

Why the little things in language matter to linguistics

J.S. Baker

Trinity Hall McLuhan Symposium

April 26th 2014

Contents

- 1) Spelling variation in Codex Bezae
- 2) Changes in verbs from Latin to French
- 3) Case in “split-S” languages

1) Spelling variation in Codex Bezae

Codex Bezae

- Produced in about AD 400
- Contains most of the Gospels and Acts and a fragment of 3 John
- Written in both Greek and Latin on facing pages

Spelling errors

Black text: Codex Bezae; red text: “standard” spelling

uidet lupum uenientem et dismittit obes

uidet lupum uenientem et dimittit oues

he-sees wolf coming and he-abandons sheep

et fugit et lupus rapit et dispargit

et fugit et lupus rapit et dispergit

and he-flees and wolf snatches and scatters

“he sees the wolf coming and he abandons the sheep and runs away, and the wolf snatches [the sheep] and scatters [them]” (John 10:12b)

Why is this interesting?

Why is this interesting?

1) It gives information on contemporary pronunciation

- Spellings such as *obes* for *oues* suggest that the sounds /b/ and /w/ have started to be pronounced the same
- Lots of other example of these two letters being confused, e.g. *bobis* for *uobis*, *uiuit* for *bibit*
- *b* is never used in place of *u* as a vowel! - we don't get mistakes like *lesbs* for *lesus*
- We don't see the same error in the Greek text – no confusion of β and υ

Why is this interesting?

2) It gives information about the origins of the manuscript

- It suggests different sources for different parts of the manuscript

Origins of the manuscript

- Frequencies of the eight overall most common errors in each the Gospels correlate well with each other
 - Correlation coefficients with average: 0.81, 0.71, 0.82, 0.87
- But Acts does not correlate so well
 - Correlation coefficient: 0.58

Frequency of most common errors



Origins of the manuscript

- This may suggest that the text of Acts was copied from a different source, with errors replicated from both sources
- Also other ways in which text of Acts differs from the other books

Origins of the manuscript

- More research on spelling variation in other texts might allow us to locate the manuscript more precisely in space and time

2) Changes in verbs from Latin to French

Verbs in Latin and French

AMARIS – “you are loved”

AMABARIS – “you were being loved”

AMATUS ES – “you were loved” (*lit. “you are loved”!*)

TU ES AIMÉ – “you are loved”

TU ÉTAIT AIMÉ – “you were being loved”

TU AS ÉTÉ AIMÉ – “you were loved”

TU FUS AIMÉ – “you were loved” (*literary or archaic*)

Why do small details matter?

Why do small details matter?

- If we ignore them, we might produce misleading (=wrong) theories about how change occurred

- **Perfect** forms in Latin: “was, has been” etc. (vs. imperfect: “was being”):

- Past perfect (“pluperfect”)

had been

- Present perfect (“perfect”)

have been

- Future perfect

will have been

- Lots of later Latin texts use perfect forms of BE to form the passive perfect
 - *fu-*
 - E.g. *missus fuerat* “he had been placed”
- Cf. French *tu fus aimé* “you were loved”
- Claim: later Latin replaced its passive perfect with a new type exclusively using *fu-* forms

But what happens when we
examine texts in more detail?

But what happens when we examine texts in more detail?

- Vulgate – Gospel of John:
 - Form of BE used in passive depends on tense:
 - Past perfect: 11/18 *fu-*
 - **Present perfect: 0/168 *fu-* (approx.)**
 - Future perfect: 1/2 *fu-*
- We see similar patterns in other texts
- But without paying attention to the details we might never have noticed this

Deponents and unaccusatives

- **Deponent verbs** in Latin have passive forms but not passive meanings:
 - e.g. *moreris* “you die”
mortuus es “you have died”
- Perfect forms of these resemble verbs in French which form their perfect tenses with BE (“**unaccusative verbs**”):
 - e.g. *tu es mort* “you have died”
(lit. “you are died”)

