

Interview with
Edith Moravcsik

LK

Let me start with our traditional question. Why linguistics? What motivated you to study language and to deal with it professionally?

EM

Foreign languages played a big role in our family. In addition to Hungarian – our native language – my mother spoke German and French and my father – a professor of Greek philology – knew German, Russian, French, Modern Greek, Ancient Greek, and Latin. He even had some Turkish; along with Russian, he acquired it in the prisoner of war camp in Krasnoyarsk during WWI. He spent five years there and happened to meet a Turkish fellow prisoner who taught him his language.

As a child, I took lessons in German and English with private teachers. In school, I studied Russian, Latin, and Ancient Greek. In spite of his broad range of familiarity with foreign languages, my father did not speak them well and I was not good at speaking languages, either; but, just as my father, grammar intrigued me and in particular, how the grammars of languages differed. I remember that my Ancient Greek grammar book listed verbal modes – indicative and subjunctive – under the different tenses, while my Latin textbook had it the other way, with modes comprising tenses, and I wondered whether this indicated a difference between the two languages or whether it was simply due to the textbook writers' whim.

When I graduated from high school, I had to choose a major for my university studies. I would have liked to study general linguistics but there was no Linguistics Department at the University of Budapest at the time. My favorite language was Russian – but this was in 1957 right after the Hungarian revolution against the communist regime and the Russian occupation. Since my father was a fairly prominent person, my parents felt that if I opted for Russian, this would be interpreted as an endorsement of the communist regime by the family, which we definitely did not want. Another possibility was English but this in turn could have been seen as indicating an anti-communist position – a dangerous option. Since I disliked German at the time, the only remaining choices were the politically neutral classical languages: Latin and Greek.

When in 1964 at the age of 25 I immigrated to the US, I was first teaching Classics but this was not a field of study I wanted to stay with. Being in the US and having to hone my English skills, I was constantly faced by the striking differences and similarities between English – my “outer language” - and Hungarian – my “inner one” – and this experience increased my interest in linguistics. Indiana University in Bloomington IN had a very good Department of Linguistics and since I was also offered a teaching assistantship there to teach Hungarian, I seized this chance to realize my desire to become a professional linguist.

LK

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

EM

I studied Classics at the University of Budapest between 1957 and 1963 and Linguistics at Indiana University in 1966-1971. Professor-student relations in Hungary at the time were very different from how things were at American universities in the 1960 and are today. University courses – other than language and other skill-related curricula – were based on lectures, with little or no participation by the students. Professors were not as easily approachable as in the US. Acquiring factual information was emphasized over learning new ways of thinking and argumentation.

Since the University of Budapest (Eötvös Lóránd University by its full name) was in the heart of the city, it had no campus nor did it have student dormitories as far as I know. Student life consisted mostly of studying together; joint extracurricular activities were infrequent.

LK

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

EM

While in Europe, general linguistics emerged as a separate field mostly from philology and historical studies, in the US, it was initially linked to anthropology, hallmarked by names like Franz Boas and Edward Sapir, and to missionary work. Leonard Bloomfield's *Language* (1933) and Noam Chomsky's 1957 book *Syntactic structures* were milestones for linguistics emerging as an independent field of study.

Today, all major universities and many smaller ones have Linguistics Departments or Linguistics Programs. One important change that has taken place in the past 50 or so years is the broadening of theoretical and research interests. Generative grammar, initiated by Chomsky, is still a widely-adopted framework but in addition, other approaches – such as Categorical Grammar or Cognitive Grammar – have also evolved and became part of the linguistics curricula and research. Another trend has been the growing interest in describing minority languages around the world many of which are close to extinction. Third, fundamental questions about how human languages differ and how they are similar regardless of genetic and areal relations have been taking a central place in linguistics both in the US and elsewhere; this area of study is known as language typology.

LK

Your name and work has a strong position in the field of language typology and language universals. What makes this field so attractive to you?

EM

The area of language typology and universals – how languages are different and how they are similar – is part of the more general study of how human beings and their cultures differ and how

they resemble each other. On the one hand, the study of language typology shows the broad range of possibilities of the creative human mind while, on the other hand, the study of language universals attempts to reveal limits to this variability by searching for the basic principles that underlie the grammars of all languages.

