

Review of Piet van Sterkenburg (ed.), *Linguistics Today—Facing a Greater Challenge*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company (2004). Pp. 367. Hardback, €160. Including CD Rom.

Reviewed by

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This volume brings together the plenary lectures of the International Congress of Linguists (Prague, July 2003). The accompanying CD Rom contains the rest of the proceedings of the conference. The fields covered by the plenary talks are those that are currently particularly dynamic in the opinion of the members of the Permanent International Committee of Linguists (CIPL). The 15 papers deal both with fields that are empirically as well as methodologically relatively contained, i.e. typology, morphology, phonology, pragmatics, lexicography, computational linguistics, historical linguistics, and creolistics, as well as broader ones such as the sociology of language and approaches to fieldwork and endangered languages. I shall begin by reviewing the papers pertaining to the latter group of fields, since it is here that changes seem to have been most significant in recent years, at least in terms of attitudes and the sociological dynamics of the profession.

Even if its title signals that it deals narrowly with attempts at the revival of Warrungu, a language of North Queensland, Australia, Tasaku Tsunoda's contribution actually provides a broad overview of issues of language revitalization in general. Tsunoda stresses that the main motivation for language revitalization is its 'integrative' function of maintaining the identity of the group and reviews some of the difficulties often encountered in revitalization efforts as well as methods to achieve success. The first part of the paper discussing these general issues is admirably concise and is rich in useful references. The rest is a relatively lengthy, detailed, and quite personal account of the author's recent participation in efforts during to revive the now extinct Warrungu language of North Queensland (Australia), which he had been working on as an M.A. student a quarter century earlier.

Linguistic fieldwork is treated in a chapter by Daniel Everett, who introduces a concept that he calls 'coherent fieldwork'. While having borrowed the term from the

philosopher William James, Everett gives his own definition of it: “Coherence for me personally means that I cannot objectify myself, i.e. prevent my own history and person from interacting causally with my observations and conclusions.” By way of illustrating the connection between personality and the scientific pursuit the author states that he opposes “much of the conforming power of Western culture” (p. 145) and is therefore led to look for counterexamples to theory and for unusual phenomena in languages.

Douglas Whalen, who is the founder of the Endangered Language Fund, has contributed with a paper about ‘How the study of endangered languages will revolutionize linguistics.’ Although he does mention at the outset that the study of endangered languages is not new to linguistics, Whalen still considers this area revolutionary. Whalen places much emphasis on technological innovations, mentioning the new possibilities for disseminating and searching textual as well as audio data on the Internet. Related to this, he brings up the issue of devising a unified ontology for descriptive linguistic terms which may be used for organizing digitalized descriptions of languages. But in the midst of all the excitement over new and unexpected linguistic data and the technology involved in recording them and making them available I find a lack of reference to the tradition that has raised descriptive linguistics to its current standards, namely the tradition where typology and description go hand in hand to mutually inform one another. If Whalen’s paper is representative of a new trend in North American linguistics, a characteristic of this trend is that the overemphasis on theory has flip-flopped to an overemphasis on data. If the time seems ripe for developing an ontology for linguistic description, it is only because many dedicated fieldworkers, enlightened by accumulated typological knowledge, have known the right kinds of phenomena to record and have known how to organize their results in grammar books. The study of typology and the writing of grammars are the central activities that have advanced linguistics in the 20th century, and if linguistics is to progress further these will still be central activities.

The contribution of Ayo Bamgbose hovers at a fairly abstract level where issues relating to language planning and language policies are discussed with the aim of shaping a theoretical approach to their study. While the careful terminological discussions may be valuable for a specialist readership, a general reader could use more actual historical examples in order to acquire a feeling for how language

planning and policies vary and have varied worldwide and how such initiatives have affected languages and their speakers.

Having briefly considered the papers that deal with the life of languages and ways of recording or preserving them I now turn to the papers that address various more sharply defined disciplines within the broader field of linguistics.

Giacomo Ferrari's state-of-the-art paper on computational linguistics gives a good overview. The author lucidly presents various opposing tendencies which have characterized computational approaches to language during the last half-century. Although he mentions several areas in which results have been achieved, including parsing methods, dialogic models of natural language interaction that take into account the user's intentions, morphological and lexical analysis, and the treatment of corpora, Ferrari admits that there is a grain of truth to the claim often heard that "Computational Linguistics, like Artificial Intelligence, created a number of models, programmes, and prototypes which claimed a lot but did nothing at all" (p. 164). An illustration of the schism between theory and practice is provided by parsing techniques, where computational linguistics has developed increasingly sophisticated algorithms that combine semantic interpretation and syntactic parsing, whereas practical applications, such as tools for text analysis and the identification of keywords, use shallow parsers that essentially ignore sentence structure. Ferrari prefers to see computational linguistics as a theoretical branch of linguistics rather than as a practically oriented enterprise. Thus, rather than seeking out ways to bridge the theoretical and engineering aspects of computational approaches to language he acknowledges that the schism has come to stay.

