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My life and times with linguistics at the University of Canterbury

Elizabeth Gordon

Affiliation

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Elizabeth Gordon

I was born and raised in Christchurch. When I was seven my parents moved me from Sydenham primary school, in the poorest area of Christchurch, to St Margaret's College, a private girls' school. Here my lower class accent was mocked and my new school provided elocution lessons to help me to get rid of it.

I went from school to the University of Canterbury, where I achieved a B.A. in English and History and then an M.A.(Hons) in English literature. My plan was to become a secondary school English teacher and I thought it would be a good idea to combine teacher training with an overseas experience. My mother had a friend whose husband knew Professor Roy Niblett, the Director of the University of London Institute of Education. Letters were sent and in 1963 I was enrolled there to do a Postgraduate Certificate in Education. I did not have to pay any fees. At the time I was completely unaware that the London Institute was leading the world in developing new approaches to the teaching of English in schools. It was an excellent training and the approach to school English teaching was completely different from anything I had experienced in New Zealand.

The move to studying Linguistics happened by chance rather than by planning. A friend sent me application forms for a Commonwealth Scholarship which I completed in a casual manner, saying that I would like to help Colombo Plan students studying in New Zealand to improve their English. It came as a shock when I was told that I would be awarded the scholarship but that I must study Linguistics. I had to find out what Linguistics was.

In 1964 I was therefore enrolled for an M.Phil at University College London. My designated supervisor was Professor Randolph Quirk, a man well known for his scholarship and his uncertain temper. I had a weekly tutorial with him and often felt his impatience at having to deal with someone so ignorant of his subject. He sent me off to read Leonard Bloomfield's *Language*, and then Edward Sapir's *Language*. Quirk had a weekly seminar attended by people from all over London University. His interests were very much connected to his major project *The Survey of English Usage* and in this seminar no concessions were made for beginners. After two months in his class I was told to present a paper on whether it was true, as the newly emerging American linguist Noam Chomsky had suggested, that native speakers had an innate understanding of grammaticality. Fortunately I was also able to attend Linguistics lectures in other London University colleges. These included lectures by R.H. Robins at SOAS, and A.C. Gimson and J.D. O'Connor in the Department of Phonetics. A weekly seminar I very much enjoyed was M.A.K. Halliday's class on Scale Category Grammar.

The M.Phil required a thesis and Professor Quirk thought I should write on the indefinite article. I came back to him with a proposal that I would write on the language of church sermons, something I had plenty of experience of as the daughter of an Anglican vicar. The result was a thesis on *The Prosodic and Paralinguistic Features of a Corpus of Church Sermons*. I used the system of intonation analysis devised by David Crystal and Randolph Quirk published in *Systems of Prosodic and Paralinguistic Features in English* (1964). My corpus consisted of 12 sermons collected on a battery powered reel to reel taperecorder, transported in a large leather bag and set up in the isolation of a front pew. The analysis of the intonation was time consuming, using a specially designed system whereby a short section of recording was transferred on to a loop that I could listen to over and over again.

Randolph Quirk's approach to Linguistics was eclectic. Through him I was introduced to different approaches to the study of language. When Chomsky visited London we spent time reading about and discussing transformational grammar but we were not converts. Quirk's eclectic approach had a strong influence on me and I always remained a 'hocus-pocus linguist' rather than a 'God's truth linguist'. For two summer vacations I was a tutor in the University of London Summer School of English where I quickly needed to get a practical knowledge of the English language, useful for international English teachers.

By the time I had completed my MPhil I was a convert to Linguistics. I had grown up with the rules of traditional grammar and been told that my New Zealand accent was ugly. The non-judgemental way of looking at language which I learnt about at the University of London was new, exciting and liberating. I came back to New Zealand with the enthusiasm of a missionary.

Teaching at the University of Canterbury

In 1967 I was appointed to a lectureship in the English Department of the University of Canterbury. Professor Garrett was the Head of Department and his policy was only to appoint women to temporary positions. However in 1967 he had no one to teach the language section of English 1 and when I mentioned that I had been offered lectureships overseas he immediately gave me a permanent position.

The language section of the stage one English course covered the history of the English language. Professor Garrett confided in me that the students found it very boring and he himself wondered about its value. That gave me the motivation to make the subject as interesting as I possibly could. The stage one class had over 900 students and each lecture was given four times without any teaching aids, microphones or overhead projectors. There was no oversight of my teaching so on my own initiative I decided to compress the history of the language into half a year and spend the rest of the year introducing the class to the descriptive study of language. I also gave lectures on New Zealand English and a lecture on Pidgin English. Years later people told me how they been amazed and delighted to hear a university teacher telling them that they should never be ashamed of their New Zealand accent.

In 1969 I had my first M.A. class - 'The Development of Linguistic Ideas'. I planned this as the course I would have liked to have had myself when I began to study Linguistics. The course began with Plato and *The Cratylus*, moved through the

development of traditional grammar, the historical linguists Grimm and Werner, and then de Saussure. From more recent times I talked about the American field linguists Boaz and Sapir, and then Bloomfield and the mentalists. The British linguists were of special interest to me – Malinowski, Firth and M.A.K. Halliday. Finally we arrived at Chomsky.

This course was taught for several years in the MA class and eventually because of student demand for more Linguistics it was moved to stage two in the undergraduate programme.

The Linguistic classes were popular with the students but not so popular with the English Department staff who were especially troubled by my “sloppy” approach to the English language. The fact that I would not condemn split infinitives was a bridge too far. Motions were passed at departmental meetings to get rid of Linguistics and these were passed with almost universal support. When I became pregnant in 1970 and then again in 1971 Professor Garrett did his best to make me resign. He told me that my desire to continue teaching was unnatural for a woman and that to appear in a pregnant state in front of a large class could cause student unrest. The pregnancies were given as an excuse to remove Linguistics altogether from the English Department. There was no maternity leave at that time but I persisted through stubbornness, the support of my husband, and the strong determination that Linguistics should continue. In the first years of my teaching I felt as if I was constantly fighting for my job and for my subject.

Student demand continued to call for more Linguistics and before long more staff were appointed – Kon Kuiper, Derek Davy, Andrew Carstairs-McCarthy and later Kate Kearns. This meant that I could now no longer do just what I liked. At first we had two stage two classes – the Development of Linguistic Ideas now shared with Kon Kuiper, and Robin Barrett’s class in Systemic Linguistics. Before long third year Linguistics classes were added and a full honours programme. But we were always considered outliers by our friends in English literature who were later relieved when we broke away from them and set up the Department of Linguistics.

In 1979 I had a sabbatical leave at University College London. My plans to study more Phonetics were disrupted when my brother John Osmer, an Anglican priest working in the mountains of Lesotho, was sent a parcel bomb from South African government sources. It blew off his hand and almost killed him. I spent many weeks in Lesotho with him and eventually brought him back to London for treatment. Because I had lost so much work time I stayed on in London when my family returned home to New Zealand. This meant I was able to attend Dick Hudson’s lectures on Sociolinguistics and I also had the time to do all the background reading in this subject. When I returned to New Zealand in 1980 I had become converted to Sociolinguistics.

The course in Sociolinguistics which I developed at the University of Canterbury was very much based on Dick Hudson’s lectures. It covered varieties of language, language culture and thought, speech as social interaction, the quantitative study of speech and linguistic and social inequality.

Sociolinguistics was taught at the University of Canterbury first as an honours paper, then it moved to stage three and finally to stage two. Once again I found myself defending my subject as there was a suspicion that Sociolinguistics, being popular, was also too easy, unlike the rigours of Chomskyan Linguistics.

