Interview with
Bernard Comrie

Greville Corbett (GC)
You have had an interesting life. We met several times at a remarkable typology seminar at Cambridge that Ed Keenan ran. Maybe start by telling us about that exciting time.

Bernard Comrie (BC)
Edward Keenan <https://linguistics.ucla.edu/person/edward-keenan/> was a Senior Research Fellow at King's College, Cambridge 1970–1974; I was a Junior Research Fellow there at the same time. Ed organised the typology seminar you mention, although I don't think we used the term "typology" at the time. The idea was to work our way across the world, looking at which languages are spoken where, which language family they belong to, etc., but more importantly to prepare typologically-orientated grammar sketches of representative languages or families. This was surely the first time such a seminar had been organised in Cambridge, maybe in the UK. Some of our sources were rudimentary, e.g. our catalogue of the world's languages was a preprint version of what eventually became Voegelin & Voegelin (1977), long since superseded by Ethnologue <https://www.ethnologue.com/> and Glottolog <https://glottolog.org/>. But grammars of Papuan languages were starting to become available, while Dixon (1972) provided a grammar of an Australian language that not only raised to a new level the study of indigenous languages of Australia but also had a major impact on linguistic theory. So that, coupled with our own expertise mainly in European languages (plus Ed's on Malagasy), meant that we were really able to make progress in giving ourselves an idea of the world's linguistic diversity, an essential first step in the development of later work such as WALS (Haspelmath et al. 2005; Dryer & Haspelmath 2013).

At that time, at least in the British system, it was assumed that a linguist, especially one interested in syntax, would be a specialist in a particular language, which might be English, though I picked Russian as my language (and wrote my Ph.D. thesis on clausal complements in Russian), while others in my cohort selected, for instance, Italian and Welsh. One might make structural comparisons with other languages, but the thought of such comparisons being the basis of a piece of work, the essence of typology, was close to revolutionary.

I had been interested in different languages at least since my early teens, at which time I already started amassing my own collection of grammars, as well as borrowing all those that were available in our local town library. Indeed, it was while I was in grammar school that I carried out my first typological project – although I didn't know it at the time! Our Classics teacher had presented the rule that in Ancient Greek neuter plural subjects require a third person singular verb, and mused out loud whether there might be other languages with a similar rule. I rose to the challenge. With hindsight, I already recognised some of the problems that confront the typologist, e.g. neuter gender is a language-specific category of Ancient Greek, so what counts as comparative material in a language that lacks this category? I don't recall all the details of the report I finally gave to the teacher (and which surely no longer exists), but I do recall including the Georgian rule whereby non-human plural noun phrases trigger singular agreement, and even the (literary) Welsh rule where only third person plural pronouns, but not full noun phrases, trigger plural agreement. One already sees an early inkling of the Animacy Hierarchy – see Corbett (2006: 184–185) for a more professional summary with reference to relevant data.

But until I started working with Keenan my interest in cross-linguistic work was largely a hobby, not fitting into what I was expected to do in my undergraduate or postgraduate studies. So this seminar was certainly a watershed in my development as a linguist: what I had taken to be a pastime turned out to be the main activity for the rest of my professional life! One of the topics Keenan and I worked on alongside the seminar was accessibility to relative clause formation. Ross (1967) has already noted that there are syntactic constraints on relative formation in English, e.g. you cannot relativize a noun phrase that is already inside a relative noun phrase, as in (1) (Ross 1967: 119 – the bracketing is mine).

(1)   a.   *I read [a statement [which was about that man]$_S$]$_{NP}$.*
        b.   **[The man [who I read a [statement [which was about]$_S$]$_{NP}$]$_S$]$_{NP}$ is sick.*

Keenan's work on Malagasy (Keenan 1972) suggested an even stronger constraint there, namely that you can only relativize subjects, i.e. a literal translation of (2a) is possible, but not of (2b), for which one has to use passive voice presenting the patient as subject, as in (2c).

(2)   a.   *the woman [who bought the rice]$_S$*
        b.   *the rice [which the woman bought]$_S$* [* in Malagasy]
        c.   *the rice [which was bought by the woman]$_S$*

We expanded the range of languages considerably, using both published sources and work with native speakers of various languages from Cambridge University's richly international student, faculty and academic visitor pool. The result was Keenan & Comrie (1977) – still by far my most widely cited article!

