Interview with professor Dirk Geeraerts[1]

Marcos Luiz Wiedemer[2]

Ivo da Costa do Rosário[3]

Abstract: Dirk Geeraerts is professor of linguistics at the University of Leuven, Belgium, and his main research interests involve the fields of lexical semantics, lexicology, and lexicography, with a focus on social variation and diachronic change. His theoretical orientation is mainly that of Cognitive Linguistics, with an emphasis on empirical methods for linguistic analysis. He is the founder of the journal Cognitive Linguistics and he is the editor, with Hubert Cuyckens, of The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics. Since 2005, he is managing editor of Mouton de Gruyter's Cognitive Linguistics Research series.

Key words: Dirk Geeraerts. Interview. Linguistics.

Soletras: Could you please talk a little about what is Cognitive Sociolinguistics and what is the object of study of this area?

The term 'Cognitive Sociolinguistics' refers to all kinds of research within the framework of cognitive linguistics focusing on the sociocultural aspects of linguistic variation, both from an intralingual and an interlingual perspective. Research of this kind has been around in cognitive linguistics for a long time, but it is only in the last ten or fifteen years that it has become an outspoken trend in the development of cognitive linguistics. By now, a number of substantial publications (collective volumes, thematic issues of journals, monographs) illustrate the approach, among which I may cite the following as particularly relevant:

Kristiansen, Gitte and René Dirven (eds.). 2008. Cognitive Sociolinguistics: Language Variation, Cultural Models, Social Systems. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

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[2] Professor Adjunto (Linguística) da Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro / Faculdade de Formação de Professores (UERJ/FFP). Membro (pesquisador) do Grupo Discurso & Gramática (UFF). E-mail: mlwiedemer@gmail.com.

[3] Professor Adjunto (Língua Portuguesa) da Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF). Atua nos cursos de gradução e pós-graduação. Membro (pesquisador) do Grupo Discurso & Gramática (UFF). E-mail: rosario.ivo2@gmail.com.

Geeraerts, Dirk, Gitte Kristiansen and Yves Peirsman (eds.). 2010. Advances in Cognitive Sociolinguistics. Berlin / New York: De Gruyter Mouton.

Harder, Peter. 2010. Meaning in Mind and Society. A Functional Contribution to the Social Turn in Cognitive Linguistics. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter Mouton.

Pütz, Martin, Justyna Robinson and Monika Reif (eds.). 2012. Cognitive Sociolinguistics. Social and cultural variation in cognition and language use. Thematic issue of Review of Cognitive Linguistics 10.

Kristiansen, Gitte and Dirk Geeraerts (eds.). 2013. Contexts of use in Cognitive Sociolinguistics. Thematic issue of Journal of Pragmatics 52.

So, Cognitive Sociolinguistics is basically 'variationist linguistics in the framework of Cognitive Linguistics' – which means that a distinction could be made between this kind of approach and cognitive approaches to linguistic variation in a broader sense. In a general way, all approaches that combine cognitive and sociovariationist points of view are forms of 'cognitive sociolinguistics', even if they do not specifically refer to theoretical concepts or descriptive practices that are typical for Cognitive Linguistics. Perceptual dialectology, for instance (which studies the way in which objective forms of language variation subjectively live in the minds of language users) does not necessarily use the conceptual framework of Cognitive Linguistics, even though it is undoubtedly a form of cognitive sociolinguistics (without capital letters). In any case, the distinction between Cognitive Sociolinguistics and cognitive sociolinguistics should not be exaggerated: there is no clearcut borderline, and people working in Cognitive Sociolinguistics see themselves as making a contribution to cognitive sociolinguistics in the broad sense.

Soletras: *What topics are currently investigated by Cognitive Sociolinguistics and what are the future developments of this theory?*

To keep my answer within reasonable bounds, let me focus on intralinguistic variation. Obviously, there is also quite a bit or research in cognitive linguistics on interlinguistic variation, including questions about linguistic relativity, but I believe we can see most clearly what Cognitive Sociolinguistics is about when we concentrate on language-internal variation. I think it's then useful to distinguish between three topic areas. The first area is concerned with general theoretical models of the role of social factors in language, the other two areas cover the descriptive contributions of cognitive linguistics to the study of linguistic variation.

Theoretical and programmatic studies falling within that first area analyze the way in which the emergence of language as such and the presence of specific features in a language

can only be adequately understood if one takes into account the socially interactive nature of linguistic communication. Important representatives of this strand of research include Croft on a socio-evolutionary view of language, Sinha on language as a so-called epigenetic system, Zlatev on situated embodiment, Verhagen on the central role of intersubjectivity in language, and a number of researchers thinking of language as a complex adaptive system.

