Interview with
Jean-Rémi LAPAIRE

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

JRL
I need to go back to my high school years in Paris, in the 1970s. As 80 % of schools in France, *Lycée Janson de Sailly* (where I went) was state-run and free but, being located in the West End, was also very elitist. Pupils who wanted to secure admission to medical or engineering school, or any prestigious academic institution, had to choose science as their major, which I reluctantly did to keep options open. But my interest went to literature and philosophy, as well as modern languages. So, after graduating from high school and successfully passing the entrance exam to *Ecole Normale Supérieure de St Cloud*, I did a bachelor's degree in English at *Université Paris Ouest Nanterre*, with a strong focus on literature and poetics. This taught me a great lesson in linguistic complexity. I received confirmation that literary discourse was indeed the richest form of human expression. It embraces poetry and drama (written and staged); fiction (traditional and experimental); the widest range of expressive styles; multifocal modes of narration, and a stunning variety of social contexts. The language of literature is the ultimate revealer of both the creativity and conventionality of language rules at large. It opens a window into the rich semiotic structure and socio-cognitive processes at work in all forms of linguistic expression. Thus, being successively a student of science and literature helped me become a student of language and linguistics.

Although I spent many years in English-speaking countries, first as a child and later as young adult, I would certainly define myself as the typical product of the French education system, with its secular Republican spirit, its national syllabus and uniform guidelines. For all its flaws and failings, this is a system that values two important things in my eyes: intense theoretical discussion and close textual analysis (commonly referred to as *commentaire de texte*). Even if France has been declining in international education rankings, I am proud to say that most history, literature and philosophy teachers in secondary schools still pay considerable attention to the process of writing (*l'acte d'écriture*) in its formal, aesthetic and ideational dimensions. This, after all, is the country of Genette, Foucault and Derrida. Students are encouraged to view texts as complex structures that deserve to be contextualized and scrutinized if the subtle process of meaning making is to be understood. From junior high onwards, everyone is taught to look at syntax, wording and the strategic use of figures of style, in relation to textual genre, social context, and communicative intent. My son, who is 16 and goes to the local state school, does just that. So did his two sisters, a few years ago. Not much has changed in 40 years. In my days, though, greater attention was paid to "narrative angles" and the interplay between "narrative voices". All this makes us French citizens language conscious and language sensitive creatures, which may explain why we get so passionate about language issues, and why most us feel terribly inhibited when we have to learn another language: how can we ever master such multilayered complexity? This also makes French students wary of linguistics: haven't they done enough "language stuff" already, with all the horrors of French spelling and grammar in primary school, then the close textual analysis in secondary school?

In the late 1970s and early 80s, most language departments offered introductory courses in linguistics only in the final year of the B.A. course. The first classes I attended in 1978 paid lip service to Saussure and Bloomfield, took a quick look at distributional linguistics, ignored functional linguistics altogether, and concentrated mainly on generative grammar. All my instructors were enthusiastic chomskyans, born again language scholars who embraced the

generative revolution and all its promises with a mixture of candor and fervor. Their faith was contagious, and the mathematical flavor of their formalizations made sense to me, the former science major. I felt I could become reconciled with my past, inhabit an in-between space that stretched across science and the humanities. That's when I decided to become a linguist. But I soon realized that there was little room in "transformational grammar" for a truly integrated understanding of language functioning. I wanted a theory that could handle together syntax, semantics, pragmatics and aesthetics. I was disappointed and moved to central Paris where I met the French "enunciative" linguists – Antoine Culioli and Henri Adamzewski – who shared Chomsky's concern for *mental grammar*, and who also happened to be minimalists. But their research methods and conception of linguistic inquiry radically departed from Chomsky's. They believed that linguists were first and foremost *observers of life* and *collectors of authentic language material* produced by real life speakers and writers. They had no objections to my using literary corpora. Any theorization of language, they claimed, must be based on *genuine usage events*, i.e. the description of the situated "utterances" that appear in connected discourse. These do not have to be canonical sentences.

I did a PhD on determiners and deictics under H. Admaczewski's supervision at the *University of Paris Sorbonne Nouvelle*. Linguists were in high demand (for reasons already expressed) and it was not long before I landed my first university job in Toulouse, in 1984. The first undergraduate classes I taught were on "literature and linguistics." I remember exploring tense, modality and deixis in novels by Virginia Woolf, E.M. Forster and Jean Rhys, as well as plays by Beckett, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams. The Southern city was warm and beautiful. The undergraduate students were fascinated. I was in Heaven, and still feel that way when I teach graduate seminars in Bordeaux, even if my interests have shifted to new domains, in particular pragmatics, cognitive linguistics and gesture studies. I have never ceased to believe in the joy of teaching linguistics, although things are not as enjoyable as they used to be with undergrads.

 LK
What do you think is the position of linguistics in present-day society? Has it changed if you compare it to the period of your studies?

JRL
The situation has changed dramatically, and I am sorry to say, to the linguist's disadvantage. From the 1970s through the 1990s, linguistics enjoyed golden days in France and held many promises. Lacan, Foucault and Barthes themselves had stressed the centrality of language and symbolic activity in human experience. New departments opened, new courses were designed. Since most forms of knowledge and social interaction were language-mediated, whoever cracked the codes of language functioning, it was felt, would open a window into the human mind. Linguistics- or the "science of language", as the French like to call it (*sciences du langage*)- would become the ultimate science. It would be used to analyze any type of discourse and deconstruct all forms of reasoning.

Was this naïve or arrogant, or both? The demotion of linguistics from such heights was fast and inevitable. My own impression is that it started in the early 2000s for two major reasons. First, cognitive science replaced linguistics as the most promising source of insight into human knowledge and expressive behavior. After all, language itself is a product of the human mind. By exploring the socio-biological nature of the mind / brain, scholars delve even deeper into human consciousness, and are likely to gain greater insight into our conceptual and expressive capacities. Many linguists now accept this and have chosen to redefine themselves as "cognitive scientists". Whether this makes sense or not, such an opportunistic move is good

strategy: professional identity and, even more importantly, access to generous funding are maintained in this way.

The second reason for the decline of general linguistics is to be sought inside the community of linguists itself. The marginalization of pragmatics and the lower status of sociolinguistics, the dry and technical approach adopted by formalists have not only put students off linguistics, but also turned linguists into "technical experts" of language (*techniciens de la langue*). Linguists are left to do the menial tasks, the parsing, the corpus searches and the statistical work, rarely the "deep thinking" about language, which has been handed back to other specialists. How dull and defeatist, how intellectually irresponsible! Few linguists act as the ambitious "conceptualizers" of language they should be (*penseurs du langage*)! No wonder Chomsky and Lakoff now "do" very little linguistics and have turned to political science instead, a subject they find more prestigious and gratifying. I would personally encourage more frequent and fruitful collaboration with psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, socio-psychologists, anthropologists, media and communication experts, to bring in other perspectives on language use, while offering tools for greater descriptive accuracy in return. In my own experience, students always respond well to integrated approaches that link formal aspects of grammar and word formation to embodied social practice, for example modality and interpersonal manipulation, negation and linguistic politeness systems, grammatical gender and sexism, noun phrase determination and cultural frames, word creation and verbal empowerment, anaphora and dementia, etc.

Let there be no mistake about the claim I am making here. Phonology, morphology and syntax are as vital to linguistic analysis as is human physiology to medicine. And I would certainly not deny that students who are willing to make a decent living out of linguistics, as speech therapists, application developers, artificial intelligence advisors, must learn the hard facts of syntax. Neither would I challenge the principle that learning a foreign language requires learning conventional forms, not just engaging in communicative interaction or performing tasks (as is now too easily proclaimed by language teaching specialists). What I am saying is that we must be careful to keep linguistic enquiry completely open, meaningful and accessible to all. Language is our common inheritance and communal possession. People will listen to us, students will come to our classes, if we teach them something about language use and language structure (a) that they can understand (b) that relates to their experience (c) that teaches them something about the world they live in. Until then, numbers will be declining. Fewer and fewer students write their masters dissertation in linguistics at my university. And my bet is that nothing will change unless *we* change.

