An interview on linguistic variation with …

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Juan Uriagereka is a Professor at the University of Maryland (College Park) and a recipient of the Euskadi Prize for Research (2001). His work within theoretical linguistics and linguistic variation is well-known. He has contributed, for instance, to the emergence of biolinguistic approaches to language. Among his publications it is worth highlighting *Rhyme and Reason: An Introduction to Minimalist Syntax* (MIT Press, 1998), *Derivations. Exploring the Dynamics of Syntax* (Routledge, 2002), *Syntatic Anchors: On Semantic Structuring* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), and *Spell-Out in the Minimalist Program* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

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?

JU: All of those notions seem relevant to me. I happen to have grown with influences from three different communities, maybe even four: the Galician, the Basque, the Spaniard, and the Gypsy community to some extent, more indirectly. All of those have enriched my life and I care about how they present themselves through their dialects. That very word is contentious. I'm old enough to remember, especially for Galician, discussion of whether it was a dialect of Spanish or even Portuguese . . . Not to speak of Caló, many of whose terms were every day life in my soccer games in the neighborhood. A Romani dialect with Spanish terms? The other way around? Neither? These are charged pre-theoretical notions, and as far as I am concerned, the number one priority is to preserve these cultural manifestations. Number two priority is using them to understand ourselves better. That's where you move into language, the language faculty. In my view, following Chomsky, there is one language: the human language. That's what we are all trying to study. It manifests itself in a myriad dialects, some of which have an army behind, to quote Max Weinreich (those are called languages, plural). Each of the speakers of such dialects, often multilingual ones like the members of my family and most families in the world, speak their own idiolect. That's what any of our readers carry in their heads. Do you need more? I don't know: I think that's plenty, with our level of understanding . . .

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

JU: Half of the world's languages are in danger of disappearing within our lifetimes. In fact, most of the surviving ones will be from only a couple of "language families" (if you want another term for your previous question), which right there makes most of the versions of ourselves immaterial. I try as best I can to speak to my kids about their ancestry, the historical aspects that, say, led Spain to a Civil War, the struggles for social change, anarchism… These are topics that I've literally heard about over the kitchen fire, in large part because there was a time when it was illegal to even talk about them. Now it isn't: but they've become irrelevant. For me at least, a child of the so-called "transition", this was once every day life, which is what moved me to Chomsky's thinking through a book edited by Carlos Otero that I was luckily given when I turned seventeen. In my view this cultural richness is the very first reason to keep diversity alive, to study it, fight for it, to enjoy it. I have no problems with any of that—only with then becoming possessive about our version of ourselves: patronizing, self-centered, arrogant. That is, I suppose, what drives us into, in the end, countries or empires. I have little patience for that, since everywhere in the world I've been, I've been treated with equal understanding, once people could see beyond my features or my accent, and gave me a chance to explain myself or talk about my own people. It is the human perspective that shines through the diversity that makes us unique. I don't see either aspect as contradictory.

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

JU: We are a wonderful mess. My best friends and I, my loved ones in my family… always argue. I don't think you can really appreciate someone if you're not honest with them, and sooner or later (when you tell them what you take to be a truth, which they don't appreciate, or vice-versa) that turns into tension. But from the tension comes an examination of reality, and occasionally even new structures. In my own doctoral thesis I worked on the languages I knew and loved, which were not very well known at the time. I tried to show how some phenomena that my academic elders (for instance Mitxelena) had observed fit into the picture that was beginning to emerge then, which we now call Minimalism. I was only one among several, a whole generation of linguists and philologists, who created the wonderful explosion of linguistics that we have seen in so many places in Iberia. I am just the errant gypsy that didn't return, but I carry their teachings with me wherever I go. I think, in any case, that it is the responsibility of linguists from diverse backgrounds to, first, learn their craft with the best teachers (I count my blessings because mine were the likes of Howard Lasnik or Esther Torrego); but next they must bring their language to the fore, with good manners but also passion and honesty, whether it fits the picture or it doesn't. It is, in turn, the responsibility of the linguistic community to take these efforts seriously. The beacon of that was, for Basque linguists and many others, the late Ken Hale. Talk about a genius of respect for the other! So much so, that Ken was able to talk to you in your own language. That is rare; but even if you need translation, remember: don't ever look down on another human being, unless it is to help them rise from the ground where they have fallen.

