A multiple-grammars approach to intra-speaker variation
in verb movement in English questions
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Many English speakers exhibit variation in T-to-C movement in unmarked matrix and/or embedded interrogatives, as can be seen in the examples in (1) through (3).

**African American English (AAE):**

(1) a. She can leave? b. What she can eat?
   a’. Can she leave? b’. What can she eat?
   c. I wonder if she can leave. d. I wonder what she can eat.
   c’. I wonder can she leave. d’. I wonder what can she eat.

**Appalachian English (AppE) / Irish English (IrE):**

(2) a. Can she leave? b. What can she eat?
   c. I wonder if she can leave. d. I wonder what she can eat.
   c’. I wonder can she leave. d’. I wonder what can she eat.

**Standard English (StE):**

(3) a. Can she leave? b. What can she eat?
   c. I wonder if she can leave. d. I wonder what she can eat.

The possibilities in (1) have been attributed to African American English (e.g., Roeper & Green 2007; RG), while the forms exhibited in (2) have been attributed to Appalachian English (e.g., Wolfram & Christian 1976) and also to Irish English (e.g., McCloskey 2006). It is further generally assumed that “Standard English” only exhibits the patterns in (3). It is important to note that these three sets of examples are all unmarked functional/semantic equivalents of one another. Thus, (1a)/(1b) are out-of-the-blue equivalents of (1a’)/(1b’) (and of (3a)/(3b)); similarly, the embedded questions in (1c’,d’)/(2c’,d’) are interpreted as unmarked indirect questions, like the examples in (1c)/(1d), (2c)/(2d), and (3c)/(3d).

The names given above each set of examples reflect the custom in the literature of labelling the patterns exhibited by individual speakers with a single dialect name. This custom however should not detract from the question of whether syntactic variants (such as (2c) and (2c’)) belong to the same “grammar.” The name for a dialect, which conventionally represents speaker behavior, should thus be taken to be independent of the question of the organization of the variants in speakers’ minds.

In this talk I pursue a “multiple grammars” approach to the intra-(and inter-) speaker variation seen in (1) through (3) (in the sense of Kroch 1989; 1994, following Borer 1984). Take for example (1): while the label “African American English” might describe the use exhibited by some speakers, the argument is that it does not refer to a single coherent grammatical system. The variants in e.g. (1a,b) vs. (1a’,b’) are not to be analyzed as two choices arising from a single grammar; rather, they are the reflex of the availability in the lexicon (of some English speakers) of two distinct functional (C0) heads which mutually exclude one another, and which give rise to distinct movement possibilities.

For the “multiple grammars” approach, I appeal to the analysis in McCloskey (2006) for Irish English, and contrast it with the RG analysis for African American English. Because each analysis is driven by a different set of facts, neither is intentionally designed to address the observed variation holistically. As a result, the different theories make distinct predictions, which I show are relevant for all of the facts, including some not (or only partially) addressed by each of these authors. The totality of patterns I explore leads to some novel empirical observations and to some novel conclusions regarding clustering of properties. It is argued that a McCloskey-like “multiple grammars” approach allows precisely for the kind of dissociation of surface facts (anti-clustering) attested, captures the kinds of variants possible in the different grammars, and rules out the unattested variants.
References:


