Isogloss: A new journal for linguistic variation in Romance and Iberian languages[*]

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The coexistence of variation and uniformity as characterizing one particular phenomenon has fascinated researchers from different fields, for different reasons, and from different perspectives. Language is not an exception. Present-day debates

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still revolve around these two poles of the same scale, in what seems to be another example of Jorge Luis Borges' claim that "there is no debate of abstract nature that does not replicate the controversy between Aristotle and Plato" (*The Aleph*).

The general goal of linguistics is to explain the nature of human language through the description of languages or concrete phenomena of particular languages. Such goal is satisfactorily achieved if both language and grammatical phenomena are viewed within an integrated system and related to a general theory of language.

In the 19th century, linguistics was devoted to the comparison of languages and to the reconstruction of the common ancestor of particular groups of languages, sometimes finding abstract regularities, sometimes just describing how (un)related systems behave. Such studies gave rise, already in the 20th century, to seminal structuralist and typological studies that largely focused on lexical and morphophonological aspects of languages – with the notable exception of Greenberg's (1963) work on crosslinguistic syntactic patterns – (cf. Labov 1969, 1994, 2001, Weinreich 1954, Talmy 1975). Post-structuralist investigations made it possible to approach language patterns from a different perspective and to incorporate syntax to the study of language variation. The presence of syntax in the study of linguistic variation has progressively increased during the second half of the last century in formal typology estudies (cf. Baker 2008, 2010a, Cinque & Kayne 2005, Comrie 1981, Croft 1990, 1995, 2002, Dryer 1992, 1998, 2005, Haspelmath et al. 2005, Kayne 2000, Shibatani & Bynon 1995). At the methodological level, Chomsky (1965) already emphasized the limitations of classical studies, especially with respect to the syntactic plane:

> Valuable as they obviously are, traditional grammars are deficient in that they leave unexpressed many of the basic regularities of the language with which they are concerned. This fact is particularly clear on the level of syntax, where no traditional or structuralist grammar goes beyond classification of particular examples.   [from Chomsky 1965: 5]

The aim of achieving descriptive and explanatory adequacy that has characterized formal (generative) work since its origins and that hides a deeper and manifold description vs. explanation conflict required confronting the problem "of explaining how we can know so much given that we have such limited evidence" (Chomsky 1986: xxv). This puzzle – so-called *Plato's problem* – was a hallmark of the Principles and Parameters (P&P) framework and it is still addressed in Minimalism, its goal being that of going *beyond* explanatory adequacy. Although the original P&P plan was possibly too optimistic (cf. Newmeyer 2004, 2005), it fostered original and unprecedented work on morpho-syntactic variation (cf. Barbiers 2013, Biberauer 2008, Fábregas et al. 2015, Picallo 2014, and references therein for up-to-date discussion) that brought along important consequences for the study of grammatical categories, lexical semantics, cartographic regularities, externalization mechanisms, interface conditions, etc.

The working notion of parameter allowed incorporating into the generative studies a lot of comparative work that paid special attention to the differences, coincidences and correlations detected among large groups or families of languages (Romance, Germanic, Slavic, Sinitic, Semitic, Japanese, Hungarian, Korean, Basque, etc., during the last two decades of 20th c.) as well as among languages belonging to the same family (within the Romance group: French,

Spanish, Portuguese, Romanian, Catalan, Italian, etc., and some of their dialects). This has led, over recent years, to the development of macroparametric (cf. Baker 1996, 2001, 2008) or microparametric (cf. Cinque & Kayne 2005, Kayne 2000) approaches to linguistic variation. The macroparametric perspective considers that great typological differences (head initial/final, configurationality, etc.) may follow from a single parameter and, consequently, that it may help isolate some properties characterizing large families or groups of languages. In contrast, the microparametric view focuses on small differences concerning particular related constructions that can be found between two closely related languages or two (dialectal or sociolectal) variants of the same language. Such small differences are taken to be significant enough to be as pertinent as large-scale differences for the understanding of the nature of human language (cf. Gallego 2011 for a comparison between the two approaches and their relevance for linguistic theory).

In a growing context like this, phenomena like cliticization, null subjects, participial agreement, auxiliary selection, adverb placement, restructuring, or topicalization became the focus of interest to characterize not only Italian, French, and Catalan, but also general properties of language. Similar stimuli were provided by work on Germanic (cf. Rohrbacher 1994, Ackema et al. 2012), Scandinavian (cf. Holmberg & Platzack 1995, 2005), and other families (cf. Mchombo 1993 on Bantu, Tallerman 2005 on Celtic, Baker 2010b on Austronesian, etc.). Work on lesser studied non-Indoeuropean languages, like Basque, helped broaden the typological scope of this growing enterprise. All those sources of variation played a key role not only in generative studies but in contemporary comparative linguistics as a whole.

We also believe that language variation is closely related to language change. The fact that languages evolve beyond external factors (invasion, migrations, isolation) shows that our faculty of language is guided by internal mechanisms of change. The objective of many recent studies in sociolinguistics (cf. Labov 1994, 2010) and grammatical theory (cf. Lightfoot 1991, Roberts 2007) has shown that these changes follow certain regular patterns that reveal the internal organization of our language faculty. We should not forget that comparative method in linguistics started with the Neogrammarians and their discovery that changes in phonological systems in Indoeuropean languages follow regular patterns. That comparative methodology is applied not only to study languages in their diachronic dimension, but also in its synchronic one.

The present journal is born with the goal to foster the study of variation in Romance and Iberian languages. We do this in order to create a forum for discussion that help us progress in our understanding of those varieties, their differences, and similarities. Such understanding may improve by using tools, types of evidence, and perspective that differ in their nature, but ultimately complement each other.

Linguistics is not a young field (it goes back to Pānini, 400 years BC), but it is in constant change, in part because of the synergies it has attempted to establish – with better or worse luck – with Biology, Literature, Mathematics, Music, Chemistry, and more (cf. Benítez-Burraco & Boeckx 2014, Mendívil 2009, Uriagereka 1994). Borrowing a notion from those disciplines may provide us with a new tool, thus allowing us to look at things from a fresh perspective. The journal is thus open to new ideas or interdisciplinary attempts whose objective is to contribute new ways of dealing with variation or explanatory advantages in the analysis of

particular linguistic phenomena. That is certainly the spirit of *Isogloss*, a title that already reflects our interest in traditional approaches to the study of variation, and their potential to enrich contemporary research.

We hope that readers will find the papers, reviews, and interviews of this journal useful, thought-provoking, and overall interesting. VALE.

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