Empirical determinants of grammatical gaps and grammatical inventions

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The identification of a *gap* in the grammatical system or inventories of a language (henceforth *language system*) presupposes the *observation* of such a gap in language use. My presentation is mainly concerned with three aims: i) attempt to understand the kinds of observations that lead to the conclusion that there must be such a gap; ii) make a proposal for the observational heuristics of identifying linguistic gaps, and iii) present a theory of the strategies that speakers employ when confronted with gaps in terms of linguistic creativity, in particular, *grammatical invention*.

The observation of a gap, by necessity, is theory-laden, as it is guided by expectations about the conventionalisation and use of forms. It is the non-fulfillment of such expectations (on what to observe) that leads to the identification of a gap by linguists. The best indicator of conventionalisation is corpus frequency. The thesis that some (expected) unit may not exist in a language predicts its absence from corpora and must be tested with corpus research. But here we need to be careful and distinguish, following the tradition since Saussure, absence from speech and absence from the language system. Rare configurations may still have frequent solutions. This is typical in syntax. Consider (1): While *wh*-extraction out of an embedded clause is rather frequent, with the addition of further subordinate clauses the configuration gets rarer and rarer.

(1)   What do you think [that Paul thinks [that Anne thinks [that John thinks [that Mary suggested __]]]] ?

This has never been seen as problematic, because the acceptability of cases like (1) can still be elicited. The assumption of a single rule of cyclic *wh*-movement is corroborated in the eyes of researchers. So despite its rarity, (1) exemplifies no gap, because it receives a standard solution. Assume now a hypothetical variant of English, English', where in cases with 4+ embeddings like (1) a new construction with *quid* (from Latin, 'what') would be used:

(2)   **Quid** do you think [that Paul thinks [that Anne thinks [that John thinks [that Mary suggested **it**]]]] ?

The source of this solution would have to be located in speakers' general linguistic competence. The *quid*-construction would then be analysed as a kind of ad hoc device outside of grammar (Reis 2017). **But:** there is no principal reason to exclude such an analysis for cyclic *wh*-movement in (1). Speakers might make up such a recursive rule at the very same moment when confronted with a 4+ embedded question. The reason why (1) appears less ad hoc to us is that (1) is constructed *by analogy* to simpler cases. A *failure of analogy* seems to be a further criterion for the identification of a gap. In turn, construction by analogy seems to be sufficient for us linguists to exclude the assumption of a gap. This might be a problematic epistemic aspect of our practice insofar as we obviously privilege construction by analogy over other modes of construction, where in fact these might just be strategies of grammatical creativity which are different but equal in status as solution strategies when confronted with rare configurations. What is necessary, in particular, are empirical criteria that allow us to distinguish cases where construction by analogy is a sign of conventionalisation from those cases where analogy is used as a mechanism of grammatical invention and I will discuss several such cases from the grammar of German in my presentation.

References

Reis, Marga. 2017. Grammatische Variation und realistische Grammatik. In Marek Konopka & Angelika Wöllstein (eds.), Grammatische Variation. Empirische Zugänge und theoretische Modellierung, 255–282. Berlin & Boston: de Gruyter.