LK

In recent years many of our colleagues (both from Slovakia and abroad) have been complaining about the average quality of students´ knowledge as well as their approach to language studies. Have you observed any changes in this respect?

JRL

"Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit" wrote Oscar Wilde in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, "touch it, and the bloom is gone!" There is something fresh and charming about not knowing much about formal linguistic categories, while speaking a foreign language reasonably well. Doing "ground zero linguistics" (as I like to call it), starting from scratch is not a problem if genuine attention is shown in class. The real challenge, I admit, is the lack of interest shown by a growing number of first and second year students. They seem to loathe technical definitions (which they probably view as unnecessarily contrived), and resent theoretical discussions (which they believe are pointless). Their conception of linguistic description has become overwhelmingly utilitarian. The vast majority don't see much point in handling formal issues,

testing hypotheses, opposing conceptions, comparing definitions, etc. Visiting Slovak and Romanian students have been an exception so far, I must say! Most of the others want to get the descriptive job done, speedily, and at a low intellectual cost. This can be very annoying. But again, I have found that the moment you start using life situations, or whenever stories are told, or connections established between the grammar of speech and the grammar of social interaction, eyes light up and notes are taken with glee.

LK

Your field of specialization is gesture. It sounds exciting but seems somewhat removed from the topic of your PhD thesis. How did your interest in this field start? What is the link between bodily action and grammar?

JRL

During my visiting scholarship at UC Berkeley in 1991, I developed a strong interest for Lakoff and Johnson's "cognitive theory of metaphor" which emphasized the *embodied nature* and *imaginative character* of human reason. Lakoff and Johnson not only rejected the mind-body split but also claimed that "rationality" had a strong *narrative* and *imagistic* component. Meanwhile, Langacker's "cognitive grammar" emphasized the *contentfulness* and *meaningfulness* of grammatical markers and constructions. All this had a liberating effect on my mind. I felt free and ready to use the resources of "imaginative rationality" boldly and creatively in order to explain how grammar works. So, when a major publishing house in Paris contacted me to co-author a new collection of English textbooks for French schoolchildren, I suggested writing "stories about grammar" that would both "explain and entertain". The co-authors were very supportive, and I was soon given the green light to proceed. I started working on the narrative developments of simple everyday metaphors that were associated with grammatical meanings. For example, I used a time machine and a virtual reality story to show how we "travel back in time" (*When I was a child*) and "dream" (*If I won*) with the preterit (V-ed). Other stories were invented to illustrate how "barriers" are erected across action paths with *can't* (*You can't go now*), how we use *must* to "put pressure" on people (*You must come to my party*) and *mustn't* to "hold them back" (*You mustn't go*), etc.

Interestingly, I found that many of the metaphors I was recruiting for my fancy grammatical narratives had a bodily basis and were rooted in sensory-motor experience: "putting pressure", "holding back" (in the examples just given), "looking ahead" (for future-reference), "wavering between options" (for epistemic uses of may in *I may decide to go… or stay longer*, *You may be right… or wrong*). I was equally struck by the concreteness and physicality of supposedly abstract morphosyntactic descriptions: "forming" words and expressions, "moving" or "shifting" constituents, "attaching" or "affixing" morphemes. Finally, I realized that the Greek- or Latin-based vocabulary used to describe grammatical categories was concrete (in essence) and metaphoric (in nature): *auxiliaries*[1] were originally construed as "helpers", the *past*[2] referred to the "steps" made by humans as they move along the path of history, *syntax*[3] was about "putting things together in order." I thought that enacting the body- and substance-based metaphors that were lexically entrenched might make sense to learners, that dead metaphors might be brought to life again, that "visual thinking" (Arnheim) might help everyone "see" what grammar is about. So "grammar in motion" videos were added to the agreed "grammar stories"- or NarraGrams. I designed the movements – or KineGrams – with the assistance of a professional choreographer, Jean Masse. 70 gesture sequences were thus created and performed by professional dancers in 2005.

