Slow linguistics – a manifesto[1]

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Comments on 'Slow linguistics – a manifesto'

Klaas Willems, Ghent University

Slow Linguistics – ein Manifest

Der vorliegende Text fordert in zehn Thesen eine Herangehensweise an linguistische Fragen, die sich aus der besonderen Natur des Objektes ergibt: menschliche Sprache ist nicht irgendein aussenstehendes Naturobjekt. Jede menschliche Sprache kann von Sprechern – und von Linguisten – erlernt werden. Dies ist ein zeitaufwändiger Vorgang, der jedoch zu einer Kenntnis der Sprache führt, von welcher aus gewisse linguistische Fragen anders und kompetenter gestellt werden können als ohne diese Kenntnis. Das Manifest fordert, bewusst mit diesem Zeitaufwand umzugehen und ihn nicht als Nebensache abzutun. Und es nennt einige Beispiele von Bereichen, in denen das Sprachen können (und nicht nur Sprachen kennen) für linguistische Forschung von Vorteil oder sogar notwendig ist.

Schlüsselwörter: *Slow linguistics, Sprachkompetenz, Empathie, Epistemologie, Grammatikalität, Intuition.*

Slow Linguistics – un manifiesto

El presente texto postula en diez tesis un acercamiento a los problemas científicos de la lingüística que resulta de la naturaleza particular del objeto: el lenguaje humano no es un objeto "externo" como cualquier objeto de la naturaleza. Una lengua particular puede ser adquirida por cualquier persona (y por cualquier lingüista). El aprendizaje de un idioma es un proceso largo y costoso, pero lleva a un conocimiento de un idioma a partir del cual ciertas cuestiones lingüísticas se plantearán de manera mejor y más competente. El manifiesto postula que hay que tomar en consideración conscientemente esa necesidad de tiempo y que no se trata de un asunto secundario. Se presentan algunos ejemplos de áreas en las que el "saber idiomas" (y no solo el conocerlos) es una ventaja o incluso una necesidad para la investigación lingüística.

Palabras clave: *Slow linguistics, competencia lingüística, empatía. epistemología, gramaticalidad, intuición.*

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[1] This text was published originally on adacemia.edu in October 2018. It provoked several positive and also critical reactions in an Academia discussion forum. I would like to thank all participants of the interesting and fruitful discussion.

The following lines should not be misunderstood. What I want to propose here is not an extension of the tents of the 'slow food' movement to the academy in general and to linguistics in particular[2]. It is, rather, a continuation of what I argued in a paper in Spanish on "empathic linguistics"[3] and has to do with the special status of the study of human language within the scientific disciplines, although some of the main thoughts are valid for work in all of them. The issues briefly raised here are not in themselves new, but they are of course controversial. I offer them as a starting point for discussion, and I am looking forward to receiving comments!

1. Linguistics, as is the case with other academic disciplines, is currently marked by an ethos of 'faster, higher, further' and 'publish or perish'. High-speed scholarship is by its very nature productive in terms of quantity, but not necessarily of quality.

2. Linguists, like other scientists, need time for new ideas to gestate. They need open spaces, concentration and freedom for the critical and open-minded development of their thoughts.

3. Human language can be approached like any other scientific object of study. We can formulate hypotheses, test them, and discuss our findings. Yet human language is also a human faculty, and languages themselves were not only created by humans but are are continuously re-created by speakers and learners. Our L1 is not a limitation but rather an open door towards any language or language variety. Language acquisition is a long-term process, and this is the case in the acquisition of both L1s and L2s. It enables us to see a language from inside and to monitor, to a certain degree, grammaticality and variation. Our language knowledge is by no means a substitute for scientific research on the phenomena we are addressing, but it serves as an important starting point.

4. Language learning can go beyond the acquisition of living languages. In principle, any language can be learned by anyone, even a language which no longer has speakers, such as a 'dead' language or an earlier stage of a 'living' language. According to the degree of documentation of a language, as well as the time and effort we invest, we can acquire a degree of competence in such cases, and we can develop intuitions on what might and what might not be expected.

