

### **How difficult is grammatical variation, really?**

The presentation investigates if it is difficult for speakers to choose between different grammatical ways of saying the same thing (as in *I liked the speech of the president* versus *I liked the president's speech*). That variation is problematic is a prejudice certainly harbored by language mavens and style guide writers, who typically are in the business of proscribing particular linguistic variants. But even among (some) professional linguists we find a gut feeling that variation is to some extent abnormal, and/or unpredicted, and/or difficult, and/or complex (consider e.g. the Principle of No Synonymy in Cognitive Linguistics). Against this backdrop I will report on a project in progress at KU Leuven in which we check the extent to which grammatical variation contexts in corpora attract disfluencies (such as filled and unfilled pauses). If grammatical variation is indeed difficult in terms of speech production, then we should see a positive correlation between the incidence of grammatical variation contexts and the incidence of speech disfluencies. An analysis of the Switchboard corpus (covering spoken US English), which we annotated for 15 major variation phenomena in the grammar of spoken English as well as for filled and unfilled pauses, fails to uncover any evidence for such a correlation. This is another way of saying that having a choice between grammatical variants does not seem to make life harder for language users. I will conclude by sketching the implications of this finding for theorizing about linguistic variation, as well as directions for future research.