

Isomorphism and optionality in language

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Key words: Isomorphism, optionality, cognitive linguistics, sociolinguistics, Construction Grammar

This workshop aims to bring together usage-based functionalists and variationist sociolinguists, two groups that have often been seen as making contradictory claims about the nature of isomorphism and optionality in language. Functionalists tend to consider that language is geared towards exclusive mappings of form and meaning, adhering to principles of *isomorphism* (Haiman 1980: 516), *contrast* (Clark 1987), *no synonymy* (Goldberg 1995: 67), or *no equivalence* (Leclercq & Morin 2023). By contrast, variationists tend to express skepticism towards the “doctrine of form-function symmetry” (Poplack 2018: 7) on the grounds that language is rife with “alternative ways of saying ‘the same’ thing” (Labov 1972: 188). From this perspective, language would instead appear to align with a *principle of optionality* (Szmrecsanyi, Gardner & van Hoey to appear). The tension between these perspectives raises profound questions about how linguistic structures balance cognitive pressures for systematicity with the fluidity of real-world usage.

Through this workshop, we aim to rekindle Hollmann’s (2017: 542) incentive “to bring scholars from both fields around the same table” to explore the extent to which these seemingly divergent perspectives “can be reconciled” (De Smet 2019: 305). Specifically, we seek to examine whether common ground can be established between the principles of isomorphism and optionality, opening avenues for a more integrated understanding of the interplay between form, function and variation in language. For instance, how might the cognitive pressures posited by functionalists - such as economy, optimal expressivity, and communicative efficiency - interact with the sociolinguistic realities of variation and choice? Are the principle of isomorphism and optionality fundamentally complementary, representing different levels or domains of linguistic analysis, or do they reflect deeper theoretical and methodological divides that must be addressed? By addressing these foundational questions, we hope to contribute to a more comprehensive theory of language that accounts for both its structured regularities and its inherent variability, ultimately enriching linguistic research across diverse paradigms.

There are a variety of questions that the opposition between isomorphism and optionality seems to raise. Among other issues, we will consider the following:

What is the scope of isomorphism and optionality? Isomorphism, which predicts a systematic difference in meaning, could be taken to constitute a *principle of no variation* (Uhrig 2015: 331). Leclercq & Morin (2023) contend that this conclusion may be premature, and that the two views do not contradict each other. They propose that the apparent conflict arises from differing focuses: variationists focus on semantic (truth-conditional) content only (Labov 1978: 2), and argue that different ways of expressing the same semantic content is possible; functionalists, by contrast, typically discuss both semantic and pragmatic meaning, and believe that a difference in form should lead to a difference in at least one of those domains, such that two constructions may perfectly be semantically identical but then would have to be pragmatically distinct (Goldberg 1995: 67). This raises the question: what counts as (a difference in) meaning? In a Construction Grammar approach to language, not only semantic but also pragmatic and social types of information are theorised to contribute to the meaning of a construction (Leclercq & Morin to appear). By comparison, variationists seem to view sociolinguistic variation as language-external (Labov 2014: 23). So, do variationists “lack (...) an articulated theory of meanings” (Lavandera 1978: 11), or is the functionalists’ very rich view on meaning (Bolinger 1977: 4) too bloated? Addressing these questions could help clarify the scope and compatibility of the two approaches.

What are isomorphism and optionality principles of? Isomorphism is not presented as a prescriptive rule that speakers need to follow but as the natural outcome of more general cognitive pressures (e.g. *maximised economy* and *maximised expressive power* in Goldberg 1995: 67; *optimal expressivity* in Leclercq, Morin & Pijpops to appear). Does this mean that isomorphism as a ‘principle’ is best understood as a strong tendency rather than an absolute rule? To what extent do these cognitive mechanisms truly (or only) support isomorphism? Are there similar or other cognitive principles that underlie optionality? Likewise, Leclercq & Morin (2023) argue that isomorphism is a property of constructional knowledge and conventions independent of the contingencies of language use, yet language use is precisely the playground of variationists. This begs the additional question of how much the features of conventionality and language use contribute to defining criteria for spelling out the notions of isomorphism and optionality, and their potentially complementary role. Addressing these questions could provide a clearer framework for reconciling the roles of cognitive, conventional, and usage-based factors in the study of linguistic variation and structure.

What kinds of empirical and quantitative evidence bring support or cast doubt on isomorphism and optionality? Besides the theoretical considerations outlined above, it is important to examine how empirical and experimental observations contribute to our understanding of these concepts. There has been a surge of studies in the more recent literature, making use of a wide variety of methods and data sources (e.g. Gardner et al 2021, Levshina & Lorenz 2022, Nijs & Van De Velde 2023, Weber & Kopf 2023, Cai & De Smet 2024, Hotta 2024, Leclercq, Morin & Pijpops to appear). It remains essential to determine how far these findings align with or diverge from the theoretical positions outlined before, and whether they contribute to a more refined understanding of the issues at hand. By focusing on the interplay between theory and data, this workshop seeks to highlight the empirical basis for these competing views and foster discussion on their broader implications for linguistic research, potentially offering new pathways for integrating theoretical and empirical approaches.

The workshop will start with an introduction by the organizers and will be concluded with a final discussion. Please feel free to contact the convenors if you have any further questions.

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