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General Linguistics and Cartography: an Interview with Ur Shlonsky

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*This issue of **Revista Letras** is dedicated to the publication of some selected papers presented at the “Intermediate Meeting” of the Grammar Theory Working Group (GTTG) of the National Association for Research and Graduate Studies in Letters and Linguistics (ANPOLL), held at the Federal University of Roraima, July 2019. Currently, GTTG members are researchers from different fields (such as Phonology, Morphology, Syntax, Semantics and Language Acquisition), affiliated to Brazilian universities and research institutes. At the 2019 meeting, in addition to discussions more specifically related to grammar theory, it was sought to establish dialogues with different ANPOLL working groups, in particular with members of the Psycholinguistics and Indigenous Languages groups. Another topic covered was grammar teaching at the Basic Education. Basic Education has been a concern of many group members, who have come up with proposals to show how grammar theory can contribute to the study of grammar and to the learning of (spoken and written) standard Portuguese.*

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*We are delighted to interview in this issue the renowned linguist Ur Shlonsky, professor at the Department of Linguistics at the University of Geneva. His main areas of expertise are syntactic theory and comparative syntax. With research on aspects of Semitic languages syntax, especially Modern Hebrew, and work on Romance languages and Romance dialectology, Professor Shlonsky has provided important contributions to syntax theory and, more recently, to the Cartographic Approach. Among his various research topics, we can cite the syntax of null subjects, relative sentences, resumptive pronouns, cliticization and *wh*-interrogatives. For a more detailed view of his cv, as well as a list of some of his publications, the reader can consult the link <https://www.unige.ch/lettres/linguistique/collaborateurs/profs/shlonsky/>.*

*Unquestionably, the topics addressed in this interview with Professor Ur Shlonsky will definitely bring important contributions to *Revista Letras* readers – especially those of the present issue – once some of the GTTG priority axes for the*

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2019-2020 biennium have been addressed in this interview. Some more personal questions make it possible for the readers to know when and how Professor Shlonsky's interest for theoretical Linguistics – and, particularly, for cartographic studies – arose. The interview will also cover some topics on the cartographic program which are more related to Professor Shlonsky's current research, namely issues on the syntax of the left periphery and the study of the Subject.

Professor Shlonsky, many thanks for your participation in this interview! Now, the reader can learn and be delighted with your answers to our questions.

Professor Shlonsky's trajectory in Linguistics

Dear Professor Shlonsky, we start our interview with more “personal” questions. The Revista Letras readers might be wondering about your interest for Linguistic Theory and Cartography.

1. So, to begin with, we would like to know how your interest in Linguistics arose.

I majored in Philosophy at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and although I was encouraged by my teachers to continue, I found that the philosophy of language revolved around a limited set of questions (the nature of meaning, reference, intentionality etc.). Hesitant as to what I was going to study next, I spent some time travelling in Mexico and it was while visiting the pyramids of Teotihuacan, overwhelmed by the esthetic impact of structure (in this case, architectural) that I realized that I should study language structure, and that I should do so by looking at data, at different structures, at different languages.

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2. As we have mentioned in the Introduction, our main concerns in this interview are to exchange ideas about Cartography, a very prolific line of research within Generative Linguistics nowadays. Hence, our second question is still “personal” in a sense and is partially related to the previous one: how did your interest in Cartography arise?

Cartography got its name in the late 1990s, but the interest in structure, functional structure in particular, was all over the place years before. My classmate at MIT, Steve Abney, was writing his thesis on the DP, Pollock's 1987 GLOW talk, which I attended, was the basis of his well-known 1989 paper on “splitting INFL” and there was also lesser-known work at the time taking seriously the idea that functional morphemes had to find a place in the structure. So, I can say that Cartography was a natural research area at the time I was a graduate student. I think that if one looks at morphosyntactic

phenomena from a formal angle, one is inevitably drawn to ask how the morphemes come together? Why they appear in a certain order? What is their relative scope? These are all “cartographic” questions, and they arise, I think, the moment one looks at a complex set of data.

Current Issues in Linguistic Theory and in Cartographic Syntax

We are addressing now some questions concerning general topics within Linguistic Theory and some specific questions within the framework you currently base your work on, the Cartography Program.

3. Let us start with the “more general” ones by asking something on the study of endangered and underdescribed languages. How do you evaluate the theoretical contributions and challenges of this type of research?

