

ON THE FIRST ISLE CONFERENCE AND RELATED TOPICS

With Professor Christian Mair, Albert-Ludwig University of Freiburg,
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for the Linguistics of English (ISLE)

Rodica Albu

R.A.: Here we are, in Freiburg, at the end of the First ISLE: International Conference, which you have successfully organized together with Professor Bernd Kortmann and your team. I am sure the Linguaculture readers would like to hear about this major academic event in English linguistics from an insider. What is the story of ISLE in a nutshell?

C.M.: The story of ISLE – the International Society for the Linguistics of English – for me started at a conference in Manchester organized by David Dennison and his associates, where the idea was first floated that it might be good to have a more integrative international society of linguists devoted to the study of English than the existing ones, which tended to fragment into people with an interest in historical linguistics, people with an interest in variation, people with an interest in the synchronic description of English and so on and so forth. One of the prime movers was the late Richard Hogg, who died at an unfortunately early age a few years ago, and in the follow-up to this Manchester conference, several people, including – probably most prominently – Elizabeth Traugott – pulled their weight to bring ISLE about. Simultaneously, people interested in the ISLE association were encouraged to submit bids for the first conference. My colleague Bernd Kortmann and I said it might be a good idea to host the second conference but start by bidding the first one – we assumed that the first conference would automatically take place in an English-speaking country but expressing an interest would probably improve our chances for the second. So we approached Elizabeth Traugott with this offer. Now, as it turned out, our bid was successful in the first round, that is, ISLE 1, in 2008, which, on the one hand, has made us quite proud; on the other hand, it put us under a lot of stress, but the option was that we were trusted to organize ISLE I in October 2008 and, looking back, I suppose we don't regret that our bid was successful

prematurely. The good thing is ISLE I went well and somebody else will organize ISLE II.

R.A. Do you know who will do that?

C.M.: Currently there are two bids which will be voted on – Boston University in the United States and University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Personally, I sense that the balance will weigh down in favour of Michigan but the jury is still out on that one¹ One of them will....

R.A. Who can be a member of ISLE?

C.M.: Currently there is an ISLE home page which is still under construction.² The executive of ISLE has a mailing list of those who are considered provisional members. Anybody who was a regular participant at ISLE in Freiburg is added to this list. The two lists will be amalgamated and these people are the provisional members of ISLE. They will receive further correspondence in regard to the future of ISLE and at the first business meeting, when ISLE was formally constituted as a society, it was agreed that this body of people would provide the provisional membership and everybody paying their 15 euro annual dues would become regular member in 2009. Who can join? Any English language professional in English studies all over the world – it's an international society. Great efforts were made to keep the membership fee within reasonable limits and for members who don't manage the membership fee or people who find it very difficult to transfer the membership fee the Constitution foresees special provisions, so nobody with a professional interest in English linguistics all over the world should be barred from joining ISLE purely because of the membership fee.

R.A.: Let us focus on this first conference – size, scope, directions...

C.A.: Well, as organizers, my colleague Bernd Kortmann and I were in charge of setting the terms by inviting plenary speakers, keynote speakers. We had prominent historical linguists like Olga Fisher, prominent corpus linguists and grammarians like Baas Aarts, sociolinguists - John Rickford from Stanford.

¹ The next ISLE Conference will take place in Boston, Massachusetts, USA on the 17-21 June 2011. (See <http://www.isle-linguistics.org>)

² The site is now complete and includes instructions on how to become a member. See <http://www.isle-linguistics.org/>.

Probably another high point because of his high profile in the general public was David Crystal.

R.A.: Who offered a demonstration of edutainment and... infotainment.

