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Introducing Studies in Transparency

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Introducing *Studies in Transparency*

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This short contribution introduces the current collection of articles written in the context of the research project on transparency carried out at the University of Amsterdam. It provides a brief outline of the overall research topic and situates the individual contributions to this volume in the wider context of the project.

1 Introduction

In 2011, *Linguistics in Amsterdam* published a special issue entitled *Transparency in Functional Discourse Grammar*. The opening article (Hengeveld 2011a) proposed an approach to the systematic study of transparency in language that was applied to a number of languages in the ensuing articles (Grández Ávila (2011) on Quechua, Jansen (2011) on Esperanto, Leufkens (2011) on Kharia, and Nordhoff (2011) on Sri Lanka Malay), and was rounded off by preliminary generalizations, adding data from Dutch (Hengeveld 2011b). The topic of transparency has since then been studied extensively and has not only been applied to many different languages in descriptive synchronic studies, but also to language stages in acquisition, contact, and change. This second special issue of *Linguistics in Amsterdam* on the topic of transparency contains contributions of both types.

In this introduction the research topic is presented in Section 2, with a special focus on the relevance of the topic for language description and the study of language acquisition, language contact, and language change. Section 3 then introduces the individual contributions to this volume, focusing on their relevance to the general issues outlined in Section 2.

2 Research questions

For the purposes of this introduction, transparency may be defined informally as a one-to-one relation between (pragmatic and semantic) meaning and (morphosyntactic and phonological) form. The research project on transparency at the University of Amsterdam arose from a rather basic and straightforward

observation: if languages are primarily means of communication, one would expect them to be maximally transparent. Yet we find that many languages actually exhibit many opaque features, such as fusional morphology, expletive elements, discontinuous constructions, etc. The question that arises then is where this opacity comes from.

An answer that is given in the existing literature is that languages become more opaque over time (Comrie 1992; Lass 1997, Deutscher 2000). Certain aspects of language that were once functionally motivated, loose their original function in a process of syntacticization and become mere obligatory elements. These aspects are aptly called 'historical junk' and 'linguistic male nipples' by Lass (1997). A good example of this are predominantly arbitrary grammatical gender systems, that arose out of systems of semantic classification. Other aspects of language may become more opaque due to the application of the principle of economy, which may lead to, for example, the disappearance of clear morpheme boundaries. The emergence of suppletive forms of high-frequency verbs would be an example of such as process.

If this were the only development involved, all languages, except very young ones, would be opaque as a result of their having grown older. However, there are also languages with a long history but a high degree of transparency. This is due to the fact that in situations of intense language contact, with many second language learners, languages tend to become more transparent, or are rather made more transparent by second language learners regularizing what had become irregular (Kusters 2003; Dahl 2004; Szmrecsanyi & Kortmann 2009; Trudgill 2011). Creole languages are especially interesting in this context. As these languages arise in situations of extreme contact, are young languages and therefore predicted to be transparent on the one hand, at the same time, they derive part of their structure from their substrate and superstrate languages.

The points listed above already show the importance of language learning for the topic of transparency. Second language acquisition develops faster when the language to be acquired is more transparent (Andersen 1984). Similarly, research into first language acquisition shows that there are important differences in the acquisition speed of young children acquiring their mother tongue that can be attributed to differences in the degree of transparency of those languages (Slobin 1977; MacWhinney 2005). Thus, one may say that languages that are transparent are more learnable than languages that are not.

One further step is of interest then. Languages have different degrees of transparency, but the question is how the non-transparent features are distributed across languages. Is this distribution random or systematic? In order to investigate this latter point, much of the research carried out within the transparency project aims at establishing whether the differences in the degree of transparency of languages can be described systematically in terms of an

implicational hierarchy. A first attempt to provide such a hierarchy is Hengeveld (2011b). A much larger typological study is presented in Leufkens (2015). Further generalizations based on a larger set of languages and using a somewhat different classification of non-transparent features are given in Hengeveld & Leufkens (2018). The hierarchy presented in the latter paper is given in (1):

(1)　　　　　1. Grammatical agreement (clausal)/Nominal expletives
⊃
2. Grammatical gender assignment/Tense copying/
Grammatical agreement (phrasal)/
Morphologically based stem or affix alternation
⊃
3. Discontinuity
⊃
4. Morphophonologically based stem or affix alternation
⊃
5. Grammatical relations
⊃
6. Crossreference/Apposition/
Phonologically based stem or affix alternation

This hierarchy can be read top-down or bottom up. In the top-down reading, it states that if a language has an opaque property somewhere in the hierarchy, it will also have all the properties lower in the hierarchy. In the bottom-up reading, it states that if a language does not have an opaque property somewhere in the hierarchy, it will neither have any of the properties higher in the hierarchy.

　　　A hierarchy such as this one has important applications in several fields. In synchronic descriptive terms, the hierarchy predicts that any new language that is submitted to investigation will fit this same pattern. In acquisitional terms, it predicts that the features lower in the hierarchy are acquired much more easily than the ones higher in the hierarchy. In diachronic terms, there are two predictions. First of all, if a language develops in isolation, it will gradually acquire the features in (1) in a bottom-up fashion. And second, if there is a large influx of second language learners, a language will gradually loose the features in (1) in a top-down fashion.

3　　The articles in this issue

The contributions to this issue can all be related to the different perspectives on transparency presented in Section 2.

Two papers are dedicated to the synchronic description of individual languages. Kees Hengeveld and Rafael Fischer analyze transparency in A'ingae (Cofán/Kofán), a language isolate spoken in Colombia and Ecuador, and show that this is a language with a high degree of transparency. Iris Legeland focuses on Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT). She shows that NGT neatly follows the predictions made by the transparency hierarchy. Since this is the first study of transparency dedicated to a sign language, it also has wider relevance, as it suggests that the transparency hierarchy has cross-modal relevance.

One contribution to this study is dedicated to language acquisition. Maud Westendorp first of all provides a fine-grained analysis of opaqueness in the verbal domain in Norwegian and Swedish. She finds that Norwegian is more opaque as regards discontinuity in the verb phrase. She tentatively relates this observation to the fact that children take longer to acquire this construction in Norwegian than in Swedish.

The remaining contributions to this volume focus on language change and language contact. Nour Efrat-Kowalsky and Lorenzo van Velzen study transparency from a diachronic perspective in Hebrew and Italian, respectively. Nour Efrat-Kowalsky shows that Hebrew has become slightly more transparent over time, likely due to the influence of language contact. Lorenzo van Velzen shows that, contrary to expectation, Italian, despite having passed through a period of intense contact, did not become more transparent during this period. He suggests that contact with less transparent languages may have caused this situation to occur.

Felicia Bisnath and Silvia de Grandis arrive at a similar conclusion. They study the development of Sranan, a creole language, which as such would be expected to be fairly transparent. However, this language has remained in constant contact with the non-transparent languages Dutch and English. They therefore suggest that the Transparency Hierarchy should take social context into account.

Finally, Luisa Seguin studies Haitian Creole. As shown in Leufkens (2013), as a creole language, arising in a contact situation, this language may be expected to be more transparent than both its substrate (Fongbe) and superstrate (French) languages. The author convincingly shows that indeed Haitian Creole is more transparent than either of these languages.

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