The need for cross-linguistic work of this kind was clearly being felt across the world, since this period also saw other projects such as the Stanford Language Universals Project led by Joseph H. Greenberg and Charles A. Ferguson in the USA <https://linguistics.stanford.edu/news/truly-archives-language-universals-project>, the UniTyp project led by Hansjakob Seiler in Germany (Seiler et al. 2021) and the Leningrad/St. Petersburg Typological School in Russia <https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Петербургская_типологическая_школа>.

This emphasis on empirical cross-linguistic comparison has been the main hallmark of my work ever since. I am not atheoretical, and certainly not anti-theoretical, but I confess to being data-driven rather than theory-driven.

GC
Given that, which puzzle are you most proud to have solved?

BC
My daughter is an engineer, and I have learned that one of the main differences between an engineer and a scientist is that the engineer has a solution for every problem, while the scientist has a problem for every solution. Have I really ever solved a puzzle? Maybe, but usually only to find that this then gives rise to another puzzle. But I will cite one example that comes close.

I was working on Chukchi (to use the spelling I now prefer) in the mid-1970s, and one of the resources I found invaluable was the verb paradigms given as an appendix to Moll & Inènlikèj (1957). But they are given as essentially unanalysed paradigms (though with indication of some morpheme boundaries), without any discussion of the principles underlying

the rich set of forms. I was able to work out a number of generalisations in the encoding of arguments in the verb morphology for most tense-aspect-moods, e.g. the interaction of nominative-accusative and ergative-absolutive alignment, plus a few portmanteau forms, the use of an inverse prefix for some combinations of an object higher in animacy than the subject, and the use of morphologically antipassive forms for some first-person objects. But as I tried to bring all relevant verb forms together, one form proved recalcitrant, namely the Future Progressive form with a third person singular subject and a third person plural object, for which Moll & Inènlikèj (1957: 180) give the form in (3a), with an inverse prefix, while my analysis predicted the form in (3b), without that prefix.

(3)   a.   *na-ra-pela-rkə-nenat*
             INV-FUT-leave-PROG-3SG>3PL
        b.   *ra-pela-rkə-nenat*
             FUT-leave-PROG-3SG>3PL
             'he/she will be leaving them'

Fortunately I was able to send a letter to my mentor in Leningrad, Vladimir Petrovič Nedjalkov <http://www.glottopedia.org/index.php/Vladimir_P._Nedjalkov; https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Недялков,_Владимир_Петрович>, asking him to ask Petr Ivanovič Inènlikèj, the native-speaker co-compiler of the dictionary, to check the verb form for me. The response came back that Petr Ivanovič was very surprised that I had noticed this misprint, indeed that I was the first to do so. For once I had a theory – well, an analysis, at least – and it identified what turned out to be an error in the published raw data. Puzzle solved! See Comrie (1980: 74) for a discussion in the broader context of Chukchi verb morphology. In terms of publication, it's a footnote in my own article, but it remains a source of immense self-gratification.

GC
I'm sure you know about the BBC radio programme Desert Island Discs, which has been running since 1942. If you were to be marooned on a desert island, which one book (or article) would you take with you? and, as a follow up question, which grammar? and which record?

BC
I'm going to take the parameters of the question seriously, imagining that I am indeed marooned on a desert island. This means that I won't necessarily be going for the best book, article, or grammar, but rather for something that will keep me challenged for however long it takes until I'm rescued.

    For the book, I'll take Sapir's *Language* (1921). I've read the book several times since my undergraduate days, but there are still several parts that I feel that I don't yet understand and that I might benefit from. In particular, as a typologist I have to admit that I've never really come to grips with the typology of languages that Sapir presents. This will be an opportunity to catch up.