The last development in my teaching was the introduction of a course on New Zealand English. This again was met with some resistance as it was considered there was not enough substance for a university course. The first paper on New Zealand English was introduced into the English honours programme. The shape of the course was planned with the help of Professors James and Lesley Milroy, who spent time in the English Department on Canterbury Visiting Fellowships. Jeanette King was a student in that class. Two years later the course was moved into stage three where it was limited to 40 students, with some students turned away. It was decided that this course would involve field work, whereby students worked in groups of four with each student recording two speakers according to a speaker quota sample of 8 – young (approximately age 20-30), middle-aged (approximately 45-60), male and female, manual/unskilled and professional/ managerial. The recordings included the reading of a prepared word list and ten minutes of casual speech. Each student also worked on a project of his or her own choosing. I was very fortunate to be able to teach the course with Margaret Maclagan and everything was done jointly with her. I think we made a good team, and it was a very enjoyable teaching experience for me and I think also for the students who appreciated contributing to a genuine research project. The material collected by the students in this class became the Canterbury Corpus, the collection of word list and casual contemporary New Zealand speech of around 400 speakers (Gordon & Maclagan, 1999). This corpus has been used for further research, especially in the ONZE programme.

Linguistics and Education

Because of my experience at the Institute of Education in London I was always interested in the teaching of English language in schools. From the time I arrived back in New Zealand I was asked to be on committees, give lectures, and participate in courses on English teaching. The approach to English teaching eventually adopted in New Zealand was strongly influenced by work done at the University of London Institute of Education by people such as James Britton, Harold Rosen, and Nancy Martin who had been my teachers in 1963.

I was involved with two significant projects relating to English teaching in schools (Gordon 2005).

In 1969 the new prescription for English language teaching in the 6th and 7th form was the brain child of Professor John Pride of Victoria University of Wellington. Pride insisted that language must always be seen in a situation and overnight teachers were told to teach new topics such as the language of advertising and the language of conversation. Pride insisted that no linguistic theory should be taught in schools and linguistic terminology should be kept to a minimum. He believed that by studying the language of advertising, for example, pupils would discover inductively about the workings of language.

While students found the new topics refreshing it was soon clear that they were learning almost nothing about language. I was asked to chair an ad hoc committee of the NZ Linguistics Association to write a report on this. Our report made a strong recommendation that a knowledge of grammar should be an integral part of the English course.

In 1986 the *Committee on the 6th and 7th form English Language Syllabus* was set up to develop a new English syllabus. I was the only linguist on this committee and my main objective was to follow the recommendation of the NZ Linguistics Association and bring grammar teaching back into the 6th and 7th form.

After much discussion and strong advocacy from the Maori members of the committee, it was decided that grammar could be taught but through a simple comparative method, comparing English and Maori. Andrew Carstairs-McCarthy and I wrote a short paper explaining the proposal (1989). We emphasised that we were not expecting English teachers to speak or write Maori. The teachers should know 'just enough to be able to illustrate in a summary fashion the differences between English and Maori structure'.

A survey showed that about 75% of the English teachers were happy with this proposal provided that they could have good resources. But 25% were outraged. The outraged were well organised and campaigned strongly against the proposal, often, in my view, dishonestly. In the end the Minister of Education, David Lange, who was also the Prime Minister, refused to ratify the proposal, probably because with an election coming up any reference to Maori was considered politically unpalatable.

I now look back on this whole attempt to introduce grammar teaching in New Zealand 6th and 7th forms as a disappointing failure. Perhaps we were naive not to expect a backlash because of our suggestion of using examples from Maori in an English grammar. Sadly I believe that if we had used a European language for our comparison it would have been accepted without argument.

The second initiative involving English teachers came in 1995 when the NZ Ministry of Education brought out *English in the New Zealand Curriculum*, part of a major review of all curricular areas. The section in the English curriculum on 'Exploring and Learning about language' proposed a return to grammar teaching in New Zealand schools. A year before the new English curriculum was launched, it was decided that a handbook on language written specifically for teachers was needed, because so many had expressed the need to know more about the English language, and especially about grammar. I became the 'principal developer' of the handbook *Exploring Language* and was responsible for writing most of it. I was also heavily involved in the professional development courses.

