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## AN INTERVIEW WITH HOWARD JACKSON

1. *Would you tell us something about how you became a linguist, about your schools and education?*

Well, as far as school is concerned, when I did A-levels in the 6th form I was interested in foreign languages, I took German, French and English as my three A-level subjects, German and French were always my best subjects, and eventually I went to university to study German, I went to London, I spent four years studying German, and French two years as well, the first two years. Anyway, in the third year – that's a four-year university course – I went to Freiburg in West Germany and I studied for a year there. I became interested in linguistics then; in the German Department, where I was studying, they had just got a new professor, Hugo Steger, who gave, I think, one of the first courses in structural linguistics in Freiburg. That was in 1969, so that was actually quite early. I had also attended, while I was in London, during the first two years of my course, Michael Halliday's inaugural lecture when he became professor of linguistics at University College London; it was entitled 'Grammar, Society and the Noun', I remember the title of it, and I was reading linguistics books as well. And in fact, in my final year one of the lecturers in German at King's College London, where I was, did a course on linguistics in German, in fact, he talked about some of the areas I was interested in. I then went on to Reading University to do a Master's in linguistics, and eventually it was followed by a doctorate in linguistics, and one of the topics that I was able to take in the Reading linguistics course was an option on the structure of modern German. My PhD then was a contrastive analysis of verb syntax in English and German. By that time I'd secured a job in Birmingham, at what was then Birmingham Polytechnic, where I was teaching linguistics and German, as it turned out. The German disappeared eventually and I was teaching exclusively linguistics within

the English Department, and that's where I've been for the last thirty years or so.

2. *Are you still in favour of the structuralist view in linguistics?*

What do you mean by structuralism (he laughs)?

3. *Well, you were influenced by structuralism, weren't you?*

Sure, sure. That was the paradigm of the time. But on the other hand I also took in a number of other things as well. My professor at Reading while I was there was Frank Palmer, who was a pupil of J. R. Firth the first English professor of linguistics in England, I should say in the 1950s. And Firthian linguistics is not structuralist in the strict sense. I read my Saussure, Bloomfield, Chomsky, and so on, but I also read Firth, and I was reading, I became interested, when I was doing my PhD, in valency grammar, so I was reading Tesnière in French, I was looking at the work of Helbig in Germany and other people who were writing in that area. So there were other influences actually coming in. Also of the two Americans, Bloomfield and Sapir working I suppose in the 30s, I always found much more, I was much more comfortable with Sapir than I was with Bloomfield, and Sapir had a much wider view of language and linguistics, putting it in the context of society, culture, and so on. I always felt that was a much more humane view of linguistics. I didn't get on with Chomskyan linguistics at all. And it seemed to me fairly early on that if you are going to be a Chomskyan, you are going to be A Chomskyan and only a Chomskyan, and you had to in a sense follow that particular school. That seemed too narrow to me. I suppose, the other kind of American linguist who I would say was influential in my thinking was Kenneth Pike who, I suppose was a structuralist but I think a much broader one, much more the Sapir tradition than the Bloomfield tradition. And a lot of his work was asso-



ciated with the analysis of unwritten languages, and eventually taken up by an organization that was involved in linguistics and Bible translation. So that was very much applied stuff.

4. *You have released a lot of books on lexicology, lexicography, meaning, 'Grammar and Meaning', 'Vocabulary and Meaning'. Do you do it strictly on a linguistic ground or are you trying to get psychology involved somehow? Is it becoming interdisciplinary what you are doing now?*

I think I've remained linguistic rather than psychological or cognitive. I've always had a problem with the idea that semantics was a level of description in language, like phonology and syntax, morphology and so on, it always seemed to me that meaning was something that invaded the whole of the language, that actually it is what language is about, language is about making meaning and conveying meaning, therefore there isn't in that sense a separate level of semantics since it invades everything from phonology onwards. And I think the other thing that became clear to me was that even when you are talking about grammar, you can't talk about it in isolation, grammar is there to serve the communication and meaning, and therefore grammar is not arbitrary. The kind of choice you make in grammar usually has some kind of motivation – semantic motivation. My book 'Grammar and Meaning' was an attempt to put grammar in that kind of context. My books have been largely textbooks trying to get students to understand how language works.

