

### Comment on Esa Itkonen's contribution

Itkonen's 31 pages explaining explanation were interesting reading but I have a fundamental critique. While a correct understanding of the basics of the notion of explanation is important for a linguist, I do not believe that a linguist needs to know all Itkonen's points. Would he consider writing a shorter version for linguists?

I have formulated what I believe a linguist needs to know about how to understand and use *explanation* in the following way (see *Fundamentals of Diachronic Linguistics*, Lincom Europa 2012, p. 20):

1) To clarify or make understandable (that, what, how): *He explained an obscure point.*

2) To provide a reason for saying something: *The subject function of this noun is explained by having a nominative ending*

3) To provide a cause for some event. To say why, because of what, something happened: *The boiling of the water is explained by it having been heated to 100 degrees.*

Is this too short and too simplistic or is it sufficient for a linguist?

Since thinking about and discussing explanation has had a great importance in my more than 70 years as a linguist, I will comment on this notion mainly from the viewpoint of my own experiences believing, however, that what I will explain (=clarify) is shared by others. During my first 25 years (from 1940) at the University of Uppsala I was surrounded by historical linguists (philologists, neogrammarians). I considered myself to be and was called a structuralist, phonologist or modern linguist. In often heated discussions I maintained that the synchronic description of a language seen as a means of communication was a worthy topic for academic studies. This view was by the others said to be unscientific because there was no explanation. I pointed out that by *explanation* they meant what should be called *historical explanation*. My main idea was that, while historical linguistics was interesting, it did not mean that synchronic linguistics should not be the most important part of the studies. This incredibly simple point was not understood by the older linguists. It was discussed in a similar way in many language departments in many countries at the time. In some places the traditional misconceived idea about the language study having to be "historical" was not cleared up until the 1970s. I believe one can maintain that nothing has damaged the study of language so much as the consequences of this traditional notion of explanation requiring historical study (for some details see my *Memories of a linguist 1940–2010*, München: Lincom Europa 2012, p. 6–7, 21, 38–39, 58–59, 108).

During my years of continuous discussions with the historical linguists I do not think they had a very clear idea of the meaning of explanation. In their idea it had to involve history and cause and exclude "mere" description. In my opinion, and certainly in the opinion of other young modern linguists at various universities, if the older linguists said explanation and meant historical explanation, they should use this expression. They should also realise that synchronic description, in particular of modern languages, was the most important area in linguistics. My understanding of explanation was limited but perhaps sufficient for my

purposes. I was, however, very happy to improve my understanding of this notion in the 1970s through profiting from Itkonen's ideas through personal discussion and through his publications. I feel that I understand explanation even better now after having read his present even more detailed account. But was my previous more limited understanding not sufficient for understanding linguistic problems?