

## CHAPTER 6

# Ideal Speakers and Other Speakers: The Case of Dative and Some Other Cases

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this article I would like to discuss the nature of linguistic variation, basing my discussion on variation in Icelandic and Faroese datives, among other things. The specific questions I will address are the following:

- (1) a. What is the nature of linguistic variation in general and intraspeaker variation in particular?
- b. What can we learn about internal grammars (the nature of I-language) by studying intraspeaker variation?
- c. What can we learn about the nature of linguistic change by studying intraspeaker variation?

The data come from three major variation studies:<sup>1</sup>

- (2) a. Syntactic variation in Icelandic (IceDiaSyn) 2005–
- b. Syntactic variation in Faroese (FarDiaSyn) 2008–
- c. Phonological variation in Icelandic (RÍN) 1980s

 I am grateful to the generous support of The Icelandic Research Fund to all of these projects is gratefully acknowledged. IceDiaSyn and FarDiaSyn (principal investigator Höskuldur Thráinsson) were connected to the Scandinavian research networks Scandinavian Dialect Syntax (ScanDiaSyn) and Nordic Center of Excellence in Microcomparative Syntax (NORMS). Höskuldur Thráinsson and Kristján Árnason were principal investigators of RÍN. I am grateful to all my collaborators in these projects, both Icelandic, Faroese and Mainland Scandinavian ones, too numerous to mention here. Thanks are also due to two anonymous reviewers and the editors of this volume, who helped me improve the article. It is not their fault if the article is still less than ideal. Ideal linguists are probably even more rare than ideal speakers.

The data from the first two surveys will center around variation in case marking in general and dative variation in particular. A major point will be the pervasiveness of intraspeaker variation in case marking. Data from the phonological variation study will then be presented to show that the extensive intraspeaker variation observed in the syntactic overview projects is not just some sort of an artifact of the research methods used, since very similar variation was also found in a phonological study that used very different methods of data elicitation. I will then argue that as linguists we need to take intraspeaker variation seriously when we develop models of speakers' internal grammars. Intraspeaker variation reflects an important aspect of the grammars of normal speakers, especially when there is an "ongoing change." More particularly, I will maintain that the kinds of results reported on are predicted by the approach to intraspeaker variation advocated by Tony Kroch (1989, 2001) and Charles Yang (e.g., 2004, 2010).

## 2. DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO INTRASPEAKER VARIATION

As is well known, linguists of different theoretical persuasions tend to have widely diverging ideas about the nature of intraspeaker variation. Thus many sociolinguists tend to believe that extensive intraspeaker variation is a normal state of affairs. They claim that speakers often alternate between forms that have the same meaning or function and their choice is then typically governed by various factors depending on the linguistic context or social situation. This concept goes back to the work of Labov (see, e.g., Labov 1972) and also to the influential article by Cedergren and D. Sankoff where it is maintained (1974: 333) that optional rules can be "assigned application probabilities as functions of the structure of the input strings, possibly depending on the extralinguistic environment."

While linguistic variation of all kinds can be said to be the "bread and butter" of sociolinguistics ("the more the merrier"), the generative approach to linguistic variation is often rather different. Generative linguists are typically more concerned with the *limits* of linguistic variation, namely the question why languages are not more different than they are. They (we) thus completely reject the famous statement attributed to American structuralists by Martin Joos (1957: 96) "that languages can differ from each other without limit and in unpredictable ways." An extremely influential and productive approach to linguistic variation is the so-called Principles and Parameters approach of Chomsky (1981) and much later work. As is well known, this approach assumes that all languages follow certain fundamental principles and that linguistic (or at least syntactic) variability between languages (and dialects) is determined by a finite set of parameters, typically (or ideally) binary. Under this approach, variation between languages, dialects and speakers

(*interspeaker variation*) is to be expected to the extent it can be accounted for in terms of different parameter setting. The so-called *intraspeaker variation* (variation within the language of a single speaker) is less straightforwardly accounted under a parametric account, as we shall see below. Similarly, if one equates intraspeaker variation with some sort of optionality and believes in the principle of economy of derivations, which is, for example, basic to Chomsky's 1995 Minimalist Program, then it is not immediately obvious how to deal with intraspeaker variation. One way to do so is to argue that certain instances of variability should be possible under economy because the variants could be equally economical and hence "the grammar doesn't mind" (see Biberauer and Richards 2006). Another minimalistic approach maintains that intraspeaker variation may result from underspecified functional categories and different "lexical choices" (see Adger and Smith 2010).

An alternative approach has been proposed by Kroch and his associates (see, e.g., Kroch 1989, 2001 and references cited there). One of Kroch's main points is that the linguistic competence of speakers is often best characterized by assuming that they have acquired two grammars (i.e., as a case of syntactic diglossia) and that these grammars are in competition, both in the linguistic community in general (where one grammar might represent a more conservative and the other a more innovative variant) and in the language of individual speakers. Thus the speakers' output may at times be more consistent with one grammar than the other and "competing forms may differ in social register" (Kroch 2001: 702).<sup>2</sup> In such cases we might then expect to find evidence for dialect accommodation in the sense of Trudgill (1986) and others.

In a similar spirit, Yang has in recent work (e.g., 2004, 2010) argued that parameter setting in language acquisition is not "triggered" once and for all by some crucial evidence but, rather, proceeds in a probabilistic fashion. He has summarized the main points as follows (2004: 455):

[T]he learning model extends to a model of language change (Yang 2000), which agrees well with the findings in historical linguistics (Kroch 2001) that language change is generally (i) gradual, and (ii) exhibits a mixture of different grammatical options. But these are possible only if one adopts an SL [statistical learning] model where parameter setting is probabilistic.

2 Speaking of "two grammars" in this context is in fact an idealization of sorts. What is meant is that that with respect to a given phenomenon that is changing, there will be a grammar that is consistent with the earlier stage (say, OV word order, to pick a phenomenon that has been much discussed by Kroch and his associates) and a grammar that is consistent with the later stage (VO word order in this case). The idea is that the linguistic situation in the speech community can be described as the result of a competition between these "two grammars," and also that the competence of certain speakers can profitably be so described. There is no claim being made to the effect that speakers cannot have more than two internalized grammars nor that there cannot be multilingual speakers.

Yang's work can thus be seen as a further development of the idea of “competing grammars” usually attributed to Kroch (1989), as described above. Yang puts this as follows (2000: 248):

The model formalizes historical linguists' intuition of grammar competition and directly relates the statistical properties of historical texts (hence, acquisition evidence) to the direction of language change. It is important to recognize that, while sociological and other external forces clearly affect the composition of linguistic evidence, grammar competition as language acquisition (the locus of language change) is internal to the individual learner's mind/brain.

I shall argue in some detail below that data from the variation surveys mentioned above provide support for this way of looking at variation while at the same time shedding a new light on the way in which linguistic judgments and linguistic output can vary between speakers under the same conditions. As mentioned above, the data come from a number of rather extensive linguistic surveys, both syntactic and phonological, which have made it possible to study linguistic change in progress and the properties of the synchronic grammars of a large number of speakers.