5. *Slow linguistics* is not meant as an excuse for working less, or for doing so less intensively. On the contrary, it conveys the need to invest sufficient time so that we can achieve the necessary degree of competence in a language, and thus when we deal with it scientifically our research can be optimal. This investment might entail learning a language, of living for years with a community under study, of transcribing medieval manuscripts or recordings of spoken language. The machine transcription of medieval manuscripts and spoken language, for example, will soon be almost as error-free as human transcriptions, or maybe even better, and it

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2 See Petrini, Carlo (2003): *Slow Food: The Case for Taste.* New York: Columbia University Press; Berg, Maggie / Seeber, Barbara (2016):*The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

3 Kabatek, Johannes (2014): "Lingüística empática", *Rilce* 30-3, 705-723.

will certainly be much faster. This might be a useful means of arriving at a practical end-point – that of obtaining an accurate transcription – but it is no substitute for the training process which is a fundamental prerequisite for the ability to formulate appropriate and potentially enlightening research questions from our empirical material. Slow linguistics is wary, perhaps even suspicious, of superficial mouse-click studies which yield fast results, but which do not necessarily reflect a global knowledge of the issues at hand.

6. As for grammaticality, one could argue that we do not need in-depth knowledge here and that asking natives (who have already made the requisite investment in time) is enough. But the judgements of native speakers are often problematic, can be erroneous, and are typically biased by a number of factors. Linguists who are L2 learners of their target language will never become genuine native speakers, but they can achieve a close perspective on the object of study, while maintaining a critical distance. Whereas they might rely on natives for linguistic introspection and for corpus data, their special position in relation to the language allows them to perceive phenomena that natives simply will not see. This, though, on the condition that a linguist has had enough time to come very close to native-like competence.

7. The collaboration between natives and linguistically trained near-natives can be a very fruitful one. For example, when transcribing oral texts, natives tend to produce grammatical and meaningful texts. Whereas near-natives or machines might transcribe ungrammatical passages because performance data is defective, natives will tend not to do so, because grammaticality and meaningfulness are not violable 'maxims' but part of the essence of speech, and they know what is grammatical and meaningful in their language. The tension between (slowly trained) non-natives and natives opens questions which must be answered, and allows us to focus on unresolved issues here.

8. Deep knowledge of a given research field is important in any scientific discipline. A researcher working on ultracold quantum gases (an issue obviously related to time and to slowness, but that's another question) will not formulate any hypothesis without a profound knowledge of the latest research, and is also likely to have lifelong experience in the field. Hypotheses do not emerge causally from mere calculations, but from a researcher's intuitions based on multiple strata of knowledge, both new and established. In this sense, items 1-3 above are valid for physics and indeed any other area of science. However, the knowledge base of linguists is somewhat different here: they create language structures within their own brains, they are part of the co-hermeneutic process of communication, they are intensively and "slowly" trained, and thus are themselves part of the experimental setting. This is of course a dangerous, but also a very promising difference.

9. If we accept the need for slow linguistics, a numerous of consequences for the organization of research follow. The time required for learning a language, for transcribing a manuscript or for becoming part of a community, should be anchored in curricula, in projects, and more broadly in education. PhD students should not be asked why they have not published several peer-reviewed papers in their first year. Supervisors, though, must also be aware of the

dangers of slowness, and advise young researchers to "learn your language, transcribe your manuscript, do your fieldwork, but do it intensively and without wasting time".

10. Slow linguistics is not intended to be the only viable approach to linguistic scholarship: there are branches of linguistics where an object is completely unknown (attempts to reconstruct the ancient history of human language, for example) and in such cases the points discussed here will not apply (with the exception of 1, 2 or 3). However, this manifesto seeks to defend the necessity of accepting a slower approach to linguistics, of supporting projects where long-term preparation is included, of giving time to young (and older) researchers, of having confidence in the aims of scholarship without always asking for quick results. It is a proposal which will eventually lead to less quantity, but perhaps to higher quality.

II. From phenomenology to responsibility

Comments on 'Slow linguistics – a manifesto'

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Johannes Kabatek's manifesto raises important questions that merit further scrutiny. In these comments I offer a few observations that are intended to complement the manifesto and, hopefully, deepen our understanding of some of the issues it addresses. Throughout my comments I will take specific statements in the manifesto as a starting point and then develop my own point of view.

