

An interview on linguistic variation with...

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José-Luis Mendívil-Giró is Professor at the *Universidad de Zaragoza*. His work has focused on the areas of lexical semantics and morphology, from both synchronic and diachronic points of views. He has made important contributions in the field of biolinguistics, where he has argued in favor of a biologically grounded nature of the faculty of language. Among his publications, the following ones merit special attention: *Las palabras disgregadas* (PUZ, Zaragoza, 1999), *Gramática natural. La gramática generativa y la tercera cultura* (A. Machado, Madrid, 2003), *Origen, evolución y diversidad de las lenguas. Una aproximación biolingüística* (Peter Lang, Frankfurt, 2009), *On Biology, History and Culture in Human Language* (Equinox, Sheffield, 2014, with J.C. Moreno Cabrera) and *El cambio lingüístico: sus causas, mecanismos y consecuencias* (Síntesis, Madrid, 2015)

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?

JLMG: The ideal situation would be that there is only one language and that it does not reflect accidental aspects unrelated to what we want to unveil about the faculty of language. As this is obviously not the case, we have to deal with approximations to that ideal. I feel that the less abstract a level, the less useful it will be, if the objective is addressing the faculty of language. Of course, other goals may require less abstract levels.

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

JLMG: Essentially two. Firstly, linguistic variation, both in time and space (and both in physical and social space) is interesting in itself, and inherent in the system. Nobody speaks “human language” or Universal Grammar. We speak a language or we do not speak at all. Secondly, this fact (which in itself is an explanandum) provides a comparative perspective that other cognitive systems do not offer. As Longobardi has repeated, vision or short-term memory (as far as we know) have no cultural history, but the language faculty is necessarily implemented in languages, which offer different historically determined solutions to the same core of principles and requirements. Undoubtedly, the fact that language varies across human groups offers a relevant opportunity to determine

its invariable aspects. This is a notable advantage over other more uniform cognitive systems in the species (i.e., less sensitive to environmental influences).

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

JLMG: I believe that this tension is intrinsic to the science of language. Since its origins in ancient Greece we have witnessed the controversy between “analogists” and “anomalists”, and that tension has crossed the entire history of Western thought. Thus, the controversy, though formulated in other terms, reappears in the Middle Ages (compare Villadieu’s Latin grammatical treatise with the Modistae’s speculative grammars), it continues among the Spanish Golden Age Latinists (compare Nebrija’s treatise with Sanctius’ *Minerva*), and it re-emerges in the seventeenth century (compare Du Marsais’ treatise on the “good use” of French with Arnauld and Lancelot’s *Grammaire générale et raisonnée*). And of course, it reappears in the twentieth century with the emergence of Generative Grammar in the context of linguistic structuralism and the famous Martin Joos’ conclusion that languages can vary without limit. Arguably, there have always been two opposed sides: those who see languages as variations of the same theme, and those who see them as peculiar and unique objects to study in themselves. Of course, both sides are partly right. In a paper entitled *The Myth of Language Diversity* I analyzed the programmatic article by Evans and Levinson (in which they establish variation as the crucial feature of human language), and I suggested that the difference between these two views on language and languages can be expressed as follows: The functional-cognitive perspective involves an inductive approach from languages to language, while the Chomskyan stance implies a deductive approach from language to languages. I find the second point of view more motivating and coherent.

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

JLMG: I was trained in a tradition according to which dialectological studies were boring and uninteresting. For example, when we studied neogrammarians’ fantastic hypothesis of the regularity of phonetic changes, dialectologists spoilt it all by telling us that each word has its own history. Then, as in biology, I thought that there were two types of linguists: those who resembled entomologists and those who resembled molecular biologists. And of course, the latter attracted me more. I am not sure that I have overcome that prejudice, but I did learn (through rigorous studies of variation, especially those of Labov’s tradition) that the ultimate answer to the questions we are interested in cannot be reached in a data vacuum.

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?

JLMG: I think we are obliged to accept that all kinds of evidence (regardless of the method of extraction or collection and regardless of its nature) are relevant. It makes no sense to privilege one type of data over others in general terms. A given hypothesis has no more or less empirical support depending on whether the data used came from a huge corpus or from a speaker’s introspection. After all, the quality of the research does not depend on the type of data used, but on the quality

of the theories we construct to explain them. The important thing, of course, is that our theories have to predict all data, regardless of their etiology, or they will be poorly formulated.

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?

JLMG: I must repeat what I said in the previous answer. Language theory should not depend on the type of data, but on the quality of the hypotheses handled. Data only serve to falsify hypotheses, not to build them. Of course, good scientists have to look for all the data that will allow them to falsify the hypothesis, but data without a theory are useless.

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?

JLMG: I may be wrong because of my own ignorance, but I do not think that the fact that dialectal studies have focused on lexicon, phonetics, and morphology is only a consequence of disregard for or ignorance of syntax (much as, indeed, syntax has been “the Cinderella” of historical studies, as I think David Lightfoot said). It is also possible that dialectal syntax studies are more difficult to conduct simply because in syntax there is less room for variation than in other domains of languages. Of course, there is dialectal and typological variation in syntax, but we have many clues to think that syntactic variation is more an artifact of phonological and morphological variation than purely syntactic. I prefer to speak of “morpho-syntax”, and I like the idea that the null hypothesis is that in morpho-syntactic variation, syntax is the constant and morphology the variable.

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, is 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?

JLMG: It is that and much more. As I argued in *The Myth of Language Diversity* (opposing Evans and Levinson), it is the problem of viscerally rejecting that there is a faculty of language, in other words, rejecting that all existing languages are manifestations of the same system of knowledge, and sustaining the view that languages are essentially cultural objects, abstract tools that have evolved independently and whose essential structure comes from outside the mind and brain. And this belief is a consequence of the old anthropocentric prejudice that humans are culture and not nature. I sincerely believe that we need new generations of researchers (free of the prejudices of older traditions) to approach this issue with new eyes. It is a false polemic that is doing great harm to the science of language as compared to other cognitive sciences and to science in general.

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?

JLMG: There must be a parametric theory, because parameters, as Chomsky and others defined them, are objective facts, which demand an explanation. As typological linguistics has shown, structural differences amongst languages tend to be grouped in certain ways and not in others, and this calls for an explanation. The idea that certain properties underlie these systematic (though not perfect) groupings remains fully in force. What we have learned is that parameters are probably not global options of grammars, but accidental (though systematic) constraints in the process of language development in individuals. But this fact does not question the relevance of the concept of parameter. On the contrary, parametric research seems crucial in the task of unraveling how much is fixed and how much is variable in the grammars of human languages.

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

JLMG: I think the end of the previous answer is a good start to answer the last one: What is the relation between the biologically conditioned aspects of language, which undoubtedly exist, and the culturally determined aspects, which also undoubtedly exist? That remains, I believe, the central theme of linguistic theory, and there is still much to do.