### 3. THE METHODOLOGY OF THE SYNTACTIC SURVEYS

#### 3.1 The Main Method and Some Precautionary Measures

In the syntactic surveys (IceDiaSyn and FarDiaSyn) we used written questionnaires and then interviewed a (rather small) subset of the participants in the surveys. In a separate pilot study we experimented with a few different methods of questioning the subjects and then ended up with questionnaires with three separate tasks. The main task involved evaluation of sentences where the subjects were given three choices, as shown in Table 6.1:<sup>3</sup>

Settu X í viðeigandi dálk:

- Já** = **Eðlileg** setning. Svona get ég vel sagt.  
**?** = **Vafasöm** setning. Ég myndi varla segja svona.  
**Nei** = **Ótæk** setning. Svona get ég ekki sagt.

<sup>3</sup> Although the glosses of the sentences in Table 6.1 are irrelevant for our present purposes, the curious linguist might want to know what they are anyway:

*Þingmaðurinn*      *heimsótti*      *kjósendur.*  
the parliamentarian      visited      voters  
Hann spurði hvort að þeir alltaf hefðu búið í kjördæminu.  
he      asked      whether      that      they      always had      lived      in      the district

Table 6.1. AN EXAMPLE FROM AN ICEDIASYN QUESTIONNAIRE.

		já	?	nei	Athugasemdir
T2100	<i>Dingmaðurinn heimsótti kjósendur.</i> Hann spurði hvort að þeir alltaf hefðu búið í kjördæminu.				

There were typically over one hundred examples of this kind in each questionnaire, broken up by different tasks, as will be illustrated below. The grading was explained and illustrated at the beginning of the session and the basic instructions were then repeated at the top of each page as shown here. These instructions read as follows in English translation:

- (3) Yes = A **natural** sentence. I could easily say this.  
 ? = A **questionable** sentence. I would hardly say this.  
 No = An **unacceptable** sentence. I could not say this.

As explained and illustrated at the beginning of each session, the purpose of the italicized sentence (see Table 6.1) was just to give an appropriate context and the subjects were asked to evaluate the second (the nonitalicized) sentence only. At the end of each line some space for optional remarks (*athugasemdir*) was provided.

In order to maximize the likelihood of getting reliable answers we took a number of precautions, partly following methodological suggestions found in the literature (see, e.g., Schütze 1996: chap. 5, Cornips & Poletto 2005). Thus we would, for example,

- (4) a. **explain the grading scale** by giving illustrative examples  
 b. **vary the order** of the test sentences (e.g., reverse for ha75.1(a)s of the subjects)  
 c. **test different constructions** in each overview and **include fillers**  
 d. **vary the tasks** (absolute judgments, relative judgments, fill-ins...(see below))  
 e. **include a break** in long sessions to prevent excessive fatigue and boredom  
 f. **include context sentences** to get all subjects thinking of similar contexts  
 g. **try to use natural sounding examples** (short, plausible, lexically neutral...)  
 h. test **multiple examples** of each construction to minimize unwanted effects

- i. try to make the contrasting variants maximally close to **minimal pairs**
- j. test **different types of speakers** (age groups, locations...)
- k. throw out data from “**unreliable speakers**” (e.g., “language specialists”)
- l. get speakers to **report on their own intuition** (see Henry 1995, 2005a, b)

The reason for most of these should be obvious but the last one may warrant an explanation. It is sometimes maintained that investigators should ask their subjects *indirect* rather than *direct* questions, for example, “What do people around here say?” or “What is most common in your (local) dialect?” rather than “Could you say this yourself?” The idea behind this is the belief that speakers might not want to admit that they use a particular variant themselves. In our kind of study it would not have made any sense to use the indirect method. The main reason is that we wanted to compare groups of speakers so we had to try to make sure that the speakers were in fact reporting on their own intuition. We were not interested in their beliefs about the language of others. Besides, asking about such beliefs is actually a question of a very different nature as it is in fact not a question about linguistic intuition at all but rather a metalinguistic one. As will be argued in the following subsection, there is every reason to believe that most speakers answered honestly to questions about their intuitions and were in general not influenced by prescriptive ideas.

### 3.2 Indicators of Reliability

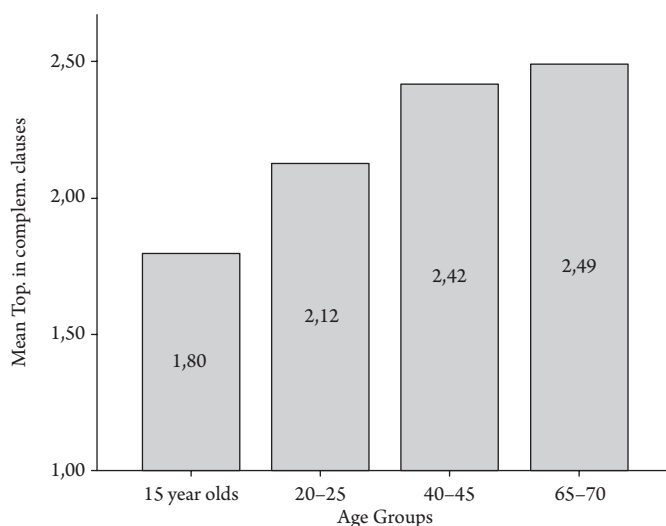
Before presenting relevant results from our syntactic surveys, it is useful to give some thought to the question how one can tell whether the results are reliable. Some of the indicators of reliability are listed in (5):

- (5) a. The observed **systematic** (e.g., differences between age groups and (in a few cases) regions, etc.) and not random.
- b. Answers from **all generations seem reliable**, e.g. it is not the case that the youngest generation “accepts everything.”
- c. The **subjects answer honestly** in general and don’t seem worried by any kind of prescriptivism or the like (see below).
- d. Comparison of **different tasks** confirms reliability of judgments.
- e. Comparison with **corpora** confirms reliability of judgments.
- f. Comparison with **interviews** confirms reliability of judgments.

- g. Comparison of results from IceDiaSyn and FarDiaSyn with results of the **phonological interviews** in RÍN shows interesting parallels strengthening the conclusion.

By the first point we basically mean that *the proof is in the pudding*: If there had been something seriously wrong with the methodology we would not have expected the results to be systematic. Instead, we should have observed cases of random variation, which we did not find.