Nicoletta Calzolari summarizes the experiences gained during various European as well as transatlantic projects in human language technology, focusing mostly on the interaction between textual corpora and computational lexicons. She points out that a central challenge in building computational lexicons lies in semantics and briefly describes how this has been dealt with in the various projects. Calzolari dwells on an interesting aspect of using corpora for lexicography, namely that it becomes impossible to establish clear-cut rules and constraints on usage since language use often exhibits continua rather than sharp boundaries. Moreover, usage often contradicts expectations from introspection.

Rufus H. Gouws provides a brief overview of some developments in the

relationship between lexicography—the practice of dictionary-making—and lexicology—the theory of dictionary-making. Gouws observes that there were dictionaries long before there were theories about them. Thus, the first lexical compilations date to somewhere between the fifth and the third millennium B.C., whereas the first extensive study in lexicology did not appear until 1971, when Ladislav Zgusta published his *Manual of Lexicography*. Although lexicology has been placed on a firmer footing in recent years, there is still a gap between lexicography and lexicology, and a continuing tradition places both either outside or just within the margins of the field of linguistics. Gouws mentions some reasons for this. One is that lexicography needs to reflect real language usage and, as such, is in inherent opposition to at least one dominant paradigm in linguistic theory, namely generative grammar and its concept of the ideal speaker-hearer; another is that dictionaries are doing just fine on the book market without any orientation towards theoretical linguistics.

Robert Harnish provides a brief account of classical themes in pragmatics, focusing mostly on the speech act theories of Austin and Searle and criticism thereof raised by Levinson and Schegloff and on Gricean conversational implicatures and alternative accounts for implicatures by Sperber & Wilson and Recanati. Given that the paper carries the subtitle ‘state of the art’ one should expect minimally a definition or characterization of the field being discussed and a broad overview of present and future developments. Harnish’s contribution, however, presents pragmatics without defining its subject matter, and does little to signal the directions in which the field is currently moving.

In his elegant paper “Towards a less ‘syntactic’ morphology and a more ‘morphological’ syntax” Stephen R. Anderson sets the scene for the discussion by observing that whereas structuralist theory viewed syntax as being organized essentially the same way as morphology, generative theory conversely maintained that morphology obeys syntactic principles and has no properties of its own. Anderson vigorously argues that morphology, indeed, does have many properties not shared with syntax, and with regard to word vs. sentence structure he more generally claims that “there are virtually no principles of any substantive sort that the two share” (p. 31). In characterizing morphology he argues against the traditional view that words are composed of morphemes as their constituent parts. One argument is that there do not appear to be any morphological principles that refer directly to

morphological structure. For instance, one does not find cases where an infix is placed after the first morphological constituent of a form. Other arguments are that word formation sometimes involves non-concatenative changes (e.g., substitution and subtraction) and that the relation between elements of form and elements of content is not always one-to-one, given the existence of content-less morphemes, zero morphs, portmanteau morphs, and multiple exponence. Instead, Anderson is in favor of a so-called 'realization' view of morphology, according to which a word's content involves some kind of feature structure and where rules (in earlier formulations of the author) or a system of constraints along the lines of Optimality Theory (in the author's current view) specify the relation between form and content. While the paper recaptures much of Anderson's earlier work, it still conveys a sense that there are many open questions to explore, such as the possible existence of other similarities and differences between the properties of morphology and syntax, or the possible losses or gains in insight that might ensue from replacing traditional, constituent-oriented approaches to both areas with constraint-based approaches.

There are two contributions to the book on typology, but both give rather unbalanced portraits of the field. Rather than writing on typology in general, Alexandra Aikhenvald has contributed with a paper on evidentiality, a subject matter which she has published on extensively elsewhere. As for Petr Sgall's contribution, this focuses mostly on the history of European typology, in particular contributions of the Prague School. A somewhat related contribution is the one by Emmon Bach, which gives a mixture of arguments, ideological statements, and historical notes on discussions for or against syntactic universals from the perspective of someone who has mainly been working within the framework of generative grammar but nevertheless finds the diversity of language structures interesting and the undertakings of field linguists praiseworthy. Although both Aikhenvald's and Sgall's contributions are intrinsically interesting, they are limited in scope (as is Bach's), and one could have wished for a single, comprehensive contribution on typology, in my opinion one of the currently most important and dynamic fields of linguistics.

In his paper on the development of generative phonology during the last three decades Harry van der Hulst argues that there has been a shift in focus from derivations in the seventies, following the publication in 1968 of Chomsky and Halle's *Sound Patterns of English* (SPE), to representations in the eighties, mostly as a result of various reactions to SPE, and then a return back to derivations in the

nineties. Optimality theory (OT), the dominant paradigm in the nineties, purports to be a non-derivational approach and is very different from SPE in so far as it operates with constraints rather than rules and has no levels intermediate between input and output. Nevertheless, Van der Hulst finds that it belongs to the derivationally-oriented theories in the overall historical picture and points out a number of parallels between SPE and OT. Hulst criticizes OT for not making a distinction between natural processes and quirky, language-specific morphophonological phenomena, for operating on the psychologically unrealistic assumption that optimal outputs are selected from an infinite set of candidate outputs rather than from a small set of 'reasonable' alternatives, and for allowing the number of constraints to grow incessantly. In his conclusion Van der Hulst expresses a wish for yet another return to representational issues and mentions some approaches that he would like to see more elaboration of, that is, Dependency Phonology and the related, more recent Government Phonology model.

