Carleton Linguistics 1990 to 2020

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When I arrived at Carleton in the fall of 1986, I took my task to be pretty straightforward. I was to design and build a curriculum in linguistics, which would fit into the College in a way I and other interested observers would determine. People in academia will recognize that this chance to build a program from scratch at an excellent college with administrative encouragement is very rare and precious, the opportunity of a lifetime. I never took it for granted.

Before coming to the College, I had taught at the R1 universities University of New Hampshire, University of Wisconsin Madison, and the University of Arizona Tucson. I had been a visiting faculty member at the small colleges Reed and Hampshire. I had spent a year at the University of Gronigen in The Netherlands, and Nankai University in Tianjin, China. My degree was from the very theoretically oriented and highly regarded Linguistics Department at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. I had a fair amount of experience at a range of schools, so my first goal was to get a good sense of the kind of place Carleton was and the kind of students it attracted.

Linguistics is a very diverse field with a wide range of orientations toward many different disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, literary study, computer science, biology, mathematics, neuroscience, speech and hearing therapy, and what I will call theoretical linguistics, developed primarily by the linguist Noam Chomsky and explained below. Different departments have differing specializations, determined by the training of the staff and the requirements of the hosting institution. The goal of my first few years was to decide the best fit for Carleton by assessing the interests and skills of the students, how linguistics would mesh with the well-established faculty, and my own experience and training.

This was not so hard to do. I was hoping that I could build a successful theoretically oriented program since that's where the bulk of my training was, and which I found most interesting. But it is quite abstract and can be forbiddingly technical. So I tried it out in my first classes, and found that there was significant enthusiasm among the students. They were very smart, intellectually brave, and eager for challenges. With the encouragement of my more experienced colleagues, I set up the first installment of Carleton Linguistics.

The idea was that the core of the program would be syntax, the study of sentence structure, and phonology, the study of sound structure. Syntax was the more important of these, for reasons I'll come to shortly. But there are many approaches to the syntax of natural languages, and I was facing early on an important decision as to which of these would get instantiated at Carleton.

My UMass dissertation took a technique for specifying artificial languages developed between the two world wars primarily by Polish logicians, called categorial grammar, and applying it to the goal of Chomskyan linguistics. (*Structure Building Operations and Word Order* (1985) Garland Press). However, as will be described below, Chomsky had chosen a different kind of mechanism for building sentence structure called Phrase Structure Grammar, and the question I was facing was which mechanism would be taught at Carleton, or maybe both. Since the Chomskyan method was very prominent, and categorial grammar was, relatively speaking, quite obscure, I decided that

Carleton's curriculum would focus on Phrase Structure Grammar and the ramifications of that view. The important point was that this approach could then be a gateway to many of the significant lines of inquiry that Chomsky and his colleagues were pursuing.

The Chomskyan Idea

One of the things that make languages interesting is that identical, or at least very similar, thoughts can be expressed in many different ways, and they all work. This observation, that there are many ways to accomplish a particular goal, was actually a persistent theme in the Linguistics Department during my time there. I'll return to this later.

If you know about languages from diverse parts of the world, you know how different from each other they seem, so much so that you might be inclined to agree with Edward Sapir's famous suggestion that "languages vary without limit". This is a bit of hyperbole, but one might well suspect that the limitations on variations in languages are due to what languages are used for, like the limitations on the structure of shovels are determined by what they are used for. Any possible variation that will get the job done is admissible and likely to be attested.

Contrast this with kidney location in humans. Not everyone has two kidneys, but if you do, even though I don't know you, I know where in your body your kidneys are. That's because kidney location is for the most part independent of your personal experience. It's fixed, not by your interaction with your local environment, but rather by what we can call your Initial State, that is, properties that are specified prior to any interaction with the world. Properties, like this, largely fixed independent of experience, we will call Rigid.

Born in Chicago, I have been a lifelong Chicago Bears fan. Properties like this we will call Plastic. They are Plastic because they are shaped in their bearers by their interaction with their local environments. The acquisition of Bears fanhood requires significant and sustained interaction with Bears-related stimuli, maybe even during a particular sensitive period in the young fan's lifetime. If you root for the Denver Broncos, that tells me something about the character of your engagement with your local environment.

This is a sliding scale to be sure, but to a first approximation it looks like we can sort properties into the (relatively) Rigid and the (relatively) Plastic. We could even represent this with a couple of equations. Thinking of the properties of an organism as a function of its genotype (G), the information supplied prior to experience, applied to the argument of its interaction with its experience (E) resulting in who, we might say, the organism is, or to use a slightly more technical term, its Information Content (I).

