

Interview with  
**Peter TRUDGILL**

PS

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

PT

From childhood I was always fascinated by linguistics even though, until I was twenty years old, I did not know there was any such thing. I read all the foreign language grammars in our local library, and collected as much information as I could find about the languages of the world. I studied French, German and Latin at secondary school, and asked for *Teach Yourself Spanish* and *Teach Yourself Malay* as birthday and Christmas presents. As – like other young people in the 1960s – I then hitch-hiked round Europe, I got interested in languages I encountered like Flemish, Luxembourgish, Plattdeutsch, Swiss German and Macedonian as well as Italian and Greek. When I left school I went to Cambridge University to study French and German, even though I was not a naturally gifted practical linguist and hopeless as a literary scholar. One of the most important things ever to happen to me was therefore to find, quite by chance, in the Modern Languages Library, a copy of Hockett's *A course in modern linguistics*. I realised, as I turned the pages, that this was what I wanted to study.

PS

*You have been one of the most influential sociolinguists. Who influenced you at your beginnings and what determined the direction of your research?*

PT

Without a doubt, William Labov. Again quite by chance, in 1967 I discovered in a bookshop in Edinburgh – where I was doing an MA in General Linguistics – the 1966 book *Sociolinguistics* edited by William Bright (the proceedings of the 1964 UCLA Sociolinguistics Conference). There I found Labov's article "Hypercorrection by the lower middle-class as a factor in linguistic change", which I thought looked very exciting. I bought the book, even though it was very expensive for a student, and took it home. I read Labov's article immediately, and decided straight away that this was the direction I would like my linguistic research to take.

PS

*You are respected as, inter alia, an authority on dialects. Do you find any difference between research into 'languages' and 'dialects'? How did you select the dialects for your research.*

PT

No, I do not find any difference here.

It seems mostly that dialects select me, rather than the other way round! For example, after spending some holidays on the south coast of Crete, I found myself becoming very interested in the local dialect and began to do research on that.

PS

*What has been the role of field research in your research activities?*

PT

Some of my work has not been based on field research but rather on library-based research, while other research has depended on field-work, for instance my early work in Norwich, later work on East Anglian English dialects, some work on Norwegian dialects, and work on the Cretan dialect just mentioned.

PS

*In your view, is sociolinguistics paid relevant attention to in university curricula in Britain and other countries of your experience?*

PT

It varies. In some places, the situation is very pleasing. In others, students seem to be remarkably ignorant about our subject. It could be better!

PS

*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?*

PT

Obviously linguistics should play a much bigger role in most societies than it does. There is so much ignorance about language amongst teachers, politicians and journalists – not to mention the general population – and so much unreasoning prejudice against nonstandard dialects, minority languages, and colloquial speech. Only linguistically well-informed thinking can counteract this.

The current predominance of neo-liberal business-school thinking, along the lines that everything is a business transaction and everyone is a “customer”, does not help linguistics, nor the humanities in general, at all.

PS

*Do you think that the advanced technologies have changed the linguistic behaviour of languages users? Do you consider this issue a big topic for sociolinguistics?*

PT

Not very significantly - only in rather trivial ways. I do not consider it a big topic. It provides us with some good sources of data, maybe; but the uniformitarian hypothesis remains valid: technology has changed, but the nature of human languages has not; nor have the mechanisms of linguistic change. Moreover, the main means of transmission of phonological and grammatical changes remains face-to-face interaction.

PS

*What are your main research objectives for the coming years?*

PT

I am currently writing what I hope will be a sociolinguistic and historical-linguistic *magnum opus* on my native East Anglian English, a topic which I have devoted several decades of research to.

PS

*And finally, could you please reveal something from your extra-academic activities? What are your hobbies? How do you relax?*

PT

I write a weekly column on language and languages in Europe for the *New European* newspaper (this is relaxation!). I'm a great classical music fan. I support Norwich City Football Club. And I am very interested in cricket – I don't think Slovakia has a team? That's a pity.

*Thank you very much for the interview.*

Pavol Štekauer

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