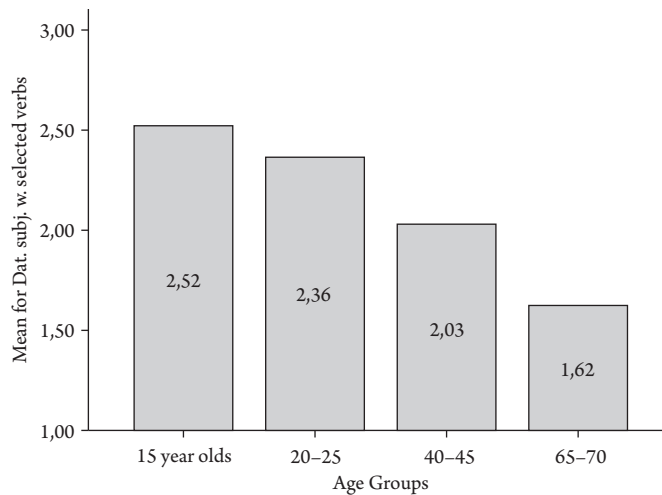
The second point is also worth emphasizing. We were among other things interested in detecting ongoing changes and also variants that are on their way out. Hence there was a rather large spread in the age of our subjects, the youngest group typically being around fifteen years of age and the oldest one sixty-five to seventy. Now it had been suggested to us that it might be difficult to get reliable judgments from the youngest group, for example because the youngest speakers might accept everything. As illustrated by Figures 6.1–6.2, however, some variants were accepted most readily by the youngest generation, whereas others were favored by the oldest one, which is obviously what we had hoped for (these are figures from IceDiaSyn):<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 6.1**

Mean evaluation of topicalization in complement clauses ( $N > 700$ ). Correlation with age:  $r = .466$ . Statistical significance:  $p < .001$ .

<sup>4</sup> We made three different surveys using written questionnaires in IceDiaSyn with the number of participants in each ranging from 714 to 772. The means in the graphs are “mean grades” from the evaluation (see Table 6.1), where 3 = “all examples found to be natural” and 1 = “no examples found to be natural.”



**Figure 6.2**  
Mean evaluation of dative subjects with typical Dative Sickness verbs ( $N > 740$ ). Correlation with age:  $r = -.511$ . Statistical significance:  $p < .001$ .

The third point has to do with possible reluctance of the subjects to admit that they find stigmatized variants acceptable. Fortunately, very few of the variants we were interested in had figured at all in the prescriptive discussion. One notable exception, however, was the so-called Dative Sickness, namely the tendency to replace accusative subjects with dative subjects for a particular class of (“impersonal”) verbs (see Figure 6.2). This particular variant has been frowned upon in schools for a few decades at least, although there is very little evidence that this prescriptivism has slowed the change down, as Figure 6.2 indicates. As mentioned above, the questionnaires in IceDiaSyn typically involved different tasks. One of the tasks was the absolute evaluation of sentences explained in the discussion around Table 6.1 above. Another was a fill-in task where the subjects were asked to fill in blanks in a short passage by using the pronouns “I, he, she” as appropriate for the context. Some of the blanks were for subjects of typical Dative Sickness (DS) verbs. This method for investigating subject case marking with this particular class of verbs was originally developed by Svavarsdóttir (1982). It was found to work well and has been used several times since then (see, e.g., Jónsson & Eythórsson 2003, 2005). These studies have suggested that the speakers were generally unaware of the fact that they were providing information about case-marking preferences by filling the blanks with pronominal forms. Given this, one might have expected that the acceptance rate of sentences with dative subjects of the relevant verbs would have been lower than the relative frequency of dative subjects selected for these verbs in the (disguised) fill-ins and in spontaneous speech. But this



is not what we found. The acceptance rate of sentences with dative subjects for typical DS verbs was consistently higher in the judgment tasks than the selection rate of dative subject pronominal forms in the fill-in tasks. This is illustrated in the first row of Table 6.2 with numbers from IceDiaSyn for the verb *langa* “want,” which is one of the most common DS verbs. The other rows show figures from a couple of other studies, as will be explained below:

Table 6.2. ACCEPTANCE, SELECTION, AND USAGE OF DATIVE SUBJECTS WITH *LANGA* “WANT” IN VARIOUS STUDIES.

Study	All age groups			Youngest age group	
	Judgments	Fill-ins	Corpora	Judgments	Fill-ins
IceDiaSyn	68% accept	19% select	7%/25% use	77% accept	35% select
Jónsson & Eythórsson 2003					40% select
Svavarsdóttir 1982					32% select
Friðriksson 2008			15% use		

The figure 68 percent in the first row shows the acceptance rate by all age groups combined in IceDiaSyn for sentences with a dative subject with *langa* “want” and the figure 19 percent indicates how many of these subjects actually selected a dative pronominal subject in a fill-in task in the same survey. Corresponding figures for the youngest age group separately are 77 percent and 35 percent, respectively. In a spoken language corpus considered for comparative purposes the corresponding figure is 25 percent, as shown in the middle column, but in a corpus that is mostly based on written (published) material the figure is only 7 percent, as dative subjects of *langa* are typically weeded out by proofreaders.

The remaining numbers in Table 6.2 are also of some comparative interest. First, note that some 40 percent of the youngsters tested on a fill-in task by Jónsson and Eythórsson (2003) selected dative form of the subject. A corresponding figure from Svavarsdóttir’s original study (1982) was 32 percent. Since the tasks and the age groups were comparable (twelve-year-olds mostly, i.e., somewhat younger than the youngest group in IceDiaSyn), this indicates a slow but steady increase in Dative Sickness among Icelandic teenagers during the twenty years that had passed between the studies. Finally, spontaneous speech recordings made by Friðriksson (2008) showed only 15 percent usage of dative (as opposed to accusative) subjects. This is lower than the 25 percent usage rate reported for a spontaneous speech corpus by Svavarsdóttir (2006, 2011) in connection with IceDiaSyn and

closer to the 19 percent selection rate for the fill-ins in IceDiaSyn. The observed differences might be due to a number of reasons, one being difference in the age of the speakers involved in the different studies, another the topic of the conversation, as it has often been observed that speakers are more likely to use third-person dative subjects than first-person (see, e.g., Svavarsdóttir 1982).

The most important aspect of these results is the fact that they show very clearly that the speakers have no problem with accepting dative subjects of a DS verb like *langa* “want” in a judgment task (the acceptance rate ranges from 68 percent for the group as a whole to 77 percent for the youngest age group). But this does not necessarily mean that all of the speakers who accept the dative variant will actually select a dative subject form in a fill-in task. As it turns out, many of the speakers actually prefer an accusative subject with *langa* even if they find the dative subject natural. This is what the selection figures show: 19 percent of the whole group select the dative subject in the fill-in task, and 35 percent of the youngest group. This is consistent with the finding that the accusative subject variant with *langa* actually gets an even higher acceptance rate than the dative subject variant in the judgment task (88 percent of the whole group accepted the accusative variant and 68 percent the dative one).

These results suggest, then, that the subjects in IceDiaSyn were largely unaffected by prescriptivism since Dative Sickness was actually our main concern from that point of view and here the subjects had no problem admitting that they found the (stigmatized?) dative subjects with the DS verbs natural.<sup>5</sup> In addition, although the acceptance rate was considerably higher than the selection rate, there was a *strong and highly significant correlation* between the judgments and the selection:  $r = .570$ ,  $p < .001$ . This is obviously encouraging and lends further support to our belief that the judgments were reliable.

