The nature(s) of syntactic variation: evidence from the Serbian/Croatian dialect continuum
Peđa Kovačević & Tanja Milićev (University of Novi Sad)

Syntactic variation has often been seen as a challenge to the generative framework. Originally, the problem of variability in the syntactic data has been implicitly or explicitly handled by the ‘parameters’ models (the traditional Principles and Parameters framework (Chomsky & Lasnik 1993) or the modified microparameters framework (Kayne 1996, Baker 2008, a.o.). In the Minimalist Program, the design of narrow, simple and uniform syntax confines all variation to the lexicon or PF externalization (Chomsky 2007, Boeckx 2011, and others). While examples of variation found within one I-language (or more closely related I-languages) are obviously problematic for the parametric approaches, (Radical) Minimalism seems to lack the criteria for determining the sources of variation (the lexicon or PF). In order to reconcile empirical and theoretical concerns regarding syntactic variability, Adger and Smith (2005; cf. also Adger 2006, Adger & Smith 2010, and Adger 2014) develop a notion of Syntactic Variable, which refers to (i) interdialectal variation, explained by the availability of different functional heads (i.e. something close to microparameters), or (ii) underspecification of lexical items for morpho-phonological features, resulting in intradialectal variation (i.e. the possibility of pronouncing the same structures differently).

We aim to develop Adger and Smith’s concept of intradialectal variation by locating, in the Serbian/Croatian data, two different ways that it can manifest itself. The hallmark of syntactic variation in the Serbian/Croatian dialect continuum is the seemingly free variation of infinitives and the so-called da + present structures after modal verbs (1a&b), (cf. Mišeska-Tomić 2004, Todorović 2012, Veselinović 2016, a.o.). The variation in the uses of the verb trebati (2a&b) is completely confined to the Croatian portion of the dialect continuum, where some speakers prefer one form over the other, while others switch between the two forms quite freely. Thirdly, it has been known that 2nd position clitics have a choice of attaching to the first phonological phrase (2P clitics, as in (3a)) or first phonological word (2W clitics, as in (3b)). While it has been argued that structures like (3a) are the default form for Serbo-Croatian as a whole (Bošković 2001), some traditional approaches, as well as normative grammars of Croatian do not see structures like (3b) as marked at all (cf. the discussion in Peti-Stantić 2009).

In all of these cases, it would seem, based on the existing analyses, that these elements are in free variation (at least in some dialects), while language standards tend to mark one version as “more Croatian” (infinitive after modals, transitive use of the verb trebati and 2P clitic use), and the other as “more Serbian” (da + present after modals, non-transitive/impersonal use of trebati and 2P clitics). The standard prescriptions would thus suggest a microparametric treatment of these structures. However, we have found a different and more complex picture.

Our study involved a sample of students (N=120) attending gymnasium schools in four different settings: in Zagreb, Croatia (N=30), in Ruma, in the South of Vojvodina, Serbia (N=30), and two groups in Subotica, in the North of Vojvodina, Serbia. Subotica was represented by two groups – students attending school in the Standard Serbian (N₁=30), or in the Standard Croatian (N₂=30), to single out the effect of ethnic identity as a sociolinguistic factor (cf. Labov 1972). The data were collected via a written elicitation task targeting these structures.

We found that the variation in the use of infinitives and da + present is distributed normally within the sample (skewness = -0.14; kurotsis = 1.24), and the differences among
groups are statistically significant (Linear regression: p<0.01, $r^2$ 0.63). For trebati, the same pattern was captured, only variation was confined to the one group in Zagreb. Variation of the second kind (the use of clitics) shows no signs of normal distribution (skewness = 6.61; kurtosis = 51.81), and there are no significant differences between groups (Linear regression: p=0.205, $r^2$ = 0.014).

We interpret the variability in the use of the infinitive/da + present and the use of transitive/impersonal trebati as examples of intradialectal variation. This suggests two possibilities for their formal description. These rivaling structures are either completely the same syntactic objects that are only pronounced differently; or, there is some slight difference in the lexical input which yields different structures as the output of the uniform syntactic mechanism. A piece of evidence that points to the former conclusion is found in (4a). Namely, even though da + present has been analyzed as a way of adding subjunctive meaning to the expression (Mišeska-Tomić 2004, a.o), in contemporary Serbian one can find examples like (4a), where da + present is used to denote simple future devoid of any subjunctive components. Also, the special status of trebati as an impersonal verb in Serbian seems to be eroding across the board, as cases such as (4b) become more and more frequent in Serbian. When it comes to the use of clitics, the fact that no group stands out among the others exhibiting a different pattern of use (all groups employ both 2W and 2P) clearly shows that we are not dealing with a microparameter. Although the choice between the two options for clitic attachment is regulated by mysterious factors (as even for those speakers who find 2W clitic uses ‘marked’, no clear information-structural, stylistic or other effects have yet been identified), we assume that relevant factors must exist, and that they are at the root of existence of the two alternatives for clitic placement.

(1) a. Ivan mora pojesti večeru  
Ivan must eat-INF dinner-ACC  
‘Ivan must eat his dinner’

b. Ivan mora da pojede večeru  
Ivan must DA eat-PRES dinner  
‘Ivan must eat his dinner’

(2) a. Ivanu treba pomoć  
Ivan-DAT needs help-NOM  
‘Ivan needs help’

b. Ivan treba pomoć  
Ivan-NOM needs help-ACC  
‘Ivan needs help’

(3) a. Pravi igrač je došao  
true player AUX-CL come  
‘A true player has come’

b. Pravi je igrač došao  
true AUX-CL player come  
‘A true player has come’

(4) a. Ivan neće da ide kući  
Ivan not-will DA go-PRES home  
‘Ivan won’t go home’

b. Ljudi trebaju da žive normalno  
people should-3PL to live normally  
‘People should live normal lives’

Selected references: