Discussion of Robert S. Kirsner, 
*Qualitative-quantitative Analyses of Dutch and Afrikaans Grammar and Lexicon*

Introduction

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From the moment Robert Kirsner's book *Qualitative-quantitative Analyses of Dutch and Afrikaans Grammar and Lexicon* (John Benjamins, 2014) appeared, it was clear to us that this occasion should not go unnoticed in the journal *Nederlandse Taalkunde/Dutch Linguistics*. Organizing a discussion of the book was, in our view, the perfect way to pay tribute to Kirsner's lasting contribution to linguistics in general and to the description of Dutch in particular. To be sure, not all of the research conducted by Kirsner since the late nineteen sixties is covered by the present volume; lacking most conspicuously is his earlier work on the verb *zullen* (Kirsner 1969), on presentative sentences with *er* (Kirsner 1972, 1979) and on the (pseudo) passive (Kirsner 1976/1977). However, the range of topics addressed in this book is still impressive: demonstratives, pragmatic particles in the context of imperatives, a detailed analysis of the idiom *ho maar*, progressive constructions and indirect object constructions.\(^1\) At our request six commentaries were written by experts on specific topics dealt with in the book, and Kirsner was then given the opportunity to respond to all of them in a concluding paper.

Not only the multitude of topics discussed, but also the specific approach advocated by Kirsner provides more than enough food for thought, as the discussion will make clear. From the start of his career, Kirsner's approach has been quite an original one in Dutch linguistics, both from a

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\(^1\) A convenient overview of the contents of the entire book, including Chapter 3 on demonstratives in Afrikaans not further discussed here, is provided by Kirsner himself in the first section of his response.
theoretical and from a methodological point of view. At a time when
native speaker intuitions were considered as the main data for linguistic
theorizing, Kirsner based his analyses on language use data, mainly texts.
Intuitions were elicited in an experimental context, testing hypotheses that
were generated by corpus analysis. The way in which Kirsner uses ques-
tionnaires and quantitative data from texts is critically assessed in the
contributions by Egbert Fortuin and Jeroen van de Weijer, whereas Fons
Maes and Monique Flecken specifically point out the need to complement
Kirsner’s research with new methodologies that have been developed in
the past decades.

While, methodologically, Kirsner’s approach accords very well with the
usage-based methodology advocated in modern Cognitive Linguistics,
Kirsner has always kept a critical distance to Cognitive Linguistics at the
theoretical level, see the concluding section 7.3 in his book, called Columbia
School and Cognitive Grammar. It is indeed the Columbia School, ini-
tiated by William Diver at Columbia University, which is Kirsner’s theore-
tical home base. In this approach, a language is seen as a system of rather
abstract signs, which typically have an instructional meaning, i.e. the signs
guide the hearer to the message that the speaker wants to convey, at the
same time guiding the hearer to pay a varying degree of attention to dif-
ferent aspects of the message. The different signs constitute a system with
differential values. Labels like ‘structuralist’, ‘semiotic’, ‘functionalist’ and
‘communication-oriented’ all apply to the theoretical outlook of Columbia
School research. Now, the postulated abstract character of the signs goes
hand in hand with a preference for monosemic analyses (‘one form, one
meaning’). In this respect, there is a difference with Cognitive Linguistics,
which prefers ‘richer’ (polysemic) descriptions, in which different uses of
the same sign are considered as part of the linguistic knowledge of the
native speaker, not as different interpretations-in-context, as the Columbia
School sees it. The issue clearly has to do with the division of labor be-
tween semantics and pragmatics, which will stay on the agenda of linguis-
tics for a while. In the discussion, Bob de Jonge presents a more in-depth
description of this ‘functionalist struggle’, while Dirk Geeraerts makes the
case for polysemy, specifically applied to Kirsner’s analysis of ho maar!

It is interesting to note that with respect to the degree of abstractness of
linguistic knowledge, the Columbia School shows affinity with generative
approaches. In both frameworks, the knowledge of language is considered
as an abstract system, which is at quite a distance from language use. The
two approachers differ, however, when it comes to the role of language use
as a methodological access to the abstract system. For Columbia School
researchers, language use offers the point of departure for developing hypotheses about how the system is structured, whereas generative grammar trusts intuitions and phenomena of language acquisition as providing the primary access to the object of study, being the language system. In contrast to Columbia School and Generative Grammar, Cognitive Linguistics positions the language system closer to language use, so that (quantitative) generalizations over language use data are rather easily accepted as being representative for the knowledge of native speakers about their language.

These short introductory remarks are just meant to make clear that the Columbia School represents an interesting position on the methodological and theoretical parameters of linguistic theorizing. Dutch linguistics has been in the lucky circumstance that through the work of Kirsner this position has been part of its discours since the 1970s. We thank Monique Flecken, Egbert Fortuin, Dirk Geeraerts, Bob de Jonge, Fons Maes, Jeroen van de Weijer and, of course, Bob Kirsner, for their cooperation in this project. We hope that the following critical discussion will contribute to the necessary reflection on the best practices in linguistic research, Dutch linguistics being part of that enterprise.

Bibliography


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