Interview with
Martin Everaert

IG
It is already a tradition in this journal to start by asking every interviewee what drew them into linguistics in the first place. So I ask the same: why linguistics, and what else (if anything) could it have been?

ME
I started studying Dutch. It turned out that I didn't like literature very much, but in those days, every student of a language (Dutch , French, etc.) had to take a course in 'General Linguistics' as well. That course was really good, and it drew me in: I think what I particularly liked was the methodology – they thought about how to do science, how to do linguistics! Of course, there were also the fascinating ideas of generative grammar, but it was not only that – it was also a bit philosophy of science.
Linguistics in Utrecht was very good because it was a mix of people with different linguistics backgrounds (such as syntax, morphology, phonology, history of linguistics, sociolinguistics, etc.), but also people with a background in psychology and mathematics. So that's why I moved from Dutch to Linguistics.

IG
On every linguistic profile I can find, your top two research areas are listed as 'Syntax' and 'Lexicon'. You teach and write about syntax, but you were also the director of the Institute of Dutch Lexicology. What came first: syntax or the lexicon? And do they usually meet in the middle, or pull you in different directions?

ME
I really started out as a syntactician; my PhD was on syntax. Then I wrote a grant proposal to become a fellow of the Royal Academy, and I decided to do that on idioms (I was interested in the core-periphery distinction), which visibly moved my interest to the realm of the lexicon. Later on, because Tanya Reinhart came to work with us in Utrecht, I gradually moved from hardcore syntax, to what we now call the syntax/lexicon interface. But my interest in idioms is kept alive to this day.

For a very long time work on idioms was not very popular in theoretical grammar, it was more popular in psycholinguistics. But I kept doing it, and I am still working on it, and I still have the feeling that I have to write down the ultimate article, in which I explain to (theoretical) linguists how they should think about idioms, why they are mistaken about what idioms are, and so on.

Incidentally, this also meant that, when I became director of the Dutch Institute of Lexicology, I wasn't a total stranger to the domain.

I also have to admit that it helped that my wife is a translator, which made me, much more than the average linguist, I guess, be aware of the importance of the lexicon, and how difficult it is to find the right words, the collocational restrictions you need to be aware of when you need to translate. I also began to realize that English had these wonderful dictionaries, which were not available in Dutch - like the COBUILD, which has a lot of collocations and a lot of information that is actually very interesting for linguists, and they're most of the time forgotten in linguistic programs.

IG

Speaking of the Lexicon and dictionaries, one large-scale project that you chaired was the COST Action ENeL (European Network of e-Lexicography), with the main aim (among others) of setting up a 'European dictionary portal'. Why dictionaries? What makes them still necessary in the age of Google Translate?

ME

For me it was fascinating to be involved in a project that was focused on lexicographers – and let's face it, in the world of linguistics, lexicographers are sometimes perceived as on the periphery. I was seeing how they were struggling to keep dictionaries alive, because more and more people don't use them. I was brought up in a world where it was normal for every family to have the big Dutch dictionary in the bookcase. And then, this completely disappeared; you saw dictionary companies closing, and you saw people developing electronic dictionaries, but they were most of the time not really dictionaries – they were made the easy way, without too much effort. It was also not possible to make good electronic dictionaries commercially because in the digital age such information is supposed to be available for free. I saw how these lexicographers, who came from a world of making books, transitioned to a world where you have only electronic versions of dictionaries.

To answer your question, yes, dictionaries are still necessary, because people really don't realise how words can differ in their use and meaning across languages. I admit that it's not really crucial perhaps to use a dictionary of Dutch if you are a Dutch native, although it helps you to be aware that what you attach as a meaning to a word might not be the same meaning for other people. But especially across language dictionaries are a must, and people don't understand how misleading Google Translate is. On the one hand it's amazing to see how good it sometimes is – I can type in sentences and I can get a really good translation; on the other hand, polysemy is lost on Google Translate. (I'm actually constantly busy trying to beat Google Translate. Only last week I managed to come up with sentences that it was not able to translate well, but for an interesting reason. Google translate cannot deal with structure, and that is of crucial importance in translating.)

If people don't use a dictionary but use Google Translate, they don't realize that there might be more. If you open a dictionary, you might see that a word has ten different shades of meaning, and that in combination with some other word it actually gets a different shade of meaning. And that is something that is completely lost when you use Google Translate.
But if you're travelling in China or Japan and you don't understand a sign you hold your phone up and it says 'Cafe' or such, then that's useful – it's good for approximations but not for nuances.

