Excursions Journal

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Conference Review:

First Interdisciplinary Linguistics Conference, Queens University Belfast, 14th-15th October 2011

From the tangible excitement evident in the wavering voices of Vander Viana and Milena Mendes, the organisers of the First Interdisciplinary Linguistics Conference (ILinC), it was apparent that the event had exceeded its ambitions. As the Head of QUB's School of Modern Languages commented in the opening ceremony: what had been intended as a small-scale endeavour organised by postgraduate students had become something much larger; the *I* which had been intended to stand for 'Interdisciplinary' had come to be taken as 'International'. This could be attributed to the recruitment of three keynote speakers who are leaders in their field: founder of systemic functional linguistics MAK Halliday, whose address was the first keynote; feminist linguist Deborah Cameron, who provided the centrepiece of the second day; and Halliday's longtime collaborator and partner Ruqaiya Hasan, who closed the conference. As Viana remarked, there had been some rumours that the conference must be a scam: its programme seemed too good to be true.

The declared theme of the conference was to explore 'the impact of language studies in academia and beyond'. Indeed, this issue of *impact* was to be a recurring theme in the keynotes and papers presented at ILinC, as at other events during this conference season, in a milieu where academics face the governmental requirement to demonstrate the tangible 'impact' of their work, under the threat of budgetary cuts. But the interdisciplinary nature of the event

meant that the material covered was especially wide-ranging in its focus, and in the academic approaches taken.

Queens University's beautiful 19th-century Lanyon building welcomed delegates in the clear, if chilly, Belfast morning. The aim of the conference was to be selective, not to have too many presentations running simultaneously, and to group them into overlapping sessions with cohesive themes. But despite such efforts, delegates still found themselves dashing from one seminar room to another in order to catch their preferred selection of papers, such was the range and quality of the work presented. The number of disciplines represented meant that four sessions were usually running at any one time: for instance, a literature thread, one on pedagogy, one on linguistic theory and another on representation. But even with such disparate fields, the multidisciplinary interests of the delegates meant that many of us found ourselves longing to be in more than one room at once.

The poster sessions on the first morning meant that it was to some degree possible to take in a sampling of such broad offerings. The subjects covered traversed history and geography: Leonie Dunlop's (Glasgow) research explored the spacing of lexemes in manuscripts of Old English, using the physical dimensions of the layout to identify word compounding, and paid special attention to onomastic lexemes, discovering a correspondence between the space around a word and its grammatical category. At the other end of history, Maria Grazia Sindoni's (Messina) work explored the 'metatexts' generated around a 'viral' YouTube video ("Charlie bit my finger"). The commentaries these videos attract conceal, within apparent 'randomness', some predictable patterns exposed by corpus-driven analysis. Languages under study included Swedish, Spanish, French (including Canadian varieties), Portuguese, and of course, given the location of the conference, Irish language, including Irish Sign Language. The relationship of English to other languages was similarly well explored, in particular focusing on issues of teaching English in other cultures, and translating between it and other languages, as with the focus on metaphor in aeronautical discourse in the work of Maria Del Mar Robisco (Polytechnic University Madrid): the aircraft as organism (with wings, a tail, a nose) or as hotel (with service, cabins, orders). Other work was language-independent: Fabiana Fausto's (QUB) systemic-functional exploration of the structure of 'fables', and Jon William Carr's (Edinburgh) fascinating modelling of language evolution, exploring how nonsense words used to label shapes of varying colour come to acquire morphology and systematicity as they are transmitted, with 'virtuous errors', from speaker to speaker.

Professor Halliday's keynote address pursued this foundational theme, tackling the core question of *why* we need to understand about language. His speech followed the development

of language through both 'ontogeny' and 'phylogeny'. Firstly he tracked the development of language in the child, as speech emerges from action: thinking *is* doing, and language *construes* experience, rather than merely representing it. Secondly, he followed the development of metaphor, through the similes of Homer, to the abundance of 'dead metaphor' in present-day language. Since lexicogrammar construes human experience, both synchronically and diachronically, we ignore its effects then at our peril: 'failures and distortions of knowledge will be missed if linguistics is lost' as a discipline. Halliday presents a powerful rationale for upholding attention to language as an underpinning discipline across a range of fields, and argues for a linguistics *unit* in every school of study, rather than an isolated linguistics *department*.