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

JU: Linguistic studies always *start* in dialectology because we are curious, first, about our own community. This was certainly the case historically: Sanskrit, Hebrew, Chinese, Greek, Latin, Arab grammarians studied the languages of their communities. It is only much later, probably with the School of Translators in Toledo in the thirteenth century, at least in Iberia, that you start *comparing* languages, as you translate knowledge from one form to the other. Think about the lesson there, though: before there was a single, unified, Spain (a nineteenth century concept and legal reality), there was a school of wise people working together in a wonderful city, translating back and forth from Arabic, to Hebrew, to Latin . . . The king responsible for that, Alphonse, wrote poems in Galician. He was an astronomer too, who Spanish modern historians complained was so interested in gazing at the stars that he dropped his crown in the process! So anyway, philology is, first, dialectal—then it becomes dialectical. When you start asking about what is common between your dialect and your neighbor's, how to tell your joke in his or her terms, what you would need to say to woo a loved one in a different language, and so on. Eventually you start asking about the commonalities, which of course are many. Some obvious (all languages have verbs and nouns and so on), some less so (all languages have recursion…). These two aspects have to co-exist. You can't really preserve a language without writing it down, especially nowadays. At that point you need your field workers, your dialectologists, your philologists, the wonderful wanderers that get their back pack and start walking to the next village, and meet with the elders and share bread. In the process you distribute respect and understanding. Eventually, you think about it all.

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?

JU: I distinctly remember the moment I read Jacobson writing something like "I am a linguist; nothing linguistic is alien to me", at the end of his article on linguistics and poetics. I think he was profoundly right in paraphrasing Terentius this way. I am a linguist because I know I am human, and therefore everything linguistic, which is to say everything human . . . concerns me. So please: let's bring evidence *from wherever we can.* Let's never chastise evidence! I am old enough to have seen some laugh about the other's evidence. Please don't. I deeply, deeply respect the work of linguists, wherever it comes from—even if, or perhaps especially if, I disagree with whatever conclusions someone may associate to the evidence. That's a different matter: how to interpret the evidence. We are *merely* human, so we are often wrong. But evidence? What's the problem with that? To me disrespecting evidence is like disrespecting food that someone may offer you. It's a sin. And I say that with all my passion and coming from an agnostic perspective, thank God: a sin against linguistics.

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?

JU: I know that people fight over this, and for some it should all be corpora and statistics and for other all of that is superficial. Interestingly, there are few folks out there who suspect that the rapidity and (to some extent) globality with which we conduct linguistic computations suggest that we may be dealing with a quantum system of some sort. If you hold a view along these lines, it is really a bad idea to laugh at corpora, even if you are seeking a computational analysis of, more or less, the traditional sort. (I mean, Turing computability.) Obviously corpora are just a snapshot. But they are still real for what they are: the reflex of an intricate reality. Of course, the corpora are nothing without the analysis, and at that point you need a theory. For what it's worth, my own proposes something admittedly quite radical: the *nature* of the relations among the concepts that you somehow articulate into words in your mind is statistical. I know I'm not the first to say anything like that; for instance, Paul Smolensky has been defending a view along these lines from a connectionist perspective. My view isn't connectionist: I am a boring syntactician working with Universal Grammar. Still: my work with Roger Martin is essentially built on the idea that, when push comes to shove, lexical dependencies yield networks which are best understood in quantum terms, at which point you have something rather concrete to say, for starters, about those bizarre chain occurrences (objects that appear in multiple places at once and collapse into a given configuration when you interpret them). I could be (very) wrong about this. But shouldn't we give ourselves the chance to try? If so, why should I ignore what corpus folks can offer me?

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?

JU: Long ago, centuries, we figured out the parts of speech, the alphabets and syllables, etc. We, linguists, gave that to humanity: imagine doing math without writing! Language is a very complex phenomenon, though. Until we understood about the nature of evolution (yesterday), we thought of it as a divine gift. Now we hope (largely through recursion and similar such devices) that perhaps it is time to understand its internal aspects, those that lead to thought and other inner secrets of human nature. Some of these we know through introspection, and go back to the tradition of logic. Others, we begin to unearth through the comparative study of languages or the neurobiology and genetics of other animals. It is all happening in front of our eyes. As progress ensues, the questions deepen. We don't just talk about the fact that your language has more vowels than mine or mine has tones and yours doesn't, but we start worrying, also, about whether you can *elbow your way out of the party* in your language, and if not, why not. Is this an accident or a deep property of the system? If the latter, what does it say about the system as such, that it can vary in this particular way? I actually think one day, if we manage not to have destroyed all our languages or all our records, we may have the equivalent of a periodic table of sorts, of what are possible ways of realizing forms within human cognition.

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?

