Multilingualism as the new comparative syntax

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1 A model of a linguist

Liliane Haegeman has made groundbreaking and lasting contributions to the study of grammar, and it is a great pleasure to be able to honor such a wonderful linguist and friend by way of a small contribution in the present festschrift. Her work is characterized by its focus on argumentation, rigor, and theoretical perspicuousness. During her career, she has covered a range of areas in addition to 'core' syntax, as also emphasized in another festschrift (Aboh et al. 2017: 3): Dialect variation, register variation, first and second language acquisition. Her work on comparative syntax can be characterized as she herself characterizes the field, where emphasis should be put on the very last sentence in the quote.

> An important development in generative syntax over the last fifteen years is the revival of the interest in the comparative study of language. In fact, a major criticism leveled against early generative grammar concerned its central interest for conceptual problems often to the detriment of the empirical study of language. When empirical data were considered, this was often only to serve a theoretical point, and in the analyses a small range of data of only a handful of languages was taken into account, standard English occupying a central position among the languages under examination. Over the past twenty years, we have witnessed a surge of comparative work along various dimensions. In this new comparative syntax, careful study of empirical data takes a central position with a

> stimulating two-way interaction between theoretical de-
> velopments and empirical study. (Haegeman 1997: 1)

This quote highlights the importance of a close interplay between description and theory as they both depend on each other. This interdependence has always been crystal clear in Liliane's work as she has worked to identify the linguistic properties that can vary across languages and those that are constant. This puts her work firmly into the generative tradition trying to unearth what knowledge of language is and how this knowledge can be acquired. As she continues in her already quoted chapter, "The question of acquisition focuses on the issue of how much of our linguistic knowledge is due to experience, the linguistic input provided by the environment we are exposed to, and how much is due to a predetermined mental faculty" (Haegeman 1997: 1).

Methodologically, her work has made use of several different methods. Since her earliest work (Haegeman 1983), she has been a keen consumer of naturally occurring data, which she has either accessed through corpora or gathered herself. She has of course also relied heavily on acceptability judgments both in investigating her native West Flemish but also in her investigations of English.

Liliane's work has always highlighted how linguistic competence needs to be investigated broadly, and how different sources of data speak to different aspects of this competence. And she has set a high standard for the tight relationship between empirical generalizations and theoretical analysis. With that in mind, the next section will try to say something about one aspect of current developments, which in many ways can be viewed as an integral part of the work on comparative syntax that the quote from Haegeman (1997) highlights.

2   The formal grammar of multilingualism

Comparative syntax has been the zeitgeist of formal grammar since the early 1980's. In recent years, we may say that a new zeitgeist has emerged. It is not the only zeitgeist, but it is one of several, and it is the formal study of multilingual data. Traditionally, multilingualism has not been at the core of formal generative studies. This is among others made clear in the following famous quote:

> Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-
> listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community,
> who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such

grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations,
distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (ran-
dom or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the lan-
guage in actual performance (Chomsky 1965: 3).

It was always clear that this was an idealization - no one thought that such an
ideal speaker-listener or such a speech-community actually existed. However, it
was a very useful idealization as it made it easier to develop theories of complex
empirical phenomena. It enabled the grammarian to abstract away from issues
that would make it hard to extract generalizations and then start to develop de-
scriptively adequate grammar fragments.

It took some time, but eventually work on second language acquisition was
established within a generative frame. Whether the logical problem of language
acquisition applied to the acquisition of an additional language in adulthood,
was one of the main goals of the early research in this area, see e.g., Clahsen
& Muysken (1986), Flynn (1987), Schwartz (1987), Bley-Vroman (1989), White
(1989), Schachter (1990). Put differently, do language-specific constraints re-
duce the hypothesis space in learning a second language, similarly to what is
argued to be the case for first language acquisition? Textbooks such as Hawkins
(2001), White (2003) and Slabakova (2016) document the success of this ap-
proach, and (Rothman & Slabakova 2017) is a state-of-the-art paper outlining
the changes in generative approaches to second language acquisition over the
years and connecting them to the current prominent approaches and trends.
Recently, third language acquisition has also become a produtive area of inves-
tigation within formal models, cf. e.g., Rothman (2011, 2015) and Westergaard
et al. (2016) and references therein for discussions and comparisons of different
models.