More generally, learning about differences and similarities among languages also teaches us to observe divergent and shared features among things in other walks of life as well, such as social orders, religions, and other cultural and natural systems. We learn that things are not wholly different nor entirely the same. Discovering commonalities behind the differences among individuals, cultures, religions, philosophies, and social orders suggests a more fine-grained, more balanced, and more tolerant view of a diverse and ever-changing world.

LK

Who influenced your professional life the most of all?

EM

My most beloved professor at Indiana University was Gerald A. Sanders. He was interested not only in descriptive linguistics and linguistic theory but also in theory-formation in general, scientific argumentation, and other questions of the philosophy of science. We learnt a lot from him on these topics.

He was also very humble. I remember the first class of a course that he had been assigned to teach: “Contrastive analysis”. At the time, Sanders was in the very beginning of his career and was still working on his PhD dissertation. When he came to the first class facing us, he said: “I know very little about this topic; we will have to explore it together.” And this is indeed what happened: the basic assumptions and hypotheses of contrastive analysis were gradually revealed to us in the process of a joint discovery, where professor and students were near-equal fellow-travelers. I tried to apply this approach to some extent when I began my own teaching career. Sanders was also a very insightful theoretician. His book *Equational grammar* (1972) did not penetrate mainstream linguistics at the time but in subsequent years, several of his proposals were independently discovered by various researchers and have become generally accepted in the field.

In addition to Gerald Sanders and Joseph Greenberg, there are three other linguists who greatly contributed to my life as a linguist. One is Wolfgang U. Dresser, University of Vienna, who in the 1970-s invited me to teach in Vienna multiple times. The other is Frans Plank, University of Konstanz, who in the early 1990-s offered me a chance to become part of LINGTYP – a project assessing European languages from a typological point of view. This five-year-long collaboration put me in contact with a great number of truly wonderful linguists. Third, I am very grateful to Martin Haspelmath, who was instrumental in getting me invited for two stays as a visiting researcher at the Max Plank Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig.

LK

*You co-edited 4 volumes of *Universals of Human Language* and you also cooperated with Joseph Greenberg in the *Language Universals Project*. What was this era like?*

EM

The Stanford Universals Project, the final outcome of which was the four volumes of *Universals of Human Language*, was sponsored by the National Science Foundation of the USA from the late 1960-s through 1976. Headed by Joseph Greenberg and Charles Ferguson, there were about two or three full-time researchers employed in the project at any one time and a few other guest contributors. Each of us worked on a topic selected in consultation with Greenberg; there were weekly meetings where we reported on our work. The papers were published in a working paper series.

The project was data-oriented: we mined grammars and worked with language consultants to gather data on given grammatical topics, such as definite articles or agreement or existential sentences, with the goal of formulating crosslinguistic generalizations. While we regularly visited the Stanford library, Greenberg and Ferguson were very generous in letting us use books from their extensive private collections.

The project did not subscribe to any particular linguistic theory. Our work was orthogonal to the direction of generative grammar which, at the time, was focused mostly on English.

LK

Social and human sciences are rather underestimated in the present-day society. What do you think why? What do you think about the role linguistics should play in a society?

EM

The fact that social and human sciences may be somewhat backgrounded in present-day society could be due to the spectacular advances in natural sciences – in physics, biology, also medicine – and to the great progress in computer technology. Many of these new developments directly affect our everyday lives and thus seem more important than the more subtle gains that literary and language studies have to offer.

I do believe, however, that linguistics can offer valuable tools for us to live a good life. First, it is helpful for people to understand that language can be an object of observation and scientific analysis. Recognizing that the way people speak can be observed and analyzed adds a new angle from which to regard the world.

Second, the study of language instills in us an understanding of the concepts of diversity and change, which are ubiquitous in all domains of life. Any one language has several variants – such as dialects and styles – that are somewhat different but still rule-governed; and different languages can be very distinct but they are also similar in some ways. The acknowledgment of diversity leads to a more expansive world view and to tolerance with notions that are different from what we are used to, whether linguistic, cultural, or interpersonal. Similarly, languages change all the time, which in turn helps us accept change not only in language but also in culture and in any aspect of individual life as well.

Third, observing the use of language in the political arena and individual life opens our eyes to the many ways words subtly influence the way we think. For example, the fact that English has a single second-person pronoun *you* that can be used when addressing anyone supports a more egalitarian view of people than the address forms of other languages where different pronouns are used depending on age, gender, and social status.