The writing of *Exploring Language* (1996) was a challenge as it was to be used by both primary and secondary school teachers. One of its functions was to set out a grammatical terminology and description which would be used in all schools throughout New Zealand. My main challenge was to make the grammar clear without being too complex, to find a balance between simplicity and completeness without compromising accuracy. The interest in the study of the English language was high at the time and it remained so as long as it had the support of the Ministry of Education, with professional development courses. But without constant and continuing teacher development even the best prepared and resourced schemes can fail.

New Zealand English: Writing and Research

When I joined the English Department at the University of Canterbury in 1967 there was no research culture in the department. Very few members of staff and none of the

senior staff had PhDs. With four young children and my niece and nephew also living with us during their secondary schooling, it was not difficult to avoid research and concentrate mainly on teaching and administration.

My interest in carrying out research and writing about New Zealand English began in the 1980s, although I had been lecturing on New Zealand English from the beginning.

In 1985 Tony Deverson (a colleague in the English Department) and I wrote a book for schools on New Zealand English which was a topic in the New Zealand school English curriculum – *New Zealand English: an Introduction to New Zealand Speech and Usage*. This book was revised and considerably extended in 1998 as *New Zealand English and English in New Zealand*. In 1989 Tony and I wrote another book to support a topic in the English curriculum. This was *Finding a New Zealand Voice: attitudes towards English used in New Zealand*. This book was accompanied by a cassette tape with recordings of speakers, interviews, and discussions relevant to the topic. The books were popular with school teachers and widely used in New Zealand schools.

It was in the 1980s that I began to do research into New Zealand English. I first began investigating written records to see what people had written in the 19th and early 20th centuries about the newly emerging New Zealand accent. The reports of New Zealand school inspectors published in the *Appendices to the Journal of the House of Representatives* were an excellent source of data (Gordon 1983, 1998).

In 1983 Margaret Maclagan and I also began what was at first a small research project into the ear/air merger. We recorded 14 year old pupils in four Christchurch schools, representing males and females and middle and lower class social groups. This ended up as a major longitudinal study lasting 20 years. It was a remarkable opportunity to be able to track a sound change for so long (Gordon & Maclagan 1989, 1996, 2001).

It was also in the 1980s that by chance I discovered the Mobile Disc Recording Unit's archive in Timaru. These were recordings of old New Zealanders collected by the NZ National Broadcasting Service in the 1940s and they proved to be a rich source of data. In 1989, with the help of a research grant, we were able to acquire a copy of the whole archive. Today preservation copies on CD of the archive are held in a temperature controlled room of the University of Canterbury Macmillan Brown library.

With the help of a FoRST research grant and later two Marsden research grants we were able to establish an excellent research team for the project named ONZE – The Origins of New Zealand English. Some years were spent getting the original recorded material into a state where it could be used for academic research and credit for this work must go to the Project Manager Gillian Lewis. Among other things, the work involved orthographical transcription of the recordings and the collection of background historical information about the speakers and their families.

In the planning for this research we were greatly helped by sociolinguists visiting the University of Canterbury on Erskine fellowships. William Labov spent hours with us discussing our plans and methods. Peter Trudgill became an active member of the ONZE team and came back to New Zealand every summer to work on the data. He carried out auditory perceptual analysis of 100 speakers and his contribution was invaluable. Lyle Campbell became joint director of the project and was actively involved at every point. We were lucky to receive good support from the

University of Canterbury who gave us ideal rooms to work in. In the year when our FoRST grant was not renewed the University provided us with enough funding to keep the ONZE team employed for a year until we received a Marsden grant.

Looking back, I can see how fortunate we were to have had such a good team. We had experts in phonetic and phonological analysis, acoustic analysis, British dialectology, theoretical issues, statistics and local history.

