

# Introduction

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Investigations of linguistic variation are interesting and important both from the point of view of theoretical linguistics and from that of social and cultural studies. This special issue of the *Nordic Journal of Linguistics* focuses on linguistic diversity from a theoretical perspective and presents five selected papers that combine the study of dialect data with linguistic theorizing.

The study of linguistic diversity is one of the keys to understanding the human linguistic capacity and the limits within which human language systems may vary. Such studies may be approached in various ways, and in recent years it has become customary to distinguish, from an empirical point of view, MICRO- and MACROCOMPARATIVE studies, i.e., the study of MICRO- and MACROVARIATION, respectively.<sup>1</sup> Macrocomparative studies, understood as large-scale comparisons across a wide range of different and often genetically unrelated languages (as for instance in the universalist tradition initiated by Joseph Greenberg), have the advantage of revealing properties which are shared cross-linguistically, as well as areal features; this approach can furthermore suggest, by non-attestation, which grammatical patterns are not allowed by the human language faculty.

Microcomparative studies – as highlighted in this special *NJL* issue – have, on the other hand, the advantage that particular phenomena or subsystems of grammar can be studied in a manner resembling a laboratory environment. The study of closely related linguistic varieties enables the linguist to keep many properties of the overall system ‘constant’ and focus on the few properties setting the varieties apart. A main proponent of microcomparative linguistics is the theoretical syntactician Richard S. Kayne, who has repeatedly emphasized the importance of comparative work on closely related languages because it ‘can be thought of as a new research tool, one that is capable of providing results of an unusually fine-grained and particularly solid character’ (Kayne 2000:5).

The advantages of microcomparative approaches apply equally well to phonology/morphophonology as to syntax/morphosyntax, but it is perhaps fair to

say that whereas microcomparison has been a natural and integrated component of phonological theorizing throughout the last century of modern linguistics, the awareness of how rewarding it is to compare the SYNTAX of closely related linguistic varieties is fairly recent. There are probably several reasons for this. On the one hand, phonology and morphology were the center of attention for most linguists when dialectology arose as a research discipline in the neogrammarian era, a time in the history of linguistics when the search for regularities in the historical development of SOUNDS was the main preoccupation. This led to a natural amassing of phonological and morphological dialect data. Moreover, the birth of modern linguistics, as marked by the appearance of Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale*, did not alter the main focus of linguistics since structuralism (and in particular the study of the syntagmatic versus paradigmatic dimensions) clearly was best designed to tackle (segmental) phonology and morphology, not syntax.

The question, then, is why the shift of focus onto syntax that came with the Chomskyan revolution in the middle of the 20th century did not immediately make its way into dialectology. In part this is a question with only historical relevance, since we now, a few decades later, are indeed witnessing a boost in the interaction between theoretical syntax and dialectology. But for the record, it may nonetheless be worth noting that by the 1950s dialectology had become a well-established research discipline with its own research goals which only partly pertained to linguistics, the socio-cultural side of linguistic variation being equally important. For this reason dialectology and variational linguistics were, and presumably still are, less influenced by the developments within general linguistics.

It is nevertheless not quite accurate to claim that dialectologists have not been interested in syntax whatsoever, and it is interesting to note that there must have been a certain general interest in dialectal syntactic variation at the beginning of the 20th century. In Scandinavia there are in fact several monographs on non-standard syntax from this period, such as Lars Levander's grammar of the Swedish dialect of Älvdalen (Levander 1909), Ragnvald Iversen's study of the syntax of the city dialect of Tromsø (Iversen 1918), Martin Svendsen's study of syntax of the city dialect of Stavanger (Svendsen 1931), and Gudrun Lundström's study of the syntax of the Finland-Swedish dialects of Nyland (Lundström 1939). Furthermore, as shown by the bibliography in Vangsnæs (1996), several publications throughout the 20th century present studies of syntactic and morphosyntactic phenomena pertaining to the dialects of the Scandinavian language area. We may also add that within Scandinavian philology there has been a tradition all along for comparative grammar studies of the standard languages (see for example Hulthén 1944, 1947 and Lundeby 1965), and given that these languages comprise three mutually intelligible varieties (Danish, Norwegian and Swedish) that all relate diachronically to the other two written standards (Faroese and Icelandic), microcomparative syntax has been an implicitly integrated part of the Nordicist tradition.

