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Serendipity and strategy: the growth of Linguistics at Victoria

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Serendipity and strategy: the growth of Linguistics at Victoria

Janet Holmes

I was born a Lancashire lass and spent my first eighteen years living in a small village, Formby, located between Liverpool, the big smoke for us, and Southport, a rather genteel holiday resort where the sea rarely made an appearance. My mother was insistent that she did not have an accent, by which she meant that she did not speak with the Liverpool accent, aka Scouse, that characterised my father's speech, and subsequently my two brothers' speech too. The girls (my sister and I) attended a convent school in Crosby after passing the 11+ examination, and were consequently somewhat protected from exposure to the accent which Howard Giles subsequently consigned to the bottom of the British slag heap on the basis of his attitude evaluation research. This despite the fact that we shared it with the fab four (aka the Beatles) who topped the music charts and whose music I danced to in the Cavern. Our school shared the widespread negative opinion of Scouse and organised elocution classes for us; we could therefore (in class) produce vowels which were the teacher's rough approximation to RP, and avoid rhyming "cup" with "book" and pronouncing "fair" as "fur" as a true Scouser and indeed most northerners would. Perhaps this early experience sowed the seeds of my later passion for sociolinguistics.

In the sixth form we were taught by a very young new Liverpool University graduate who inspired me with a love of English Literature and Language, and these subjects along with French were those I selected in my first year at Leeds University. Because my maiden name was Quirk, I was constantly asked in the English Language class if I was "any relation to Randolph", a scholar I had never heard of at that time, but whom I subsequently discovered was engaged at University College, London in compiling the pioneering one million word Survey of English Usage, the very first corpus of spoken and written British English. I enjoyed both language and literature (where we were privileged to hear lectures from the famous Marxist critic Arnold Kettle), but I decided in my second year to switch to Linguistics because I hated the large anonymous literature classes, and had heard that the Linguistics classes were much smaller and more interactive. (This might be seen as the first of several "quirky" decisions that proved fortuitous.)

At Leeds in the late 1960s, Professor Terry Mitchell was a Firthian linguist and so the syntax I first encountered was what has now evolved into Structural Functional Linguistics, which, interestingly, has always included a social component. But in my third year, another young syntax lecturer made a big impression by introducing us to Transformational Grammar. Chomsky's hot-off-the-press *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* was our textbook and we had enormous fun constructing our own transformational rules, an experience which stood me in good stead when I later contributed to our third-year syntax course at Victoria University of Wellington

(VUW). But even this stimulating development did not have the impact of sociolinguistics, an exciting new discipline with which I fell in love immediately. This was 1966 when scholars like Labov, Gumperz, Ferguson, and Hymes were publishing ground-breaking articles and books which would subsequently become classics. Dell Hymes came to Leeds to give a talk on the concept of communicative competence, a critique of the socially impoverished (in Hymes' view) notion represented by Chomsky's grammatical competence, and I was hooked by the excitement of this debate between a theory based on describing abstract grammatical structures and a theory which aspired to capture the complexities of the knowledge underlying appropriate *use* of language in social contexts. At that point it was possible to read practically everything written in this exhilarating new discipline of sociolinguistics.

My thesis, an MPhil, the norm for postgraduate study in England at that time, addressed areas which have recurred throughout my academic life: the sociopragmatic meanings and distribution of spoken discourse markers occurring in narratives recounted to me by people of different ages and genders (Holmes 1970). It involved recording (and then transcribing and analysing) spoken discourse with a heavy state-of the art reel-to-reel, so-called portable machine, manufactured by UHER. During the second year of my thesis, when I was engaged in analysis, I was invited to join a group of linguists as part of a three-week British Council course in Poznan, Poland. This was 1969 and Poznan was a grey, depressing place behind the Iron Curtain; the students were convinced every conversation inside a building was being taped and so requested walks in the cold grey streets to talk about pop music and politics in the west. My family ran an electrical shop which also sold records and I would have been very popular indeed if had thought to take some Beatles records with me! My main recollection of that experience was that I subjected the poor students to a whole sociolinguistics course compressed into three lectures! Their English was good but later I reflected they must have been completely bemused by my passionate but pedagogically inexperienced outpourings! They got their revenge in a very funny review at the end of the course with parodies of all the visiting lecturers; I learnt some interesting lessons by seeing how others perceived my delivery!

At this point I was looking for a job and though school teaching was the career I expected to pursue, I was also keeping an eye out for academic positions. John Pride, formerly at Leeds, but by now Professor English Language in Wellington, sent me an advert for a Linguistics lectureship, and so I included this in the job applications I submitted that year. Tony my husband was supportive as we both wanted to travel and when I was offered the position for three years as I understood at the time, we enthusiastically accepted, planning to travel on around the rest of the world later. (It turned out that no one really thought I was expected to leave after three years of probation, and when I asked for a reference, planning to apply for other jobs after two and a half years, the Head of Department was astonished and asked if I was unhappy! How times have changed.)

The position I took up was an interesting one – a Faculty position in Linguistics attached for administrative purposes to the English Department. Philip Mann's position in Drama was similar and we both understood that we had an implicit mandate to grow our areas, as we subsequently did. The Head of the English Department at the time was the diminutive, tough, and authoritarian Scotsman, Ian Gordon, an international scholar who had published extensively on a wide range of

topics, including Katherine Mansfield, John Galt, and an aspect of English language, *The Movement of English Prose*, a book I had read in one of my undergraduate courses. He proved generous and kind to me, though others had different experiences under his leadership.

I arrived in July 1970, and taught the third term of an introductory Linguistics course to a small group of very enthusiastic students, many of whom were only a couple of years younger than I was. At that time, syntax and phonology were being taught by members of the English Department (Peter Peterson and Peter Hawkins), and John Pride was teaching sociolinguistics under the guise of a course labelled *The Use of English*. Gradually, over the next ten years or so, with the strong support of Graeme Kennedy who was teaching English grammar in the English Department at that time, and Max Cresswell in Philosophy, Linguistics emerged as a distinct major, first administered by a Board of Studies, and finally established as an autonomous Department in 1988. I chaired the Department from its inception until 1992. In those early years, I variously taught or contributed to courses in introductory linguistics, linguistic theory, sociolinguistics, language change, language variation, language learning processes, the structure and use of English, New Zealand English, and language policy, often very happily co-teaching with others such as Laurie Bauer and Graeme Kennedy. We had the good fortune to attract Robyn Carston (a former Honours student) to teach Semantics and Pragmatics for a while, but University College London was too great a temptation for someone so brilliant and Deirdre Wilson eventually persuaded her to move there permanently. Because of limited staff resources, Linguistics courses began at 200-level for many decades, but an introductory 100-level course is now available to strengthen the major.

John Pride and I co-taught a sociolinguistics Honours course, *Language in Culture and Society*, and we co-edited a book, *Sociolinguistics*, my first publication, based on the texts we had selected for the course (Pride and Holmes 1972). A second important publication which emerged from my teaching was the textbook *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* which I wrote while teaching the second-year sociolinguistics course in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This publication was very much the result of serendipity. Because of my interests in epistemic modality, I was back in Lancashire at Lancaster University on research and study leave in 1988. Geoffrey Leech was teaching pragmatics there, along with Jenny Thomas with whom I developed a lasting friendship, and the late and much-admired Chris Candlin teaching and researching in applied linguistics. Geoff had been my thesis examiner but he had evolved from the thin, intense, dark-haired scholar I remembered from that first encounter into a much more relaxed, warm and approachable colleague. Walking along the corridor one day he pounced on me and said "We need someone to write the Sociolinguistics textbook for our Longman series. I am sure you could knock it off in three weeks!". In fact, it took more than two years, but I really enjoyed turning my course notes into a readable textbook; my eldest son Rob was then 17 and I used him as my imagined audience - though he only ever read the first chapter!

Another area of teaching for which I developed a great love as I gained experience over the years was postgraduate supervision. Miriam Meyerhoff was my first MA by thesis student and so bore the brunt of my inexperience. Fortunately, she was robust enough to survive and proceed to better supervision under experienced US academics Howard Giles and Gillian Sankoff (with Labov in the wings as an

additional commentator). Many other postgraduate students followed and among them are internationally respected academics such as Stephanie Schnurr (Warwick), Julia de Bres (Luxembourg), Brian King (Hong Kong), and Jen Hay (Canterbury), as well as my Language in the Workplace team colleagues, Meredith Marra and Bernadette Vine. One of the wonderful benefits of supervision are that both parties always learn a great deal from each other, and for me an extra benefit is that I now have firm friends all over the world who once worked closely with me, as well as a wonderful team at Victoria with whom I continue to work.

Feminism provided another strand to my engagement in activities at VUW. The 1970s were the early years of second wave feminism. Germaine Greer (*The Female Eunuch*) visited Wellington, and famously used the shocking word "bullshit" in her talk in the Student Union building. Phillida Bunkle established an interdisciplinary course in the area of women's studies, to which I contributed lectures on language and gender, and together she and I worked with the enormously supportive Social Work Professor, John McCreary, to establish a staff childcare centre. My strongest memory of that endeavour was being asked to appear before the irascible, chauvinist Kevin O'Brien to argue our case to the University Council. At 7 months pregnant with my second child I was probably most useful as a visual aid.

Women were grossly under-represented in the higher echelons of the university during the late decades of the 20th century, and I was in demand, often I suspected as a token woman on many committees. With the mentorship of Stuart Johnston and Graeme Kennedy, I learned my way around the university bureaucracy and convened committees on student grants and scholarships, workloads and assessment, overseas students, among many more. Most usefully I was a member of a Committee on the Status of Academic Women, convened by the liberal Deputy Vice-Chancellor Ian Campbell, and later the Promotions Review Committee convened by Gary Hawke which led to several important improvements, including making promotion a matter of application rather than a process under the gift and favour of (almost universally male) Professors, many of whom tended to be blinkered about who qualified as a suitable candidate for advancement. And I was usefully and not entirely fortuitously Dean of Languages and Literature when the vital arguments for a separate Department of Linguistics needed support at a higher level.

In making this progress in the university administrative system, I was fortunate in having two or three valuable mentors in an era when mentoring was an unrecognized activity. Young male academics tended to be proteges of their supervisors or Professors and were thus more fortunate in being provided with support and advice than the very few young female academics in the university system. My obvious mentor John Pride was not well (he suffered badly from petit-mal epilepsy); but Stuart Johnson, who followed Ian Gordon as Head of the English Department, and Graeme Kennedy, a supportive colleague, were always available to provide advice and to discuss problematic issues. I was very indebted to them and my experience informed my contribution to the Committee on Women's Status so that mentoring schemes were eventually established specifically to assist women academics.

Another aspect of my teaching over the years was a contribution to the courses run by the English Language Institute (ELI). The Director, H.V. George was an iconoclast, greatly beloved by his loyal staff but a thorn in the flesh of the University administration as he ran the ELI as a fiefdom and refused to conform to most

University guidelines and administrative requirements. His position did not affect Linguistics, however, and Graeme Kennedy and I collegially co-taught ELI courses on the Functions of English and Issues in Minority Group Teaching as part of the Diploma in Teaching English (DipTESL) as a Second Language, and I also co-taught Bilingual Education and Language Policy courses with John Read. Chris Lane, who had taken over John Pride's Use of English course when John moved into a research position because of ill health, also contributed to DipTESL courses. These links proved fortuitous when a forced re-structuring in the 1990s required small Departments to coalesce into larger units. The links between the ELI (where Graeme was now Professor of Applied Linguistics) and Linguistics were already well-established (a joint Research Committee, for example, as well as co-taught courses), and the subsequent union in 1997 resulted in the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies (LALS), which has maintained a collegial and academically productive relationship over more than two decades. In subsequent years David Crabbe as Head of School and I as de facto Deputy (and Acting Head several times) comprised a good team; we established a mentoring scheme which was later used as a model for the University, as well as research support groups, regular meetings for thesis students, and most importantly daily morning tea, which facilitated communication between staff members, and provided an ideal social venue where visitors and new PhD students could meet a range of staff.

Turning to research, the context when I joined VUW was very different from today's stressful PBRF-driven environment. In my first few years, I focussed mainly on my teaching, with just a few papers on humour, attitudes to accents and their educational implications, and, with Dorothy Brown from the ELI, on the concept of sociolinguistics competence in second language teaching (Holmes and Brown 1977). My first sabbatical leave at Oxford University in 1976 provided the basis for a small study of children's sociolinguistic skills (I recorded young children from the local school phoning their parents from our flat) (Holmes 1981). I also attended the first Sociolinguistics Symposium in Walsall along with Peter Trudgill, Jenny Cheshire, Bob Le Page, and Lesley and Jim Milroy, among other subsequently famous sociolinguists. However, the most productive activity during the 1970s in terms of my later research turned out to be the development of a speech corpus to illustrate the many ways in which epistemic modality could be expressed in English as part of my contribution to the DipTESL Functions of English course. This subsequently provided the basis for many articles, including some which explored and complexified Robin Lakoff's influential claims about "women's language", an area where I have continued to publish throughout my research career.

In the early 1980s I was involved in writing a handbook, *Language for Learning*, to introduce primary school teachers to sociolinguistic concepts such as linguistic variation, and attitudes to different varieties, and to explore the educational implications of such concepts. After discussion with teachers at Lopdell House, along with Joan Metge who was undertaking the same task with a focus on relevant cultural concepts, and the invaluable assistance of Bea Hamer, a superb editor from the Department of Education, the resulting book was circulated to all primary schools. I then spent my Fridays for two or three years visiting schools all over the country to give talks on these topics, and met a wide range of interesting teachers and learners from rural as well as urban areas. I was also involved in supporting Richard Benton's

mammoth efforts to promote Maori-English bilingualism, and especially immersion education. I was privileged to visit one of the earliest immersion programmes at Ruatoki and see at first hand the efforts of local iwi to support this initiative. I subsequently visited immersion programmes in Toronto and wrote another teacher-oriented booklet *Bilingual Education* (Holmes 1984), exploring the options available and assessing their relevance to New Zealand.

During the 1980s, Allan Bell and I met when he presented a fascinating paper on audience design at a Wellington Linguistics Society meeting. As a result, we continued to talk and gradually developed plans first to co-edit a book about New Zealand English (Bell and Holmes 1990), and then to undertake a social dialect survey in the Wellington area – the Porirua Project as it subsequently became known. Mary Boyce, one of my MA students at the time, was co-opted as a research partner, since she lived in Porirua at the time and could provide introductions to members of the iwi at her local marae. The results of our research were first published as *Variation and Change in New Zealand English*, and later in articles developing the analyses in a variety of ways. In addition to articles by Allan and me, Mary Boyce's MA explored the attitudes to te reo Maori expressed by participants in the survey. David Britain who came to VUW as a post-doctoral Fellow in Linguistics in the early 1990s (heady days when such a position could be funded by the university) used our Corpus to study the distinctive High Rising Terminal (HRT) in New Zealand English, a feature later relabeled *UpTalk*, and the topic of a recent book by my colleague Paul Warren (2015). And Miriam Meyerhoff, working as a researcher on the Porirua Project Corpus, published the first study of the pragmatic particle *eh* (Meyerhoff 1994). During the 1980s, Donn Bayard was also collecting social dialect data in Dunedin (e.g. Bayard 1987) and Elizabeth Gordon and Margaret Maclagan began a longitudinal study of the merging of EAR and AIR among children in Christchurch secondary schools (e.g. Gordon and Maclagan 1990). Social dialectology was thus born in New Zealand, and New Zealand English began to attract increasing international attention largely thanks to these efforts, together with those of Laurie Bauer in the areas of phonology and morphology. In time these analyses of our variety of English began to impact discussions of English varieties internationally, and also contributed to theory development in the area of language variation. Miriam Meyerhoff continues this variationist research with a current study of multicultural varieties of English in Auckland.

Another string to my developing research bow addressed issues around language maintenance and shift. Here my main contribution was supervising Honours, MA, and later PhD students who researched these topics in minority communities (eg. 'Anahina' Aipolo studied the Wellington Tongan community, Maria Verivaki the Wellington Greek community, and Mary Roberts the Wellington Cantonese, Samoan and Gujarati communities). At about the same time, Laurie Bauer and I, together with Allan Bell and Graeme Kennedy were working on the notion of collecting one million word corpora of written and spoken New Zealand English to parallel the USA Brown Corpus and the UK Survey of English Usage. Others who assisted were Maria Stubbe, the first Corpus Manager, and Miriam Meyerhoff, an indefatigable research assistant. In the end, just about everyone we knew, staff, students and friends, were dragged into the collection of data for the conversational section of the spoken corpus since it was such a challenge. The resulting Corpus included 75% of colloquial New Zealand English – a record for corpora collection at

the time (Holmes, Vine and Johnson 1998). The final research string in my career has been the Language in the Workplace Project (LWP). Allan and I had been lucky to obtain initial funding from VUW and the Government Social Science Research Fund, and then from the Foundation for Research Science and Technology. But by the mid-1990s attitudes to research funding were changing and the first seeds of an emphasis in the criteria for public funding on research with potential impact on social and economic development were beginning to be apparent. In this climate, the idea of studying workplace discourse (which after all absorbs a large part of our week) had greater appeal, and in 1995 I was fortunate enough to obtain FRST funding for the initial phase of LWP which began in 1996.

We first approached workplaces which were similar to our own (i.e. white-collar, professional, government offices) since we felt that we were likely to be more familiar with features of the workplace cultures in such contexts. Our methodology was unique at the time but has since been widely adopted. Volunteers record a range of their everyday interactions in their workplaces over a period of about a month. Data collection typically commences after a period of ethnographic observation, and is followed wherever possible, by individual interviews and/or discussions with groups to elicit their views about the communication patterns identified and the analysis we have undertaken. We made a deliberate decision to focus on successful communication, that is, to study how people manage to communicate effectively at work. Hence our first publications examined how people achieve their transactional goals in such workplaces, whilst also attending to the relational or interpersonal dimension of interaction which ensures smooth collegial relationships (e.g. Holmes and Stubbe 2003, 2015). Subsequently our research has encompassed a wide range of topics including workplace humour, power and politeness, leadership styles, meeting discourse, and intercultural communication, as well as examining the influence of social variables such as gender (e.g. Holmes 2006) and ethnicity (Holmes, Marra and Vine 2011).

This research clearly had a range of practical applications, not only for speakers of English as a first language who faced communication problems in their workplaces, but also for English as a second language learners and especially recent immigrants to New Zealand who were keen to gain employment. With the expansion of the LWP team to include applied linguists, (Nicky Riddiford, Angela Joe, Judi McCallum and Jonathan Newton), we developed a practical strand to our work which has continued to be important. Working with a productive and supportive team has been one of the most treasured aspects of my research experience.

Looking back over a very varied academic career, which has involved a wide variety of teaching, a considerable range of administrative roles, and a great deal of fascinating research, I am aware that I was very lucky in making good choices at crucial points, often without being aware of their significance at the time. I am grateful to all those enthusiastic students whom I loved teaching, and to my colleagues who have provided so much support and good humour over the years. As Laurie says in his chapter, being retired means more time for less pressured research activity, but it also provides more time for family and friends, and for activities such as reading, tramping, and travel, all of which I love. And finally it has been a great privilege to be involved in the growth of sociolinguistics in New Zealand from early beginnings at Victoria University of Wellington in the 1970s through to the healthy state it is in

today, taught in every New Zealand university, often by our former students, and with its valuable influence evident in many other areas of linguistics too.

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