    The grammar I'll take with me will be Young and Morgan's *The Navajo language* (1987). Perhaps I'm cheating a little, since this is actually billed as a "grammar and colloquial dictionary", but even the dictionary part contains substantial grammatical information. I've often dreamed of getting more deeply into an Athabaskan language, and this will be my opportunity. The book contains so much material that I'm sure I won't exhaust it, or get bored,

before I'm rescued. One disadvantage is that I won't have any of the other literature on Navajo, or the possibility of collaborating with a native speaker, so I will surely rediscover a lot of wheels and create a few square wheels of my own. But I know that I'll have enough material to keep me engaged however long my stay on the island. I trust, incidentally, that the island will have a big sandy beach on which I can write verb paradigms.

When it comes to the record, music is my hobby rather than my profession, so I feel somewhat less obliged to be responsible, but even so the choice would be difficult. The composer I would most miss is J. S. Bach, but if I take one Bach disc then I will only regret not having taken each of the others. As a challenging work that I might come to terms with during an extended island stay Elgar's Cello concerto would certainly come into consideration, in which case I would take the 1965 recording by Jacqueline du Pré with the London Symphony Orchestra under Sir John Barbirolli (EMI). But come to think of it, you didn't specify that the recording had to be music. So I'll take whatever is at the time the best single-disc introduction to the sounds of the IPA. That way I'll be able to keep my phonetics up to speed for when I'm rescued.

GC
I think we could allow you all of Bach (provided the organ recordings are by Peter Hurford). And, continuing on the favourites theme, have you a favourite example sentence?

BC
Somewhat embarrassingly, my favourite example sentence is one of my own, though it did arise from a comparison with examples provided by others, so the choice is not as narcissistic as it might seem. My example is (4).

(4)   *The man dropped the melon and burst.* (Comrie 1988: 193)

What is interesting about (4) is that although in the real world it's much more likely that the melon would burst after having been dropped, English syntax requires that the two verbs *dropped* and *burst* have the same subject, leading to the bizarre interpretation that the man dropped the melon and the man burst. This contrasts with the situation in other languages where real-world probabilities take precedence over strict syntactic constraints. Lenakel, spoken on Tanna island in southern Vanuatu, has an "echo-subject" prefix *m-* occurring in a second conjunct and requiring one to find an antecedent in the first conjunct. Usually, the antecedent is the subject of the first conjunct, as in (5).

(5)   *magau   r-ɨm-aamh   tom   kani   m-ɨm-akɨmw*
        Magau 3SG-PST-see Tom and   ES-PST-run_away
        'Magau saw Tom and ran away (i.e. Magau ran away).' (Lynch 1983: 215)

However, real-world considerations can override this, as in (6), where it is much more likely that the pawpaw (papaya) splattered than that I did.

(6)   *i-ɨm-alak-hiaav-ín   kesi   m-pwalhepwalhe*
        1EXCL-PST-throw-down-TR pawpaw ES-splatter
        'I dropped a pawpaw and it (the pawpaw) splattered.' (Lynch 1983: 216)

These examples illustrate a more general property of English in contrast to many of the world's other languages, namely the extent to which it is syntactic, with syntactic requirements typically overriding considerations of plausibility of interpretation.

I will permit myself to mention a couple of other favourite examples. At different times in the recent history of linguistics there has been discussion of the notion 'possible lexical item', in the sense: What are the constraints on the semantic content of lexical items? An example that certainly stretches the bounds is found in Tarma Quechua (Adelaar 1977: 456), where the single lexical item *miba* denotes 'child having physical characteristics of a being that has frightened the mother during her pregnancy', and has a derived verb as in (7), which directly expresses the relation between the mother and the animal that frightened her during pregnancy and caused the child to look like that animal.

(7) *wawa-:*   *miba-:ku-ru-n*   *ĩama-ta*
     daughter-1SG   miba-REFL-PFV-3   llama-ACC
     'My daughter "miba"-ed a llama (i.e. gave birth to a child having the physical characteristics of a llama because a llama frightened her during pregnancy).'

The example shows the importance of cultural factors in determining possible lexicalisations. If one lives in a culture where there is a folk belief that a child can show the physical characteristics of an animal that frightened the mother during pregnancy, then the relation between 'daughter' and 'llama' (and implicitly 'child') in (7) not only makes perfect sense but is a good candidate for lexicalisation.