G(e)= I	This is a Rigid property, like kidney location
g(E)=I	This is a Plastic property, like Bears fanhood

Rigid properties are acquired with little or no relevant experience, like the ability to recognize objects in humans or swimming in fish, and are relatively uniform across the species. Plastic properties require significant information from the local environment, so they take time to acquire and vary as as much as environments vary. So, where's human language? For all the world, it looks Plastic, since

there's evidently lots of variation in languages across the species,

and

the acquisition of the language seems to require intense local experience.

So, at first it seems, Sapir wins. Variation in languages is limited only by what works to get the job done.

But Chomsky, ever the contrarian in almost all things, politics included, will argue that in fact languages are much more Rigid than they seem. We'll touch on the arguments briefly below, but we can already see why Chomskyan linguistics is a good subject matter for a liberal arts college like Carleton. The scientific study of language from this point of view is the study of a very central aspect of Human Nature. And that is the central focus of a liberal arts curriculum, at least so far as I am concerned.

Before turning to how all this was implemented in the Carleton curriculum, we should at least have a quick look at why Chomsky and his many followers came to believe in the Rigidity of human language.

One key part of this story is that Chomsky knew some mechanisms for specifying an infinite set of well-formed strings of symbols in a language which had been developed for artificial languages, such as logics. Many readers of this will have had some contact with these things.

p, q, and r are well-formed sentences (wffs, or well-formed formulas)
if α is a wff, then so is **not**α.

We already have infinitely many wffs.

if α and β are wffs, then so is $(\alpha\&\beta)$.

So, as your logic teacher said, "Listen up. ((p&q)&**not**p) is a wff, but (p&q)&**not**p) is not. Take it to heart."

So these mechanisms, sometimes called recursive definitions, provide a way to sort, or we might say, partition, the set of all the strings over an alphabet into the well- and ill-formed.

Kiki has not eaten her dinner
*Kiki not have eaten dinner her

The * indicates ill-formedness. So here's a neat idea. Maybe what you have in your head when you know English is a recursive definition of some kind. Maybe we can find it. Maybe we can then ask the extent to which this recursive definition is Rigid or Plastic. Who knows? It certainly seems worth a try.

We don't need to go into much detail here, that's what classes in Linguistics are for, but to round out this discussion, when we use recursive definitions to describe languages like English, we seem to discover all sorts of properties that were previously obscure, thanks to the precision of the mechanism. And maybe some of those properties are Rigid, that is, are an unlearned part of the

Language Faculty, and thus an aspect of human nature, like the location of kidneys, and therefore should show up in all human languages that have the appropriate possibility.

To take just one example, English is exuberantly compounding, that is, people make up new compound words all the time:

timeshare
foot powder
lamp shade
toenail
woodwater
waterwood

You can go ahead and make up a few dozen on your own. The meanings are not always clear at first, but you know that *woodwater* is probably a kind of water, but *waterwood* is probably a kind of wood. (I just made these up.)

English also has productive plurals:

boat boats
book books
hana hanas

(*Hana* is the Japanese word for 'nose'.) But the odd thing is that productive plurals are not allowed inside compounds:

boathouse
*boatshouse (even for more than one boat)
bookrack
*booksrack

If I fry a lot of eggs, I'm still an eggfryer, not a *eggsfryer. Let's call this the No Plurals in Compounds Constraint (NPCC). (It's actually a bit more complicated than this, but we can set all that aside for now.)

The odd thing is that English learning kids seem to know this without ever being told about it. I ran this experiment with both my daughters live and in-person in my class at Carleton. (No rehearsal.)

Me: What do you call a guy who eats water?
Nora (4 years old): A guy who eats water.
Me: Well, you can also call him a water-eater. What do you call a guy that eats hair?
Nora: A hair-eater. (I'm shaping her up to invent compounds she's never heard.)
Me: What do you call a guy who eats ink?
Nora: An ink-eater.
Me: Great. Now what do you call a guy who eats noses?

Note that she's prompted with the plural. Here the class leans forward a bit because they know this the crucial question.

Nora: A nose-eater.

The class erupts into applause. She knows the NPCC!

Nora: What? What did I say?
Me: I'll tell you later.

Now, if Nora knew the NPCC without any instruction, maybe it is Rigid. And if it is Rigid, we predict that it should show up in all human languages that have compounding and productive plurals. Of course, this raises many challenging questions, such as how could such a thing become "hard-wired" we might say, when it's hard to see how it could be adaptive. But you can see how the questions are interesting and perhaps shed new light on human nature. Right down the middle for the Carleton curriculum.

