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*The making of a sociolinguist*

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## *The Making of a Sociolinguist*

Allan Bell

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I was born in 1947 in Wellington, but moved with the family to Palmerston North the following year, when my father became minister of a church there. We moved to Auckland in 1957 after he died in a vehicle accident – a pivotal cataclysm in my young life. So I did most of my growing up in Auckland, five years at Auckland Grammar School. I was one of their bright boys, but did not enjoy it very much – too competitive, too narrow. In the fifth form, the curriculum options presented me with a dire choice – to either continue with maths or take up German, I couldn't do both. I was good at maths, and I could certainly have later used a stronger foundation in statistics when I went on to do quantitative sociolinguistics. On the other hand, I was also good at languages, so I chose German, which became my main L2. I did well in the national scholarship exams, topping the country in the humanities subjects in 1965.

I sometimes reflect on what the accents of my forebears who emigrated to Aotearoa/New Zealand may have sounded like. My great-grandfather captained sailing ships between Glasgow and New Zealand before settling here in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and I would love to credit him with importing the centralized KIT vowel to this country, given its prevalence in Glasgow. My mother's mother – the only grandparent I knew – had no kind of accent that struck me. I do remember her referring quaintly to luncheon sausage as 'Belgian' – it had been 'German sausage' until the First World War. Scotticisms carried through into the family lexicon: Mum went out daily to 'do the messages', and transmitted such arcane dialectalisms as 'lang may your lum reek' and 'haud your wheesh'. Maybe that is why – my younger colleagues tell me – I am a late bastion of the /w~ɹ/ distinction in NZ English.

My mother also inherited the Scottish commitment to education, although she had not herself been given much opportunity. Both my older sisters went to university despite the financial strain on a solo-parent family dependent on the benefit. At the University of Auckland myself from 1966, I continued with the languages for my BA – English, French, German. In retrospect I regret keeping the choices so narrow, it would have been good to extend myself at least into sociology or anthropology. Apart from the foreign language learning, most language-subject study focused on literature. Linguistics was taught in its Hallidayan form, recently brought back from the UK by Forrest Scott and Colin Bowley. Colin's lecturing style managed to kill off most people's interest in the approach, but he later proved to be an excellent PhD supervisor. Doing MA by papers only in 1969, I could see little point in what seemed the self-reproductive scholarship involved in a career in literary studies. I was able to include an English linguistics paper into a German Masters (First), plus the one German linguistics paper available. That course brought me to study under my first

mentor, Werner Droescher, who became a friend and saw a graduate essay of mine through to publication in a student issue of *Te Reo* in 1969.

1970 I spent as a labourer in the Auckland fruit and produce markets – an instructive encounter with non-academic life, which also vernacularized my accent for a while. I won a Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst scholarship, which took me to the University of Stuttgart in 1971 and began my linguistics education in more earnest. I didn't find descriptive or theoretical linguistics to my taste, but Applied Linguistics was strong at Stuttgart. I wrote a long exit essay on contrastive analysis, which might have gone on to be published in a journal if I had known what publication was. After a semester's struggle to cope with the local Schwabian dialect, I became a near-native speaker of German. The time in Stuttgart was also crucially formative for me in the way that such liminal experiences in one's early 20s can be – and I still have friends there.

Meantime back in New Zealand, I had won a doctoral scholarship and decided to pursue this in English linguistics at Auckland. The scholarship was on a 'mixed-tenure' model available at that time – one of its three years could be spent at an overseas university. This was a carrot, since in the 1970s Kiwis still wanted to get their doctorates overseas, preferably from the UK, and preferably Oxbridge. At least mine would have an overseas component. I decided to do a year's coursework first, given how piecemeal my grounding in linguistics had been. I had to come up with a thesis topic quickly before leaving NZ again in September 1972, and lighted on 'the language of news' (modelled on Leech's *English in Advertising*, 1966). I decided on this hurriedly and without much reflection, but it has proved to be a serendipity that has served me well professionally as well as academically.