IG

I return a bit to your passion for idioms: linguists tend to regard them as a less 'creative' side of language. On the other hand, across papers in collaboration with Noam Chomsky, Bob Berwick, Riny Huybregts and others you always come back to the notion that, due to its infinitely recursive nature, language affords an infinity of novel expressions. What then is the appeal for you of this phenomenon, which does not seem to exhibit the 'creativity' you believe to be the essence of our language faculty? What overarching questions about language can it address?

ME

I once organized a conference in which Igor Mel'cuk was one of the speakers. And I'm fond of quoting one of the things that he wrote in his articles: 'we speak in phrasemes'. We speak in idioms, collocations. And Igor is absolutely right – we are not constantly creating novel

sentences, we are often repeating the same formulaic language. In practical terms it's important to learn idioms, collocations if you want to learn a language – but it's a mistake to think that that is the essence of language! The essence of language is that we are *capable* of NOT using idioms, we are capable of formulating novel thoughts. Look at what writers or poets are doing – they show what you can do with language, how you can create new meaning!

It might seem a bit problematic that I am interested in an aspect of language that we are not necessarily using every day. So, let me give you an analogy, an imperfect one, that I sometimes use in my class: let's say that you are interested in cars, a 'car-scientist'. You are looking for a car, as a means to get from one place to another. Now you look at a Ferrari – in the case of a Ferrari, more than in the case of a Volkswagen, the chances are low that you are using it simply as a means to move from A to B. You might have that car to show off – to make people realize that you are extremely rich, that you have good taste, etc. Of course as a theoretical 'car-scientist', I'm not interested in the fact that you might use the Ferrari to show off – rather I'm interested in the fact that the Ferrari *could*, technically, get to a speed of 350 km/h. There are many Ferraris who will never reach that speed, but they *could*. And in that sense, I look at language the same way: what you might see (performance) is not what you get (competence).

I'm looking at what we *could do* with language, although most of the time we are not doing it. That is why I study the recursive nature – or what you might call the 'creative' aspect – of language, which allows us to create something new.

Even if we focus on idioms, we have to realize that they are not 'only' fixed expressions. You just need to look at advertisements and you will see that people will want to be creative – they add words or they only take part of the idiom and refashion it. Take this Dutch advertisement from an airline company: *Lufthansa en United airlines zijn in alle staten!*, lit: 'Lufthansa and United airlines are in all states'. It refers to the fact they want to let us know that you can now fly to any state in the US. But it is doing this by using the idiom 'in alle staten zijn' which means 'be frenzied/agitated'. You can see that they are *aware* of the internal structure of the idiom and of its meaning. I'm interested in that – in the fact that they can play with idioms. So even in the most fixed aspects of language, there's still a creative component.

IG

One of your earliest (and most enduring?) research interests is reflexivity, which you worked on together with Eric Reuland and Tanja Reinhart, among many others. Over time you collected an impressive amount of data across many languages from West Frisian to Fijian, and showed that classical theories (Government and Binding, Head-driven Phrase Structure Grammar, Lexical Functional Grammar) could not account for all these phenomena, and your typology of anaphoric expressions showed how theories could be improved. What is the strength of good cross-linguistic data, and how much is this power harnessed in current linguistic research?

ME

To begin with, I want to stress that, contrary to what people think, formal syntacticians just like formal phonologists are actually working on many, many languages. It's of course very important to work on many languages – the problem is that it is also extremely difficult. For instance, together with Eric Reuland we are now working on Chinese, on a topic where we thought that everything that could be said has been said. And then, as our PhD student (and MA-students) made observations (which had actually been made a long time ago but then forgotten), we started to realize that things might in fact be a little bit different than previously assumed.

What this shows is that you need very detailed information to work on languages, and that is very difficult – especially if you are working on languages that don't have good grammatical descriptions. For Chinese this was not a problem, because many people worked on Chinese before. There are enough grammars and enough people around to do the work. On the other hand, if you are talking about non-documented languages, it's extremely difficult work and I can understand why people are not doing it. It would take forever to do the type of detailed work that I'm normally used to in my theoretical work. For instance, together with my colleague K.V. Subbarao, we are working on a Tibeto-Burman language – Kokborok. We get the data from the field-work and we start working on it – at some point I think 'this is interesting', because Kokborok is doing something that goes counter to a supposed strong cross-linguistic generalization. How come? So we go back and we get more data and it turns out that if you ask more questions, and get more details, that the picture is slightly different. But that takes a lot of time, and you need experienced linguists, like Subbarao, to do such work properly.

