

Interview with
Bas Aarts

PS

What brought you to linguistics?

BA

Well, linguistics runs in my family. My father worked as a professor of English at Nijmegen University, and his love of the English language was infectious! He tells me that he first became interested in English during the war. At the time my grandparents, who were living in a village near Maastricht in the Netherlands, hid English pilots whose planes had been shot down. The Netherlands was occupied by the Nazis at the time. My father had been particularly impressed by a pilot called Ernest Jackson whose RAF plane crashed in a wood not far from my father's village on 14 February, 1943. My grandfather took Jackson in, but the pilot's presence became known to the Germans, who arrested him. My father recalled the event, at a ceremony in 2017 to commemorate the shooting down of the plane:

Before the Germans arrived, Jackson gave my father some of his belongings: his watch, his boots, a compass and his signet ring with the letters E. J. My father passed that ring onto me and I have been wearing it for more than 40 years. I remember when the Germans came to make Jackson a prisoner of war. He made the Victory sign when they drove off. I was an eight-year-old boy at the time.

This event made a great impression on my father and was probably one of the factors that led him to study English at University. And as they say: the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

PS

You are Director of the Survey of English Usage. To what degree is it a managerial and to what degree a linguistic work?

BA

It's a mix of the two. With my team I need to spend a lot of time applying for grants. We've been quite successful in this, and over the years the grants have allowed us to build two major corpora the British Component of the *International Corpus of English* (ICE-GB) (www.ucl.ac.uk/english-usage/projects/ice-gb) and the *Diachronic Corpus of Present-Day Spoken English* (DCPSE) (<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/english-usage/projects/dcpse/>). These are grammatically analysed collections of language materials that contain a combined total of around 1.8 million words of written and spoken English. Although they are small by today's standards, these corpora are fully tagged and parsed (i.e. grammatically analysed). The SEU has one of the largest collections of *parsed* spoken English currently available anywhere in the world. Users can conduct complex and detailed searches of the corpus with the exploration software ICECUP (International Corpus of English Corpus Utility Program; <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/english-usage/resources/icecup/>) which can be used to find and extract instances of grammatical and lexical constructions in the corpora, and to track linguistic trends including changes in the contemporary language, as well as the use of contextual and frequency data for a vast array of linguistic features.

More recently we built the *Englicious* website (www.englicious.org) which makes a wide variety of innovative teaching materials freely available to pupils and teachers in primary and secondary schools. These include lesson plans, interactive exercises, projects, glossaries,

etc., as well as background materials for teachers to improve their subject knowledge of English grammar, e.g. videos. The example sentences used on the site come from the corpora based at the Survey of English Usage.

This year we celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Survey of English Usage, which was founded by Randolph Quirk. See <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/english-usage/about/history.htm>. We are organising a memorial event for him on 9 July 2019 (<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/english-usage/events/quirk19.htm>).

PS

You have significantly contributed to the compilation of the Diachronic Corpus of Present-Day Spoken English (DCPSE). How does this work gear with your research into grammatical phenomena?

BA

As mentioned above, both ICE-GB and DCPSE are tagged and parsed, and you can search them not only for individual words or parts of speech, but also for grammatical patterns, using the ICECUP software. In my research I have made extensive use of these resources, as they are a good way of finding authentic examples. To give you an example, some time ago I wrote an article about what I called ‘binominal constructions’ such as *a fool of a policeman* (<https://bit.ly/2SffDTa>). These are quite common in many languages, e.g. *een schat van een kind* (Dutch), *o pobre do Manuel* (Portuguese), *la tonta de Juana* (Spanish). The question of which noun in these constructions is the head is a fascinating syntactic puzzle. In most of the scholarly work that has been published on this construction the data have been made up, and so somewhat artificial. In my work I used the Survey’s corpus resources. A particularly interesting example that I came across is *a bitchy iceberg of a woman*. It’s not a very politically correct example, but it’s authentic, and grammatically it’s interesting because here we have an adjective (*bitchy*) placed in front of a noun (*iceberg*) that it does not modify. I used authentic examples like this to argue that in binominal noun phrases the second noun is the head.

PS

You were Vice-President of the International Society for the Linguistics of English. Could you introduce this society to our readers? In what respect does it differ from the European Society for the Study of English (ESSE), or are these two societies complementary in their scope of activities?

BA

ISLE was founded because it was felt by many scholars working in the field of English linguistics that there was no society exclusively for them. We do of course have the Linguistic Society of America, the Linguistics Association of Great Britain, the Societas Linguistica Europaea and so on, but these tend to be very large organisations with a wide range of linguistic interests, whereas ISLE is exclusively focused on English linguistics from Old English to Modern times. ESSE is also focused exclusively on English, but it is predominantly about literature. More recently ESSE has become more concerned with linguistics, especially because its President is a linguist. However, personally I feel more ‘at home’ at ISLE conferences than I do at ESSE conferences.

PS

You are founding editor of the English Language and Linguistics journal. What are your experiences with this work? This is connected with, inter alia, problems of finding well-

qualified reviewers willing to participate in the peer-reviewing process. In general, how do you evaluate the situation in linguistic journals?

BA

I founded *English Language and Linguistics* in 1997 with David Denison and Richard Hogg because we felt that there was no journal that catered exclusively for the field of English linguistics. I was editor for almost 15 years and then reviews editor for another few years. This was hard work because you have to read a large number of manuscripts, send them out to readers and, if accepted, prepare them for publication. Towards the end of my stint I often found it difficult to find reviewers. This isn't surprising because reading manuscripts for journals is a lot of work. I found that colleagues differ enormously in how much time they are prepared to spend on manuscripts. A small handful were always very helpful, and even prepared to read revised version of papers. Others were less obliging. I think that the shortest review I ever received was just two lines. These days there are so many developments in journal publishing, especially open access publishing, that it's hard to keep up. We may well see changes in the way journal articles are reviewed.

PS

What is the main current focus of your linguistic research?

BA

In my current research I'm working on the lexical item *for*. In a book chapter that was recently published (<https://bit.ly/2SN25nb>) I argue that all instances of *for* are prepositions, including the *for* that is regarded as a subordinating conjunction (as in e.g. *We are happy for you to call us*). I am next working on what I call the predicative use of *for* in constructions such as *I took him for a fool*.

PS

As it follows from our interview you are no doubt a versatile academic with a range of activities. Is there one you like most of all?

BA

I particularly enjoy conference visits because they give me the opportunity to meet new colleagues in the field and to catch up with old friends.

PS

Given your workload and your multifarious activities the question of free time necessarily arises. Do you have any free time? If so, how do you spend it?

BA

I really love reading about history, so when I go on holiday with my family I research the history of the place where we are going, and I start looking at maps, for which I have a passion. My children are not always as interested as I am in the castles and museums that my wife and I drag them to!

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