The Nordicist interest in comparative syntax has largely been descriptively driven. Gradually, from the early eighties and onward a theoretically motivated interest in comparative syntax has emerged, both in the Scandinavian domain and more generally. Chomsky's *Lectures on Government and Binding* (Chomsky 1981) is a milestone for comparative theoretical syntax as the removal of language-specific transformational rules from the theoretical apparatus posed new challenges with respect to accounting for crosslinguistic variation.

The current growing interest in microcomparative syntax is quite pronounced in Europe, where several large scale dialect syntax projects have been undertaken in recent years, such as the *Syntactic Atlas of Northern Italian Dialects* (ASIS), conducted from the University of Padua, the *Syntactic Atlas of Dutch Dialects* (SAND), which is a collaborative effort of several institutions in Belgium and The Netherlands, the project *Dialect Syntax of Swiss German*, conducted from the University of Zurich, and the project *English Dialect Syntax from a Typological Perspective*, conducted from the University of Freiburg. Considerable efforts are now also being made to further develop microcomparative syntax in the Nordic countries: the project umbrella, *Scandinavian Dialect Syntax*, which involves nine research groups across the Nordic countries, is currently in an initial phase, and the *Nordic Center of Excellence in Microcomparative Syntax* (NORMS), which combines the dialect syntax network with University of Tromsø's Center for Advanced Study in Theoretical Linguistics (CASTL), has recently been appointed by the Joint Committee for Nordic Research Councils for the Humanities and the Social Sciences (NOS-HS) for a period of five years. Three of the papers presented in this volume are written by researchers involved in these Nordic research efforts (Bentzen, Jónsson & Eythórsson, and Westergaard).

Four of the five papers in this volume discuss issues concerning dialects of the Nordic languages: the paper by Bentzen discusses the relative ordering of verbs, subject and adverbs in Northern Norwegian as opposed to Standard Norwegian; the paper by Bye investigates syllable structure and the coda maximization seen in a variety of Northwest Saami dialects; the paper by Jónsson & Eythórsson discusses variation in subject case marking among contemporary speakers of Faroese and Icelandic; and Westergaard compares two dialects of the Norwegian county Troms with respect to absence of the Verb Second effect in *wh*-questions, a phenomenon well-known from a variety of Norwegian dialects. The fifth paper in the volume brings us to an entirely different part of Europe: Munaro & Poletto present a study of the syntax of certain pragmatic particles found in Northeastern Italian dialects, focussing on the dialects of Pagotto and Venice.

Thus, this selection of papers presents a variety of topics, mostly concerning syntactic issues. All papers focus on how the data presented can be exploited from a theoretical point of view, and the methods by which the data have been collected vary. At one end of the spectrum Bye's phonological paper largely relies on

descriptions found in the literature on Saami dialects whereas at the other end, Westergaard employs statistical methods to a corpus. Jónsson & Eythórsson base their discussion on a study of judgment tasks presented to a large number of speakers, and Bentzen too has consulted the judgments of native dialect speakers. Munaro & Poletto are themselves speakers of the dialects they focus on and furthermore have direct access to the comprehensive knowledge about the syntax of Northern Italian dialects amassed through the ASIS project (see above).

The primary goal of this special issue on dialects and linguistic theory is to show how dialectology and theoretical linguistics can be combined in constructive and fruitful ways. The diversity in topics as well as in methods should give the reader some good examples of how this may be done. We thank the reviewers that have been involved in the selection process as well as the authors who reacted to our call for papers by submitting manuscripts.

## NOTE

1. An early use of the terminology is found in the introduction to Hellan and Christensen (1986).

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