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Modality, Semantic Maps and Lithuania: an interview with Johan van der Auwera

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Johan van der Auwera is Professor of General and English Linguistics at the University of Antwerp. He holds undergraduate degrees in Germanic Philology and in Philosophy (1975). His PhD was on the philosophy of language (1980) and his 'habilitation' was on the structure of the noun phrase (1990). He was/is a member (or chair) of expert committees for national and international research councils, most prominently, the European Research Council (2006–2013), the European Science Foundation (2005–2010), the Belgian Research Councils (Flemish 2000–2009, French 2010–2015), the French, Swedish, Danish and Norwegian Research Councils (mandates with various lengths), as well as various national research assessment committees. He is a member of the *Academia Europaea* and was president of the *Societas Linguistica Europaea* in 2005. He has published 6 monographs and over 200 scholarly articles, most of them in refereed journals or collective volumes, in English, but some also in Dutch, French, German, Croatian, and Russian. He has edited 23 books or theme issues of journals and is on the board of 8 journals and book series, most prominently *Linguistics,* of which he has been the editor-in-chief since 2005. His *Google scholar* h-index is 29. His research focuses on grammatical semantics with special reference to conditionals, mood, modality, negation, indefinites, impersonals, and similatives from a synchronic and diachronic as well as an areal perspective, and occasionally from a historiographical point of view. Languages studied are English, including New Englishes and Creoles, Germanic languages, European languages and the totality of the world's languages (typology).

Jolanta Šinkūnienė (JŠ): Professor van der Auwera, thank you very much for agreeing to answer some questions for this special issue on *Modality and Evidentiality in European languages*. To begin with, how do you perceive your path from your PhD thesis to the present day? Was it a focused professional evolution or there were some points in life when you wished you'd rather be doing something else?

Johan van der Auwera (JvdA): On the whole, my life in linguistics has been a fairly linear career and this is partially because the outset of this path was surprisingly easy.

When I was 21, I got a doctoral scholarship to go to the United States of America. I went to the place which I, as a 21-year-old, considered to be the heaven on earth for linguistics – Berkeley California. It was a cultural hub, a center of learning. Though it was fantastic, linguistically I was a little bit disappointed. At that time, I was probably a pretentious, young, overambitious, angry linguist and I was a little disappointed that the people I admired from the distance were not living up to my expectations.

Since I was rather disappointed, I did not do my PhD there as I was supposed to, but I did it in Belgium after all. I turned out OK, but it was a wrong decision for a 21- or a 22-year-old. After my PhD, I got a postdoc position and became a lecturer of Economic English followed by another postdoc position in Germany. When I was thirty two, relatively young, I received tenure as a researcher. This was the first time when I felt relieved, of course, but also worried, because I realized that this is what I would have to do for the next 35 years unless I drastically changed the course of my life.

Until then I was much more logically oriented. I was working on conditionals. However, I became disappointed with the logical approach to language. What saved me at that point was a change of pathway, but still within linguistics. I was interested in what all languages had in common and how they nevertheless differed and that is why I turned into typology. In 1997 I was employed as a researcher in a tenured position, but the institute that had this position itself 'faulted'. I applied for the professorship in English linguistics and this way I turned back to English while still doing typology. After typology had saved me from the logical approach, I have had enough things that fascinated me. There was never a point any more when I thought I should be doing something entirely different.

JŠ: When you decided to switch to typology, was it a trendy field at that time?

JvdA: No, not really, though Comrie was already very prominent in the field and Greenberg was still working, to name just two major figures. It was ten or more years before the Association for Linguistic Typology took off. It was also seven or eight years before the EUROTYP project started, so it was a little bit before typology became prominent in Europe. This rise to prominence really happened in Europe in the 1990s, at least in my perception.

JŠ: So in a way you sensed the right field?

JvdA: Yes, that may be in retrospect correct.

JŠ: Was it typology that brought you to Lithuania?

JvdA: No, it wasn't. In 1998 professor Aurelija Usonienė from Vilnius University was in Antwerp for the conference on modality, which my colleague Patrick Dendale and me co-organized. She was doing a contrastive paper on *seem*, we talked, and this was a period when Erasmus started or when I got involved in the program, and quite soon I came to Vilnius University to give lectures. I have always been interested in cross-linguistic work. Typology is one thing, but cross-linguistic work is a slightly broader term because contrastive linguistics is also included. I worked contrastively on several languages, for example, English and Dutch, and I also worked on many, many languages. So, to get back to the question, in a sense it was contrastive linguistics that took me to Vilnius and a like-minded linguist.

