

Interview with Nicholas Evans

Anthony Woodbury

Anthony Woodbury (AW):

I want to start out with the beautiful autobiography that you wrote, commissioned by our colleague, Zarina Estrada Fernández in Hermosillo,¹ where you basically talked about your linguistic coming of age and you described your resolutely monoglot childhood growing up in Canberra. So the question then is, do you find it at all paradoxical that you found your way into such a polyglot conception of what linguistics is, even among linguists who are supposed to be quite polyglot in their outlook? And in this, of course, I'd say that you're not alone on the Australian linguistic scene or for that matter the U.S. linguistic scene. I know many Australian linguists who have that same background but have a comparable ethos to you. So, I just want to talk about that.

Nick Evans (NE):

Yeah, it's a very interesting question. I think that the sense of loss or lack is a very powerful drive in life. In my case, that meant that inside our family, there was a lot of talk about languages that earlier generations used to speak. On my father's side, Welsh, which had got lost about two generations before when his poacher grandfather jumped on a boat and emigrated to New Zealand 'ahead of the law'. On my mother's side, her grandfather had been a missionary in Samoa and learned Samoan, worked on the Samoan dictionary, and actually made a speech in Samoan at Robert Louis Stevenson's funeral. And then her father had also been a missionary in India and my mother's mother had basically run away from a lousy school teaching position in the Victorian gold fields to a more interesting job teaching at a girls' school in Calcutta and learnt Bangla. So there was lots of talk about other languages.

But there was also this thing that I mentioned in the article for Zarina: you grow up, you walk around in the bush, which I did a lot of, like all Canberra kids at that time, and you see trees, plants, birds, you don't really know their names, but you felt very detached from what's around you. I think that somehow subconsciously makes you want to regain what you didn't have. So, possibly if I had had a more polyglot upbringing, say in central Europe, let's say Slovakia, then I would have had a head start on learning other languages, but I wouldn't have had that powerful emotional need to do so. I think that's something that a lot of people here in Australia have felt, and probably in North America too. It also means that when Indigenous people who've been dispossessed of their language talk to me about their wish to learn it back, I'm not so skeptical, as some would be. I don't really believe in a critical period. I speak quite a few languages now, but I didn't learn any of them until my mid-20s. And it's not that I speak them perfectly, but you know, you get there if you've got the drive.

¹ Evans, Nicholas. 2009. On never quite becoming a linguist. In Zarina Estrada Fernández, Albert Álvarez González and María Belén Carpio. (eds.) *Ser lingüista: un oficio diverso y polifacético. Diez años de la Maestría en Lingüística*. Hermosillo, Sonora: Editorial Unison. Pp. 77-98.

AW

Right. Gradually slower and slower maybe. Unfortunately, as we both know! That absolutely, definitely resonates on the North American side, too, for sure. I want to basically start out by talking about your beginnings as a linguist. One of the first things that you did was to work on Kayardild on Mornington Island in Queensland. And that was your PhD, it was also your 1995 grammar. Tell us about that.

NE

Yeah, God I was lucky, I've got to say. And I've got Ken Hale to thank for that. Because he'd been up there and worked on Lardil on Mornington Island and had recently visited the island to present a draft Xerox copy (those were the days) of a Lardil dictionary he'd been working on for a while.² And that was very positively received. And people from the Kayardild community there were really keen to have something similar. They asked Ken if he would come back and work on Kayardild. And he said, look, sorry, I've just got my hands full with a lot of other projects. Ask Bob Dixon, he's always got students coming up. So, the church worker there³ actually wrote down to Bob Dixon.

I was about to go off to a job in China. I was sick of being a broke student. I'd bought a suit and was going to leave in two days. And Bob Dixon just rang me up out of the blue and said, hey, come in, Nick, I want to talk to you. So, I did. And he said, well, would you be interested in going to work on Kayardild? So, I went to the library, read what little there was, which was mostly by the ethnographer, Norman Tindale, and then said, OK, that's it. You know, like, Kayardild's not going to be around much longer. They were fascinating people on Tindale's description, and Chinese is always going to be there. So, that's what I did.

And it was the most open-hearted welcome you could imagine. The evening I arrived, I went down the beach. I had to wait because all of the Kayardild men were out on a sandbar spearing fish. It was quite cold. It was wintertime. They were there. There was this sort of smell of cooking dugong and turtle fat, which you might recognise or not from the Arctic. But the evening I went down to the beach and all the men just started teaching me and they were grabbing me here and there, just saying, you know, *marrald!*,⁴ *kirrk!*, *thukand!*, and so on, *miburld!*, just grabbing me and touching me and saying these words. And it was just so primal, you know, that's not how you learn a language in a classroom or with Duolingo. There it's mediated by an English word, but that wasn't the case. It was just very experiential, like being a kid. I think that helped a lot.

And then I was very lucky that Darwin Moodoonuthi, who was the community leader, and his wife, May, adopted me. It took a little while to sort out the kinship relationship because at first they were a bit deferential to this whitefella who'd arrived. But when they saw how stupid and useless I was, they thought, no, we'd better make you our son. So, that's how I came in there. And it really was like having a second childhood, I would say, in every sense of the word. My dad used to send messages to Darwin. He actually wrote a poem about Darwin near the time that he died, because he felt so happy that I was getting this second upbringing. And of course, it means that you learn the language in a very experiential way, which was the case all the way through with

² Later published as Ngakulumungan Kangka Leman. 1997. *Lardil dictionary*. Gununa: Mornington Shire Council.

³ David 'Scotty' Maxwell, a lay worker for the Uniting Church on Mornington Island.

⁴ These are the Kayardild words for 'ear', 'nose', 'chin' and 'eye' respectively.

Kayardild. It had to be like that because hardly anyone was really bilingual in English. So, the only way I could learn the language was going to be by using it, which might mean going out hunting, talking to people, drinking with people, all of that stuff. So, I wish I could have had more other ways of approaching it because it remains the most fascinating language I've ever encountered, but that wasn't possible at the time.

AW

So that's quite a rare situation then, that the language had so few speakers and yet those speakers were monolingual. I presume that by now probably things have changed quite a bit.

NE

It's terrible now. You just don't hear it spoken anymore. There's probably a couple of very old people who can still speak it or understand it, but they're not together, that's the thing. There was a sort of ghetto, partly on the beach in what we call humpies, sort of lean-tos, and partly in a couple of adjoining houses. So the acoustic environment was that you could hear it spoken, and especially the women, who spoke it really raucously, constantly laughing. So in the early 1980s you were just bombarded with it. Then at some point that just changed. It was one of those unforeseen consequences of a series of little decisions, let's bring those poor people up from the beach, let's give this family a bigger house. And gradually that spatial contiguity was destroyed, in addition to people passing away, of course.

AW

It's one of those kinds of observed stories over time of these things that are said to occur precipitously, but nobody actually knows very well just how, unless they bother to dredge it up.

NE

Yeah, and the terrible thing is, I wasn't doing nearly enough of what I could have been doing, like taking notes of who was living where, in what household at what point, and so on. I just didn't think to do it. I hadn't got a proper training in anthropology or anything. I definitely should have done more of that. But there are only so many hours in the day. And I was trying to wrap my brain around the Kayardild language, which needed a lot of attention.

AW

As we know from the heft of the book that you published, the grammar that you published of Kayardild.⁵ So after that, you have basically been quite itinerant with respect to languages. You moved to the west, to Western Arnhem Land, and you did work there with languages like Bininj Gunwok, Dalabon, Iwaidja, Ilgar, Marrgu, and I'm just interested in how that was different and the kinds of settings that you encountered there, the people and the languages.

⁵ Evans Nicholas. 1995. *A Grammar of Kayardild*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. xxv + 837 pp.

NE

Yes. It was another world. And partly when I started work it was on Gun-djeihmi⁶ because in the Kakadu National Park they wanted linguists to come and work on that, so I did. And then that gradually drew me in the world of Bininj Kunwok, of which Gun-djeihmi was one variety. And there was a world where kids were (and are) still speaking the language, it was (and is) still the vehicle of everyday life. You absolutely had to speak it if you wanted to understand what was going on.

And people were in some areas still living in traditional paperbark shelters. Memorably, a couple of times I slept the night on these sort of paperbark beds, I guess you could call them, in a rock shelter with paintings done by the grandfather of the person who was teaching me the language. So like it was very, 'oh, here I am, this is how people have always lived'. I didn't know at the time that this is where the earliest dates for Australian settlement would end up like at Madjedbebe 65,000 years ago, that's in Gun-djeihmi country.

Part of it was just this sense of incredible cultural richness, but also of being in a polyglot society where everyone's joined up, where ceremonies need to draw on a whole lot of different languages and clans, where the word for 'song' also means 'leg', which is really interesting. *Man-karre* in Kunwinjku, for example, which really means 'calf' or 'leg', but it's also like a leg of a song cycle, that is an episode or it could be a verse, and then it comes to mean 'song' in general and 'song and dance and ceremonial culture' in general. So, it's a very interesting semantic chain. But the point is that those really important songs, you know, can go on for nights and nights and nights, and that's how the universe is kept rolling along. You have to have these ceremonies and that's how the social universe is kept rolling along because you're initiating new young men into that. They can only work when everyone gets together. No one has all of the keys. One group knows something, another group knows something else, another group knows something else. Each in their language, it's got to all be brought together for the ceremony to take place.

It's the opposite of our universalist view of language or Wikipedia. Anything can be up there, which goes back to the Enlightenment and the French encyclopédistes. Well, that's of course got something to say for it. That's why we're scientists, right? But on the other hand, it brings this arrogance that any person can understand anything from any language. And in principle, the contents of any culture can be made available for all the world, which then makes appropriation very easy. Whereas the philosophy in Western Arnhem Land, like elsewhere in Indigenous Australia, says: You've got your stuff, guys. We respect that. You keep charge of it, and we will need you because that's your role. So, that's how languages fit together in a multilingual ecology of knowledge. I hadn't got that on Bentinck Island because it was very much a literally isolated group, monolingual, which is unusual in the Australian context. But in Arnhem Land it was there front and centre. And you also realise that if you were not going to be like a social moron, you had to speak several languages. I'd always thought, oh, you're a linguist, I'll go and work on language X. That's fine. Suddenly I was, oh, no, I've actually got to learn X and Y and Z, not just before I can be taken seriously around here, but also before I can understand what's going on. So, gradually I began to move in that direction.

⁶ A dialect of Bininj Kunwok (aka Bininj Gun-wok), incorporated into Evans, Nicholas. 2003. *Bininj Gun-wok: a pan-dialectal grammar of Mayali, Kunwinjku and Kune*. (2 volumes). Canberra: Pacific Linguistics. Also spelled Kundjeyhmi.

And also, the languages were structurally, in some ways, the opposite of Kayardild, at least if you just think of morphological typology. Kayardild is arguably the most extreme dependent marking language in the world. And languages like Bininj Kunwok and Dalabon are really heavily polysynthetic head marking. So it was nice to work at those two ends of the spectrum, even though in their phonologies and their semantics, you feel you're in the same world, more or less, with some variations. But in terms of the morphosyntax, you think, oh no, I just moved across into another universe, except that word order still has nothing to do with it.

