

Roeland van Hout

Homo e-loquens

Nature loves variety. Unfortunately, society hates it. *Milton Diamond*

Human beings speak and interact in an impressive number of different languages varieties, and, within these varieties, in very many ways. This huge scale of variation between and within languages seems to be a more pregnant human characteristic (the homo loquens) than being smart (the homo sapiens). The variability of language has led to the formulation of the principle of inherent variation (cf. Weinreich, Labov, & Herzog 1968). Language variation can nevertheless be put aside to focus on the robustness or homogeneity of the internal, underlying grammar (Chomsky; i-language), but I want to argue that we need to address the pervasiveness of variability and changeability of language (Labov; e-language) in a fundamental way, to understand what language is and how language structure evolves.

The current 86 Indo-European languages can be traced back to a common ancestor of 8700 years ago (Gray & Atkinson 2014), which is only about 435 generations, and is an example of the variability and changeability of languages. I will discuss other, recent examples from the Dutch language area to illustrate the extent of variability. These examples relate to sounds, words and grammar.

Changeability and variability can be coped with by human adaptivity in communicative processes, in combination with impressive learning capacities. I will focus on adaptivity processes, also in relation to form-meaning correspondences and semantics. I will argue that human meaning is by its very nature incomplete in interactive processes, in fact driving the changeability of form-meaning relationships.

My conclusion is that unifying, structuring forces in the language variability space come from interactive processes. External forces unify and structure language variation and language. This is amply demonstrated by urban studies on language variation, but also by dialect maps showing the convergent force of social factors.