Syntax and Variation

Reconciling the Biological and the Social

Leonie Cornips Karen P. Corrigan

SYNTAX A



RECONCILING THE BIOLOGICAL AND THE SOCIAL

Edited by

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CHAPTER 1

Toward an integrated approach to syntactic variation

A retrospective and prospective synopsis

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Overview

1.1 Stimulus for the volume and its overarching aim

Five of the contributions (Adger & Smith, Barbiers, Cheshire, Gervain and Zemplén as well as Henry) arose from invited presentations at the workshop on Syntactic Variation organised by the editors of the present volume that was held in June 2003 during the *Second International Conference On Language Variation In Europe* (ICLaVE 2) at the University of Uppsala. The primary aim of this workshop was to initiate cooperation between internationally renowned generative and variationist linguists with a view to developing an innovative and more cohesive approach to syntactic variation. The present volume then evolved by inviting further contributions from like-minded scholars so that the work as a whole would contain treatments incorporating the analysis of external factors into accounts focusing on the internal linguistic conditioning of syntactic variation and change cross-linguistically.

We have partitioned the book into four major parts, grouping chapters that have orientations in common together. Part I, which contains the contributions by Cheshire, Muysken and Sorace, focuses on the locus of syntactic variation and aspects of modularity. The chapters in Part II by Henry and Gervain and Zemplén are oriented towards methodological innovation with an emphasis on personal pattern variation.¹ The contributions in Part III by Adger and Smith, King and Van Gelderen seek to address syntactic variability in real and appar-

ent time with particular emphasis on the extralinguistic factors of age, gender and style. Finally, Part IV, which consists of contributions on Dutch (Barbiers) and Romance (Benincà & Poletto) is devoted to synchronic variation across geographical space.

1.2 Wider context

We are not the first to point out that researchers who espouse the frameworks encapsulated by the umbrella terms 'biolinguistics' and 'sociolinguistics', diverge quite rigidly in terms of both their methodological approaches and theoretical persuasions.² Although there remain certain formal resonances between the paradigms since the early days of their inception, the fundamental differences between them created a schism that has persisted through most of the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (cf. Cheshire 1987, 1999; Cornips & Corrigan 2005; Hudson 1995; Henry this volume; Kroch 1989; and Sankoff 1988a). In this regard, Wilson and Henry (1998:2) note that "there have been few real attempts to marry these seemingly divergent positions" and Meechan and Foley (1994:63), likewise, suggest that theoretical syntacticians and sociolinguists "rarely, if ever, cross paths".

The welcome relaxation of the generative position on the status of externalist accounts from that of Smith (1989), typified in the quotation below from Chomsky (1999:34), demonstrates that the time may well be ripe for a more integrated approach such as those introduced in Cornips and Corrigan (2005); Henry (2002); Meechan and Foley (1994); Meyerhoff (2000); Van der Wurff (2000) and attempted more exhaustively in the present volume.

Internalist biolinguistic inquiry does not, of course, question the legitimacy of other approaches to language, any more than internalist inquiry into bee communication invalidates the study of how the relevant internal organization of bees enters into their social structure. The investigations do not conflict; they are mutually supportive. In the case of humans, though not other organisms, the issues are subject to controversy, often impassioned, and needless.

As such, entertaining "Reconciling the biological and the social" could well be described in Kuhn's (1970) terms as the initial phase in the creation of a mature scientific community, united by a single paradigm. It is hoped that by doing so we will overturn the present situation which still fits all too squarely within Masterman's (1974:74) diagnosis of the problems engendered by an "immature science" (Kuhn 1970:182):

Each sub-field as defined by its technique is so obviously more trivial and narrow than the field as defined by intuition, and also the various operational definitions given by the techniques are so grossly discordant with one another, that discussion of fundamentals remains, and long-run progress (as opposed to local progress) fails to occur.