When I was a graduate student at the University of Cambridge, the ascendance of Generative Semantics gave rise to discussion of the kind: Can *kill* be analysed as 'cause to die'? I recall one seminar where the example in question was whether *forget* can be analysed as 'no longer know'. The brilliant computer scientist Karen Spärck Jones <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karen_Sp%C3%A4rck_Jones> was sitting in on the seminar and came up with a beautiful example that has stuck with me ever since – I don't remember the exact wording, but it was along the lines of (8).

(8)   *I no longer know Norwegian, but I have not forgotten Norwegian.*

She was referring to the radical language planning that Norwegian had undergone, changing it from the language she had learned from her mother. This does point to an important difference between *forget* and *know/recognise*: *forget* always characterises the experiencer, while *know/recognise* can depend on either the experiencer or the stimulus (or both); ergo, *forget* cannot be analysed as 'no longer know'.

GC
Let's stay with the theme of favourites. In Monty Python's Life of Brian *(1979), Brian's attempts at protesting in Latin are a linguistic high spot of the film. Have you any similar favourite film or TV show moments?*

BC
Even though I left my native Britain for the US in the late 1970s, my sense of humour has remained solidly British. Although I have been taken to or chanced upon American comedy

events, the only comedy event to which I actually took myself in the US was Monty Python at the Hollywood Bowl (1980).

American comedy, even when widely judged to be hilarious, often leaves me cold. A case in point is Mel Brooks' *Blazing Saddles* (1974). The only line that had me really laughing was when the Indian chief meets the Black sheriff and says "a shvartser", i.e. 'a Black person', but in Yiddish! The sheer incongruity of a traditional indigenous American apparently not knowing English but able to speak Yiddish! I first watched the film with some of my English family members, none of whom knows German (through which I access Yiddish) or Yiddish, and none of whom got this joke, so mine was a solitary chuckle on this occasion. Although presumably not specifically directed at linguists, a joke of this kind can be interpreted as such by linguists.

Another such example comes from Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville* (1965). Lemmy Caution is reintroducing basic moral concepts to one of the brain-washed denizens of Alphaville, Natacha von Braun – despite the names, all characters in the film are French-speakers. Part of the dialogue runs as follows, as Natacha struggles to retrieve the notion of 'conscience':

> *Natacha:*   *Le conscience.*
> *Lemmy:*   *LA conscience.*

Again, the example speaks to linguists, even if not initially addressed to them, as the native speaker gets the gender of the newly recalled French word *conscience* wrong (*le* is the masculine singular definite article), and has to be corrected (the word is feminine in French, whence the need for the feminine singular article *la*). I first saw Alphaville as a University of Cambridge undergraduate at the Cambridge Arts Cinema, which catered largely to the university crowd, almost of all of whom would have had at least several years of "school French". The auditorium erupted into spontaneous laughter, so on this occasion I was able to share in the joke.

Sometimes of course a joke goes even further linguistically, casting light on some linguistic phenomenon, again even if this was not the author's intent. One of my favourite short examples comes from the Morecambe & Wise Show, one of the most popular British TV shows from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. The dialogue between the Duke of Wellington (played by Eric Morecambe) and Napoleon (played by Ernie Wise) runs, as best I remember, as follows:[1]

> *Wellington:*   *Were you speaking English?*
> *Napoleon:*   *Yes.*
> *Wellington:*   *Sorry, I was listening in French.*

Again, I first saw this show with English family members, and this time we all burst into laughter, with one person adding that the joke seemed to have been designed for me, the linguist of the family. Beyond its sheer zaniness, it does illustrate an important feature of speech perception, whether or not the script-writers intended this. We have probably all been in the

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[1.] I have not been able to track down the original episode, although the material is also used in the 1973 Christmas special, where Eric and Ernie reprise these roles with Vanessa Redgrave as Josephine (https://m.imdb.com/title/tt0651160/mediaviewer/rm3447224224/?ref_=tt_md_1).

situation at an international venue of overhearing a conversation and wondering what language it is, only to realise, once we have "tuned in", that it's a language we know well, even our native language, after which everything is readily comprehensible. Speech perception isn't just taking raw acoustic material and processing it – you have to be proactive!