My supervisors – Bowley and Scott – knew only the British scene, and the obvious place for me to go was University College London where Randolph Quirk was founder and director of the Survey of English Usage. The Survey proved – in my experience – to be a white elephant, and Quirk himself a rather disdainful academic. It was however an exciting time to be studying linguistics at London. I learned phonetics from J D O'Connor (a delightful teacher), and linguistics from an innovative and enthusiastic group of fresh young lecturers whose scholarship was just starting to become widely known: phonology with Neil Smith, syntax with Deirdre Wilson, semantics with Ruth Kempson, and sociolinguistics from Dick Hudson and Bill Downes – both of whom produced textbooks in the subfield soon after. Too late I learned that if I had played it right, I could have turned that year into a London MA with little extra work. At the time that omission mattered, but as my career developed, the lost opportunity wouldn't be of any lasting moment.

What I learned in classes in London was stimulating but also discouraging. The then orthodoxy was transformational-generative grammar, which declared that a study of style and register such as mine was neither worthwhile nor interesting, nor did the theory provide any tools to undertake it. However early in 1973 I made a transforming discovery. The British Council maintained the best linguistics library in London at the time, and I was browsing their shelves and came across a squat, rather poorly-produced volume, stuffed with tables and figures. It was Labov's *Stratification of English in New York City*, his 1966 PhD thesis as published by the Center for Applied Linguistics. I read it line by line, table by table, graph by graph. I didn't understand it all, but made pages of close hand-written notes (I still have them). I discovered that it

addressed fundamental issues of doing research such as mine – I had found a way to approach my subject.

Back in Auckland in late 1973, I read widely in linguistics, sociolinguistics and mass communications. At this time New Zealand's isolation still exacted a cost in difficulty of access to books and journals, which could take months to come across the sea or never arrive at all. But I managed to get most of what I wanted, and honed my topic to a style comparison of news on radio stations in Auckland. I borrowed six radio sets and six reel-to-reel tape recorders, and set about recording all news from 6am to midnight on five weekdays. I found I had hit on two serendipities: first, some of the sets of news originated out of the same studios of what is now Radio NZ but were broadcast on different stations – the then National Programme, and the ZB commercial network. I had unwittingly stumbled on a kind of natural matched guise through which I could compare the styles of the same readers broadcasting the same news to different audiences. Secondly, I managed to get hold of the 'wire copy' texts of news which stations received. This meant that for some stories I had the original which stations then edited and re-styled for their own use. I made good use of these gifts in my eventual analysis and writeup.

Then as well as researching news language I began to write it – in 1976 I took on editorship of the Auckland University student newspaper, *Craccum*. It was a fulltime job, and I'm sure Colin Bowley thought he'd lost me as a PhD student. However at the end of the year, I came back to the doctoral work, and in 10 months did most of my linguistic coding, all my analysis and interpretation, and most of the writeup – I still don't know how. I submitted the thesis in September 1977, just a few weeks beyond my target date of my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. Looking for examiners for the thesis, we decided to start at the top – namely Labov. He said yes, gave the thesis a good write-up, and from then on was a crucial mentor at important junctures of my career.

Meanwhile there was a living to be earned. I moved to Wellington, but it took time to get a job. Some friends thought it was rather funny that I was an unemployed PhD: I didn't find it at all funny to be enrolling at the labour office. After six months I got a job as editor of a conservation magazine, and so began some 20 years of media work in the NZ public service, largely covering science, environment and agriculture.

After two years editing *Soil & Water Magazine*, I sought a belated postdoctoral year and left for the U.S. in 1980. En route I went to the Linguistic Society of America annual meeting in San Antonio, Texas. I simply attended, not having dared to submit an abstract because I was afraid my work wouldn't have been good enough. I discovered that it would have been, and that the standard of our NZ conferences was the equal of North American ones. In Washington, D.C., I was taken in by the Center for Applied Linguistics as an honorary postdoc (funded from my own savings). CAL had been a focus of sociolinguistic research since the 1960s, when it supported and published the founding variationist studies. Walt Wolfram was the Research Director and became a good friend and invaluable mentor. He later continued that role as one of my go-to editorial board advisors on the *Journal of Sociolinguistics*. CAL was then housed beside Georgetown University, where I was able to audit classes from Ralph Fasold. I also, at Labov's invitation, commuted (by 5am train) to Philadelphia to attend classes at University of Pennsylvania, including a now-legendary course taught jointly by him, Erving Goffman and Gillian Sankoff.

Through presence at CAL, Penn and the 1981 NWA conference, I came to know – and be known by – most of the leading North American variationists. Two small experiences stand out as emblems of their generosity. When Labov introduced me to the class at Penn, Goffman – to whom Labov had loaned his examination copy of my thesis – commented: ‘It’s a great thesis’. Soon after, he would footnote it in his major article on radio language (Goffman 1981) – a young scholar’s dream! Second: I had never written a journal paper before, so I asked Gillian Sankoff to read a draft manuscript for me, and she did. I reminded her of this many years later – she had forgotten. But it stands for me as an indicator of those interactions which senior scholars may not remember but which are crucial to the younger academics involved.

The year at CAL turned me from a student into a scholar. I then won a Leverhulme Postdoctoral Fellowship to the University of Reading where Peter Trudgill was. 1982 gave me the chance to get to know many British and European sociolinguists, partly through attending the Sociolinguistics Symposium of that year in Sheffield. My presentation was on ‘Style – the Neglected Dimension’, which I gave in fear of being the mouse that roared at Labov, whose attention-to-speech model was the received wisdom on sociolinguistic style. It was a year of wide and deep reading in sociolinguistics, devoted entirely to producing just the one article – ‘Language style as Audience Design’. I had worked up the kernel of Audience Design in 1974 in early drafts of a theory chapter for my thesis. In 1977, in the last stages of writing the thesis, I came across Howie Giles’s accommodation theory, providing a much deeper sociopsychological basis for what I had observed in my media data. At the end of an all-night session on the photocopier just before departure from the UK, I mailed it off – in fact to *Language*, which quickly rejected it. Next stop was *Language in Society*, where Labov supported it into print, still I think the longest paper they have ever published, and now the most cited.

The immediate reception of the paper was, to tell the truth, largely disappointing. I was excited to be invited by Elaine Tarone to speak at a conference in Minnesota on accommodation in language in 1986, alongside Labov and Trudgill, but after that there seemed not much impact. That apparent lack of interest in the Audience Design paper helped fuel my necessary return to the journalistic workforce to earn a living through the 1980s and 1990s. I worked as media person for the NZ Department of Scientific & Industrial Research for much of this time, punctuated by running an agricultural news service for a couple of years. DSIR was an ideal job. My task was largely to write stories about the scientific work of the department. I ranged across ecology, genetics, superconductors, plant breeding, earthquakes, oceanography. Lacking any science specialization myself, I figured that if I could understand it, then I could present it so that other people would also understand. The media uptake was often huge, and I relished the challenge of digesting and presenting arcane science for lay consumption. The work also fed into my research interest in the language of media, since I was spending half of my day actually doing it. When I came to write my book on *The Language of News Media* in the late 1980s, I was able to draw on my firsthand experience of news writing and editing, and use examples of stories I had written or edited myself – ‘observant participation’, you could call it. I think it was that unique hands-on flavour, derived from my involvement as practitioner as well as researcher, that contributed to its success as one of the foundation texts of media sociolinguistics, cited even more than the Audience Design paper. It surprised

both me and I'm sure Blackwell Publishers by going into six printings in 15 years – also providing a flow of royalties that was welcome to a freelancer.

The combination of science and media, research and practice, led me into one of the most interesting and sociopolitically significant studies I have undertaken, the 'Hot News' project. DSIR was doing much of New Zealand's climate change-related research in the late 1980s when the greenhouse effect and ozone depletion first came into the news. I got the support of the department (and the Ministry for the Environment) to research media coverage and public understanding of the issue. This early stage of climate change as a public issue came just before the internet, meaning that almost everything that the NZ public knew about the matter was derived from the local mainline mass media. So I gathered media coverage and conducted a (small) public survey of people's knowledge of the issues. Public understanding largely reflected the information that people had available, but the occasional badly inaccurate or overstated story clearly triggered public misunderstanding or exaggeration, for example of potential temperature or sealevel rises (Bell 1994). I was able to take these kinds of findings and incorporate them into workshops I was giving for scientists on how to communicate with the media.

By the late 1980s I was drifting out of academia and research, absorbed in ultra-fulltime journalism and editing. But I was in Wellington, and knew the Linguistics folk at Victoria University. Janet Holmes and I had obvious shared interests, and she wielded her considerable institutional influence to ease me into the Linguistics section from 1987 as an honorary research fellow, housed in a prefab building precariously squatting at the base of a cliff on the Kelburn campus. Commissioned to write a survey of research on NZ English for Jenny Cheshire's book on *English around the World* (1991), Janet and I realized how slight the research base on the variety really was. Funding was just starting to become available for social sciences research in NZ: we applied and received a princely NZ\$30,000 in 1989 to begin what would be the first variationist study of NZ English – the Porirua Project. I stepped down to half-time work as media consultant at DSIR, and for those next few years had my ideal work configuration – half sociolinguistics research, and half media.

We chose Porirua as location for our study, a lower socioeconomic suburb north of Wellington where our colleague Mary Boyce lived and had strong networks, especially in the Māori community. We worked up a questionnaire, structured a sample of 75 speakers largely around gender and ethnicity, and interviewers went out armed with Sony cassette recorders. In variationist fashion, we targeted a number of sociolinguistic variables – /h/-dropping, ING, the *ear/air* diphthong merger, the KIT vowel. Miriam Meyerhoff worked as a research assistant and published her findings on the *eh* particle; David Britain arrived in 1991 as a postdoctoral fellow and took on the high rise terminal intonation – in his own speech as well as in research: it is a very infectious feature. We were laying the foundations of solid empirical work on NZ English, including specifying for the first time the nature of the 'Māori English' which NZ linguists had been trying to tie down for decades.

This project opened the floodgates for wide and deep empirical work on NZ English using the Porirua sample, the Corpus of NZE at Victoria University, and the Origins of NZ English and associated databases at University of Canterbury. Studies and findings poured out during the 1990s, and within a decade NZE went from being the least to the most studied major dialect of English. Beginning with *New Zealand Ways of Speaking English* (1990) with Janet Holmes, I co-edited collections of articles

intended to make available important work on NZ languages that might otherwise not reach publication. That work and all that has followed it has made this country an international focus and driver of sociolinguistic research, method and theory well beyond its size. Curiously we found that focussing on the peculiarly local in our sociolinguistic situation attracted international interest in a way that our earlier less distinctively New Zealand studies had not.

I can see a certain strand of nationalism in the research. An early title of mine on NZ media language was 'This isn't the BBC' (1982), where I expressed apprehension that NZE would fall 'out of the British frying pan and into the American fire' in our sociolinguistic orientation. I needn't have worried – our accent is becoming more itself, not less. Studying performance language has also been one of my delights, from Billy T James's Māori English to Marlene Dietrich's non-native English persona.

Around this time I took my first opportunity to turn research expertise to the service of the endangered languages of this country. For 10 years I worked as an expert witness with the Māori advocacy groups who took court cases to require the Government to honour its Treaty obligations to support and promote te reo as a *taonga* through broadcasting (Bell 2010). That provided the legal basis on which Māori Television was founded a decade later, and in 2018 Māori is much more visible and audible in public than 20 years earlier – although it remains under threat at the crucial level of inter-generational transmission.

Meantime I had largely lost contact with what was going on in the area of style, but around 1990, I somehow noticed that John Rickford was giving a conference plenary (presumably at NWAV) on the subject of style. I contacted him to say that his talk looked like it would be of interest to me. John replied that, yes, the paper would not just be of interest – it was based squarely on my own work. That study was published in 1994 as Rickford & McNair Knox. John's intervention and advocacy put style centrally on the agenda of North American variationism, and Audience Design at the centre of its theorizing. There is no encouragement like being noticed, and soon John and his colleagues were planning the 1996 NSF-funded round table on style from which the Eckert and Rickford 2001 volume emanated. According to the ambiguous title that I eventually used for my chapter there, I was now 'back in style' (2001). Audience Design had become the default sociolinguistic approach to style for a couple of decades, leading one colleague to dub me 'Mr Style'. Although it is now less fashionable than more obviously agentive approaches, Audience Design played a leading role in moving style from the periphery to the core of sociolinguistics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – and the structure/agency pendulum may be swinging back (see my take in Bell 2016).

Given Nik Coupland's and my shared interest in sociolinguistic style, we had come across each other's work in the early 1980s after both of us had finished our respective theses. We corresponded, and eventually met in 1986. Nik set up a six-month visiting fellowship for me in 1994 at the Centre for Language & Communication Research in Cardiff, where he was founder, director and lynchpin of an innovative and high-quality grouping of sociolinguists and discourse analysts. Nik and I started to talk about how the field was now large enough to offer scope for a second general journal alongside *Language in Society*. Adam Jaworski joined our discussions as potential Reviews Editor, and the idea of the *Journal of Sociolinguistics* was born. We began publication in 1997, co-editing between New Zealand and Wales.

Most of the submissions came in to Cardiff – in hard copy, by snail mail. At this relatively early stage in the digital age, the collaboration was made possible by email (and would not go fully online till 2008). I undertook the copy editing myself for the first couple of years, determined to establish an excellent standard from the start, and providing a handy additional income stream in my freelance portfolio.

I moved from Wellington back to Auckland in 1995, and this slowly diminished my contacts with, and contracts from, the public sector, based in Wellington. Although I had authored one of sociolinguistics' seminal papers and co-founded a leading journal, I had never held a secure position at a university. It was becoming harder to make a living freelance, but in 2000 Auckland University of Technology was created out of a former polytechnic. It was keen to upgrade its academic workforce quickly, and I applied for and was appointed Professor of Language & Communication in 2001, going from zero to 'full professor' in one leap.

In 1999 Donna Starks, Karen Davis and I had won a difficult-to-get Marsden Fund grant to study maintenance and shift in the four main Pasifika languages present in Aotearoa/New Zealand: Samoan, Cook Islands Māori, Niuean and Tongan. We held community consultation meetings, which quickly rocked back the conduct of the project because of our lack of involvement of Pasifika people. We were then joined by Melenaita Taumoeofolau of the University of Auckland, and by a formal advisor, an elder, an interviewer and an analyst from each of the four groups – a team of 20. The results from the 120 interviews of the Pasifika Languages of Manukau Project provided the first hard evidence of language shift in these speech communities. The community involvement was crucial but exhausted most of our available time, reducing the academic outputs that could be produced from the project while prioritizing community support and language advocacy. It also led on to research on Pasifika Englishes, especially with Andy Gibson and Donna Starks, analysing the English accents in the Manukau recordings. That enabled us to move on to a study of the successful Pasifika animated comedy *bro'Town* and its representation of Samoan Englishes.

My main task once employed at AUT was to bring together a research institute from the disparate strands of specialization in the Faculty of Arts – communications, journalism, languages, art, design. The Centre for Communication Research was founded with me as Director, received substantial central AUT funding and began to build capability. We were able to support fellowships for AUT staff, appoint a postdoctoral fellow, fund visits by overseas academics, and generally develop capacity and culture among AUT's embryonic research constituency.

After five years of good work, the Centre lost its central funding in the wake of some unpleasant internal political moves but, transformed into the Institute of Culture, Discourse & Communication, it gained support from the faculty. The *Journal of Sociolinguistics* operation was run from here, particularly aided by the appointment in 2005 of Andy Gibson as Editorial Associate. Andy would be my colleague for over a decade in the *Journal* and several research projects, and a mainstay of the Institute. In 2006 we began the New Zealand arm of the World Internet Project, initiated by Philippa Smith, who has been the other constant in ICDC besides myself. We conducted large two-yearly nationwide surveys supported by major public-sector funding. We also founded the NZ Discourse Conference in 2007. Thereafter it was hosted every two years with a high standard of presentations and some of the world's leading discourse scholars as plenary presenters, who also gave workshops about



their approach and methodology. After 10 productive years, ICDC lost its faculty funding in 2017. We passed the World Internet Project and NZ Discourse Conference on to other units at AUT, and the Institute became increasingly a paper centre, which I expect to be closed after I retire in March 2019.

Through this time I was supervising up to a dozen thesis students, including Philippa's doctorate, a stellar MPhil by Andy ('doctoral standard', wrote one examiner), and a seamless PhD from Alwin Aguirre on online discourses of Filipino migrants in New Zealand. I also began teaching. I had taken the odd one-off class while at Victoria, and rather more in my short spell at University of Auckland (1997-99), but had neither enjoyed it nor felt I did it particularly well. But taking my own graduate-level class for a full semester made all the difference. I enjoyed teaching sociolinguistics in a new Masters degree, mainly with mature students, who all conducted individual projects of their choosing under my eye.

I had signed a contract in 1999 with Blackwell for a textbook, whose pragmatic aim – in my then freelance situation – was to provide another income stream. Taking the AUT job soon after meant that on the one hand I had a much stronger base of teaching experience to work from, but ironically no longer had the time to write the book. It wasn't until 2009 that I managed to get back to consistent writing. For the textbook I then drew on my fund of reading as Editor of the *Journal* as well as on my own wide range of work across the field. *The Guidebook to Sociolinguistics* (2014) presented my vision of sociolinguistics for the 21st century, under two overarching themes: delight in the profusion of language, and commitment to marginalized voices. The approach built on my teaching principle that the best way to grasp sociolinguistics is to do it, so I provided detailed guidance for conducting hands-on research.

I applied my journalistic craft to produce a book whose depth would serve graduate students but whose clarity would make it accessible to undergraduates. One of the most encouraging evaluations was this email from Bill Labov: 'I've been having the best time today reading through your Guidebook once again, and I can't put it down without writing to you. What an extraordinary amount of thought, care and insight you have put into this book! It is a work of art.' It is worth noting here that three out of the dozen or so international sociolinguistics textbooks have come out of New Zealand (Holmes, Meyerhoff, Bell).

Throughout my career I have enjoyed the risk of crossing disciplines. Bakhtin is one of my leading icons, that proto-sociolinguist whose thinking foreshadows much of the agenda for this field. Given the abstruseness of Bakhtin's thought and writing, it was a challenge to craft an article aimed at distilling the essence of his thinking for sociolinguists (Bell 2007). Bakhtin's stress on responsiveness has an obvious resonance with my own approach. Central to this is the idea of listenership, of our Being Audience to the speakers we are hearing, of our active response to what they say and how they say it.

Also from Bakhtin comes the importance of Voice – not language in the abstract, or even specific languages or their varieties. Rather, voice as something which is physical and embodied; situated and localized; temporal and immediate; nuanced, distinctive and personal. For me this has focused for the past 15 years in singing in a classical choir, Auckland Choral. I have enjoyed researching pronunciations as we have performed in a dozen or more languages including Hebrew, Tongan, Māori, Spanish, German (Modern and Middle High) and Latin in

its Italian Church, German Church and Medieval Secular varieties. As Bakhtin has said, voice throws a bridge between the self and the other.

Still more demanding in crossing disciplines was my encounter with the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur. As I worked in discourse analysis from circa 2000, I realized that hermeneutical philosophers had been grappling for two centuries with many questions that we discourse analysts had only recently started to formulate. I began to rework Ricoeur's proposal for a 'hermeneutical arc' of text interpretation into discourse analytic terms, and exemplified that by analysing the biblical story of Babel. Following the lead of some insightful Old Testament scholars, I concluded that the traditional Western interpretation that Babel is a curse was in fact less plausible than a reading which sees multilingualism as a blessing. By the time I had covered all that territory, the paper had blown out to 20,000 words – what journal was going to publish that, especially since the deadline for the next PBRF round was looming? I sent it off to Teun van Dijk's *Discourse Studies*: he responded immediately expressing scepticism that hermeneutics could possibly offer anything to discourse analysis. But a day later, after reading the paper, he came back proposing to make it the focus of a theme issue on discourse analysis and hermeneutics, with a slate of scholars from different backgrounds commenting on my article (2011).

Meanwhile there was change at the *Journal of Sociolinguistics* from 2008. One thing that Journal editorship can be guaranteed to do is to diminish the time available for your own research, and after 10 years, Nik Coupland decided to step down as Co-editor. I continued as sole Editor but, believing in the need for diversity in the editorial team and process, appointed three Associate Editors – all submissions were assessed by me and one of these. This structure worked outstandingly well, and David Britain, Monica Heller and Lionel Wee were the first of a line of wonderful Associate Editors with whom I worked over the next decade – insightful, efficient, amiable, committed. One theme collection particularly dear to me was the 2016 issue that I co-edited with David Britain and Devyani Sharma to mark 50 years since Labov's foundational New York City study. We commissioned essays to overview and assess his lifetime of innovation and contribution across the field. As well as a tribute to Bill Labov, the issue forms a fitting bookend to my editorship and to a career whose beginning had been launched by his work.

But by then I had been doing the Editor's job for 20 years. I estimated I had probably read about 3000 manuscripts, greatly enabled by a daily pattern of a manuscript taking the length of a latte at a local café. The reading had given me a unique perspective over the field (for more on that, see my exit Editorial, 2017), but enough was becoming enough, and I stepped down at the end of 2017 after a tenure as long as Dell Hymes on *Language in Society*.

Being an editor has been the most consistent strand of my career, both as professional and academic. After a full 50 years it is strange not to have the rhythms, disciplines and interactions of editing shaping my working life. I miss the mechanics of layout and proofing, and of dealing with type – the first major magazine I edited was still being set in solid hot-lead type and printed on letterpress. The designing and shaping of a regular publication involves a satisfying creativity, culminating in the pleasure of holding a fresh-minted hard copy in the hand – which is for me not matched by viewing an assemblage of PDFs on line.

After 20 years at the centre of a *Journal* network which was the centre of the field, it is strange to be on the sideline, but it has gifted me back my own research time.

I have one last major theoretical and empirical paper with which I want to sign off from the field – my work on accent stock phrases (such as *fish and chups* for the centralized NZ KIT vowel) and their place in the ideologies and styles of speakers, and in the theorization of sociolinguistic style and its social meaning. Otherwise I am intentionally easing out of mainstream sociolinguistics. With the exception of the above piece and hopefully a co-authored 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of the Guidebook, I have said most of what I want to say.

I ask prospective PhD students three short questions about their topic: *Is it interesting? Does it matter? Can it be done?* For my own research, it has always mattered that the project should matter, that it should have human and social significance. This has guided me into linguistics rather than literary studies, into sociolinguistics rather than theoretical or descriptive, into editorship and journalism, the sociolinguistics of mass media, the social repercussions of linguistic inequity, and support of endangered languages. At heart I am very much a \*socio\*linguist: my main interest has been to address language issues in their social dimension, and social issues in their linguistic dimension.

In recent years, this has taken me back to biblical texts that I have known since childhood to see what a sociolinguist's sensibility can bring to understanding them. My retirement project is to ask what a sociolinguist's eye can offer to biblical studies, an area close to my heart. I have been reading my way into this fresh discipline, with the mixed excitement and bewilderment of a novice, just as I was 45 years ago when I started in sociolinguistics. I intend to work on some of those biblical passages that most obviously say something about language: Babel of course, Pentecost and its many 'tongues', the Prologue to the Gospel of John – 'In the beginning was the Word', with its avowal that language in some basic way reflects the character of the universe. I have started by looking at the New Testament Gospels and find that a sociolinguist does have something apparently fresh to offer: New Testament scholars clearly know little about how bilingualism works. They have therefore – to my assessment – given inadequate accounts of the origins and development of the Gospel texts, assuming a process of translation that was simply unnecessary for the Greek/ Aramaic bilinguals who transmitted the traditions.

Not everything in one's career works out, but I don't regret my corkscrew employment history, whose mix of research and journalism kept me sharp and interested. It would have been nice to hold a stable academic job earlier, but those were the choices I made. I owe a considerable debt to the institutions which took me in when I was a 'freelance academic nomad' (Walt Wolfram's label), especially the Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, D.C., and Victoria University of Wellington. Latterly I was hosted by the University of Hong Kong on a Visiting Research Professorship (2014-18) in the stimulating environment of the School of English there.

New Zealand linguistics has been conducted collegially for as long as my memory goes back (the late 1970s). Conferences are environments of supportive comment and question rather than attempts to cut others down. We collaborate across universities. Of course there has been competition and difference, but ours has largely been a positive and encouraging environment and community to a much greater degree than anywhere else I have experienced, and that is a tradition to be celebrated and cherished. Personally I have been blessed in the quality and collegiality of my

collaborators, many of them mentioned in this article. Most have become good friends as well as co-workers.

Sociolinguistics in New Zealand is in good hands under the next generation's leaders such as Miriam Meyerhoff and Jen Hay (both former students of Janet Holmes and researchers with me in the early 1990s). Many younger scholars are coming through the programmes at Canterbury and Victoria. It is gratifying to see the field here remain robust and cutting edge 25 years after New Zealand sociolinguistics first came to the fore internationally.

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