Introduction

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1 How should this book be read?

Questioning Language Contact. Limits of Contact, Contact at its Limits (henceforth QLC) is the first volume of the new peer-reviewed book series ‘Brill Studies in Language Contact and Dynamics of Language’ (BSCD), which focuses on the study of language contact, language use and language change in accordance with a view of language contact whereby both empirical data (the precise description of languages and how they are used) and the resulting theoretical elaborations (whence the statement and analysis of new problems) become the primary engines for advancing our understanding of the nature of language and the dynamics of language change. Consequently this involves linguistic, anthropological, sociological, historical, and cognitive factors, but also potentially a critical approach to the methods used for the study of these phenomena. This of course implies paying particular attention to epistemological frameworks as they reshape the requirements for knowledge in this field. Such is the undertaking of the QLC project. More specifically, how can one characterize QLC? Before answering and detailing the contents and objectives of QLC, I will begin by stating what it is not.

2 Framework: “This is not a handbook”

Academic establishments in the English speaking world customarily produce what they call handbooks, less common in the French speaking world. What is a handbook? It is not the same as a manual, since manuals are educational in purpose and aim to give an overview of work carried out in a given field. In academia, handbooks claim to present what their specialist authors consider the state of the art in a given field. The goal is a synthesis on an academically recognized subject and, ideally, handbooks summarize current debate on the subject and include bibliographical resources for further reading. The goal of

1 My thanks to Margaret Dunham for her English translation.
2 Let us make it clear that “this” is not an avatar of the well known painting series by Magritte on ‘La trahison des images’ nor of the commentary by Michel Foucault (1973. Ceci n’est pas une pipe. Saint Clément de rivière: fata morgana). Although…
handbooks is to delimit a field of study by covering it as thoroughly as possible through a comprehensive overview, not to present novel results. In other words, handbooks belong to what B. Latour, who opposes two visions of science “as different as the two sides, one lively, the other severe, of a two-faced Janus” calls “all made science” or “ready-made science”, clearly distinguished from “Science in the making” (1987: 4).3 For example, it is this characterization of handbook which underlies the definition given by Wikipedia, a source which I deliberately chose for its obvious value as ‘popular science’ (en.wikipedia but not fr.wikipedia, which shows that it is not as popular among French speakers):

[a] handbook is a type of reference work, or other collection of instructions, that is intended to provide ready reference. […] A handbook is a treatise on a special subject. Nowadays it is often a simple but all-embracing treatment, containing concise information and being small enough to be held in the hand. […] The name ‘handbook’ may sometimes be applied to reference works that are not pocket-sized, but do provide ready reference, […] Handbooks are widely used in the sciences and in medicine as quick references for various kinds of data (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Handbook, February 22, 2014).

Thus on the question of what QLC is, it is easy to see that it is not a handbook since, from the outset, it lacks the essential characteristic of a quasi-encyclopedic presentation of recent research with emphasis on principes articles to define the contours of contemporary studies establishing a stable academic framework which, in return, ‘justifies’ the production of a handbook.

However, it is also not a collection where each article would serve to provide precise scientific results stemming from a narrowly delimited framework of ongoing research: ‘science in the making’ to continue the Latour metaphor.

Of course the goal of the QLC project is to partake in active—and reactive—scientific research on language contact, where much is being done. This shall not however be done blindly following mainstream methodology uncritically. The objective is rather to step back and look at the dynamics behind mainstream construal and compounding of knowledge. The guiding principle is to establish this distance. This inevitably leads to re-presenting (in the sense of presenting anew) results of empirical research and reexamining some well-known analyses; this in turn leads to their being questioned, transformed, revisited. Even—and perhaps above all—when questions appear to have ready answers

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