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INTERVIEW S PROFESOROM DAVIDOM SINGLETONOM

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Trinity College, Dublin.

Sunčano i hladno, netipično irsko zimsko jutro.

Naš sugovornik je dr. David Singleton, lingvist i primijenjeni lingvist, svjetski poznati stručnjak za pitanja usvajanja drugog i stranog jezika, poglavito pitanja uloge dobi u usvajanju jezika, međujezičnog transfera i mentalnog leksikona. O tome svjedoče njegovi brojni radovi objavljeni u uglednim časopisima te knjige *Language Acquisition: The Age Factor* (1989), *The Age Factor in Second Language Acquisition: A Critical Look at the Critical Period Hypothesis* (1995, urednik u suradnji s Zsoltom Lengyelom), *Exploring the Second Language Mental Lexicon* (1999) te *Language and the Lexicon: An Introduction* (2000).

David Singleton radi kao izvanredni profesor u Centru za jezične i komunikacijske studije (Centre for Language and Communication Studies) Trinity Collegea, predaje na diplomskom lingvističkom i postdiplomskom primijenjeno-lingvističkom studiju i, osim kao znanstvenik, cijjenjen je i kao osoba od koje se na svako postavljeno pitanje dobije relevantan i iscrpan odgovor. Profesor Singleton je nekoliko godina bio tajnik AILA-e (Association Internationale de Linguistique Applique), a trenutno je već treću godinu predsjednik EUROSLA (European Second Language Association). S obzirom na te i brojne druge dužnosti, njegovu vrlo plodnu tridesetogodišnju znanstvenu i stručnu karijeru, te radno iskustvo (o kojem sam govori nešto niže), profesor Singleton nam se učinio idealnim sugovornikom za interese i potrebe čitatelja našeg časopisa.

Pa evo naših pitanja i dobivenih odgovora.

1. *In the books and articles you have written over the last 20 years, you have been concerned with both theoretical and applied aspects of learning and teaching second/foreign languages. How would you define the relationship between these two aspects of your research?*

I started in linguistics. My first encounter with modern linguistics was in Cambridge where I did a postgraduate diploma in, basically, theoretical linguistics, very much in Chomskyan vein. Then I did my doctorate on lexical semantics and it wasn't really until I started work as a lecturer in Dublin that I got into the applied end of things. My first job was in the French Department at St. Patrick's College, which is a teacher education college, and there I became involved in the syllabus reform movement that was happening in the late 70s in Dublin. Through that involvement I got interested in methodology, recent approaches to syllabus design, curriculum design, issues around materials in the language classroom. I was involved in designing two syllabuses for Irish; we were applying the principles that were being discussed in the Council of Europe to the Irish situation. On the basis of the work I had done in this area and articles published on the topic, I got a post in Trinity as a lecturer in applied linguistics. I continued to work on these issues for quite a long time. I was also involved as a kind of expert in the committees organised by the



Ministry of Education which were concerned to revise the syllabuses in the secondary schools. Then, around mid 80s I started looking more at the acquisition-learning side of things, and doing some research in that area, which led me, eventually, to move away from the more applied side of things. However, I'm still interested in it, and I occasionally write an article on the topic.

I would say that there is a sense in which my work has come full circle because my most recent book was on lexicology and, although it included material on psycholinguistics and language acquisition, it was looking at the lexicon in a very broad sense and it put me in touch again with my Ph.D work. But, I have certainly not abandoned second language acquisition. I think it is important always to keep one's research fresh; I suffered a bit for being too associated in the past with just a couple of issues, like the age factor.

2. *Language Acquisition: The Age Factor (1989), currently out of print, has probably been one of your internationally most referred to books. The age issue is of great interest to both experts and laymen. It seems, though, that the research findings do not overtly support the common wisdom expressed in the saying "the earlier the better" when it comes to acquiring and learning second languages. What position do you hold in this respect?*

I am currently revising the 1989 book and I have also recruited a co-author. We hope that a new edition should be on the shelves some time next year.

