

An interview on linguistic variation with...

Martin Haspelmath

Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History
Leipzig University

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Martin Haspelmath is Professor at *Leipzig University* and the *Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History*. His work has focused on the areas of linguistic typology, linguistic variation, language contact, and syntactic and morphological theory. He has made outstanding and leading contributions in the study of linguistic universals; currently, he is the PI of the ERC Project “Grammatical Universals”. He is one of the editors of the *World Atlas of Language Structures* (WALS) and the *Glottolog* databases. He has further published articles in journals like *Cognitive Linguistics*, *Diachronica*, *Folia Linguistica*, *Language*, *Linguistic Typology*, *Linguistics*, *Theoretical Linguistics*, and has been involved in various handbooks and collections of papers.

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?

MH: “Language” and “dialect” are sociological concepts, not directly connected with our biological faculty of language. But how to delimit biological and sociological aspects is not really clear to me – because our ability to form (and associate with) social groups of various kinds is also a biological faculty. We clearly have an innate “language instinct” of some sort, but likewise we have an innate “social instinct”. I don’t know whether these can be separated, or whether our instinct to learn the language(s) of our social group(s) is just a single mental faculty. I have never really seen this question addressed in the literature.

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

MH: Different reasons for different people, and I respect them all – for example, contrastive linguistics is quite relevant to language teaching. My Ph.D. supervisor Ekkehard König was professor of English and wrote a terribly interesting, very well-informed book about English-German contrasts. I study crosslinguistic differences and similarities because I am intrigued by all the world’s languages, and because world-wide patterns can give us insights into human language in a way that studies of regional variation cannot.

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

MH: I once read a fascinating article (by Georg Bossong) that talks about a pendulum swinging back and forth, between universalism and particularism: Medieval scholastics were universalists, followed by Renaissance particularists, followed by Enlightenment universalists, followed by Romantic, historicist and structuralist particularists, followed by Chomskyan universalists, followed by endangered-languages particularists... That's kind of depressing, and I would hope that we can halt the pendulum and give both the particularities and the universals their due. But it's hard: When we encounter actual language use, it's always a particular language, but we still have the strong feeling that it represents a general species-wide faculty that we want to understand. My own take is that we shouldn't try to describe the particularities of languages in terms of a universal system, and thus to give them their due by recognizing them as historically unique social constructions. At the same time, we should compare them, using a universal set of comparative concepts, which are distinct from the particular descriptive categories. This will yield many universal observations, and it resolves the tension to my satisfaction.

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

MH: It seems to me that dialectology primarily contributes to the study of particular languages. A general dialectology (that contributes to the study of human language in general) does not seem to exist, or exist prominently. But this is a general problem with sociolinguistics – it tends to focus on particular situations. There seems to be very little systematic cross-linguistic work in sociolinguistics, and I think there could be more cross-linguistic work in dialectology, comparing the ways in which dialect variation occurs in many different languages, and trying to make predictions that can be tested when looking at new languages.

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?

MH: No, we need all the evidence we can get to study languages and language. In recent years, more and more linguists are shifting to quantitative methods, but I don't see that they necessarily give more insight than other methods. They are easier than they used to be, so it's natural that they are being used, and they are getting more prestige, but it's still very important to have a very good qualitative understanding of the concepts and the phenomena.

Isogloss: Your recent research has focused on linguistic universals, where you explore the relevance of usage-based explanations and the form-frequency correspondences in language. Could you briefly explain what results this interesting line of research has obtained so far?

MH: I'm working on a book that describes dozens of universal coding asymmetries (called "markedness asymmetries" in 20th century work), and that proposes an ambitious theory explaining them as form-frequency correspondences, ultimately

due to a highly general principle of efficient coding. This research programme actually started 20 years ago, and over the years I discovered more and more phenomena that can be subsumed under the general form-frequency correspondence observation, even phenomena where one wouldn't have expected them, e.g. in numeral classifiers and in independent possessive pronouns (e.g. the contrast between Spanish *mi* and *mío*). Almost all aspects of grammatical coding that are universal can be related to usage frequency and coding efficiency, I think. I hope that this will soon be recognized more widely by linguists.

Isogloss: One of the most well-known works of yours is the *World Atlas of Language Structures* (WALS). In the last years, the study of dialectology seems to be experiencing a wave of new initiatives, largely because of the impact of the internet and social networks (Twitter data, crowdsourcing, etc.). What do you think about the use of these methods / tools? Do you think they can make a valuable contribution to the study of language variation? Are they compatible with more traditional techniques?

MH: Absolutely. I don't know much about new methods of gathering data via the internet, but I'm convinced that we can use this data and learn from it. Language is an incredibly multifaceted phenomenon, and its forms are influenced by millions of utterances every day, most of which are unrecorded. The little that we record allows us to make many interesting statements, but by increasing our data in line with current technical possibilities, we could get a much denser representation of language use and thus a clearer picture what is going on, especially regarding trends in variation.

Isogloss: Some recent studies argue that it is diversity that 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?

MH: As I said earlier, we need to reconcile diversity and universality. Yes, languages are very diverse, but they are also very uniform, from a different perspective. It is natural that different people are interested in different aspects of language, and I'm not surprised that most people are not as interested in universality as I am – after all, most linguists study just a single language (at a time), and that will often bias them to the particularist perspective. On the other hand, universality is very prestigious in many circles, so this biases linguists toward the universal perspective. But true progress in understanding will only be possible if we manage to suppress these biases and recognize the value of all perspectives. Personally, I need the language describers so I can read their work and formulate universals, but I also need colleagues who think about universality along with me. I think disagreements in substance are not about diversity or universality, but about the degree to which one can build on certain highly specific assumptions (about UG).

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?

MH: I think it is an intriguing idea, and there was a lot of research that inspired me personally in the 1980s and partly in the 1990s. But as the theories have become more and more complex, it has become less and less easy to test them. Perhaps the most prominent parametric proposal in the last decade was Bošković’s NP/DP parameter, but I never quite understood what exactly was claimed by it, because of all the theory-internal machinery that is required to set it out. Unfortunately, it seems that most of the ideas about parameters that were launched have not stood the test of time. For me, the lesson has been that universality of human language probably does not lie in a universal system of categories and architectures, but in universal responses to the demands of efficiency of language use, which partly shape language systems in similar ways. This view of universality does not have immediate consequences for how a researcher who works on, say, Sardinian dialects, would work – so I do not expect it to become influential soon. But I think it’s more realistic than much of the speculation about universal binary branching, universal c-command and universal features, which is not really constrained by actual data from actual languages, as far as I can see.

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

MH: The challenges won’t change, but the diversity landscape is changing dramatically. In a sense, the study of existing language and dialect variation is the most important task for the current generation – much of the work on universality that I am doing can in principle wait till the 22nd century, when we will have only a few big languages left. But on the other hand, work on particular languages gets more interesting when it is put in relation to other languages and to worldwide trends. So clearly, my work on universals has value even now, though sometimes I think that comparativists like me shouldn’t get so much attention and prestige. Maybe you shouldn’t have interviewed me, but someone who is involved in actual language and dialect description. . .