JŠ: There are many cases when the contact between scholars is established, but it dies out soon. This was not your case with Lithuania – what was it that helped to maintain this contact for as long as nearly twenty years?

JvdA: After my teaching visit, I was in the committee of Aurelija's (prof. Aurelija Usonienė – JŠ) habilitation and then, as a result of this second visit, Aurelija had been to Antwerp several times. A number of students from Vilnius University came for shorter or longer periods of time. Also, during my first visit I knew about the Flemish linguist, specialist of Slavic and Baltic, Axel Holvoet, who was doing research in Lithuania, and from then onwards I had two contact people in Vilnius. Two people who knew each other and who moved in partially the same, partially different circles. I was also a member of PhD defence committees of several doctoral students from Vilnius University (Benita Riaubienė, Erika Jasionytė, Ugnius Mikučionis, Vita Valiukienė – JŠ). Also, my doctoral students came to Vilnius University to give lectures.

JŠ: Coming back to your role in linguistics, you are, no doubt, a very prominent scholar in the linguistic arena. How do you see your impact on the field of linguistics?

JvdA: If I have to name the three topics in which my work has had some impact or hopefully will have some impact, then one will be modality. It is correct that since that conference in Antwerp in 1998, and even before that, I worked on modality. Even in my doctoral thesis there was quite a bit on necessity and possibility. Even though now pride of place goes to something else, modality is the one field in which I have done most things. The second area is something I have been working on for about ten years perhaps, namely sentence negation, or more particularly, what is called the Jespersen Cycle. I wrote a paper in 2009 and I see that it is being read. I will continue working on this. The third area is related, but it is a little bit different, viz. negative concord. This is what I am concentrating on now. So if I just name three topics, these are modality, sentence negation and negative concord.

JŠ: The first linguistic field you have just mentioned is that of modality. In her chapter *Subjectivity, (Non-)subjectivity and Intersubjectivity in English Modality*, Roberta Facchinetti refers to modality as a "never-ending issue" (2009, 53). Indeed, it seems that it is an inexhaustible field that constantly offers new theoretical and empirical perspectives. In your opinion, what accounts for such great popularity of modality as a research area?

JvdA: It must be complicated semantically. Of course, many semantic domains are complex (because of multifunctionality) and there is as much interest in tense and aspect, I think. Then in some languages, the form, the morphosyntax is interesting too. It so happens that English is not only the language in which many of us write, but it is also the language that is very well described, and much of the scholarship on non-English follows in part what has been done on English. The English modal auxiliaries are very special. So the language that is best described and that we all converse in happens to have very special morphosyntactic features of modal verbs. As a result one may wonder: is modality in my language also a little weird as far as the morphosyntax is concerned? What I also find interesting is that in many languages the epistemic system, the way uncertainty is expressed, has nothing to do with the modal markers for capacity or permission. Quite often epistemic markers are adverbs or particles, whereas ability and permission are expressed by something verbal. This would be different from what happens in English and Western European languages.

In *The Oxford Handbook of Modality and Mood* I co-authored two chapters, one of which is with Daniël Van Olmen on areal features, with reference to Standard Average European. It is interesting that languages of not necessarily the same family may take inspiration from one another with respect to the modals: for example, Slavic languages borrowed German markers, Swedish borrowed a Low German one. The second chapter which I wrote with Alfonso Zamorano Aguilar was on the history of the field, so I wondered what had happened before Palmer. It turns out that issues of modality have been studied for two thousand five hundred years, they were treated until recently under the category of *mood*. If the adjective *modal* was used, it was the adjective of *mode*, not of *modality*. In Greek antiquity one finds not necessarily professional linguists, but also philosophers, logicians wondering what necessity is, what possibility is. There were accounts in the 17th–18th century English tradition asking whether the imperative *go now* is the same as *you may go now*. One of them was called the primary mode of permission or possibility, the other one was called the secondary mode. So the relation between what we now call *modality* and *mood* has also been found fascinating or at least interesting for centuries. One may conclude that the phenomenon of modality is semantically interesting and morphosyntactically interesting.

JŠ. The *Modality's Semantic Map*, which you proposed together with Vladimir Plungian in 1998, has become a very popular model, it is widely cited with over 700 citations on Google Scholar. What influence, in your opinion, has it had on the development of modality studies worldwide?

