Dialect Syntax and Parallel Grammars: A Challenge to Generative Frameworks?

Kristin Melum Eide and Tor A. Åfarli

NTNU, Trondheim

1. Introduction

Nowadays, using one's native, non-standard dialect almost unequivocally implies a special kind of multilingualism since the language user nearly always also uses a standard dialect. At first glance, the Principles and Parameters framework (P&P; cf. e.g. Chomsky 1986, 1988, 2000) may not seem adequate for describing the syntactic system in the mind of an active dialect user, especially since P&P and its predecessors were designed to accommodate an idealized monolingual language user. Chomsky (1965: 3) claims that "Linguistic theory is concerned with an ideal speaker-listener in a completely homogeneous speech community." Mixed systems with intermediate stages between non-standard and standard dialects would be excluded as research objects in this theory: "The language of such a speech community would not be 'pure' in the relevant sense because it would not represent a single set of choices among the options permitted by U[niversal] G[rammar] but rather would include 'contradictory' choices for certain of these options" (Chomsky 1986: 17). Intermediate grammars and grammaticality judgements, however, often occur in investigations of the syntactic features of non-standard dialects; Cornips (2006), for instance, studies non-standard (and intermediate) Dutch dialects.

One crucial decision is whether to discard P&P as an adequate theory for the study of non-standard dialect syntax or modify it to accommodate multilingualism, including intermediate grammars with features from several linguistic systems co-existing in the mind of the same language user. We will argue that the latter strategy is preferable. Modifying some of the fundamental

assumptions of P&P is necessary if it is to be an adequate theory for the study of non-standard dialects as well as intraspeaker variation, the linguistic, and particularly syntactic, variation we may observe in the same individual. To some extent, any individual is multilingual; to quote Cook and Newson (2007, chapter 6), "The issue is really whether it is proper to set universal bilingualism to one side in linguists' descriptions of competence or whether it should in effect form the basis of the description from the beginning."

It would be a misrepresentation to claim that Chomskyan linguistics refutes the existence of multilingualism or that the theory cannot in principle describe and explain the multilingualism of individuals. On the contrary, Chomsky (2000: 59) emphasizes that "Whatever the language faculty is it can assume many different states in parallel." Furthermore, a multilingual language user typically selects the appropriate language for the context without being impeded by language interference. Addressing a related question, Chomsky (1988: 187) says:

> This is a very important question which I have been pretending all along does not arise. The question is a very mysterious one.… The child learns different languages, say Spanish at home and English in the streets. But in fact, the problem is really more general, because every human being speaks a variety of languages. We sometimes call them different styles or dialects, but they are really different languages, and somehow we know when to use them, one in one place and another in another place. Now each of these different languages involves a different switch [parameter] setting…. Somehow, young children have a theory of society and a theory of language, and they are able to link them up in some fashion to indicate that you speak this language in this social situation.

This kind of multilingualism, usually referred to as *register*, is the focus of dialect research and (other) sociolinguistic research. In generative grammar frameworks, however, it is often ignored. This might be due to the tacit assumption that a language user's choice of register is most relevant at a lexical, not a syntactic level, i.e. that register is mainly concerned with what words and lexical elements the language user chooses to employ. However, at least some syntactic features belong to the type of phenomena we consider register. For instance, one set of syntactic rules applies to written standard norms, another set to other contexts. In standard prose, a Norwegian language user would hardly ever drop the subject in a finite clause (**Fortsetter bombingen* 'continues the bombing'), but the phenomenon is a hallmark of newspaper headlines (cf. Fjeldstad 2000). Moreover, in so-called 'diary syntax' (Haegeman & Ihsane 2002), subject-drop is very common even in languages where this would yield ungrammatical results in ordinary prose (*Traff ham igjen i dag* 'met him again today'). In informal speech, both the subject and the auxiliary may easily be left out ([*Har du*] *Sett' n Ola nå*? '[Have you] seen Ollie around?'); the same is the case for the object in topic-drop ([*Den filmen*] *Så æ i går*. lit. '[That film] saw I yesterday').

One of the more peculiar facts is that Norwegian hymns may use 'German' word order: in embedded clauses, the finite verb is clause-final (*Om du deg skjuler når angsten meg plager*, lit. 'if you yourself hide when fear me torment', cf. Barstad 2000). A similar fact can be observed in what we refer to as 'festive syntax', observable in greetings and salutes in newspapers (*Hurra for Mia som på Elveng bor*! 'Hooray for Mia who on Elveng lives!'). Clause-final finite verbs, or more generally, non-V2 word order even in main clauses is obviously considered more 'festive' that ordinary V2; this type of syntax is accepted in these contexts, but rejected in

most others. In poetry, we find unusual word order in phrases (*Tre katter små* ‘three cats small’). All these syntactic phenomena are often lumped together under ‘poetic free word order’. A thorough investigation of the data, however, reveals that poetic word order does not open the door to syntactic anarchy. On the contrary, the syntax of hymns, for instance, is subject to very strict rules. The relevant syntactic system is simply different (Barstad 2000).

A different syntactic system is also at play in a language user using a non-standard dialect. A number of syntactic features of Norwegian dialects are only acceptable in dialectal contexts; when lexical items from the standard dialect are used, those features become unacceptable and ungrammatical (Dial. *Kåin du lika best*? Stand. **Hvem du likte best*? Lit. ‘which-one you liked better?’ cf. Åfarli 1986, cf. also below).

We want to emphasize that any language user knows, accepts, and even actively uses many different ‘secondary syntactic systems’ in specific contexts.

2. A Theory of Universal Bilingualism: Roeper (1999)

According to a recent theory developed by Thomas Roeper, all humans are multilingual. The notion of multilingualism is thus extended beyond mastering more than one national language or non-standard dialect (in a way similar to the quoted from Chomsky 1988 above). Roeper claims that “hidden bilingualism” appears in many areas. While other theories resort to the notion of optionality or optional rules, Roeper argues for two contradictory subgrammars. He supports his theory with the optional V2 rule in English (among a range of other phenomena). As is well-known, English does not employ an obligatory V2 rule; in most cases, putting the finite verb in second position leads to ungrammaticality (**He read often Nietsche.*) However, there is a contextually-based V2 rule in children’s stories and

narratives with most verbs of telling or saying (*"I am melting," shrieked the witch*.). Verbs of saying thus trigger a different set of grammatical rules than other verbs, e.g. other intensional verbs, in this context. Such examples, Roeper says (op. cit. 6), show that

> A person has numerous grammars: every lexical class with rules that are incompatible with another class should constitute a separate grammar. It sounds unwieldy and implausible to argue that a person has a dozen grammars. The essence of this assertion may, nonetheless, be true. It implies that the notion of a grammar should change to a more local conception.

Language development is another area where different grammars co-exist, according to Roeper. Most children acquiring English go through a stage where structures with an accusative subject in main clauses (*Me want*) co-exist with the 'adult-like target grammar' (*I want*). Roeper argues that there is no optionality with respect to the morphological case of the subject; instead, it would be more correct to describe this situation as a stage where two different, and contradictory, grammars compete. One is specified to always give the subject accusative case (in the relevant clause type), while the other always dictates a nominative subject (in the corresponding clause type). All development of this type should be seen as competition between grammars; diachronic studies should be analysed from the same perspective (op. cit. p. 4): "I proceed from the assumption that wherever one finds a continuum, or historical gradualism, a more refined level of analysis will reveal discrete phenomena."

Vivian Cook shares this view, at least in relevant respects. Cook and Newson (2007) refer to Cook's (2003) study of what we might call *contamination.* This concept describes a situation where the grammaticality

judgements of a language user are influenced by the acquisition of a second language (cf. Cook and Newson 2007, chapter 6).

> Multi-competence has raised the issue of how the second language knowledge in the [final state] affects the other component of the final state – the first language […]. French speakers who know English react against French sentences using the middle voice, compared to those who don't know English:
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> a. Un tricot de laine se lave à l'eau froide.
> b. *A wool sweater washes in cold water.

One may very well posit a comparable contamination between different varieties, dialects, and standards of a national language. This fits well with the findings of Leonie Cornips (cf. especially 2006) who has studied Dutch dialects for a number of years. In some cases, informants identify a construction as being part of their local dialect, while other aspects of the study reveal that the construction does not belong to the dialect, but to the norm. This indicates that informants accept constructions foreign to their dialect as dialectal constructions. An explanation for this fact may proceed from the assumption that the language user has at his disposal a number of subgrammars (local dialect, standard dialect, other contextually-determined secondary grammars) and is unable to distinguish which grammaticality judgments go with which subgrammar.

This also implies that a set of data from the same informant (recordings, written texts, mixed sets) may display features of contradicting subgrammars. This should make linguists proceed with caution. If a data set consists of many different, and potentially contradictory, subgrammars, constructing a single coherent underlying grammar would be akin to constructing a single picture

from a box of puzzle pieces, where each piece may belong to any one of a dozen different puzzles. This would be a challenging and perhaps futile task.

3. Dialect syntax

A dialect is often understood to be a linguistic variety common to a group of people in a geographically (or socially) defined area. According to this understanding, a dialect is a collective phenomenon, i.e. something that is common to a group of people. In generative grammar, however, a language is defined as an individual phenomenon; it is an object generated by an Internalized language or grammar, an I-language or I-grammar. The implication is that a dialect is an individual phenomenon since a given dialect is a language. In other words, a dialect is an idiolect, which means that there are as many dialects as there are individuals. Based on this, Kayne (1996: xiv-xv) presents some controversial ideas (our italics):

> [I]t is often estimated that the number of languages presently in existence is 4000-5000. Such estimates must evaluate the contribution of Italy as one. […]
> […] that in Northern Italy alone one can individuate at least 25 syntactically distinct languages/dialects solely by studying the syntax of subject clitics. […]
> A very conservative estimate would be that present-day Italy has at least 500 syntactically distinct languages/dialects. 500,000 would in consequence, I think, then be a very conservative extrapolation to the number of syntactically distinct languages/dialects in the world at present.
>
> *It is possible to arrive at a much more radical reevaluation based on the following question: Can anyone think of another*

> *person with whom they agree 100 percent of the time on syntactic judgements (even counting only sharp disagreements)? [...]*
> *[I]t is entirely likely that no two speakers of English have exactly the same syntactic judgements. In which case there must be many more varieties of English than is usually assumed.*

If we accept the characterization of a dialect as an I-language or idiolect, a dialect understood as a collective phenomenon is an arbitrarily delimited set of I-languages/idiolects that share certain traits. This is in line with the way a dialect is characterized in Chambers & Trudgill (1998: 5): "'Dialect' […] refers to varieties which are grammatically (and perhaps lexically) as well as phonologically different from other varieties."

The definition of a dialect as an I-language/idiolect naturally opens the possibility for including second language varieties into the class of dialects, cf. the following quotation from Berggren & Tenfjord (1999: 21) (our translation):

> Det gjør det rimelig å omtale mellomspråk som varieteter […]. Mellomspråk er imidlertid ikke gruppespråk, de er unike for hver innlærer. Slik sett har de karakter av idiolekter. Dette aspektet ved mellomspråk lå til grunn for Corders gamle omtale av mellomspråk som "idiosynkratiske dialekter".
> [This makes it natural to talk about interlanguage as varieties […]. Still, interlanguage is not group language; it is unique to each individual learner. Thus, interlaguages may be seen as idiolects. This feature of interlanguage was fundamental to Corder's characterization of interlanguage as "idiosyncratic dialects"]

In other words, interlanguages are I-languages/idiolects and it is not natural or expedient to group them into classes: the differences are more striking or interesting than the similarities.

We conclude that a dialect is an individual I-language/idiolect. A given dialect is one of several I-languages in the register of the individual language user. Thus, linguistic data from the same informant can belong to several different subgrammars. Distinguishing between the subgrammars can be relatively easy when it comes to multilingualism involving languages that are clearly different, such as Norwegian and English, for example. However, it can be difficult when a standard dialect co-exists with a local dialect, the two varieties have largely the same lexical base, and the pronunciation of the local dialect does not differ significantly from that of the standard dialect (i.e. if it is easy to 'translate' between the two dialects with respect to pronunciation). Distinguishing between different subgrammars in the same individual is further complicated by parametrization.[1]

4. Parametrization

Henry (1996: 79) says the following about the expectations about dialectal differences based on classical parameter theory:

> [C]lassical parameter theory, under which the effects of parameter setting are seen in a range of areas of the grammar, predicts that differences between dialects will be comparatively large-scale at the surface level; a difference in the setting of one parameter will have a range of effects throughout the grammar.

