic placement rather than extensive quotation. Footnotes are avoided entirely, even in places where they might have helped the flow of prose. Style has been kept as simple as possible. This does not mean, unfortunately, that the essay is easy to read at all times: cutting out verbosity tends to increase information density, and parts of the essay presuppose knowledge of naive set theory. Time and again I have therefore included remarks and cross-references that are meant to direct the reader, running the risk of being tedious rather than obscure; and readers who are not trained for formal detail or are unwilling to bother with it are helped in still another way, by paraphrases in plain Eng-

lish of most formulations of the theory, and by inclusion of simple examples. The problem with paraphrases is, however, that they may be misleading and, in minor ways, inaccurate; in a case of doubt it is always the original formulation that takes precedence over its paraphrase.

In summary, then, I try to be easy to disagree with by clearly stating my points. I do hope that some of them have been made.

Berlin, December 1992 Hans-Heinrich Lieb