JvdA: I can imagine that the most important thing was the semantic map approach. We did not invent it, it was implicit earlier, it had a strong exemplification in Martin Haspelmath's book on indefinite pronouns, which is a monograph length demonstration of the use of this kind of semantic map approach. At that time there was only one type of semantic map, later on there were also statistically informed maps, which could also be called semantic, but which were different. We used this semantic map for modality and that was in one sense new, but it also connected directly with grammaticalization paths, which especially Bybee *et al.* in their very influential book had proposed. In their book, one section was about modality. Of course, grammaticalization is a little bit different. Nevertheless, if something develops semantically in a certain direction, it may also develop its grammar and it may become more abstract; for example, the epistemic sense is more abstract than when I simply use the modal verb in *I can swim*. So our work is strongly based on Joan Bybee's work. I know that sometimes the reference to our paper is in the context of semantic maps; these readers are linguists who cited our paper not because they are interested in modality, but because they are interested in semantic maps.

What is also good is that semantic maps are falsifiable. There are arrows that go in a certain direction, usually in one direction, although in the paper there are some bidirectional lines as well. They also connect the strictly modal uses to related uses that are not strictly modal, we call them pre-modal in some senses and post-modal, like in the use *may he live a hundred years*. Everybody calls *may* a modal verb, but if you say it means possibility here, you miss the point! It has an optative use. Plungian and I made claims about certain directionalities and you can look at a language and find it to be correct or false. For example, we made one claim which was wrong! In Swedish you have a non-modal use when you say *how do you do*. You can say *how may you* literally, everybody calls the Swedish verb used there a modal verb, but if you say it means possibility, you miss the point. It is again a special use, and we made a claim about this use based on some understanding of the diachrony, but it was wrong and that's fine. We made a falsifiable claim and most of the map still remained valid.

The third influential thing about the article, I think, is that the terminology is reasonably straightforward. It is better than some other terminology. If we take the widely used *root modality*, what does *root* mean? Some people misunderstood this term. *Root* comes from generative grammar, from a paper that was written about root transformations and it was a very technical term that referred to non-epistemic uses. But some people have

thought *root* to mean the original sense! So I find *root* not straightforward. I don't have problems with *epistemic*, everybody uses *epistemic* in the same way, I think, though you can disagree about what *evidentiality* is and whether it is part of *epistemicity* or not. *Deontic* is also fairly clear, and *participant-internal* has been used by other people as well. I understand the term *dynamic*, which was used by Palmer, who was among the first to write influential good work on modal verbs. For example, *it can be cold in Sweden*, Palmer called this, if I am not mistaken, *circumstantial dynamic*. Is that *dynamic*? *Participant-external* is a fine term as well, I think. In the sentence *it can be cold in Sweden*, I do not see any participant. I still use our terms and I see that some other people seem to like them as well. So the terms, I think, are the third area of impact.

Then there are small points. For example, in those days people often claimed that deontic meanings can turn into epistemic meanings. I think, that is wrong, it is not deontic uses if you mean by *deontic* permission and obligation. It is not a permission sense that becomes an epistemic sense, it is something much more general. We conceive of *deontic* modality as a subcase of *participant-external* modality. For example, in the permission use in *I may go now* the permission comes from the outside. Permission is one kind of *participant-external* modality and the meaning that developed the epistemic sense is the more general *participant-external* meaning. We are not the only ones who thought of this, but, I think, we tried to clearly say we do not believe that *deontic* becomes *epistemic*. This is an example of a very specific point.

JŠ. You have mentioned *The Oxford Handbook of Modality and Mood,* which you are currently co-editing with prof. Jan Nuyts. What type of book is it?

JvdA: It is an overview, but it does not cover everything. For example, one section deals with modality in various types of languages, so there is one chapter on modality in European languages, one chapter on modality in Chinese, but, of course, there is no chapter for every language or language family. There is one section on history, which I have just sketched, there are several chapters on various approaches, such as logical semantics, the formal generative approach, the functionalist approach, the cognitive approach, so the handbook does offer an overview of much that we as a community find interesting. Then, of course, references will guide the reader to more work. The arrangement of the chapters is thematic. There is one chapter on epistemic modality, there is one chapter on non-epistemic modality, there is one on diachrony, on acquisition, etc. Even though the book has some 750 pages and it covers a lot, it obviously does not cover everything.