Before returning to the Carleton Linguistics curriculum, I want to add a note as to how I see the field as a whole. Here's the fundamental problem:

> When naturally occurring human languages are described very carefully, it becomes clear they are spectacularly complicated. But yet young humans, at a time in their lives when they can do little else in the way of complex mental operations, like, say, arithmetic, manage to routinely acquire these elaborate cognitive systems with almost no explicit guidance. It seems clear that they must be "prepared" (to use a term from psychology) to acquire these things. But what is the nature of this, presumably genetic, preparation?

So now we can see the Chomskyan gamble. Can you discover the contribution of Human Nature (Chomsky calls this Universal Grammar) by writing out carefully constructed recursive definitions (a grammar) for a wide range of human languages? So a linguist constructing a grammar of say, Yumplatok, a language spoken in Australia, needs to pay attention to proposed grammars of Dakota, Mandarin, and English, among many others. This is really hard to do, perhaps accounting for why linguistics has a reputation as being a rather challenging field.

At first, i.e. from the 1950s to around 1980 or so, things seemed to be going well. Linguists were indeed finding quite abstract similarities among the languages they studied, such as French, Italian, Dutch, Japanese, and others. But, in my opinion, now that many other kinds of languages have been given careful descriptions, there is room for serious doubt about whether this mainstream strategy will be successful. We just don't seem to be finding what we would expect to find if children's amazing language acquisition can be explained by a significant contribution of human nature.

So the fundamental question seems to be well articulated, but the proposed solutions so far seem to be coming up short. I think we're missing some fundamental insight. Maybe it will be supplied by some students in today's linguistics classes.

The Curriculum of the 1990s

The core courses in syntax and phonology were taking shape, but there was still the question of whether linguistics would comfortably blend in with the established course offerings at the College. I wanted to make sure that Linguistics at Carleton would be welcomed by my colleagues, and that they

would come to appreciate the contribution linguistics could make to the academic program. So at this point I made a decision to broaden the scope of our curriculum to make contact with as many departments as possible. I knew this would compromise my personal research agenda, but I was willing to risk this to enhance the prospects of linguistics at Carleton. So I developed a general introductory course, Introduction to Linguistics, which was shaped specifically for a Carleton student.[1] I also built a number of courses specifically aimed at a particular department or interest group.

Formal Foundations of Linguistic Theory (Mathematics)
The Japanese Writing System (languages)
Language and Mind (Philosophy)
Linguistics and the Literary Art (English)[2]
Language and Brain (Biology)
Language, Speech, and Evolution (Biology)
Language Acquisition (Psychology)
deafness and Deafness (a course about signed languages and the Deaf community)

The core of the program was in syntax, which eventually evolved into a three-course sequence:

115: Introduction to the Theory of Syntax
The goal of this course was to demonstrate to students that they could actually do original work in theoretical syntax. The plan was to give them some tools for the description of languages, and then set them on a project, for example, how to accurately describe the (amazingly complicated) English auxiliary verb system.

216: Generative Approaches to Syntax
This course introduces students to some of the professional literature. In 115, they've done some theorizing themselves. Here, they see much more sophisticated analyses of areas of English and other languages.

315: Topics in Syntax
An in-depth study of a particular aspect of some language or languages. This is meant to result in an advanced understanding of some area of syntax and how it can be approached with up-to-date tools. It was hoped that this would lead some students to do a high-quality analysis of some topic in syntax for their comps paper (senior thesis).

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[1] Courses like Introduction to Linguistics are very common, usually as very large service courses, with enrollments often in the hundreds. I taught courses like this at both the University of Wisconsin Madison and The University of Arizona Tucson. These classes met in large auditoriums. I would strap on a microphone and lecture twice a week, and graduate students would meet smaller groups for a third class. It always seemed to me that the idea was to arrange things so that I would spend as little time as possible thinking about this course, freeing me up to work on what was more valuable to the university, my research. This would not be appropriate at Carleton. Instead, the instructor for the course would choose three or four topics that they were particularly enthusiastic about and build the course around those. So the course content would change across instructors, or even across various offerings of a particular instructor. The idea was that this would encourage a lively enthusiasm about teaching the course that would be good for the students as well. The cost of doing things this way was this course could not be reliably presupposed for any particular topic. But this struck me as a small price to pay for significant intellectual engagement.

[2] This course was mainly about metrics, which I take to be the study of meters in various genres of poetry. Typical questions might be the nature of Shakespeare's metrical practices, as opposed, say, to Milton's or Pope's.