1.3 The acquisition of local and supralocal varieties

Not surprisingly, given its orientation, variationist sociolinguistics often focuses on speakers of local varieties or dialects (cf. the papers by Adger & Smith, Cheshire, Henry, King and Muysken). As the contributions to this volume by Barbiers, Benincà and Poletto, Gervain and Zemplén and Henry confirm, the necessity for generative researchers with interests in syntactic microvariation to also attend to these vernaculars seems to be on the increase.³ Two separate, but related, questions arise with respect to this kind of data that we feel should be addressed in this introduction since they have important implications for our discussion of the major themes of the volume in the sections which follow, namely: (1) how are non-standard varieties acquired by the individual/community? and (2) to what extent are such vernaculars subject to variation and change within individuals/social groups and across diachronic, diatopic and diatypic dimensions?⁴

The field of biolinguistics envisages linguistic change as primarily being driven by the acquisition process because learners have the option of adopting innovative settings for the parameters provided by Universal Grammar. There has, however, never been the same emphasis on acquisition within the sociolinguistic paradigm. Indeed, Roberts (2002: 333) has recently claimed that investigations into "the acquisition of variable features by young children" are "relatively new." Early studies in this model, such as Labov's (1989) investigation of (-t, d) deletion in Philadelphia, did find that pre-pubescent language learners acquired the socially situated variability that characterized their parents' speech patterns. Nevertheless, there are several reasons why this age group has been relatively neglected in sociolinguistics by comparison to their importance as data subjects in the evolution of the biolinguistic paradigm. In the first place, discriminating between developmental errors and genuine variability can be highly problematic. Secondly, the methodological practices favoured by sociolinguists which require large subject groups and many hours of data do not easily lend themselves to the recording of very young children. Some may be taciturn in the presence of adults and even their peer group, they may favour telegraphic speech and tend to have short concentration spans, all of which

make it very difficult to gather enough variable data of the right kinds. That there is much to be gained by attempting to overcome these problems is clear from the findings of Chambers (1992), Roberts and Labov (1995) and Foulkes et al. (1999) which examine variable caretaker input and child output, though their investigations focus solely on the phonological component. Extending this research "above and beyond phonology" (Sankoff 1980) to explore *grammatical* variability in this age group will be one of the most interesting future challenges of the integrated approach to syntactic variation advocated here.

A related issue, of course, is whether we consider adult speakers in contemporary western communities in particular to be 'true' monolinguals anyway, given the social milieu that generally pertains (highlighted, for example, in the 2004 collection entitled The Acquisition of Sociolinguistic Competence, edited by Bayley and Regan). Thus, in addition to the fact that every dialect is naturally a heterogeneous system, varieties rarely exist nowadays in absolute isolation. Indeed, most competent speakers of language X can usually resort to a range of varieties along a continuum from standard to non-standard, depending on social and discourse contexts. Indeed, while syntax is often viewed within sociolinguistics as a marker of cohesion in large geographical areas, syntactic variants may also act as marker of local identity, as is the case with variability in the phonological component (cf. Cornips in press). It is surely not beyond the pale, therefore, for sociolinguists to claim that dialect systems of even adult speakers are not static but are participating in ongoing processes of change as a result of social, political, cultural and economic influences. Even in those increasingly rare communities in which supralocal models are absent, face-toface interactions are often polylectal (cf. Auer ms. and Harris 1985). Indeed, as Henry, this volume, demonstrates more attention should be paid by both sociolinguists and biolinguists to the phenomenon of idiolectal variation in this regard. In addition, dialect speakers may be raised 'bilingually' from birth in the local dialect and a supralocal variety, thus being, in effect, simultaneous L1 acquirers. It is also possible that in certain linguistic contexts (reminiscent of diglossic situations) children acquire the supralocal variety at a somewhat later age and, as such, should be considered early child L2 acquirers of the standard. As a result, it is likely (following the views expressed by many of the contributors to Bayley & Regan 2004 and in Sorace this volume, regarding adult L2 acquirers of typologically different languages/varieties) that in so-called non-standard communities, the total exposure to both the dialect and the standard variety is reduced compared to that of monolingual standard or dialect speakers and this is worth bearing in mind.

