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A linguistic autobiography

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A linguistic autobiography

Andrew Carstairs-McCarthy

I grew up in Surrey (England), and attended private schools (a 'prep school' in Redhill followed by a 'public school', Eastbourne College). Like all children with that background at the time, I started French at a young age and Latin a year later. My father had a degree in history but had always rather regretted not doing classics, so thanks to him I started Greek when I was eleven. I thus became a classicist, one of what was in those days still a sizeable group within the UK school system.

It is not to Greek and Latin that I owe my interest in linguistics, however. When I was nine or ten, somebody gave me a little book that I still possess: *The Gospel in Many Tongues*, subtitled 'Specimens of 826 language in which the British and Foreign Bible Society has published or circulated some portion of the Word of God'. This captivated me. Some children have imaginary friends or private worlds. For me, my private world became languages: not French or Latin or Greek and certainly not English (they were all part of the tedious and oppressive public world), but practically anything else, the more exotic the better. I would borrow (say) *Teach Yourself Danish* or *Russian for Beginners* from the public library, get as far as lesson three, then return it so as to dabble with Swahili or Esperanto or whatever else I could lay my hands on. I was intrigued by sound systems, writing systems and morphology (the more elaborate the better), but not syntax (which would in any case be treated in cursorily in most of those textbooks) or semantics. Chinese, I discovered, had scarcely any inflectional morphology, so it did not appeal. On the other hand, Turkish (for example) was a garden of delights.

At the same time, I lapped up books about obscure words and word histories by writers such as Ernest Weekley, Eric Partridge and Ivor Brown – a genre of writing that enjoyed a modest boom in the early to mid twentieth century. The only serious linguist that I came across at that time was Otto Jespersen. When I won the Duke of Devonshire Senior Classical Prize at Eastbourne College in 1961, I had the sense to ask for a copy of his *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin* (1922), which I still possess.

Aged sixteen, I was entered for a classical scholarship to Balliol College, Oxford. Having been offered a scholarship, however, I was disappointed to find that the college took it for granted that I would continue with classics. I would have loved to escape into linguistics. But Oxford at that time had no linguistics other than 'philology', that is the historical study of ancient and medieval European languages. I grumbled and protested. A few months before I was due to go up to Balliol, I had an interview with the senior tutor in classics there, Robert Ogilvie. He tried to persuade me that, even if Latin and Greek language and literature did not appeal to me, I would benefit from the fact that the Oxford classics course included a large component of

philosophy, modern as well as ancient; and philosophy (he argued), alongside law, provides the best possible training in clear thinking. But I dug in my heels. So it was decided that I would do the closest thing to linguistics that was available to an undergraduate at Balliol. That happened to be Sanskrit, since the Boden Chair of Sanskrit was tied to Balliol.

I still hankered to do linguistics, however—or, rather, what I conceived linguistics to be: that is, a sort of ‘language appreciation’ pursuit, akin to ‘music appreciation’. I imagined linguists savouring the bouquet of obscure etymologies and delighting in elaborate suppletive morphology or vowel harmony in hitherto undescribed languages. So wasn’t linguistics available at some other university, perhaps?

Somehow (I forget how) it was arranged for me to have a chat with Professor N.C. Scott at the School of Oriental Studies (SOAS) in London, where linguistics had been pioneered in England by J.R. Firth. This gist of Scott’s advice was: ‘Why be in such a hurry? You have this scholarship to read classics at Oxford. Why not take advantage of it, and then come to us afterwards for an Academic Postgraduate Diploma in General Linguistics?’ So, to Robert Ogilvie’s surprise, when I arrived at Balliol in October 1963, I announced that I didn’t want to read Sanskrit after all but would stick with classics. That meant ‘Lit Hum’ (the Honours School of Literae Humaniores), which in those days involved a year and a half of Greek and Latin literature (‘Mods’) followed by two and a half years of philosophy and ancient history (‘Greats’).