LK

Joseph Greenberg with his approach to language universals influenced the 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?

EM

While I am not sure that there is an actual revolution in the making in linguistics, I see two exciting trends that appear to be gaining ground. One I mentioned above: a whole-sale effort to describe minority languages about which so far there has been little or no information. While the Summer Institute of Linguistics has been pursuing this kind of work for decades, another more recent organization that encourages and funds the writing of grammars is the Language and Culture Research Centre at James Cook University in Cairns, Australia. In addition to typological monographs presenting comprehensive crosslinguistic comparisons of specific properties of grammar – such as evidentiality or gender – a number of single-language grammars have been and are being completed by researchers at this organization. I often hear about PhD dissertations completed at other institutions as well that are grammars of endangered languages. The other trend that appears to be growing is cognitive linguistics – that is, the study of the relationship between linguistic competence and general human cognitive capacities. While Noam Chomsky has suggested that linguistic competence is a special type of endowment separate from general cognition, many linguists and psychologists – e.g. Brian MacWhinney and Michael Tomasello – have been able to explain certain aspects of linguistic competence as part of general human cognition.

LK

You mention that it took some time before Sanders' ideas penetrated into the mainstream linguistics. What do you understand by the mainstream in linguistics?

EM

By mainstream linguistics, I just mean theoretical frameworks that are predominantly represented in published work, in conference programs, and in the curricula of linguistics departments.

LK

You also suggest that the Language Universals Project was orthogonal to the direction of generative grammar. Does it also mean that the Project competed with Chomsky's followers? Was there any cooperation between the two groups?

EM

There was no cooperation between proponents of the two lines of research nor was there overt competition between researchers doing empirical work in language typology and those who followed the Chomskian line of theoretical research. However, in his book *Aspects of the theory of syntax* (1965), Chomsky made a disparaging statement about Greenberg's statistical universals faulting them for being based on surface facts rather than underlying grammatical structure and this view turned away many linguists from research conducted at the Stanford project. Chomsky's views gradually softened in the course of subsequent years: Greenberg's generalizations came to be re-evaluated as suggestive and requiring explanations. In his book *Language form and language function* (1998, pp. 350-364), Frederick J. Newmeyer discusses the relationship between the Greenbergian and the Chomskian approaches to language universals and shows that they are entirely complementary – which I also believe they are. We need both facts and theory.

LK

Is there a theoretical linguistic framework you favour? Do you consider yourself to be a representative of a particular linguistic school?

EM

I have not done detailed descriptive work within any of the various theoretical frameworks and do not explicitly represent any of them. My views on grammar are based on Gerald A. Sanders' framework (e.g. *Equational grammar* (1972)), according to which there is a single mechanism – equational statements - to connect phonetic form and meaning including phonology, syntax, and the lexicon. Implicitly, this view links language to all other symbolic objects – body language, traffic signs, religious symbols – in that simple equations relating form and meaning are applicable to all of them.

In addition, I am very much interested and have done some research in how linguistic knowledge relates to general human cognition – i.e., in cognitive linguistics as described above.

LK

Which of your publications is the most valuable to you? Is there any student of yours you are particularly proud of?

EM

I have published papers that I now take a dim view of but there are some that I do like even though none of them have become widely influential. One of these papers is titled “Conflict resolution in syntactic theory” (*Studies in Language*, 2010, 34/3, 636-669). In it I propose that the main problems that theoreticians encounter in describing languages boil down to contradictions among various aspects of the data. Accordingly, the descriptive devices theoreticians have introduced – including phrases, categories, and levels of description – are tools of resolving contradictions and as such they are the same as conflict-resolving tools applied in other sciences and in social and private life.

During most of my career, my department educated undergraduates and thus I had little direct access to graduate students. Of the few graduate students that I had in my courses, the best one was Elena Mihas currently working at the Language and Culture Research Centre at James Cook University (mentioned above). Most of Elena's work has had to do with South-American languages. Her dissertation was a monumental grammar of the Arawakan language Ashéninka Perené, published in 2015 by Mouton de Gruyter. In a class I taught at the University of Vienna in the early 1980-s, I had a particularly curious and insightful student named Martin Haspelmath. The course, rudimentary as it was, turned out for him to be a first exposure to language typology - a field in which since then, he has become one of the most prominent researchers of the world.

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