In an exemplarily succinct essay on creolistics Kees Versteegh describes the beginnings of this field and shows how some major trends and discussions have since evolved and how creolists in different ways have sought to define their discipline in contrast with other areas of linguistics—often in too rigid ways. Some progress has been made in so far as some of the early hypotheses dominating the debate have been proven wrong or are—for good reasons—no longer widely accepted in the community; these include the idea of a common origin of all pidgins and creoles or the opposed idea that their common properties derive from universal properties of the human linguistic faculty. Many other issues, however, are unresolved. One is how to define the object of study that would define the discipline. At one extreme the notions of 'creole' or 'pidgin' have been applied to any language exhibiting strong interference from other languages, while on the other extreme they have been limited either to include only languages that have evolved under socio-historical circumstances involving colonization and slave trade or that possess certain typological features thought to be characteristic. Other issues are the respective contributions of superstrate and substrate languages to creoles and how to characterize the acquisition process. On these various issues Versteegh avoids taking extreme positions, and points out that much is unknown simply because of the lack of data. His recommendations for future research include employing communication theory in studying pidgin structure, looking at variation within creoles, and situating creolistics

within contact linguistics. The last recommendation stems from the author's view that "the difference between pidginization/creolization and ordinary linguistic change is much smaller than some creolists used to believe" (p. 315).

Lyle Campbell's contribution on major current themes in historical linguistics is a sustained exercise in negative argumentation. For instance, areal linguistics is largely dismissed since "it is individual historical events of diffusion that matter, not the post-hoc attempts to impose geographical order on varied conglomerations of these borrowings" (p. 111). Grammaticalization is said to have "no explanatory power of its own" (p. 116). Greenberg's attempts to demonstrate long-distance relatedness by multilateral comparison are rejected (p. 117). Johanna Nichols' historical-typological approach "does not see past the limitations of the comparative method." Dixon's notion of punctuated equilibrium "proves not very useful" (p. 121). The idea of Bellwood and Renfrew that the spread of farming lies behind the growth and spread of some of the largest language families in the world is "not necessary . . . nor sufficient" (p. 122). Nettle's attempt to correlate size of language with the extent of economic risk is "too narrow" (p. 123). . . etc. One can agree or disagree with Campbell in each individual case, but one is unlikely to become persuaded by him to change whatever opinion one might already have. This is because Campbell's general approach to demolishing a theory is to give a few counterexamples to some prediction that it makes rather than to more fundamentally question whether the theory raises the right kinds of questions and has a potential for refinement such that it can give increasingly better answers. The reader who is looking for pointers towards future developments in historical linguistics receives little help in Campbell's contribution. In actual fact, however, the field is currently moving quite fast in new directions. Some of the current activities that could be mentioned include several independent attempts to employ large-scale typological databases in diachronic studies, the development of controlled quantitative phylogenetic methods, or initiatives to further the cooperation among historical linguists, population geneticists, and archaeologists.

There will necessarily be a lot of arbitrariness involved in selecting the subfields that should be portrayed in a book whose title includes the words *Linguistics Today*. Possibly the selection at hand comes as close as any to being representative. If indeed it is, one may ask whether there are recurrent themes or tendencies showing in what direction linguistics as a whole is moving. One conclusion to be drawn is that the effects of the Chomskyan revolution today are slowly dwindling. Within areas at

the core of formal linguistics, such as phonology and syntax, there seems to be a recognition that theories have not really grown closer to capturing Universal Grammar, but have instead been moving to and fro between dialectic poles such as rules vs. representations and lexicalist vs. syntactic approaches. At areas somewhat more at the periphery the revolution has made itself felt, but not, it seems, in particularly productive ways. Within creolistics there was for a period excitement about the apparent possibility of finding close mirrors of UG, but this was relatively short-lived. In computational linguistics there seems to be a divorce between the formal theories that are believed to capture language structure adequately and the algorithms that are actually used when it comes to making implementations. Moreover, corpora representing actual language use are replacing the competence of the ideal speaker-hearer as the object of attention both in computational linguistics and lexicography. Finally, activities such as fieldwork and language preservation, which were never on the agenda of generative grammar, are enjoying an increasing popularity. If, indeed, linguistics is becoming less organized around a single paradigm it is very hard to predict in which direction the field is going. Almost certainly large quantities of new data will be accumulated and computational means for handling and distributing them will be developed. But what insights will eventually be gained from such activities only time can tell.