

Interview with  
**Laurie Bauer**

LK

*Why linguistics? What was the motivation beyond your decision to deal with language professionally?*

LB

I think there are two questions here: why did I take up linguistics originally (as an undergraduate), and why did I go on to become a professional linguist. Neither answer reflects well on me. I took up linguistics for the reason that I wanted to study languages, but I did not enjoy the study of literature (note, that is different from did not enjoy the literature, which I did; it was the study of literature which I found off-putting). By the time I had completed my PhD in Linguistics, I was completely enculturated into Linguistics and enthusiastic about it, and I thus think it was natural that I should look for jobs that allowed me to follow this passion.

LK

*Where did you study and how do you remember those times?*

LB

Both my undergraduate degree and my PhD were from the University of Edinburgh. At the time I was there, many leading linguists were on the staff, and a number of people who would later go on to chairs elsewhere. I was taught by, among others, John Lyons, David Abercrombie, Gill and Keith Brown, John Laver, Jim Miller and later (in my postgraduate career) by John Anderson. I was also taught as an undergraduate and supervised as a postgraduate by Duncan McMillan, who was a real role-model in terms of the ability to speak a foreign language, and also a fine historical linguist. As a first-year undergraduate, I think I was in the penultimate year of the First Ordinary Phonetics class (Peter Ladefoged had been an early graduate of the class), and that class changed my life and made me really interested in academic study in a way that I had not been previously. I was excited by it, and intellectually challenged by it, as I was by subsequent classes in Linguistics. I was part of a group of keen students, and I really enjoyed my years in Edinburgh.

LK

*Could you compare the position of linguistic disciplines within university programs in Britain at the time of your study with the current situation?*

LB

I don't think I can do this, and for several reasons. The first is that I am no longer au fait with the situation in Britain with regard to linguistic studies. The second is that I was not a typical student.

LK

*And, what is the difference between the study of linguistics in Britain and in New Zealand?*

LB

The main one is that British honours degrees are far more specialised than New Zealand degrees (where there is little specialisation before year 4), with the result that there was time to cover far more material in the British degree than there is the New Zealand degree. This is nothing to do with linguistics, as such, that is the way the systems operate. In New Zealand today there is far greater emphasis on sociolinguistic factors than there was in the degree I did, but I think that would be true in some British universities as well.

LK

*Could you comment on current development in linguistics? In the past there was always one big personality that revolutionized further development in linguistics, such as Saussure, Bloomfield, Chomsky. Do you think that this kind of linguistic revolution is possible nowadays?*

LB

I'm sure that such a thing could happen again. As to current developments in linguistics, I find it hard to know what to say. There are conflicting trends, and sometimes energy is spent in trying to denigrate one or another of these trends when it might be better spent in developing another. I think any linguist will find some of the trends more palatable than others, but I don't think we can tell where the next major development will come from. I do think that we need to take stock of where we are, as a profession (if we can say that), with reference to many cherished positions in linguistics, in all branches of linguistics. I think we need to re-evaluate some of the ideas we have inherited from the structuralists and the neogrammarians, as well as those we have received from Chomsky, Labov and other major figures of the late twentieth/early twenty-first centuries.

LK

*It seems to us that the position of the 'classical' linguistic disciplines, including morphology, lexicology, traditional syntax has been weakened; they seem to be replaced by various less theoretical courses in the curricula of a number of universities. Do you have the same feeling? If yes, do you find this trend positive? Our experience is that – as a result of this trend - students of linguistic departments suffer from the lack of theoretical knowledge of language in general.*

LB

We have ourselves introduced a course for first-year students in what I call humanistic linguistics or soft linguistics, and the text book is *Language Matters* (Palgrave 2006) written by me and two of my colleagues. There are lots of ways in which you can raise consciousness of linguistic issues without doing formal syntax or phonology, and I think that there is a useful role for such courses in an era when university education is aimed at a far wider audience than was the case when I was a student. I worry when I see students looking at topics such as dialect variation which involve understanding phonetic and phonological variation without having the understanding of phonetics or phonology to allow them to appreciate what the variant pronunciations are or how those variants might be linked to each

other. If students are not taught phonetics/phonology before doing such courses, then room needs to be made in these courses for the prerequisite scientific knowledge, in my view (something similar might be said with relation to morphology and syntax). The difficulty is that if you run two courses, one called 'phonetics' and the other called 'why do people from Birmingham sound so bad?', one of those courses sounds much more approachable than the other. Perhaps we re-term the 'phonetics' course as 'making funny noises' (I know, they're not really 'funny' at all, but we have to respond to popular perceptions).

LK

*In analogy to this question – I have heard that the very same thing can be said about music. In the past there was always one big band or singer who influenced the music – The Beatles, Rolling Stones, Elvis Presley, later Depeche Mode, etc. Have you ever been a music fan? If yes, what kind of music do you prefer? What are your hobbies?*

LB

As a teenager I was keen on folk music (both the real traditional stuff, and the Dylan-inspired versions), but enjoyed a range of pop and light classical as well. I haven't been to a concert of popular music for as long as I can remember, though I have been to classical concerts (since my wife is a classical music fan, and my daughter plays classical music).

LK

*I understand that you did not like the study of literature, however, you like literature. What kind of literature do you prefer? What does a linguist read in his free time (if there is any?) When reading, are you able just to enjoy a book or you cannot resist and analyze the book also from some linguistic point of view?*

LB

I usually read thrillers and crime novels, from which I pluck a lot of examples of word-formation. I read a lot, and watch virtually no television (we do not have a television set).

LK

*What do you think, what is the position of linguistics as a science in everyday life? How important it is for our existence?*

LB

I think that in everyday life linguistics as a science is totally overlooked. Lay people find it hard to think of their being a science of language at all. So if that is necessary for our existence, we are in real trouble.

LK

*You are also known for your lectures for a radio station in New Zealand. What was the response of the audience? Do you find it important to acquaint the public with linguistic thinking?*

LB

I think that university teachers have a duty to take their subject into the lay community they serve, as well as into the scientific community they serve, though I find it very difficult to move between those two audiences. I am always happy to be interviewed for the media when I think I have some insight into what is going on (sometimes the questions asked by the media

are so far off my radar that I have nothing to say about them). I have not done radio lectures as you say, but four of us from the School of Linguistics and Applied language Studies at Victoria had a monthly slot on a national radio programme for a time, and also wrote a regular column for the local broadsheet. We got very positive feedback on those attempts.

LK

*There has been an immense tradition of morphological studies in the countries of Central and East Europe. My impression is that, in the past, western linguists knew very little about the achievements in morphology and in linguistics in general in this region of the world. Do you think that the situation has improved?*

LB

No, I don't.

LK

*Some eight years ago, an attempt to establish an international association of morphologists failed. Do you consider this kind of association useful and worth resumed effort – especially in view of the previous question and broader cooperation with linguists from different continents? Or do you find the current possibilities for co-operation – determined by the existence of the Internet, numerous conferences, a large number of journals – sufficient?*

LB

I was not really sure why that initiative failed; I think it got too tied up in fights between competing journals, which was unfortunate. I am, in general, relatively positive about such initiatives; but they do require someone passionate at the centre. Otherwise, the likelihood is that they will become rather vacuous with insufficient material of interest to all the membership to make it really worthwhile, and more or less trickle on without making a major contribution.

*Thank you for the interview.*

Livia Körtvélyessy