Deponents and unaccusatives

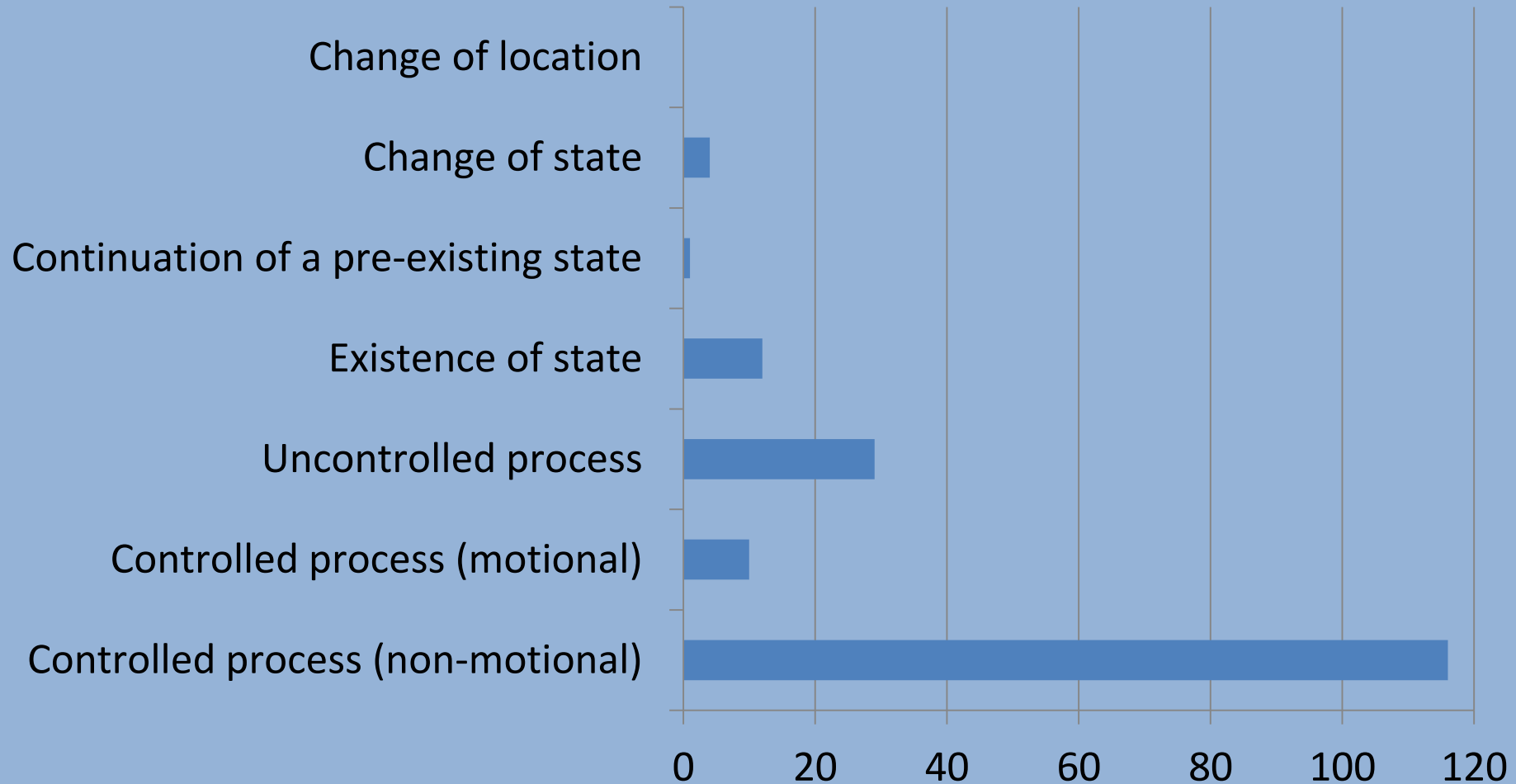
- It is often claimed that unaccusatives in French (and Italian etc.) derive from the Latin deponents
- But if we look closer we see many exceptions
 - *sequor* > *suivre* “follow” (deponent > not unaccusative)
 - *veneo* > *venir* “come” (non-deponent > unaccusative)
- In fact ...

The Auxiliary Selection Hierarchy

- Sorace (2000): verbs nearer the top of the hierarchy more likely to form perfect tense with BE:
 - Change of location
 - Change of state
 - Continuation of a pre-existing state
 - Existence of state
 - Uncontrolled process
 - Controlled process (motional)
 - Controlled process (non-motional)



- But: most deponents are closer to the *bottom* of the hierarchy (away from the BE end):



Deponents and unaccusatives

- This suggests that we need to say more than just “unaccusatives derive from deponents”
- Looking at the details of individual verbs has helped us see things we might have otherwise missed

3) Case in “split-S” languages

What is split-S case?

- English makes a case distinction e.g. between *I* and *me*:
 - *I go, I fall, I run, I work, I play*
 - *I love you, I study linguistics*
 - *You love me, Linguistics intrigues me*

What is split-S case?

- But some languages use the equivalent to *me* in certain contexts where we would use *I*

- E.g. Central Pomo (USA):

• *ʔa· q^hadé·č'* “I fight” lit. “I fight”

• *ʔo· ló·ya* “I fall” lit. “me fall”

(Mithun 1991:518-9)

Split-S in grammars

- Often when grammars are written of split-S languages the authors will say things like “this is a split-S language” and give a few examples, but not go into any more detail.
- We might question whether this is sufficient.

Split-S and unaccusativity

- Some authors have claimed that the verbs which take *me* forms are the same as “unaccusative” verbs in other languages
 - (e.g. the verbs in French which take BE)
- But what happens when we consider things in more detail, considering verbs on a case-by-case basis?

Split-S and unaccusativity

- We see that (in many languages) split-S does not line up too well with diagnostics of unaccusativity such as Sorace's Auxiliary Selection Hierarchy
- E.g. in Central Pomo *go* and *arrive* take *I* forms (and not *me* ones) even though they are unaccusative in languages like French (Mithun 1991)
- We need to look for other criteria

The details of split-S systems

- In fact, looking at verbs individually we see that the criteria for split-S vary between languages
- E.g. *die* is associated with *I* forms in Guaraní and Mohawk, and *me* forms in Lakhota and Central Pomo (Mithun 1991)
- *sneeze* is associated with *I* forms in Lakhota but *me* forms in Central Pomo and Mohawk (Mithun 1991)

The details of split-S systems

- When writing a grammar of a split-S language, it isn't enough just to say "L is a split-S language" and leave it at that!

Conclusion

- In linguistics, if we are to have an accurate understanding of the big picture it is important to consider small details.

References

- Mithun, M. (1991). Active/agentive case marking and its motivations. *Language*, vol. 67, no. 3, pp. 510-46.
- Sorace, A. (2000). Gradients in auxiliary selection with intransitive verbs. *Language* vol. 76, no. 4, pp. 850-90.

The End