5. *And you do, actually. In fact I liked your books much better than I've read a couple of books on semantics but mainly generative semantics which I think are too complicated. It's not for linguists and not for future teachers to understand this, rather just l'art pour l'art.*

Well, I think linguistics divides into two camps. I think there are linguists who pursue linguistics in order to build models, and that's the aim. And there are linguists who in Pike's words get their feet dirty trampling in the empirical mud, who see their aim to explain how languages work. So, actually, it's data they are interested

in. And that really is how I became interested in corpus linguistics and the whole idea that in a sense the data is important, and what it's about is trying to explain what's there.

6. *I've known you as a person who keeps in touch with different universities all over the world, I know that you functioned as an external examiner at a time. Would you speak about it, please?*

Right. This is a particularly British system, I think, and I've worked as an external examiner in a number of universities in Britain, in fact, next month I'm going to the University of Central Lancashire but I also, I think what you are referring to, served as an external examiner for four years for a university in Hong Kong. That was actually a very interesting experience, I mean Hong Kong's educational system was just like the British one, anyway, and had the system of external examiners. Before the four years, I had been involved in the validation of the course in the first place. And I was interested to see how the students progressed through the course, and to be involved in that kind of thing, because external examiners are partly checking on the standards of the marking and making sure that the standards are maintained, and that there is a certain equivalence of standard across the system, that's part of what external examiners are there for, a kind of outside critical friend to advise departments on development of courses, and so on. Yeah, I was interested in getting involved abroad in my university, my department has been formulating exchanges with European universities.

7. *Well, I think it's a real advantage for European students to have the opportunity to study in England for a couple of months but I wonder how British students feel about coming to any kind of European university like for example to a Hungarian university to study English here, that should be quite weird.*

Well, yes and no, in the way we put it, first of all the experience with a different culture is a good thing in itself but they are also seeing how English literature and English language is studied in another university culture and that's

important as well because we don't all study in exactly the same way. We don't have the sort of the old medieval European university system when what you studied in Oxford was the same as what you studied in Rome or in Paris or in Geneva or wherever. We don't have that now, we have our own system though they are probably beginning to converge more now within the European Union with the Bologna Declaration, but nevertheless we have our own culture, our own ways of doing things and it's interesting for students to experience that.

8. *I heard in the news that teachers in England are quite dissatisfied. Does it concern teachers in higher education, too?*

No, not really, I think teachers in higher education don't have enough industrial muscle. If a university lecturer goes on strike, who cares? If nursery school teachers go on strike, parents will be affected by it. So by and large for university teachers it's rare that they go on strike. There was one early this year in London because people who work in London get extra pay in terms of what's called the London allowance. Now for teachers, and in fact for university teachers it's very low and they were striking because they wanted a higher allowance.

9. *We've just returned from Croatia. You were invited as a keynote speaker at the Croatian Applied Linguistics Conference. How did you like it? What did you experience?*

It was my first trip to Croatia. Very much enjoyed it. Loved the countryside, the town we were staying at, Opatija, we looked round Istria Peninsula, people were very hospitable and we were well looked after, enjoyed giving the lecture on grammar and vocabulary so that was nice. Unfortunately I wasn't able to appreciate the other papers because they were all in Croatian but I was impressed; in fact something may come of that because Boris Pritchard who was one of the organizers of the conference is involved in a corpus linguistics project on Maritime English at the University of Rijeka and we intend to continue correspondence, we may be cooperating in some way on that project. Something may come out of it. And I guess it won't be the

last time I've gone to Croatia.

