

Interview with Bernd Heine

Tania Kuteva (TK)

You are known for the outstanding academic excellence and international leadership in such a great variety of areas of linguistics that my first question comes almost automatically: had you ever imagined that you would become a trend-setter, one of the leading scholars in linguistics in the world? What attracted you to linguistics as a young man?

Bernd Heine (BH)

Thank you for this kind characterization of my person. To be honest, linguistics was never on my agenda when I was young. It all started at age 13 when I happened to watch *King Solomon's Mines* -- a movie about predatory European adventurers traveling to the central Africa in the 19th century on the way to searching for wealth and excitement. I would never watch that movie again, riddled as it was with prejudices and an obtrusive belief in the white man's superiority. But at that time, in 1952, it revealed to me the fascination and the mysteries of the African continent and I decided to become an 'Africa explorer'. Accordingly, when I entered the University of Cologne in 1960, I registered for African Studies as my major subject.

Professor Oswin Köhler, then director of the Institute of African Studies (*Institut für Afrikanistik*), informed me that learning African languages and studying linguistics was a requirement to graduate in African studies. At that stage I was on the verge of abandoning my plan to become an 'Africa explorer' because during my school time language and linguistics was never something close to my heart -- I was interested in people, not in languages. But in the end, my curiosity to 'understand Africa' was stronger and I joined the Institute, which became my academic home up to my retirement in 2004. And during all that time, doing field research in Africa and writing publications on African linguistics were my favorite activities.

TK

Which was the first area of research that you were drawn to and why?

BH

As you can see from what I just said, my aversion to linguistics had disappeared soon and, what is more, I soon became aware that African languages differ in some respects from languages in other parts of the world. In 1978 I published a book on African language typology (Heine 1978) but subsequently my research focus shifted gradually from Africa to languages elsewhere.

One of the main reasons was due to Tom Givón: He published a devastating review of my 1978 book, arguing that my traditional approach merely consisted of descriptive calculations rather than offering any explanation. I responded to him in a paper and he seems to have been impressed by my reaction -- we became friends and up to this day we still are very close friends. At the same time, he inspired me to look for explanations and I followed his line of research by looking for explanations in diachrony, our joint stance being that languages are the product of their history and hence can best be accounted for with reference to how they came to be what they are.

TK

You are a world-leading founder of grammaticalization as a theory in its own right. What is it that attracted your attention to grammaticalization, and made you invest so much effort on elaborating – and „shaping“ – it as a theory?

BH

This line of research was also shared by a number of other colleagues, most of all Elizabeth Traugott and Joan Bybee, and in 1988 Givón staged a conference at the University of Oregon in Eugene to promote the study of grammaticalization. The results of that conference were published in two collective volumes (Traugott and Heine 1991) and cleared the ground for establishing this new field of linguistics. To be sure, our perspectives were not exactly the same. Elizabeth was mainly interested in semantic change, Joan in language usage, and I in cognitive processes. On the whole, however, we were all driving in the same direction, namely trying to overcome the at that time prevalent bias against diachronic perspective of language structure.

TK

How did you come to use the methodology of grammaticalization theory to an area of language research that had been banned for almost a century, i.e. the study of language evolution?

BH

Right, language evolution had no positive standing in linguistics until the turn of the century. Likewise, with grammaticalization. I remember, for example, that in one of my early publications I used the phrasing 'so-called grammaticalization' in order not to annoy the many colleagues for whom the term grammaticalization then was close to a swearword.

TK

In the second half of the 20th century Noam Chomsky postulated that recursion is a design feature of language – in addition to the design features of language that Charles Hockett identified in his work in the 1950s and 1960s – and this became one of the tenets of mainstream linguistics both inside and outside the USA. In your own research on the reconstruction of the genesis and evolution of human language grammar you take a radically different standpoint. You claim that recursion is not an innate, or in-built, cognitive mechanism, specific to a special 'human language device' but rather an epi-phenomenon of grammaticalization. On what grounds did you come to this conclusion?