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[1] Lat. *auxilium* 'help'.

[2] Lat. *passus* 'step'.

[3] Gr. *suntithenai* 'to put together in order'.

Figure 1 – Looking back with the preterit

Figure 2 – Barring the way with *can't*
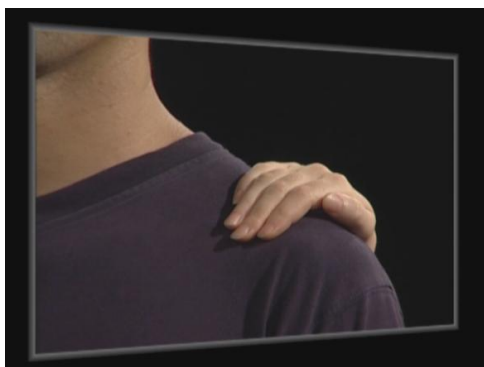*(You can't do that)*

Figure 3 – Adding an affix to a base

While "grammar in motion" was being choreographed, one of my PhD students, Simon Harrison, was exploring the grammar-gesture interface in spontaneous speech. We both sensed that the gesture sequences would have a higher descriptive power if they were based on the *real gestures* that people make when they spontaneously produce grammatical meanings. Simon worked on assertion and negation. I worked on tense, aspect, modality, quantifiers and determiners. We found that eye-movements, hand-movements, postural shifts frequently accompanied such meanings, although in an unsystematic way. Interestingly, the prominent specialists that we most revered in the field of gesture studies- Adam Kendon, David McNeill, Geneviève Calbris – did not believe much in the existence of a "grammar-gesture nexus." I took this as a challenge and from then on (2005) immersed myself in gesture studies, with a

particular focus on the role of gestures as co-articulators of grammatical meanings. I also developed a marked interest for "gestures of the abstract" (McNeill), the movements that speakers unconsciously use to *form and display abstractions*. In doing so, such gestures *give manual shape to mental activity* (Streck). Some of the KineGrams I had invented were in fact gestural abstractions. I took the plunge and started teaching seminars and writing research papers on gesture and cognition, gesture and grammar, gesture and language teaching, etc. I had learnt from the "grammar in motion" project that working with dancers, who had their own understanding of the dynamics and aesthetics of expressive moves, would be of invaluable help. I soon developed multimodal seminars, which combine corpus annotation (in the computer room), formal instruction (based on research papers) and workshops (with actors and dancers).

LK
I recently read an interview with a famous neurologist who is also a university teacher. He claims that students have a lower IQ nowadays because of the negative influence of social networks. He also noticed this fact in discussions with his students - their word stock is limited, their sentences are shorter than they used to be 30 years ago; the information load in their utterances is lower; they have a more limited capacity for abstraction ... Have you observed similar changes in body language? Do social media influence also nonverbal communication?

JRL
Marcel Jousse (1886-1961) was a French Jesuit priest who developed an anthropological theory of gesture that stresses the centrality of "mimism" - a process whereby all movements from the socio-physical world find their way into the human perceptual and cognitive systems. Humans unconsciously "absorb" movement patterns, reprocess them, and eventually "reenact" them in their semiotic systems. I think Jousse was essentially right about "mimism" and our propensity to "replay experience" (Fr. *rejouer*). Everybody knows that children and teenagers are prone to "take in" other people's verbal and grooming codes. And no one would deny that television series and humor videos, from Europe and the US, have had a marked impact on the humor, dress patterns, facial expressions, greeting rituals, bonding strategies, etc. of today's Western youth. But as Jousse rightly pointed out, what is performed on the socio-interactional stage is not a mere imitation of the original input: all the verbal and nonverbal material must be subjectively and creatively *reprocessed* in some way.