In short: Extremely important. I remember as a student that if someone was working on English, French, Italian etc., it was said that they were studying UG, if they were working on, say, Hebrew, like I was, then they were taken to be working on Hebrew and if it was on some lesser-known language from Australia, Africa or Brazil, people would say that they were working on “exotic languages”. Aside from being almost racist, this is a very unscientific way to do Linguistics. There are no exotic languages! I would even go further and say that the advantage of working on minority languages, languages which are only or primarily spoken and not written, is that one doesn't have to deal with prescriptivism and can access directly speakers' intuitions about their language.

If you look at the wealth of discoveries in syntax, morphosyntax and phonology, over just the last generation, you cannot underestimate the value of data that has come from lesser-described languages and their input into the theory of UG and of parametric variation. Finally, as linguists, we have a commitment to human civilization in describing and preserving endangered languages.

4. Are there specific contributions from Cartography to this field?

One area for which cartography has provided a very useful framework of description and analysis is the left periphery. Many languages have what are sometimes called “particles”, expressing different kinds of Force, Topic, Focus, degrees of evidentiality, speaker's attitude etc... which have traditionally been relegated to pragmatics and discourse analysis. The cartographic approach has proven very useful in bringing these pieces of morphology into sentence structure and studying their functional features, their position and the hierarchy in which they appear. I recently read with great interest work by Seki, Franchetto & Santo, Maia, Stenzel, to mention only a handful, working

on what I think is the left periphery of languages spoken in your part of the world. I think this is very exciting. I would say that one of the (perhaps originally unintended) results of recent work in Cartography is precisely in bringing in discourse-related (non-truth-functional) elements of meaning into syntactic structure and thereby connecting them with more well-studied components of syntactic structure.

5. Very recently, we have observed a growing movement of formal linguists researching on grammar teaching in basic education. In Brazil, for instance, this was also noted, especially with some members of the Grammar Theory Working Group from ANPOLL (The National Association of Graduate Studies and Research in Letters and Linguistics). How do you see the contribution of Linguistic Theories to language teaching and, particularly, the efforts of some generativists in trying to bring the epistemology and methodology of their theory to class?

An aspect of this issue is very much on the agenda in Europe today, as it concerns language teaching directed at the refugee population. I am involved in a research project designed to train teachers of French (the majority language in Geneva) in basic linguistics and provide the teachers with tools to understand some of the first languages spoken by the refugee population (Arabic, Persian, Tigrinya, primarily) in order to develop more successful teaching methods based on grammatical comparison. We would like to compare such a teaching approach with more traditional ones, which avoid grammar and comparison, by testing student populations at different levels of acquisition.

6. If we think on Cartography, are there specific contributions from this research program, in your view, to grammar teaching in Basic Education?

I don't know about Cartography as such, but I have no doubt that the understanding of structure is crucial to basic language education. Take foreign language teaching. Here, in Geneva, the first foreign language taught to school children is German. The results are a total failure: after 7, 8 years of German, the children cannot write a paragraph! They spend hours learning grammar, but since the approach is not structural, or comparative, they simply never get it. In my first-year syntax class at the University, I show the students basic German word order – OV in the verb phrase and V2 in CP – in 25 minutes, by comparing it to French. I have tried to do this with my school-age children, and it took about 1 hour. At the end, they completely understood it. I think that linguists have an important role to play in designing curricula for language teaching at all levels by relying to theoretically-sound descriptions of the students' mother tongue.

Some specific issues on Cartography

Now, we would like to ask three (very) specific questions on Cartography which openly dialogue with your work. Two of them are more related to your recent work on the left periphery. The other one specifically targets a topic on Subjects you have worked on with Luigi Rizzi.

7. The first question of this subsection is about interrogative sentences. Recently, we have seen a set of cartographic studies based on different languages that focus on questions with elements corresponding to high adverbs, such as *why* and *how come*, from English, *perché* and *come mai*, from Italian, among others. In the paper “*Where is Why?*”, published in 2011 in partnership with Gabriela Soare, you propose a refinement of a proposal by Rizzi (2001). One could say that the main difference with respect to Rizzi’s analysis relies on the fact that, for you, elements of the *why* type always undergo raising. More specifically, such phrases leave an unpronounced copy/trace in a non-criterial projection – lower than IntP –, namely, ReasonP.

In addition to English and Romanian – the languages which served as the basis for the presentation of your proposal –, have you found data from other languages confirming the idea that elements corresponding to the English *why* are externally merged in [Spec, ReasonP]?

10 Yoshio Endo has worked on ReasonP in Japanese in some of his recent papers and I am currently working on a paper with a recent PhD of ours, Caterina Bonan, on the different positions of *why* in Veneto dialects. Our point in the paper with Gabriela Soare was that if *why* were merged in Spec/Int then it would be criterially-frozen in that position and one would not expect a long-construal interpretation of it (that is, questioning the embedded eventuality, not the matrix one). So, there should be (at least) two positions for *why*: a position for external merge distinct from the criterial one.