BH

This is actually an issue where your research was at least as important as mine. Remember that in 2007 we published a book where we argued that grammaticalization theory is able to reconstruct the evolution of recursion -- yes, as a kind of epi-phenomenon of general language evolution (Heine and Kuteva 2007). Our findings suggest that recursive language structures must have evolved when early humans developed grammaticalized structures of phrasal and clausal modification. Such a development is a natural outcome of grammaticalization processes and, accordingly, can generally be explained with reference to the way humans constantly extend the usage of their linguistic resources to cope with new needs of cognition and communication.

It goes without saying, however, that explanation is contingent on the kind of questions that one may wish to ask and, accordingly, an account in terms of grammaticalization theory provides only one of the many conceivable explanations one may think of. Whether recursion is in fact the result of some in-built cognitive mechanism is an issue that is beyond the scope of work on grammaticalization but at least a hypothesis to that effect does not find support from this work.

TK

Your work on grammatical typology – which takes into account the most sizable knowledge accumulated so far on the commonalities observed in the rise and development of grammatical categories in the languages of the world – as well as your research on language contact has

enabled you to come up with a coherent model of grammaticalization. You have published conclusive data showing that grammaticalization runs the same course, i.e. it proceeds according to the same principles, independent of whether we are dealing with a language-contact situation or not. This was the main agenda you pursued in your work till the end of the first decade of the 21st century. Ever since then you have started focusing on an area of language that had been marginalized in grammaticalization studies for decades, namely discourse. What was the trigger for this radical change of focus in your work?

BH

One finding emanating from our research on grammaticalization is that it is sensitive to contact between languages or dialects in that it can, for example, be triggered or accelerated by language contact. Furthermore, that research has also shown, as you say, that grammaticalization in fact follows essentially the same principles irrespective of whether or not language contact is involved, and that the traditional distinction between internal and external grammatical change is in need of reconsideration: The boundary between the two is much more fluid than many of us, including myself, were believing.

But, right, for roughly the last decade my interest has shifted to the study of discourse. The trigger for this radical change was the observation that our models of grammar, and of language at large, were too much centered around the structure of sentences and the presentation of information in a propositional format. What tends to be ignored in this work is that sentences constitute but one of the building blocks that people use for processing discourse.

TK

In your recent work on Discourse Grammar you have turned your scientific curiosity to the issue of (in)compatibility of linguistic research with the latest developments in neuro-science. This is reflected in your work on neural correlates between the parts of Discourse Grammar (Sentence Grammar and Thetical Grammar, in your terminology) and the human brain. How important is, in your view, an interdisciplinary approach in this respect, in spite of the caveat that – at this stage of development of cognitive neuro-science – we might very well be the ‘victim’ of a fad, the fad of ‘neuromania’?

BH

Sure, there is a kind of neuromania in contemporary linguistics. Considering that neuro-science is such a fascinating and booming field it comes as no surprise that linguists proposing new hypotheses on our understanding of language will also look for neuro-linguistic evidence to support their hypotheses. In our work on Discourse Grammar, an interest in neuroanatomy emerged when we found that our distinction between two modes of structuring discourse, referred to as Sentence Grammar and Thetical Grammar, shows striking parallels to a distinction that had been made earlier in neuro-linguistic research, where the distinction is usually described as one between a microstructure and a macrostructure of discourse.

Since that work by neuro-linguists was the result of extensive empirical analyses there was no major need for our research group to engage in experimental testing: Rather, we were able to draw on the findings made by our colleagues from neuro-science to establish that the distinction exhibits remarkable correlations with that of brain lateralization. Accordingly, the conclusion we reached in 2015 was that, whereas the microstructure implicates mainly parts of the left hemisphere of the human brain, building a macrostructure of discourse is a task that cannot be achieved without the participation of right hemisphere activity (Heine et al. 2015).

