LINGUISTIC HORIZONS

Cameron Morin (University of Paris)

Rare dialect syntax in Construction Grammar

How did you first get into linguistics?
I was introduced to linguistics late into my studies which had focused mainly on literature, philosophy, and history – the first lectures I attended were in the final year of my Master's degree. I was immediately hooked by the theoretical aspects of the discipline, as well as the mysteries that it tried to probe. I was also attracted by the scientific rigour of linguistics, which I found somewhat lacking in the subjects I had specialised in before. So, I tried to get into a linguistics Master's the following year… and here I am now, doing a PhD!

What do you look at when you look at syntax in dialects?
If we take a few shortcuts and consider syntax as word order on the one hand, and dialects as varieties of a language on the other, then what you're looking at when you're into dialect syntax is how certain varieties have syntactic structures deviating more or less distinctly from the 'standard' language. For instance, while Standard English would have you say 'You/we were at the party last night', some speakers in certain dialects of English go for the alternative 'You/we **was** at the party last night'. Dialects are often full of syntactic variants like this. The notion of variation is therefore crucial in the study of dialect syntax.

What is the difference between cognitive linguistics and sociolinguistics? How do they come together in your work?
While cognitive linguistics focuses on the relation between linguistic structure, linguistic behaviour, and general cognition, sociolinguistics studies linguistic form and function in society. Although these two disciplines may appear to be separate,

there is an interface between the two, since humans mainly carry out their (linguistic) lives in groups and communities: for instance, dialects and their structures seem to be related to social cognition, which may be reflected in the formal variation they feature. These ideas, among others, are constantly in the background of my work.

What got you interested in these areas of linguistics?

I think this specific area of research is a compromise between two big tendencies in my academic interests. I've always been fascinated by the theoretical abstraction that is typically present in metaphysics and philosophy of mind. At the same time, I personally need this knowledge to be more concretely applied, and this is what cognitive science and sociology provide for me. So, I get the best of all these worlds in my linguistic research. I feel like this is one of the biggest advantages of the field in general: there are so many angles you can take and combine to suit your preferences!

What questions are you seeking to answer in your current research?

My PhD project currently focuses on double modals: these are rare syntactic structures that occur in varieties of Southern American English and a couple of British dialects such as Southern Scots, e.g. 'I **might could** help you' instead of 'I might be able to help you'. I am trying to model them in the framework of Construction Grammar (CxG), currently one of the bigger strands of theories in cognitive linguistics. My two main sources will be corpora of computer-mediated communication, such as Tweets, and hopefully psycholinguistic experiments

carried out in the field as well. There have been a few projects on dialect syntax in Construction Grammar, but double modals are particularly intriguing, and I think they could make a useful case study of rare syntactic constructions.

What is your average day like as a researcher?

I have a 3-year contract with the University of Paris which represents about 80% research and 20% teaching. I have classes with undergraduates in English studies where I'm in charge of courses introducing them to linguistics (especially morphosyntax and semantics in English). These are some of my favourite parts of the week. An average day dedicated to research can take place pretty much anywhere that has space, enough quiet, and coffee – usually a library, an office, or even home sometimes. Since I like travelling a lot, research is quite a convenient type of job for me!

Have you published your research?

I haven't published a fully-fledged article in a journal yet. I feel like there is a really big learning curve for collecting data, analysing and interpreting results, learning about the technicalities of formatting and submission, as well as writing in a clear and rigorous scientific style: I am learning more about this every day! However, I've started sharing my work in blog posts, book reviews, and texts destined for the general public – these smaller projects afford precious training for the more ambitious ones that may come in a little while.

What is your dream linguistics research project?

That's a tricky one. In a sense, I am living one of my dreams right now: to be given the chance of earning a living by studying and sharing findings. Every day, I see myself pushing the boundaries of my knowledge, while realising there is infinitely more to learn. Also, I've only been in linguistics for a couple of years and am catching up on a lot of basics and foundations, so I can't really tell what kinds of projects I may be involved in later in my career. I think experiments and fieldwork may become a personal favourite, though!

What advice do you have for young linguists, or those seeking to get into postgraduate research?

It might sound generic, but I genuinely think passion is the absolute prerequisite for research, especially linguistics, which can be a challenging domain if you come from the arts. Other important attitudes that come to my mind are patience, perseverance, and a proper balance between humility and self-esteem. I would also encourage prospective linguists to really nurture social ties inside and outside their professional network: it's easy sometimes to isolate yourself, since your work is largely solo and focused on specialised topics that are not always shared with your colleagues. ¶

Cameron Morin is a PhD researcher and teaching fellow at the University of Paris.