

Rethinking Parameters

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It is unquestionable that our knowledge and understanding of language variation has qualitatively improved in the last three decades. To a certain extent, this is due to the fact that minimalist theorizing and comparative syntax have made considerable progress in our knowledge about the human language faculty and parametric variation. This book offers a good showroom of that, and in so doing it also reveals that there are different and controversial views on the status, locus and size of parameters: Are the parameters provided by UG, or do they constitute emergent properties deriving from points of underspecification? Where are parameters located? What can a parametric view tell us about the process of language acquisition?

As is well-known, the Principles and Parameters framework (Chomsky 1981, 1986, Chomsky & Lasnik 1993) is a key research model in the history that gives a linguistic solution to Plato's problem, that is, how are natural languages learned? The basic idea behind the P&P framework is to distinguish the *principles*, a finite set of fundamental abstract rules that are common to all languages, from the *parameters*, specific and learned, that determine the major points of linguistic variation. Over the years there has been a gradual move away from the original conception of parameter—the main issue this review focuses on—, whereby variation was restricted by UG, to a view where they would constitute emergent properties arising from points of underspecification. In the context of this on-going discussion, the book under review, *Rethinking Parameters*, offers a representative sample of current generative research on the emerging issues of parameters. The volume is organized into two sections: Part I, “The nature of variation and parameters”, which discusses theoretical proposals related to parameters; and Part II, “Parameters in the analysis of language variation: case studies”, which focuses on empirical matters.

The papers included in Part I address two questions: One, where in the grammar is the variation anchored? and two, what is the format of permissible variation?

Some authors (**Adger**, **Gallego** and **Roberts**) propose a “lexicalist” parametric approach and they agree that variation is attributable to the features of items in the lexicon. In particular, **Gallego** considers that the “complex-but-atomic” nature of lexical items follows from a process of *reprojection* that renders opaque their internal components. Therefore, they are immune to Agree and (Internal) Merge, like lexical islands, and lexicon nuances are, according to this author, at the

hearts of variation. Whereas the *Combinatorial variability* model proposed by **Adger** suggests that linguistic variation is only in the context of features checking operations, that is, when uninterpretable features are involved. Finally, **Roberts**, who reconciles the macroparametric and microparametric views, presents syntactic variation by making use of parameter hierarchies. After describing four parametric hierarchies (word-order/linearization, null arguments, word structure and discourse configurability), he submits a more general and principled format for the hierarchies and concludes that the only features involved in parametric variation are (excluding N) the categorical features which define phase heads and the movement trigger: \wedge , D, V and C.

These three authors accept that variation can be attributed to those areas in the linguistic system that have to be learned, that is, in the lexicon, where lexical items are conceived of as bundles of features. Nevertheless, it should be noted that, depending upon the approach, the features could be affected by *reprojection* (thus capturing lexical integrity) or by variation—at least in the case of uninterpretable features and the categorical features which define phase heads and the movement trigger—. This said, not all views presented here are “lexicalist”. **Boeckx**’s *Strong Uniformity Thesis* (SUT) links variation to the externalization process. Under SUT, parameters are points of variation that should be confined to the morphophonological component, since the realization is done with the tools provided by it. His conception is still parametric in important respects (variation is finite and limited), but this author eliminates any parametrization of syntax. Furthermore, he insists on the need to “take the variation to be pattern, not pre-pattern”, distancing ourselves from empirical pieces of evidence and conceptual arguments.

In this section, two papers (Boecks and Fasanella & Fortuny) extend a theory that brings linguistic variation and language acquisition together and the latter (**Fasanella & Fortuny**) addresses the Greenberg’s problem (“what is the degree and format of permissible variation?”). After reviewing certain macroparametric proposals and microparametric schemata in order to show that they neglect learnability conditions, F&F argue that variation is constrained by mechanisms of data analysis active during the process of language acquisition. In other words, they derive variation from three principles governing data analysis procedures used in language acquisition: atomicity, accessibility and positive evidence.

The second part of the book includes five case studies that, reviewing particular parameters, offers an empirical basis of linguistic variation.

Mensching & Weingart analyze some of the classical properties of the Null Subject Parameter (Rizzi, 1982): a) the existence of *pro*, b) the existence of free inversion and c) the non-existence of overt expletives, and predict that B should not be “a universal property of null subject languages”. According to Alboiu (2006), they assume that Romance Null Subject languages “parametrically” vary in the distribution of *pro* in the respective lexicons: *pro_{ref}* and *pro_{expl}* (the same items, differing only regarding whether their features are valued in the derivation), or *pro_{stage}* (a spatiotemporal argument, which merges in the VP domain and raises to the T domain). **Jeong**’s paper has two interconnected objectives: on the one hand, examines structural variation within classifier languages and on the other hand, it examines the current Leu (2008)’s proposal about NP modification. This author also casts doubts on another traditional parameter: the NP/DP Parameter proposed by Bošković, which teases apart languages with phonetically overt articles that

project a DP structure from those lacking overt articles that project NP structure. Focusing on data from East-Asian languages, she reformulates Bošković's assumption and upholds that all languages are DP-languages: with "single DP", like Chinese, or "double DP", like Japanese.

Bauke, who examines the distinction between Germanic and Romance languages in the domain of nominal root compounding, shows that alongside productive and compositional nominal root compounds, German also has a pattern of non-compositional and non-productive nominal root compounds. Assuming the data from German, she presents two different derivational paths that generate the two types of nominal root compounding. Finally, Bauke concludes that the difference between both language families is a case of microvariation, arising from the absence or presence of a number features on the *n*-heads.

In **Mathieu's** contribution, linguistic variation can be reduced to "differences between prosodic properties between languages" and eliminates, like Boeckx, any parametrization of syntax. Evidence for this is found in synchronic and diachronic French data. While *wh-in-situ* languages, like French, tend to use prosodic phrasing to express focus, Spanish, an overt *wh* movement language, expresses focus culminatively, using pitch accents. The last chapter also takes an approach based on comparative syntax. **Reintges & Cyrino** offers a diachronic case study of Brazilian Portuguese and Coptic Egyptian in order to prove that "diachronic macro-changes are not directly amenable to the strictly lexical view on parameters". As a final point, they defend, following Fasanella & Fortuny, that the study of linguistic diversity is of paramount importance for the study of cognition and language acquisition.

Rethinking Parameters constitutes, in sum, a robust theoretical and empirical overview of the notion of *parameter*. Ten papers, written by thirteen authors, show that the original conception of parameters proposed by Chomsky has changed significantly in the last three decades. Nevertheless, and although we have come a long way from the first rigorous attempts to identify the limits of variation, the current proposals are still far from uncontroversial: They range from the idea that linguistic variation can be captured by a few universal macroparameters to suggest that parametrization wouldn't exist. Linguistic variation is thus one of the main conflicting (and challenging) topics in linguistics and this book proves so.

References

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