If I was looking at Dutch, I could go really deep into one phenomenon, because it is my native language. But I'm not capable of doing that at the same level with Kokborok – even if I think 'I now got it', I'm not sure if I really did. And I know this from Dutch as well: my dissertation is well-known for an observation that was, up to that point, ignored in traditional grammars. Traditional grammars simply had not noticed it. (It is not me who initially noticed it, it was my supervisor.) But you can see that even in a well-studied language like Dutch, it takes a very long time and a lot of hard work to derive the real and important generalizations. We should still do it – we should still work on many languages, but perhaps in a slightly different way than I see being done. If I look at the world of typology, I welcome the work of Greville Corbett, who does cross-linguistic work but limits himself to a small subset of languages, and tries to study them in detail. This is contrary to other typologists, who try to study one phenomenon in as many languages as possible – a work which, by its very nature, has to be at some point a little superficial. That being said, you need this wide scope as much as you need the focus – although I myself would rather go into more detail, and strive to be more precise.

IG
You also used your data on reflexivity to make a more general theoretical point in your reply to the famous Evans & Levinson (2009) paper, which attempted to discredit the long-held Chomskyan notion that languages are essentially similar in their abstract building blocks. What do you think drove their scepticism about 'language universals' (i.e. abstract properties that all languages share), and how can this scepticism be addressed?

ME
I must admit that I'm not particularly driven to prove that I'm *right* in a certain theoretical position. I may have strong opinions about whether people are right or wrong – but I want to understand their point of view. So I'm fascinated by Evans & Levinson (2009): to assume, as your starting hypothesis, that languages can vary without limit, I find that puzzling. I don't understand how you can take that as a starting point for your scientific endeavour. And then in their reply to our reply they discarded one of our claims as 'complex talk'. Also a remarkable formulation, in my eyes. In that sense I am truly a different type of scientist from Evans and Levinson.

IG
Because you cannot imagine how you can build on the assumption that everything varies without rhyme or reason?

ME
I think that Evans and Levinson are more inclined to an anthropological approach to linguistics, while my view is more inspired by the promise that you can do linguistics as if it were part of the sciences. In anthropology it's perhaps not that strange to say 'we study birth rituals, which vary in very unexpected ways'. What Pinker (1995) described as the Standard Social Science Model (SSSM): "[…] we hawk the anomalous, peddle the strange. Merchants of astonishment." (Clifford Geertz 2001).

In what regards languages, I accept that there is diversity, but I would be very surprised if there were not sparks of uniformity as well. And to be uninterested in what languages might share is amazing for me. You don't have to believe that we are born with some innate predisposition – but it is a great leap to make it the core assumption of your theory that languages can diverge without limit.

Methodologically, this also means that you will never be able to *see* what the similarities are – because by definition you make the differences rather than the similarities central to your theory. For myself, I would rather have a theory that is too restrictive, which keeps formulating commonalities between languages that later turn out to be wrong. By designing it this way you will eventually find out what the true commonalities are. But if you design your theory the other way around, you will never find anything.

IG
When did you first become interested in language evolution and why? And how does a linguist interested in syntax and the lexicon join forces with a scholar in zoology and psychology (Johan Bolhuis) to write a book about Birdsong, Speech and Language?

ME
Completely by chance. Hauser, Chomsky and Fitch (2002) had written their paper in *Science* (*The Faculty of Language: What is it, who has it, and how did it evolve?*) and there was a reaction (Gentner et al. 2006) to it, a paper which claimed to show that zebra finches were capable of doing something that they were not supposed to [i.e. that they were capable of learning structures which were meant to be unique to the human language faculty]. At some point, a radio programme decided to spend time of this, and they invited Johan Bolhuis, who is the birdsong specialist at this University. Because the debate has a linguistic aspect to it, he thought it would be great if there was a linguist involved as well – and somehow I was the one who was involved.