C.M.: It certainly was. Elizabeth Traugott gave the presidential address, which was not just a ceremonial occasion but a very substantial contribution on the state of the art of the field, which many people appreciated. Replacing Anna Wierzbicka, the Polish-Australian scholar, who had to withdraw for personal reasons, we had Marianne Hundt. I shouldn't forget another important variationist, Raj Mestrie, who introduced the South African perspective. This was the list of keynote speakers which was mentioned in the call for papers – they probably attracted people with similar interests who wanted to meet them. We didn't constrain the area from which we expected contributions – variationism, historical linguistics, language change, corpus-based description of Modern English, discourse analysis, English as a global language. At the end of the conference we realized that, for example, the generative description of English was somewhat underrepresented; so were probably the wilder margins of discourse analysis, but, since you can't cover such a huge field as English linguistics as a whole, we trust that what we left out will be filled in other, future, ISLE conferences. We did not want to constrain the fields.

R.A.: From your perspective, what kind of tensions – frictions – can be noticed among English linguists at present?

C.M.: At present, I am not noticing a lot of friction. I remember many people calling for a crossing of boundaries in their presentations at the conference. I recall many people arguing against futile barriers, pointless dichotomies, and, probably, instead of friction I would say – you just get people staying away from this conference or that conference, not showing an interest, so I don't think there were any intellectual wars being fought at this conference.

R.A.: Not at THIS conference – it was very well balanced, but globally... other schools might feel neglected...

C.M.: We didn't get a lot of submissions and then reject abstracts representing a certain approach. There might be frictions if, say, we accepted 60 submissions representing a specific approach and we rejected others...

R.A.: I actually had in mind the functionalist versus the generativist schools...

C.M.: I'm quite sure there are several prominent linguists who don't take very seriously the work that was showcased at ISLE. I suppose this is something we have to live with – linguists are entitled to varied opinions, and whether ISLE has a future will depend on the activities of the organization that was constituted at the business meeting and on the size and effect caused by further ISLE conferences, the next one coming up in 2011 and, presumably, the third in 2014.... So I suppose it is too early to tell whether ISLE is a success and it is too early to tell in which way ISLE will influence the future course of English linguistics.

R.A.: But the beginning was definitely excellent and it was a very good idea to choose the University of Freiburg, which is now among the nine universities that have been designated elite German "Universities of Excellence".

C.M.: Yes, Excellenzuniversität. We are obviously very proud to have come out so strongly in this national competition. We are even more proud that Humanities and Linguistics were mentioned explicitly as factors contributing to the success of Freiburg and obviously ISLE with the associated publicity effect is welcome on that front too because, after all, I don't think you would be able to get high caliber speakers in these numbers to a conference in Freiburg if there wasn't some appreciation internationally of Freiburg as an important centre of research on the English language. So, even if I say so...

R.A.: Don't be modest. That's the truth. What about the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS)? I understand it has recently been founded as a consequence of the Excellence Initiative in 2007... They say "it aims to promote high-level research, develop interdisciplinary research fields, and assist young researchers in their development." Could you explain that in more concrete terms?

C.M.: The Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies is the central piece of Freiburg's bid for the Excellence competition. It is a response to the fact that as a professor in addition to doing your core work in research and teaching you are tangled up in numerous bureaucratic affairs. There's too much work in examining, writing reports and so on and so forth, and the University of Freiburg wants to alleviate this situation for its key researchers by offering them temporary "asylum" so to speak at the Institute for Advanced Studies as internal fellows. During their stay in the Institute for Advanced Studies, which typically lasts between one and three semesters, they are encouraged to invite internationally renowned scholars as external fellows and in the time they are

free from their ordinary routine duties – they can pursue their research goals in this congenial environment.

R.A.: While being in such a period of grace, to what extent do you have to continue your advisory work? Do you still keep in touch with your PhD students?

C.M.: Of course. Most people would actually hate to give up contact with better or more advanced students. Typically, your colleagues or substitutes that replace you will see to routine teaching and examining duties, and the occasional class taught for senior students – advanced students – supervising MA theses, supervising PhD students is not something you would typically want to give up, because, after all, these people often give you as many ideas as they get from you.

R.A.: Professor Kortmann is now in such a position. How about you?

C.M. Well, obviously, it would be fairly disastrous for this department if everybody left for three semesters at the same time, so we have coordinated our efforts in such a way that someone holds the fort and someone else takes advantage of the opportunities that free us and he is spending his three terms right now – and I wish him well for his work. When he comes back it will be my turn, which I am obviously looking forward to.

