

Interview with **Ruth A. Berman**

Liliana Tolchinsky (LT)

*It is already a tradition in this journal to start by asking every interviewee what drew them into linguistics in the first place. So I ask the same: **why linguistics**, and what else (if anything) could it have been?*

Ruth Berman (RB)

As a young teacher of English as a foreign language in (what was then the remote desert town of) Beersheba, I was awarded a British Council grant to study at the School of Applied Linguistics in Edinburgh. There I had the good fortune to be taught by the two leading British linguists, the late J.R. Firth and his protégé, the groundbreaking functional linguistic Michael Halliday. Their lectures led me away from applied linguistics in the narrow sense of foreign language teaching into the study of general linguistics, which has been at the core of my academic concerns since then.

LT

*Your first main publication was your 1978 book *Modern Hebrew Structure*, which for decades was a compulsory reference for every scholar interested in the Hebrew language. This book offers a deep analysis of Hebrew from the generativist framework of the time. A couple of years later slowly but steadily you started to publish work on Hebrew child language (preschoolers' construal of transitivity, the development of inflectional morphology, the interface of morphology, syntax, and semantics) until language acquisition became central to your research. Why, what led you to move to language development? What were the motives underlying such a move? And how would you describe your epistemological approach to language acquisition coming from a formal generativist background?*

RB

I will answer in a few stages, chronological and conceptual. First, after my studies in Edinburgh, I moved in 1965 from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem to the then infant hence innovative university of Tel Aviv (where I remained until my mandatory retirement in 2004). There I was given the chance to set up and coordinate a large-scale project that produced a series of readers and grammar-books called "English for Speakers of Hebrew" for middle- and high-school students in Israel. This project sparked my interest, first, in contrastive analysis of Hebrew as the source language and English as the target language for learners; and, second, it provided a venue for my view of language learning as going from form to function and back again: That is, while students were presented with generalizations comparing lexical and morpho-syntactic structures in the two languages, we invariably contextualized them through their use in actual texts. These two themes, which were originally pedagogically motivated, have been at the core of most of my linguistic work since then.

One, my interest shifted from English-Hebrew comparisons from the anglocentric orientation of much of (psycho)linguistics at the time to an interest in cross-linguistic comparisons in first language acquisition (as elaborated in my response to your next question). Also, although originally highly-structuralist, my insistence on embedding target learning topics in actual texts drove me in the direction that underlies my work since the 1980s: Linguistic forms and structures are best studied, certainly in developmental perspective, when anchored in actual usage of genuine texts. At the time, the texts we used were lifted from different written sources (from short stories and other works of fiction to encyclopedic entries

and even poems). Today, technological developments have made it possible to analyze use of language in genuine contexts of speech and writing, elicited from children of different ages and from speakers of different language backgrounds.

Second, why Hebrew? First, everybody in Modern Linguistics at the time when I started working on my Ph.D. in the late 1960s was still largely anglo-centric. Chomsky himself, when I consulted him at one of the Linguistic Institutes I attended in the 1960s, suggested I try Hebrew (on the morphophonemics of which he had written his M.A. thesis in the early 1950s). I was proud to do so, as someone who had acquired Hebrew as a second language (as a native speaker of English, having grown up in South Africa). And also because I have always enjoyed striking out my own path in research, rather than following some accepted direction of research or model of analysis. The result was the book you referred to from 1978, in part an extension of my 1973 Hebrew University dissertation on nominalizations in Hebrew. As a young scholar working on this project largely unaided by teachers or colleagues in Israel, this was a formidable challenge, since at the time there was almost no work on Modern Hebrew in the framework of contemporary theoretical linguistics. Besides, to my good fortune, writing my (two-volume, Hebrew-language) dissertation, on a baby manual Olivetti forced me to examine a wide range of morpho-syntactic phenomena in Hebrew beyond nominalizations. This led me to delve into a range of areas like the *binyan* system of verb-patterns (also termed prosodic templates by phonologists), tense and aspect, copular clauses, and many others that at the time were mainly considered in pedagogical or philological perspectives. Taken together, these analyses formed the basis for my 1978 book on Modern Hebrew. And they continue to interest me to this day, as you can see in my latest publication (from 2020) as editor of a volume in the John Benjamins series [Studies in Language Companion Series] *Usage-based Studies in Modern Hebrew: Background, Morpho-Lexicon, and Syntax*.

Two subsequently developments: Sabbaticals in Berkeley brought me into close contact with scholars whose approaches to language and linguistics had a major impact on my thinking. Most of all, I am indebted to my mentor and dear friend and colleague Dan Slobin for encouraging me to shift from second to first language acquisition. He was also the impetus later on to working on cross-linguistic comparisons of language development in our joint “frog story” narrative study (Berman & Slobin 1994) and in the large-scale Spencer Foundation funded project on text construction from middle childhood across adolescence, in which you were a key participant.

Back to my work on Hebrew child language, in the 1970s and 80s there was almost no work on the topic in Israel, beyond Aaron Bar Adon’s monumental, but methodologically inadequate, 1959 Hebrew-language dissertation and the psycholinguistic insights of I.M. Shlesinger into general processes of early language acquisition. So ... I set out on another new path, starting out like many psycholinguistics with their own child in my first publications on Hebrew child language. These studies included, in the late 1970s, a paper on “Natural phonological processes at the one-word stage”, another on “Early verbs”—where I first queried how a child produces her first verbs in Hebrew, which has no inflectionally unmarked, basic verb form like English *eat, sleep, dance*—and also on the issue of bilingualism, after a sabbatical in the U.S., “A case-study of a Hebrew-English child”. Two papers published in the early 1980s were forerunners of two key issues in my developmental and linguistic work since then: “Children’s word-formation and lexical innovations”, and “Children’s discourse style (in Hebrew)” when my daughter was about to enter school.

Since then, the topic has flourished and—as I note in the introduction to the 2016 TiLAR series volume that I edited on *Acquisition and Development of Hebrew: Infancy to Adolescence*—today children’s Hebrew figures in dozens if not hundreds of published works and dissertations, including by students of my own and others. And it covers topics in phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon, and writing, as well as language of the deaf.

A second development can also be attributed to the influence of my years in Berkeley: Particular credit here goes to the late esteemed and beloved Charles Chuck Fillmore, who made me realize how structure is only one part of language, and to Wallace Wally Chafe, who sparked my interest in narrative discourse. From there, and stemming from Slobin's pioneering work in the relationship between form and function in child language, it was a short step to re-orienting to the issue of how and for what purposes people use language, moving from its structures to its functions in different domains. This has most recently found expression in the 2020 volume I mentioned earlier on *Usage-Based Studies in Modern Hebrew*. In sociolinguistic terms, this turned out to be a (not altogether successful) attempt to combine under a single umbrella the work of general linguists working on Hebrew and by Hebrew language scholars: The first group operate along much the same lines as their counterparts in the English-speaking world, whereas many of those raised in the traditions of Hebrew-language studies tend to regard Hebrew as a world to itself, and if not entirely purist in orientation, rely heavily on the historical antecedents of the language, with little or no regard for psycholinguistic or cognitive factors.

Another shift since the 1990s has been that I recast my studies in areas like Hebrew derivational morphology, genitive constructions, and nominalization in usage-based terms, relying on documented materials from studies of my own and my associates in cross-linguistic projects on developing discourse and text-construction abilities. My mantra in this domain is that you need to start with linguistic structure, but analysis remains arid unless you go beyond this to query how these structures serve in and for human communication.

LT

*Looking at your research projects and publication there is almost no topic that you haven't touched on: lexical and syntactic development, discourse analysis, narrative development, L2 teaching, bilingual language acquisition. Which among them was **the topic that made you understand language development better than any other**? Which one do you think is crucial for understanding development?*

RB

This will be rather a cop-out answer, "all of them together". Especially for Hebrew, where so much of phonology is interwoven with morphology which in turn impacts reading and spelling, on the one hand, and syntactic structure, on the other. And the moment you look at discourse, the question of "genre" arises, causing me to want to find out whether what Slobin and I found for picture-book stories applies to other types of discourse, such as personal-experience narratives and non-narrative genres like expository discussion, in both the spoken and written media.

LT

In contrast to mainstream developmental linguists you have expanded your research work, mainly after 2000 on two areas or domains of language acquisition that are rather neglected: "later language development" in the sense of changes that occur in language after age 5 and on to and beyond adolescence as writing as well as speech. You are a linguist (paraphrasing Roman Jakobson), so from a linguist's point of view, what is the interest of going deep into later developments? And, also as a linguist, how comes you address written language development?

