Interview with
**Michael Fortescue**


Lachlan Mackenzie (LM)
*The tradition in this journal is to start by asking every interviewee what drew them into linguistics in the first place. So that's my kick-off question, too: **why linguistics**?*


Michael Fortescue (MF)
I suppose the fact that my parents moved to Switzerland, where I spent all my summers while at boarding school, had something to do with it. However, I had already begun teaching myself 'exotic' languages other than the obligatory French, German, and Latin taught at school – as a means of escape from incarceration in that austere institute! I had been through every Teach Yourself language book I could lay my hands on by the time I left. Amongst the smorgasbord of subjects I threw myself into as an undergraduate at Berkeley, I eventually chose Slavic languages and literatures to graduate in. The department was excellent and the choice also afforded me exciting stays in Slavic-speaking countries. I eventually received my MA in the same subject. During vacations and in between degrees I did a lot of travelling, always with relevant grammars at hand. Later I was to live in Japan, France and Denmark for lengthier stays, which further had an impact on my career choice. As an oddity, I should mention that it was thanks to a recommendation by Georges Mounin, whose course on semiotics and avian communication I had attended at Aix-en-Provence, that I came to Edinburgh for my PhD.


LM
*From my knowledge of your work and of you as a person, to label you merely as a 'linguist' does a great disservice to the breadth and depth of your interests and contributions to a range of disciplines. How would you put your understanding of 'language' into a broader perspective?*

MF
From the start my interest was in languages (and literatures) rather than in specific linguistic theory – that came later. In fact I circumnavigated purely theoretical linguistics almost entirely until moving to Edinburgh, and here it was the theories of Functional Linguistics and Pragmatics that attracted me, as reflecting real language typology and structure. My interests were soon expanded to the philosophy and cognitive underpinnings of language, thanks in part to an innovative graduate seminar of Epistemics that was established while I was at Edinburgh (alas, it is no longer offered as such). It combined linguistics, philosophy, psychology and burgeoning AI in a manner I found exhilarating. This certainly affected my choice of dissertation subject. In short, I rapidly came to the conclusion at that time that language can only be fully understood as part of a broader perspective.


LM
*I first met you of course when we were both PhD students in Edinburgh. Your thesis on a discourse production model for the party game Twenty Questions, later published by John*

*Benjamins, combined innovativeness with humour. Your textbook on linguistics, the* Domain of Language*, is extremely humorous. Do you feel that linguistics has taken itself too seriously and needs an injection of light-heartedness?*

MF
Absolutely, I am frankly bored by most of the in-grown generative literature that has dominated our field for so long. Humour itself is of course a largely linguistic matter, as Wally Chafe has admirably illustrated, amongst others. The breaking of rules and expectations is worthy of investigations in its own right, and often has been – with relevance stretching from neurolinguistics to pragmatics. As you know, I have indulged in a side line of writing humorous little books from time to time, something I have never felt as incompatible with serious scholarship!

LM
*It was while writing that thesis that you first delved into West Greenlandic in order to be able to transcribe Eskimos playing Twenty Questions in Copenhagen. This was soon to lead to a career in Eskimology in Denmark and more generally to a lifelong fascination with polysynthetic languages and with what in your valedictory lecture you were to call 'extreme linguistics' – the study of languages with exceptionally long and complex words. What is it about those languages that continue to enthral you?*

MF
Well, they are certainly challenging, but that has perhaps been part of the fascination to me – as an avid jigsaw-puzzler. But so has my interest in the cultures of speakers of these languages, typically hunter-gathers – at least historically so. The spread of Inuit languages across the Arctic is particularly satisfying to study as a dialect continuum, with plenty of interesting sound and semantic changes and virtually no interference from other languages. One thing that has always amazed me is how the complexities of such languages – in particular their morphophonemic and morphosyntactic patterning – could prove so long-lasting and (apparently) easily learnt by young children. It surely reflects a very human love of puzzling out patterns beyond the pressure of tribal 'esotericism', which has often been invoked. This has led me to investigate how Greenlandic children do in fact learn their language, resulting in a contribution to Dan Slobin's seminal series on the cross-linguistic acquisition of language.

LM
*Your expertise in Eskimo languages soon took on a historical dimension with your involvement in attempting to answer the many questions around the roots of Indigenous American languages in Siberia. In your 1998 book* Language Relations across Bering Strait*, you appraised not only linguistic but also archaeological and genetic evidence to present a scenario for the prehistoric spread of Uralo-Siberian languages (and others) into the North of America. You have also been remarkably active as a lexicographer in that (vast) area of the world, with comparative dictionaries of Chukotko-Kamchatkan, Wakashan, and Nivkh. Looking backwards (and forwards), how would you characterize this body of work?*