We also put in:

325: Syntax of an Unfamiliar Language
For this class, we would hire a Carleton student who was a native speaker of a language not taught at Carleton which was likely to be new to the students in the class, something like Farsi. (There are many of these languages at the College.) This "consultant" would then respond to the students in the class trying to figure out how to describe parts of the target language in a sophisticated way.

I want to mention two particular students from around this time who represented significant progress for linguistics at Carleton. One was Paul Hagstrom, class of 1993, a math/physics major (distinction in Physics). He took some classes from me, and was a truly spectacular student. He decided that he wanted to try graduate school in linguistics, and so he applied to some of the leading departments. He was admitted to MIT, Noam Chomsky's department, and then the most influential program in the world. To me, this was a pivotal moment, because it indicated that our curriculum was on the right track. Paul is now (October 2024) an associate professor in the Department of Romance Studies at Boston University.

The other student who had a strong influence was Kathryn Flack (now Kathryn Potts), linguistics major from the class of 2000. She took a record nine courses from me, and went on to get her Ph.D. in linguistics from UMass Amherst. Her work in our program was a primary motivation for us forming a special major, that is, the possibility of a student majoring in a field that did not have a regular department. Having a major meant having a comps (senior thesis) procedure. I wanted it to be an important event, something that would accomplish several goals. I modelled it on the dissertation defense I had experienced at UMass.

The work had to be a serious project, challenging the student to take on some consequential research. I chose a three-step process, a three-credit course in the fall of the senior year, during which each senior major would choose a topic. This would be followed by a six-credit course in which each student would meet weekly with a faculty advisor. (In the beginning, this was always me.) By the end of winter term, if all goes well, the student would have a nearly completed manuscript which took on and proposed a solution to an issue in linguistic theory. There would then be a public defense.

The defense was meant to be a big deal. The public was invited, and anyone anywhere could read the thesis and ask challenging questions. Even Chomsky himself could express sharp disagreement with the analysis, though he never did. We once had a member of the men's soccer team give a linguistics defense, and the whole team showed up. The candidate would speak for between twenty and thirty minutes, and then the faculty could ask questions and make remarks. The floor would then be open to everyone, that is everyone on Earth.

The student should feel pressure. They should be nervous. They need to prepare carefully. But the one difference between our procedure and one at the doctoral level is that the candidate knew beforehand that they would pass. Thus, the crucial moment for them was getting Permission to Defend from the faculty. When the student finished speaking, and there were no more questions, I would walk across the room to them, shake their hands, and say "congratulations".

By 2009, we were a well-established part of the Carleton curriculum. There were some obstacles that needed to be met. For example, I was once invited to a meeting by the Dean of the College, and

there I was told that he was cancelling the Linguistics Program, I would be assigned to existing department, and when I retired linguistics would disappear from Carleton. Naturally, I needed to respond to this, and with some luck did so successfully. A short time later, we finally had a Dean, Scott Bierman, who was enthusiastic about linguistics and its role in the curriculum. He let me hire a one-year proof-of-concept person. It was another pivotal moment for the program.

I decided that I would hire a syntactician from the mainstream theory that our program embraced. It happened that one candidate, Catherine (Cati) Fortin, was on the market that year. She was a student at the University of Michigan, her thesis written under the direction of Professor Sam Epstein. Sam was a student of mine when I was at Hampshire College, and I thought he was spectacular. He was brilliant and enthusiastic, and he went on to an impressive career as a theoretical syntactician.

Cati was hired, and our enrollments were strong. We were also able to bring Cherlon Ussery, also a syntactician, to Carleton as a scholar-in-residence. Around 2010, I gave the syntax part of the curriculum to Cati and Cherlon. They had the freedom to manage it as they saw fit, much like the freedom I had to build the program in the first place. I would do my best to cover other parts of the curriculum, especially the phonology sequence.

By the mid-twenty teens, linguistics at Carleton had become the Linguistics Department. We had what I hoped would become a solid set of courses in theoretical syntax. We had an array of other what I thought were interesting courses, and I personally was trying my best to hold up other aspects of our program, knowing that my retirement was already on the near horizon. I would pass the chair to Cati and Cherlon.

I'll conclude this history by briefly describing what to me were very important parts of the department's curriculum.

The Kyoto Program

In 1983-84, my wife Angelique and I taught for a year as visitors at Nankai University, in Tianjin, China. It was a wonderful experience and had a strong effect on us, and how we saw ourselves in the world. Mao Zedong had died in 1976, and the disastrous Cultural Revolution ended. China was a wreck. There was almost no infrastructure, agricultural production was very poor, fear and mistrust were rampant. But the Chinese people we met were amazing. They were generous and kind, and now that the country was slowly opening to the West, optimistic.