From that point onwards Johan and I started talking to each other. He had a whole group of collaborators who were interested in this topic, and wanted to talk to us linguists. We organized a conference, and out of that conference came this MIT book, *Birdsong, Speech and Language*. I was also the co-organizer of a conference on language evolution – *EvoLang* – which we hosted here in Utrecht, thanks to Rudie Botha. I knew Rudie Botha because we had had the same supervisor for our dissertations, and he was working on language evolution when he suggested to me that I should organize *EvoLang*.

One of the speakers at *EvoLang* was Bob Berwick – it was the first time that I met him and I liked him very much. He eventually stayed a little longer than planned because there was this volcano that had erupted in Iceland, which made it impossible for him to fly back. It turned out that Bob was, by training, a biologist, and he started talking to Johan Bolhuis. And from then on there was this group with Johan, Gabriel Beckers, Riny Huybregts and me in Utrecht

and Bob on the other side of the ocean, and we started working together. It was fun and sometimes also lightly frustrating, because it was a truly interdisciplinary team: there were two linguists, Riny Huybregts and me, there were two biologists, Gabriel Beckers and Johan Bolhuis, and there was Bob Berwick, who was neither a linguist nor a biologist – he considers himself a computational linguist – and who brought in the sort of expertise that none of us had. I found out that it is very difficult to write an article with 5 people because we each have such different ideas; it was also amazing to see how we could differ in opinion about what is important or how you should define something. For instance, we had to talk for more than 3 or 4 months about what 'compositionality' meant, which Riny and I considered quite simple, but the biologists didn't think was that straightforward. But I later realized that this was also extremely useful: by having to explain to a biologist this extremely fundamental notion of compositionality, we had to come up with relevant examples and think about it ourselves more in depth.

IG
So this collaboration, between people with extremely different backgrounds, is fruitful once everyone aligns themselves to clear definitions?

ME
Yes, but I must admit that I can afford to spend time on this. I am on the point of retirement, Riny Huybregts is already retired. I would not advise this kind of endeavour to younger researchers, because it requires a lot of energy and time, and the output is not sure. And that is one thing that is very frustrating: we keep telling younger people that they need to do interdisciplinary work, but this can be time-consuming, and highly dependent on chance – if you are lucky, it turns out well for your career, but if not it can frustrate your career.

IG
That is exactly what you were saying in one guest lecture you gave at the University PJ Safarik in Kosice. You joked: I would advise you not to do language evolution, it is endless, it is hopeless – then how do you see the future of this area of research? What are the methods you most trust to produce valuable insights (and what methods do you find less reliable)?

ME
As the original Hauser, Chomsky and Fitch (2002) article pointed out, one very useful avenue could be comparative biology: to look at one phenomenon, and see how that is realized in different species, and from that to draw conclusions about whether it is a feature unique to humans or not. This might eventually also allow you to refine your definition of the phenomenon itself.

Take for instance Theory of Mind [**Editor's note:** *the ability to understand the point of view, intentions or thoughts of a different individual, especially when they are different from one's own*]. It is a fascinating topic if you look at research on crows, apes and humans – it is good work, not at all endless or hopeless. It is best done from an interdisciplinary perspective: if you are doing research on Theory of Mind in crows, you should co-operate with a linguist, someone who works on language acquisition and knows a lot about Theory of Mind from that perspective. I think that this comparative research is reliable, and it can deliver valuable insights.

I am a bit more hesitant about the method of using artificially created 'grammars' [**Editor's note:** *studying the learning capacities of different species by exposing them to strings where are stimuli combined according to certain 'grammatical' rules, and then testing their ability to discriminate 'grammatical' from 'ungrammatical' strings*]. Artificial grammar

learning allows us to look at what animals and humans are able to learn: we are turning language into abstract patterns, and seeing if these patterns are, in principle, learnable. The problem is that if you say that the animal can 'learn' these patterns, you are still not sure what kind of mental representations they have of these patterns, how they represent the underlying grammar. Something that we know in linguistics is that you can have completely different grammars that can generate the same set of strings. So it is often difficult to interpret the findings, but I think it is absolutely one part of the puzzle.

The challenge is always in making the step from what we observe to what may be the underlying explanation.

IG

Apart from being a researcher yourself, you have also played a big role in – shall we call it – the management of research(/ers)? You've been director of the Netherlands Graduate School of Linguistics (LOT), of the Utrecht Institute of Linguistics OTS, and you have also been on the board Niels Stensen Foundation that offers research grants to promising young postdocs. What has been your vision of scientific research in all these capacities, the principles that guided you when overseeing a research institute or selecting between candidates for a research grant?