MF

If I were to characterize it in a single word I would have to say 'enjoyable', both as regards the puzzle-solving and the field work, but I hope that it has also had a more objective usefulness than that! In recent times the tide has turned against attempts at reconstructing long-distance relationships between languages – which has often been over-enthusiastically indulged in, especially in the last century. I see my historical work as falling between the two extremes of speculation based solely on look-alikes and the rigid scepticism of many historical linguists today. I have simply applied tried and tested principles of historical reconstruction to the material at hand as far as they will go. This will inevitably result in a certain amount of uncertainty at deeper time depths – but this is also true of established Indo-European linguistics. What is particularly conducive to historic (that is pre-historic) reconstruction with the languages of northernmost America and Siberia is that the history of their speakers is much less complex than that of Europeans. The opportunities of contact between small groups of hunter-gatherers over vast areas must always have been restricted compared with our part of the world. The forthcoming volume by Ed Vajda and myself on mid-Holocene language connections between North America and Asia will hopefully be seen as 'state-of-the-art', integrating the relevant archaeological and population genetics with our purely linguistic reconstructions of 'Uralo-Siberian' and 'Dene-Yeniseian'.

LM

*You and I came into close contact again in the 1990s and 2000s, when you were working closely with colleagues from the Danish school of Functional Linguistics and I was collaborating with Simon Dik and Kees Hengeveld in the Dutch school of Functional Linguistics. We were interested in what these approaches could mean for understanding the whys and wherefores of findings from language typology, for example the dominance of suffixing over prefixing. How, on reflection, do you now stand with regard to those attempts to model language, both process and pattern?*

MF

When I arrived in Copenhagen, interest in Functional Grammar – in particular Simon Dik's version – was just taking off, whereas, unlike in the Anglo-Saxon world, there was decidedly muted interest in Generative Linguistics. Copenhagen linguists seemed to have been inoculated against overly formal approaches by reaction against the former dominance of Hjelmslev's abstract manner of analysing language. I found that FG was not only well-motivated in terms of structure but had broad typological application, not just limited to a single language – English. In fact it helped me solve a number of unusual grammatical features of West Greenlandic and other languages I was working with. My interest in linguistic universals was first sparked off by this encounter. The universals that FG was coming up with were of the kind that could be related to both human cognition and communicative interaction, both the patterning and the historical processes leading up to it. The Danish variety of FG as it developed was never that far in spirit from the Dutch variety, but was largely motivated by a desire to avoid what for some practitioners was seen as the over-complicated formalism of Dik's model.

LM

*One area in which you have been a model-builder is that of the mental lexicon, notably in your book* A Neural Network Model of Lexical Organization *(2009). You defend the view that, rather than being located in a specific brain area, lexical knowledge is widely distributed across many different cortical areas. Your conclusions were developed outside any neurolinguistics laboratory. How can the individual linguist contribute to our understanding of how the brain processes linguistic signals and knowledge?*

MF

My understanding of the neurological underpinnings of language is based on the experimental work of others – I am no experimentalist myself. What I believe I have offered, as a generalist, is a broader view on this subject than is met with from specialists, who by necessity have tended to focus on very specific phenomena. There has been great progress in our understanding of the relationship between brain and language in recent decades, as expressed for example in the work of Friedemann Pulvermüller, and in connectionist modelling, not to mention in the rapidly expanding field of Cognitive Linguistics. Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of my own contributions to this field is the application of some of Whitehead's seminal concepts to the actual processes involved at a very general cognitive level. More recently, I have investigated how polysemy and the diachronic development of verbs of cognition across languages relate to the brain. Here I have let the facts of language determine theory more directly.

LM

*You mention the British mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, well known for his cooperation with Bertrand Russell on* Principia Mathematica *but hardly for his linguistics. I know you have a particular affinity with him and in various of your publications you have championed his philosophical insights. Could you sketch how his thinking has impacted on your own? In particular, you could perhaps draw out his influence on your 2017 book* The Abstraction Engine, *in which you present the brain as an organ not of computation but of abstraction.*

MF

Abstraction is a cardinal aspect of the brain's functioning that has perhaps not been fully appreciated in its broad extent. Whitehead had a good deal to say on the subject and was definitely well ahead of his time in his theory of prehensions and the notion of "transmutation". This has not been widely appreciated, however, as his all-encompassing but terminologically obscure philosophy cannot be said to be easy going for the reader. My task has been to render the core of his ideas here in terms that general linguists (and psychologists) can evaluate for themselves.

LM

*In your most recent work, you have ventured to explore some intriguing analogies between cognition and the quantum mechanics of sub-atomic particles/waves. Can you lay out some of the similarities you have descried and consider their relevance for the pursuit of linguistics?*

MF

Quantum Cognition is a new and controversial approach to brain function that bases itself on the analogy between certain aspects of quantum theory and cognition – as opposed to a literal interpretation of quantum mechanics as the source not only of memory but of consciousness itself, as advocated by Roger Penrose and others. My own take on this is simply to stress the importance of process and of correlative relationships at all levels of reality, including the linguistic, where context plays such an important role. This has in fact been recognized in linguistics ever since Saussure's structural linguistics – and up to the Functional Discourse Grammar of yourself and Kees!

LM

*Thank you for the interview*.