JU: The whole point of science is to understand what's common in your phenomenology, so that you can show how it follows from fundamental laws. Diversity as such is never the goal, but *what you need to explain* if your system is clever and deductive, and this is true in cosmology, chemistry, biology or wherever you look. The only way in which language would be different is if the sciences that pertain to thought work differently from everything we've been doing for centuries. Once you are in that frame of mind, you find what you find, probably surprising stuff if the theory is any good. In that regard, take recursion. It is a big deal because it is the only known treatment of creativity, or how to come up with unlimited thoughts while being a limited creature. The claim that Pirahã doesn't have recursion is highly surprising, if all the other known languages do. I mean, it could be, logically speaking, that after this bizarre situation is found, all of a sudden recursion-less languages start popping out across the world, and after all we were wrong in thinking that creativity is a linguistic trait or recursion the way to deal with it. Fine: Where are those other languages? Reality is probably more mundane. We know that some languages have a systematic distinction between hypotactic and paratactic dependencies (often manifesting it terms of subjunctive vs. indicative moods), while others only present rampant hypotaxis. So I suppose it is possible that the parameter is more nuanced and still another class of languages only presents parataxis, not real clausal embedding. Does this mean the language has no recursion? At best it would mean that the putative recursive structures do not manifest themselves hypotactically, so you go look for them elsewhere. The brouhaha relates only to the controversies that surround Chomsky's work, and the contentious consequence of affirming that something like recursion must be innate. The bottom line, though, is that humans have a pretty unique ability, which is extraordinarily rich and sophisticated. Concentrating on how it differs from culture to culture is fine as a way to give us a better understanding of what the thing amounts to. But to claim that that is its essence is, well, incomprehensible to me.

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?

JU: Consider where the theory was coming from: the Royaumont encounter prior to the Pisa Lectures. Since I a most familiar with Noam Chomsky's work that I co-edited, let me quote a passage from his contribution:

The approach largely emerged from intensive study of a range of languages, but as in the early days of generative grammar, it was also suggested by developments in biology — in this case, François Jacob's ideas about how slight changes in the timing and hierarchy of regulatory mechanisms might yield great superficial differences (a butterfly or an elephant, and so on). The model seemed natural for language as well: Slight changes in parameter settings might yield superficial variety, through interaction of invariant principles with parameter choices.

I can't really find anything to object to in this proposal, either in biology or in language. Of course, it is a very broad program, particularly when the "regulatory mechanisms" as such are still poorly understood in either instance. Much of the criticism of this proposal has been based on the fact that parameters in the literature are fraught with counterexamples. So probably those examples of parameters were as shallow as early attempts in the life sciencies, prior to the current understanding in terms of molecular biology. In fact, by the nature of the enterprise, any "parametric theory" will have to evolve with the times, as our understanding of the language faculty matures. As I said, I think the faculty is considerably deeper than we have assumed, going into matters of matrix mechanics of the sort arising within Hilbert spaces. If any of that is even remotely true, it will force a different view of what the relevant parameters amount to. For example, the size of relevant matrices when they get "lexicalized" may vary. In any case, what's the alternative? Unless you don't think the language faculty exists, in which case, of course, you expect "endless forms", whether beautiful or ugly . . . So my view is that if we didn't have a conception already in terms of parameters, we'd have to invent one. Luckily, the proposal is already there, so we "only" need to work it out.

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

JU: Without a doubt, the main challenge is loss of language diversity—everything else is dwarfed by comparison. This is a human tragedy, comparable to the loss of ecosystems. Ironically, I think the only chance we have at preserving the richness of human culture is enhancing the value of human decency. It isn't easy. I get very angry when I feel my culture being insulted. Irrationally so, not sure why. So I understand nationalism, I suppose, and going to war about it, which we've been witnessing for centuries, if not millennia. Perhaps it is human nature too, an outgrowth of complexity or God only knows what. One thing is clear though: we are reaching a limit. We live in a very fragile environment that is ready to explode. My colleague Bill Dorland once asked an audience to consider a jar full of bacteria that reproduce by doubling in size every minute; if the jar will be entirely full precisely at noon, what time will it be when it is precisely half-full? After the initial puzzlement, some kid in the audience said: "Eleven fifty nine." That's the situation we're at right now: eleven fifty nine and the clock ticking. Like the bacteria, we are happily reproducing with the jar "half-empty" . . . All indicators suggest that the society we have created (we, meaning the First World) is not sustainable. We have multiple atrocities going every day to add spice to the meat brewing, which the physicists have been warning us about for decades. It is a double whammy: we are destroying the planet *and* the human cultures that

might give us a chance to find a different way. Perhaps we deserve it, maybe we are an evolutionary monster. But if that's the case, all we have to do is let the clock tick, it'll all take care of itself. If we want a different fate, we need to think, and do it fast, and with a different attitude. That starts with the way we relate to one another as academics. If we succeed at creating a different climate, one of cooperation and creativity, perhaps, just perhaps, we might begin to ask ourselves how to open the jar, if it indeed has an opening . . .