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" Linguists, like other scientists, need time for new ideas to gestate. They need open spaces, concentration and freedom for the critical and open-minded development of their thoughts." (§ 2)

Nowadays you often come across the magical formula "time for new ideas to develop" in vision statements, project applications, guidelines of boards and committees etc. There is unquestionably truth in this phrase in a straightforward sense, otherwise science would lose part of its justification. However, "new" is a relative concept and the unceasing quest for "new ideas" in linguistic research might to some extent be part of the very problem addressed in the manifesto. Linguistics has produced many discoveries and insights over the last 100 odd years, but should we automatically expect the discipline to come up with new findings of a comparable amplitude and at the same pace in the decades to come? Linguistics is one of those scientific disciplines that, despite its natural disposition to inter- and transdisciplinary research, does not probe into the same kind of endless universe such as we know it from the subject matters of disciplines like physics, biology, the life sciences and so forth. Of course, there are still a great many languages that have not yet been properly described, and many linguists have rightly argued that here lies one of the most urgent tasks of the language sciences in the near future. But this is not immediately related to the quest for "new ideas". Conversely, the recent rise of large-scale distributional studies in grammar, typology, contrastive linguistics, applied linguistics etc. have undoubtedly led to new findings, in particular because of the increasing amount of language data that has been made available and the application of new quantitative methods. However, the theoretical concepts and basic principles guiding these studies can hardly be qualified as new. Moreover, many ideas and issues that have been raised in the language sciences in the past have not received the attention they deserve. In my opinion, linguists should try to cope with what has been said and written in linguistics in the past rather than feeling the constant urge to generate "new ideas". Furthermore, alleged new ideas often turn out to be in part reiterations of what has already been claimed or known, or at least intuited, in the past, albeit from different – ideally, complementary – perspectives. However, turning one's attention to the history of the language sciences requires an open, critical, well-informed and constructive mindset, which is very different from the pseudo-historical straw-man argumentations occasionally to be found in introductions of research papers (the countless inept renderings of, e.g., Ferdinand de Saussure's thoughts based on perfunctory readings of the *Cours* are just one case in point, and many more could be added).

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"Our language knowledge is by no means a substitute for scientific research on the phenomena we are addressing, but it serves as an important starting point". (§ 3)

I believe that at least part of the problem raised in section 3 of the manifesto comes from the fact that often the conceptual distinction (*distinctio rationis*) is overlooked between the starting point of research in a purely heuristic sense and the point of departure of linguistic research in an altogether different, "phenomenological" sense, which arguably is epistemologically more basic. It is possible to spell out the distinction by contrasting the words "Anfang" and "Ansatz" in German. While language can be approached as an object of study with whatever objective that may come to mind, there is a significant difference between approaching language as an object like any other object of study and approaching language on the basis of a speaker's prior "knowledge of language" in the sense of, e.g., Husserlian phenomenology or Coserian Integral Linguistics. For example, language is amenable to a purely quantitative or purely formal study, *as* *if* language was a physical or formal object. In these cases, I maintain, no "phenomenological" knowledge of language is needed to carry out research that will meet the highest standards of quantitative or formal research: the approach is virtually exhausted by the methods deployed to reach the research objectives. This research takes its factual starting point ("Anfang") in the application of one or more particular methods to a delimited object of study, e.g. distributional analyses of all sorts, frequency analyses, formal analyses and so forth. Conversely, if language is approached on the basis of the prior knowledge of what language "is" as a form-meaning pairing system that is perpetually created and re-created in the mental and social lives of speakers, then the approach is of an altogether different nature. Such an approach not only constitutes a factual starting point by choosing some relevant method, but it additionally constitutes a distinctive "Ansatz" of research. It is rooted in knowledge of language not as an independent object but as part of the speaking subject who in turn is part of a speech community. Such an approach entails that the research that will be carried out will enrich our knowledge of language beyond what is uncovered by methods that are applicable to any scientific object of study. This second sense of "starting point" has variously been hinted at in the literature, using terms such as "Sprachsinn" (e.g., Humboldt), Fr. "principe" (partly, e.g. Saussure), "intuition" (e.g., Coseriu), "empathy" (e.g., Itkonen) etc., but as far as I know it has never been systematically investigated with regard to linguistic research questions and methods (plural).