Professor Hasan's lecture towards the end of the conference picked up on the thread of children's acquisition of learning, and similarly pursued this into the role of language teaching in education, and the centrality of linguistic structures in modelling knowledge and transforming the biological *brain* into a 'personalised' *mind*. Why some children progress to more abstract layers of language than others was left as a provocative question for the audience; what drew applause from those present was the challenge to governments that if there is not enough money to educate people, why does it seem that we have the money, in funding the wars that continue to be prosecuted, to kill them? Both Halliday's and Hasan's addresses promoted questions at the heart of linguistics studies, and provided an inspirational framework for the conference. Both attended delegates' presentations, and made themselves available for questions about their work, which at times made for a queue of delegates seeking advice and comments on their own research.

My own interests in ILinC were manifold, but nonetheless subjective and necessarily selective. My PhD study in visual narratives drew me to multimodal linguistics and stylistics, the application of linguistics principles to the study of literary texts and visual narrative. I also teach English at A Level, so the pedagogically-focused talks were of interest, as well as any of the subjects that my cohort of students were studying for their own small-scale research projects; so I was one of those delegates skipping hurriedly from session to session in different strands of the conference. The flip side of this broad interest in a range of theory was that the more technically-focused presentations in specific fields escaped me, and my own limitations with practical modern language learning meant that the work on translation and comparative grammar was of less saliency for me. Indeed, one paper title with the promisingly broad question 'Should I sound like you? And who are you anyway?' turned out to be a discussion of Irish-language models of speech for teaching in Republic of Ireland secondary schools:

inducting this neophyte conference-goer into the wisdom that a provocative title, in the absence of any other information, is not necessarily a good reason to attend a given talk. The following selection of papers is therefore, of course, an idiosyncratic path through the breadth of what was under discussion and can't pretend to be fully representative.

The first session, on Linguistic Approaches to Literature, represented a core theme for my A Level teaching. Argyro Kantara (Independent) explored the encoding of cultural norms and myths in fairy tales. She argued that these stories overwrite children's concepts acquired from life, whereby fairytale concepts of 'old woman', 'young' and so on are being 're-indexed' to the 'tilted' encodings found in the tales, as evident through the collocations in this corpus of work. 'Woman', for example, either collocates to 'wicked' and 'false' or 'beautiful' and 'good'. Roberta Piazza (Sussex) used a tracking of the adjacency pairs in dialogue from *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* to reveal the patterns, and the nature, of conflict between characters in that play. Finally in this session, Clara Neary (QUB) unpacked some of the metaphor use in Gandhi's autobiography, remarking on the different selections of metaphor and allusion in the English version (the Bible being a greater source of reference here than in the Gujarati), and arguing that the lexical fields used for metaphor in both reveal the nature of Gandhi's thought.

I was disappointed that this session clashed with Gender, Identity and Language Use, which explored gender identity in Italian parliamentary discourse and among Russian-speaking women in Britain, and a fascinating dissection of the use of 'sort of' in British women's and men's speech by Greg Watson (East Finland). Watson unearthed that while neither gender use this hedging phrase more than the other, their functional usage of it differs – with women more likely to use it as an element of politeness.

Two papers addressed the representation of gender issues in multimodal advertisements: Helen Morrow (QUB) focused on the construction of femininity in cosmetics ads, from an approach of Critical Discourse Analysis, whereas Clare Anderson (Birmingham) contrasted the discourse of ageing in ads aimed at male and female customers, finding that the men's language constructs a more *active* subject, physically and sexually, and assigns the features of ageing to the wear-and-tear of 'fun' rather than the nature of the human organism and the 'loss' or 'decay' assigned to women, in a provocative and compelling reading. CDA emerged as a powerful tool again in Kyung Hye Kim's (Manchester) contribution to Session 14 later, where collocations produced by corpus analysis (another key tool) revealed issues of address and lexical field bias in American newspaper coverage of news stories on North Korea.