Despite my generally disparaging remarks about American comedy, my favourite line from the movies actually comes from an American film, The Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup* (1933), in which Groucho says of his brother Chico:

> *Chicolini here may talk like an idiot and look like an idiot, but don't let that fool you, he is an idiot.*

The linguist can of course do a pragmatic analysis of the way in which the sentence leads one to expect a contradiction of the initial appearance, only to have this expectation overturned. But I think the line has an important message for linguists. When I was a graduate student, we were taught to look for hidden differences, with one of Chomsky's famous examples being the difference between the following two English sentences:

(9)   *John is eager to please.*
(10)   *John is easy to please.*

Superficially, the only difference is the choice of lexical adjective, but further thought reveals more subtle differences, in particular in that *John* is interpreted as subject of *please* in (9), but as its object in (10). So appearances can be deceptive. But one should not go overboard, and should always be open to the possibility that things are the way they seem. Matsumoto (1997), for instance, argues that the Japanese translation equivalents of the different English constructions in (11)–(13) not only look the same, but actually are the same, with a unified structure whereby a dependent clause is attached as modifier to a head noun (whence the term General Noun-Modifying Clause Construction), as in (14):

(11)   *[the book [which I bought]$_S$]$_{NP}$*
(12)   *[the fact [that Caesar died]$_S$]$_{NP}$*
(13)   *[the smell [of the fish frying]$_S$]$_{NP}$*
(14)   *[[…]$_S$...]$_{NP}$*

This then gave rise to a wide-ranging typological project in which I was myself swept up; see Matsumoto et al. (2017). The fact that translation equivalents look different in English doesn't have to mean that one is dealing with distinct constructions in another language.

GC
Within linguistics you've tackled several areas. Tell us about going beyond our discipline.

BC
I've always been interested in history, including human prehistory, and sometimes linguistics on its own can give us substantial insights, such as the recognition of the Indo-European language family in the late eighteenth century, or the proof that Malagasy, spoken on the island of Madagascar off the east coast of Africa, is an Austronesian language and unrelated to other languages of the African continent. But details often remain unclear – how did Indo-European

languages spread in Eurasia? how did the Malagasy get to Madagascar? I recall that as an undergraduate in Cambridge I asked a question of one of the specialists on the history of the English language. We know that England shifted from being Celtic-speaking (at the time of the Roman conquest) to being Germanic-speaking (around the middle of the first millennium CE). So I asked what this meant "on the ground". Did the Anglo-Saxons kill or drive out the Celtic-speakers (a case of population replacement)? Or did they assimilate them (a case of "language shift")? The answer I received was simple: "We don't know, and we never will."

Well, linguistics on its own may not be able to answer this question, but sometimes cooperation with other disciplines can lead to answers. Sometimes archeology can help, as when the spread of Lapita pottery is linked to the spread of Austronesian-speakers into Oceania (Kirch 1997). But one has to be careful – an uninscribed pot does not in itself tell you the language of the person that made it. Since the late twentieth century, another discipline has made major contributions to our understanding of human prehistory, namely population genetics, and from 1998 to 2015 I had the unique opportunity of directing the Department of Linguistics at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology (MPI-EVA) in Leipzig, an interdisciplinary institute that included a Department of Human Evolution that in turn included a Human Population History Group headed by Mark Stoneking <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_Stoneking>. A question similar to the one I posed for the history of English had also been asked with respect to Azerbaijani, a Turkic language spoken in the Caucasus. From the historical record we knew that Turkic languages had arrived in the Caucasus about 1000 years ago, but until recently had little idea of what happened on the ground. Nasidze et al. (2004) summarises genetic work involving MPI-EVA colleagues and others showing that speakers of Azerbaijani are in terms of population genetics close to speakers of other, non-Turkic languages of the Caucasus, and distant from speakers of other Turkic languages, i.e. we are dealing with a case of language shift. This is a solid result that would have been unimaginable even a few decades ago. Many situations are, of course, more complex, and Pakendorf (2007), a doctoral dissertation written in my department at MPI-EVA, illustrates this from linguistic and population genetic perspectives for the history of the Sakha (Yakuts), a Turkic-speaking people of eastern Siberia who had earlier contact with speakers of a Mongolic language and more recent and ongoing contact with speakers of the Tungusic language Evenki.