ME

Different aspects, depending on the different functions you're referring to. When talking about the Graduate School of Linguistics, I thought that it was extremely important to make people realize that it is much better to (theoretically) disagree but still work together, than to disagree and oppose each other to such an extent that you are jeopardizing the whole enterprise.

For instance, I may fundamentally disagree with a functional linguist, but it is much better to still work together in order to advocate the position of linguistics in the whole domain of science. That was something that was really great in the Netherlands Graduate School of Linguistics, that we managed to work together across domains, across fields, phoneticians and syntacticians and pragmaticists alike.

Within the Utrecht research institute, this was also partly the case – it was important that people worked together, or were at least aware of each other's research. But there I had another purpose as well: most of the times, national science foundations and universities want to impose a certain direction of research, top-down. They want bigger topics, they want the research to fit into certain general themes. So there I was constantly busy protecting people from that pressure from above.

I wanted to make sure that they could actually do what they want, and I would then reformulate it in such a way as to fit it to a general theme. The possibilities to occasionally fund research that was completely outside the boundaries of what was customary, that was the most rewarding. I once managed to spend some money on a very 'quirky' project that later turned out to be very fruitful, and it is very nice when that can happen.

In general it is very good if you can give the people the freedom to do what they actually want to do – as a researcher nowadays you don't have that freedom as much as you did a few decades ago. To give you an example, nowadays the University does not have money to say to young people 'whatever you want to research, write a good research proposal and we will fund it'. New PhD students are always part of an externally funded project, which means that they are not totally free in what they are doing, even if they did choose to work within that project. The boundaries of your dissertation are defined by that project as it was initially formulated, and if you want to change directions somewhere in the middle that is usually not possible. Still, some good supervisors allow these changes in direction.

As to the Niels Stensen Foundation, I found it very interesting to be part of a group of people with very different areas of expertise. I learned how a theoretical physicist looks at a

linguistics proposal. However, what is very frustrating is the differences in publication strategies: the attitude was sometimes that if a candidate is good, they cannot have just one journal publication, they should have 5 or 6. So I would have to explain that it depends on the field of linguistics, or if we were looking at a candidate from literary studies I would point out that this type of work isn't published in journals. That made me aware of such evaluation strategies, so I am now advising young students to try to publish as much as possible in journals – even if it is not a very prominent journal – rather than in an edited volume.

IG
You are currently the Head of the Department of Humanities at Utrecht University, and you coordinate a variety of courses on language structure, language theory and language evolution. How do you see the new generations of linguists that are coming up? How are their interests, expectations and aptitudes shifting (or are they?), and what does that predict for the study of linguistics in the future?

ME
The number of students in the Netherlands who are doing linguistics (i.e. not as part of a language program) has grown, but the population has also changed. In the period when we had 10 students, 4 or 5 of them would be interested in fundamental questions in linguistics. Nowadays, we have 60 students in a BA program, and you would be happy if the same number of students were interested in any fundamental issue (I am slightly exaggerating). You can persuade them to think about it in a course, but ultimately, they are looking for something that can be applied, which you can relate to the outside world.
The field is changing – more and more funding agencies stimulate a sort of linguistics that you can relate to societal issues. However, I still feel that there are enough people around who are on the one hand interested in quite fundamental issues, and on the other hand capable of showing how these relate to societal issues. And that is in itself a good thing, much better that it was before. I was rarely invited to think about how what I was doing related to the rest of society – and that is now very much in the focus of young researchers.
Ultimately, my role is to give my students a good training – and what they do with it is up to them.

IG
Finally, and to end the interview on a more personal note: what would you say has been your greatest satisfaction from your work? A moment, or project, or discovery, or change that you brought about which makes you most proud to be a linguist.

ME
I must admit that, if you look back, the thing that really gives you pleasure is if you see someone developing like s/he wants. I've supervised a few BA-theses in the last year, and there were a few where I thought 'Wow, this is really good work, this is someone who is asking the right questions'. And such a thesis makes you so happy, you forget about everything else.
So my greatest satisfactions were in teaching, or when I was a research director, in enabling PhDs and then seeing how some people simply found what they wanted to do.

Thank you very much for the interview.

Ileana Grama