With regard to the descriptive contributions, I usually refer to the two relevant areas as 'studies in the variation of meaning' on the one hand and 'studies in the meaning of variation' on the other. The basic question for the 'variation of meaning' approach will be obvious: how does language-internal variation affect the occurrence of linguistic phenomena that have the specific attention of Cognitive Linguistics, notably meaning, and more generally, conceptual construal by linguistic means? The question is relevant for variationist linguistics at large because meaning is probably the least studied aspect of language in mainstream sociolinguistics. (Like mainstream grammar studies, mainstream sociolinguistics favours formal variables.) Variationist studies within Cognitive Linguistics, then, involve issues such as the social distribution of prototype-based meaning extensions, the lectal productivity of metonymical patterns, the variable use of metaphor in discourse, lexical variation in pluricentric languages, usage-based approaches to borrowing, or spatial semantics at dialect level.

The third main area of investigation for Cognitive Socioinguistics is concerned with what I have called the 'meaning of variation', i.e. with the way in which language variation is perceived and categorized by the language user. In general, if the cognitive representation of language variation by the language user is of the same type as other types of categorization, then the categorization phenomena that Cognitive Linguistics typically focuses on should also be relevant for an analysis of the way in which language users mentally represent linguistic variation – in other words, we expect phenomena like prototypicality, metaphor and metonymy to play a role in the cognitive representation of variation. In practice, two strands of research so far stand out, concentrating on prototypicality effects and metaphorical conceptualization. To begin with the latter, metaphorical models of lectal structure are concerned with the question to what extent metaphors frame people's perception of language varieties. Work in this direction covers both high-level cultural models of language variation and normativity in general, and attitudinal metaphors involving specific dialect and standard language environments. Prototype-based models of lectal structure, as studied by Gitte

Kristiansen, emphasize that lects are not internally homogeneous, but are rather characterized by centrality effects: some aspects have a more central role than others, and will be more saliently represented in the mind of the language users.

I realize that this is a fairly abstract overview, so to balance that, let me add a practical advice: if you would like to know more, take any of the volumes mentioned earlier, and have a good look at the studies you find in there.

Soletras: *What contribution and advantages Cognitive Sociolinguistics offers to linguistics research in relation to other models of cognitive linguistics?*

As I see it, incorporating a variationist perspective into cognitive linguistics is an essential and inescapable consequence of the basic theoretical approach embodied by cognitive linguistics. To explain the point, I think it's useful to first have a look at the fundamental position of cognitive linguistics (and other functional approaches, to be sure) in the history of modern linguistics. As I have argued in

> Geeraerts, Dirk. 2010. Recontextualizing grammar: Underlying trends in thirty years of Cognitive Linguistics. In Elzbieta Tabakowska, Michal Choinski and Lukasz Wiraszka (eds.), Cognitive Linguistics in Action: From Theory to Application and Back 71-102. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter Mouton,

there is a specific pattern underlying the evolution of 20th century linguistic theory – a pattern, to be precise, that involves a decontextualization of the grammar from structuralism to generativism, followed by a recontextualization in functionalist and cognitive theories. The gradual emergence of 'autonomous syntax' as the alleged core of linguistic description implied that the features of language that were considered central to linguistic theorizing abstracted away from a variety of aspects of language: from meaning and function, from the actual contexts of language use in action and in interaction, from cultural and social diversity (or, if you wish, from semantics, pragmatics, sociolinguistics).

Cognitive and functional approaches can then be seen as recovering these discarded elements, and reintroducing them into the study of the language. Interestingly, if you look at the internal development of cognitive linguistics, this is also a gradual process, in the sense that the different aspects do not reappear immediately and at the same time.

As a first and fundamental step, meaning and function take precedence over form in Cognitive Linguistics theorizing: if anything, cognitive linguistics is a systematic attempt to

give meaning and function a central role in the description of natural language, by looking at language as a tool for categorization and cognitive construal. This is what has predominantly occupied cognitive linguists in the 1980s and 1990s: developing the importance of prototypicality, conceptual metaphor and metonymy, figure/ground alignment, frames, mental spaces and various other forms of semantic construal for the description fo language.

Then, by the beginning of the new millenium, cognitive linguistics increasingly defines itself as a usage-based approach to language, roughly in the sense that there is a dialectal relationship between structure and use: individual usage events are realizations of an existing systemic structure, but at the same time, it is only through the individual usage events that changes might be introduced into the structure (There have been various voices expressing the idea, but Bill Croft's book *Explaining Language Change* of 2000 makes the point very clearly).