JŠ. What impact has the development of corpus linguistics and contrastive linguistics had on the study of modality and evidentiality?

JvdA: Corpus linguistics in general (and it applies to modality as well) allows us to see things which we could not ordinarily see and which are nevertheless real. A classical case, confirmed by quite a few people, is that in English the modal *must* is losing its high frequency, it is disappearing in some aspects, or is used less, and to some extent *have to* takes over. Everything that was grammatical in the 1960s with *must* is still grammatical now, and obviously it is not the case that *must* has become archaic. Still, with corpus work you can see what you couldn't see earlier thanks to computers and technical progress. So it is true in general that you can do big data with sophisticated methodologies used in linguistics and it has been fruitful for modality as well. We can see that the modal systems are on the move, that peripheral modals are becoming more prominent and there are also emerging modals, such as *wanna*, for example.

JŠ. Do you think emerging modals and varieties of English could be the future of modality studies?

JvdA: There are still gaps in research both synchronically and diachronically. For the standard big Englishes you can go back in time with diachronic corpora. For the new Englishes, there are now corpora, but they are usually just synchronic. There are some minor attempts at diachronic research, but such studies are usually limited. The new Englishes and the English Creoles also offer new systems, and we can now investigate them with corpora (the ICE corpora, for example). But it is difficult to do historical work on, for example, Hong Kong English or Philippine English. I have worked a little bit myself with Hong Kong and Singapore English. There is also research by Peter Collins and Dirk Noël.

JŠ. You have also been teaching World Englishes. Why this particular field?

JvdA: If you look at English right now, British English is a minority English. There is a view at the University of Antwerp that if you train good Anglicists they should be aware of the variety in English including the Creoles. You can't be a good Anglicist now without a scholarly awareness of this dimension of variety. That has become a general feeling.

JŠ. Is the study of World Englishes related to typology in your view?

JvdA: What unites the topics I deal with in linguistics is variation. When I teach Old English, I treat it as a variety of English. And that is the way I look at English Creoles and also at contrastive linguistics, for example, how different, but related Dutch and German are. This perspective is no less present in typology – we look at how different English and the non-English languages are. Difference and unity is what underlies most of my work.

JŠ. Is typology a difficult field for students?

JvdA: If you have four years for a doctoral thesis, you have some time to figure it out. An average student does not write a PhD thesis, an average student writes an MA, or a BA, or a term paper. Then it is difficult in a sense that the scope is necessarily limited. For the classes in typology that I teach, there is a 12–13 week duration, and there is, of course, no time for the students to read many grammars. That is why they do more contrastive linguistics, for example, compare indefinite pronouns in Romanian and English or Dutch, or do a meta-study, i.e. look at two points of view in a typological debate. The debate could be about whether or not mirativity exists. What students can do is to read Scott DeLancey and his critics, or they can read Alexandra Aikhenvald, or any two people who strongly disagree with one another. Then the student makes up his / her mind and writes a seminar paper. So it is possible for a short term educational activity, like a class, it is possible for a BA or MA thesis and it is obviously possible for a PhD.

JŠ. You are the editor-in-chief of the linguistic journal *Linguistics* published by de Gruyter. How would you define the impact of *Linguistics* on the linguistic scene especially now when there is a multitude of linguistic journals published worldwide?

JvdA: First of all, there is a multitude of journals, which surprises me. Companies like Benjamins and De Gruyter come up with new journals all the time. The publisher Brill, which was a traditional conservative publisher, also entered the journal market. On the other hand, there are more linguists than ever before and more of them now write in English. Some journals have more of quality control, some journal have less of it. *Linguistics* is one of those journals in which refereeing is very serious and also time consuming. The majority of the papers that get published go through a revise and resubmit stage, there are few that are accepted with minor changes. It does not mean that the author follows every single recommendation, he or she has the right, and often uses that right, to disagree with referees. Having a very strong refereeing system results in higher quality and should result in higher impact. But *Linguistics* is one of those journals that is not bound to a particular orientation or a particular topic and that decreases its impact. For example, the impact factor of *Cognitive Linguistics* is higher than of *Linguistics* because if you are a cognitive linguist, maybe your first option to publish would be in the journal called *Cognitive Linguistics*! If there is a large community interested in one perspective or one topic, the impact of the journal will be higher. But with *Linguistics* we still publish a top journal, which is thematically open and framework neutral.