R.A.: Speaking of that, would you please mention a few directions in your own work – scholarly, managerial, current projects?

C.M.: My managerial work is of course primarily that work which I do in connection with being a member of the National Council for the Sciences and Humanities, which involves a lot of committee meetings on the future of higher education, which involves evaluation activities, evaluation of research areas, evaluation of specific institutions. In Freiburg I currently have no high profile responsibilities in the University administration, which I'm actually quite thankful for. My own research work currently involves the comparative analysis of English, French and Spanish as world languages, a project which I have developed together with a colleague in the Romance Department, Stefan Pfänder, I have just seen the ICE – International Corpus of English – Jamaican component to successful completion. I am looking forward to evaluating these data now in various types of sociolinguistics and world Englishes analyses and I think these would be top of the list and... something which is probably a life-

long interest with me is the study of on-going change in English grammar – recent and on-going change – the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries – I expect to work on aspects of this for the rest of my professional life.

R.A.: As for the frame of this type of research, well, this is the kind of work you cannot do without compiling work, without having corpora, having a good team. It cannot be done individually any longer. There should be a brain on top, of course, yet the team is also important.

C.M.: Well, you are referring to the relationship between individual research – the scholar, the piece of paper and the pencil in the peace and quiet of his or her study – and this team-based research of the type that is familiar from the natural sciences. Well, I would say there's clearly need for both types of approach. There have been team-based ventures in Humanities too – I am thinking of the major dictionary projects like the *Oxford English Dictionary* and related ventures. In the present day and age I would mention the compilation and analysis of machine readable language data bases – corpora – as a major focus of team-based efforts. I wouldn't have been able to compile any of the corpora that I have been involved with by myself. This requires work by research assistants, this requires help by people who are computer literates to a greater extent than I am personally, statisticians and so on. I agree this is increasingly important, but I don't think we should pit one approach against the other one. I actually think that even in corpus linguistics, when all the compilation work is over and done with, there is scope for the individual researcher who brings in his idea, who uses the corpus to pursue his own ideas, his very own hypotheses, so I wouldn't necessarily pit the two approaches against each other. Rather, I wish that both flourish alongside each other.

R.A.: How would you comment on that statement that Professor Traugott mentioned in her plenary that “when English linguistics sneezes, general linguistics catches a cold”? Is there any room for those perhaps brilliant linguists who happen to deal with general linguistics in non-English-speaking countries? Do they have a chance to make their voice heard in the present context?

C.M.: English is the most widely spread language in the world, the academic establishments in the English-speaking countries – in the United States of America, Britain, Australia – are probably the most well developed and smoothly-running research machineries in the world today, and all this weighs heavily in favour of English as a testing ground for most new linguistic theories

but I think it's being recognised increasingly that we are living in a multilingual world and multilingualism is a fact of life in the English-speaking countries today. Whereas it would have been true to say that Papua New Guinea or the jungles of the Amazon would have been the most multilingual areas in the world fifty or a hundred years ago, today clearly the "English-speaking" cities New York, Los Angeles and so on are among the most multilingual areas in the world and Anglophone linguists have an active interest in other languages and there is no reason why someone who is not an English speaker should not succeed in English linguistics. There is in principle no reason for a linguist specialising in a language other than English to become internationally famous and successful as long as they ... publish their work in English.

R.A.: What question would you like to ask yourself to finish with?

C.M.: Well, the question I would probably ask myself is: since there is a flourishing academic research scene in English linguistics, how can we improve the dialogue between academically-based, university-based English linguistics, with its increasing trend towards specialisation, professionalisation, and the interest in language and linguistics which is out there among the educated public, in schools and so on? I think David Crystal during his plenary showed ways of encouraging this dialogue and this is a question which I think is worth asking because, after all, academic linguistics – the description of English – should not remain a thing which is based in some ivory tower. It should be nurtured by wider public interest in language and linguistics and its results should feed back into a more general debate on language and linguistics issues in a suitable fashion.

R.A.: Thank you so much for taking the time to share all this with me – and with the potential Linguaculture readers.