

An interview on linguistic variation with...

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Henk van Riemsdijk is Professor Emeritus, Tilburg University (The Netherlands). His work within the field of theoretical linguistics is widely recognised among linguists all over the world and his contribution to spread and consolidate the generative approach to grammar in Europe was crucial. Among his outstanding list of publications it is perhaps worth highlighting the recent volumes, coedited with Martin Everaert, of *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion of Syntax*, 2nd edition.

Isogloss: From your perspective, what are the relevant levels of abstractness to approach the faculty of language? The standard ones (namely "language," "dialect," and "idiolect")? Others?

Henk van Riemsdijk (HvK): They can all be relevant in their own right. There are certain issues in microvariation that cannot be seriously addressed without taking dialect into consideration. Similarly, many a linguist will have found him/herself in a situation of disagreement about the judgments of the majority of the speakers of his/her language. An idiosyncratic judgment can sometimes be eliminated by discovering, for example, that the deviant judgment results from a teacher's idiosyncratic style requirements at school, or the fact that his/her parents had developed a somewhat idiosyncratic way of talking with each other, or some such thing. On the other hand, if no cause can be found, this may lead to interesting findings in a corpus search. Dismissing the deviant judgment as just an individual quirk should be at the end of the line.

Isogloss: What are the main advantages / reasons to study linguistic variation?

HvK: At the time when virtually all generative linguistic research was done on English, this fact was often used as a criticism of generative grammar. The answer tended to be that in depth study of a single language such as English can reveal a lot about not only the grammar of English but indeed also about general principles of the structure and functioning of grammars in general, i.e. about UG. Nevertheless we now have at our disposal the riches of thousands of languages (though the numbers are alas decreasing), ways of studying them in depth through good field work, through linguistic instruction of the native speakers as well as

the training of thousands of students with diverse native languages in the major linguistics departments around the world. This multiplies the data, the analyses, the generalizations that linguists can work with in their endeavor to uncover the secrets of the deep properties of human language. We should never forget that, despite advances in experimental, in particular neurophysiological, research the major questions that we address in linguistics have to be studied through a blackbox method. That is a tough challenge and we should welcome every expansion of the empirical domains from which we can cull results. This is true for experimental methods, for corpus research and many other approaches, but studying language variation in depth is now and for considerable time to come the most fertile source of progress.

Isogloss: How do you conceive the relation / tension between linguistic variation and linguistic uniformity throughout the years?

HvK: Linguistic uniformity is the result of pressures of mutual intelligibility and of other largely sociological factors. This is just reality that we have to take into account. All I can add to this is that uniformity is often misleading. It brings to my mind an example I found very instructive in this regard. In the late 70s and 80, when Hungarian linguists started working on Hungarian grammar from a generative perspective, many claimed that there were no dialects. This seemed quite incredible to me. Hungary has 10 million inhabitants and is almost three times the size of the Netherlands, a country in which there is considerable dialectal variation. Switzerland is less than half the size of Hungary and only about 60% of the population speaks some variety of German as their native language. And Switzerland is notoriously rich in the variety of (Swiss) German dialects spoken there. It has never been completely clear what led to the Hungarian linguists' claim that Hungarian had no dialects. My wild guess is that, again largely for sociological reasons the sense of unity and uniformity was felt to be important: speakers of a non-IE language surrounded by IE languages may sense a threat of losing this core element of their national heritage, especially after having been part of the Austro-Hungarian empire in which German was the dominant language. With growing self-confidence the realization emerged that Hungarian does indeed have dialects. Studying their differences will enrich our insight into the fascinating properties of Hungarian and its varieties.

Isogloss: In your opinion, what are the contributions of dialectology (both traditional and present-day studies) to the study of language?

HvK: In my view (and in that of many others) the distinction between language and dialect is largely sociological. In that sense it is of interest to certain subdisciplines of linguistics such as sociolinguistics, but not to theoretical grammarians. There is no difference between looking at the differences between the dialects of Zurich and Berne in Switzerland and the differences between the languages of Sweden and Norway which are mutually intelligible to roughly the same degree but happen to have the status of languages due to the fact that they belong to politically different nations. Note, though, that the latter case abstracts away from the considerable dialectal diversity within each of these language domains.

Isogloss: What are the relevant sources to obtain evidence to study language and its variation (speakers' own competence, corpora, experiments, non-linguistic disciplines, etc.)? Is any of them potentially more relevant than the others?

