Objectivity and bias in linguistic description:
Ideals and reality

Rik De Busser

2019 International Graduate Research Symposium

26 October 2019, ULIS, Vietnam National University, Hanoi

NATIONAL CHENGCHI UNIVERSITY

Introduction

- Every linguist or language teacher relies on descriptions of the languages that they study, learn, or teach

- It is important that these linguistic descriptions are reliable

- How can we be certain that this is the case?
  - Ideally
  - In reality

Describing a language

- Specialists:
  - "The job of descriptive linguistics is to describe individual languages as perceptively and **rigorously** as possible, with maximal **accountability** to a **naturalistic** corpus of data ideally collected within a broad program of language documentation [...] to ensure that the **full spectrum** of language structures are represented." (Evans & Dench 2006, p. 3)
  - "**Empirically-based** linguistic research" (Aikhenvald 2007, p. 3)

- Popular:
  - "In the study of language, description or descriptive linguistics is the work of **objectively** analyzing and describing how language is **actually used** (or how it was used in the past) by a group of people in a speech community. " (Wikipedia)

Describing a language

- Empirical adequacy
  - The description of a language should reflect how a language is used
- Intelligibility
  - A linguistic description should be understandable to a wide linguistic audience over a long period of time
- Unbiased
  - A linguistic description should not select certain phenomena and leave others out and should be as neutral as possible

Objectivity

Objectivity

- What is objectivity?
  - "Objectivity is blind sight, seeing without inference, interpretation, intelligence" (Daston & Galison 2010, p. 17)
    - Not really possible with linguistic research
    - Is 'blind sight' desirable when you deal with languages?
  - Typically treated as a cornerstone of science
    - But: "Scientific objectivity has a history. Objectivity has not always defined science. Nor is objectivity the same as truth or certainty, and it is younger than both." (Daston & Galison 2010, p. 17)
  - Weak interpretation: avoidance of (subjective) bias
    - Try to get an idealized, neutral view on the data you collect

Bias

- Judgements about the world (including language) rely on incomplete data
- We use heuristics to make simplified generalizations about these data
- This often leads to errors, which can be incidental or systematic
- These errors are not necessarily the result of ignorance, negligence, or bad intent
- They are to some extent unavoidable
- (There are different types of bias; see Kahneman & al. 1982; Gilovich & al. 2002)

Where can we find bias?

- Bias is that it is everywhere

- Previous research
  - Psychology
  - Statistics
  - Clinical studies

- What about linguistics?

Example: Dutch causative constructions

- Generally accepted story: there are two causative verbs
  - *doen* 'do': direct causation
  - *laten* 'let': indirect causation

(Verhagen & Kemmer 1997; Coppen et al. 2007)

Example: Dutch causative constructions

- *Doen* 'do': Causer has a tendency to be inanimate (58%)

  (1) *de   stralen-de   zon   **doe-t**   de   temperatuur   oplop-en*
       the   shine-ADJR   sun   do.PRES-3S   the   temperature   rise-INF

  'The bright sun **makes** the temperature rise.' (V&K)

- *Laten* 'let': Causer is typically animate (99%)

  (2) *de   sergeant   **liet**   ons   door   de   modder   kruip-en*
       the   sergeant   let.PST.S   us.ACC   through   the   mud   crawl-INF

  'The sergeant **had/made** us crawl through the mud.' (V&K)

Example: Dutch causative constructions

- The problem: other constructions with causative-like semantics
  - *Maken* 'make'

(3)   *hij*   **maakte**   *me*   *nerveus*
      3S.NOM   make-PST.S   1S.ACC   nervous

      'He **made** me nervous' (fv800876)

(4)   *...* *ze*   **maakte**   *me*   *ook* *aan* *het*   *lachen*
      3S.F.NOM   make-PST.S   1S.ACC also at   the.N   laugh-INF

      'she also **made** me laugh.' (fv800706)

Example: Dutch causative constructions

- The problem: other constructions with causative-like semantics
  - *Geven* 'give'

(5) Ø   ***geef***   *me*   *gras*   *te*   *eten.*
   give   1S.NOM   grass   PRT   eat.INF

'… make me eat grass.' (fv800618)