Was Professor Burrow, the Professor of Sanskrit, disappointed at losing a pupil? I never found out, because I never met him. I later learned that, despite being the darts champion of the village of Kidlington, he was reserved and unsociable. So it was a happy deliverance. I was a shy boy, but as a classicist I had a group of fellow-students to socialise with right away. If I had joined a tiny group of Sanskritists, with perhaps no age-mates at all, my Oxford experience would have been very different and far less positive, since I found in due course that Ogilvie was right: a part of Mods and Greats that I really did enjoy was philosophy. At Oxford in those days that meant Plato’s *Republic*, Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, the classic British empiricists (Berkeley and Hume), and contemporary Anglo-American work, influenced by the logical positivists on the one hand and Wittgenstein on the other.

In 1965 I mentioned to Anthony Kenny, one of my philosophy tutors, that I was interested in linguistics. ‘You might like to borrow this, then,’ he said, handing me a slim blue volume that turned out to be Chomsky’s *Syntactic Structures*. This was not at all like what I imagined linguistics to be. It was all about English (a language that had already been described exhaustively, surely?) and was curiously mathematical in its approach (what on earth were ‘finite state Markov processes’, for instance?). But I did not let it put me off. After all, Tony Kenny was a philosopher, not a linguist, and perhaps he was attaching too much importance to some marginal eccentric.

In 1967, with a First in Lit Hum, I proceeded to SOAS, just as Professor Scott had suggested. A big focus of the two-year diploma course there was ear training. We practised the cardinal vowels under the tutelage of people who had been taught by Daniel Jones himself. We learned about prosodies and phonematic units from pupils of J.R. Firth. We read de Saussure’s *Cours*. We became familiar with American structuralist phonology and morphology as presented in Martin Joos’s *Readings in*

Linguistics I. We attended Michael Halliday's lectures on system and structure at University College. For all this I am most grateful. On the other hand, the intellectual demands of the course were very modest compared with Oxford, and I learned little more about 'transformational grammar' than what I had gleaned from the book that Tony Kenny had lent me.

At Oxford I had been introduced to varieties of philosophy that emphasized the importance of language in solving philosophical problems. Ludwig Wittgenstein, J.L. Austin and Gilbert Ryle, though very different from one another, had in common this linguistic emphasis. But I already knew enough about languages to see how naïve they often were. I knew that, to talk sense about the influence of language on thought, it was not enough to know only English, French, Latin, and perhaps German or Greek. Out of this interest grew my first published article (1971) (written while at SOAS), in which I discussed for a philosophical readership the apparent absence of a category 'colour' in the Philippine language Hanunóo.

In late 1968 or early 1969, Neil Smith (fresh from a spell at MIT) delivered at University College an informal course on new American developments. We began to hear about 'generative semantics', with example sentences from George Lakoff ('Seymour used the knife to cut the bagel', 'Seymour cut the bagel with the knife', and so on). It became increasingly clear that generative grammar was on the rise. I therefore applied to MIT to do a PhD. Then, in the summer of 1969, Noam Chomsky himself delivered a couple of lectures at University College as well as the John Locke Lectures at Oxford. So I was excited when I heard that I had been accepted by MIT, to start in September 1969.

At the same time, I was offered a lectureship at the Victoria University of Wellington. I had to decide: should I proceed straight to a secure job in far-away New Zealand, or should I sit at the feet of Chomsky and his colleagues at MIT? I chose the latter. This was an excellent decision from the point of view of New Zealand linguistics, because Vic appointed Janet Holmes to that lectureship instead. Little did I know in 1969 how little I knew. If I had gone straight to Vic with a linguistic education limited to a two-year diploma, I would have been a poorly informed teacher and I would have had a serious struggle to get myself established as a researcher – if I ever managed it at all.

I arrived in Cambridge, MA, in September 1969 expecting to start straight away on a PhD thesis. This reflected more ignorance on my part. I had not understood how an American PhD training works, with a formidable course-work component before one can even think about a thesis. All we newbies had to undergo a 'Baby Syntax' course taught by John Robert ('Haj') Ross and Ken Hale, as well as a phonology course taught by Morris Halle. A course nicknamed 'Bad Guys' covered structuralist linguistics, but I somehow managed to escape this, probably on the basis of my SOAS training. But I could not escape the 'Crazy Language' course, on the grammatical description of a non-Indo-European language with a native consultant (or, in those days, 'informant') under the guidance of Ken Hale. When I took the course, the 'crazy language' was Māori, and the consultant was Pat Hohepa. On my eventual arrival in New Zealand in 1981 I contacted Pat, but got no reply. I suspect he had not relished the experience of being pestered for black-and-white grammaticality judgements by us smart-alec acolytes of Chomsky.

Strictly speaking, as an Oxford graduate, I did not satisfy part of MIT's graduate school entry requirement: a minimum of one year's undergraduate science or mathematics. So I and others in my position were required to take a course nicknamed 'Remedial Math', taught by Joan Bresnan (then a senior graduate student). The textbook was Burton's *Introduction to Modern Abstract Algebra* (1967). This was all about semigroups, groups, rings and fields: quite unlike my garbled recollection of school trigonometry. Later on, during my nonacademic interlude in London (1972-9), it encouraged the perpetual student in me to take the 'Mathematics Foundation Course' at the Open University, followed by 'Topics in Pure Mathematics'. The OU in those days, before the internet and even before videorecorders, was not for wimps: one had to turn on the TV at 6.30 am to watch a lecture on statistics, for example. The two week-long summer schools that I attended were demanding but fun. I recall a rather deaf retired postman who took to advanced algebra like a duck to water. Having no similar aptitude for maths myself, I was pleased to get a B in the foundation course.

For the pure mathematics course I had to miss the exam, unfortunately, and I had left it too late to arrange alternative assessment. On that day in 1975 I was in Brussels, discussing a draft directive put forward by Directorate-General XIII, whose remit was the removal of 'non-tariff barriers to trade' (the official translation of the French term *entraves techniques*). The draft directive was on noise levels for construction equipment (current generators, tower cranes and jack-hammers). This was every bit as exciting as it sounds.

I return now to my spell at MIT from 1969 to 1972. After the coursework, I had hoped to tackle a research topic in morphology. So how was morphology handled there? Unfortunately, not at all. Like Poland in the nineteenth century, it had disappeared from the map, its territory being partitioned between phonology, syntax and 'the lexicon'. Paul Kiparsky was the faculty member most interested in morphological issues, and I tried to develop ideas for a thesis under his supervision, examining inflection class systems. But, even for Paul, the only really interesting part of morphology was morphophonology, and that in turn boiled down to phonology, within which the fashionable issue at that time was the contrast between 'feeding' and 'bleeding' rule orders. It is significant that, among MIT students of the early 1970s, a language that had no morphophonological alternations was described as having 'no phonology'.

Mark Aronoff, a year below me at MIT, did carve out a fruitful line of inquiry into morphology which led in due course to his justly famous monograph *Word Formation in Generative Grammar* (1976). But I did not manage that. I therefore decided in 1972 to quit. Morris Halle tried to dissuade me, diagnosing in me a bout of the 'smartest-boy-from-Pinsk syndrome' (Oxford being Pinsk, in his view). But it seemed to me that, now that I understood what linguistics was really about, it wasn't something that interested me. I therefore entered the UK Civil Service in September 1972. My five years as a full-time student of linguistics had not left me out of pocket, fortunately, thanks to a postgraduate exhibition at SOAS and a Harkness Fellowship at MIT; but they had not led to the hoped-for academic career.

I was reasonably happy as a civil servant in the London headquarters of the Department of Employment (taking OU maths courses on the side) until such time I was promoted to the rank of Principal in 1975. This put me in charge of other people,

a role I have never enjoyed. Was there any way out? I answered an advertisement for candidates to join the secretariat of the European Parliament based in Luxembourg, and in 1977 spent a week in Luxembourg to see what it might be like to live there. As it happened, the week included Whit Tuesday, when every year a dancing procession in honour of an English saint, St Willibrord, culminates in a huge gathering outside the Benedictine abbey at Echternach. The bishop's address was printed in full in the local newspaper, *Das Luxemburger Wort*. He switched between German, French, Luxembourgish and Dutch (for the benefit of pilgrims from the Netherlands and Flanders). The polyglossic situation intrigued me. The newspaper was mostly in German, but official notices were in French, and likewise quasi-official notices of births, marriages and deaths – except that a few birth and marriage announcements were given a less formal flavour by being in Luxembourgish. All this was a way of saying 'We speak a German dialect, so it's sensible for us to learn to read and write standard German. But that certainly doesn't mean we are Prussians!' This experience of mine came in handy years later, when I taught a segment of a sociolinguistics course while Elizabeth Gordon was on leave.

Fortunately I did not get the European Parliament job, because in 1979 Professor R.H. Robins at SOAS came to my rescue by accepting me back as a PhD student at the ripe age of 34. The Leverhulme Trust kindly granted me a two-year Senior Studentship, intended for people of mature years without a higher degree. (Fortunately for me, my SOAS diploma did not count as a degree, and I had earned no qualification from MIT.) I took in a lodger to help pay the mortgage on my flat in Chiswick, in west London, and economised on transport by cycling between Chiswick and Bloomsbury. On winter evenings I would work late in the Senate House Library as a way of postponing the long cold ride home, sustained by a cheap dinner at Birkbeck College's basement canteen (typically shepherd's pie followed by rhubarb crumble). The upshot was that I finished the PhD in the minimum permitted time (two years).

I was fortunate in having two supervisors who allowed me to go my own way, no matter how unfashionable the directions I chose: Geoffrey Horrocks (a newly appointed lecturer) and Theodora Bynon (familiar to me from my Diploma days). I wanted to broaden my knowledge of highly inflected languages outside the Indo-European family, so I took advantage of the excellent course in Zulu taught at SOAS by David Rycroft (a native speaker of the closely related language SiSwati, of Swaziland). Rycroft had made brilliant sense of Zulu's tonal system: the nine phonetically distinct tones previously identified by Clement Doke could be boiled down phonologically to three. Apart from Zulu, I had while still a civil servant learned a fair amount of Hungarian from the *Learn Hungarian* textbook and LPs by Bánhidi, Jókay and Szabó. This accounts for the prominence of Zulu and Hungarian in my thesis entitled 'Constraints on allomorphy in inflexion', which was the basis of my first book *Allomorphy in Inflexion* (1987). (A pedantic note: the spelling *inflexion* is etymologically correct!)

In 1980 I applied for another New Zealand job: a linguistics lectureship in the English Department at the University of Canterbury. Among the appointee's tasks would be to provide the phonological content of a new course in generative grammar, for which Kon Kuiper would cover syntax. In those days, candidates for such junior positions were not interviewed, and it wasn't until months later, towards the middle

of 1981, that I that received a phone call from Derek Davy (Head of the English Department at Canterbury) to ask whether I was still interested. I confirmed my acceptance by telex – a technology that no longer exists, perhaps.

I arrived in Christchurch on Guy Fawkes Day, 1981, and remained at Canterbury for nearly twenty-seven years, progressing from lecturer to professor. I witnessed the emancipation of linguistics as a separate department followed by its merger, first with classics (nicknamed ‘Clanguistics’) and later with modern languages. (Subsequently it has moved yet again.) So how did working in New Zealand influence my development as a linguist? I think in all honesty I have to say: not much. During my first two or three years I took Māori courses taught by Bill Nepia, Lindsey Head and Margaret Orbell, but I did not energetically seek out ways to become fluent, and the relative lack of allomorphy in Māori meant that it never figured in my research.

On the other hand, perhaps if I had lived closer to major northern-hemisphere research centres in linguistic theory, I would have felt inhibited about getting involved with language evolution in the 1990s. That is because most respectable linguists then would have agreed with the Paris Linguistic Society’s notorious prohibition of that topic. But remoteness can confer freedom! I found refreshing the adventurous but clearly argued proposals of Derek Bickerton in *Language and Species* (1990), and I was encouraged too by discussions in Christchurch with Bill Labov in 1995 and the philosopher Daniel Dennett a year or two later. So I joined the language evolution revival.

I had become more and more convinced that what makes morphology interesting (interesting in a scientific sense, that is, not as merely a quirky hobby) is precisely the fact that languages can so obviously do without it. Why are there two patterns of grammatical organization, not just one? It is not hard to understand why so many people have tried so hard to argue that there really is only one (imposing the Polish-style partition that I have already alluded to). At the same time I was becoming increasingly puzzled by a question that harks back to my philosophical training. Why are there not one but two ways in which a linguistic expression can fit the world accurately, inasmuch as it can ‘be true’ (like the sentence *France has a president*) or it can ‘possess a referent’ (like the noun phrase *the president of France*)? And if there must be more than one, why stop at two?

The second of these puzzles led me to teach myself (as best I could) about evolutionary biology, paleoanthropology, animal communication, and neurophysiology. Thanks to one of the first Marsden grants, I was able to visit Leslie Aiello and her colleagues in the Anthropology Department at University College London for a month in 1996. The title that I suggested for the book that emerged was *Sentences, Syllables and Truth*. But John Davey, my commissioning editor at Oxford University Press, no doubt correctly surmised that that would be a total turn-off, so the book appeared as *The Origins of Complex Language* (1999).

I suspect that many readers never got beyond chapter 3, where I broached the truth-reference distinction in a manner that owes a huge debt to my philosophy training at Oxford. However, I still believe that there is mileage in the suggestion that the truth-reference distinction is ‘exapted’ (in biological terms) from the syllable-onset distinction. That would explain why, when the part of the brain that controls articulation in speech (Broca’s area) is damaged, something also tends to go wrong

with the ability to produce well-formed sentences (much to the sufferer's frustration). To investigate this idea properly, one would need to examine a large sample of Broca's aphasics. Both practical and financial obstacles have always stood in the way of that. However, David Gil (2012 and elsewhere) has meanwhile argued eloquently that at least one language (Riau Indonesian) does lack precisely the distinction that I argue to be superfluous.

I returned to the first of my two puzzles (why morphology?) in *The Evolution of Morphology* (2010). Synonymy-avoidance (a cognitive expectation that we share with chimpanzees and perhaps other mammals) conspires with phonological assimilation to yield nested stem alternation patterns and distinct paradigmatic 'vocabularies' of affixes (I suggested). These complexities survive because, even though they too are communicatively otiose, the brain's adaptively advantageous skills in other areas (especially rapid vocabulary acquisition) render them easily learnable.

Noam Chomsky is fond of saying that, to an intelligent visitor from Mars, all human languages would look practically the same. I disagree with him on that, but I share his implied regret that we have no Martian visitors to talk to. We humans are peculiarly ill-equipped to study human language because we are so close to it. We readily take for granted features of it that would almost certainly seem weird to members of a comparably intelligent but alien species. That may seem a pessimistic conclusion to reach after decades as an academic linguist. But we should remind ourselves that serious work in general linguistics (as opposed to 'philology' in its more traditional senses) is barely a century old.

Having mentioned my first article, I will mention also my latest (2018). Robert Ogilvie, to whom I grumbled in 1963 about having to study classics, would be pleased. I have recently developed an interest in the *Aeneid* of Virgil, the Roman poet addressed by Tennyson as 'thou, majestic in thy sadness at the doubtful doom of humankind'. But I would scarcely be in a position to publish articles on Virgil now if I hadn't been required, at age eighteen, to read his entire output in Latin. Moral: when young, don't do what you want to do; do rather what you will have wanted to do when you are old!

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