

Format Call for Proposals: Research Traineeships 2015

1. Title of the Project

Methodological innovation in the study of language contact: judgment tasks and dialogue experiments

2. Coordinators

Make sure to mention your respective departments.

Dr. Paul Vogt (DCI)

Prof. Ad Backus (DCU)

3. Project Summary

Short summary in which you give a clear and concise outline of your project, including the research question, the intended methods of data gathering, the collaborative aspect of the project, as well as the objective you would like to achieve with the help of a research trainee. Max. 1000 words.

Languages are constantly changing; if the usage-based perspective on language and linguistic competence is correct it couldn't be otherwise. Change, that is, is a design feature of language because usage determines a speaker's competence and usage is never the same from one moment to the next, as well as different for every person. Language change is the diachronic implication of synchronic variation. However, there must be constraints on this dynamic because otherwise it is hard to understand why as language users we don't really have the feeling that things are constantly changing and why we don't suffer communication breakdown every day. While there is no shortage of theorizing about these issues, it is interesting that we don't have a very good picture of how pervasive change really is. This may be because different aspects of the phenomenon are studied by relatively unconnected sub-disciplines. Historical linguistics provides detailed descriptions of individual changes in the past (reasons for the change, its timing and through what stages it ran its course). Evolutionary linguistics focuses on the time it prototypically takes for lexical and syntactic changes to go to completion. Contact linguistics analyzes cases of codeswitching and structural interference in on-going contact settings, without much regard for diachronic development. Finally, psycholinguistics has uncovered relevant information on how the need for alignment in conversation makes people adapt to each other linguistically but doesn't link this much to the issue of language change. The same holds for the study of accommodation in conversational analysis and sociolinguistics.

All this leaves us with a research gap: we don't know how to measure the rate and pervasiveness of change, and we don't know how to assess the extent to which this differs across different types of change. In this project, two students tackle this problem, together with their supervisors, by exploring new methods that might cast light on these issues. Recent work in contact linguistics has moved away from the sole reliance on recorded natural conversations. Studies have employed experimental and judgment tasks to investigate issues such as inter-individual variation in the adoption of new variants and the degree of entrenchment of such variants (as well as the inherited variants they are possibly replacing) in the competence of individual speakers. One project will focus on judgment tasks; the other on experimental tasks that induce alignment. Though they investigate similar phenomena, they will report separately; it is the intention of the supervisors to write a paper about the entire project at a subsequent stage.

Project 1: Judgment tasks

Project 1 investigates an important methodological question about judgment tasks: what do they really measure? As more and more studies of language contact and sociolinguistic variation are adopting a usage-based approach, this question has become urgent, since it's not at all clear whether we really know much about how participants approach judgment tasks. So far, participants have answered questions such as 'how often do you hear X around you?', 'how often do you use X?', 'do you like X?'. It is hard to know whether studies using different variants of the question are directly comparable, even if they use the same stimulus item (e.g. a putative loanword, or a particular case of grammatical interference). The proposed study would compare participants' responses to various ways of asking the question, covering various aspects of language (words, expressions, constructions that are partially lexically filled and syntactic structures). In order to do this, we will divide the participants into three groups who will each receive a different version of the task. Finally, a subset of participants will participate in one or more focus group discussions in which they reflect on how they carried out the task as well as on the scores the various linguistic features received. The latter aspect will provide additional data that allow triangulation of judgment task findings with estimates of usage frequency. The selected language pair will be decided as soon as we know which student is going to carry out the study. If the student is Dutch, we will focus on Anglicisms in Dutch; otherwise, we will exploit the languages the student knows, or rely on the Turkish-Dutch expertise and community network of one of the supervisors (and two of his PhD students). If the language contact situation focused on is outside the Netherlands, the judgment task and the focus group discussion will be executed online.

Project 2: Alignment task

To assess how linguistic variants that induced by language contact may be transmitted through a population of speakers, an experiment will be designed and carried out. The general idea is that Dutch-speaking participants will perform a novel task explained to them by a confederate. The confederate will use a particular lexical or structural feature during the instruction that could be a possible Anglicism. Examples include English words like *freak out*, loan translations such as *ik heb de switch gemaakt naar X* (from 'I made the switch to X'), and grammatical constructions such as *en zij zo* introducing a quote (roughly modeled on English 'and she's like'). Both confederate and participant will then perform the task while continuing to communicate, during which the confederate continues to use this particular variant. In a subsequent session, the target participant takes over the role of the confederate (without the explicit instruction to use the variant) and instructs a third participant to carry out the same task. This session will be monitored and analyzed to examine whether the participant uses the focal linguistic variant or not.

In a second experiment, various experimental conditions will be designed based on sociolinguistic and usage-based theories to investigate under what conditions the linguistic variant will be reused by the participants. These conditions could either be linguistic (e.g. based on different levels of syntactic complexity or rareness), pragmatic (e.g., salience of lexical items in relation to salient aspects of the task), or social (e.g., based on primed differences in status); which condition we choose we will leave open until we have engaged with the student carrying out the study.

4. Project timeline

List of planned activities (possibly with milestones and intermediary results).

<i>Month</i>	<i>Judgement tasks</i>	<i>Alignment tasks</i>
1	Literature study	Literature study
2	Design judgment tasks	Design experiment 1
3		
4	Collect data	Collect data
5		
6	Analyze data	Analyze experiment
7	Design focus group	Design experiment 2
8	Collect data	Collect data
9		
10	Analyze focus group	Analyze experiment 2
11	Write paper	Write paper
12		

5. Research Trainee Profile

Describe the general tasks of the research trainees, whether they need any preliminary knowledge (regarding the topic and/or research methods) and which skills the research trainees should have. Also specify which type of students are eligible to apply (Ba, Ma, ReMa).

At the end of your proposal, provide some information on how to apply e.g. required documents for application (resume, motivation letter etc.) and an email address where applications should be sent to.

For Project 1 we will be looking for a student with some expertise in contact linguistics; Project 2 would ideally attract a student who has some experience with experiment design. Both students should have some basic knowledge of statistics. Not much will be required beforehand, other than an affinity with doing research.

Students can apply by sending a letter of motivation along with a CV to Paul Vogt at P.A.Vogt@uvt.nl.