Note that any form of reductionism that looms large when the starting point is exclusively methodological is not in itself a reason to reject the purely methodological kind of approach. For example, the frequency bias in current functional, cognitive and psycholinguistic approaches to language may end up being circular. This would be the case, in my view, if one type of frequency was ultimately to be "explained" by another type of frequency, possibly under the guise of "general functional and cognitive principles", "purposiveness", "adaptive selection" etc. But the quantitative findings themselves are genuine findings about at least one dimension of language, viz. its objectively quantifiable side. Similarly, the generalisation of an extremely simple hierarchical structural pattern such as the X-bar structure along with the device of movement in generative grammar lends support to the view that syntax is the all-pervasive formal device on which human language (grammar) builds, despite the reductionism such an approach entails with regard to the study of meaning (semantics and pragmatics) in natural languages. But this is again no reason to reject the approach if no claim whatsoever is made regarding a particular "Ansatz" of the study of language in the aforementioned sense.

The real problem arises when an intrinsically reductionist, purely method-driven approach to language makes a claim to absoluteness. Ideally, any approach starting from an "Ansatz" that is rooted in the prior intuitive knowledge of language is wary of such a claim. For it is cognisant of the fact that every approach has its drawbacks and leaves us with unresolved questions about language which fall within the purview of still other disciplines and modes of enquiry (including philosophy of language, literary studies, anthropology, history, sociology, psychology etc.).

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"According to the degree of documentation of a language, as well as the time and effort we invest, we can acquire a degree of competence in such cases, and we can develop intuitions on what might and what might not be expected". (§ 4)

The matter might be complicated. It is hard to see how a speaker could develop intuitions unless s/he is able to share her/his developing competence with other people possessing or developing a similar competence. Intuitions of meanings in a language (lexical, syntactic, discourse and beyond) are not a private matter. The only level you could attain privately as a non-native speaker is probably some kind of introspection, but not intuition, which is a tacit knowledge of language that is necessarily shared among individuals. Hence the knowledge involved is heterogeneous and can only be determined by delimiting what is language-specific ("encoded") from what is universal (pragmatically inferred), what is particular of the language system and what pertains to non-language-specific discourse traditions (texts), what is purely linguistic from what pertains to the general logic of thought (broadly construed). All these delimitations require that the dialogical perspective (i.e. that of "negotiating" contentful human interaction) is taken into account because that is the only viable route in the language sciences to determine what speakers create in discourse on the spot (which may be triggered by a multitude of external and/or internal factors) or in compliance with some tradition or convention in language use, on the one hand, and what their language holds ready for them, on the other.

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"Slow linguistics is wary, perhaps even suspicious, of superficial mouse-click studies which yield fast results, but which do not necessarily reflect a global knowledge of the issues at hand". (§ 5)

Again, I believe this is to some extent a matter of choice (cf. supra), i.e. whether you commit yourself to an approach of language from a purely methodological point of view or whether you take the prior intuitive knowledge of language in some reasonably well-defined sense, e.g. as described above, as your vantage point. I think that for many linguists nowadays "global knowledge" has the undesirable connotation of being too much theory-laden, not sufficiently driven by empirical observations, not sufficiently backed by quantitative findings, not properly cross-linguistically validated, not grounded in what is commonly called "psychological reality" (however vaguely defined) and so forth. For instance, a successful typological model such as Semantic Map theory explicitly sidesteps the vexing issue whether a distinction has to be made between meanings of (grammatical) morphemes encoded in particular languages

("Bedeutungen" in Coseriu's parlance) and the various uses of such morphemes in discourse ("Bezeichnungen", cf. Coseriu, *Formen und Funktionen*, Niemeyer 1987). Proponents of the Semantic Map model prefer to talk instead of "functions", encompassing the two levels of content without further differentiation. The typological insights thus uncovered are most interesting and the relevance of the maps is beyond dispute (in particular for contrastive and language acquisition purposes, as maps display structured sets of "senses" of morphemes in a range of different, if comparable, languages). Still, the model's contribution to our understanding of what according to Humboldt is the pivotal feature of languages, viz. "Sprachverschiedenheit" with regard to encoded form-meaning mappings, is by definition limited. However, the "local" gain of typological comparability of related and unrelated languages the Semantic Map model provides makes it attractive to typologists and other linguists precisely because the objective of a "global" understanding of the meaning/function relationship in language and language use is bypassed in favour of a more concrete and measurable objective.

