

An interview on linguistic variation with...

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Joan Veny i Clar is Professor Emeritus of Catalan Philology at the Universitat de Barcelona. He is one of the most important dialectologists of Catalan, with prominent works such as the 1978 monograph *Els parlars catalans* (“The Catalan dialects”), although he has also done extensive work in the diachronic linguistics and etymology of this language. He is a member of the Institut d’Estudis Catalans, the Catalan Academy of Science and Humanities, where he currently leads the project *Atlas lingüístic del domini català*, ALDC (“Linguistic atlas of the Catalan domain”), accessible at <http://aldc.espais.iec.cat/>

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”)? Any other?

Joan Veny (JV): I like to take as basis the concept of historical language or diatopic language, that is, the whole set of dialects, a diasystem of natural languages. This set is implemented in each dialect. Thus, Catalan, as a historic language, is realised as Valencian, Majorcan, North-Western Catalan, etc., and in each of their speakers (idiolects). The abstraction is to be found, in my view, in the standard variety, in spite of its conventional character.

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

JV: I will deal with geographic variation, since it is the kind that I have studied. 1) If a dialect is the basis of the standard variety, it is important to know the features of this dialect and assess the differences between the former and the latter (French, Italian, etc.); in the case of Catalan, a language synthesising the major dialects, all of them have to be known. 2) The history of literature of all culture languages offers, in its old stages, literary products written in a dialectal variety. Given the general stability of dialects, they have to be studied in order to understand the language of the work in question, which is often splashed with archaisms. 3) Still within the literary domain, in the case of anonymous works, we can find out, thanks to the knowledge of dialects, the dialectal area to which the author belonged. For Catalan that has happened, for instance, in the case of the translation of the *Diàlegs de Sant Gregori*, associated to Northern Catalan and in the case of the *Speculum al foder*, associated to Central Catalan. 4) Dialects often

represent frozen stages of the evolution of the common or literary language. For instance, Latin *LACTE* ‘milk’ has yielded *llet* through *lleit*, preserved in Ribargoçan and Pallarese Catalan; the article *el* ‘the’ originates from *lo*, maintained in North-Western Catalan, on the basis of phrases like *La pols de lo camí* ‘the dust of the way’ > *La pols del camí* > *El camí* ‘the way’; the pronominal combination of accusative + dative (*el me dónes* ‘it.ACC me.DAT give.2SG’) versus the more modern one, involving the linear order dative > accusative (*me’l dónes* ‘me.DAT=it.ACC give.2SG’), is preserved in Majorcan. 5) The knowledge of dialects widens the lexical reservoir of a language. 6) Dialectology is a solid foundation for etymological researches. For instance, the etymon for *penegal* ‘rockfish’ was discovered thanks to the Blanes variant *pelegal* ‘a fish that lives in the *pèlag*, the deep ocean’. 7) When codifying a particular language, dialectal contributions can be decisive. Thus, for example, the graphic form of the feminine endings in *-es* was established as the definite solution on the basis of the forms found in Western Catalan. 8) Lexical creativity finds in dialects the strength of a rare originality, together with their archaic character.

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

JV: 1) Historic grammars need dialects to illustrate, with more examples, the “laws” of linguistic evolution, sometimes with “secondary laws”, such as the centralisation, in Catalan, of stressless initial /o/ (*clotell* > *clatell* ‘back of the neck’). 2) The histories of the language, in order to account for the pression of adstrata (Aragonese and Occitan in the case of Peninsular Catalan; Sardinian, in the case of Algherese Catalan) or of borrowings from other languages have to resort to dialects, for instance, for aragonesisms in Valencian or anglicisms in Minorcan. 3) The method of geolinguistics makes it possible to trace dialectal fragmentation, the boundaries and relationships between dialects; dialectometry, with its quantitative method, complements the qualitative method.

4 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?

JV: At a descriptive level, monographs and linguistic atlases are the basic sources. The former can furnish an exhaustive description of a given dialect, with an open inventory, while the latter offer a global snapshot of what is spoken in a territory, but with a limited questionnaire. Both resort to speakers: monographs may have into account the diversity of informants, of different age and gender (a sociolinguistic approach); atlases are based on a few speakers who, by virtue of their membership in the same generation, of the rural character of their environment and of their attested sedentariness represent the, so to say, general way of speaking in each town or village. At a diachronic (and partially synchronic) level, historical dictionaries and linguistic corpora are useful to get to know the use of certain words in the last century or in the Middle Ages. Popular culture (beliefs, superstitions, etc.) are a useful complement to dialectal studies. For instance, the words *eixavuiro*, *vuiro* and *uís* ‘sneeze’ can only be accounted for on the grounds of the belief in the value of the sneeze as an augury. Also

useful is knowledge of the environment, as in a renewed version of the old *Wörter und Sachen* movement: it is necessary to know the features, habitat, dimension, customs, etc., of birds, fish, plants, insects, etc., with all their varied names, to discover their etymology or their motivation.

Isogloss: Why do you think that 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?

JV: The lexical, phonetic and morphological components are more “visible”, more salient in the discourse. After ten minutes of dialogue with a speaker, one realises that s/he speaks a different dialect on the grounds of those components, while a distinctive syntactic feature will hardly have come up. The reason is that syntactic dialectal distinctions are more tenuous, less marked than phonetic or lexical distinctions. That is why dialectal syntax has been the poor relation of dialectology. Lately it has been revitalised, mainly due to Generative Grammar.

Isogloss: Some recent studies argue that it is diversity what truly characterizes human language, often implying that the universal nature of language is wrong. What is your position in this debate?