HvK: There is no principled difference of any kind between these various sources of evidence. The most important difference, perhaps, is a very practical one. Some cost a lot of money to create (corpora, for example) and some take an awfully long time for the data to be gathered. In some cases that cannot be avoided, but in many other cases it is quite unnecessary as introspective evidence, subject to the social control of the linguistic community is perfectly adequate. An interesting study in this regard is a paper (currently still under review, I believe) by Jon Sprouse, Carson T. Schütze and Diogo Almeida from 2013 entitled Assessing the reliability of journal data in syntax: Linguistic Inquiry 2001-2010, available at <http://ling.auf.net/lingbuzz/001352>. In this article the authors show for 146 phenomena discussed in 10 years of issues of the journal Linguistic Inquiry that experimental methods (magnitude estimation and forced choice tasks) which replicate the data given in the articles in question to a very large extent: for 139 of the phenomena the matching was at 95% with an error margin of 5%.

Isogloss: Much current theoretical research is complemented with corpora and statistical / experimental analyses. In fact, dialectology also resorts to experimental and field work methods, traditionally. What do you think is the position of theoretical approaches to language in such scenario?

HvK: I have nothing to add to my answer under point 5.

Isogloss: Why do you think dialectal studies have typically focused on the lexicon, phonetics, and morphology? Are we in a better position now (than decades ago) to carry out studies on syntactic variation? If so, why?

HvK: Part of the answer is undoubtedly that traditional grammars were usually largely on phonology and morphology and had little to say about syntax. This is true of school grammars, for example, and also for diachronic research, which can rely quite confidently on morphological data but lacks the possibility of asking informants judgments about syntax, which is extremely hard to avoid. In some cases corpora can help to a certain extent, but in many others the relevant data simply cannot be retrieved. We definitely are in a much better position to study syntactic variation now and indeed a very considerable percentage of syntactic research is explicitly or implicitly about syntactic macro- or micro-variation.

Isogloss: Some recent studies argue that it is diversity what truly characterizes human language, often implying that the universal nature of language is wrong (or that some allegedly specific traits, such as recursion, are not present in all languages). Is this scenario a residue of the fact that the I-language / E-language distinction has not been understood? Is it something else?

HvK: It's largely an ideological issue, I think. Some linguists are deeply relativist. If we put a Ferrari on the Moon, is it still the same Ferrari. Clearly it will behave

quite differently on the Moon than on Earth, but in its structure and intrinsic properties it is still the same Ferrari. If you wish to stress diversity you will be impressed by the difference in behavior in radically different circumstances, if you search for commonalities you'll study the intrinsic properties. Generativists are of the latter type: we are impressed by how much is common to the world's languages and we like to go to the bottom of these commonalities and try to draw conclusions from them about how language acquisition can work, how language evolved, how it sets mankind apart from the animal world, etc. My own feeling is that if you are keen on only finding differences, you lack a certain curiosity, an interest in trying to solve such big questions as language acquisition and evolution.

Isogloss: Within the Generative Enterprise, the research stemming from the Principles and Parameters framework has proven very fruitful to study both variation and uniformity. However, this trend has been subject to much criticism, on both theoretical and empirical grounds. In your opinion, what is the status of "Parameter Theory" nowadays?

HvK: First I am glad to see that the notion of parameter is on its way back. Ian Roberts and his group at Cambridge University have been particularly active in this respect, and so has, in a quite different fashion, Giuseppe Longobardi and his group at York University. Second, I have a feeling that the notion of parameter lost some of the popularity it had in the Principles and Parameters framework because under Minimalism the focus was so strongly on so-called Narrow Syntax. The idea, as I see it, was to focus almost exclusively on the one big question 'What makes Man Unique in the Animal World', that is, what specific genetic property has endowed man with language and is lacking in the other animal species? Recursion is the predominant answer. OK, but even assuming this is the right answer, language is so much richer. I do not mean to say this in the way a biologist marvels at the almost endless variety of flora and fauna. What I mean is that there are huge numbers of phenomena that have intriguing properties, often badly understood, subject to interesting patterns of variation among languages, that are falling by the wayside due to the over-emphasis on narrow syntax. Take ellipsis, or take long distance anaphora, or take default case marking, or whatever. These areas of study are just as likely to result in interesting abstract principles that may help understand why these phenomena have the properties that they have. And if these accounts reach a satisfactory level of abstractness, traceable to some genetic property or some so-called third factor, i.e. some principle of physical or biological design, I do not give a hoot about whether this is a property that we share with certain animals or not, or whether it is the consequence of some principle of design found elsewhere in the physical world. On the contrary, suppose it is a genetic endowment that man shares with part of the animal world, that raises interesting questions such as why those animals did not develop language the way we did.

Isogloss: What are the challenges that we will have to address in the following decades when it comes to study language and its variation?

HvK: Pursuing what I say above in point 9, I believe that a broad (as opposed to narrow) interpretation of what syntax (and grammar more generally) is about

should regain its full interest. That students and researchers should be encouraged to tackle difficult analytical problems and curious generalizations, study them from as many angles as possible, in particular study their similarities and differences in broad varieties of languages, both at the micro-and macro-level, and wherever possible formulate hypotheses on the fundamental abstract principles that account for them.