10. *We were talking about this European English. Would you say some words about this idea? I mean in the world English is getting more and more important and the debate is for Europeans and I guess for the other continents as well is whether it should be British English or American English but you have mentioned you realize there is a third kind of English being made up by Continental people and you call it European English.*

Well, this is an interesting debate. There is partly the question of whether English is imperialistic, the idea of English being a global language which people will use if they want to communicate with each other and don't understand each other's first language and native language. Is English being imperialistic, is it actually causing the death of other languages? I think there is a view which suggests that that is the case. And certainly there is a society for endangered languages, and there is a book I think written with the title Linguistic Imperialism, by Philipson. Nevertheless, the idea of a global lingua franca, a European lingua franca is not new. It was Latin in the Middle Ages, and I suppose it goes through the 16-17<sup>th</sup> centuries. I think I'm right in saying that in some universities in Europe Latin was the language of instruction up until the 18<sup>th</sup> century in some subjects. So the idea of a European lingua franca is not new. The question then is what kind of model you have. Is it British English or is it American English? And which variety and so on. Or do you actually have a variety itself which sets, creates its own standards? Which is neither British nor American, but on its own becomes a kind of lingua franca, not a pidgin but a variety of English in its own right. And certainly my feeling is, certainly looking at vocabulary anyway, even within a national variety like British English, there isn't a single vocabulary. There is a set of vocabularies. There is a core vocabulary which we all share, which we use the whole time. But there are a whole lot of vocabularies according to who you are, what kind of activities you are engaged in, what your job or profession is and so on. There is no





reason why we shouldn't talk about a number of Englishes. So there are national varieties, there are supranational varieties, world English, the term was used by David Crystal who talked about a variety of English which in a sense can be used as a lingua franca both between English speaking people and others who have another language or between people who don't share a native language but use English as the means of communication. Presumably this world English will try and, I think in Crystal's terms, avoid some of the idiomatic language, idioms metaphors and so on, which are cultural and exclusive. Actually British and American don't share the same idioms anyway, I mean there are some we don't understand, the British don't understand those the Americans use and vice versa, so you need to avoid that kind of thing for world English and use a vocabulary presuming grammatical structure which is in a sense core or basic. Even going back to Ogden and Richard's idea of basic English.

11. *The problem for example in Hungary in terms of language examinations, like whether we should get stuck on one variety of English or, well, there are people who have influences from the US, and there are other people who have influences from England. And obviously it shows in their English speech. However, you wouldn't say that this person speaks the American variety of English because there are certainly British elements in it because in schools teachers use British English in the English teaching procedure. However, on TV or in movies they get a lot of influence from American English so it's really hard to decide whether to accept these inconsistencies in language use?*

This question came up yesterday with the students, actually. We were looking at the relative pronoun which is used with persons.

12. *Well, that's something new.*

Well, maybe it is, maybe it isn't, I don't know. Maybe we haven't just discovered it or realized what is actually going on and it was clear from the paper that we were looking at that there is a variety of personal nouns on a kind of scale from non-person to fully person, and the que-

stion came up as an English as foreign language teacher do you teach that kind of thing? My opinion was in the early stages you probably say 'who' with persons and 'which' with non persons. It's fairly black or white. As you get more advanced you have to realize that language is not categorical, you can't pigeon hole everything, many things are indeterminate, on a scale and so on. And you have to be aware of this. And it seems to me that has an effect both on what you teach advanced learners of English and it also has an effect on how you regard the English which people use. I suspect that as language teachers we've probably been too inflexible. But it's very hard, I think, because if you are not a native speaker, you don't know what is possible and what is not possible. But even as a native speaker I think we make different judgements. And I think it's always well-known that native speakers are actually much harder on foreign speakers of their language than their fellow native speakers. And it's a difficult area.