AW

Yeah. So when you talk about the polyglot environment, it makes me think of your Bininj Gunwok grammar, which is almost kind of vertiginous in the sense that you tried to cover lots and lots and lots of different varieties and dialects of the language, all in one grammar. There aren't too many examples of that, but it kind of reminded me of Stanley Newman's Grammar of Yokuts⁷ which covered six substantially different varieties of the language or the language family. And I'm just curious what things came out of that for you, what things were creaky or difficult. I'd just be interested to know what you ended up concluding about that enterprise.

NE

Yeah, well, I think it's like seeing depth somehow. That is, we're binocular creatures with our two eyes giving us some depth. And as we speak now, I'm surrounded by flies,⁸ which of course have a lot more in their compound eyes. You're right. I think the more you add that in, the more you begin to see the dynamics of what's going on. I'd say this gave rise to what turned into another major interest of mine, that is just seeing how these variations can form your understanding of what's going on. And they can also help you make sense of little resistant pockets, which seem to be exceptions. But then when you look at how they're played out in another variety, you say, oh, no, that's why it's like that. It's like what Larry Hyman says, in his very nice article in the Ratliff and Newman book⁹: languages have stories to tell, and by putting closely related languages together, you can get more of the story. So, that's how I found it useful.

Actually writing it, and probably even worse, actually reading it, is a problem, because you get cluttered. You just think, come on, move along with the main narrative. We don't want to go down one more foxhole, hearing about four more dialects or six more dialects, how they do it. So, I don't really recommend it as an expository device, but I think it was useful to do. That's another sort of interest as we start to see things much more and more as hypertext, how we might conceive of structures that will allow you to sort of proceed linearly down a single variety of your choice. But at the same time allow the reader to decide, okay, this is the story, but from any point in that variety, I can jump down to look at what happened there?

It also just helped remove some problems of analysis. I've always thought that the best attitude to research is to make your problems your friends. We get them, and they can drive us crazy, right? But sometimes there's a good reason they're there. And if you listen to the problem,

⁷ Newman, Stanley. 1944. *Yokuts language of California*. Viking Fund Publications in Anthropology 2.

⁸ The interview was conducted by Zoom, and Evans was at Guerilla Bay on the south coast of New South Wales.

⁹ Hyman, Larry. 2001. Fieldwork as a state of mind. Pp. 15-33 in Newman, Paul, and Ratliff, Martha. *Linguistic Fieldwork*. Cambridge University Press.

you'll start to understand something. For example, I was busting my brains trying to get some cells of the transitive paradigm filled out, like 'they two acting upon we two' or something like that. And different speakers were giving different answers. Back at that naïve stage of my career, I thought, well, either one person's wrong or I didn't ask the question properly or whatever, rather than, oh, yeah, well, that's what you would expect, we don't expect everyone to have the same values. So I put all the forms in. That's one of the most unreadable parts of that grammar, actually. But then more recently, Alexandra Marley did an absolutely brilliant PhD¹⁰ looking at that, and she found this most incredible variation in how people organise those paradigms. She looked at about 40 people, and there's about 15 systems out there. So, the old Saussurean idea of copies of the same dictionary being put in everyone's head, it just doesn't add up. And we know since Labov, of course, that variation is part of life. But somehow it doesn't strike you as deeply when you're just thinking of, do you have post-vocalic r or not, or how do you pronounce this vowel, as when you look at the absolute nucleus of grammatical organisation, which are those pronominal prefixes. You just think, God, people still manage to talk to each other and sometimes don't even seem to notice that there's differences there.

AW

Let's now move even further along. About 15 years ago, after all of this work that you've been doing in Australia, you started working in Papua New Guinea, along the south coast. What impact has that had on your work? And what was it like to change? And that obviously has linguistic as well as non-linguistic dimensions.

NE

Yeah, look, there was a lot to that. I just felt I was growing a bit too comfortable and that I had what anthropologists call a secondary ethnicity, just starting to take the world for granted again within the parameters of Australian languages. I thought, I better jump myself out of that. But I've also always been interested in the possible deep time connections with New Guinea.

The funny thing is when you look there, I mean from where you're sitting in North America, it might look like the same neighbourhood, right? And it's not far geographically: when I take the banana boat in from Daru to the Mae Kussa River to do my fieldwork, I wobble in and out of the Australian telecommunications system and every now and then sitting hungry in a boat I'll get a little Australian phone beep saying 'order a Domino's pizza we deliver anywhere' – I haven't tried testing them out.

But you get there and you're in another universe. I might as well have gone to Japan or something. And everything about how things work is different. Now, one of the things that was most exciting was that for the first time in my life I worked on what we always say we train people to do, that is just work on a language from scratch, and even on a language family from scratch. It's appropriate that the language names there, like Nen, Nmbo, Idi and so on¹¹ are all what Pat

¹⁰ Marley, A. 2020. Kundangkudjikaberrk: Variation and change in Bininj Kunwok, a Gunwinyguan language of Northern Australia. PhD Thesis. The Australian National University.

¹¹ Evans, Nicholas. 2012. Even more diverse than we thought: the multiplicity of Trans-Fly languages. In Nicholas Evans & Marian Klamer (eds.) *Melanesian Languages on the Edge of Asia: Challenges for the 21st Century. Language Documentation and Conservation Special Publication No. 5*: 109-149.

McConvell calls shibbolethonyms, meaning ‘what’, because ‘what?’ was certainly a question that came up there again and again during my first few years of fieldwork. I’m talking about the Yam family,¹² which we now know has 20 or 25 languages in it – there was virtually nothing when I started on it in 2008. I mean, just tiny little things from the 19th century, basically. So you just have to work it all out, and that’s fun, as you know. I also found, again, as I had found in North Australia, this was sort of familiar, that people with very little or no formal schooling were completely switched on to language, loved talking about it in very sophisticated ways. Sometimes they didn’t have a name for something, but they’d always wondered about it. And, you know, you introduce a term like ‘infinitive’ or something, and people immediately take it and run with it. You need the infinitives for Nen because the verbs in it are like a burger with a lot of very fat breadroll and condiments on either side, these welters of prefixes and suffixes, and next to nothing in the middle or just a fine sliver of meat, which might be the verb root or a chewed-up version of it. So, you’ve got a lot of stuff to peel away before you get to the core. And if you’re making a dictionary, and when a verb can have four and a half thousand forms, you’ve really got to get that infinitive or you can’t make sense of the chaos. It took me a while to find a nice way to get these – the simplest is to make them complements of a ‘phasal verb’ like ‘begin to’, then peel off the allative suffix after the infinitive, which is just *-t*, e.g. *gnakatawn* ‘I watched you (a long time ago)’, *wakaest napamdn* ‘I began watching you’, infinitive *wakaes* ‘to watch, see’ (root elements underlined). People quickly got the hang of this little trick so that if I asked my very talented Nen teacher Jimmy Nébni to help me find the infinitive of an exuberantly inflected form he could pluck it out for me.

People there speak very good English – I regularly get Whatsapp messages from Jimmy, who has a Grade 5 or 6 education, asking me to explain what words like ‘exogamous’ or ‘moiety’ mean as he reads his way through a tattered old ethnography of the next-door tribe I left in the village¹³. That means they’re very switched on to semantic nuance. One time I was doing some elicitation and asked ‘how would I say, I’ve finished working in the garden’, because I was just trying to get the infinitive of work, which you could get in this frame (since ‘finish’ is another phasal verb). And he replied, what do you mean exactly? Do you mean you stopped working in the garden or you finished working in the garden? Because he was very, you know, keyed in to, you know, had you actually completed working, all the work that needed to be done, or you just took a break. So, that sort of thing is a delight.

People there are very keen house builders, that’s where a lot of the creative efforts go into, alongside string games and weaving as major cultural preoccupations. And they love using this metaphor of building the language. They constantly say things like, oh, the ancestors were building that or we’re rebuilding it here, we’re rebuilding it there. So, there’s this real sense among Nen speakers of this creative aspect to language structure emerging. For a later project I did, the Wellsprings of Linguistic Diversity,¹⁴ one of the start-up ideas I had for that was just talking to

¹² Evans, Nicholas, Wayan Arka, Matthew Carroll, Yun Jung Choi, Christian Döhler, Volker Gast, Eri Kashima, Emil Mittag, Bruno Olsson, Kyla Quinn, Dineke Schokkin, Philip Tama, Charlotte van Tongeren and Jeff Siegel. 2018. The languages of Southern New Guinea. In Bill Palmer (ed.), *The Languages and Linguistics of New Guinea: A Comprehensive Guide*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter. Pp. 641-774.

¹³ Williams, F.E. 1936. *Papuans of the Trans-Fly*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

¹⁴ See Evans, Nicholas. 2018. The dynamics of language diversity. In R. Mesthrie & D. Bradley (eds.) *The Dynamics of Language*. Capetown: Capetown University Press. Pp. 12-35.

people in the village of Bimadbn about the fact that a lot of, especially women, were married into the village from another language background. And although they mastered Nen pretty well, they would introduce some small changes and people were just talking about how far that was influencing the language and so on. Very much an indigenous appreciation of how multilingualism can affect language structure. And then the thing that's really struck me, and one of the things I've become more and more interested in, is how much people seem to be deliberately fostering diversification there. I find that a really fascinating area because one of the orthodoxies we have is that bilingualism produces convergence. Obviously, it often does, but it can also drive things in the other way.¹⁵ And I'm increasingly convinced that in very multilingual places, there's just a lot of memes floating around – or linguemes, to use Bill Croft's more specific term. So if you're wanting to sort of simultaneously align and diverge from each of the groups that you deal with, you've just got so much linguistic material with which to do that. It's not really something that is easy to test at this point, but that's my best current guess of how we can account for this extraordinary linguistic diversity there in New Guinea.

The other thing that I really hit there, from having worked in Australia where all the languages are cut from the same cloth, is you just walk one village to the east, it's like walking from Spanish to Basque. You know, these really are different, different languages – one ergative, the other accusative; one with clusivity, the other without it; the one syncretising second and third person through hundreds of cells of its verb paradigms, the other syncretising first and third person – and people manage to maintain daily, intimate bilingualism, since so many marry across this linguistic divide, without any significant convergence of systems and even with some divergence.

There's a view of New Guinea that what drives the language diversity there is these ravines and valleys and inaccessible mountains in the central cordillera. But all of the places where you get those mountains and ravines and inaccessible areas, they all belong to one language family, Trans New Guinea. Where you get the real diversity is where you just have to walk to your neighbour, just like you'd be walking to the shop, not hard at all. But it's precisely in those cases that ownership rights need to be shown, by a sort of linguistic passport or title deed or something like that. How do we develop models to account for this – honouring the seminal work of William Thurston in New Britain¹⁶ and before him the work of Amund Larsen on Nabooopposition?¹⁷ Really testing these properly on a regional and then global scale, and finding the smoking gun of linguistic divergence in multilingual speech communities, is a big challenge we're just starting to tackle.

¹⁵ See Evans, Nicholas. 2019. Linguistic divergence under contact. In Michela Cennamo & Claudia Fabrizio (eds), *Selected Papers from the 22nd International Conference on Historical Linguistics*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins. Pp. 563-591.

¹⁶ Thurston, William R. 1987. *Processes of Change in the Languages of North-Western New Britain*. Pacific Linguistics, Series B, No. 99.

Thurston, William R. 1988. "How Exoteric Languages Build a Lexicon: Esoterogeny in West Britain." In *VICAL 1: Oceanic Languages; Papers from the Fifth International Conference on Austronesian Linguistics (Part II)*, edited by Roy Harlow and Robin Hooper, 555–79. Auckland: Linguistics Society of New Zealand.

¹⁷ Larsen, Amund B. (1917) 1993. Nabooopposition – knot. In Ernst Håkon Jahr & Ove Lorentz (eds.), *Historisk språkvitenskap* [Studier i norsk språkvitenskap 5], 97–131. Oslo: Novus.

AW

One idea that I see as part of that, and that I think is a very worthwhile thing to pursue, both in that context, but also more widely, is the idea that a language isn't just something that kind of plays out various principles or various expectations or various mindsets that we may have, either cognitive or social, but also becomes, even if not always totally consciously, at least what you might call an intellectual product, a product of people's genius, let's say. And I really like that way of thinking of things, and I think that it can be revolutionary and transformative as linguists and others learn ways to be able to show those kinds of things. Sometimes it's something you suspect, but you can't put your finger on why. You see how beautiful the structure of Algonquian verbs is, but you don't know exactly who to credit for that, but to try to see these things really as intellectual products that we as linguists have at least some capacity to bring out. And I just like where they're headed. So, the metaphor of building that you talk about is really maybe worth writing about or expanding on to try to see how far it gets pushed.

NE

Yeah, there's a lot to be done in this sort of whole area of Indigenous metalanguage – of how people talk about language – because it's so revealing and fascinating. With the building metaphor it still has a slightly over-purposive feel to it. I really like Rudi Keller's notion of objects of the third kind,¹⁸ which are the unintentional products of intentional activity. Keller argues that this is the right way to see language, and I think that most of the time that's right. You can have very smart and complex intentional activity producing very complex unintended products. And that's the difference between the sort of textbook examples we see in the non-linguistic literature on 'invisible hand' processes, which might be equal length supermarket queues or the operation of markets on prices that economics use. I think in language it's just like several orders of complexity more than that. People have to simultaneously try to satisfy so many demands when they use language, and that's what makes it so complex – we know from evolutionary simulations that the more selection constraints you need to satisfy, the more optimal solutions there are.¹⁹

AW

I want to turn now to questions of linguistics and society, and I guess we are segueing in this direction anyway. And I want to start out in more concrete questions and then start to move to more general ones. To start out, let's talk about linguistics in Australia and over the last few decades, basically springing upon the world scene; there has been a linguistics in Australia like no other, really. I found myself admiring it from afar since I was an undergraduate in the early 1970s and making regular pilgrimages since then.

NE

Which we're very grateful for.

¹⁸ Keller, Rudi. 1994. *On language change: the invisible hand in language*. London: Routledge
Keller, Rudi. 1998. *A theory of linguistic signs*. Oxford University Press.

¹⁹ See e.g. Niklas, Karl J. 1994. Morphological evolution through complex domains of fitness. *PNAS* 91. 6772–6779.

AW

But what do you think, what's up with that? What do you think the reasons are for the uniqueness and importance of Australia in our discipline? It's been really special.

NE

I think you've got to say that the first fact is just the underlying linguistic diversity of the area, that is all of Australia's indigenous languages, then all of the languages of the Pacific and the New Guinea and so on. And in each of those, there are these remarkable linguistic cultures that are sort of waiting to be listened to in a way. That produces a weird tension of an officially monoglot, anglophone nation being there at the epicentre of the world's linguistic diversity.

But that doesn't explain really what happened, because up until, I'd say, the early 1960s or so, there was very little going on here in terms of academic linguistics. There was Arthur Capell, who was the best we had at the time but wasn't really a great linguist.

But then a whole cast of characters who arrived here between 1960 and 1975, I would say, whose combination gave it the stamp that it's got. There was Ken Hale, who, as we know, was a linguistic genius, and his fascination and his ability just to get through to what was going on is remarkable. Then the homegrown boy, Geoff O'Grady, who got into linguistics while working as a stockman in the Pilbara region and trying to get his mind around the Nyangumarta language spoken by his mates, went off to the University of Indiana to get a doctorate in linguistics, and travelled around half of Australia with Ken Hale getting down word lists and other recordings; it was their work that revealed the importance of Pama-Nyungan as a huge family of Australian languages covering seven-eighths of the continent. And then Bob Dixon arriving, working on Dyrbal and other languages of the Cairns rainforest area. Bob was the one who got me into linguistics and taught me a lot of the trade in an unfailingly original and encouraging way.

Then Anna Wierzbicka, who Bob recruited sort of by accident. She happened to be married to a Polish-speaking Australian political scientist who she'd met in Eastern Europe. So, it's really thanks to her husband, John Bessemers, that she came out here – but then Bob had the astuteness to hire her. Even if you don't agree with every aspect of her theories, what Anna always did was give the confidence to think that meaning was tractable and to try and put into words what was going on. I've never met anyone with such a fine semantic ear. That was at a time when semantics was dominated by formalizing theories, that were pretty insensitive actually to real usage, so her approach was a welcome contrast. Plus she brought this lofty and typically Polish command of five centuries of European linguistic theory which she would ineffably transmit to students.

And then, equally important, was the American anthropological linguistic tradition which especially came in with Bruce Rigsby to University of Queensland, who trained some great anthropological linguists like Peter Sutton. And a whole lot of other anthropologists who came to ANU as fellows, and who were deeply interested in language: scholars like John Haviland, Roger Keesing (who then invited people like Steve Levinson, Penny Brown, Elinore Ochs and Alessandro Duranti as visitors), James Fox and Geoffrey Benjamin – and a stream of Chicago-school anthropological linguists like Michael Silverstein, Francesca Merlan and Alan Rumsey who all added their own spice to the soup. Not to mention Jeffrey Heath and his insistence on grounding grammar-writing in actual texts, and Adam Kendon, working on Warlpiri Sign Language, and gesture.

So those were some of the people who really got things going, I would say. And then there was like a generation of Australian linguists, I wouldn't be the youngest in this generation, they probably started about 10 years before me, with people like Michael Walsh, Peter Austin, Terry Crowley, Cliff Goddard, Hilary Chappell, Jane Simpson and so on, who were just hungry for something linguistic. They were typically coming to the ANU, doing some Asian language like Japanese for Peter, Indonesian for Terry, Chinese for Jane and Hilary, and so on. At that time there was an Asian Studies degree at the ANU – and special scholarships to the ANU to take it, which attracted people like Peter and Terry – whose structure was that you did an Asian language, paired either with economics or with linguistics. I know Peter started off thinking he was going to do Japanese and economics but there was a perceptive course advisor – I think it was the great Japanologist Professor Alfonso – who said, why don't you try linguistics? Virtually none of us started out knowing what linguistics was, except for Terry Crowley, who grew up in the country town of Shepparton, orchard country, already wanting, eccentrically, to be a philologist. So he already knew, but most people didn't – they just got sort of drawn in. There was also a short-lived system of Master's-level coursework scholarship, which Bob Dixon did much to set up, and which let people change track into linguistics after studying other subjects – this was instrumental in recruiting people like Jane Simpson (from Old English and Chinese), David Nash (from mathematics) and myself (from psychology and biology) who had little or no linguistics background from their earlier studies. So I think it was a particular configuration of ideas, personalities, and academic support, at a historical moment where there was also, you know, people felt like it's time to start attending to these things.

AW

Another thing you could say about it is that it wasn't just that the ball got rolling in all of the ways that you talk about, with all of the interests and the people that you mentioned, but it keeps progressing. I want to touch on the Australian Research Council's Centre for Excellence in the Dynamics of Language (CoEDL) that started up about a decade ago under the auspices of you, basically: you've been leading this group, called CoEDL for its acronym. I was lucky enough to have something of a front seat as a member of the Advisory Committee, so I know a little bit about all of the amazing things that happened. But what's especially notable to me is how you sought to bring together all of the language sciences and humanities around the idea of linguistic diversity, not only that which was fostered in this earlier phase that you talk about, but going way beyond that, touching on so many things regarding indigenous heritage and that of the Pacific and of the whole Earth; language in the public sphere; language technology, just to cite a little bit of it. What's your take on it now that CoEDL has run its course? What do you think has come out of it? What did the process of leading something like that mean for you and do for you?

NE

Well, looking at the first question first, I think that the shift from talking about language sciences instead of just linguistics is really key. When we launched it, I said that language is too important to be left just to the linguists. I am of course a linguist myself, so I don't want to downplay what we know at all, but there's a lot we don't do habitually. Having anthropologists, philosophers, psychologists, computer scientists and roboticists, evolutionary biologists, and speech therapists

around the table talking regularly over eight years about these problems was really enriching and got us all out of our comfort zones.

Naturally it took a while to establish the common ground. Just try using the word *ergative* to anyone who's not a linguist, they'll just roll up their eyes and either get angry or turn off. And it was the same for the terms other fields were using as well. So, part of it was just getting each other to see what things were interesting. And there were blind spots on all sides. So, just to give an example from philosophy: linguists and anthropologists are very interested in kinship, but there was no philosophy of kinship. It wasn't regarded as a problem for philosophers to think about. But through CoEDL, because we had all of these workshops and incredible philosophers like Kim Sterelny there, and at some point, we decided to just use some funds to organise a workshop on kinship, evolution, philosophy and linguistics, which I co-organised with Kim and Steve Levinson, who was also part of the centre, as you know. And we found out some amazing things at that.²⁰

That was possible because CoEDL could take a high-risk approach. With the Australian Research Council, they give you a high bar to get it – and we were very surprised but delighted when we did, since almost all of their Centres of Excellence before that had been in the hard sciences. They basically say, write 550 pages to convince us that you guys deserve to be trusted. But if you're lucky enough to get through those trials, as we were, they give you a lot of trust to work out what to do, which means you can take some risks. No research can be good if you always have to come up with exactly what you said you'd do – that's the tyranny of deliverables. You know, that removes the drive to go out on a limb and see what's out there on that wobbly outer branch.

Another thing that we've been building is the ELPIS pipeline for 'accelerated transcription', as part of a drive to build up the size of corpora we can build for under-resourced languages. That grew out of a CoEDL 'Tools Summit' workshop that Nick Thieberger organized in 2016. At that workshop Janet Wiles was there – who's an absolutely brilliant computer scientist – and she pointed out that linguists seem to spend a lot of time just talking about how to get from 98 to 100 per cent in your analysis. But what about the stuff where you're only at 5 per cent? You know, this is where engineers can help you. Because if you're an IT person, if you move up, say, from a 12 per cent success rate to 17 per cent, you're a hero. So she said something along the lines of: just tell me what sort of problems do you have like that, where are your bottlenecks and what you would like to have? And the field linguists identified transcription as one of those – as you'd know, it often takes an hour's work to transcribe a minute of text in a language you're working on in the field. Now we're not talking about the unrealistic and even undesirable sense of automated transcription. That would be the kiss of death for real field work – you'd get false positives for the stuff you don't know yet, whereas so many of your most interesting discoveries as a field-worker come up precisely at the moments that you're puzzled by something you CAN'T hear, in your language teachers are able to. Rather, what we're talking about is assisted transcription where you can get all the easy stuff done in an automatically aided way, then you can use your time more productively to focus on the hard bits that remain. So with Janet, Ben Foley, Daan van Esch from

²⁰ See Sterelny, Kim, Nicholas Evans & Stephen Levinson. 2021. Kinship revisited. *Biological Theory. Thematic Issue 'Evolution of kinship systems'* As well as the other articles in this volume.