2. Outline of contributions and their methodologies

There are a number of points of synergy and contrast with respect to the methodologies adopted and the grammatical phenomena analysed in the present volume and it is to these issues that we now turn. As regards the data-sets mined, for example, with the exceptions of King's paper on Acadian French, Muysken's investigation of Ecuadorian Spanish and Van Gelderen's analysis of the Corpus of Spoken Professional American English (CSE), contributions focus on the linguistic landscape of Europe. In addition, the data described passim is predominantly spoken and synchronic, although Van Gelderen's paper on the history of English, which draws on written sources, is unique in both these respects. However, the approach of all the authors to their materials is a comparative one, drawing on parallels and distinctions between: (i) idiolects (Henry's investigation of expletive there agreement and Gervain & Zemplén's investigation into focus-raising across divergent Hungarian lects); (ii) dialects (like Barbiers' account of word order strategies in Dutch varieties and Benincà & Poletto's treatment of agreement and person features in Romance) and (iii) languages (as is the case with Sorace's contribution). Adger and Smith, Cheshire, Henry and Van Gelderen all offer accounts of different dialects of English in the British Isles and North America, including standard varieties, though they differ with respect to the manner in which the data was collected and subsequently mined. The papers by Adger and Smith and Cheshire, for example, focus on samples of tape-recorded speech using the classical sociolinguistic interview method and they, therefore, share the approach of King and Muysken in this regard. Van Gelderen's paper, by contrast, is corpus-based using data from different periods, dialects and styles of English. Henry's account of another variety of English (those vernaculars spoken in Northern Ireland) is more akin to the classical generative method since her analysis relies on accessing intuitions. As such, it is similar to the oral and written elicitations described in the work on Dutch by Barbiers, on Hungarian by Gervain and Zemplén and that of Benincà and Poletto and Sorace on members of the Romance language family. However, there are particularly innovative aspects of the methodologies described by both Henry and Gervain and Zemplén that are worth foregrounding here. Henry's method is unique in that it relies on a predetermined set of test sentences only in the initial phase of data collection, the bulk of her intuitive data coming from long term discussions of acceptability judgements with individual native speakers. Likewise, Gervain and Zemplén's contribution is unusual in the context of theoretical treatments of syntactic variation in that it takes a quantitative approach (akin

to mainstream sociolinguistics) in its reporting of cluster analysis results for the acceptability judgements of individual native speakers.

As far as syntactic phenomena are concerned, the features addressed in this volume range from treatments attending to aspects of the DP (such as Benincà & Poletto's and Van Gelderen's innovative accounts of the pronominal systems of Romance and English, respectively) to novel analyses of word order strategies (like Barbiers' contribution on verbal clusters in Dutch and Gervain & Zemplén's account of variation in the constructions amenable to focus-raising in Hungarian). In between these two poles, there are integrated accounts of various syntactic features that have often been addressed rather less successfully in the past by researchers working independently within either the biolinguistic or sociolinguistic paradigms. Thus, Sorace's and Van Gelderen's contributions address the popular generative topics of parameter setting/re-setting as well as pro-drop and verb second phenomena inter alia. The unusual patterning of verbal agreement, do-periphrasis and negation in Buckie English is tackled by Adger and Smith while Cheshire's paper revisits conventional sociolinguistic accounts of variation in pronoun tagging and verbal -s and introduces the relatively unrecognised phenomenon within this paradigm of independent adverbial clauses. Issues surrounding variation in the systems of inflection and case feature prominently in the papers by Gervain and Zemplén as well as Van Gelderen, who also posits a potential relationship between co-ordination and different classes of noun. IP phenomena, as previously mentioned, are addressed by Barbier's contribution and Muysken's paper gives a detailed account of the gerund in Ecuadorian Spanish. The latter is permitted in a variety of constructions (as it is in English) and these gerundial expressions are especially interesting from our perspective since they are subject to very considerable internal and external variation. If one were forced to isolate the single most prevalent grammatical phenomenon discussed in the volume it would have to be agreement. Although it is the focus of the contributions on expletive there by Henry and negative concord by Adger and Smith as well as King, it also features in some form or other in almost all of the papers. This is perhaps not unexpected given the fact that this variable is relatively immune from some of the problems that often beset the application of traditional Labovian methods (originally developed for socio-phonetic/phonological analysis) to the syntactic component (see Cheshire this volume and Cornips & Corrigan 2005). Moreover, considerable generative research effort has been invested in the analysis of the internal structure of IP (see Bobalijk & Jonas 1996; Pollock 1989; Rizzi 1997 inter alia), with the result that the facts of verbal agreement, for instance (see Chomsky 1995, 2000, 2001b and Pesetsky & Torrego 2004) are

much better understood than other sites of syntactic variation such as the prefabricated expressions described in Cheshire's chapter in the present volume.

