An Interview with Professor Dirk Geeraerts (part 2): QLVL (The Quantitative Lexicology and Variational Linguistics)

Fatemeh Shahverdi Shahraki[1]

PhD Student of Linguistics, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran

Jing Du[2]

PhD Student of Linguistics, Beihang University, Beijing

Dirk Geeraerts is a professor of Linguistics at the University of Leuven (KU Leuven), Belgium. His theoretical orientation is mainly that of Cognitive Linguistics with a special emphasis on empirical methods for linguistic analysis. His involvement in Cognitive Linguistics dates back to the 1980s, when his PhD project was one of the first in Europe to explore the possibilities of a prototype-theoretical model of categorization. He is a member of QLVL, a research group at the University of Leuven that focuses on empirical, corpus-linguistic studies of language variation with a specific emphasis on lexical variation. Within the framework of Cognitive Linguistics, language variation is approached from a quantitative and corpus-based perspective. This area includes two specific interests: lexical variation both from a synchronic and diachronic point of view, as well as the interaction between internal (structural) and external(lectal) variation. Dutch is a pluricentric language, with more than two national variety: Netherlandic Dutch and Belgian Dutch. The accompanying language variation, relates to the process of linguistic standardization that evolved differently in both rigions (Geeraerts, 2003). Alternatives are attested in pronounciation, in word choice and meaning, or in sentence constructions. From a diachronic point of view, language policy and changes in society, each show a noteworthy influence on the degree of variation (http://wwwling.arts.kuleuven.be/qlvl/).

[1] E-mail: fathemeh.shaverdi@yahoo.com
[2] E-mail: millydu1019@buaa.edu.cn

The same project can be used for Farsi Language, because it has also standard varieties in Iran, Tajikestan, and Afghanestan.

What follows is an interview with Professor Dirk Geeraerts which took place in November 2017, at KU Leuven.

1) How many languages are there in the corpus? And can people have access to the corpus?

G: The corpora that we have compiled ourselves, basically is production. So, we have two points where we made corpora for Dutch, then we used other language corpora. We have done research on Dutch, English, Italian, French, etc. We can have many corpus data. But then, we often use corpora from linguistic Corpora which all the people also get like regular English corpora.

On the other hand, the thing that we are developing, and the things that we would like to share more, are the specific methods of analysis that we are using. So, the project, the biggest project, that we are working on at the moment, is the lectological semantic project. At the start of that project, we will try to make available the techniques that we have been using and developing for lexical and lectometerical and semantic analysis. Something that is available at this point is in development, let's say, it should be ready before my retirement (laugh). In a few years, there would be more tools.

2) You are a cognitive linguist, and a member of QLVL. Are there any relationships between these two fields?

G: Yes, that is also part of the answer to the first question. There are maybe two important things in the history of Descriptive Linguistics. One thing is that I have always thought that Linguistics and science in general, no longer is the work of an individual. If you think of some of the most interesting linguistic research that is being done at the moment, like certain five inter disciplines of Max Plank Institute that do different types of research, but that always has a certain volume focusing on a certain topic. And specifically when you do empirical research, so do the same on linguistics, experimental and

corpus linguistics, then you need a team of people to provide the logistics of your fieldwork. You need someone with special skills in methodology and you need people with technical skills and so on. Therefore, we are specifically trying to build a team. Even for PhD students, it is important that they belong to a group that has certain common interests. So, they can learn from each other. There are various reasons for thinking that building research groups or units is important for the work of linguistics. And that's a conviction that I have had for a very long time. About the background, it is also triggered by the fact that I started my career in an institute, not just in a regular department, but in an institute with a very specific focus. When I came here (KU Leuven), I have been trying to model the operation and the organization on that idea of the necessity of having team to work on a certain formula and certain topics. And one other aspect of that theory of sociological one, if you wish, you need money for that, of course. The money that a university supplies, may be just enough for one professor and one system. That is not enough. In practice, what I have done over the past thirty years, is to use project money to expand the team. And that had been possible because over the last decades, project money and this environment was available. Giving those funding position has been possible to build up a certain tradition. So, come back to the initial question, the background is the idea that you really need a certain volume of research to develop certain areas of study. It's the practical sociological history of QLVL. The theoretical history in essence is that, when I came here (Leuven), I had done a lot of work on diachronic semantics reflected in the blue book: "Diachronic prototype semantics". And that was because based on the diachronic corpus manually analyzed, possibly, then on the basis of that, I have developed theoretical concepts about possibilities of semasiological structure, then the crucial steps for the further development of Cognitive Linguistics, where there were switch from a semasiological[1] perspective on grammatical perspective. So, the very first funded project that I had here, lead to the book "The Structure of Lexical Variation". That was very data-based. We collected

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[1] Onomasiology, as a part of lexicology, starts from a concept which is taken to be prior (i.e. an idea, an object, a quality, an activity etc.) and asks for its names. The opposite approach is known as semasiology: here one starts with a word and asks what it means, or what concepts the word refers to.

data, and if I want to summarize what happened after that, for twenty years, what we have been trying to do, is to expand on the model of description and define here, by using on the corpus, by expanding the interesting lectal variation and social variation. The perceptual structure, if you wish, the groundwork can be found in the diachronic prototype semantics book. Then further extension or switch on semasiology and then all the rest from the conceptual framework was described in this book. Research has an expanding structure. So, in that sense, you get automatic expansion of the research.

References

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