Well, there is an age factor, and nobody is going to deny that. There is a broad tendency for people who start a language early to do better in the long run than the people who start it late, but there are number of things one has to take into account. First of all there are people who will beat the age factor; there are people who start learning a second or a foreign language late in life and do, nevertheless, achieve near native proficiency at all levels, in-

cluding accent. There is some really interesting work done by Bongaerts and his team in the Netherlands showing just how far people can get even with the late start. One thing often said in favour of the age factor is that nobody has ever pointed to a late starter who has actually achieved in all respects native proficiency. However, it is emerging from recent work that that is probably true even of early beginners; even early bilinguals are never quite the same as monoglot native speakers. So, maybe, one of the factors is not the age factor but just the fact of having another language – that will always change the nature of the competence that a learner will arrive at, even with a very early start. Actually, the real question is not whether there is an age factor but whether this age factor is in the nature of a critical period or not. Lenneberg's view was that the age factor had to do with the critical period associated specifically with the lateralisation of language functions to the left hemisphere and subsequently there have been various versions of the critical period hypothesis. They have all claimed that the age factor relates to maturation specifically linked to language. Maturation is associated with all kinds of things. For example, in naturalistic second language acquisition, a comparison has been made by some authors recently between the very different experiences of a young immigrant as opposed to an older immigrant: the two have different educational experiences; the possibility of making choices who to interact with also differs, as does degree of willingness to maintain a particular linguistic and cultural identity... There are all kinds of differences that happen to correlate with age but are not necessarily connected to neurological maturation of the brain functions. More generally, we know that as we age we do certain things less well, we get slower, our senses get less acute; so it is not surprising that older people do not generally achieve such good results in second languages as younger people. A whole range of factors enters the picture, and to reduce it all to a critical period which is specifically related to lan-

guage seems to me to be too simplistic. In any case, there are two arguments against the critical period as Lenneberg conceived it. First, lateralisation is known now to be completed much earlier – by the age of five at the latest. Second, the fact that there are adult beginners that can do so well also argues against the idea of the critical period. In other kinds of critical periods that we know in nature there are no exceptions: the constraint is species-wide. As far as language learning is concerned there is some evidence, which still has to be interpreted, that the decline involved is actually a continuous slope rather than something that happens stepwise. If there were a critical period, you would expect in the second language situation that there would be a sudden drop in the learning ability maybe at age 12, and after that everybody would be equally unsuccessful. That is not what actually happens. Older adults are worse than younger adults, which is not in accordance with the critical period hypothesis.

By and large, in the light of more recent evidence, especially from the second language domain, we are now talking about the possibility of maturational constraints which have a more general scope and do not necessarily imply critical period. Therefore, my basic response is: age factor – yes, critical period – no. That is my provisional position. But there is a lot interesting work coming out about the topic. For example, Bialystok has entered this area recently, and Hyltenstam's work is always interesting...

3. *What made you focus on the age issue?*

I think it was just interest in the topic. The first time I wrote about the age issue was back in 1981 when I wrote a little occasional paper published by our Centre for Language and Communication Studies, and, in fact, that occasional paper takes a different line from the line I have now. At that time I was a bit sceptical about the age factor. I admitted later in life that I had changed my mind because the evidence was overwhelmingly in favour of an

age factor. So it was just interest, and I think that's not an ignoble trigger for research; I think you have to be interested in what you are researching...

4. *Would you say that the fact that there is an age factor works in favour of early foreign language instruction in the school situation?*

Well, in the school situation there are so many other factors. It is certainly not the case that starting a second language early is a guarantee of success. If you look at the Irish situation, all children start learning Irish already at the age of four, but, nevertheless, language revival has not been an unqualified success in Ireland. There are, of course, people who would use Irish at every opportunity, but most people in Ireland don't. The problem that Irish faces is that it is in competition with English, which is a world language and so obviously useful, and it seems that children at schools look at it in the same way. Of course, this probably would not apply to situations in other countries where English is learned as a foreign language, but what I am trying to say is that it is not just the question of introducing a foreign language at the early age and expecting everything to work out well. There were some studies back in the 70s in Ireland which showed that children as young as nine were already orienting themselves towards the Irish language or not, depending of what they saw themselves doing later in life, whether entering a public service, where Irish is an advantage, or doing some other job where the knowledge of Irish is not necessary. This instrumental dimension was present at a very early age and it influenced children's willingness to learn the language. So, the factors in question are: attitudes towards the language, both parental and children's; conditions under which the language is encountered in school; how committed the teachers are who teach it and how proficient they are; what teaching materials are available; what the nature of the learning experience is, because motivation is





something which develops and changes according to one's experience in the classroom. The amount of preparation done by the authorities before foreign languages are introduced into the primary curriculum on a large scale is of crucial importance.

So, yes, there is an age factor and, moreover, there are some educational arguments in favour of early language instruction which do not depend on the notion of an age factor: for example, the fact of less crowded timetables at primary level and the benefits of introducing another culture early in a child's life. However, there is a hugely complex set of variables and arguments one has to deal with, so the answer is not simple.