3. Major themes addressed

3.1 An integrated theory of syntactic variation

As noted previously, this volume offers a range of papers situated within two of the most salient current frameworks for analysing syntactic variation and change between and within language varieties. Common ground for all the papers is that each attempts to achieve an adequate understanding of the mechanisms determining syntactic variation and change by combining insights from both paradigms. Many researchers have previously claimed that such a bridge is a prerequisite to enable us "to understand language variation and change as they are driven by social factors but constrained (at one level) by the nature of possible grammars" (Wilson & Henry 1998:8 and see Sells et al. 1996b: 173). Achieving this largely depends on how much variationist and generative researchers are actually willing to countenance and accommodate viewpoints from both disciplines. In our view, the variationist approach would benefit considerably (as King this volume, also argues) from elucidating "microvariation by analysing very closely-related grammatical systems using the technical apparatus that the generative tradition makes available." The more 'classic' variationist contributions here are, therefore, innovative in just this respect in that they use formal insights from generative theory (Muysken), and Minimalism, in particular (Adger & Smith, Henry and King) to explicate patterns of variation and change. On the other hand, we believe that the generative approach has much to gain from a perspective in which the organization of the grammar may be seen as somehow reflected in patterns of usage (Taylor 1994; Van der Wurff 2000) and by availing of a variationist methodology, one can then truly catch "a glimpse of grammatical structure" (Meechan & Foley 1994:82; Sells et al. 1996a:624). Thus, quantitative results may not only lend strong support to structural analysis (Pintzuk 1995; Van der Wurff 2000) but they also provide more evidence for microvariation between closely related grammatical systems exhibiting 'orderly heterogeneity' that can, in turn, be correlated with external variables of one sort or another. Far from side-stepping the fact that syntactic innovations propagate at different speeds diachronically, diatopically and diatypically (as most 'classic' generative studies are wont to) those who work primarily within this paradigm and are represented in this volume (Barbiers, for example) understand the importance of considering quantitative differences to be evidence for aspects of their theoretical analysis. Gervain and Zemplén, especially, have applied the Principles and Parameters framework to Hungarian focus-raising and their findings with respect to native speaker judgements regarding this phenomenon have led them to a similar view to that expressed in Henry's contribution, i.e. that variation is a ubiquitous problem for the generative linguistic enterprise as it is currently conceived. It would seem that unless the framework can devise a systematic treatment of varying intuitions in terms of both their collection and classification, coupled with some mechanism for incorporating quantitative methods, then certain syntactic phenomena will forever remain elusive. The importance of the variationist approach in this regard is also highlighted in both the study by Muysken of the gerund in a partly bilingual Quechua-Spanish community in Andean Ecuador and in Benincà and Poletto's account of variable person features in Romance dialects. Each of these contributions clearly demonstrates that there are implicational relationships between their sets of data in terms of frequency and probabilities that should not be ignored. Muysken, for example, claims that the frequent use of the gerund in one construction appears to be linked to similarly frequent usage of the same variable in other constructions. Likewise, Benincà and Poletto claim that morphological extension is a probabilistic phenomenon, i.e., the more features which two forms have in common, the more probable extension there will be. As such, we strongly agree with the view of Sells et al. (1996b: 173) articulated below:

Variation theory needs grammatical theory because a satisfactory grammatical characterization of a variable is a pre-requisite to decisions about what to count and how to count it, and it is an essential element in the larger question about where variation is located in speakers' grammars.

The contributions in this volume by Adger and Smith, Barbiers, Benincà and Poletto, Gervain and Zemplén, King and Van Gelderen are testament to the fact that for the generative enterprise, the inclusion of quantitative analyses of usage patterns is critical since they provide insight into the categorical or variable behaviour of the variants in question. Likewise, the chapters by Adger and Smith, Cheshire, Henry, King and Muysken robustly demonstrate that variationist sociolinguists who resort to formal linguistic theory can find novel and more effective measures for deciding which variants are syntactically related and which are syntactically remote. This suggestion was already tentatively made by Corrigan (1997: 224–227, 2000b) and Wilson and Henry (1998: 11) in their analyses of constructions such as (1a) and (1b) below and we are pleased

to be able to incorporate in this volume Henry's most recent findings regarding this phenomenon amongst speakers of Northern Irish English vernaculars.⁵ (1a) has a preverbal subject and singular agreement whereas (1b) is an expletive *there*-construction showing singular agreement with a postverbal subject (DP-associate):

- (1) a. When the grapes was in season "When the grapes were in season."