As a final indicator that the subjects’ judgments are generally reliable consider the following: As mentioned above, a subset of those who had filled in the written questionnaires were interviewed later. In these interviews we wanted among other things to try to elicit production data to compare to the judgment data that we had obtained. The so-called New Passive Construction (or the New Impersonal, see Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002, Thráinsson 2007: 273ff.) seemed to offer an opportunity to do this,

<sup>5</sup> Although prescriptivists often talk about Dative Sickness and school teachers have tried to eradicate it for decades, it seems that there is very little awareness of the phenomenon among the general public. In interviews conducted in connection with IceDiaSyn we sometimes asked the subjects if they had heard about Dative Sickness. While many of them said that they had, and knew that it had something to do with the use of Dative, they were usually unable to give relevant examples.

since here there was a great difference between the age groups: The youngest speakers would typically accept the NewPass examples, whereas the older ones would virtually all reject them. A typical NewPass example is given in (6c):

- (6) a. **Krakkarnir** hrintu **mér** í frímínútunum. (active)  
 the kids pushed me(D) in break  
 “The kids pushed me during the break.”
- b. **Mér** var hrint í frímínútunum. (regular passive)  
 me(D) was pushed in break  
 “I was pushed during the break.”
- c. **Það** var hrint **mér** í frímínútunum. (new passive)  
 there was pushed me(D) in break  
 “I was pushed during the break.”

The regular passive in (6b) is characterized by the auxiliary “be” and the past participle of the main verb “push” and the theme (or patient) of the predicate occurs in subject position.<sup>6</sup> In the NewPass we also get the auxiliary “be” and the past participle of the main verb, but the theme (patient) stays in situ (in apparent object position) and the subject position is typically filled by an expletive *það* “there” (or some other element occurs in initial position).

In the interview the subjects were first presented with a model pair of sentences like (7a, b) and it was pointed out to them that a sentence like (7a) could be paraphrased by starting with (the expletive) *það* “there” as in (7b) (a natural expletive passive for all speakers):

- (7) a. **Einhverjir** köstuðu **tómötum** í **söngvarann**.  
 some people threw tomatoes in the singer  
 “Some people threw tomatoes at the singer.”
- b. **Það** var **kastað** **tómötum** í **söngvarann**.  
 there was thrown tomatoes in the singer  
 “Tomatoes were thrown at the singer.”

The subjects were then presented with an example like (8a) and asked to paraphrase it by a sentence beginning with *það* “there” and they typically

<sup>6</sup> Since Dat. objects have a lexically assigned case, they keep their case in the passive construction. Acc. objects do not in the regular passive, as is well known, but in the NewPass the theme/patient argument would retain an Acc. case (see, e.g., Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir 2002, Thráinsson 2007: 273ff.).

had no problem coming up with a paraphrase like (8b), which is a natural expletive sentence for all speakers of Icelandic:

- (8) a. Einhverjir fóru að syngja í rútnni.  
       some people began to sing in the bus
- b. Það fóru einhverjir að syngja í rútnni.  
       there began some people to sing in the bus

But when the subjects were presented with (9a), only the youngest speakers could paraphrase it as (9b), which is a NewPass example as explained above, whereas the older speakers were at a loss:

- (9) a. Krakkarnir hrintu **mér** í frímínútunum.  
       the kids pushed me in break
- b. Það var hrint **mér** í frímínútunum.  
       there was pushed me in break

Here there was almost a perfect correlation between the judgments of the speakers and their production:  $r = .989$ ,  $p < .001$ . This means that virtually all of the speakers who had accepted NewPass sentences in the questionnaires could produce such sentences under these circumstances, whereas the ones who had rejected NewPass examples could not produce them either. One could not really ask for a stronger confirmation of reliability of the judgments.

#### 4. OBSERVED VARIATION IN DATIVE CASE MARKING—AND ELSEWHERE

In this section I will first present evidence for interspeaker variation in datives and then turn to the extensive intraspeaker variation. At the end of the section I will then present some data from phonology to show that the observed intraspeaker variation in case marking is by no means an isolated phenomenon.

Before we turn to the examples it should be pointed out that variation in case marking is arguably more “pure” from a syntactic point of view than many other instances of variation, as it typically seems devoid of any

<sup>7</sup> Note that this implies that (morphological) dative does in such instances express a particular meaning different from the meaning conveyed by accusative, for instance. More specifically, there is no reason to believe that speakers who use a dative subject (or object) with a given verb have a particular lexical meaning in mind for this verb different from the meaning that it has for speakers who use an accusative subject (or object) with it. This semantic neutrality of case marking variation is particularly obvious when we have intraspeaker variation in the case marking with a given verb, as we shall see below.

semantic or pragmatic nuances (the same is probably true of agreement but not necessarily of word order variation, use of reflexives/nonreflexives, etc.).<sup>7</sup> Hence case alternations are useful for determining the nature of variation. But before we continuing our discussion of variation in case marking, it should be emphasized that for most verbs in Icelandic there is no variation in subject nor object case marking. The same is true of Faroese. So variation in case marking is the exception and not the rule. Nevertheless, these exceptions are important in the present context.

#### 4.1 Interspeaker Variation in Case Marking

Dative case variation in Icelandic is mainly of two kinds: variation in subject case and object case. Some speakers accept (and use) dative subjects with experiencer-type verbs that used to take accusative or even nominative subjects. The acceptance rate for selected verbs of this kind in IceDiaSyn is shown in Table 6.3:

Table 6.3. ACCEPTANCE RATE OF DIFFERENT CASES IN SUBJECT POSITION FOR SELECTED VERBS ( $N > 740$ ).

Verb	Nom. subject	Acc. subject	Dat. subject	(N+)A+D
<i>hlakka til</i> “look forward to”	48.6%	59.7%	44.2%	152.5
<i>langa</i> “want, long for”		88.3%	68.2%	148.7
<i>vanta</i> “need, lack”		92.1%	56.6%	156.5

As the reader will note, the figures in Table 6.3 indicate not only interspeaker variation but also intraspeaker variation. If there was no intraspeaker variation, the figures in each row (acceptance of Nom. + Acc. + Dat. subjects) would add up to 100 percent but they add up to around 150 in each case. We will return to this issue in section 4.2 below.

Originally, the verb *hlakka til* “look forward to” took a nominative subject, whereas *vanta* “need, lack” and *langa* “want, long for” took an accusative subject. As Table 6.3 shows, accusative is (still) the most widely accepted subject case for all of these verbs, although it represents an innovation for *hlakka til* and has been corrected in schools. Two-thirds of the oldest generation (66.0 percent) accepted (the original) nominative subject with *hlakka til*, but only one-third of the youngest generation did (32.5 percent). But if we compare the acceptance by different age groups of accusative subjects and dative subjects for the typical DS verbs *vanta* and *langa*, we see that the dative subject is most widely accepted by the

Table 6.4. ACCEPTANCE RATE OF ACCUSATIVE AND DATIVE SUBJECTS WITH SELECTED DS VERBS ( $N > 740$ ).

Verb	15-year-olds	20–25	40–45	65–70
<i>langa</i> acc.	85.2%	88.2%	<b>90.8%</b>	89.3%
<i>langa</i> dat.	<b>79.6%</b>	78.0%	66.7%	43.8%
<i>vanta</i> acc.	86.7%	<b>96.1%</b>	93.8%	91.7%
<i>vanta</i> dat.	<b>46.9%</b>	35.1%	15.4%	7.5%

youngest generation, but there is very little difference between age groups in the acceptance of accusative subjects with these verbs. This is illustrated in Table 6.4.