8. Interrogative sentences with high adverbial wh-elements have a special syntax in relation to questions with argumental wh-phrases or with wh-phrases corresponding to low adverbs. This observation has led Rizzi (2001) and Shlonsky and Soare (2011) to propose that high adverbial wh-elements are externally merged in a high position within the left periphery, as mentioned in the previous question. How do you see the case of languages where wh words of the *why* type can appear in a post-verbal position? This is the case of Brazilian Portuguese, for instance, where a question like “*A Maria viajou por quê?*” (Literally, ‘*Maria traveled why?*’) is grammatical and interchangeable with “*Por que a Maria viajou?*” (‘*Why did Mary travel?*’), in both cases allowing a cause/reason and purpose reading.

This is very interesting. As a matter of fact, you find this in many Veneto dialects. In Trevigiano, for example, Bonan (2019) shows that one element, *parcossa* can appear both clause-internally and in the left periphery. In both positions, it triggers Subject Clitic Inversion (SCIL), just like other wh words in the language. The other ‘why word – *parché* – can only appear in a left peripheral position and does not trigger SCIL. *Parché* thus behaves like Italian *perché*. Brazilian Portuguese, as far as I know, has optional wh in situ (see, e.g., Figueredo Silva & Grolla 2016), so the link with the Venetan dialects does not seem to be spurious.

I don’t know if this has been done, but if not, it would, in my judgement, be worthwhile to test whether a negative word inside the clause is compatible with clause-internal *por quê*: “A Maria não viajou por quê?” and compare it with negation in a sentence with fronted *por quê*. Intervention effects of this sort may tell us whether *por quê* is interpreted in the clause-internal position or whether it is (covertly) moved.

9. In your (2007) paper with Luigi Rizzi on the strategies of subject extraction, you assume, with Rizzi (2006), that the inflectional domain would have two dedicated positions to the valuation of the features associated with the subject, namely [Spec, TP] and [Spec, SubjP], a very welcome idea within Cartography once this approach follows the *One Feature, one Head Principle* (Kayne, 2005) as one of its main methodological guidelines. If one thinks on other developments on the IP zone within Cartography – let us remember Cinque’s (1999) influential work on adverbs and functional heads –, one will possibly ask how the cartography of subject positions à la Rizzi (2006), Rizzi and Shlonsky (2007) and many other cartographers like A. Cardinaletti (see, for instance, Cardinaletti, 2004) can be harmonized with the Cinque hierarchy. To be more precise, we were wondering where these two functional heads, namely, [SubjP] and [TP] would be placed among the adverbial-like positions of the Cinque hierarchy.

This is a difficult question. To answer it properly requires that both Spec/SubjP and Spec/TP be lexically filled. Only then can we really see what adverbial material can appear between them. In Rizzi and my 2007 paper, we didn’t have such cases. However, in a recent paper co-authored with Isabelle Roy, we studied copular sentences in French, which employ the pronoun *ce*, which is obligatory (in addition to the copula) in inverse copular constructions.¹ Here is an example: “Mon meilleur ami c’est Jean” (my best friend CE is John). To make a long story short, we argued that *mon meilleur ami* is in Spec/SubjP while *ce* is in a lower position (which we took to be a

1 Roy, Isabelle & Ur Shlonsky. 2019. Aspects of the syntax of “ce” in French copular sentences. In María Arche, Antonio Fabrégas & Rafael Marín (eds.), *Copulas across languages*, 153–169. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

lower subject position, not Spec/TP, following another paper I wrote with Luigi Rizzi²). It now becomes possible to test adverbial intervention between two subject positions which are simultaneously filled. We haven't done that, but the test sentences should not be difficult to construct.

Cartography today and tomorrow

Thinking on the “future” of a theoretical program and on the possible research questions which may be addressed is a very important reflection in Epistemology. On this particular issue, we have three questions for you.

10. A prolific line of research in Cartography nowadays turns to the description of left peripheral categories with specific semantic-discursive import which somehow include the speaker (Giorgi, 2010), the addressee (Haegeman; Hill, 2013), evidential and epistemic functional categories (Cruschina, 2015), as well as many other functional categories which, under a closer inspection, are actually present among the highest projections of the Cinque hierarchy (speech act, evaluative, mirative, etc.). In the 3rd International Workshop on Syntactic Cartography – which took place in Beijing last Fall –, we have seen a plethora of works which solved some of their (mainly distributional) puzzles by turning to the assumption that there would be some projections in the left periphery which would convey specific (semantic-discursive) notions. Lima's (2020) MA dissertation gives an overview of some of those works on these “SAP categories” and shows that many of these grammatical units are actually IP-internally encoded, among the highest categories of the Cinque hierarchy.