 (Corrigan 1997:215, U1455/L2399-2400/1945F/MS1112)
 - b. There was two priests lived there
 "There were two priests who lived there."

(Corrigan 1997: 218, U132/L212-213/1973M/MS1810)

Within the variationist paradigm, agreement phenomena of this kind naturally appear to represent syntactic variants of one and the same linguistic variable (see Cheshire this volume; Eisikovits 1991; Hazen 1996; Meechan & Foley 1994 and Poplack & Tagliamonte 1989) whereas they would be considered syntactically remote in generative syntax on account of the difference in their formal syntactic behaviour (see Belletti 1988; Chomsky 1991; Corrigan to appear; Henry 2002 this volume; Roberts 1997 and Wilson & Henry 1998).

3.1.1 Questions to be addressed in an integrated theory of grammar
Bearing issues such as these in mind, we would like to argue that the approach taken by contributors to the present volume finally makes it possible to address fundamental questions such as: (1) Why is grammatical differentiation non-arbitrary, bounded and predictable (cf. Cornips 1998)? and (2) Why is the same degree of variability not shared by all individual speakers despite the fact that 'orderly heterogeneity' can be discerned across the community. From this perspective, Barbier's contribution contends that:

Generative linguistics and sociolinguistics are complementary in that it is the task of sociolinguistics to describe and explain the patterns of variation that occur within a linguistic community, given the theoretical limits of this variation uncovered by generative linguistics.

Moreover, the chapters by Gervain and Zemplén and Henry provide strong evidence to support the claims of Cornips and Poletto (2005) that linguists should strive towards a more systematic collection strategy for eliciting intuitions in 'spontaneous' and experimental elicitation settings, particularly given the open-ended nature of syntax. Heretofore, spontaneous data within the variationist paradigm has been considered to be far more authentic than in-

tuitions or elicited data of the sort advocated in some of the contributions to this volume (cf. Coupland 2003 and Rickford 1987). The request for progress with respect to data collection techniques is also crucially addressed to generative theorists who, as their research proceeded in the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, have relied on data that has become increasingly subtle and, in many ways, therefore, more challenging (Gervain 2002; Labov 1996 and Schütze 1996). However, as Gervain (2002) has recently argued (and see Henry in press), we feel that it is important to note that degrees of acceptability or grammaticality uncovered by biolinguistic methods are not in themselves problematic. Rather, what seems most controversial to us is the imprecise manner in which they are accommodated within generative analyses. It is our view that attention to these issues will, for example, clarify what scale, if any, is being used, how the different degrees of intuition relate to one another and how they should be interpreted in the analysis (cf. Gervain 2002).

3.1.2 The locus of syntactic variation

A persistent problem addressed by many of our contributors relates to the manner in which a well-known truism of variationist theory is accounted for, i.e. that individual speakers can use several variants of the syntactic variable (when maintaining the same style level). In fact, this issue is related to questions posed by successive generative models concerning the locus of syntactic variation, its restrictions and predictability. In the literature, several alternative approaches to this 'choice' are suggested, as outlined by Muysken (this volume). Three options with respect to 'variability' are offered here: (1) it is placed outside the grammatical mechanisms (cf. the contributions to this volume by Adger & Smith as well as Cheshire and King); (2) it is located inside the grammar by re-introducing optional rules (Henry 2002, this volume and Wilson & Henry 1998) and, finally (3) it is brought about by movement constrained by agreement (Barbiers this volume). The first option was originally advocated by Kroch (1989) who claimed that the grammar was a blind, autonomous system and the notion of 'choice' (optionality, variability) was not part of it. Instead, the individual speaker avails of separate or competing grammars when expressing variability. Adger and Smith (this volume) likewise, argue that the notion of 'choice' cannot be accounted for within the autonomous grammar. However, in contrast with Kroch's vision, this doesn't imply that individual speakers "have different grammars, per se, but rather a range of lexical items open to them, some of which will have syntactic effects." In their analysis, the notion of 'choice' concerns the level that serves as the input for the autonomous, grammatical system. Henry's contribution to this volume on the other hand reflects

her (1995, 2002) position that individual grammars include variability and, consequently, that the speaker has a real choice in terms of syntactic operations like optional verb movement and agreement, for instance. Different again is Barbier's claim in this volume that not all variation can be reduced to morphosyntactic or spell-out properties but that different dialects may share the same grammar. Such a stance, therefore, permits (indeed predicts) a certain degree of optionality (i.e. variation is thus taken to be an inherent property of the grammatical system).