This becomes even clearer on the bar chart in Figure 6.3, where the mean evaluation of accusative subjects for examples with the verbs *langa* and *vanta* is broken up according to age groups. Figure 6.4 shows comparable results for dative subjects with the same verbs.

These figures show that the younger age groups are more “bidialectal” than the older ones in the sense that they typically accept both the innovative case marking (Dat.) and the traditional one (Acc.), whereas the older generations (especially the oldest one) only accept the traditional value. This is an interesting result from a theoretical point of view, since it gives an idea of how linguistic change may spread and suggests that intraspeaker variation may be a more common state of affairs under such circumstances

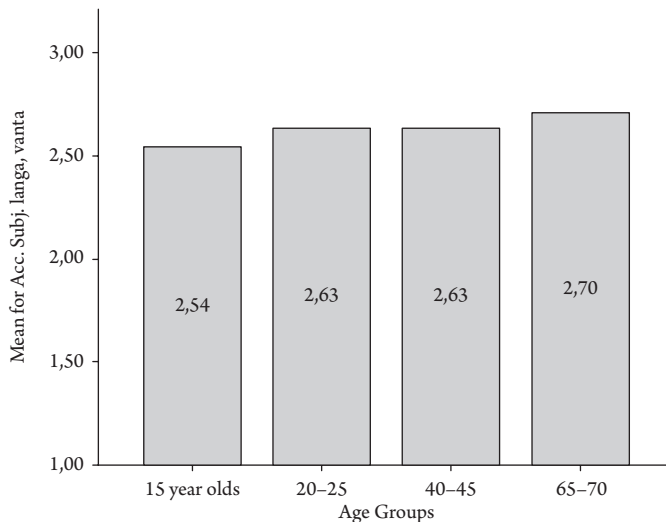
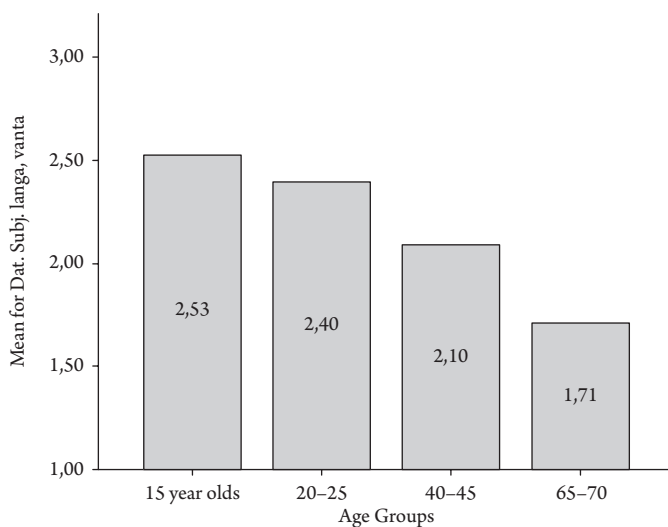


Figure 6.3 Mean evaluation of accusative Subjects with *langa* “want” and *vanta* “need.” Correlation with age:  $r = .133$ .



**Figure 6.4**  
Mean evaluation of dative subjects with *langa* “want” and *vanta* “need.” Correlation with age:  $r = -.459$ .

than often assumed. But before we look more closely at intraspeaker variation, it is useful to look at an instance of variation in object case for comparison.

While it is standardly assumed that accusative is the default (or structural) object case in Icelandic and dative is a lexically assigned case, it is also well known that dative object case shows some regularities (see, e.g., Barðdal 2001, Maling 2002, Svenonius 2002, Woolford 2006, Thráinsson 2007: 156ff.). What has been less well documented in the literature is the fact that for some verbs there is a variation between dative and accusative on objects. This is obviously of interest for theories that attempt to relate dative object case marking to semantic or thematic notions, since there is no reason to assume that this variation correlates with differences of interpretation by the speakers involved. First, consider the figures in Table 6.5.

*Table 6.5.* ACCEPTANCE OF ACCUSATIVE AND DATIVE OBJECTS WITH SELECTED VERBS.

Verb	Acc. object	Dat. object	Total Acc.+Dat.
<i>faxa</i> “faxes”	91.3%	23.8%	115.1
<i>framlengja</i> “extend”	82.7%	61.0%	143.7
<i>negla</i> “nail (a ball into a goal)”	66.5%	72.6%	139.1
<i>rísta</i> “demolish” (lit. and fig.)	22.3%	82.4%	104.1

Table 6.6. SELECTION AND ACCEPTANCE OF DATIVE OBJECT WITH RÚSTA “DEMOLISH” AND DATIVE SUBJECT WITH LANGA “WANT.”

Verb	Dat. selected	Dat. accepted
Object case with <i>rústa</i> “demolish”	88.1%	83.6%
Subject case with <i>langa</i> “want”	19.2%	68.2%

As pointed out in connection with Table 6.3, the combined acceptance of the different cases indicates intraspeaker variation, namely that many speakers accept both accusative and dative objects with these verbs. It is interesting to note, however, that there is a considerable difference between the verbs involved. Thus there is hardly any intraspeaker variation in object case selection of *rústa* “demolish” but large variation in the case of *fram-lengja* “extend,” for instance.

It is also important to note in this connection that we were able to discover another important difference in case variation by combining the methods of elicitation we used. Recall that we collected information about case marking preferences in two different ways: The speakers were both asked to evaluate sentences and to fill in blanks in short narratives. As discussed in connection with Table 6.2 above, this combination of methods showed in some instances that speakers who accepted a dative subject with a given verb might nevertheless select an accusative subject when filling in the blanks. Table 6.6 shows an interesting difference between the subject case of *langa* “want” and object case of *rústa* “demolish” in this respect.

As Table 6.6 shows, there is hardly any difference between the selection rate and acceptance rate of dative objects with *rústa* “demolish” whereas there is considerable difference between corresponding figures for the subject case of *langa* “want.” This means, then, that a speaker who accepts dative object case with *rústa* will also use it, but a speaker who accepts dative subject case with *langa* may not use it. The other side of the coin is that a speaker who does not select dative subject case with *langa* may nevertheless accept it. The reason for this difference is that speakers are much less likely to be bidialectal with respect to object case of *rústa* (see also the figures in Table 6.5), but they may very well be with respect to subject case of *langa*, as already discussed. Assuming that the selection task under discussion mirrors production (you select the form that you would use), this clearly shows that production data do not necessarily tell us the whole story about the internalized grammar of speakers. Facts of this sort should thus help dispel the myth that it would be best if we could rely on “natural data” in syntactic studies (“real examples” found in spontaneous speech).