Google, and others, CoEDL was able to build this up and brought in some interestingly unexpected players like Boeing and so on, to help us with this.²¹

I won't say we've got it all cracked, but still we've got some very promising tools that linguists will be able to use. You might say, well, isn't that what's available online with automatic transcription and so on that I'm going to be doing with this Zoom interview after?²² Well, it's not, because if you think of the world's 7,000 languages and look at what languages these great tools are now available for, there's about 100 or 150. And the training sets needed for those run into the millions of words. I read an article recently in *The Guardian* that referred to a corpus as 'small' that only had 10 million words in it. Well, I'm sure you and I would die for a corpus that size for any of the languages we work on. For example, Christian Döhler did his PhD with us at ANU – a brilliant field worker, and very switched on technologically – on a Papuan language called Komnzo, distantly related to Nen. At the end of five years, which was an extra long PhD, thanks to some extra funding from the Volkswagen Foundations DOBES project, he had a corpus of about 12,000 words. So, you know, how can we manage to get more generous corpora for underdescribed languages? Because I think if we take seriously the grounding of linguistic work in real speech, not just i-language or grammars mainly based on elicitation, then we do want at least a million-word corpus for these. That seems like a very, very long way off, for any of the languages I work on, although Alan Rumsey, also a part of CoEDL, is the first person to break the million-word barrier for a Papuan language, Ku Waru, and Felicity Meakins for Gurindji and Gurindji Kriol. So it can be done, but it's a long road. So that's another example of how bringing together an unusual combination of people can solve some new problems.

AW

We should probably say at some point, we didn't really do this clearly enough yet, what exactly CoEDL was. I think that the impressive scale of it and the forward-looking and bold and risk-taking attitude of the ARC (the Australian Research Council), are really worth mentioning here, because I think that that's a key thing. So, just maybe let's give you a chance to just say a line or two about that.

NE

Well, I would say, you know, I'm really grateful to them that they have the attitudes they do, which in a way is the opposite of what we live in in a normal university life. That is, they see the chance to do fairly risk-taking research, not by people who are shonky, but by people who have proven their spurs and then get a chance to take something off in a wild direction. They also want to favour interdisciplinary research because they see that as something that doesn't really perform well in the normal granting system.

²¹ See Foley, Ben, Wiles Janet and Nay San. 2022. Managing transcription data for automatic speech recognition with Elpis. In Andrea Berez et al, *The Open Handbook of Linguistic Data Management*. MIT Press.

²² The draft of this interview was transcribed by the Cockatoo AI-powered transcription, off a Zoom recording, then manually edited. We note that AI-powered transcriptions are still unable to furnish results like 'Painful pause', transcribed to such effect in Ashwini Deo's interview with Paul Kiparsky in this journal (<http://www.skase.sk/Volumes/JTL51/07.pdf>).

My biologist colleague Lyndall Bromham, also associated with CoEDL, led a team that studied this problem.²³ In Australia we have a system of research field codes that you always have to put into every grant application. They're a drag to put in. But being the talented sort of informatician that she is, she managed to harvest all of these out of ARC applications and look at the relative success rates according to the configuration of codes, because it allows you to get a good proxy for truly interdisciplinary proposals. And they found that interdisciplinary research proposals have a significantly lower chance of getting funded.

That's for other categories of ARC grant, whereas when you have a centre of excellence, that's sort of in your DNA and they encourage interdisciplinarity in many interesting guises, like having novelists tuned in to the landscapes in a centre of excellence on Coral Reef ecologies, or philosophers interested in the boundaries between self and other in a centre of excellence in materials science – if a robot's 'skin' is too human-like, it's freaky for humans to touch.

But then you have to work out a way of designing a centre in a way that the whole is much more than the sum of its parts. And that generates a lot of excitement. I think that probably the key design principle was a bit like the human brain: you have a lot of neurons there when you were a baby, but they haven't grown together yet. Over the time that you have a centre, just in a fairly organic way, you see how new connections develop.

You can't take that for granted, though. People might just all sit in their corners for seven years and not talk to each other. So, you know, for me, I think that was the biggest challenge as director, to try and find other ways of joining people together. And I think we managed to do it most of the time. One design principle was that each one of the nodes, the universities, should have more than one of the programs – that is what we called 'shape', which is basically linguistic structure, then three others, processing, learning, and evolution. They were our four programs, and each of the four universities – ANU, U Melbourne, U Queensland and Western Sydney University – should have at least two of those. As well, that no one of those programs should be just at one university. Through that design you make sure that in people's day-to-day lives there was some cross-talk, and then when you brought people together at the higher level, either for our Big Bang 'CoEDLFests' once a year or for smaller workshops, you got a lot more interaction. So I think that design principle was really important.

The other thing that guides the ARC in its Centre of Excellence scheme is that they want young scholars to develop in a very nourishing, exciting environment, not to be a lone PhD student somewhere, but to have a lot of stuff going on around them. Again, I think that that model works pretty well.

But these generous resources can't be expected to last forever. Nick Thieberger, another of our Chief Investigators in CoEDL, likes to talk about the 'mallee'²⁴ model' for making institutions durable, evolving them to survive through fire and drought. In the Australian funding landscape, at least – I know that countries like Germany have much more durability to their funding – it's like feast or famine. You get seven or eight beautiful years and then you come out of it. But I think a

²³ Bromham, L., Dinnage, R. & Hua, X. Interdisciplinary research has consistently lower funding success. *Nature* 534, 684–687 (2016). <https://doi.org/10.1038/nature18315>

²⁴ Mallee trees are a type of eucalyptus that have developed special resilience to fire and drought through a root network of 'lignotubers' which can grow back after the trees above the surface have been damaged by fire or drought. The word derives from the word *mali* in the Wemba-wemba language of western Victoria.

good field – and, especially, a strong, interconnected and mutually supportive community of researchers – is able to sort of take those alternations in a creative way.

AW

As long as we're talking about linguistically notable countries, we're being hosted in this journal from Slovakia, and Slovakia and its earlier instantiation in Czechoslovakia have also made disproportionate contributions to the field, despite their small size. Think back to the Prague School and many other linguists through the decades who have been from that exact corner of the world. So, have you had any personal links or connections there?

NE

Thanks for raising that. It might be surprising how many there are. Actually, I've just got a new car, which I called Egon Yalulu. I think cars should have names. And since it's a Škoda, its first name Egon is after a famous Czech journalist and writer,²⁵ who tried to attend a labour conference in Australia in the early 1930s and wanted to warn people about the dangers of Nazism: Egon Kisch. He was denied entry to Australia on the specious basis that he failed a Scottish Gaelic dictation test – in those days there was a rule that would-be arrivals could be denied entry if they failed a dictation test in any European language. When I went to high school, this was a story we all learned from our lefty history teachers.²⁶ So, he's a bit of a hero in Australia and wrote a really interesting book about that called *Australische Landung*,²⁷ which I read in the field in Papua New Guinea after my then PhD student Christian Döhler kindly gave me a copy out there. And then *Yalulu*, that second name of the car is the Kayardild word for flame, because it's flame-coloured. So Egon Kisch was an early link.

And then, of course, as a student, you know, especially the Prague school, and especially Trubetzkoy, he was very influential, and I had his *Principles of Phonology* in my backpack when I went up on my first field work.

Someone else who influenced me a lot on the more ethnographic front was the incredible George Chaloupka, who came to Australia from Czechoslovakia as a refugee in 1950. He empathized with Aboriginal people in Australia, who he saw as under the oppressive colonial yoke just like Eastern European nationalities under the Soviets, and married an Aboriginal woman of the Noongar nation. At some point he went up to the Northern Territory, working as a hydrologist mapping out potential dams for the city of Darwin. But his real love was art. While out mapping watercourse he saw all these painted rock shelters and made a lot of friends with Aboriginal people in the area, especially Nipper Kabirriki, who was a Gun-djeyhmi speaker, in fact the very first Gun-djeyhmi speaker I ever met, after George introduced me to him. It was George who worked out the sequencing of art styles in Arnhem Land through superimposition. You deduce that one style, let's say the 'dynamic style' or the 'X-Ray style', is more recent than the other, because you see instances of the one superimposed on the other. So he worked out these four temporal styles

²⁵ Born in Prague to a German-speaking Jewish family, and he wrote in German, but he identified strongly with Czech Prague culture and Czech was one of the languages he spoke.

²⁶ Lest readers think this is an odd individualistic choice, I recently came across an Australian blogger labelling him 'my all-time greatest hero in Australia' – see <http://melbourneblogger.blogspot.com/2013/12/my-all-time-greatest-hero-in-australia.html>

²⁷ Kisch, Egon Erwin. 1937. *Landung in Australien*. Amsterdam: Allert de Lange.

in Arnhem Land.²⁸ , though of course like all pioneers his model is now seen as simpler than the full evidence suggests. George was a very good friend. He died a few years ago, but I went on some memorable field trips with him.

And then I also had the good fortune to go to Slovakia with my son Dylan at some point because when our family was living in Germany in 1997-8 – that’s when I wrote the Bininj Gunwok grammar, on a Humboldt Fellowship in Cologne which was a formative period in my life – our neighbour in the apartments was a Slovakian plant physiologist interested in plant communication, František Baluška, who edits the Journal of Plant Signalling and Behaviour. His boys were good friends with Dylan. The Baluškas invited us to come and spend a memorable week with them in the Tatra Mountains, skiing, drinking Smädný Mních, one of my favourite beers, and eating in Koliba. And more recently my colleague František Kratochvil, who has done fascinating work on the Papuan language Abui, has established a very interesting linguistics program in Olomouc, which I had the good luck to visit, So it’s a country very dear to my heart, or two countries now after the velvet divorce.

AW

Now I’d like to segue a little bit from our discussion of linguistics in its broader societal context by talking about your worldview. To me, what I find very inspiring and infectious in all of what you do, is the exuberance that you show over the value of language and linguistics. This comes through on every page of your book, Words of Wonder.²⁹ And I’m wondering if you could just expand on that, if that’s a fair question.

NE

Well, the Chinese translation of that book has just come out.³⁰ Though I don’t know Chinese myself, unfortunately, I’ve been told by many Chinese colleagues and friends that it is a wonderful translation (by Yaching Tsai) – as Jorge Luis Borges said, *el original es infiel a la traducción*. The Chinese title means ‘one word, one universe’. And I think that captures something: when you really get into language, you see how it just suffuses almost every aspect of life. So, for me at least, this is the opposite of the stereotype that Sapir refers to, of grammarians – or, nowadays, linguists – as dry, dull, frigid pedants. But I see it more in the way that the first founders of the Oxford Dictionary saw James Murray when they chose him to be the editor, as so wonderfully recounted in that book *Caught in the Web of Words*: they wanted to find someone who was interested in everything, because if you weren’t, you wouldn’t be able to make a dictionary. You had to be interested in geology, in the way farmers talked, in the seasons, the family, just everything. Language leads you in all those directions. You’re mainlining into the human experience. And also, I’d just say, politically, being something of an anarchist by nature, it’s great to be in a field that revels in these magnificent and very diverse creations, which have never been planned out by

²⁸ Chaloupka, George. 1993. *Journey in Time: The World’s Longest Continuing Art Tradition: the 50,000 Year Story of the Australian Aboriginal Rock Art of Arnhem Land*. Sydney: Reed.