13. *And it also is a problem that foreign language teachers, who are not native speakers of English, want to concentrate on grammar so much that they wouldn't be stigmatized, under-educated or something like this. And they don't really concentrate on the communicative aspects. After a while as I experience myself what I realize is that I can transmit my thoughts if I stop concentrating on my grammar. And I as an English teacher am in trouble because I hear so many incorrect forms from my students that after a while I start to be confused, and I have to relearn the whole thing again instead of improving all the time.*

I think linguists have to recognize that in a sense – and language teachers as well – that they have a particular sensitivity to language. Most speakers filter out a lot of mistakes that people make whether they are native or foreign. I think, you don't notice them. But I think as language teachers or linguists we are supposed to be alert to this. I mean I notice things that people say and that I read and so on in an ordinary conversation and newspapers which other people don't see at all. And I comment on them and then it's a



surprise even for the members of my family that I make these kinds of comments. But that I think is because language is your business. It's inevitable that you are looking out for these mistakes and they've impinged on your consciousness, so I suspect that we are probably harder on learners than we ought to be. That's one point. And the other point is that English is nobody's possession these days. I think British people have genuinely regarded it as their possession and exported it to North America, but it's more theirs now in terms of quantity, they have a greater right to say it's theirs. But British people still think that the English language is in some way theirs. And the other thing is that it's actually spoken across the world by many many different people. And it's as much theirs as it is anybody else's. It's nobody's.

14. *Yes, that's right. But even Americans claim that if they want to write something in a correct way, if they apply for a university or a job or anything they are in trouble because they want to use British English they know that they can impress people by using British English. In spite of the fact that they are much more than the Brits back in England but still the prestige of British English is there. Even though there are cases when they laugh at British English but when it comes to important questions they regret not speaking British English or not being taught at school British English. I had some friends who were applying for graduate schools, they were learning a lot of words of Latin or French origin, they tried to improve their own lexicon and they also asked me to correct their writings because they knew that I was taught in school British English. For example they always had problems with the conditional, the tenses Present Perfect and Simple Past.*

It's also a particular variety of British English, this kind of educated language. British English comes in many many forms these days, it's a multicultural society. You hear, if you like, a South Asian variety, from the South Asian community, and you hear a Caribbean variety, in fact not just one but several Caribbean varieties in England, I guess you hear, you probably hear a Chinese variety and we have quite a large Chinese community, you hear a Greek variety, many

people came from Cyprus, so there are lots of varieties spoken by different communities in the UK. And the idea that British English is somehow a monolithic standard is an illusion.

14. *And talking about varieties, probably there are varieties in Wales and in Scotland.*

Yeap.

15. *How about Wales now? When I was there Welsh was reviving.*

Yes, I think they've been very successful, actually in reviving Welsh and I think Welsh has a prestige now it didn't have forty years ago. When you go into Wales, most of the signs are bilingual and there has been a secret resentment of English people, I think that's probably died down now but certainly there are places in Wales where Welsh is normal. You ring up, as I did, you telephone the Library of Wales in Cardiff and the answer you get on the telephone is in Welsh first of all. And then there's Welsh TV channels, Welsh radio, and so on, so I think it's more alive than Irish Gaelic, which I think is struggling.

16. *I remember back in 1995 when I was in Bangor, North Wales, the hotel receptionist asked me what I was doing there. I didn't want to talk about psycholinguistics or sociolinguistics so I decided to tell him that I was studying English. And he became quite shocked, looked at me in a weird way asking 'English? Here? Why don't you go to England then?' Anyway, how about Gaelic? Is it in a worse situation?*

Well in Scotland, Scots Gaelic, I think they are trying to revive it, not with so much success. There is a variety of English called Scots that I think is probably much more live than Gaelic. Gaelic is spoken largely only on the Highlands and Islands and I remember many many years ago hearing it spoken in Oban right up on the West coast. The proportion is not nearly as many Gaelic speakers as there are Welsh speakers. Welsh has been a success story in terms of minority languages in the UK.

17. *Just like Romance in Switzerland.*

Yeah, and like Catalan in Spain.

*Thank you very much for the interview.*

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