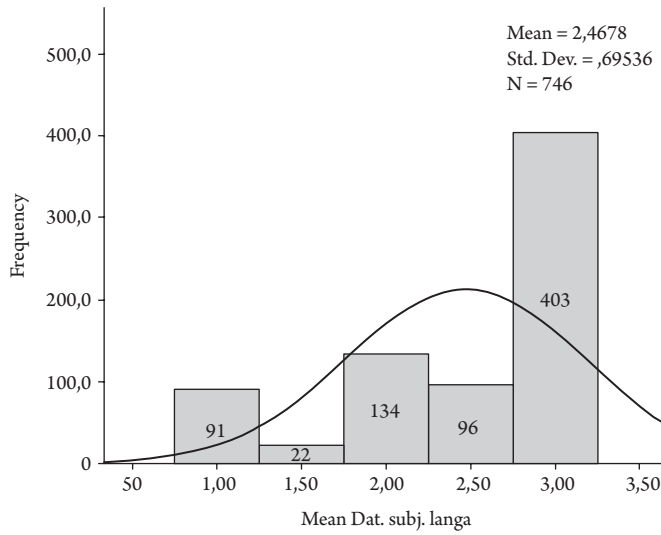
With this in mind, we can now turn to a more detailed investigation of intraspeaker variation in case marking.



#### 4.2 Intraspeaker Variation in Case Marking

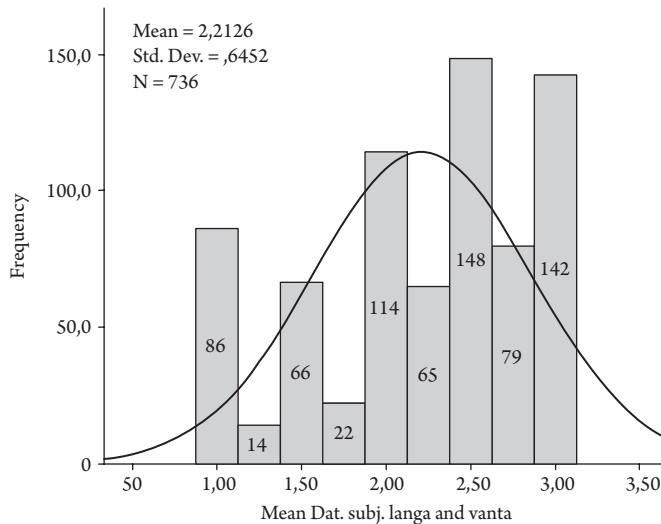
The differences in intraspeaker variation between *langa* “want” and *rústa* “demolish” can be visualized in histograms like the following (here we are only considering two examples with dative arguments for each verb).

If there was no intraspeaker variation, the only bars that would show up on these histograms would be the ones for 1 (= no dative arguments found natural) and 3 (= all dative arguments found natural).

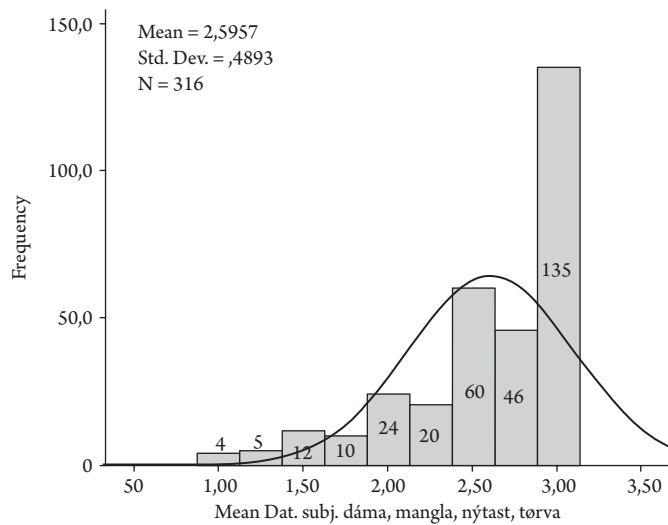


**Figure 6.6**  
Distribution of means for dative subjects of *langa* “want.”

“need,” and *tørva* “need” in Faroese. As Figure 6.8 shows, about 43 percent of the Faroese speakers tested (136 out of a total of 316 in this instance) accepted all examples of dative subjects with the verbs in question, whereas only about 19 percent of the Icelandic speakers accepted all of the dative subject examples with *langa* and *vanta*.



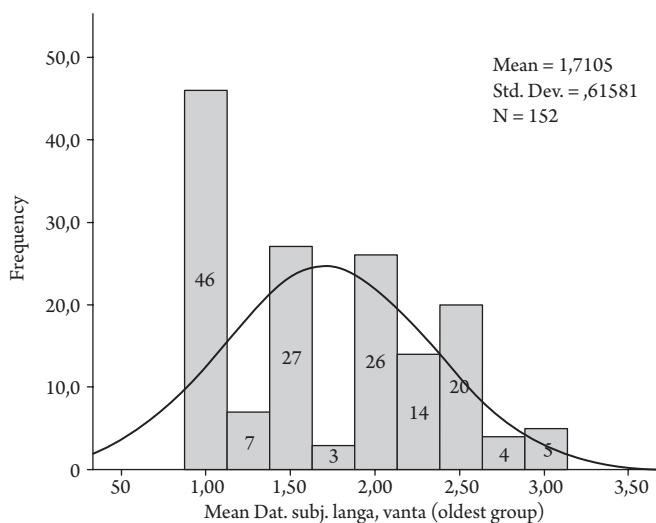
**Figure 6.7**  
Distribution of means for dative subjects of Icelandic *langa* and *vanta*.



**Figure 6.8**  
Distribution of means for dative subjects of Faroese *dáma*, *mangla*, *nýtast*, and *tørva*.

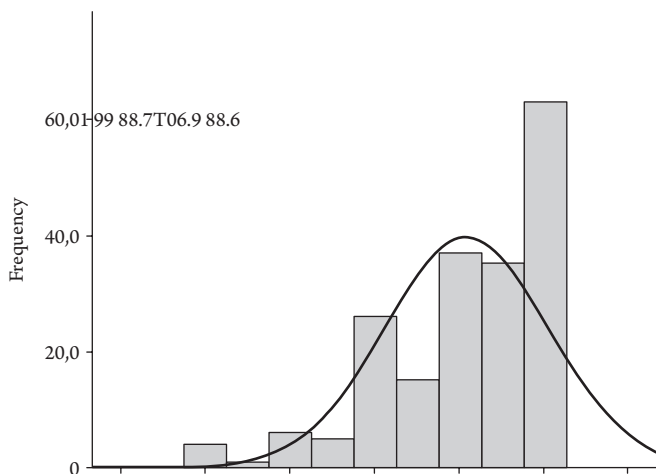
It is important to note in this connection, however, that the historical development has been rather different in the two languages in this area. The Icelandic verbs *langa* and *vanta* originally took accusative subjects, and the dative subjects are an innovation still frowned upon in schools. This is the so-called Dative Sickness, a change in progress, as we have seen. In Faroese, on the other hand, the accusative subjects have virtually disappeared (see, e.g., Thráinsson et al. 2004: 252ff., Jónsson and Eythórsson 2005). Here, too, many verbs that originally took accusative subjects now take dative subjects (including *vanta*; the verb *langa* is not used anymore in Faroese). But a further development is now taking place in Faroese as nominative subjects are replacing dative ones for many verbs. Now the Faroese verbs *dáma* “like” and *nýtast* “need” presumably took dative from early on (as their Icelandic counterparts still do). The verb *tørva* “need,” on the other hand, corresponds to Old Norse (and Icelandic) *þurfa*, which took a nominative subject, so here the dative subject is an innovation. The same is presumably true for *mangla* “lack,” which is apparently a loanword from Danish (d. *mangle*). Thus the dative case marking of the subject of the last two verbs indicates a strong tendency to regularize thematic case marking of a subclass of experiencer verbs in earlier stages of Faroese, although it is now beginning to give way to structural nominative case.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> A similar development has happened in English. Thus the verb *like*, for instance, used to take a non-nominative argument (e.g., *him liketh*) which now occurs in the nominative (*he likes*). The controversy about the details of this development need not concern us here (see, e.g., Allen 1986, Eythórsson and Barðdal 2005).