As for general language and cognitive abilities, I share David Crystal's optimism and faith in modernity. I am a great admirer of today's young people. Students have never written so much. The scope of literacy has been considerably enlarged to include computer and smartphone literacy. Think of all the instant messages that your students send, the innumerable web sites they consult, the countless contributions that many of them make to blogs and forums. New discourse types have emerged that blend spoken and written genres. There is a wealth of vocabulary and grammar there, undoubtedly less academic and argumentative (from a scholarly perspective), but nonetheless rich and meaningful. More has been gained, I feel, than has been lost, although I would agree that today's students find it harder to describe and define anything accurately. But surely, we can help them with that, can't we?

LK
The popularity of nonverbal communication has been increased recently by TV series, such as Lie to me. Have you noticed a similar development in your classes? Do you make use of your expertise in your personal life?

JRL

In *Lie to me* (2009-11), Tim Roth plays the role of a body language scientist. The character was inspired by the towering figure of Paul Ekman, an American socio-psychologist, who emerged as the leading world expert on facial expressions in the 1970s. Ekman started by testing Darwin's hypothesis[4] that some expressions of emotion are cross-cultural, i.e. cut across languages and cultures. He traveled to New Guinea and tested subjects who had never been exposed to "mass media input." Photographs of "posed Caucasian facial expressions" were displayed before the tested subjects, who had to choose "the emotion term that best matched the emotion in the photograph" (Ekman & Keltner 1997). "Happiness, surprise, disgust, anger, fear and sadness" were rightly and confidently assigned to the photographs by just about everyone. The same test was reduplicated in a variety of communities around the globe with similar results. Ekman concluded that Darwin was indeed right: some emotions are not only "universal" but receive similar facial expression everywhere. What is subject to variation, are not the "micro expressions" themselves but the "display rules" and the "psychology of emotions" across cultures.

Ekman needed increased amounts of funding for his research. Developing sophisticated computer devices to track and analyze facial expressions comes at a cost. He eventually agreed to collaborate with police departments and security units. As a nation, Americans tend to be obsessed with truth and security issues. They had found their man, and he had found the support he needed. Ekman appeared in numerous television programs and authored a number of best-selling books. He established the Paul Ekman group, which is officially dedicated to the "real world applications" of "behavioral science." Also, he agreed to act as a scientific consultant in the production of *Lie to me*.

Many people look at "body language" as the ultimate revealer of what people genuinely think. As the saying goes, "the eyes are the mirror of the soul" and as we know (by instinct), the way someone moves may not exactly match what they are trying to say. So what? I find it far more interesting to think of gestures as *co-articulators* of verbal meanings, simple or complex, overt or covert, truthful or insincere. When you ask someone a question, for instance, postural shifts and hand movements occur that largely depend on the question type (open or closed) and the pragmatic function of what is being asked. When we talk about the past, our eyes tend to look up sideways. Why is that? The moment you realize that linguistic expression is multimodal, that stress, intonation and gesture work closely together, that our hands perform "symbolic actions" (Kendon) and "manufacture meanings" (Streeck), that the "gesture space" in front of us functions as interactional space, narrative space and notional space, your perception of language is greatly enhanced. Students love it. They are delighted to discover that being a linguist means being an "observer of life", very much like a painter, a dramatist or a novelist. They realize that the social world around them is full of life and movement, that the human body can perform anything and represent anything. So yes, gesture studies are bound to change a person's perception of everyday life- for the better!

LK
Dear Jean-Rémi, thank you very much for an extremely interesting interview. Let me finish it with a rather personal question. May I ask you to give us three gestures that best describe you?

I would select the "globe" gesture, which public speakers use when they need to shape and display abstract concepts. I would also add some lateral hand movements for connecting ideas,

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[4] Charles Darwin published *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* in 1872.

and eye movements for exploring possible worlds. Finally, I would close with a smile, followed by a slight head bow, to thank you for your patience and kindness.

Lívia Körtvélyessy