MICROVARIATION IN SYNTACTIC DOUBLING—AN INTRODUCTION

Sjef Barbiers

ABSTRACT

This introduction discusses some reasons for doing large-scale microvariation research on syntactic doubling. It provides an overview of the types of syntactic doubling phenomena attested so far, the issues that they raise and the types of analyses that have been proposed.

1. SYNTACTIC DOUBLING

The syntax of natural language can be defined as the set of rules or principles according to which morphosyntactic features are combined into morphemes, morphemes into words, words into phrases, and phrases into sentences. According to the Principle of Compositionality, one of the leading hypotheses of

---

1The chapters in this volume are a selection of the papers presented at the Edisyn workshop on Syntactic Doubling that was organized at the Meertens Institute in Amsterdam, March 16–18, 2006. All chapters were assessed by two anonymous reviewers and by the editors. Since the chapters start with an abstract, they are not summarized in this Introduction.
modern linguistic research, the meaning of a complex expression is determined by the meanings of its constituent expressions and the rules used to combine them. If this is correct, every constituent should contribute to the meaning of the complex. From this point of view, syntactic doubling is an unexpected phenomenon. In syntactic doubling, a constituent (i.e., a morphosyntactic feature, morpheme, word, or phrase) is expressed two or more times. For example, in the colloquial English sentence in (1a), negation is expressed three times, whereas Standard English would use only one negative element (1b). The construction in (1a) is known as negative concord.

(1) a. At the end of the month, nobody ain’t got no money.
    b. At the end of the month, nobody has money.

Since the additional negative elements in (1a) do not yield a meaning different from (1b), the question arises as to why these elements are there, or even, how they can be there. Normally, when we interpret a sentence, it is impossible to simply ignore the presence of some of the constituting elements, and that is exactly what seems to be necessary in (1a) to arrive at the intended interpretation. These questions are important, because syntactic doubling is a pervasive and very frequent phenomenon, and by no means restricted to negative elements.

The Principle of Compositionality is primarily relevant for semantic research. Its syntactic counterpart, the Economy Principle, states that language design is maximally economical and efficient. According to this principle, there should be no superfluous steps and elements in the derivation of a syntactic structure. The Economy Principle is one of the reasons why current generative syntactic research concentrates on dependencies, such as the dependency between the argument position of a wh-word and the fronted position in which it surfaces, and syntactic agreement phenomena, such as the agreement between a subject and a finite verb. Both are considered to be imperfections that a language conceivably could do without, since they involve seemingly superfluous steps or elements. Syntactic doubling, of which agreement is in fact a subcase, should be part of the list of imperfections, as it seems to violate economy as well.

Syntactic doubling may provide us with a window on pure syntax, i.e., on those aspects of syntax that are independent of building a complex meaning. This does not imply, however, that doubling never contributes to the information that is conveyed by a sentence. Even when it does not contribute to the meaning in the narrow sense, doubling can have a discourse function, for example, in dislocation constructions, where a constituent can be presented as a contrastive topic. Therefore, for each doubling construction, we have to ask if it

---

2The Principle of Compositionality is commonly attributed to Frege (1892).
3The Economy Principle was proposed in Chomsky (1995).