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An interview on linguistic variation with...

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Questions sent: 11-05-2015
Answers received: 14-08-2015

Leonie Cornips is affiliated to the Department of Language Variation, Meertens Institute, Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences and is professor in the Department of Literature and Art, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Maastricht University. She is a researcher in variationist linguistics and has extensively worked on the morphosyntactic variation in new varieties of Dutch, but also on bilingualism, bilingual acquisition and idiolects. Her work includes a wide range of morphosyntactic topics as gender, aspectual markers, argument structure and verbal clusters. Her most recent research projects deal with vocabulary acquisition by young bidialectal children and their cognitive developments and the construction of social and local identities through language practices in the Dutch province of Limburg.

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?

I'm working within the variationist sociolinguistics paradigm. According to Labov (2010), “the central dogma of sociolinguistics (is) that the community is conceptually and analytically prior to the individual. This means that in linguistic analysis, the behavior of an individual can be understood only through the study of the social groups of which he or she is a member. Following the approach outlined in Weinreich et al. 1968, language is seen as an abstract pattern located in the speech community and exterior to the individual. (...) The human language faculty, an evolutionary development rooted in human physiology, is then viewed as the capacity to perceive, reproduce and employ this pattern.”

In my research, the level of abstractness concerns idiolects and, in particular, syntactic variation located within the idiolect. But the phenomenon of intra-individual variation is always examined in relation to other individuals or groups the speaker identifies with, etc.

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

First of all, we cannot study anything else than variation since variation is the essential property of language and it is the Faculty of Language (i.e. the linguistic system, understood as abstract processes and representations) that brings about variation. It is no longer controversial to claim that properties of individual grammars differ. To cite Kayne (1996:xv-xvi): “(...) there must be many more varieties of English than is

usually assumed. In fact, if it is true that no two English speakers have the same (syntactic) grammar, then the number of varieties of English/distinct grammars of English must be at least as great as the number of native speakers of English. Extrapolating to the world at large, one would reach the conclusion that the number of syntactically distinct languages/dialects is at least as great as the number of individuals presently alive (i.e. more than 5 billion).”

The fact that we even imagine the possibility of studying something else than linguistic variation reveals that most linguists consider language as a homogenous fixed and discrete entity. But the idea that there exist speakers who are essentially monolingual is entirely problematic and the ideological result of European nation-state formation. Monolingualism is an invention in Europe and exported through colonialism in other parts of the world (see among many others Heller 2007 and Makoni and Pennycook 2007).

Second, the study of syntactic variation is crucial to understand why ‘language’ changes continuously, when and where (actuation problem formulated by Weinreich et al. 1968) and in which contexts. Finally, central questions in current syntactic research are: (i) What are the limits of syntactic variation for the individual speaker? and (ii) Where is the locus of syntactic variation in the grammar model? In my opinion, intraspeaker variation is the most challenging kind of variation to examine in order to enhance theoretical models. After sixty years of powerful theory development about the internal organization of grammar, the idealized monolingual speaker-hearer environment should be left aside and, instead, generative insights should be tested in the realm of language use where this internal organization has its most complex output (Cornips 2015).

How do you conceive the relation between linguistic variation and linguistic uniformity throughout the years?

E-language as a social and I-language as a psychological construct do not exist independently of one another, but their interaction influences the grammars of speakers and the way they speak. The multilayered relationships between language as a social product (variation) and language as “grammar” (uniformity) shape continuously language norms and in turn language norms influence ‘language’ and ‘grammars’. These norms are crucial since they determine which linguistic elements are selected (or not selected) by speakers in specific contexts and, consequently, relate to the central question of how people use language in their daily lives (social practices) and how their grammar is organized. The norms, the selection of linguistic elements and the daily practices of people influence one another continuously (see the “total linguistic fact” by Silverstein 1985). This “holistic” view of language is the only one that can explain how individual grammars are restricted and at the same time how individuals are able to overcome these restrictions in specific situated contexts. A combined approach into the issues of linguistic variation and linguistic uniformity enables us to predict why some structures are more resistant to syntactic variation and change than others and the route(s) individuals may take to overcome these syntactic “restrictions”. In this process, the interpretation and evaluation of linguistic forms through interaction is of crucial importance in the acceptance of the so-called ungrammatical constructions.

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

The contributions of dialectology are huge at the moment when considering the recent studies into geographical micro-variation or micro-parametric syntax that is the comparative study of minimal different syntactic properties in closely related language varieties (often dialects like dialects of English, dialects of Dutch etc.). Micro-variation studies are similar to dialectological ones because they deal with the description of the geographic distribution of one or more syntactic patterns (this is where the contributions of dialectology count), but differ with respect to the kind of analysis of the syntactic properties that cluster together in a restricted number of dialects. In the ideal case, dialectological findings inform researchers in micro-variation enterprises where to look for which kind of phenomena. Further, dialectology (and sociolinguistics) is familiar with experimental designs that allow researchers to elicit acceptability judgments of speakers who are non-linguists.

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?

In my perspective, spontaneous speech by the same individuals collected in all kinds of interactions and contexts is the best data, in particular, data collected by ethnographic fieldwork. But I consider all data as valid, especially when they are combined with each other, for instance speakers' own intuitions next to controlled experiments etc.

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?

I have a strong opinion on this. Language is a social fact, linguistics should be an empirical discipline. Theoretical approaches to language have to collect data beyond their own intuitions. Labov already wrote in 1972 that linguists "cannot continue to produce theory and data at the same time."

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?

There was the idea in dialectology that dialects didn't differ from each other with respect to syntax, probably because lexical and phonetic differences are perceived more easily by linguists and non-linguists than abstract syntactic differences. Traditional dialect atlases seldom reveal syntactic differences. However, note that in Dutch dialectology the phenomenon of inflected complementizers was known for a long time but was not considered relevant by theoretical syntacticians until properties of functional heads became important in the theoretical framework. And yes, we are in a much better position to carry out studies on syntactic variation, due to both enhanced experimental methodologies and formal theories that inform us where to expect syntactic differences.

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, is not present in all languages). What is your position in this debate?

See answer to question 3. I consider variation the hallmark of language.

How would you describe the dialogue nowadays between the formal or theoretical description of languages and sociolinguistics?

The dialogue between them is still marginal although it had some upswing since the nineties in the former century especially through publications by Kroch (2001), Wilson & Henry (1998), Hudson (1995), Cornips & Corrigan (2005), Adger & Smith (2010) and many more etc. Recently, sociolinguists and generativists have combined their expertise in studies about the phenomenon of micro-variation but in the end the questions posed by both and their research interests are too different.

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

The study of language variation flourishes within sociolinguistics. The findings show that language use is characterized by orderly heterogeneity, that is, regular patterns of social and linguistic conditioning. Linguistic variation does not simply reflect but also constructs social meaning. The challenge for formal studies is to embrace experimental designs and other kinds of data collections to achieve an accurate knowledge into the envelope of variation, which is necessary to provide a deep and fine-grained understanding of the parameters, i.e. which invariably features of functional heads generate variation in language production.

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