An interview on linguistic variation with...

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Josep Quer is an ICREA Researcher and Professor at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra. His work has focused on the analysis of a range of phenomena (negation, agreement, quantification, etc.) that hinge on the interaction between different grammar components (morphosyntax, semantics, prosody) both in spoken and sign languages. He is currently working on the formal study of sign languages, both with a focus on the morphosyntax and semantics of Catalan Sign Language (LSC) and on crosslinguistic and crossmodal research. He has made important contributions in this field, for example, he led the research group that published the first comprehensive grammatical description of LSC. Among his publications, the following ones merit special attention: *Mood at the Interface* (Holland Academic Graphics, The Hague, 1998), *Gramàtica bàsica de la llengua de signes catalana* (DOMAD, Barcelona), *Exhaustive and non-exhaustive variation with free choice and referential vagueness: Evidence from Greek, Catalan, and Spanish* (Lingua, 2013), and *When agreeing to disagree is not enough: Further arguments for the linguistic status of sign language agreement* (Theoretical Linguistics, 2011). He is currently the principal investigator of a European Research Project within the framework of Horizon2020: SIGN-HUB (693349), with the title "The Sign Hub: preserving, researching and fostering the linguistic, historical and cultural heritage of European Deaf signing communities with an integral resource", which gathers nine different institutions.

Isogloss: From your perspective, how do the relevant levels of abstractness (namely "language," "dialect," and "idiolect") apply to sign languages?
JQ: Sign languages constitute a particularly interesting domain to explore this fundamental question. In research we tend to approach signing communities in more or less the same way we approach spoken language communities, but the degree of variation within a community of signers is much higher that within a community of speakers. This stems from the fact that for most deaf people language acquisition will take place under atypical circumstances: only 5-10% of deaf people in Western societies are born into a family where sign language is used. This means that most deaf signers will start acquiring sign language at later stages in life than at birth, and that will depend on different factors linked to the decisions of hearing parents about learning themselves sign language or enrolling their kid in a bilingual bimodal school. For many deaf individuals, their parents will opt for spoken language only, especially after their kid has received a cochlear implant. In case spoken language acquisition turns out to be unsuccessful or incomplete, as happens in many cases, those deaf individuals may discover sign language and the Deaf community as teenagers or even adults. This means that their exposure to sign language will take place many years after the critical period

for acquisition, with the consequences thereof, thus becoming early or late learners in a strict sense. Note that, in addition to such unique acquisition paths, their language models will be mostly non-native sign language users (hearing teachers, speech therapists, interpreters). The degree of spoken language acquisition during the first years will be decisive for this population. In almost all cases, deaf signers will be bilinguals with sign and spoken language, with very different degrees of spoken language competence (mostly in written form). In front of this complex scenario, it seems clear that treating sign language communities as more or less uniform communities would be a mistake. For this reason, sign language researchers have tended to focus on native signers, but they are a very small minority within the community. How to deal with the intrinsic variation within a community then? The only way is having (and trying to properly interpret) metadata about the acquisition path of informants. There is still relatively little known about how late acquisition impacts grammatical competence, but working on these issues is crucial. In a nutshell, idiolectal variation needs to be addressed more seriously than currently done.

Isogloss: In 2016, you were awarded a European Project within the Horizon 2020 Program. Could you tell us a little bit about this project? How will it further our understanding of the faculty of language?
JQ: SIGN-HUB, which is the name of the project, aims at creating an open digital platform with some crucial resources for sign language research. The type of resources being developed are of four types: (i) Developing comprehensive grammars for six European sign languages using an online grammar tool that implements the SignGram Blueprint (Quer et al. 2017), which is a very detailed guide for sign language grammar writing published in open access. (ii) Creating an online atlas of sign language structures (see question 3). (iii) Creating the baselines for sign language assessment anchored in core grammatical properties across native signers, early learners and late learners, with the ultimate goal to help develop appropriate testing tools and intervention for atypical signing populations with sign language deficits (SLI, aphasics, etc.). (iv) Setting up a repository of life narratives of elderly signers from different Deaf communities, with the goal not only to document Deaf life and experiences across Europe in the last 70-80 years, but also to document older forms of the sign languages at hand, with the goal to be able to set up corpora that will allow to study microvariation from a diachronic perspective, when comparing those data to the data from earlier generations.

      The wish behind making these resources available on an open digital platform is that more content can be added in the future. For instance, the online grammar writing tool should enhance grammar writing for sign languages other than those involved in the project. The goal is that it ultimately becomes a hub of resources for sign language research.

