

Choosing a variant: Unfree variation  
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The advice literature on English grammar, style, and usage is full of cases where it is claimed that two expressions – restrictive relativizers *which* and *that*, sentence-initial *but* and *however*, complementizers *if* and *whether* – are free variants, identical in semantics and discourse function; the advice is then to cease using one of them in certain syntactic contexts (always use *that* for restrictive relatives, always use *but* sentence-initially) or to distinguish them merely stylistically (*if* is informal, *whether* formal, so don't use *if* in formal contexts).

As Bolinger observed long ago, usually these “free variants” turn out to be subtly different in their semantics or discourse function, and often in their syntax as well; and sometimes these differences are related to the prosody of the variants. They are in fact unfree variants.

This seminar investigates an assortment of cases where two or more expressions serving as alternatives seem to be in free variation, differing at most in stylistic value; explores the semantic, discourse function, syntactic, prosodic, and processing factors that favor the choice of one variant over the other; and evaluates claims about the stylistic values of the variants.

This course focuses primarily on lexical variants, while LSA.341, Paraphrase and Usage, focuses primarily on alternative syntactic constructions.

Course Areas: Language Variation, Morphology/Syntax, Semantics/Pragmatics

Prerequisites: Basic level linguistics.