[1] Another interesting aspect is to which extent our theory allows for variation within one and the same subgrammar. This question is not addressed in this paper, but confer Eide and Sollid (2010), where variation within and across subgrammars is the crucial question.

However, one seldom encounters such large-scale differences in dialect studies. Dialects belonging to the same ‘language’ typically differ only with regard to one or two parameters, cf. Kayne (1996: xiii):

> To the extent that one can find languages that are syntactically extremely similar to one another, yet clearly distinguishable and readily examinable, one can hope to reach a point that the number of observable differences is so small that one can virtually see one property covarying with another.

Kayne (1996: footnote 11) also says: “In the extreme case, one may find an isolated property distinguishing two very close dialects.” As Henry (1996: 79-80) points out, this doesn’t fit with classical parameter theory:

> The possibility of two dialects differing from one another in that one applies a process (for example verb raising) obligatorily while in the other it is optional, sits uneasily with current approaches.

Even though at first sight such small-scale variation does not seem to fit easily with current parameter theory, in principle this is not a problem: there is nothing that precludes two I-languages from differing with regard to only one property.

On the other hand, the existence of several parallel subgrammars in the same individual raises a serious methodological problem regarding the use of parameters in dialect studies. The researcher cannot be sure whether the syntactic patterns an informant produces belong to the same grammar or to different ones. In the latter case, the patterns produced might belong both to the local dialect I-language and the structurally almost identical I-

language of the standard dialect. In other words: Do the pieces belong to one jigsaw puzzle or two?

The problem is illustrated in (1)-(3), where (1) exemplifies the word order pattern in *wh*-questions in Standard Norwegian (obligatory V2). The example is written using Nynorsk spelling.

(1) a. Kven likte du best?
who liked you most
Who did you like most?

b. *Kven du likte best?
who you liked most
Who did you like most?

Now consider (2).

(2) a. Hvem likte du best?
who liked you most
Who did you like most?

b. Kåin du lika best?
who you liked most
Who did you like most?

The dialects in south-eastern Norway typically show the pattern in (2a), which has the same word order as standard written Norwegian (obligatory V2). The sentence in (2a) is written using Bokmål spelling. However, many other Norwegian dialects (especially along the western and northern coast) allow the word order in (2b), i.e. no V2. This is the case for the dialect in Halsa, Nordmøre, cf. Åfarli (1986: 98). The spelling used is adapted to the pronunciation of the local dialect.

Many of the dialects that allow (2b), i.e. non-V2 *wh*-questions, also permit the word order in (2a), i.e. V2. This is the case for the dialect in Halsa, Nordmøre, as shown in (3).

(3) a. Kåin lika du best?
who liked you most
Who did you like most?

b. Kåin du lika best?
who you liked most
Who did you like most?

The two possibilities in (3) raise the issue of how to interpret such optionality: is this genuine optionality within one grammar, or should we interpret this interchange as stemming from two different grammars, where (3a) is really an effect of an interfering standard dialect grammar?

The latter alternative, namely that what we have here are two different grammars, is in line with modern generative theory, which assumes that grammars are deterministic and do not permit optionality. Instead of assuming that we have potentially three different grammars (a deterministic one with V2, a deterministic one with non-V2, and a non-deterministic one that allows both), it is preferable to adopt the more restrictive hypothesis that only the two deterministic alternatives are available. Thus, considerations of theory economy favour the deterministic solution.

If this is correct, we have to conclude that the two patterns in (3) belong to different subgrammars. This poses a serious methodological challenge for researchers in dialect syntax. How is one to sort out which patterns belong to which subgrammar? Kayne (1996: xii) is very optimistic about the potential gains from research into dialect syntax:

> Comparative work on the syntax of a large number of closely related languages 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. If it were possible to experiment on languages, a syntactician would construct an experiment of the following type: take a language, alter a single one of its observable syntactic properties, examine the result to see what, if any, other property has changed as a consequence. If some property has changed, conclude that it and the property that was altered are linked to one another by some abstract parameter.

We fully agree, but also emphasize that researchers who do dialect syntax, must consider the methodological and theoretical difficulties posed by the existence of parallel grammars in the same individual.

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