²⁹ Evans, Nicholas. 2022. *Words of Wonder: What Endangered languages Tell Us*. Maldon & Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.

³⁰ Evans, Nicholas (transl. Yaching Tsai). 2023. 寰“语”游踪：脆弱语言的袅袅余音. Taipei: National Taiwan University Press.

totalitarian states, academies, governments, enlightenment figures, no one. They've just come about from the ordinary person doing quite mundane things. I find that very ennobling as a field.

AW

There's so much to say about this, and your book says it in many, many different ways, chapter by chapter, so I recommend it to anybody who hasn't been exposed to it. In that book, you quote a line from Roman Jakobson, where he says that 'the linguist whose field is any kind of language may and must include poetry in his study'. And yet, from that time when linguists like Jakobson or Sapir were equally at home talking about typology or distinctive features or poetics, linguistics has seen a kind of a parting of the ways between the humanistic approaches that are more characteristic of philology, such as fine-grained interpretations of texts, and then the putatively more scientific approaches frequently associated with formal models of phonology of syntax or semantics, or quantitative typology or corpus linguistics, or Bayesian phylogenetics. And with this, I'm also channeling my colleague Ashwini Deo in her interview with Paul Kiparsky in this same journal: "Linguistics," she says, "seems to have moved further and further away from humanistic scholarship of language and from the broader humanities as well. What do you think might have led to this relative alienation?"³¹ And so I ask this same question to you. And do you see this as inevitable? If not, then what are the most important steps we can take to bring them back together under the broader vision that Jakobson was advocating, seeing maybe the sciences and the humanities as two sides of the same coin.

NE

Well, I gave a talk in Poznań a couple of years ago where I start by looking at the etymology of the family of words that includes *shed*, *watershed*, *scission*, *scissors*, German *Scheidung* 'divorce', but also *science*. It all goes back from this idea of cutting, splitting or dissecting found in proto-Germanic *skeithan. But we should remember that a watershed divides two river systems, and I think that the beautiful thing about linguistics is we sit or we can sit right on that watershed. I do believe that the statement that we're the most scientific of the humanities and the most humanistic of the sciences is a valid one for lots of reasons.

The alienation or fall from grace, like slipping down to one side of the mountain or better said down one side of the watershed, I think that's a historical contingency. I don't think that it's irrevocable. And there were probably good reasons for it when it happened, like so many things that seemed like a good idea at the time, right?

I largely got into linguistics because I found (the early) Chomsky such a turn-on, deeply inspiring. And one of the things about it was, coming back to something I said earlier, that it was an approach with a very democratic view of language. Everyone speaks English or whatever, so we're writing the grammar of everyone. So you get away from the sort of fusty old ideas of prescriptive grammar, cool, you think that's great, go for it, man.

But then when you take it a bit further, that removes the element of genius and creativity you find by studying the work of great poets or verbal artists. And I'm not just talking about, Shakespeare and Dante and Lady Murasaki and all of those other people. I'm talking about people

³¹ <http://www.skase.sk/Volumes/JTL51/07.pdf>

like Leo Moses, who you've described so well in the Yup'ik community,³² or in my case people like David Minyumak for Iwaidja or Djorli Laywanga for Mayali and Dalabon, composing exquisite masterpieces of sung poetry for an audience of 50 people or less in their language, but right up there with better known luminaries in the sensitivity and originality of their wordcraft. They just don't happen to have a global or even national audience.

I think once you adopt a view of language as an incessant product of human creativity, and also take evolutionary biology rather than physics as your source metaphor for how science should best be conducted in our field – well the insight that variability is the reservoir of adaptation squares very well with the ability of great wordsmiths to discern the subtle underlying currents flowing through their language and ride them in new directions, to find immanent organizational principles that less sensitive speakers haven't noticed. You can imagine a language where maybe there isn't exactly a mora or a particular type of syllable structure or whatever. It's just sort of straining to become a system of that type. And then a poet discerns, oh, I can use this to organise my rhythm in this way, or my rhyme in this way, or my alliteration in this way and just moves the system into something a little more sweetly organised. Great verbal artists can play a role like that. Then later on, other people come along and pace out the trail they've blazed. So for any system to adapt, there will be innovators who, you know, somehow see the potential of things more readily than others and change that.

So I think that's one way in which the new sort of co-evolutionary linguistics program, if we can call it that, brings human creativity and with it, poetics and other forms of verbal art, back into the fold.

AW

Another way that we can see linguistics as transformative is in its role in the pursuit of social justice. I'm interested in you talking about your view of that role. It's been talked about a lot lately, but in your view, has linguistics been a positive force? And what is its potential for being a positive force, or for that matter, the opposite? What are the prospects of that? And do you think what linguistics has brought out or can bring out about intellectual creativity and about verbal artistry can play a role in that?

NE

Well, I think it has been a positive force, but it can do much more than it has. And the relation of linguistics to Indigenous communities is becoming more complex as they get, as they should, more agency in the whole process.

First of all, one of my favourite articles, that I always get students to read is Bill Labov's article on 'How I got into linguistics, and what I got out of it'.³³ As you know, there he talks about the role he played as a sociolinguist expert witness in getting someone off who'd wrongly been

³² Woodbury, Anthony. 1998. Documenting rhetorical, aesthetic and expressive loss in language shift. In *Endangered Languages: Current Issues and Future Prospects*, ed. L. A. Grenoble and L. J. Whaley. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 234–260.

³³ <https://www.ling.upenn.edu/~wlabov/HowIgot.html>

accused of a major crime on the basis of a shonky voice identification procedure. So we need to step up there in the courts, in the legislatures, in many places, and bring our knowledge to bear. Because if language is really as central as we believe it to be, as linguists, and I think it is, it's just that we don't get that out there enough, then of course there's going to be so many elements that it's relevant to.

Just to give you one example of a very small thing in terms of linguistics, not in terms of outcomes, but when I was involved from 1997 to 1999 in a native title case for Mornington Island, Bentinck Island, adjoining mainland, so basically the Tangkic peoples, Kayardild Lardil, Yangkal and Ganggalida or Yukulda. One of the really terrible things that was in the Australian legal system at that time that had grown out of an attempt to get legal recognition in the Yolngu lands in North East Arnhem Land was this nice deceptively cute saying that was just going around like a meme, that Aboriginal people don't own the land, the land owns them. It sounds very romantic, except it just means that they can now be deprived of their land since they don't own it, which has happened in Australia through the doctrine of Terra Nullius.

But as a statement about Indigenous Australian juridical systems, it's just not true. And when Kayardild people talk about their land, it's just the same way anyone does: that is, you own it. Of course, there's additional things on top of that, all sorts of spiritual connections, but that doesn't deny the fact that you own it and you can punish trespassers and all of that stuff.

Now when that issue came up in the court case, I was in a sort of dual role as an interpreter and also as an anthropological expert witness. One of the lawyers on the other side asked something along the lines of 'can you tell me what the Kayardild verb is that means 'to own'?''. It's not actually a verb, it's a suffix. And it's listed right there in the Kayardild grammar, both in the original 1985 thesis and in the published 1995 version grammar, with the label proprietive case. It was just good luck in a way that I've chosen that name. I could have called it something else, like the 'Having case', but it was sort of nice, it was already there in my 1985 thesis, right? So, they couldn't just say I dolled it up for the court case.³⁴

But in the context of court hearings like that, we shouldn't underestimate the role of linguistics in ground-truthing claims that you're making about such topics as Indigenous ownership of land – and also sea in that case, – by showing it's there in the language, there in dictionaries, there in grammars. But not that many people get access into those. It's a problem we've had as linguists that we've just written for each other, because of the conventions we use, which do have their reasons, but are also a gate keeping a lot of people out. So, more generally, giving evidence about how local juridical and knowledge systems are formulated and transmitted through language is a place where I think we have a huge role to play.

That takes many, many different forms. It might be about local ecological management or getting that rights to do that. For example, in India, I had another student, Aung Si, who was working with Solega people,³⁵ and the Indian forestry departments won't let Solega or other tribal peoples have their own fire regimes in forests because they just think these guys don't know. As a

³⁴ See Evans, Nicholas. 2016. Born, signed and named: naming, country and social change among the Bentinck Islanders. In Di Hafner & Jean-Christophe Verstraete (eds.), *Land and Language in Cape York Peninsula and the Gulf Country*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins. Pp. 305-335.

³⁵ See Si, Aung. 2016. *The Traditional Ecological Knowledge of the Solega: A Linguistic Perspective*. Dordrecht: Springer.

result, lantana and other undergrowth has grown up. That's what elephants have to eat. Elephants get bad-tempered and they go rampaging around in villages, and the whole system just gets thrown out. But the traditional Solega management, if they were allowed to practice it, would have kept all this undergrowth at bay.

So by being able to document what people say, what they know about fire regimes and so on, you can help Indigenous groups gain back ecological control. In Australia there's a saying that the hand that holds the fire stick controls the landscape. So going back to what's now being called 'cultural burning' – burning off according to traditional Indigenous fire practices – is another example of that sort of process, even playing a role in generating local employment through Indigenous ranger groups funded by carbon credits, and understanding the language of fire management plays a key role in that.³⁶ All up, I think there are a whole lot a of things in different realms of life where linguists can play a role. And I think it's really important when we're teaching not to just be lily-livered about the value of the knowledge we're imparting. Our students should know from day one: get on top of this because you might need to stand up in court or in a government inquiry and demonstrate what you're doing and how it holds up. I think that helps makes our students aware that the arguments we're constructing, which may seem to be just about linguistics, have a broader relevance, but they have to be solidly grounded. We should expect push-back and counter arguments, of course, but the vital thing is that our students should know how to defend their position to them, and 'in a court of law' is a good bar to set.

AW

Thanks. So, another dimension of that sort of looks at the enterprise that you and I are both engaged in, at language documentation, description, analysis. One of the critiques that is going around, perhaps more in some parts of the world than in others, is that the documentation of languages, whether it's done by people who are speakers of those languages or not, is extractive in some sense, that the metaphor of extraction where you are taking something from a community or putting it somewhere that's possibly remote from that community, an archive or whatever, so that access to those products can be either intentionally or unintentionally fairly difficult. So, I'm just interested in your thoughts about that trope, and about what kinds of ways of seeing things you think also might be perhaps a little bit more in keeping with the enthusiasm that you in general have expressed about the value of linguistics and language documentation.

NE

Look, that's a real danger, that it can be extractive. And when I hear phrases like 'data-mining' and 'text-mining' and so on in connection with these languages, I just blanch. It's awful and evokes the horrors of all those non-metaphorical extractions, gold or uranium or rubber, which have wrought such havoc on Indigenous peoples and their homelands. Google and all of these other

³⁶ See Garde, Murray (2009). The language of fire: Seasonality, resources and landscape burning on the Arnhem Land plateau. In: *Wurrk: Managing Fire Regimes in Northern Australian Savannas – Culture, Ecology, Economy* (ed. Jeremy Russell-Smith, P.J. Whitehead, and P. Cooke), 85–164. Darwin: CSIRO Publications.

giant enterprises have enough hooks in the lives of enough languages and cultures and people that we don't want to give them more. So, ethically confronting the risk of an 'extractive mindset' is a real consideration.