The second point is an Open Access movement, which is partially related to web accessibility. *Linguistics* is published by a commercial enterprise, but there are some

colleagues who want to bypass the commercial side and do it all themselves. That is fine, but they have to realize that they will have to do much more work than just quality assessment. Somebody has to put quality assessed contributions into a readable format, whether it is going to be on the web, or on the web and on paper. So far I am a traditionalist in this matter; I am in favor of a partnership with an expert in the technical work. Maybe this will change but, for the time being, a partnership with a commercial enterprise that does not overprice its products is the best solution for me.

JŠ. As the editor-in-chief of the journal, what other publishing trends apart from Open Access do you notice in linguistics?

JvdA: In the field, hence also in the published output, you see that big data are prominently researched and published. In typology big data are used, but even in one language big data are used in corpus studies and with sophisticated statistical analysis. This is all visible in publications, but that is because research has developed. This is not so much related to publishing trends; this is one of the things that happened in the field.

In typology, I think, there is a little risk that if you do big data, the more data you look at, the more you might be struck by the enormous diversity. The pendulum from original typology, which was more interested in the unity across the diversity, now swings to diversity. There is a risk, in my view, that we lose track of the unity and the explanatory factors. It also relates to the feeling that if you look at the details of every single language you have to conclude that every single language is unique, that the categories that look similar are different. It is important indeed to treat every language in its own right and to describe the details, to take the variety seriously, but it is no less important not to forget what they have in common. In my appreciation of the field, in some typological work there is more of *what is where* and less of *why* and less emphasis on the unity. We should not lose sight of the unity.

JŠ. An increasing number of linguists strive to publish their research in English. Do you see English in the academia as Tyrannosaurus Rex, to use the title of John Swales' (1997) article, or as "the universal language of science", as stated on the Thomson Reuters webpage?

JvdA: A good answer has two sides to it. As I have mentioned, there have never been so many linguists, who also write in the same language. For example, at *Linguistics* it is clearly noticeable that the number of Chinese linguists from mainland China as well as Taiwan and Hong Kong sending publications to us in English, and mostly decent English, vastly surpasses what we got ten years ago. More people are able to communicate about

other languages in a language that we all can understand. So it is good that we have one language to find out about things we are interested in.

However, twenty years ago it was not like that. If you were interested in African languages you had to know French or, earlier, German. If you are a typologist and if you really know only one language, you miss out on quite a bit of research. Anybody who reads Chinese, German, Lithuanian, etc. has an advantage. When I was younger, I learned Russian, but I forgot it. I actually learned Russian on two occasions and I forgot it on two occasions! My purpose of learning Russian was to find out what the Russians had written about certain languages. Also there are subdiscplines of linguistics that are targeted at a local or national public, because they concern planning, for example, or politics or education. So the politicians, the policy makers or the teachers have to understand the relevant linguistic work, and the linguists whose works are important not for the universal arena of scholarship, but for policy or education related matters should write in the relevant (non-English) languages.

I mostly write in English, but not exclusively, and I read in quite a few languages. I think, it is good that we should remain as multilingual as possible.

JŠ. What is the most memorable event in your linguistic career?

JvdA: The most important event was when I got my tenure. I was very happy, but I was also worried whether I would remain passionate for linguistics for the next thirty years. This moment was important for me – it brought relief, but also a little bit of doubt.

JŠ. What are you currently working on?

JvdA: Modality is going down now, but, I think, it might go up again, as it has done before. But my two passions are now negation and negative concord and the expression of similarity as with the English *such*, the so called similatives.

JŠ. Coming back to Lithuania, you have been in contact with Lithuanian scholars and their PhD students for about twenty years now. Do you see any developments in Lithuanian linguistics?

JvdA: I can say something which is obvious, which relates to the fact that Lithuania was looking towards the East until 25 years ago because it was part of the Eastern Europe and now it is looking more to the West. Of course, Baltic language specialists in the whole world have always been interested in Lithuanian. But Lithuanian linguists, both the ones that approach Lithuanian from a contrastive point of view, and those that research

Lithuanian from a more typological point of view, bring Lithuanian data to the field. Not to the field of the Baltic studies, where it has always been, but to the general linguistics field. So there is obviously a change, a change in orientation and a change with respect to the possibility to bring Lithuanian to general linguistics.

JŠ. Thank you very much for this interview!

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