5. *You have mentioned the complex situation with the Irish language. Is the reality of Irish more as of a second language or a foreign language?*

Again, it is difficult to say. It is a second language in terms that it is available in the community: there are, for example, TV and radio stations broadcasting in Irish and there are bilingual street signs. However, in fact, I suspect that for a lot of people it is more like a foreign language. Not foreign in the sense of belonging to a different culture, but most Irish people have little more contact with Irish than they have with French. Of course, there is a hugely positive attitude towards the language: it is important badge of cultural identity and people do learn it in school from the age 4 to 18, because Irish is a core part of the curriculum. But, then, not much happens beyond that school experience. So, it is a very interesting question whether Irish is a second or a foreign language. Maybe it is the emotional dimension that distinguishes it from a language like French, which, for historical reasons, is the most widely taught foreign language in Ireland. However, in terms of practice, actual contact with the language, Irish certainly wouldn't be a second language in the same sense that, for example, English would be to a Hispanic migrant in the United States.

6. *When are foreign languages introduced into the Irish school curriculum?*

They are usually introduced in the first year of secondary school, which means when children are twelve, but there is a project at the moment investigating the possibility of introducing continental foreign languages into the primary school. There is parental pressure to introduce French and German at the earlier age because people believe this notion „the earlier the better”, and they see the usefulness of these languages, since Ireland is part of the European Union. The current project is exploring the ground very meticulously because, as mentioned earlier, in order to introduce foreign languages into the primary school on a national level, one has to see what is and what is not possible in terms of the resources, the teachers... It is better to do things carefully than to be hasty and end up with a disaster, as has recently happened in some west European countries.

7. *Few would disagree with the statement that English is the lingua franca of the modern world. How do you envisage the international future of English?*

Well, there is a view that the dominance of English was a result of deliberate strategies on the part of the British and the Americans in the aftermath of the Second World War; there is talk about cultural and linguistic imperialism; but I do not think this is the whole story. If you look at the history of Europe, for example, there has always been a lingua franca within Europe. In the Middle Ages it was Latin, then French took over as the language of culture, art and literature. In different regions of the world there were different lingua francas, so it seems that for practical reasons we need something like that. English seems to have come to the fore for the moment, but in the future it could be Chinese or Spanish, for example. However, I think that in the near future English is likely to increase in influence, partly because of dominance of the United

States, which has, I am afraid, turned the process of globalisation into Americanisation. This process will undoubtedly augment the international role of English.

8. *Some countries fear that the extensive use of English and its early introduction into the school curricula might have a negative effect on the use and future of national languages.*

There are worries in a number of countries in Western Europe about that. However, there are some countries where English is very present in everyday life, for example the Netherlands, but where there is still a very clear demarcation between what happens in English and what happens in the indigenous language. Dutch, for example, does not seem to be threatened within the areas in which it operates. If we go back to the Middle Ages, when Latin was the language of international discourse, there were certain things people did in Latin, but vernaculars survived and thrived. I do not necessarily think that having an international language in the picture is a threat to national or regional languages, but obviously the situation needs watching. The situation we have in Ireland is not necessarily a typical one. In Ireland the native speaker base for Irish was decimated during the Great Famine in the mid 19th century and has never fully recovered. Furthermore, in British times there was a policy of hostility towards the Irish language and a conscious attempt to impose English. But nowadays, we have to think of an international language as a kind of tool that everyone should have. There is no contradiction or incompatibility – having an international language doesn't necessarily imply losing touch with your own language or not acquiring further foreign languages.

9. *As the current president of the EUROSLA, you must have a good insight into the present SLA scene: how would you describe it? What, in your opinion, are the main focuses of most SLA researchers?*

I think second language acquisition research is very agreeably diverse: people are doing all kinds of research in this area, all kinds of things are being talked about. It has never been the case in linguistics that everyone has been together, not even in the heyday of Chomskyan revolution, but it is even less the case nowadays. There is obviously a strain or school in SLA that is very much allied to or dependant on Chomskyan theory. Researchers use second language acquisition data to test out claims made by Chomsky about Universal Grammar, but certainly in Europe that is not the dominant strain. Researchers look at sociolinguistic dimensions, variation, vocabulary acquisition and the acquisition of phonology, and also do work on language attrition and language loss, on interaction between competencies in different languages. There is also psycholinguistic strain engaged in on-line experimentation in relation to the processing of different languages in the mind. The thing about second language acquisition is that it is a convenient sort of coat-hanger, but lots of things are hung on it that are not strictly covered by the label second language acquisition. I think there is a lot of diversity in the field, and I do not see that changing, certainly not within Europe and EUROSLA.

10. *One could say that some 10 years ago there was urge to build an integrated second language acquisition theory. Could you tell us what the present situation would be?*

Here I should mention the work of Piennemann. He is very interested in looking at a schedule of second language acquisition and believes that there is predictable progress in second language acquisition. His view is that people learn things only when they are ready to learn things and on the basis of other things they have learned previously. According to this view, we can set up a developmental scale and predict where a learner is at along this continuum and where, for example, teachers will be able to intervene usefully. Piennemann's work is extremely interesting and very rigorous.