The ONZE project achieved international recognition and gave rise to many publications. The most significant of these was *New Zealand English: Its Origins and Evolution* (2004) published by Cambridge University Press.

Some final comments and reflections

When I began my time at the University of Canterbury, Linguistics classes were sneaked into a first year course on the History of the English Language. By the time I retired in 2004 Linguistics had become a fully functioning University subject with an international reputation.

Over this time I saw many changes. Women lecturers were a rarity in the 1960s. When I was the lecturers' representative on the Professorial Board for a number of years the Vice Chancellor began every meeting with "Mrs Gordon and gentlemen." I am sure my position on the Standing Committee and other committees was because "we need to have a woman". It is pleasing now to see maternity leave provisions in the University. When my children were born I was given four weeks leave but I had to forego my salary.

One area of considerable change was in the relationship between Maori and English. From 1986-1992 I was a Trustee of the NZ National Library. I well remember an early battle when some trustees strongly opposed giving the National Library a Maori name *Te Puna Matauranga o Aotearoa*. By 1992 the Head Librarian was beginning all meetings with a full Maori greeting. For some years I was the New Zealand editor of *Collins English Dictionaries*. The *NZ Collins School Dictionary* which I was asked to edit in 2000 had only 24 Maori words, mainly for flora and fauna. Ten years later Collins had appointed a Maori consultant.

As someone who suffered at times from bouts of self doubt I am grateful to those people who gave support and encouragement over the years, and to former students who even now turn up from time to time and tell me how much they enjoyed Linguistics. I would also like to acknowledge in particular the support of Lyle Campbell who cheerfully gave his time and very helpful advice. At the University of Canterbury we were very fortunate to have Canterbury Visiting Fellowships and Erskine Fellowships to bring visiting academics to our University to teach for six weeks. We had many of the 'big names' in Sociolinguistics William Labov, Walt Wolfram, Howard Giles, Paul Kerswill, Jenny Cheshire, Dennis Preston, John Rickford, James and Lesley Milroy, Peter Trudgill and others. I learned a lot from them and they also gave me support and encouragement. Our students benefitted greatly from these visits from world famous scholars.

I began my teaching life as a new convert to Linguistics and throughout my career I was very keen to promote this subject and show people how interesting it was. One way was through giving broadcast talks and between 1977 and 1990 I gave over

70 ten minute talks in the series *Our Living Language* on the Concert programme. When I retired from University teaching in 2004 I continued to give talks to local community groups – U3A, Probus, Rotary, WEA etc.

I was given a good opportunity to talk about New Zealand English in 2005 when I was asked to give the Macmillan Brown lectures at the University of Canterbury. These were broadcast nationally on Radio New Zealand and published by Canterbury University Press in 2008 as *Finding our own Voice: New Zealand English in the Making*. In 2008 I was honoured to receive the Ian Gordon Fellowship at Victoria University Wellington where I gave three public lectures on New Zealand English which were published in 2009 in *NZEJ*.

Language work did not stop with retirement. In 2007 I was asked to write a weekly column on language for *The Press*. I took this on reluctantly but I came to enjoy it and continued for nearly three years until the Christchurch earthquakes. I saw it as a good opportunity to show people how interesting the study of language can be. My columns didn't please everyone, some of whom wrote me angry and abusive letters. But many more expressed gratitude and interest and sent in more questions about language than I could possibly answer. Canterbury University Press published these columns as *Living Language: Exploring Kiwitalk* (2010).

Writing this autobiography has made me aware of how fortunate I was to have stumbled into a subject like Linguistics that has given me such pleasure for so many years. So much of my career, and the directions I took, came about by pure chance. I have been lucky enough to study the speech of early New Zealanders who might have spoken like my grandmother, born in North Canterbury in 1862. Now I listen to my grandchildren with interest and delight. Four of them in Auckland have Pacific Island New Zealand English accents; they are variably rhotic and don't merge NEAR and SQUARE. I know that there will never be a shortage of interesting topics and subjects to study.

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