RB

I feel a bit awkward answering these questions to you, since you know so much more than me and I have learned so much from *you* about both the neuroscientific basis to later language acquisition and the effect and role of writing in language development. Let me say this. First, a major insight from the “frog story” project with Dan Slobin published in 1994 was that language has a *protracted development route*. While the three-year-olds we examined were all clearly already native speakers (if not entirely proficient narrators) in English, German, Hebrew, Spanish, and Turkish, the texts they produced in the same task differed in major ways from those of 5-, or 9-year-olds, even more so from those of adolescents and adults. And the differences were not only cognitive, in story structure and elaborating on events: Their use of language, their narrative rhetoric, differed markedly from young to older children and adolescents, across all the numerous dimensions we examined, from tense-aspect to clause-linkage and syntactic packaging. Our cross-linguistic comparisons showed that what Slobin called “filtering by language” was evident by preschool age since, as I said earlier, Spanish 3-year-olds were clearly speaking Spanish in contrast to their English- or Hebrew-speaking peers. However, interestingly enough, from the start, children did not seek out ways to “compensate” for markings lacking in their languages (e.g., by using complex tense/aspect forms in languages like Hebrew or German; or by marking paths of movement by particles like English “fell *off* the cliff *down into* the pool”).

Yet, returning to the theme of the lengthy route to mature language knowledge and use, just a few examples: lexical variety and richness including in use of so-called function words like prepositions and inter-clausal connectives expands immensely from middle school on; syntactically, with age, “syntactic packaging” of clauses across stretches of a given event became denser and use of connectives more specific and appropriate; and in terms of thematic content and narrative structure, what Labov called “evaluative elements” increase to a point where by late adolescence, only a relatively small part of a narrative describes plot-advancing events, the rest expresses the narrator’s attitudes and interpretations. And in another, later study, we found that in expository discussions, 9-year-olds in middle childhood, speakers of different languages, used mainly deontic modals expressing socially conditioned, judgmental attitudes like *must*, *should*, *not right* whereas older students adopted epistemic attitudes to express more objective, individual attitudes to future possibilities in terms of what is *likely*, *may happen*, *could arise*.

Let me conclude by the topic of written language, a topic which is close to your heart and where you have done major research. Comparing the spoken versus written texts produced by the same participants in different languages and genres, we found indications of an unexpected type of U-shaped learning curve. It turned out that 9-year-olds in middle childhood wrote differently than they spoke on the same topic, showing that by this stage they had largely automatic but by no means complete control of written language as a notational system, yet the language they use is on the whole similar to that of their oral productions; 7th-graders aged 12-13, typically turn out to be *en route* to fully proficient literacy in both writing and comprehension of written texts; only by high school do students show a clear command of what you have called “written language as a special discourse style”; interestingly enough, adults tend to merge the differences between their spoken and written texts: They often import written language usages and a higher register into their speech, particularly in the more elevated genre of by expository discourse.

Finally, in recent years I have undertaken to track the developmental route of selected constructions in Modern Hebrew from preschool to adolescence. These include the *binyan* system of verb-patterns, temporal marking (in this journal), derivational morphology, infinitival clauses, impersonal constructions and, what I am now working on, subordination.

These investigations have given me additional insight into the protracted route of language development: from emergence, via acquisition, and on to mastery of linguistic form/function relations.

LT

On a more personal (not sure whether this is personal, I don't know how to qualify it). What would you say has been your greatest satisfaction from your work? I am inviting you to recollect a moment, or a discovery which makes you most proud of being the kind of linguist you are.

RB

Another toughie! As should be clear, I have had enormous satisfaction from the great (psycho)linguists I have had the privilege to learn from. I am happy to have been able, over the years, to trace the path of certain morpho-syntactic features and constructions from toddlerhood to adolescence. Doing so taught me a lot both about development over the life span and the structure and use of Modern Hebrew.

Perhaps the best compliment I ever received was from a great Semitics scholar who submitted me for membership in the Hebrew Academy of Sciences and Humanities: He said of me "Berman took Hebrew out of the ghetto."

LT

Thank you very much for the interview.