But once you see cognitive linguistics as a usage-based model of the language, it follows that the study of language variation is a compelling – and actually, inevitable – field of research for cognitive linguistics. The usage-based model implies a concern with intralinguistic variation: 'usage-based implies variational', as I once put it. When we say that common linguistic behaviour derives from the interaction between language users, it needs to be established just how common that behaviour actually is, and how the existing variation is structured by social factors – precisely the kind of questions that are central within dialectology and sociolinguistics. This is a point I have made on a number of occasions, for instance in

> Geeraerts, Dirk. 2010. Schmidt redux: How systematic is the linguistic system if variation is rampant? In Kasper Boye and Elisabeth Engberg-Pedersen (eds.), Language Usage and Language Structure 237-262. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter Mouton.

In other words, if cognitive linguistics is indeed a recontextualizing model of linguistics par excellence, and if that recontextualization involves reversing a number of preferences that are deeply entrenched in mainstream 20th century linguistics – a preference for system over use, for universality over diversity, for form over function – then a thorough investigation of variation is an integral part of the cognitive linguistics enterprise. I think I'd like to put that even more forcefully: looking at variation (doing Cognitive Sociolinguistics, in other words) completes the recontextualizing programme embodied by cognitive linguists.

But if you would then ask me if we have already reached that completion, I would have to admit that the incorporation of a sociovariationist perspective in cognitive linguistic research is not yet the normal thing to do – which it should be.

Soletras: *What differs Cognitive Sociolinguistics from Variationist Sociolinguistics?*

Let me perhaps first say that I don't see an opposition between Cognitive Sociolinguistics and Variationist Sociolinguistics. It's not the case that Cognitive Sociolinguistics is an alternative or a competitor for variationist linguistics. Rather, I believe that Cognitive Sociolinguistics can add something to the tradition of variationist language research, but at the same time, the very rich tradition of sociolinguistic investigation that developed in last half century, since the 1960s, needs to be seriously taken into account by Cognitive Sociolinguistics. So let me have a look at the relationship from the two perspectives: if I had to name just one point for each of the perspectives, what does Cognitive Linguistics have to offer to variationist linguistics, and how does it work the other way round?

On the one hand, I believe that the main thing that mainstream variationist research can offer Cognitive Sociolinguistics is a model of methodological rigor. With its focus on meaning, cognitive linguistics often has a strong qualitative slant, methodologically speaking. However, dealing with variationist phenomena requires empirical sophistication to deal with large and complex sets of data. There has been a growing tendency in cognitive linguistics at large to shift towards more quantitative forms of description, but this is a trend that can only be strengthened if we take the Cognitive Sociolinguistic programme seriously.

On the other hand, what primarily distinguishes Cognitive Sociolinguistics from variationist sociolinguistics will be clear from my previous reply: a stronger interest in meaning (what I referred to as 'variation of meaning' and 'the meaning of variation'). In this context, I'd like to draw the attention to the fact that the importance of meaning for sociolinguistics goes well beyond descriptive comprehensiveness, because questions of meaning implicitly lie at the heart of the sociolinguistic enterprise. Consider the concept of a 'sociolinguistic variable' as a cornerstone of the standard methodology of socio-variationist research. Simply put, a sociolinguistic variable in the sense of Labovian sociolinguistics is a set of alternative ways of expressing the same linguistic function or realizing the same linguistic element, where each of the alternatives has social significance. As such, a

sociolinguistic variable is a linguistic element that is sensitive to a number of extralinguistic independent variables like social class, age, sex, geographical group location, ethnic group, or contextual style and register. This automatically raises the question of semantic equivalence: if we are interested in the contextual choice between functionally equivalent expressions as a reflection of sociolinguistic factors, we first need to control for meaning and function. In the mainstream development of sociolinguistics, however, the question of semantic equivalence, as a methodological prerequisite for the sociovariationist study of lexis and grammar, was not systematically explored – whereas, by contrast, this is typically the kind of question that surfaces naturally in a meaning-oriented framework like cognitive linguistics.

An important issue for Cognitive Sociolinguistics, then, is a renewed look at the question of semantic equivalence. For more thoughts on the issue, let me refer you to

Geeraerts, Dirk. 2010. Lexical variation in space. In Peter Auer and Jürgen Erich Schmidt (eds.), Language in Space. An International Handbook of Linguistic Variation. Volume 1: Theories and Methods 821-837. Berlin / New York: De Gruyter Mouton.

As it happens, the interplay between semantic and formal variation (and the methodology of studying it) is one of the main research lines of my research group *Quantitative Lexicology and Variational Linguistics* (QLVL).

Soletras: *The collection of studies organized by Kristiansen and Dirven (2008) institutionalizing the emerging framework of Cognitive Sociolinguistics, in its introductory chapter, explains that the study of linguistic variation should combine social and cognitive perspective. Therefore, is it possible to understand cognition as social cognition?*

I believe that is the case, yes. We often tend to think about knowledge as a psychological phenomenon, as an individual relationship between a person's mind and the outside world. But that is a naïve view. In actual practice, the knowledge we have is a shared social phenomenon in various ways: it is shared in the sense that it is distributed over several people (think of all the different types of experts you need to build an airplane, for instance), and it is shared in the sense that it is transmitted through schools and other organizational means. And to the extent that language is a means for carrying knowledge, cognition is as social as language itself.