It is a quite delicate question, we know. We would like to know how you see this important ‘wave’ in Cartography, which is replicating/doubling in the CP field some of the categories we cross-linguistically find in a zone which corresponds to the IP domain.

I agree that there is a real issue here, which needs to be clarified (although I am not familiar with Lima's work). One thing is that there is no clear-cut way, in my judgement, to distinguish the IP *zone* from the CP *zone*. It isn't clear what *zone* actually means, unless we define things in a narrower way, for example: the IP zone is where inflection is expressed. But even this is problematic as there are languages in which verbs inflect for very “high” features; there are non-inflectional categories interspersed between the various tense and agreement categories which typically show up in inflection and, then, there are languages with no or little inflection. So,

² Shlonsky, Ur & Luigi Rizzi. 2018. Criterial freezing in small clauses and the cartography of copular constructions. In Jutta Hartmann, Marion Jäger, Andreas Kehl, Andreas Konietzko & Susanne Winkler (eds.), *Freezin*, 29–65. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

perhaps we should stop talking about CP and IP unless there is clear evidence to draw a line between them. Another issue is whether there are empirical grounds for replicating/doubling certain categories. Recall that Cinque had a couple of doubled functional categories in his adverb book. He needed that to explain why certain adverbs could appear in two different positions. So, there is a precedent for that. Related to that is that if one looks at languages with scrambling, one notices a similarity between the semantic/discourse properties of scrambled constituents in German, Dutch etc. and peripherally-topicalized elements in Romance. So, is the category targeted by a scrambled object, say, a “low” topic position?

One should also include various “performative” elements in the discussion, lexicalized by discourse particles. These sometime occur clause-internally and sometimes clause-peripherally.

I think it might be helpful to approach the question that you raise by first classifying them into those that can be embedded and those that are only licensed in the root. That opens up two questions, one having to do with selection by predicates, namely, what categories can be selected, and which are blind to selection. For example, Force can be selected by a verb. A verb selects declarative force and interrogative force. Verbs also select mood (e.g., subjunctive) but no verb “selects” for a Topic or a Focus. What about speaker-relatedness? Evidentiality (so speaker or addressee), etc...Why can certain categories only appear at the root? What does this tell us about their position in the clause?

11. The most Cartographic methodological guideline – the One Feature, One Head principle (Kayne, 2005) – would have us asking on the main contributions of Cartography to General Linguistics. An important discussion in General Linguistics relies on the nature of the (functional/grammatical) categories available to languages. The classification of words into parts of speech or word classes is only a first attempt, as many other categories – most of them, actually – are left out. The cartographic enterprise, which attempts to draw precise maps of the structure of the sentence and its major phrases (Rizzi; Cinque, 2010; Shlonsky, 2010) provides good methodological tools in this direction, thus, illuminating the general debate on the nature of (grammatical) categories in a broader sense (in Lyons’s 1977 spirit).

We have two interrelated questions concerning this important issue on the nature of functional categories. The first is related to the specific contributions of Cartography to the debate on the “origins” of the functional/grammatical categories: are they a product of UG? The second has to do with the “future” of Cartography, namely, which research questions – on the nature of grammatical categories – are among the most important nowadays in Cartography and in Generative Grammar in general.

It's hard to make a guess as to how many functional/grammatical categories there are. A helpful guideline is any cognition-related feature for which there is evidence for grammaticalization in some language. This question defines a research agenda, namely that of comparative syntax. Of course, this method is inductive but, at this point, I don't know of any theory of human cognition that can establish extra-linguistic criteria for this. So, this is why careful, detailed empirical description is so important, and I think we are only at the beginning of that and there is a great deal more to discover here. If syntax is a feature-based computation, which Cartography believes it is, then the relevant features are part of the grammar, part of the UG endowment.

12. Last, but not least, if you take into account your experience in the field and the current framework of Generative Linguistics in general, and of the Cartography Program, in particular, what advice could you give for those who are starting their career in this field?

It would be presumptuous on my part to give advice. I would only say that I am personally always challenged when I see some morphosyntactic behavior and I try to make sense of it. An interesting (and encouraging) exercise is to read or reread Chomsky's very early work on the English auxiliary system (*have, be* and modals). He tried to make formal sense of how these morphemes pattern and, in so doing, developed the first cartography!

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