

# Theoretical linguistics in secondary education

**Workshop proposal for SLE 2018, Tallinn, Estonia (29 Aug-1 Sept 2018)**

**Call deadline: Sunday 5 November 2017**

**Workshop: Theoretical linguistics in secondary education**

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Research and understanding from the language sciences has traditionally found its way into the secondary education context as a means to promote literary, literacy and communicative skills in students: the ability to identify genre, register, narrative structure; or to produce prescriptively correct grammatical structures. The natural ‘home’ of linguistics in the secondary context has therefore been within the study of the official language(s) of the country/region (e.g. English language in the UK, USA and Australia; Catalan/Spanish in Catalonia), and to a lesser extent EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and other modern foreign language instruction. As such, the promotion of linguistics in schools tends to be associated with applied, rather than theoretical, approaches and their practitioners. However, the recent push to introduce theoretical linguistics into the secondary curriculum rejects this instrumental deployment of linguistic understanding in the classroom in favour of the promotion of linguistic *knowledge*.

In introducing theoretical linguistics in the secondary context, however, one must first clarify the goal(s) of such initiatives; identifying *what* will be beneficial to secondary students in terms of the type of knowledge and analytic skills provided by theoretical linguistics; and the motivation and evidence for incorporating these into secondary-level teaching and learning (T&L). For example, the initiative GrOC (*Grammar Oriented toward Competences*, [www.groc.info](http://www.groc.info)) has put forward a new typology of exercises to replace those typically found in the Catalan secondary classroom; for instance, students analyse minimal pairs (e.g. Cat. *És professor* (*\*intransigent*) ‘(lit.) He is (inflexible/uncompromising) teacher’ vs. *És un professor* (*intransigent*) ‘He is a(n) (inflexible/uncompromising) teacher’; *quasi infinit* ‘almost infinite’ vs. *\*molt infinit* ‘very infinite’) with the aim of developing their ability to observe, argue, reflect on and understand grammatical structures (Bosque & Gallego 2016). Key questions that arise are the following:

- What is the purpose of incorporating theoretical linguistics into secondary-level T&L? To promote a more reflexive understanding of how language, the human mind, and science works rather than communicative and literacy skills (cf. Chomsky 1984)? Or to shift focus from a prescriptive approach to a descriptive, or even explanatory, approach, whilst nonetheless retaining an overall ‘instrumental’ pedagogy?
- To what extent are all areas of theoretical linguistics suitable for incorporation into secondary-level T&L? Which areas of theoretical linguistics are more amenable for promotion at the school level? How can they be adapted? Which types of curricular competences and learning outcomes will be targeted in each case?
- In rolling out linguistics programmes for secondary education, should the scope of incorporation be (initially) limited to certain areas? If so, which and what evidence is there for this?

As is well known amongst language scientists, the study of linguistics could equally be at home within psychology (taught as a separate subject in many countries' education systems) and other subjects with an emphasis on empirical investigation and scientific theory formation. Moreover, given its affinity with disciplines across the humanities, and social and natural sciences, linguistics is ideally placed to develop transversal skills and cross-curricular learning, a priority in many education systems. Issues to be discussed therefore include:

- How might theoretical linguistics be *incorporated* into cross-curricular approaches, or in other disciplines altogether?
- How might its place in other educational contexts be *promoted* and *justified to a non-specialist audience* (including teachers, students, school management, and parents/guardians), given the resistance to recognising linguistics as a science and the absence, or inaccuracy, of linguistics in the media and public consciousness (as encountered by those involved in previous attempts to introduce linguistics into the curriculum, cf. Denham & Lobeck 2010)?
- Furthermore, how might (theoretical) linguistics link with the study of language at other educational levels (primary, tertiary etc.)?

Another consideration is the form in which intervention by theoretical linguists should take place. For example, would its introduction be favoured by 'top down' or 'bottom up' approaches? On the one hand, linguistics education in schools has largely been implemented by 'grassroots' approaches by individuals in the classroom, or extra-curricular initiatives which provide a link between the classroom and drives on a regional, national or international level, such as Linguistics Olympiads, or smaller-scale programmes like the Language Detectives residential programme in the UK. On the other hand, it has been argued that policy change is still achieved on the level of the individual, requiring only a few individuals to effect policy change (Hudson 2007: 239). Indeed, the roll-out of GrOC across the Basque Country and other parts of Spain in addition to Catalonia is evidence of the efficacy of individual ventures to effect change far beyond their original scope. We therefore seek to understand how existing and/or future 'top down' and 'bottom up' approaches might be built on and connected in order to effect systemic and policy change on a wider scale? What insight can be borrowed from other types of educational initiative, such as widening participation, outreach and recruitment undertaken by higher education institutions to offer tasters of the discipline, disseminate knowledge to wider audiences, and to promote student intake?

Finally, how much say *should* theoretical linguists have? What will the interaction with educational practitioners be? Given many lack a background in linguistics, how might the issue of teacher training be tackled? How much input will researchers have into modifying/(re-)designing curricula and pedagogical materials? Would any major change to T&L have a relevant and proportional impact? Do exams boards have any power to promote a new way of teaching language? Moreover, would these changes offer a more attractive view of language classes among young students, and eventually lead to an increase of interest in linguistics as a scientific discipline? Crucially, the introduction of theoretical linguistics into the secondary environment will need to be *context-sensitive* (from one country, region or school to another), taking into account existing views of linguistics/language in the popular consciousness; (attitudes towards) T&L of language-related issues in schools, and how linguistic understanding and reflection is already implemented in curricula; as well as

differences in educational systems and assessment practices. For example, the autonomy of schools differs, with varying degrees of adherence to national or regional curricula; assessment in schools may be internal, or may be conducted via formal qualification or university entrance exams at the regional or national level.

To ensure the bridging of theory and practice, case studies from initiatives that have already been implemented, or are in progress, are therefore especially welcomed. What have been the (unanticipated) benefits and challenges of these endeavours; what has been the feedback from students and schools; and what recommendations and solutions, or areas of further investigation, might be proposed? The workshop welcomes proposals within a breadth of focus, including the treatment of language diversity. How can comparative linguistics at a very basic level help students understand language variation and reflect on how grammar works?

In order to submit the workshop proposal, a selection of provisional abstracts is requested. We thus invite contributors to send their short abstracts (max. **300 words**) for 20+5 minute oral presentation and discussion to [a.corr@bham.ac.uk](mailto:a.corr@bham.ac.uk) and [anna.pineda@iker.cnrs.fr](mailto:anna.pineda@iker.cnrs.fr) before **5 November 2017**. Notification of workshop review (acceptance/rejection): 15 December 2017. Please notice that after a workshop proposal has been accepted, the convenors will be requested to invite all preliminary workshop participants to submit their full abstracts by **15 January 2018** to the general call for papers. Accepted workshop proposals will be published on the conference webpage.

## References

- Bosque, Ignacio & Ángel J. Gallego. 2016. "La aplicación de la gramática en el aula. Recursos didácticos clásicos y modernos para la enseñanza de la gramática". *Revista de Lingüística Teórica y Aplicada* 54(2): 63-83.
- Chomsky, Noam. 1984. "Noam Chomsky writes to Mrs. Davis about grammar and education". *English Education* 16(3):165-166.
- Denham, Kristin & Anne Lobeck (eds.). 2010. *Linguistics at school: Language awareness in primary and secondary education*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hudson, Richard. 2007. "How Linguistics Has Influenced Schools in England." *Language and Linguistic Compass* 1(4), 227–242.