I want to emphasise that the dilemma is nothing new, right? When people wrote a grammar or a dictionary 500 years ago, say, when Sahagún was doing this in Mexico, or the many other missionary linguists of the epoch, in a way they were doing the same thing, just with less technology. But you could say that was being extractive as well, because it's taking something that is or was being kept just in the here and now of a community and making it available to others elsewhere, which is a form of extraction.

And if we think back to what I said earlier about universalist versus group-based theories of knowledge and knowledge as property, every time you get any sort of knowledge out and make it more widely available, you are feeding that in some sense. So, I think that's where the whole move to decolonise linguistics can make sense, that is, let's just never do anything that's not grounded in what communities want. Let's co-design what we're doing. Let's explain what we're doing. It might go a bit slower. There might be things we can't do – knowledge that people want to keep just in the community, or a particular part of it (say initiates) but in return for that, people will be on board. Now, there's always going to be problems, practical problems, where people don't agree in a community or whatever, or these people want it while these others don't, and so on. But still, you're building something solid if you consult properly. In my own experience people in communities are really concerned about disappearance of knowledge. I always remember sitting on the beach on Croker Island with the late Brian Yambikbik, who told me: 'my parents said to me: just like you gotta share your food, you gotta share your story'.

I'm not going to say that's always the case. There's always going to be people who just want to take their knowledge to the grave, or deem young people or outsiders or whoever it is, as unworthy recipients of what they know. And then that's just too bad, you have to respect that, just like you have to respect someone's will. But, most of the time, I think people are really keen, they're thinking about their grandchildren and their great grandchildren and they want to get behind recording things. In terms of inaccessibility, I think the main parameter there is how we write about things. So, for example, in grammar, how's that written? Our glosses are terribly off-putting. And even the fact of putting hyphens into a word and breaking it up can be offensive to speakers of some language. And we don't do that with English or whatever. So, I think there's a lot of places where we can do more to be sensitive about that. And probably we're going to be able to use things like hypertext much better as well, like just give people the options of how they want stuff presented.

Actually, just tomorrow, Lesley Woods, who's a PhD student here at ANU, is giving her final seminar before submitting her thesis.³⁷ And she's gone back and revisited the Ngiyampaa language, which had a beautiful grammar written of it by Tamsin Donaldson in 1980.³⁸ It's the sort of grammar that's a shining jewel for a linguist, but for a community member, you look at it and it's just so obscure. So, Lesley set up a Facebook page, she's been communicating with people in the community, about what are we going to call this morpheme, what are we going to call this,

³⁷ See Woods, Lesley. 2023. *Something's Gotta Change*. Canberra: ANU Press.

³⁸ Donaldson, Tamsin. 1980. *Ngiyampaa. The Language of the Wangaaybuwan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

what do we call this category, all about how to open things up so as to make the analysis accessible. I won't say I agree with every terminological choice but it's an immensely valuable process to go through.

So I think that's an area where, you know, there's just a huge amount to do and many debates to be had. And there's a tendency for linguists to be on one side and community members to be on the other, which is terrible when it happens, because we're all united by a love of language and a wish to see its value recognised. Plus it's just identifying the wrong enemies in my view, who are those who devalue or simply neglect the importance of Indigenous languages. Still you can understand why it happens and we have to work out ways of getting that dialogue to be more fruitful.

The other place where the 'extractive' label can come in is with archiving. Local archives are great but they're often very vulnerable for all sorts of reasons. For example, here in Australia was the Katherine Language Centre which had a beautiful collection of cassettes and so on, but then many were all swept away when the Katherine River flooded. And I think that with a good digital archive, like PARADISEC here in Australia or AILA in the Americas or ELAR in Europe – as long as you get enough bandwidth, they're accessible from anywhere. They're not further away than your mobile phone. So, of course, you have to deal with issues of access and everything, but those are computational problems, they're sort of solvable. So, I think that the move to the digital world has actually resolved some of those issues about where products like recordings and so on reside. But I do think it's important that the archives think seriously about how to make things user friendly. I don't think they always are.

AW

I might just add that one of the issues that comes up often is really just the abstract idea of ownership, so even where something can reside in multiple places as it now can digitally, still the idea of control, of ownership, of who has the say over how much something gets disseminated and so on, is still important.

NE

I agree. And I think we're babes in the wood about that. There's some pretty rapacious operators out there who may be doing things that we haven't even thought of. For example, there's a risk that, I think this has happened in some cases, people who are just wanting to preemptively purchase domain names and just download dictionaries of Indigenous languages and register words from those languages as domain names for next to nothing. You know, there are just things like that which we don't even think of, which can be done and that we have to be very wary about. Part of that is also working out what are appropriate regulatory frameworks at national and international levels.

AW

So, I guess a final dimension of this is that it all becomes more and more interesting as linguistics trains more people from different communities who have different language backgrounds who can explore their own backgrounds or other backgrounds from perspectives that weren't represented very much before; and how linguists operate in different milieus, how they follow their own

agendas, how they perceive and work with and follow agendas of communities. And this would be linguists who might also be members of those communities, but even for them, there are issues of parrying different kinds of agendas. So, something that you've talked about is your own promotion of Aboriginal art and of Aboriginal music. I know you've done amazing work in promoting the Kayardild painting traditions that have developed among elder women. You've also done a lot of work on the Coburg Peninsula with music in Iwaidja and perhaps other languages. To what extent do you see that as basically going into a completely different realm or zone offering your service as a linguist or as a general all-around-ethnographer or academic, and in what ways is this built-in and intrinsic and of a piece with your work? And that brings us to a more general question: there's always been, among people who do work on language documentation, some who say, well, I spend this amount of time working on the community stuff and then I work on my own stuff since it's so different that ne'er the twain shall meet. But other people say, you know, when I'm working together with community members on things that are of mutual interest, so much of interest comes out, and so it's my job as a linguist to try and work with it and make good use of it. Anyway, I'd just be interested in your thoughts on those questions.

NE

I guess I belong to the second type that you mentioned. I do see these things as very integrally linked.

I think the first thing is that I really think that being a deep participant, observer and learner and especially a deep listener is absolutely central to what you do as a field linguist. We need to train people better to do that. There's a risk that squeaky clean documentation, transcription and metadata can end up colonizing people's time at the expense of just hanging out. It can happen very easily that if, say, someone gets a language documentation grant or something like that, they've pledged some number of hours of transcribed material, and then just all the time they're having to do that transcription, instead of just going and hanging out with people. And it's often by hanging out that you really learn the important stuff, with context and vividness. So while of course, you have to deliver, I think that the granting agencies in the field of language documentation need to lower their bars of what's being asked in terms of numbers of recorded and transcribed hours, which can drive a sort of factory mentality. And the people going out as field linguists need to know part of their regime is that they have some time that's inviolable time every day or every week, however they do it, when there's no agenda at all – they're just enjoying being with people and doing stuff and noticing stuff (with small notebook in pocket of course). So I think that's really important.

The second thing is, and I'm sure you've had this same experience, I figure that most of us linguists feel we've spent maybe 1% of the time with people in that community trying to learn the language than what we really need to do if we're to understand what's going on. It's a tiny, tiny bit. Some of the people who have done the best research in Australia, since you asked about that earlier, are people like Murray Garde³⁹ and Jenny Green⁴⁰, who pretty well stayed outside the

³⁹ Garde, Murray. 2013. *Culture, interaction and person reference in an Australian language*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

⁴⁰ Green, Jenny. 2014. *Drawn From The Ground. Sound, Sign and Inscription in Central Australian Sand Stories*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

academic stream and managed to make a living as linguists, funded in rather ragtag ways to work in those communities. They're the ones who've been able to develop levels of really deep understanding and come up with beautiful monographs in their two cases.

Then the other thing is that things just keep connecting back. I'll give you one artistic and one musical example. First the artistic one. With the Kayardild language, when I was making the first dictionary, there's a word which I couldn't work out if it was just a homophone or a polysemous word, where the word for a hole, like the hole in a fishing net, is the same as the word for a school of fish, *malji*. I couldn't see how to bridge it semantically. It was only when Sally Gabori⁴¹ had her first art exhibition – actually it was a bunch of Kayardild women artists at Wollongabba Art Gallery in Brisbane – and there was a big painting of hers, maybe five metres by two metres, called Mullet, School of Mullet, portrayed as a bunch of circles, of holes. And Sally was there for the launch and I asked her and some others, why are these mullets? Well, it's when they come to the surface and their mouths just sort of let out these little bubbles and that's how you see them.

And that took me back to experiences I'd had of just being like a blind man at a football match, sitting there on the beach with a bunch of Kayardild people who were saying, look at the fish there, look at that, look at the schools here. All I could see was the sea's surface, because I wasn't tuned into the cues. But in that particular case, I mean there's many others I could give, but that was an example of how I could just suddenly see something that I hadn't seen until then, thanks to her very inspired art.

Then in the realm of music, I mean, I'm not a talented musician at all, but I love music and I love singing. For many years I'd been trying to learn song texts, as if you could just get the language without the music. But that doesn't work in Aboriginal context. People will not give you the words without singing them. They'll just try and teach you to sing it. So, transcription is actually learning to sing. And that can be really hard because the rhythms are all chopped up and the melodies are very, very tricky.

It was only when I could start to, well, I had a really good teacher, Johnny Namayiwa, who's basically a Mawng speaker, who just said, come on, I'll teach you how to sing this. And he's a very good, like, singing teacher – I think it helped that there with me was a very talented musicologist there too, Reuben Brown, who'd been working on songs in the region for his PhD. So I could finally open up this song, which we'd recorded in what we thought was Iwaija, a good decade before. That was part of the Iwaidja project, where our team included Linda Barwick, the marvellous musicologist. Now when I learned this song from Johnny I noticed there were a number of words in there from the Marrku language. Unfortunately, Marrku was dead and gone by then. But I recognised some of them and then Johnny Namayiwa said, oh yeah, yeah, that's what the word *Manbam* means – a word that appears in the song, and is even the name of a different Iwaidja song-set – it's a type of song-giving sprite. Before that moment we'd thought, despite our best efforts at finding out, that this was an arbitrary meaningless name. So all of a sudden, there we had

⁴¹ See Evans, Nicholas. 2022. The eye of the dolphin: Sally Gabori and the Kaiadilt vision. In *Sally Mirdidingkingathi Juwarnda Gabori*. Paris: Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain. Pp. 13-32.

a little bunch more Marrku (since there are other phrases in the song), just there like a sort of insect in amber or something being transmitted through that song.⁴²

And also with Iwaidja, there'd been all sorts of gaps in the verb paradigms that couldn't be filled out. I'd tried till I was blue in the face to elicit them, but had failed. But then they showed up in these songs we recorded, from a song-style called *Jurtbirrk*,⁴³ a sort of mixture of blues and haiku in the idiom of Arnhem Land music, of the late David 'Cookie' Minjumak was perhaps the most gifted composer. Now Iwaidja verb paradigms have a prefixal block combining subject and object indexing with directionals, often melding the forms together in unpredictable ways. Getting, for example, the 'away' forms with some of the combinations like 'I' and 'you' is really hard and artificial. But in this very bluesy style, there's a lot of singing about absent people, you know, oh, you've gone away and left me, or, I wanted to bring you back, and so on. Suddenly, all of these little cells in the paradigm got filled in as we worked through the transcription of that song. And then also in the lexicon, because Iwaidja people, they're not New Yorkers, like they don't talk about their emotions, they don't have an analyst. Typically you just you get a story and it's very behaviourist in a way, in the way it just sort of tells what happened without a lot of emotional coloration. You know, then he shot him, and then he fell down, stuff like that. They don't tell you how people react. But in the *Jurtbirrk* songs, there's this very delicate emotional palette that comes out in the vocabulary, and you wouldn't know about it if you weren't looking at that song style. That comes back to this point about verbal art. If you don't include things like that, you're just going to miss a lot of depth that is in the language. And this goes right to the heart of the morphology, not just the lexicon, since there are a lot of Iwaidja verbs with weird argument-indexing patterns, archaically preserving what was once a four-gender agreement system where subject or object indexed e.g. a source or cause of emotion, which pretty well only shows up in this part of the lexicon.⁴⁴

AW

All right. I think at this point, let's turn in some more linguistic-theoretical directions. Sort of as a segue, one of the things that you've been increasingly involved in, interested in, is multilingualism, and not just as a sociolinguistic phenomenon, but as a driver of linguistic diversity. You were mentioning that when we were talking about the Nen area, and even as an engine for the initial evolution of language itself. So, could you say a little bit about that?

