

Interview with
Eve V. Clark

LK

Why linguistics?

EC

I have always enjoyed languages, grew up with English and French, but after my undergraduate degree I was not too taken with continuing in French studies, so I looked at other options and 'tried out' Linguistics for a year (Diploma in Theoretical Linguistics) — and that set me on a new path. When I finished my PhD, I got a job initially on Joseph Greenberg's *Language Universals Project* at Stanford; I learnt a huge amount from Joe Greenberg and from reading grammars of many languages.... It was a good way to start. Then I got appointed as an Assistant Professor of Linguistics at Stanford in the graduate program they had set up. In 1975, that program became a full Department of Linguistics, and, aside from sabbaticals back in Europe, I have taught and done research there ever since.

LK

Where did you study? Could you compare your student life with the situation at American universities nowadays?

EC

I studied at the University of Edinburgh and at the Université d'Aix-Marseille for my undergraduate degree in French Language & Literature, then did my PhD in Linguistics, with John Lyons (at Edinburgh at the time). The British and French university systems are rather different from what I know of the US system at Stanford, where I have been teaching and doing research since 1971. The graduate programmes in the US are more structured, with two years of courses to start with (partly because undergraduate degrees here are less specialized), then after that, students do their research for the PhD dissertation. As far as student life is concerned, I think I had more freedom than today's undergraduates: I lived in a flat with friends (not in a university residence), I had various jobs for part of each summer, then went travelling for a month or two on what I'd earned. I got married soon after I began my graduate research and so moved to the US where I taught French at the University of Pittsburgh for a couple of years while I wrote my dissertation — and then moved to California where my husband had been appointed in the Psychology Department at Stanford and where I worked initially in the *Language Universals Project*.

LK

What is the position of linguistics at American universities? Any substantial changes in recent decades?

EC

Linguistics in the US is becoming more visible, especially in interdisciplinary arenas such as Cognitive Science. It is also changing as a discipline as people move to doing more corpus-based research, rather than focussing on arm-chair introspection. This is a healthy move, and makes linguists and their students a lot more aware of what current usage is really like. This change has been coming in gradually since the late 1980's, and at Stanford we like to think

we had a role in promoting this, especially at the Linguistics Institute that we ran in the summer of 1987. Linguists really do need to look at what the data are on how people use language: the findings are relevant regardless of one's theoretical affiliation.

LK

You are apparently fascinated by L1 acquisition. What is it that makes it so attractive for you?

EC

I have always been interested in development, how and why it takes place. And language is particularly interesting: It represents a very complex conventional system that has evolved to be pretty effective for communication, especially when one adds in the information from facial expressions, body stance, hand gestures, to current context and common ground. (Yes, there is a very large pragmatic component in all that.) There is now a large body of transcripts of children talking to their parents, from around age 1;6 to 5;0, as they acquire a variety of different languages – in the CHILDES Archive. So we know a good deal about their ability to produce certain forms and the kinds of conversational context in which they emerge. We also have quite good records of the range of errors children produce from those data. And it is fun to design and carry out experiments to ask more specific questions about what children can understand (and what non-linguistic strategies they rely on when they don't), can produce, and can make certain judgements about at different ages. I have worked mainly with children aged 1;3 to 5;0 or so, and I have worked on the acquisition of English, Hebrew, German, and French, sometime in a comparative framework – as in most of research on word-formation in children where I collaborated with Ruth Berman (Tel Aviv U) on a series of comparative studies of derivation and compounding in English and Hebrew. And I keep finding new questions to ask – there is always something interesting to think about, and new problems to consider.

LK

You mentioned two big linguists who had huge impact on further development of linguistics – John Lyons and Joseph Greenberg. What was the cooperation with them like?

EC

I did my dissertation with John Lyons – I had him as a teacher in part of course for the Diploma in Theoretical Linguistics which I did before starting my PhD research, and he was always very clear, fast (he wrote on the board with his right hand and erased the line above with his left! – so taking notes was always a challenge), and very scholarly. When I sent him draft chapters of what I was writing, he would start at the top of the first page with “Eve, I wonder if you have read...” and then would follow it with a list of references that ran down the backs of the next two or three pages. I learnt more about linguistics and linguistic theory when I was writing my dissertation – things have stood me in good stead ever since – than anywhere else. So completing the dissertation was a full education in itself. I have kept in touch when I could over the years, given how far away I am now, and I most recently saw him in France (where he retired), just a few years ago.

Joseph Greenberg was also a true scholar, He read everything and he had an encyclopaedic memory for details about different languages. He also had a large collection of grammars in his office, and when you went in to talk to him about some question or odd construction you'd encountered in some grammar, he would think and then say, "I think I came across that in X".

