Geolinguistic adequacy conditions for a theory of grammar

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In my presentation I will argue that geolinguistic variation can (and should) be used as an empirical window into the fundamental organizational principles of grammar understood as I-language (alongside with other windows such as language acquisition, change, typology, psycho- and neurolinguistics). Geolinguistic studies raise questions such as:

- Which are the minimal contrasts between very similar grammars, i.e., which are the minimal units of crosslinguistic variation?
- How do speakers deal with variant competition in transitional zones?
- Which factors are responsible for variant selection?
- How to account for preferential asymmetries between competing variants?
- How do variants spread? How can it be that mature speakers may be infected by their neighbors' variants, and what does this mean for their internalized grammar?

I will first outline which aspects of variation are, in my view, most relevant for a theory of grammar. I will then briefly discuss results from studies on spatial syntactic variation, suggesting that zones with variant competition are something very natural. There, speakers acquire a grammar which is easily able to deal with coexisting variants. Interestingly, it is often the case that the selection among competing syntactic variants is influenced by linguistic factors from other domains of grammar, such as phonology, morphology, or semantics (which is, assuming Parallel Architecture, not unexpected). These factors may be lead to more or less clear preferential asymmetries but not necessarily to categorical grammaticality contrasts.

Going one step further, I will relate the findings with ideas about the plasticity of grammar (microsynchronization: Schmidt 2005; Stochastic Optimality Theory: Bresnan, Deo & Sharma 2007). A model of grammar must be able not only to account for variable outputs but also to provide a cognitive mechanism for gradual variant spread from speaker to speaker. I will propose that this mechanism can be understood as a permanent adjustment process between the variant distribution in the speaker's utterance environment and the speaker's internalized grammar. If this view is on the right track it leads to much unexpected conclusions about the relationships between language variation, change, and acquisition.