(6) …   ***geef***   *ons*   *iets*   *te*   *doen...*
      give   1P.ACC   something   PRT   do.INF

'[If You have special wishes,] let us know it ...' (internet)

Example: Dutch causative constructions

- Generally accepted story: two causative verbs
  - *doen* 'do' / *laten* 'let'
- … but there are at least two others:
  - *maken* 'make' / *geven* 'give'
- Why are some constructions privileged and some forgotten?
  - Theoretical bias: direct vs. indirect causation is a traditional distinction
  - Frequency
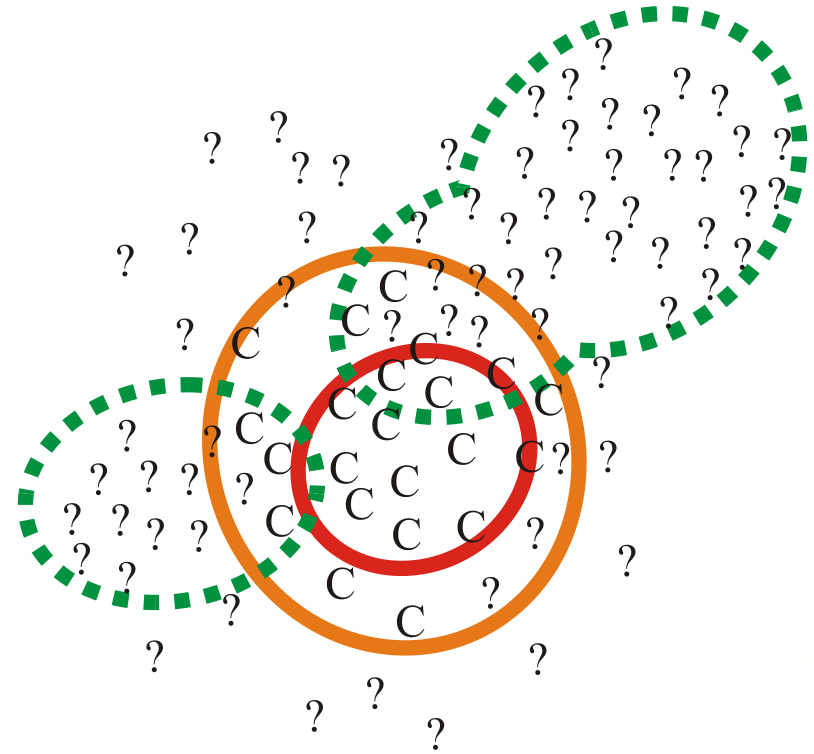
Conclusion

- Bias in linguistic description
  - To some extent unavoidable
  - Not necessarily immediately detectable
  - Very much underestimated
- This is a problem
  - Our linguistic descriptions are partially incomplete and incorrect
  - We are not necessarily aware that this is the case
- Implications
  - For linguistic theory
  - For applied linguistics: language teaching, language revitalization

Bibliography

Aikhenvald, Alexandra Y. 2007. Linguistic fieldwork: Setting the scene. *Sprachtypologie und Universalienforschung. Language Typology and Universals* 6(1). 3–11.

Chelliah, Shobhana L. & Willem J. de Reuse. 2011. *Handbook of Descriptive Linguistic Fieldwork*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Coppen, Peter-Arno, Walter J. M. Haeseryn & Folkert de Vriend. 2007. *Electronische Algemene Nederlandse Spraakkunst (E-ANS), version 1.2*.

Daston, Lorraine & Peter Galison. 2010. *Objectivity*. New York, NY: Zone Books.

Evans, Nicholas & Alan Dench. 2006. Introduction: Catching language. In Felix K. Ameka, Alan Charles Dench & Nicholas Evans (eds.), *Catching Language: The Standing Challenge of Grammar Writing*, 1–39. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Gilovich, Thomas, Dale Griffin & Daniel Kahneman (eds.). 2002. *Heuristics and Biases: The Psychology of Intuitive Judgment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kahneman, Daniel, Paul Slovic & Amos Tversky (eds.). 1982. *Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Verhagen, Arie & Suzanne Kemmer. 1997. Interaction and causation: Causative constructions in modern standard Dutch. *Journal of Pragmatics* 27 (1): 61–82.