He is a bit non-committal when it comes to theory, because he is working more at the empirical level, but the idea of arriving at a predictable developmental continuum is very much within the SLA programme, certainly in relation to morphosyntax. Some other areas, especially the lexical, will probably be more problematic in this connection.

So there is this ambition to try to arrive at an integrated body of information in relation to particular second languages. There are always complications. Even if one can predict in broad terms, there are always deviations from these developmental scales according to language background. For example, it is known that Spanish-speaking learners of English progress slightly differently from German-speaking learners, but I think we know a lot more about SLA than we knew 30 years ago. There are stabilities and predictabilities in the whole process and these have to be investigated further. The problem is that, in fact, we are still working on a very narrow data base. The discipline is only about 30 years old, so it is very young if we compare it to first language acquisition which has been looked into for two or three centuries, sometimes quite systematically.

11. *Do you believe that the data and findings from the first language acquisition field can help second language acquisition researchers.*

Ideally, first language acquisition researchers and second language acquisition researchers ought to be working much more closely than they are right now. There are some people who combine the two. Foster-Cohen, for example, is somebody who does both, and among psychologists, the work that has been done on working memory has involved studies of both first and second language. So there is some interaction. At a personal level, for the revision of my book about the age factor, I have recruited a co-author who is a first language acquisition specialist. Furthermore, there is the whole area of bilingualism which is currently attracting a lot of interest and is, in

a sense, between the two areas already mentioned. Boundaries among these areas ought to get thinner if not dissolve altogether. We are all looking at the very similar phenomena and we can draw on each other's methodology. Because first language acquisition research has been going longer and is more extensive on the whole, there is lots we can learn from what first language researchers have done, methodologically and in other ways, too.

12. *What role would you assign to first and second language acquisition research in foreign language teacher education, and what is the model of teacher education like in Ireland?*

The issues of first and second language acquisition should be addressed in foreign language teacher education, at least to the extent of raising people's consciousness. Here in Trinity future language teachers do get introduced to basic concepts of second language acquisition research. As Larsen-Freeman and Long mention in their *Introduction*, there may be limits to the extent to which we can actually apply in a straightforward way the findings of SLA, but these findings should be communicated to teachers so that they can be informed about the kind of things (errors, processes) they can expect; they should also be informed about motivation, and about how important the classroom can be in developing motivation. Despite the saying that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, I think that some broad formation involving an initiation into the recent findings of SLA research could be very useful to the future teachers.

As for the language teacher education in Ireland, it depends on whether you are going to become a primary or a secondary school teacher. Primary school teachers basically get a broad based formation in various aspects of education, but also in the academic subject they are specialising in, and they leave the teacher training college with a B.Ed (Bachelor of Education). Secondary school teachers do a degree in their academic subject or subjects for

three or four years (depending on the university) and then they take an additional year with just educational subjects, leaving the university with a Higher Diploma in Education.

13. *In recent years you have been invited as a guest lecturer to many East and Mid European Universities. In 1996 you were in Croatia for the Annual Applied Linguistics Conference. How do you assess the status of applied linguistics in these countries? In your opinion, what should applied linguists there do to get their research better recognised internationally?*

I have to say that I am very impressed by some of the research that is going on in these countries. What I think is characteristic of work being done in central Europe is that it is often very meticulous, with a lot of attention to detail. It is very carefully done, and researchers in other parts of world can learn a lot from this approach. I think that international associations such as EUROSLA and AILA have done a lot to bring together researchers from various parts of the world, and this was happening even before the great political change. The better we get to know each other and each other's rese-

arch, the more promising the future is. Collaboration of this kind can be extremely fruitful. I have just started some joint work with a Polish researcher which I think is going to lead to interesting things. Academic life has a number of disadvantages but one thing that is still on offer is this possibility (and, indeed, necessity) of international collaboration, of meeting and interacting with new people.

14. *What are your future research plans?*

I will certainly continue take an interest in the age factor issues and I will probably get more involved with experimental work within the psycholinguistic field. The research that I have started with a Polish colleague is a step in this direction. I will also continue with work of a broadly lexical kind which, as already mentioned, brings me back to where I started, re-connects my present work to my Ph.D. research in lexical semantics. I do very strongly believe that you should keep your research fresh and do in research terms what interests you. This is the great 'luxury' of academic life.

Thank you very much for answering all the questions so extensively and openly.

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*Razgovarala Marta Medved Krajnović**