⁴² Brown, Reuben & Nicholas Evans. 2017. Songs that keep ancestral languages alive: a Marrku songset from Western Arnhem Land. In Jim Wafer and Myfany Turpin, eds. *Recirculating songs: revitalising the singing practices of Indigenous Australia*. Canberra: Asia-Pacific Linguistics. Pp. 287-300.

⁴³ See Barwick, Linda, Bruce Birch and Nicholas Evans. 2007. Iwaidja *jurtbirrk* songs: bringing language and music together. *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 2:6-34. <http://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/handle/2123/13110>

⁴⁴ See Evans, Nicholas. 2007. Pseudo-argument affixes in Iwaidja and Ilgar: a case of deponent subject and object agreement. In Matthew Baerman, Greville G. Corbett, Dunstan Brown & Andrew Hippisley (eds.), *Deponency and morphological mismatches. Proceedings of the British Academy* 145:271-296. And, for a much more thorough treatment in the related language Mawng, Ruth Singer (2016) *The Dynamics of Nominal Classification: Productive and Lexicalised Uses of Gender Agreement in Mawng*. Berlin: Pacific Linguistics.

NE

Yeah, that's a topic I've gotten more and more interested in. Again, just growing directly out of field experiences and it's like my linguistic career has followed the same trajectory as my life, starting off with a really monolingual mob that is kind of going into more and more multilingual places. Because in Arnhem Land now, you don't find, at least in the places I work, you don't find that many people who are multilingual in their everyday life. They might be multilingual in a way that reflects their youth, but that's a sort of past era, whereas in New Guinea it's just there alive and well, you witness it every moment. For a long time I'd been interested in looking at particular types of language contact, at how you get this sort of summative complexification. For example, one dialect of Bininj Kunwok, in its noun class system, it's kept the classic fourfold Australian distinction between a masculine, feminine, vegetable, and neuter. But Dalabon, next door and closely related, has a different set of oppositions between paronyms and things that just exist in their own right. So a nose is always a part of a person, so you can't just say nose on its own. Whereas dog is just dog. You can say 'his dog', but you don't have to. Well, the Kune dialect, spoken by a clan which is traditionally bilingual between Dalabon and Bininj, has just crossed those two systems together.

So then you get more contrasts, right? Because for example, a seed is vegetable class, but it's also part of a plant. So that's in a paronym plus vegetable class: *man-mim-no*. Whereas an eye – which happens to have the same root, *mim*, as 'seed', is part of an animate, so it's in a paronym plus neuter class: *kun-mim-no*. On the other hand a particular tree species, say the ghost gum *man-berbern*, is in the vegetable class, but not in the paronym class. It reminded me of my dad's old slide-rule, where two differently-calibrated scales combine to give a more accurate measure, in this case of semantics as shown by the noun class system.

So then I began seeing more examples of that sort of thing, where you get a more complex system by pooling two systems. When you think about, it as a bilingual, you have to have all the conceptual distinctions you're going to need to deal with either language. So if you put them all together, it's great help. Because it's always easier to pick a subset than to elaborate things that you didn't attend to at the time.

All this started crystallising for me at, another CoEDL workshop we ran, again organized by Kim Sterelny, my philosopher colleague, on the evolution of language. I hadn't thought about this properly before. But then it gradually began to dawn on me, as someone who's a gradualist in evolution, completely unconvinced by saltationist views like suddenly you can have a little mutation and you've got recursion or whatever. I don't think it's helpful to see language as any one thing, like recursion. So I don't think it makes sense to ask: when did language arise? I much prefer to go back to Hockett's ideas of design principles, but go much further and saying, language is an integrated technological package like farming or the internet or so many of the technologies we get when we added together a whole number of innovations from many times and places to make a functioning whole.

And you can't assume that each of those innovations was 'invented' – if I can use a teleological word, I don't mean it teleologically, I just mean developed – at the same time and place. Different people can develop different things at different times, for different reasons. For example the notion of having quality words that are divorced from their reference, like getting a word that means round as opposed to just grindstone, or green as opposed to leaf, that was an

important step, right, though not one of the biggies. It may be not at the very, very heart of language, but it's something that gives us adjectives in most of the world's languages. You wouldn't have them without that. Or having pronouns, where it's just, you know, I and you. We can't assume that that evolved in the same step as working out how to do negation or how to talk about hypothetical scenarios. So each of these is one element that had to be developed to give us all of the functioning languages that we have today.

Once we take this more gradualist approach, where you're summing a whole lot of things together into an integrated system, it's not hard to think they could have been developed in different groups. And multilingualism is the conduit that joins these together and allows these innovations to be put together. Just in the same way we've seen in the last 30 years with the internet, you know, that the people who developed the idea in the first place weren't the same as the people who developed the browsers, or engineered the mouse, weren't the same as the people who worked out how to put it on mobile phones, or developed touch-screens, who weren't the same as people who developed social media platforms and so on. Those have all gradually been assembled. And farming, much more slowly, you know, developing plows, developing, domesticating chickens in one place and pigs in another, working out how to grow maize or rice or wheat or whatever crop, those took places at different times and have gradually been assembled together.

So I think we need to see language in that way. And once we do, and once we give multilingualism a role, we move away from the old monogenesis versus polygenesis debate, unresolved precisely because its premises were wrong, towards what I'm calling polysemigenesis. these partial developments towards a fully fledged modern language at different places which then get pulled together. Now it sounds like a sort of classic catch-22: how could people have been multilingual in order to develop language? But of course they would only have been multilingual in what were, a very long time ago, stripped-down and incomplete versions of human language. The same goes for the equilibration between language as sign and language as an acoustic stream. I think earlier on,⁴⁵ there was probably a much more balanced division of labor between those two elements, which gradually got put together.

AW

Maybe this is a little bit out of turn, but to me, the first thing that comes to mind though is, given the scenario you're talking about where different basic features like pronoun reference or adjectives/property words or negation develop one at a time, what about reversibility on any one part of it? So by analogy take farming, for example, where we could see that farming has developed in some places, that certain aspects of farming, like keeping gardens just at a very kind of local level develop in others, or having animals in very kind of restrictive settings develop in others; we then find that sometimes it leads to large scale farming but it also can go backwards from large-scale farming to very sort of rudimentary types. Can you take out whole big chunks of language in the same way?

⁴⁵ And as argued for in Ron Planer & Kim Sterelny's 2021 book, *From Sign to Symbol*, MIT Press.

NE

Look, I think you can. The question is which bits you're taking out, right? Just think of one of the glories of English syntax, that is, complementation. I don't know the figures, but I wouldn't be surprised if 20% of syntax articles are written about complementation?

AW

Likewise for articles in formal semantics!

NE

All of this beautiful stuff that we like to get our teeth into as syntacticians. Well, let's just imagine a sort of subset of English speakers who only speak or communicate through Twitter and social media in a very informal representation. And you're just saying stuff like: *I'm like, I'm not going to do that*, or *She's like, oh, there's Tony with his friends*, instead of *She saw Tony talking with his friends* or *She saw that Tony was talking with his friends*. We could devolve out of having complement structures there and survive OK, just in the same way as I think that complementation is a contingent development in many languages of the world, and not necessarily present there. We could probably devolve away from having personal pronouns as well. I mean, when you speak a language like Indonesian, you can use it and there are perfectly good pronouns like *saya* and *engkau*, but it's also very possible for me to say things like *Nick's seeing Tony nodding* instead of *I see you nodding*. So language can function perfectly well as a system without personal pronouns. And yes, it's an interesting question to whether some elements can be removed without total system collapse: devolutionary modeling instead of evolutionary modeling. I certainly don't think that recursion is the pin that if you pull it, everything will collapse.

AW

I think there are other ways. I think that's putting all of your eggs in one basket in a way, but I mean, I'm worried about things like negation, for example. Did that just develop somewhere at some point, and if so can it also disappear?

NE

Somebody just says, oh, do we have to do this? Oh, God, you can't live without negation.

AW

Right. But what I'm asking is if you are saying that somebody comes along and invents negation, and then it basically from then on becomes a fundamental layer of language?

NE

Well, let me ask you, I've just been really listening to a few recordings of that old song, Horse With No Name, and I'll be bugged if I can tell if the line goes – 'in the desert you can remember your name' or 'in the desert you can't remember your name'.

AW
Right!

NE
And I've looked at the written lyrics online, and you'll see both versions out there. So that song is surviving perfectly well with some sort of lack of specification, at least at that point. Admittedly, that's just on one auxiliary, and I don't think you can say the same of the with no name in the title, but it's probably more widespread than we think.

AW
Well, there are many dialect differences. For me, it's can [kæn ~ kən] vs. can't [kɛ̃'t], so different but quite close. Certainly negation is a pretty good idea. I think it's always easy to debate about which things might come and go, and we can agree that there seem to be some that stick around. But for me that's just where it's hard to imagine in a scenario that is based on sort of incremental cultural evolution; when there seem to be some things that never go away once you've got it. I'm a bit worried about why something that just evolved culturally is going to be species-wide and irreplaceably present once it's evolved.

NE
Well, it's pretty interesting. And I think something that's especially timely is epistemic validation mechanisms. If we were speaking a language with evidentials, we'd be horrified to see those sorts of seeping out into the Twitter sphere, or I guess it's now the X sphere, right, in terms of actual social debate about what facts are, which we're seeing played out here in Australia as we lead up to the voice referendum next Saturday. And the internet is awash with falsehoods. Could this be because there's not a clear framing process for epistemic verification?