Isogloss: One of the goals of your project, SIGN-HUB, is to create an interactive digital atlas of linguistic structures of the world's sign languages, an initiative that reminds us to other similar initiatives, like the World Atlas of Language Structures (WALS). What are the main advantages / reasons to study linguistic variation in general, and linguistic variation of sign languages in particular?
JQ: The idea of creating an atlas of linguistic structures of sign languages is indeed inspired by WALS. The starting problem, though, is that the amount of grammar

description across sign languages is still quite limited when compared to our knowledge about spoken languages around the globe. For this reason, next to the information obtained from the grammars of the 6 sign languages in the project, a questionnaire about grammatical features and phenomena will be distributed among the experts that we know of for the sign languages that have been described to some extent. The goal is to be able to gain knowledge on the cross-linguistic and typological variation across languages in the visual-gestural modality. Too often sign languages are reduced to a "type" and they are even referred to in the singular ("In sign language…"). Despite the effects of the visual-gestural modality and the many shared features derived from that, we know that detailed grammatical analysis uncovers interesting and too often unnoticed cross-linguistic variation. Gaining knowledge about that variation will certainly contribute to understanding the properties of the faculty of language beyond the issue of spoken vs. signed modality.

Isogloss: What is the situation of dialectological studies in the field of sign languages?

JQ: As for dialectal variation across sign languages, we basically know that it exists at the lexical level, mostly due to the schooling system, as in the case of the Sign Language of the Netherlands, where five "dialects" have been identified. We also know that Italian Sign Language (LIS), for instance, has an important degree of lexical variation depending on the major cities where it is used. This situation seems to be quite general across languages because of the lack of standardization. However, there are only very few studies that address grammatical variation across dialects (or variants) to date. Having corpora with rich metadata might help make progress in this respect, but the amount of work ahead is enormous. We virtually lack thorough and comprehensive grammatical description and their variation for almost all sign languages, even for the best studied ones.

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? What is the position that you take in your project with respect to the type of data that you use?

JQ: As mentioned before, one of the major problems for sign language analysis is the lack of resources, starting with comprehensive reference grammars, that is, thorough grammatical descriptions. In addition, only a few sign languages have a corpus available, while for some others a corpus is being developed. This means that in most cases, and in our case as well, the basic source of grammatical information is data elicitation, and in this respect, the variation attested across signers needs to be always taken into account, as explained before. The safe option is to work with native signers, but one should keep in mind that they are a minority in the language community, and not always easy to get by. Experimental data are also being used to test certain theoretical hypotheses.

Isogloss: Much current theoretical research is complemented with corpora and statistical / experimental analyses. In fact, dialectology also resorts to experimental and field work methods, traditionally. What do you think is the position of theoretical approaches to language in such scenario?

JQ: I think this trend to take those approaches into account has been very beneficial for theoretical research, as long it is recognized that the potential and the limitations of each technique or approach are recognized. Not only have they provided a new type of evidence, but they have also favoured an exchange with research traditions that did not talk too much to each other. Typological and dialectological work has opened up news venues of research about macro- and microvariation in theoretical linguistics, for instance, a very welcome development, and theoretical work from this perspective has also gained respect in the typological and descriptive traditions.

Isogloss: How do you conceive the relation / tension between linguistic variation and linguistic uniformity throughout the years? How do you think that the study of sign languages will impact in our understanding of this tension?
JQ: Keeping native signers or speakers as a baseline and examining variation at individual or group level, whether it is geographical or due to atypical acquisition or to a particular deficit, will help us better understand the areas of the language faculty that are more resilient to change and those other that are more likely to undergo modifications under the influence of different factors. This is a far more complicated enterprise, but also a more exciting and empirically more adequate one.

Isogloss: Why do you think dialectal studies have typically focused on the lexicon, phonetics, and morphology? Are we in a better position now (than decades ago) to carry out studies on syntactic variation? If so, why? In your opinion, what is the current situation in the study of cross-linguistic and cross-dialectal syntactic variation in sign languages?
JQ: Lexicon, phonetics, and morphology are probably easier areas to tackle from a purely descriptive point of view. Beyond word order, syntactic variation needs to be addressed within a particular set of hypotheses. Simply put, you need to know where to look at before you start looking into the data, in order to reach meaningful results. This is why theoretical syntax can be such a useful tool in this domain.

As said, the study of variation across sign languages is still in its infancy because of the lack of comprehensive descriptions of sign languages. This problem is being addressed, but it will take time. That's why with SIGN-HUB we try to promote research that will respond to this need.

Isogloss: What are the challenges that we will have to address in the following decades when it comes to studying sign language variation?
JQ: As I just said, the basic challenge right now is producing enough descriptive work of high quality in most of the partially documented or underdocumented sign languages. For this it is of utmost importance that more linguists start working on them. So far, people trying to describe sign languages were not trained linguists (very often educators, or users themselves), and despite the intrinsic value of such work, it falls short of the standards needed to carry out proper cross-linguistic analysis.

From my point of view, another challenge in the sign linguistic field is that linguists working in different traditions (mainly formal vs. cognitive/functional linguistics) produce descriptions that are useful for any type of linguistic analysis. The SignGram Blueprint is an attempt in this direction, and time will show whether it is a successful one.