JV: Dialectology and the doctrine of universals are truly antipodes. I personally do not find interesting universal statements such as, for instance, that all languages are characterised by a double articulation (involving meaning and meaningless units), that every language features a limited number of phonemes or that the role of metaphore is universal in semantic evolution. I am aware that N. Chomsky, J. H. Greenberg or B. Comrie have dealt with this issue, but I (and maybe many) do not find this field of study interesting.

Isogloss: Could you briefly describe which are the phases in the creation of a linguistic atlas? Which are the main challenges to be faced?

JV: First a questionnaire has to be produced, and after testing it in previous surveys, it is applied to the localities, chosen through a set of criteria: equal distance between localities, type of demography, rural or urban nature, etc. Several speakers conforming to certain conditions (speakers of advanced age, middle age or, if the territory is not too wide, as the questionnaire, of all three generations) are questioned. The answers are recorded and transcribed. The surveys must be revised, and the cases for which the transcription is doubtful must be listened to again. Then a database is compiled. Finally, the materials are mapped and can be published online. The atlas can be either a set of point-representing maps (showing one or more answers for each particular point) or an interpretive atlas, in which the different isoglosses are represented (in colour) and each word or dialectal trait receives a comment: etymological, motivational, semantic, phonetic. For instance, a comment can include information about the possible dividing force of a mountain range, the influence of a river in communications, the diffusion power of urban varieties, the influence of adstrata, etc. The ALDC is an example of the former type of atlas, and the PALDC [*Petit Atlas lingüístic del domini català*, “Little linguistic atlas of the Catalan domain”], an example of the latter type.

The main challenge of dialectology is the fact that dialects are losing their vitality, due to the loss of population in many localities, the disappearance of referents of traditional culture (ways of sowing, farming implements, concepts such as “bundle [of cereal ears]”, the parts of the yolk or the plough, etc.), even certain physical conditions such as chilblains (nowadays almost completely gone), and the influence of standard language, which tends to homogenisation. In spite of that, certain dialects keep their strength. People adhere to their variety, are proud of their words, participate in dialectal contests (such as the recent one “Com en dius” [“How do you call that?”], organised by Òmnium) or shows in television their most distinctive words through the speakers of each locality (“Paraules en ruta” [“Words along the way”], on the Catalan Television).

Isogloss: In which sense does contact between two or more languages, as in the Iberian Peninsula, affect the dialectological description of one of them?

JV: Upon undertaking the description of a Catalan dialect, for instance, it is easy to realise that, due to contact with Spanish, interfering elements have undoubtedly settled in the system, such as *acera* ‘pavement’ for *vorera*, *averiguar* ‘find out’ for *escatir/aclarir*, etc. More than 300 years of lack of official status for Catalan and prosecution during Franco’s times have left their imprint on our language. After the arrival of democracy and the restauration of media and schooling in Catalan —not carried out to the desired plenitude, though— there has been a struggle to bring the recovered language closer to its genuineness at a formal level, and the problematic colloquial language vs. standard language dichotomy has arisen: the former is spoken within the family, in cafes, etc., and peppered with interferences; the latter is selective, elevated, appropriate in formal ceremonies, freer from interferences and defined by the dictionary. Some means of mass communication, aiming at bringing the colloquial register nearer to the formal register, would desire to incorporate into the standard variety a series of foreign elements that are frequent in everyday speech. But the idea is not shared by those circles most faithful to tradition.

Isogloss: To what extent does the “vertical” extension of standard varieties through mass media (social networking websites, television, radio, cinema, etc.) affect dialectal variation? Is it conceivable that languages end up as homogenous, without variation?

JV: It has to be acknowledged that the dialects of the Catalan domain have survived during the last 300 years until the end of Francoist Spain thanks (sic) to the status of Spanish as the only official language and to the fact that illiteracy was widespread until the beginning of the XX century. Two languages coexisted in diglossia: Catalan, the B language, the colloquial language, and Spanish, the A language, the formal language. Catalan not being a standard —in the absence of schooling and of means of communication— the spoken language could in principle not draw closer to a non-existent standard. Once Catalan was introduced in schools and in mass media a tendency to homogenisation undoubtedly appeared in the cultivated, formal register. This tendency is stronger in the Principality of Catalonia than in the Balearic Islands and the Valencian Country. But variation will endure, if only weakened.

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

JV: The challenges depend on the nature of the linguistic domains considered. In France, an abruptly centralising linguistic policy has swept away not only the dialects of the *langue d'oïl*, the ancestral home of French (e.g.: *ep*, *ef*, *es*, etc., have been completely replaced by *abeille* 'bee'), but also other linguistic domains within "the Hexagon", such as Occitan or Catalan: "unité" prevails over "fraternité" and dialects manifest themselves only residually in "regional French". By contrast, in Italy dialects usually coexist with the official language, Italian, in diglossia. Catalan shows a distinctive trait: in spite of the attempts to annihilate it during the dictatorships, it has kept alive until today and because of the homogeneity of the diatopic, historic language, comprising both constitutive and consecutive dialects, it is characterised not by a monodialectal model, but by a participative, compositional model, in which the main dialects partake in some way or another. This is why certain diatopic elements are part of the written standard language (particularly more so since the 1995 edition of the *Diccionari de l'Institut d'Estudis Catalans*, DIEC) and other more numerous elements are part of the oral standard, either in the general domain or, notably, in limited domains —cf., e.g., the use of *tereseta* 'puppet' beside the more general *titella* or *putxinel·li*. In conclusion: a black future for dialects in France, survival albeit under diglossia in Italy, vitality within the Catalan area, favoured by the Proposal for an Oral Standard hosting dialectal forms that are endowed with prestige in their respective zone. Valencian includes more of these forms due to the inclusivist attitude of the Acadèmia Valenciana de la Llengua, not always in agreement with the Institut d'Estudis Catalans.