Now it's interesting to think about the consequences of this observation for cognitive linguistics. One important feature of cognitive linguistics is that it starts from an 'experiential'

view of meaning, i.e. the belief that meaning is based on experience. But broadly speaking, there are several kinds of experience. To begin with, we could at least distinguish between a physiological and a cultural kind of experience: embodiment and socialization, so to speak. But the physiological perspective suggests a universality that the cultural perspective lacks: we have more or less the same bodies, but we live in clearly different cultures. In some domains of linguistic enquiry, then, both perspectives can be opposed each other, or at least, the question needs to be asked which influence is dominant. For instance, in

> Geeraerts, Dirk and Stefan Grondelaers. 1995. Looking back at anger. Cultural traditions and metaphorical patterns. In John Taylor and Robert E. MacLaury (eds.), Language and the Construal of the World 153-180. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter,

we argued that Conceptual Metaphor Theory should take the cultural history of metaphors more systematically into account. (This is already an older article, but I keep coming back to it because I believe it is a good illustration of the point.) In contrast with the predominantly physiological explanation for 'anger' metaphors originally suggested by Kövecses and Lakoff, this paper drew the attention to the culture-specific background of at least some of the anger expressions: they turned out to have a historical background in the theory of humours that dominated Western medical and psychological thinking from antiquity to the early modern period. More recent work by Kövecses wholeheartedly embraces that sociocultural perspective; in particular, see his 2005 book heralding a 'cultural turn' of metaphor studies.

There is one more consequence that I would like to draw the attention to. If something is sociocultural by nature, then it also has a historical dimension. As you may know, I have a long-standing interest in diachronic semantics, as in my 1997 book on prototype models of semantic change:

> Geeraerts, Dirk. 1997. Diachronic Prototype Semantics. A Contribution to Historical Lexicology. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

That interest is not a coincidence, but it ties in in a principled way with a sociocultural perspective on language. The categories and concepts that cultures use to structure experience and make sense of the world are not reinvented afresh with every new period in the culture's development. But if it is by definition part of their cultural nature that they have a historical dimension, it is only by investigating their historical origins and their gradual transformation that their contemporary appearance can be well understood: specifically in the area of

semantics, a social perspective on language needs to be complemented with a historical perspective.

Soletras: *There is an increasingly strong movement in relation to the study of language change through the prism of constructionalization, in other words, there is a theoretical and empirical shift that focuses on large segments of the analysis. Consequently, is it possible to operationalize the constructionalization with Cognitive Sociolinguistics?*

Definitely so. If constructions are regular elements of linguistic structure, then everything that applies to the study of other language elements will also apply to constructions – and specifically, the importance of adopting a social perspective will be as valid as with any other layer of linguistic structure. In actual practice, we have done quite a bit of work on constructions in my research group QLVL. One of the first case studies was Stef Grondelaers' study on the Dutch particle *er*, as in

> Grondelaers, Stefan, Dirk Speelman and Dirk Geeraerts. 2008. National variation in the use of *er* "there". Regional and diachronic constraints on cognitive explanations. In Gitte Kristiansen and René Dirven (eds.), Cognitive Sociolinguistics. Language Variation, Cultural Models, Social Systems 153-203. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

I could cite various other QLVL studies along the same lines, but let me just mention that within our group, further work of this type is currently being done mainly by Benedikt Szmrecsanyi and Freek Van de Velde. More importantly, let me try to briefly describe, from a theoretical and a methodological point of view, what is characteristic for this kind of work.

In theoretical and descriptive terms, studies of this kind take a 'multivariate grammar' approach: the occurrence of a construction α is modeled in terms of a variety of factors: semantic, structural, discursive, processing-related and lectal (where 'lect' is a cover term for all types of language varieties identified along sociolinguistic and stylistic dimensions). Crucially, these factors don't work independently of each other, but they interact in sometimes complicated ways. The way the construction is distributed over the sociolinguistic variables (regions, groups of speakers, registers – anything lectally relevant) is then treated as an integral part of the meaning and function of the construction, rather than something external added to the construction.

In methodological terms, this kind of work illustrates the necessity for quantitative rigor that I mentioned earlier in this interview. To get a good grip on the complexity of the constructional phenomena, the data are taken from large corpora and subjected to advanced statistical analysis. For instance, when the analysis takes the form of a regression analysis, the irreducible interdependence of the variables shows up in the form of interactions – in the technical, statistical sense of the word.