The second day's talks continued with the eclecticism of the first. Threads pursued pedagogy at all levels; aspects of linguistics from phonology to pragmatics; sources of texts

including the broad 'cultural products' through 'online settings' to 'contrastive humor research'; and linguistics was studied in relation to 'society', 'the mind', and 'communication'. Entertaining and provocative as the film itself, Jane Lugea's (QUB) application of Text World Theory to *Inception* (and vice versa) was a thoroughly lucid exegesis of both the theory and the complex nesting of the film's narrative structure. The technology of computing was used to offer an insight into non-fluency features in written language, which is traditionally viewed as a fixed and finished mode, wherein errors are only enshrined in manuscript corrections. In Michelle Aldridge and Lise Fontaine's (Cardiff) study of typing errors and corrections using keystroke-tracking technology, writing was shown to be just as prone to 'slips' as spontaneous spoken production. A source for Freudian readings, perhaps?

Of direct interest to me as a beginning PhD student with an interdisciplinary research focus was Vander Viana's (QUB) corpus-based research into English Language versus English Literature theses. Viana found that, in addition to surface features such as differences in structure and organisation, the two disciplines tended to employ different emergent 'key key words'. Both used their own technical terminology, of course, and linguistics theses were oriented towards research methods themselves, and with understandably more grammatical and stylistic terms. Literature theses were focused more on life experiences, both individual and collective, and contained adverbials anchoring the argument in time and space. The two approaches differed in their deixis – the reference of their pronouns, for example: these tended to be personal in the literary theses and textual in the linguistic ones. I asked what advice might be given to someone pursuing an interdisciplinary research topic, but stylistics studies had been excluded from the data for clarity. This would be fuel for a future project – so perhaps I might return for the *Second* ILinC.

The centrepiece of the second day was Professor Cameron's keynote, which addressed the theme of *impact* directly. Her current wealth of experience as a linguistics researcher engaged with topics of popular interest both provided material for her talk, and meant it was itself a formidable and entertaining argument, squarely focused on the target of the conference. It was rich in polemic against the simplifications and corruptions that public representation of academic research may entail, against prominent but less rigorous 'popularising' figures – and against the codification of a requirement to demonstrate 'impact' that is increasingly imposed on academics. What is this 'impact'? Impact on which group? What if your work is foundational, and may only lead to a measurable impact after several research studies which build on it? And how are we to measure the reach and efficacy of the impact? Where academic work is presented in the press, Cameron argued, it is commonly framed as humorously

obscure or mocked as a waste of resources in elucidating the 'obvious' – and presented in forums where comment threads can outweigh the content of any given article with naive commentaries from a general readership (often directly invited to challenge the research by the newspaper carrying it), and 'voted up' democratically by a public not versed in academic rigour. The alternative framing is where an academic is sought to offer 'soundbite' support to an argument conceived by journalists; if the academic provides a subtle, equivocal or contradictory view, then a more compliant 'expert' is sought. Cameron leaves us with a paradox: if experts' opinions are framed in this way, doubted and disbelieved when aired in public, or recruited to support preconceived ideas, how can exposure lead to actual impact? A question from the hall asked whether Cameron felt her own book challenging the 'Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus' view of gendered discourse had changed any minds. She felt she had changed a few: 'one at a time, and with great difficulty.'

The First ILinC was a surpassing success, broad in scope, richly provocative, and proudly staking its place in the academic calendar. Plans are underway to make it an annual fixture and with the reputation the event has acquired in its first year, the committee for ILinC 2012 should be in a strong position to attract a similarly prominent calibre of keynote speaker. For the Second ILinC then, there should be no rumours of a 'scam': it is indeed this good.