**Figure 6.9**  
Distribution of means for dative subjects of *langa* and *vanta* for the oldest group.

As a final illustration of intraspeaker variation in case marking, consider the following: there is a strong correlation between Dative Sickness and age in Icelandic. The prediction is, then, that this should be reflected in different intraspeaker variation patterns for different generations. As Figures 6.9 and 6.10 show, this prediction is borne out.



As these figures show, the means cluster to the left (very little Dative Sickness, 46 subjects with none at all) for the oldest group, whereas they cluster to the right (more Dative Sickness, 63 subjects who found all of the examples natural) for the youngest group.

We have now seen considerable evidence for the existence of widespread intraspeaker variation in case marking. Since the data reported on are based on the judgments of speakers for the most part, one might think that the extensive intraspeaker variation observed is somehow an artifact of the research method used. Hence it is important to point out that variation between accusative and dative subjects is also found in the production of speakers, although it should be less common there for the reason described in connection with Table 6.2 above. This has been pointed out by (for example) Jónsson (2007), citing examples like (10a) from the Internet. The additional examples in (10) have similar sources, as indicated:

- (10) a. **mig** langar að eiga endalausá innistæðu  
 me(Acc) wants to have endless money-in-the-bank  
 og kaupa allt sem **mér** langar í  
 and buy everything me(Dat) wants in  
 “I want to have a truckload of money and buy everything I want.”
- b. **Mér** langar til þess að komast í þetta fit form...  
 me(Dat) wants to it to get to this fit form  
**Mig** langar að breyta fitu ... í vöðva.  
 me(Acc.) wants to change fat to muscles  
 “I want to get fit. I want to change fat to muscles.”  
 (www.eas.is/einkathjalfarinn/personuleg-radgjof/169-eg-er-alveg-lost, accessed June 15, 2012)
- c. **mér** langar að vita mjög mikið um rafmagn og tækni...  
 me(Dat.) wants to know very much about electricity and technology  
**mig** langar að vita kvort þú vitir um einhverja búð...  
 me(Acc.) wants to know whether you know about any store  
 “I want to know a lot about electricity and technology.  
 I’d like to know if you know of any store...”  
 (www.totalradgjof.is/new/faq/index.php?action=artikel&cat=13&id=830&artlang=en, accessed June 15, 2012)
- d. **mér** langar að verða miklu þyngri en ég er í dag...  
 me(Dat.) wants to become much heavier than I am today  
**Mig** langar að keppa í vaxtarrækt...  
 me(Acc.) wants to compete in bodybuilding  
 “I want to become much heavier than I am today. I’d like to compete in bodybuilding.”

([www.fitnesssport.is/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=108:langar-ae-keppa-i-vaxtarraekt-&catid=46:starfsfolk-fitnesssport-svarar-spurningum](http://www.fitnesssport.is/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=108:langar-ae-keppa-i-vaxtarraekt-&catid=46:starfsfolk-fitnesssport-svarar-spurningum), accessed June 15, 2012)

- e. mig langar að fá hjá þér þarna plattana sem...  
 me(Acc.) wants to get from you there plates that  
 t.d langar **mér** í einn sem...  
 e.g. wants me(Dat.) in one that

“I would like to get from you those plates that...I’d for instance like the one that...”

(<http://erwin.barnaland.is/gestabok/>, accessed June 15, 2012)

Similarly, Svavarsdóttir (2011) reports that in a corpus of spontaneous speech, the verb *langa* was found in the sample for ten speakers (out of twelve). Although there were usually very few examples with *langa* for each speaker, some intraspeaker variation was observed in the use of subject case. This is summarized in Table 6.7 (actual numbers and percentages are only given for the speakers showing intraspeaker variation):<sup>9</sup>

Table 6.7. THE USE OF SUBJECT CASES WITH *LANGA* “WANT” BY TEN SPEAKERS IN A SMALL CORPUS OF SPONTANEOUS SPEECH

Speaker	Nom. subject		Acc. subject		Dat. subject	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Sp. 1	1	20%	3	60%	1	20%
Sp. 2	0	0%	19	95%	1	5%
Sp. 3	1	16.7%	5	83.3%	0	0%
Sp. 4					x	
Sp. 5					x	
Sp. 6			x			
Sp. 7			x			
Sp. 8			x			
Sp. 9			x			
Sp. 10			x			

As shown here, three of these speakers show signs of intraspeaker variation, whereas the remaining seven do not (there was only one example for each of the speakers using a dative subject). Although the numbers are quite low (except for speaker 2), they show that intraspeaker variation also

<sup>9</sup> The numbering of the speakers is mine. Speakers 1, 2, and 3 are labeled A2, A3, and A4 in Svavarsdóttir’s paper (2011).

occurs in the use of subject case in spontaneous speech, not only in the judgments of these or on the Internet.

Now intraspeaker variation is, of course, not at all restricted to case marking nor to syntactic phenomena. To illustrate this we will next consider phonological production data that show intraspeaker variation which is very similar to the kind observed above: While some of the speakers stick pretty much to one variant of a given phonological variable, others use two variants interchangeably but to different degrees.

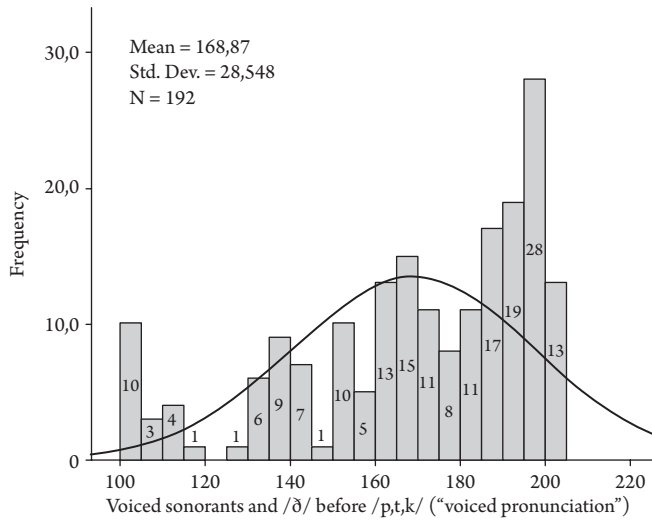
### 4.3 Intraspeaker Variation in Phonology

One of the rather unexpected results of the survey of phonological variation in Icelandic mentioned above (RÍN, see, e.g., Thráinsson & Árnason 1992, Árnason & Thráinsson 2003) was the extensive intraspeaker variation found for many of the phonological variables investigated.<sup>10</sup> It should be emphasized here that this variation was found even when the situation and social context was held constant so it does not have anything to do with socially conditioned dialects. The extent to which it shows up depends, however, on the nature of the phonological variables in question. It would take us too far afield to go into this in any detail, but a demonstration of two cases should suffice to show the similarities to the intraspeaker variation observed in case marking.