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"The tension between (slowly trained) non-natives and natives opens questions which must be answered, and allows us to focus on unresolved issues here". (§ 7)

This point is rightly stressed. The interaction between native speakers and non-native speakers is potentially beneficial to linguistic enquiry. Non-native speakers may develop, through second language acquisition and training as linguists, an awareness for linguistic particularities which might escape native speakers' attention. This is also increasingly acknowledged by native-speaker scholars.

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"It is a proposal which will eventually lead to less quantity, but perhaps to higher quality". (§ 10)

Again some qualifications may be required. The number of publications in the field of linguistics, and language studies in general, has grown exponentially over the last few decades. This may be considered a sign of the discipline's vitality, which in itself is an encouraging observation. However, the sheer quantity of publications also poses problems. In my view, there are at least five quite distinct aspects to the issue.

A first problem is mentioned in this and the two preceding paragraphs of the manifesto. Younger scholars are increasingly forced to produce publications at an early stage of their career, which may come at the cost of not being able to attain sufficient analytical rigour, depth of thought (also, and in particular, with regard to previous scholarship), theoretical and/or methodological maturity, overall structure and organization of the arguments and so forth. The last few decades have also witnessed the rise of repetitive research driven by exaggerated confidence in methods at the detriment of theoretically well-founded and/or creative research questions. Here, supervisors in particular are taken to task.

A second problem is that there is an increasingly large number of dubious venues for all sorts of research papers. Closely connected with this is the advent of predatory journals which constitute a serious threat not only to the overall quality of linguistic research but also to its scientific integrity, along with scholars' deontological attitude and, ultimately, the discipline's institutional and financial credibility (cf. Cabell's Blacklist of predatory journals, https://www2.cabells.com/). The community of linguists has to pay close attention to all kinds of threats that arise from purely financial interests which proliferate in all directions under the guise of science. The problem is compounded by the fact that many publishers sell their books and journals at prohibitive prices while it is the linguists who actually do all the important work (peer reviewing, formatting etc.). This is not a good basis for an intellectually honest and economically sound model of scientific publications. Concerns such as these have led to distinguished and important initiatives such as *Language Science Press* (http://langsci-press.org/).

A third problem is that many languages continue to lose ground as scientific languages in the humanities. It is legitimate and in many respects even beneficial that English continues to be on the rise as a kind of *lingua franca* of almost all modern sciences, including linguistics (cf. Van Parijs, *Linguistic Justice*, OUP 2011). But it is a shame that many languages which until recently had a respectable history and tradition as scientific languages are increasingly under pressure and less and less taken seriously as languages of publication, and as relevant forms of expression, in linguistic research. This issue is part and parcel of the economical rationale of scientific literature in terms of quantity rather than quality: being able to publish in English is both attractive and indispensable for linguists in many parts of the world, which in turn boosts the output in terms of quantity, irrespective of more content-related criteria. While advancing the global use of English in linguistic research as a means of communication is in itself unobjectionable, I think linguists in particular should at the same time pay heed to the preservation of their mother tongues as scientific languages.

A fourth problem, at least to my mind, is that the drawbacks of the universally adopted system of co-authorship have meanwhile reached an alarming scale. Senior authors, most often supervisors and PIs of large research projects, are increasingly listed as co-authors on publications to which they have not or barely contributed anything but which are realized under their alleged responsibility. This way of pimping publication lists has led to a frenzy of producing more and more publications, partly undoubtedly also in a perpetual search to oust colleagues purely in terms of quantity of publication output. Clearly, this issue has nothing to do with young scholars but everything with senior scholars who have the power and status that enable them to change things for the better if they wanted to.

Finally, a fifth problem, closely connected with the preceding one, is the observation that research findings get all too often recycled by the same authors. Nowadays it is not unusual to come across three or four publications by one and the same author or team of co-authors on exactly the same topic and with a content that is virtually identical for more than three-quarters of the research papers. This is particularly striking in literary studies, linguistics, philosophy, history of art and many other disciplines of the humanities, but it may well be a general problem in all sciences. Because it is difficult to put an end to this practice in a top-down fashion, it is necessary to find ways to appeal to scientists' sense of moral responsibility bottom-up and urge them to let quality prevail over quantity also with regard to this aspect of their work.