AW
All right, let's go to another thing. Let's talk some more about general theoretical issues. Your article with Steve Levinson on the Myth of Language Universals,⁴⁶ I guess now more than a decade ago, really stirred up a hornet's nest. And one of the lines of criticism was that you were abandoning the search for generalizations by simply taking diversity at face value, not trying to go beyond the diversity that you see on the surface. For example, David Pesetsky wrote that all other sciences have progressed precisely by taking nothing at face value, diversity included. So I'm just interested in your response to that kind of line of criticism.

NE
Well, I agree with David Pesetsky there that you shouldn't take things at face value. But where I think there's misunderstandings which touch on the lack of discussion about sort of philosophy of science in linguistics, which I don't think we do enough of. So, where do we put the general principles, right? Imagine you're a biologist, a sort of anti-Darwin or something, and you are

⁴⁶ Evans, Nicholas & Stephen Levinson. 2009a,b. The Myth of Language Universals. Behavioral & Brain Sciences, Target Article with Commentary, plus response (With diversity in mind: freeing the language sciences from Universal Grammar). Behavioral & Brain Sciences 32: 429-448, 472-492.

wanting to write a universal grammar of the organism. And you just have, you know, some parameters that you can set and by setting them you can end up with some sort of algae or a bacteria or a fish. How far would you get taking that approach? What makes evolutionary biology so powerful is that there's a very small set of principles which allow you to generate in the sense of having a generative theory that accounts for the existence of all of the species known in this world, and at the same time explains how evolution works. Now, every now and then there are puzzles. You say, why does this particular species have, you know, seven sexes or why is it the males in the species that carry the young in their bodies. But in general, that very small set of general principles allows you to account for the diversity.

AW

*So I think that the big problem in linguistics has been, Where do we put the general explanatory descriptions of structure, not the accounts of process that engender those structures? Or even that the structures can be engendered at all, that they're not just there. In your introduction with Alan Dench to your book *Catching Language*,⁴⁷ you are critical of how the term theory gets used in linguistics. And I'm just wondering if this puts you in a framework of being atheoretical. I mean, I think the answer is sort of implicit in what you were just saying. But I thought you might want to elaborate on that since you've gone on the record about it.*

NE

It does follow on from what I just said. That is, the word theory, I don't think gets used often enough in linguistics in the way it does get used in other sciences. Again, I think biology is a useful comparator discipline there. 'Theory' often gets used where we should simply be saying model or formal representation. And then the formal representation gets invoked as an explanation: this sentence or this doesn't occur because of structural principle X or Y or whatever. For me, that's profoundly wrong. That is, we should absolutely have models. They're great. And we should train our students to use them. That's part of what makes you a good linguist, is you knowing how to do that, because they're testable and generate any number of interesting hypotheses. They strip away the contingencies. You know exactly what you're predicting and what you're not predicting inside a given domain.

But you shouldn't confuse that with a theory. A theory is a whole body of propositions about how things are, why they are. It makes predictions. It tests things out. It is open to new data of all sorts, and hopefully can give a unified explanation drawing on these principles which are motivated principles. That's what we need in a linguistic theory. And I'm not sure that we've got a sort of field-wide campaign to develop that. Rather, it's fragmented across different phenomena, say if you're a functionalist, or work in grammaticalization, or are a variationist or a typologist – each concerned with just part of the answer. But the important thing is we have to bring that all together. And formal models absolutely have a role to play there, but they shouldn't be confused with the theory itself.

Then just with respect to description, which is what that book *Catching Language* is about, that's really about saying if we're going to have any hope of bringing the world's 7,000 languages

⁴⁷ Ameka, Felix, Alan Dench & Nicholas Evans (eds.). 2006. *Catching language: the standing challenge of grammar-writing*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

into the debate, we have to have a way of characterising how they work. And in general, the more formal the model, the less perspicuous the presentation of data. You can use it here and there in places in a grammar, but if you try and build a whole model that way it just doesn't work, at least in a first or second pass through trying to characterize what is going on at the level of a whole under-described language. I've had too many bad experiences trying to work out what's going on in a language, whether it be written in a generative framework or a tagmemic framework or a 1950s American structuralist framework, it just gets in the way of saying what's going on.

AW

I certainly agree with you! So now I want to just wrap this up maybe with some questions looking ahead. But one thing, that really what you've been talking about in the last couple of rounds almost requires you to have something to say about, is How should linguistic training go? There are many different models of linguistic training around the world. But what do you think, especially for this world as it is right now, should make up linguistic training?

NE

Look, the real problem is that there's a whole lot of stuff that needs to be added and not that much that can be subtracted. In terms of the stuff which should not be subtracted at all, I think all of those classic training types that get you to be sensitised to the code-cracking endeavour, understanding languages as a system, field methods that gets you to learn how to bring that together with being a human being, learning a language. You know, morphology, syntax, good phonetics training, phonology, typology, all of the things that you need to just find your way around the language and not be reinventing the wheel and to discern, oh yeah, this is just another VSO language, we expect all this from, hey, this is really weird, I don't know about that happening, I've never heard of anything like it. Plus, historical linguistics, anthropological linguistics, psycholinguistics, you know, discourse, pragmatics, conversational analysis, all of that stuff that we need to have.

Yeah, we can probably prune off a little bit here and there, but that's a lot of curriculum already. Though I think I probably got the most of anything as a student out of actual courses on languages. Like I remember taking Bob Dixon's mind-blowing course on Australian Aboriginal languages at the ANU, a year-long course. It was wonderful, because you got to see how everything fitted together in the one language, which you don't if you just do a course on phonetics or morphology or whatever. All that is stuff that I think we have to be very careful about throwing out. Sure, there's some easy targets, I would say, the sorts of syntactic or phonological debates which are arguing over how many angels dance on the head of a pin type. There's always the claim, oh, you need to be able to read the literature. Well, maybe, but which bits of it, because there's a lot of stuff there that I think is eminently forgettable.

In terms of the new things, there are things at the level of, you know, corpus linguistics, enough computational stuff, not to become a computational linguist, but just to find round and work out how to formulate things and deal in a smart way with data. Then I think there's lots of stuff best taught in modules. Technology is evolving so fast it's really important that people be switched on with that, but it's hard to put that into a curriculum because it will be different in a year's time. So, I think just having experts come and crash out on it for a day is the best way to go

with that sort of thing. Then, like I said, I think having more attention to philosophy of science and how linguistics fits within it is absolutely essential. I think a lot of our wasted time, in our incredibly fragmented field, and what makes so many intelligent and talented people talk past one another, without listening to each other and assessing their common ground, goes back to us not having a good curriculum in general about how the whole enterprise fits together by comparison with many other fields. I don't know who has written a book like that. I loved the Perlmutter and Soames syntax textbook⁴⁸ when I was a student because it showed you how building a syntactic model was similar to a process of hypothesis testing. Of course, the particular syntactic model it used is long out of date, but I really liked their approach. And to have something like that, maybe that's even looking at typology or whatever, would be a good thing to do. But that's just some. I'm sure you could add a lot more to the curriculum, because I admire the way you've brought in neurolinguistics and forensic linguistics and so on and elements in your own program at Austin, which I think are really important parts of being a socially engaged linguist.

AW

Yeah, and then in a few short years, you have to fit it all in, too.

NE

Well, yes and no. You go on learning through life.

AW

Yeah.

NE

I'm sure, you know, each of us is, when we came out of our supposed, you know, formal training, has vast gaps in our knowledge that we've tried to fill at least partially since then. So I think it's giving people the disposition to go on filling in what they have and working out what are the absolute things you need to have from the start and what are the things you can get in later on.

AW

I'm going to end it with just a very general question about the future. So what's happening? What's in the pipeline? What are you going to be doing for the next decade or two? What do you think is on the horizon?

NE

Yeah, for all the wonderful things about CoEDL, it had the disadvantage of leaving me less time to just sit and concentrate on a lot of writing projects that are long overdue. Some of those are working with particular speech communities on dictionary projects. I want to revisit the Kayardild and Dalabon dictionaries and make them much more comprehensive, accurate and also bring in audio material. Same with Nen. Each one of those is a big project. I still love putting stuff together in grammar, so I've got a Nen grammar and a Dalabon grammar on the cooker. Those things are

⁴⁸ Perlmutter, David & Scott Soames. 1979. *Syntactic Argumentation and the Structure of English*. Oakland: University of California Press.

gradually moving along. And there's another interesting project I've got with Murray Garde and Linda Barwick and Allan Marett looking at a particular song style associated with Dalabon and Bininj Kunwok language called Bongolinj-Bongolinj. It's one of my favourite song styles in the universe, and we are wanting to look at how that developed, what the song repertoire of the main singer was, and how that's fitted in with the languages he uses. So that's more at the interface of musicology, linguistics and anthropology.

And then at the level of sort of synthesis, I'm wanting to write a sort of book which I'm conceiving of as a sort of crossover book in the same way I tried to make *Words of Wonder*, a book about the evolution of language diversity, where it comes from, how we can account for it and so on. I'm still wrestling with how to do that because in general, the people who have had most success writing for the general lay public, say people like Steven Pinker who's done it so successfully, have the great advantage that they can use English examples, something people can just lap it up. But if you want to use examples from, you know, so-called exotic languages, you face the Steven Hawking problem – he was told every mathematical formula you give in the book, will halve the readership. It's probably the case that every phonetic symbol we use in the book will have the same effect, right?

AW

I agree.

NE

Or maybe every gloss or every meaning that doesn't exactly fit an English meaning. So, that's the expository problem. And I think any of us who are trying to work on, you know, interestingly different languages face that problem. But anyway, it's a problem we have to solve and definitely something I want to do. Then I've got another project, growing out of our language and social cognition project, which is how the grammars of different languages shape and implement the very different social universes that we live in. The book is something I've had on the back burner unfortunately for far too long and I want to return to. So those are some of my projects.

AW

Is that the project that you were working on with Alan Rumsey and Lila San Roque?

NE

Yeah, that's right. And then more recently during the CoEDL phase, we've had this Scopic project, which is what we're calling it a parallax corpus. I've been working on that here at ANU, with my colleague Danielle Barth doing the running on building the corpus and leading our team which has specialists on around 30 languages from every continent. So that's given a fascinating set of data there, which that allows us to sort of give a empirical base and comparison set for some of the problems that I'm going to raise in that book, but the book will be more anthropological and typological, and less corpus-based.

Plus, right now I'm trying to finish off the massive Oxford Guide to the Papuan Languages, which I'm coediting with Sebastian Fedden, and I'm a bit behind on that. It'll be on a scale like

Claire Bower's new book that has just come out on Australian languages, in the same Oxford Guide series.

AW

Ok Nick, let's maybe call it a wrap? It's been such a pleasure talking with you and having a chance to trace with you your work and your thinking across so many decades of fantastic engagement and accomplishment—and, as we can see from these last bits, on into the future! Thank you! And thanks, too, to our colleagues at SKASE, for offering this lovely opportunity!

NE

A big thanks to you too Tony for such a wide-ranging interview with so many questions that hit the spot. I hope I'll get the chance to interview you back sometime about all the amazing work you do at your end. And my thanks to SKASE too, especially to Pavol Štekauer, Livia Körtvélyessy, and Renáta Gregová, for giving me this opportunity to talk about language, linguistics and life in such an unbuttoned and free-flowing way.⁴⁹

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⁴⁹ And we both also thank Pattie Epps for picking up some errors and infelicities in a draft version of this interview.