Another area which departed from the idealization, focused on whether or
not there are formal constraints on code-switching or language mixing (e.g.,
Pfaff (1979), Poplack (1980), Sankoff & Poplack (1981), Woolford (1983), Di Sci-
ullo et al. (1986), Belazi et al. (1994), MacSwan (1999, 2000, 2005), Muysken
(2000, 2015), Myers-Scotton (2002), van Gelderen & MacSwan (2008), González-
Vilbazo & López (2011, 2012), see MacSwan (2014) for a review and see Riksem
(2018) for additional discussion). Studying language mixing may provide us with
a typology of what elements are possible to mix and which are resistant (to var-
ious degrees) to mixing across languages. The following quote from Riksem
(2018: 43) emphasizes this point:

In general, language mixing may constitute a potential window into our language capacity; the conditions and restrictions on language mixing can tell us which linguistic elements are possible to mix, and whether some are more available or resistant to mixing than others. Thus, studies of language mixing may refine and deepen our understanding of grammatical theory (Muysken 2000, Gardner-Chloros 2009, González-Vilbazo et al. 2013).

By way of illustration, let us consider mixing between English and Norwegian. I will use examples from the heritage language American Norwegian spoken in the USA (see Haugen (1953) for an extensive presentation of the language and its background). The specific examples here are drawn from the Corpus of American Nordic Speech (CANS; Johannessen (2015)). Consider ((1)) first.

(1)   a.   Jeg **teach**-a   # fø**grad[e]**-en
              I   teach-PAST # first   # grade-DEF.M.SG
              'I taught the first grade.'
       b.   Så   kan du **mow**-e   litt   **lawn**
              then can you mow-INF some lawn.INDEF.SG
              'Then you can mow some lawn.' (coon_valley_WI_07gk)

These examples illustrate a typological generalization (see also Åfarli (2015) and Riksem et al. (In press) on American Norwegian): One of the language is the language providing the grammatical structure, whereas lexical items can come from either language. This can be seen clearly in ((1)b), where the structure of the sentence exhibits Verb Second (V2; see Eide & Hjelde (2015) and Westergaard & Lohndal (2018) for more on V2 in American Norwegian). There are also additional examples showing that English lexical items can appear in structures that are clearly Norwegian.

(2)   a.   Å **celebrat[e]**-e **birthday**-en   hennes
              to celebrat-INF   birthday-DEF.M.SG her
              'To celebrate her birthday.' (coon_valley_WI_06gm)
       b.   etter middag-en   # vi # satt på **deck**-en   hans
              after dinner-DEF.M.SG # we # sat on deck-DEF.M.SG his
              'After dinner, we sat on his deck.' (westby_WI_01gm)

In both of the examples in ((2)), the speakers are clearly using a Norwegian struc-

ture for possessives: The possessive is post-nominal, and the nominal, even if the lexical item is English, has the Norwegian definiteness marker. A syntactic theory needs to be able to account for this, and a theory assuming that the syntactic structure is based on the lexical items itself would not be a descriptively adequate theory as it would predict that the structure should be English, not Norwegian. Space does not allow me to elaborate on what such a theory could look like, the reader can consult Grimstad et al. (2014), Riksem (2018), Grimstad et al. (In press) and Riksem et al. (In press) for one alternative.

3 Conclusion

Work on second language acquisition and aspects of language mixing shows that formal approaches also have a lot to contribute when it comes to multilingual data. In many ways, they complement more traditional work focusing on variation between varieties, but instead of looking at variation *between* individuals, they look at variation *within* individuals. They help us to create better models of our language competence and its scope. As such, they may constitute the new comparative syntax in the years to come, trying to follow the very high standards set by Liliane Haegeman and others.

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