Only when a suitably mature theory of syntactic variation has evolved will linguists be in a position to adequately address such questions. This is particularly so in the current generative research climate in which Minimalism stoically considers the grammatical system to be autonomous and variation is permitted to occur only at the moment of performance, i.e. when this endowed system is put to use. What is particularly encouraging about the modular approach introduced in Part I of the volume, is that the model allows for a meticulous examination of the extent to which variation is part of the grammatical mechanisms employed and where exactly performance fits (both on the level of proposing hypotheses and evaluating the data). Critical too is the framework's methods for determining whether or not the range of syntactic variation is the same or different in kind, therefore, neatly side-stepping the taxing issues raised in §§3.1–3.1.2 above.

3.1.2.1 Future avenues in socio-syntactic research: Interface levels? Three authors in this volume (Cheshire, Muysken and Sorace) are the most vociferous with respect to the necessity of a modular approach, though it is a latent theme in other chapters too. Muysken, in particular, argues in his contribution that this orientation is needed to explain the range of syntactic variation encountered in natural languages. He discusses the (over)use of the Spanish gerund amongst Quechua-Spanish bilinguals and demonstrates how this feature interacts with the cognition, interaction, semiotic and syntactic modules that are assumed to comprise our linguistic competence.8 It is clear from his analysis that some properties do not unambiguously fall into a single module. 9 Indeed, many authors in this volume consider variation to be engendered by the interaction between the syntactic component and other modules of our linguistic competence. Adger and Smith, for example, argue that the source governing the choice of which lexical item to enter into the syntactic component is influenced by (amongst others): (1) processing e.g. the ease of lexical access and (2) the 'interaction' module, i.e. optionality hinges on speaker-hearer relationships, and on notions of social identity. Similarly, Benincà and Poletto in

their contribution argue that the morphological and semantics modules are jointly responsible for the processes of analogy that they uncover in dialects of Romance.

Sorace's chapter explores these ideas from a language acquisition perspective arguing that features at the interface of syntax and discourse (her interpretation of Muysken's interaction module) display 'emerging' variability (or 'optionality' in her terms). Her paper explicitly addresses the question as to whether interface problems are internal to the learner's representation of syntactic knowledge, or are external to these representations, being created instead by computational difficulties with respect to integrating knowledge from different domains.

Finally, Cheshire's contribution to the volume explicitly addresses the interaction module, which she argues is directly responsible for the use of prefabricated expressions and variants expressing affective meanings in spoken language. At first sight these phenomena may appear to be instances of syntactic variation but she makes a strong case to suggest that they are, in fact, the result of interactive capacities that are responsible for the management of the sequential nature of information exchange, and for the cohesion of human discourse. Only at this interface level, can a distinction be made between pragmatic variation (communicative intent) and syntactic variation (equivalent constructions).

Of course it still remains to be seen whether a modular approach can provide an answer to the question posed earlier with regard to the extent to which variation is an inherent property of the grammatical system. According to Sorace, experimental research on native speakers points to a distinction between violations of 'soft' constraints, which trigger gradient linguistic judgements, and violations of 'hard' constraints, leading to categorical judgements. She draws the important conclusion that hard constraints are purely syntactic in nature, thus, brought about by the syntax module only and that these do not play a role outside language proper, as formulated by Muysken (this volume). Soft constraints on the other hand tend to be associated with the mapping between syntax and other modules such as lexical semantics, pragmatics and information structure. The latter two are defined by Muysken, for example, as belonging to the interaction module and it is interesting that Sorace's experimental results in another context provide further evidence supporting his view that variation emerges in the interface of the syntax and interaction module rather than in the syntax module alone. Falling out from this perspective, is Muysken's opposition to the view that properties which are normally formulated within the generative framework as 'principles' within the syntax, such as