The place of representations

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Variation calls for a theory of language not just as structure but as practice, the interplay of structure and action. This talk will examine the role of representations in variation within a theory of language as social practice.

Variables are indexical signs that link language directly and dynamically to the social world. Variation always involves change, for even if a variable appears stable over time it is fundamentally dynamic. Variation also always involves meaning, indexing social distinctions as they emerge and as they change. This challenges the view of variation as reflecting a fixed social structure. It also challenges the propositional basis of mainstream grammatical theories and coincides with work in semantics on expressive meaning (Potts 2007, Gutzmann & Gärtner 2013).

The talk will begin with a few studies demonstrating the social agency of variation. Rather than trickling down from the social macrostructure, the indexicality of variation is constructed in the give and take of interaction, expressing the continual changes that move the social world along at a local level in a dialectic with the social macrostructure. It will examine variation within Peirce's (Peirce 1931-58) semiotic theory, presenting variables as signs in practice, the product of abductive construal. In such a theory, representations can only be emergent. I propose that representations are best thought of as highly conventionalized construals whose life span depends on multiple factors.

References. Gutzmann, D. & H-M. Gärtner (eds) (2013). *Beyond expressives: explorations in use-conditional meaning*. Leiden, Boston: Brill. • Peirce, C. S. (1931–58). *The collected papers of Charles S. Peirce*. 8 vols., edited by C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss, and A. W. Burks. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. • Potts, C (2007). The expressive dimension. *Theoretical linguistics* 33, 165-197.