Exciting new prospects have been opened up recently by the possibility of sequencing ancient DNA, i.e. DNA extracted from ancient archeological finds (Reich 2018). While earlier population genetic studies were largely restricted to contemporary samples, from which history was reconstructed, we now have direct access to the genomes of humans who lived thousands of years ago. It is as if Romance linguistics had been based solely on Modern French, Modern Italian and Modern Spanish, and we then suddenly discovered texts in Old French, Old Italian and Old Spanish – and Latin! Look out for exciting updates.

GC
Which of your current projects are you most excited about?

BC
This would definitely be the work I am conducting together with Raoul Zamponi on the analysis of the traditional Great Andamanese languages, originally spoken on the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal. There were ten traditionally recognised varieties, though some were probably dialects rather than distinct languages, falling into three main groups, North,

Middle and South Andamanese. All of the traditional varieties are now extinct, the only survival being Present-Day Great Andamanese, an amalgam of North Andamanese varieties though based primarily on Akajeru. Present-Day Great Andamanese is itself highly endangered, with only a handful of elderly speakers, but has fortunately been documented by Anvita Abbi on the basis of fieldwork with the last speakers, including a grammar (Abbi 2013) and a dictionary (Abbi 2012).

Raoul and I have been working with the surviving documentation of the traditional varieties dating from the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. The documentation was done by administrators and an anthropologist, none of them professional linguists, which poses interesting challenges in interpreting some of the material, especially with regard to phonetics. The amount of documentation also varies considerably for the different varieties. A gentle introduction to our work is given in Comrie & Zamponi (2021). So far we have published a grammar of Akabea (Zamponi & Comrie 2020), with a dictionary in progress, and a grammar of Akajeru (Zamponi & Comrie 2021), the latter also including lexical material and incorporating the minimal amount of information on the two traditional varieties Akabo and Akakhora. Work on the other varieties will keep us busy for the next few years.

On the one hand, this is a data-driven project, aiming to make available material on the traditional Great Andamanese varieties with an analysis that makes them accessible to the general linguist. But our work has also turned up features of general linguistic interest, perhaps none more fascinating than the phenomenon of Verb Root Ellipsis, as in the Akabea mini-dialogue in (15), where the verb root *mek-* 'eat' is overt in the command, but omitted in the response, giving rise to a non-past tense suffix that is not attached to any root!

(15) a. *aṭitek reg dama mek-ke*
          now   pig flesh eat-NPST
          'Eat some pork now!'
      b. *yaba=da / wai dila-len   d-o   Ø-ke*
          NEG=COP / FOC evening-LOC 1SG-SBJ.NPST LROOT-NPST
          'No. I will in the evening.' (Zamponi & Comrie 2020: 152)

Verb Root Ellipsis is an exceedingly rare phenomenon cross-linguistically, indeed we know of only two clear examples outside the Great Andamanese family (Inuktitut in Canada and Kwaza in Brazil). Encountering this phenomenon in Akabea led us to write the first substantial treatment of Verb Root Ellipsis as a cross-linguistic phenomenon (Comrie & Zamponi 2019).

We are also aware of our social responsibility to make heard the voices of the speakers of the extinct traditional Great Andamanese varieties. What we can do is limited, since all the documentation was done by outsiders and presents the varieties through those outsiders' prism; there are, for instance, hardly any spontaneous texts. But the languages will live on as part of humanity's intangible heritage not only through the original documentation but also through our analysis, making the material accessible to a general linguistic audience and beyond.

GC
That's a great project. Keep us posted!

Abbreviations

1, 3 – grammatical persons; ACC – accusative; ES – echo subject; EXCL – exclusive; FOC – focus; FUT – future; INV – inverse; LOC – locative; LROOT – ellipted root; NEG – negative; NP – noun phrase; NPST – non-past; PFV – perfective; PL – plural; PROG – progressive; PST – past; REFL – reflexive;   S – sentence; SBJ – subject; TR – transitive

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