TK

Do you think that the results of your research on Discourse Grammar can be applied also to areas outside linguistics and if so, how?

BH

All models of language teaching that I am familiar with are heavily biased in favor of concepts of sentence grammar. It would seem that these models could benefit from incorporating findings made in the framework of Discourse Grammar and other dual-processing models, which assume, for example, that both language production and language comprehension are immediately anchored in the attitudes of the speaker (or writer), speaker-hearer interaction, and the monitoring of discourse.

So far, however, we are preoccupied with basic research, and the question of how this research addresses the needs of disciplines other than linguistics is to be looked into in a second phase of our research.

TK

Linguistics is a discipline where a clear-cut theoretical divide exists between formal linguists and functional linguists. Do you think this is a disadvantage or an advantage to the discipline as a distinct scientific domain within the whole domain of science?

BH

Having been brought up in a tradition of functional linguistics, I remember from my time as a graduate student that the then emerging paradigm of Chomsky's generative grammar was characterized by some of my professors somehow as 'devil's work' that should be opposed before it destroys linguistics. Things have fortunately changed and formal linguistics has greatly enriched the development of linguistics.

Functional linguistics and formal linguistics are based on contrasting theoretical perspectives and assumptions, and each has its strong and its weak points. On the whole, however, there is a lot of cross-fertilization between the two, which is beneficial to both domains. Furthermore, the fact that a student is able to decide between two different ways of looking at and describing one and the same phenomenon suggests that the presence of such a divide is definitely an advantage to our discipline.

TK

What is your vision for the direction to be taken in future linguistic research?

BH

Alright, so the question now is what is going to happen in the years to come -- a question that I find hard to answer. But what is obvious to me is that linguistics in ten or twenty years to come is likely to have little in common with the kind of linguistics that you and me are used to. For one thing, electronic technology will not only provide access to new masses of data, it is also likely to shape our techniques of analyzing and our ways of interpreting the data. So we may be faced with new theories and methodologies to establish what language is about.

For another thing, linguistics as a monolithic discipline may no longer exist. When I joined the university some sixty years ago, a professor of linguistics was somehow the king of an empire: He or she (almost invariably then it was a 'he') was in charge of anything that concerns language, from declension paradigms in Latin to Chinese syntax. In view of the increasing diversification and cross-disciplinary research one may wonder how much will remain of language as a unitary subject in the academic world of the future.

TK

What is your advice to younger researchers who are at the beginning of their academic career?

BH

I am not sure if I am qualified to offer any sound advice, especially since it is almost sixty years now since I was a younger researcher. Let me therefore just tell you what guided me when I began my academic career. The most intriguing experience I made was that doing research means that you acquire access to a new world of fascinating phenomena, discovering things that maybe nobody before you has ever seen, or seen the way you think they should be seen. Doing research then may no longer be considered to be hard work, or work at all, it may become your favorite activity, sometimes even an obsession. To be sure, research entails hard work, collecting and analyzing data requires a lot of time and energy, but since you feel it is so enriching you are prepared to spend evenings and weekends when other people are relaxing and, still, you don't feel tired.

Of course, this was not the experience that most of my classmates made, for whom studying and doing research was a means to an end, to become a teacher, a lawyer, or a government officer. And I am glad that this is the way it is because a world consisting only of professors might not be the best of all conceivable worlds.

TK

Thank you very much for the interview.

References

- Heine, Bernd 1976. *A typology of African languages, based on the order of meaningful elements*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer.
- Heine, Bernd, Gunther Kaltenböck, Tania Kuteva, and Haiping Long 2015. On Some Correlations between Grammar and Brain Lateralization. *Oxford Handbooks Online in Linguistics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Heine, Bernd & Tania Kuteva 2007. *The genesis of grammar: a reconstruction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Traugott, Elizabeth C. and Bernd Heine 1991. *Approaches to grammaticalization*. Two volumes. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins.