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Linguistics from the sidelines

Winifred Bauer

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Linguistics from the sidelines

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I blame my father. I was 2, and he started this game:

*Father: I'm me, and you're you.

Me: No, I'm me and you're you.*

Repeat from * to * until getting-up time.

I found it immensely frustrating. I had an inkling that we were both right, but couldn't give in, because I couldn't accept I was you when I knew I was me.

My father was a teacher of French and Latin, and my mother a Maths teacher. Teaching genes, and a love of both languages and Maths are important threads in what led me to Linguistics. My musical training developed my ability to listen carefully. My childhood was spend moving school every 3-4 years: Gisborne, Tauranga, Putaruru, Kawakawa, Auckland.

When I was 12, my parents decided that school was not providing adequate stimulation, and that I should learn at home some things not taught at school. This included some basic parsing of sentences from Nesfield's *Manual of English Grammar and Composition*, and Latin, where I learned just enough to understand how Latin worked. While I didn't approve of having to do extra 'schoolwork' at home, it stood me in good stead later.

I learned classroom French at secondary school, largely by 'grammar and translation'. Aged 15, I was faced with subject choices that assumed people would favour either arts or science. I refused to conform, and continued with Maths and General Science alongside French and English.

So it was that in 1965, I enrolled at Auckland University for a degree majoring in English, with French, Pure Mathematics and Music. I intended to be a school-teacher, and accepted the financial support of a Post-primary Teacher's Studentship; on completion of the degree, recipients were required to teach for as many years as they held the Studentship. This had far-reaching consequences for me, and was responsible, very indirectly, for my study of Māori.

I first met Linguistics in Stage I English, taught by Prof Forrest Scott, appointed the previous year, and Colin Bowley, newly appointed after completing the Diploma in General Linguistics at Edinburgh University. They covered basic phonemic transcription of English, and a brief introduction to morphology and grammar. No doubt thanks to my parents' extra-curricular teaching, I grasped the material quickly, and then spent quite a lot of time trying to explain it to others, which increased my own understanding.

The second year offered little that was Linguistic: History of French was a dull catalogue of 'X became Y', and the Middle English component of English II focused on translation of texts with minimal comment on language structure. However, Prof Scott offered optional classes in Old English grammar as preparation for the Stage III Old

English paper. I thoroughly enjoyed learning the paradigms and basic structure of OE sentences.

The Old English paper itself, taught by Prof Shepherd, ran on the same pattern as the Middle English paper. English III, however, offered a part paper in Modern Theories of Language Structure with Colin Bowley, as an alternative to History of the English Language. After the boredom of History of French, the choice for me was easy. Colin covered Bloomfield, Item and Arrangement grammar, and early transformational grammar. I was fascinated.

In my MA year, as well as Old Norse with Prof Scott, I took the Modern Language Structure paper with Colin Bowley. For the first assignment on transformational grammar, we had to write rules to generate a given set of sentences. I received a rather poor mark, with the comment that, although my rules did indeed generate the sentences, they did not reflect their grammatical structure. That early lesson has influenced my work on Māori, and led in particular to my belief that the current generative treatment of the VP does not reflect the structure of the Māori verb constituent.

Also from my undergraduate years, I learned the dullness of a lecture read from a script, no matter how good the script. Consequently, I have never read a lecture or a conference paper from the script, even although I typically prepared a full text.

At the end of my MA year, I was diverted from school-teaching by the offer of a Junior Lectureship teaching English as a Second Language at The English Language Institute (which I'd never heard of) at Victoria University of Wellington. The director, H.V. George, was short of staff, and had contacted Prof Scott, who recommended me. I made some hasty enquiries about the ELI (there were no computers or Google then), and, after checking that the job would fulfil the requirements for teaching under my Studentship, I accepted, and started about three weeks later.

I spent the next three years at the ELI. In the first year, I took the DipTESL myself, attending all the lectures in the course. HVG, as we called him, had extraordinary insight into language teaching and learning, and some of his mantras remain central to my own linguistic teaching, particularly 'spaced, controlled, significant repetition' as the key to learning. He was eclectic in his sources and interests, and introduced me to information structure. He also put into my hand the Library book containing Fillmore's 'The Case for Case', saying, in his idiosyncratic way, 'I think this might amuse you'. He was right. As he usually was.

After 3 years, I knew that I wanted to return to theoretical Linguistics, and applied for a place on the Edinburgh University Diploma in General Linguistics (following in Colin Bowley's footsteps). I greatly admired John Lyons's *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics* (and still do), and liked the breadth of the Diploma, and its coverage of many theories of language. Comparable US courses offered only Chomskyan theory. The Studentship authorities allowed me to delay for 2 years the final year of teaching required by my Studentship, and I spent one of the most enjoyable years of my life doing the Diploma, with teachers like Gillian and Keith Brown, Jim Miller, John Christie, Martin Atkinson and, of course, John Lyons (who taught Semantics from the manuscript of his 2-volume book of that name). My fears of being inadequately prepared proved groundless.

The following year, with encouragement from the Edinburgh staff, I enrolled for an MLitt on an aspect of transitivity in English which I had worked on from an Applied Linguistics point of view in my Dip TESL research paper. I was allocated Prof

Ron Asher for my supervisor. At one early meeting, I wanted to discuss a paper by Postal, which I thought involved a circular argument. It seemed audacious for me to accuse Postal of circularity, and I wanted confirmation from my supervisor that I was right. The best I could extract was 'I think you have made a good case'. I was annoyed, but gradually realised that it was my job, not his, to decide what was right and wrong. When the thesis was finished, I recognised the importance of knowing that it was my own work. That experience taught me a lot about supervision.

During that MLitt year, I also enrolled in Chinese I. It was valuable to encounter a language very different in structure from English, and to meet phenomena such as classifiers and tones. That course made me aware of the significance of fellow-student errors in the classroom input. I heard so many tokens of words with wrong tones from class-mates that the job of learning the right ones became much more difficult.

Before I submitted my thesis, Ron tried to persuade me to upgrade to a PhD, since I had not exhausted my topic. The Studentship authorities refused to allow an extra year's extension, and threatened to demand repayment of the \$1000 bond from my father, my guarantor. I submitted an MLitt, and made my way home.

When I returned to my parents' home in Tauranga in August to complete the teaching required by my Studentship, I was immediately nabbed by Tauranga Boys' College to teach English, as the HOD English had died during the school holidays. Since it would complete one more term of the required teaching, I agreed. It was not exactly an enjoyable experience: I hated trying to discipline fourth-form boys, and was glad to return to the ELI to complete my teaching obligations. The school experience convinced me that my goal should be a University job. For that, I knew that I would need a PhD but realised that I needed a topic very different from my MLitt if it was to be beneficial to me to write a second thesis.

In Edinburgh, people had asked me questions about Māori, which I knew nothing about, although as a teenager, when we lived in Kawakawa in the Bay of Islands, I had often heard Māori spoken in the street by groups of elderly Māori people. When I returned to Vic, I enrolled in the first-year Māori courses. Peter MacLean, the teacher, created a supportive learning environment, and we used the excellent, language-rich *Te Rangatahi* texts. Many things about Māori puzzled and interested me, especially the actor-emphatic construction, but I soon discovered that Peter couldn't answer grammatical questions. I read all the available grammars, but didn't find answers. However, Peter asked Bill Parker to help me. Bill had some grammatical understanding, and encouraged my interest. He enjoyed talking about his first language, and could provide me with helpful data, though not the answers to my questions. I decided to seek my own answers by writing my PhD on Māori grammar. Ron Asher cheerfully agreed to be my supervisor. As an Edinburgh graduate, I was entitled to 'home' student fees, and was not required to be in Edinburgh for the entire time, so I began work on the data collection and classification while I finished my year at the ELI. Early the following year, I returned to the UK with a ring-binder full of the foundation material for my thesis.

En route to Edinburgh, I was interviewed for a Lectureship teaching English Language in the English Department at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, where Barbara Strang was the Professor of English Language. I got the job, to start in the middle of the year. In the interim, I tutored for the Linguistics Dept in Edinburgh, and went on analysing my data, using a 'case' grammar approach. I gave a seminar on the

actor-emphatic construction, and in the discussion, Keith Brown asked me what happened in relative clauses, and commented that in his experience of African languages, relative clauses often provided really good clues about many aspects of the syntax. I didn't know the answer to his question, but followed it up. It proved fruitful, not just in relation to the actor-emphatic, and I remain indebted to him for that guidance.

At the start of the next academic year, I moved to Newcastle, where, besides Barbara Strang, the language staff consisted of John Pellowe, a talented and enthusiastic phonologist, and John Frankis, an Old Norse, Old and Middle English specialist. John Pellowe was a supportive and entertaining colleague, and I learned much about intonation from him. We re-designed the first-year language course, and I put together the grammar material with self-checking exercises following an ELI model. This provided an introduction to the basic structures of English in a descriptive rather than theoretical manner, since I believed then, as now, that nobody can appreciate theories about language structure without a solid grasp of the basic structural data, and the students came knowing nothing. (This ELI-influenced manual was later used in Wellington, and John Pellowe also continued to use it when he moved away from Newcastle. I learned, much later, that students in Sydney really liked it.)

The English Department in Newcastle was literature-dominated, with the language component heavily weighted towards Old and Middle English and the History of English. Very few students chose to do more than the compulsory language component of the degree. Linguistics did not fit in well. Much potential research time was spent interviewing prospective students for the following year, in a process I felt was unnecessary in most cases.

In the summer at the end of my first year, I married Laurie, whom I had met in Edinburgh during my MLitt year. He was living in Denmark, teaching as the 'Foreign Lecturer' in the English Department at Odense University. We spent the next year on either side of the North Sea, but then I got a Temporary Lectureship in the English Department in Odense, and joined him there. I was glad to leave Newcastle. I had made no progress with my thesis there.

My next Linguistic task was learning Danish. I put all my language-learning theories into practice, with support from Laurie and the department staff, including one of the secretaries who, though she spoke perfectly comprehensible English, preferred to help me struggle through in Danish rather than speak English herself. I went to a community course in Danish for foreigners, which was a model of how not to teach a language: in my first class I learnt the word *øretæveindbydende* 'deserving a box on the ears'. I made good use of it. I read extensively in Danish, to provide the quantity of language exposure that was critical for language-learning: children's books, and then young adult novels, with useful, everyday Danish, and lots of dialogue. I refrained from using dictionaries when I met new words; HVG pointed out that dictionaries give instant satisfaction, and you don't learn; striving to understand (he said 'effort after meaning') leads to remembering. By the end of 17 months, when we left, I had good enough Danish to make my way in Denmark without too many hitches. I'm still proud of that achievement.

In 1979, we returned to NZ, because Laurie had been appointed to a Lectureship in English at Victoria University of Wellington. I had made good progress with my thesis in Denmark, where the teaching load was modest, and staff were expected to

use their time on research. Relational Grammar was making its mark, and I found it a useful tool for investigating the problems that were not handled well by Case Grammar. This change in approach raised many questions about Māori which needed native-speaker answers, and I expected that returning home would allow me to finish relatively quickly. Bill Parker was still happy to answer my questions about Māori, and I completed my thesis a year later.

I also undertook some Linguistics tutoring in the introductory Linguistics course in the English Department at Vic, and was asked by the Māori Department (part of Anthropology at the time) to teach the course they ran on the structure of the Māori language. I taught that course for 3 years, before falling foul of the increasingly strident anti-Pakeha movement amongst Māori students, and was not invited back for 20 years. I continued to tutor in the introductory Linguistics course for a decade, and amongst others, tutored Miriam Meyerhoff, Kate Kearns and Mary Roberts, all of whom became Linguistics academics in due course.

My main focus at this time was raising children, with welcome relief provided by tutoring in introductory Linguistics, including once attempting to tutor in John Pride's 200-level Sociolinguistics course. Once was enough. At the same time, I continued to work sporadically on Māori. Bernard Comrie paid us a visit (en route for Papua New Guinea) early in this period. (We had met him previously in Denmark.) He and Norval Smith were trying to recruit people to write grammars following their detailed outline of the topics to be addressed (the *Lingua* Questionnaire), with the aim of getting comparable descriptions to facilitate work on linguistic typology. I suggested some Māori linguists who might be able to write one on Māori, but they declined, being too busy on the political front. I was well aware that Māori was endangered, and that the really knowledgeable speakers were almost all elderly. I knew that if a comprehensive grammar was not written soon, it would not be possible to write one. When Bernard drew a blank elsewhere, I agreed to do it. (If I had known how difficult it would prove, I would never have volunteered. Ron Asher, who wrote one on Malayalam, said it was the hardest thing he ever wrote.)

I made a good start with Bill Parker's help (he was enthusiastic about the project) until his death. After that, I tried many avenues to find a new consultant, but it was by then completely unacceptable for a Māori speaker to work with a Pakeha. The project stalled. Anthropologist Dame Joan Metge asked about it a couple of years later, and I said that, unless I found a new consultant by the end of the year, I intended to put it in the rubbish bin, since I would not be able to complete it. Her response was, "We can't let that happen." She talked to Shane Jones (who had been in a class a few years earlier where I had talked about relative clauses in Māori). The Jones family had a native speaker of Māori, Te Kareongāwai Evans, from Te Aupouri providing care for their children, but during school hours, there was only one pre-schooler at home. Shane and Joan persuaded Kare to help me. For many months, I made a weekly trip to Seatoun, to work with her, armed with a tasty bakery treat. To begin with, she wouldn't correct me, because she believed that I was the clever lady from the University, and she was just an uneducated person. I could only ask questions that did not involve her in making judgements about sentences I had invented. It took a long time to turn that understanding around: she was the knowledgeable one, not me. She had agreed to help me because she was concerned for the survival of Māori, and she remained willing, even when she found my questions difficult to answer. We

developed a good relationship, and shared many laughs. She was very fond of cross-linguistic puns.

Despite her help, I was still making slow progress. I had amassed many pages of data, but I couldn't find time to write up the material. I applied for the 1990 J.D. Stout Fellowship, billing my project as a Māori-Pakeha collaboration, and thus well-suited to the year celebrating 150 years of the Treaty of Waitangi. It was very different from most Stout Fellowship projects, but to my surprise and delight, my application was successful, and I thus had a very respectable income for the year, an office, interested and interesting research companions, and was able to devote myself to the grammar. Laurie stepped up, and took a greater share of the family duties.

At this point, I stopped tutoring in Linguistics, without regrets. It had become less interesting, as the tutorial component of the introductory course had been reduced – the price of cost-saving – and everyone had to use the same material; I had been accustomed to making new exercises if I had ideas for better ones, and to trying new approaches. I was also fed up with being asked to do extra tasks that should have fallen to a permanent staff member, like constructing exam questions, often with no more payment than (literally) a Mars Bar or two. Universities are very exploitative of tutoring staff, and the women who had argued some years earlier against the establishment of Tutorships on the grounds that they would become a 'ghetto' for female academics did not prevent that exploitation. At least a Tutorship would have provided a more secure position and a little status.

With my Fellowship money, I purchased a desktop computer (with a massive 20MB of memory!), and wrote up the backlog of material. At the same time, I continued my weekly sessions with Kare when she was in Wellington, and had the funds to travel to her home in Te Kao, and spend several days working intensively with her when she returned home. I was also able to provide her with a more adequate koha. While one kuia who lived nearby in Te Kao was very happy to join Kare in helping me, another came and berated me for my work, told me I was evil, that the grammar of Māori was in the carvings, and insisted that the local Ratana Church Minister should sit in on a session. I was relieved when he concluded that I was not evil.

Without the Stout Fellowship, I don't think I would ever have been able to finish the grammar. I remained at the Stout Centre for an extra year, and sent the files of my completed grammar to Routledge (who had taken over the series) in 1992. While it was received very positively by linguists round the world, and is responsible for starting a number of Linguistics students in other countries on the study of Polynesian languages, its reception in NZ was very negative. Amongst other unprintable things, Te Karere said I should go back to Germany where I belonged. They hadn't read the book, of course. (For the record, I have no connection whatsoever with Germany.)

This 'black' grammar was aimed at linguists, so I was not surprised that it had no impact here. It was also repetitive. At the end of the Syntax section, I felt there was nothing more to say, but was faced with an even longer section on Morphology, which basically reworked the syntactic material. (Niko Besnier found the same in Tuvaluan.) I wanted to write another grammar, structured to suit Māori, aimed at students and teachers, and include material that wasn't required by the Comrie-Smith framework, notably the post-head adverbial particles. In 1995, I was awarded a Claude McCarthy Fellowship to work on this, and the Stout Research Centre again offered me an office. By that time, computing technology had advanced, and I created some electronic

corpora of Māori texts (small by today's standards, but big enough to be of assistance), which I could search for high-frequency forms like the adverbial particles, and thus do further research without a native-speaking consultant. But of course, I had some questions that did require a native speaker's help. Sadly, Kare was not in good health, and no longer able to assist. Another Anthropologist stepped in: Niko Besnier. He introduced me to Noti Teepa, who generously helped me with my questions. This enabled me to complete the 'yellow' grammar, officially *The Reed Reference Grammar of Māori* (though I didn't know until I saw the final proofs that Reed had put their name in the title).

Over these years writing grammars of Māori, I grew increasingly aware that the language system of an endangered language, at least, cannot be studied in isolation from the socio-linguistic facts. The socio-linguistic situation affects the research every step of the way, from the issue of who counts as a native speaker to whether it is currently possible to answer all the grammatical questions you might wish to ask. Working with linguistically-naïve consultants had taught me that, although linguists become quite adept in thinking about de-contextualised sentences (or think they do), every sentence has a context for a 'real' speaker, and consultants create the contexts if they are not specified. The judgements they make about sentences reflect the situations in which they envisage using the sentences, and can lead them to reject sentences that are grammatical in situations other than the one they envisaged.

After completing the second grammar, I tried to find some other outlet for my skills. I had applied unsuccessfully on several occasions for academic jobs at Vic, in both the Linguistics and the Māori Departments. The 'real world' was not interested in anyone who had only University work experience, and clearly suspicious of anyone with Māori interests. They advised me to work in the Māori world. I was not welcome there, either, because I was Pakeha. I did various odd jobs, including the spade-work for Laurie's Marsden-funded Playground Language Project, which was at least partly linguistic; I wrote the University's *Chairperson's Handbook* (which re-structuring rendered obsolete the moment it was completed, wasting all my effort). I edited the *Calendar* when, because of the re-structuring, every page needed revision. I applied for some administrative positions at the University, to no avail. I was usefully exploitable, but unemployable.

In 2003, I was contacted by Te Ripowai Higgins of the School of Māori Studies. They had nobody to teach the 300-level course on the grammar of Māori which was compulsory for the Te Reo major. She had asked the Dean, Jim Collinge, if they could cancel the course. Jim had been the Director of the Stout Centre in 1990, and told her to ask me before he would agree to cancellation. The course was due to start in 2 weeks. I enquired whether the students would accept me, because I was not willing to work hard for students who had decided beforehand that they would not learn anything from a Pakeha (the situation I had faced in 1982). She assured me I would be welcome, and came with me to the first class, so that the students knew I had her blessing. Two of the students had done some Linguistics, and were delighted to have the author of the "yellow taniwha" (as they called the Reed grammar) as their teacher. Good reports from those first students ensured that the class size increased: over 10 years, the numbers gradually quadrupled.

I continued as a part-time and casual staff member in Māori Studies until 2013. From 2005, I taught an additional course entitled *The Social and Political Development*

of the Māori Language. I knew it would be difficult as a Pakeha to present the material on language decline, but it provided an opportunity for me to raise the linguistic issues I saw surrounding language revitalisation which I felt were often underestimated or ignored. This course drew on the entire range of my Linguistic experience – theoretical, applied, socio- and psycho-linguistic. Over the years, a number of students said it changed their lives. That was very rewarding.

Monitoring the revitalisation statistics for this course made me realise that, despite the positive rhetoric in official circles, the numbers indicated the opposite. When I put that in print, I was hauled over the coals by certain officials; attempts were made to discredit me, though I think without success. I was anxious about releasing the material to the public, for fear it would be treated by the mainstream media as evidence that the money put into revitalisation had been a waste. However, eventually it did reach a wider audience, especially when the Waitangi Tribunal in WAI 262 supported the findings, and I believe it was significant in changing people's understanding about the state of the language.

During these years at Te Kawa a Māui, I encouraged some promising students to continue to post-graduate level, by twice offering a 400-level course, and supervising several Honours research essays and a few MA and PhD theses. I believe all the current language-teaching staff at TKAM were my students at one time or another. When the School ran out of money to pay me in 2013, I retired, though I hope I left a useful linguistic legacy there.

I am now in the throes of revising the once-was-Reed grammar, to include all the information I gained while I was teaching, and from the research I did during my time at TKAM. I hope it will see the light of day in some form or other before too many more years have passed.

It's not easy being an academic on the sidelines, with no position, and no income. The bulk of the time I've spent on Māori has been as a volunteer. There is no easy Library access, rare opportunities to discuss issues with colleagues, no funding to attend conferences, no motivation to keep abreast of developments in the subject, no motivation to publish (I have done a great deal of research which will never see the light of day), no channels for recognition of achievements. And when that is accompanied by frequent abuse by ignorant people, it's not a path I would recommend, even if your heart is in it. But I don't regret choosing Linguistics. I've never been bored in a meeting, because talk is fascinating.

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