

Slow linguistics – a manifesto

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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 particular¹. It is, rather, a continuation of what I argued in a paper in Spanish on “empathic linguistics”² 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 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

¹ 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.

² Kabatek, Johannes (2014): “Lingüística empática”, *Rilce* 30-3, 705-723.

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 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.