Although it has proved to be very difficult to find any geographical variation in Icelandic syntax, such variation can still be found in Icelandic phonology. Two phonological features that basically characterize Northeastern Icelandic are voiced sonorants (i.e., /l,m,n/) and voiced/ð/ before /p,t,k/ (the so-called voiced pronunciation) and aspirated stops after long vowels (the so-called hard pronunciation). The intraspeaker variation of these features can be seen in Figures 6.11 and 6.12 (note that here the means range from 100 (= does not occur at all) to 200 (= occurs in every possible instance)):

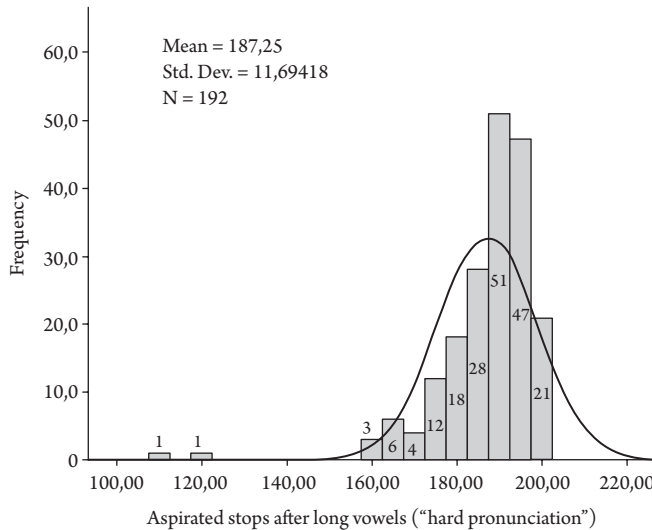
These figures show that there is much greater intraspeaker variation in the voiced pronunciation than there is in the hard pronunciation. This reflects the fact that the former is on the way out, whereas the latter is relatively stable. The pattern observed here is remarkably like the one found in the syntax, although the data come from very different parts of the grammar

<sup>10</sup> Actually, if one asks Google to search for “intraspeaker variation,” it seems that the majority of hits have to do with variation in phonetic detail. The examples to be discussed below are of a different nature, however, since they involve variation in phonological variables that have standardly been believed to define different phonological dialects (or variants) of Icelandic.



**Figure 6.11**  
Distribution of means for voiced sonorants and /ð/ before /p,t,k/ in an area in NE Iceland (N = 192).

and the method of elicitation was radically different (the results from the phonological survey are all based on production data elicited in structured interviews). Hence it is clear that the intraspeaker variation observed in the syntax is neither an artifact of the elicitation method used nor a special characteristic of case marking.



**Figure 6.12**  
Distribution of means for aspirated stops after long vowels in an area in NE Iceland (N = 192).



## 5. CONCLUSION

I would now like to summarize the main results and claims of this article as follows:

- (11) a. Intraspeaker variation is common and pervasive in those aspects of grammar that are undergoing change.
- b. Intraspeaker variation can be observed in (spontaneous) speech production but sometimes even more clearly in (syntactic) judgments.
- c. Intraspeaker variation is probably by nature a transitional stage, caused by inconsistent and conflicting input. Under such circumstances it typically shows up on a scale with a number of speakers at either end of the scale showing very little or no intraspeaker variation (these are the “ideal speakers”) and the rest of the speakers showing varying degrees of intraspeaker variation. This phenomenon needs to be taken seriously in models of grammar.

By the last point I want to claim that when the input (or the primary linguistic data) is relatively consistent and uniform, as it may very well be, there is no reason to expect extensive intraspeaker variation. Hence we should find areas of grammar without any significant intraspeaker variation. But when the input is inconsistent and even conflicting, as it typically is when a change is ongoing, be it a spreading Dative Sickness, spreading devoicing of sonorants before /p,t,k/, or whatever, intraspeaker variation will be a natural outcome. But since most changes eventually reach an endpoint, the relevant inconsistency in the input should disappear in the end and so should the related intraspeaker variation, at least in theory.

With this in mind, we can now go back to the different ideas about variation discussed in section 2 above and try to determine which ones seem most suitable to deal with facts of the sort discussed in this article. The concept of variable rules along the lines suggested by Labov (1972) and his followers seems too performance-oriented, on the one hand, as it can make reference to extralinguistic contextual or situational features. On the other, it does not really seem to be an adequate model of the situation found here, where there is a clear difference between speakers in the “amount” of intraspeaker variation characteristic of their grammars under the same circumstances. The same can be said about the proposals of Biberauer and Richards (2006), on the one hand (“the grammar doesn’t mind”), and Adger and Smith (2010), on the other (“underspecified functional categories”). It seems more promising to seek an account along the lines proposed by Yang (2000, 2004, 2010), which can partly be seen as an extension or further development of the original idea about “competing grammars” proposed by Kroch (1989). Contrary to ideas

argued for by Lightfoot (1999) and Hale (2007), for instance, it does not seem that speakers settle relatively early on a grammar that is consistent and uniform in all respects. Rather, it seems that certain areas of their grammar may remain incompletely specified for a long time, even their whole lifetime. But they are not completely unspecified, either. Some speakers are more likely than others to use voiced sonorants although they do not do so all the time, and some speakers are more likely than others to accept and use dative subjects with experiencer-type verbs although they do not do so all the time. This is an important fact, and it is not just a matter of random performance or performance influenced by some social situation or context. It is a part of these speakers' competence and can be reflected in their (syntactic or phonological) performance and also in their evaluation or judgments of sentences. Hence it needs to be taken into account in our models of linguistic competence, even if it means that we cannot allow ourselves to deal only with ideal speakers but will have to consider other speakers as well.

Finally, there are probably several ways of modeling this aspect of our competence. One question is whether or to what extent this can be related to parameter settings (see the discussions in Yang's work, e.g., 2004, 2010). I find it likely that this may vary from case to case (no pun intended). One way to find out is to investigate whether there is any relationship between variations in different areas, so to speak. If there is such a relationship or correlation, then one might want to look for a suitable parameter, at least if one assumes a fairly standard concept of parameters, such as the ones suggested to account for observed variation within Scandinavian by Holmberg & Platzack (1995) and Bobaljik & Thráinsson (1998), for instance (for somewhat different notions of parameters see, for example, the discussions in Kayne 2005 and in Manzini & Savoia 2011). At present I do not know if there is any correlation between variation in case marking of the sort reported on here and anything else in the grammars of the speakers involved. But I do know that although there is considerable interspeaker and intraspeaker variation in verb placement in Faroese, this variation correlates to some extent with available subject position, availability of transitive expletives and probably also Stylistic Fronting. This suggests that some sort of parametric variation is involved, but it would take us too far afield to go into this here (see Thráinsson 2010).

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