He'd get up, go to one of his bookcases (covering the whole wall) and reach for a grammar of some (typically obscure) language. And in it, you'd find information about that same odd construction. He also enjoyed telling stories of his WWII experiences, when he wrote short informational 'travel guides' for different African languages and had to devise a new vocabulary in certain domains – some version of 'iron horse' was his favourite for "train". He was a major force in founding the Linguistics Department at Stanford (in 1975), and he remained a central part of it throughout his life.

LK

Joseph Greenberg with his approach to language universals influenced next generations of linguists. Actually, it seems that each generation had one or two 'big names' - e.g. Saussure, Sapir, Bloomfield, Chomsky who started a kind of revolution in the study of language. What do you think about the present-day situation? Is there a revolution in linguistics in sight?

EC

This is a question that's impossible to answer. Who will stand out in the current generation? Part of the problem here is the number of areas that linguistics now plays a role in. The work in psycholinguistics and cognitive science, and all the work in sociolinguistics, occupy places that weren't even considered in earlier approaches in linguistics. The field is also changing a lot, and moving to take advantage of the corpora we can now search with ease, as well as using sources like Google for searching for specific constructions. Putting an empirical base under some of the theoretical work is a major step because it allows for a new perspective on what specific theories about language can and can't account for.

LK

Some time ago we interviewed Laurie Bauer and we asked him about the position of 'classical' linguistic disciplines like morphology, lexicology, phonology which seem to be replaced by less theoretical courses. This question arose from our experience that students of linguistic department suffer from the lack of linguistic knowledge. Laurie Bauer mentioned a similar tendency at his university and he even mentioned a label he uses for such courses: humanistic linguistics or soft linguistics. Have you observed a similar tendency at Stanford?

EC

Our Department currently offers theoretical courses in the traditional areas of linguistics such as phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and historical change, as well as theoretical and experimental courses in phonetics, in developmental psycholinguistics, in language processing, and so on. I think one mistake is to assume that any theoretical work can only be associated with traditional areas of linguistics. Not true: an enormous amount of research on language processing, for example, involves constructing good theories of processing, theories that make predictions that are then tested with real data. This reflects part of the change that has been going on in the field.

LK

What do you think about the position of linguistics in everyday life? How important it is for our existence? How are the findings of your research applied to everyday life?

EC

If one works on a topic like first language acquisition, there are many opportunities for seeing findings applied directly to everyday life: there is currently a lot of emphasis on making sure very young children (under three) hear as much language as possible. This is good, but it is also important to point out that the language here should be used in interactive contexts, where the adult responds to what the child is interested in, say. It is clear that children in fact learn a lot of early language from their interactions with adults, when they talk with them and engage in joint activities.

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?

EC

I am not sure how much this situation has improved: when I was a graduate student, John Lyons introduced me to the Prague School work in linguistics, and I made extensive use of that in my research. But I knew very little about research on morphology in Central and Eastern Europe. But note that I am not really a morphologist. I have done a good bit of comparative research on word-formation, and that necessarily brings in derivational morphology, and I did spend a good bit of time finding out about research on children's word formation in Polish and Russian (thanks to colleagues in the field). But as far as general knowledge is concerned today, I really can't answer that.

LK

What is life of a female linguist like? Is it difficult to harmonize and balance your research activities with personal life?

EC

This was challenging when I began: there were rather few women on the faculty at Stanford, though the numbers are better now (still only a quarter of the faculty though). But the field in the US has always had a significant number of good linguists in it who happened to be women – so this offers a good model to our graduate students, male and female. One area where academic life makes things a bit simpler is with children: you can adjust your hours and classes to fit in with other obligations, and this makes life much easier than in any 9-to-5 job. And since both of us are in academia and have always shared all the household chores and cooking, we found that this and the flexibility we could draw on made things much easier when we had a child. So, the short answer is, it is quite possible to balance research, teaching, and personal time – but being well-organized helps a lot!

LK

Do you have time for your hobbies? What are they?

EC

Yes – I find time but there are periods when I find myself working really intensively for 4-5 weeks, then when I finish that project, I take some time off. Hobbies – well, I read a lot for pleasure; I swim (most days); we used to take a couple of weeks to go sailing most summers,

in the Adriatic, or the Mediterranean usually. And we have a garden, which is a lot of work but also relaxing. And we travel, sometimes for work, but now for pleasure alone as well.

LK

Your husband Herbert is a scientist and works at Stanford, too. Do you discuss research and academic issues at home or are these topics taboo?

EC

Herb is a cognitive psychologist and he too works mainly on language, but focusses on adult-adult language use, so our areas of expertise overlap in some areas and not in others. As a result, we discuss research issues at home but we have rarely collaborated on a project or a paper — with the exception of our 1977 textbook, *Psychology and Language*, and one extended project on denominal verbs (published in *Language* 1979). It's always good to have a sounding board for ideas and projects, so this has been an integral part of academic life for both of us.

Thank you very much for the interview.

Livia Körtvélyessy

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