Years later, when we had arrived at Carleton, we had two daughters and we wanted to take them to Asia. For a number of reasons, China was not so attractive by then, but Japan beckoned, even though we had never been there. In 1994 President Lewis invited me to go on the Technos trip, a two-week visit to Japan sponsored by the Tanaka family. This made a strong impression on me, and in 2000-01 I was given the opportunity to be the Resident Director of the Japan Study Program at Waseda University in Tokyo. The whole family went, the girls being 12 and 8 when we arrived. Some years later, I was able to be a visiting instructor at the Associated Kyoto Program at Doshisha University.

Japan Study and AKP are both language programs, that is, they are set up to provide intense language instruction. But it was clear to me that, apart from Japanese, Japan is a nearly ideal place for off-campus study. Many things, like grocery stores and restaurants, work just as Americans expect

them to. The country is extraordinarily safe. (There are almost no guns.) Public transportation is a wonder, giving the students the ability to get just about anywhere from anywhere else.

At the same time, there are many differences that invite and reward study and further thought. Government, religion, television, child-rearing, the role of women, the attitude toward foreigners, the way people interact with each other, the food, sport, the way people dress, and of course the language are all different from what students are used to in the US.

My experience with the language programs enabled me to think carefully about what works for an OCS program and what doesn't. I made a list of properties I wanted a new OCS program to Japan to have.

No homestays. These are challenging to set up and administer, and are frequently ineffective, in the sense that the goal of using homestays to introduce Japanese culture just doesn't happen. There is often tension, or worse, with the host family. (A family in one of the programs accused the student of attempted murder!) This meant that we must find something like a dormitory, which would be a challenge because very few universities in Japan are residential. We eventually found one at Doshisha University in Kyoto. This was perfect, in part because Carleton has a long association with Doshisha, in fact at one point there was a women's dormitory called Carleton House.

Sometimes host families play an important role in introducing the Carleton student to Japanese culture, and so I wanted to find some other way to do that. The idea I came up with was the Doshisha Peers. These would be a group of Doshisha students who would join our program. We would set up occasions for students to interact with each other, with the hope that the Japanese students would act as hosts, steering Carleton students to experiences that I, and even host mothers, would be unable to provide.

We would neither require nor teach Japanese. One complaint I heard repeatedly from students in the language programs was that their experience with the culture and people of Japan was very limited. They were frustrated, as the country beckoned to them as they sat at their desks memorizing kanji. I don't want to take anything away from intense on-site language learning, but it was obvious to me that Japan had much to offer apart from Japanese. This was evidently controversial among some other Asian specialists on campus. I only knew about this second-hand, since no one ever spoke or wrote to me about it.

I was very grateful that Carleton gave me the opportunity to build this program from the ground up. (Faculty at other institutions I've discussed this with have been very jealous.) The first instantiation of what we called "The Kyoto Program," went in the spring of 2012. Based on feedback from students, it was very successful. Since I could take the program only every other year, I "loaned" the infrastructure to other departments in the off years. Linguistics went again in 2014, 2016, 2018, and the last version of the program went in 2023. (Skipped years because of the pandemic.) Altogether 136 Carleton students were able to spend a term in Japan.

When the Linguistics Department had the program, I hired local linguists to teach Structure of Japanese, and I taught courses on the spectacularly complicated writing system and the History and Culture of Japan. One of the main things I focused on during these years was the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The group visited Hiroshima during the program, but I wanted to give them more information and more context about what led up to the bombing and aspects of its aftermath. (One important source was *Racing the Enemy* by Tsuyoshi Hasegawa. See my review of *Countdown 1945* by Chris Wallace and Mitch Weiss elsewhere in my collected writings.) I was immensely grateful to Carleton for providing me the opportunity and resources to do this research.

I have written about the details of the program elsewhere (see "Linguistics and Culture in Japan" in my collection of writings). Here I just want to say that the program dovetailed with a general theme of the Linguistics Department that there are usually many different ways to do things, and most of them work reasonably well.

Here is a photograph of the 2018 group on Miyajima Island, which is not far from Hiroshima.

Finally, I'd like to mention a very special gift that I received from the 2023 group on our last night together in Kyoto. It was this message:

> Dear Mike,
>
> We wanted to say thank you for putting together an incredible program for us and being our fearless leader.
>
> This has been an invaluable experience. We've learned so much from you and we will remember this trip fondly for the rest of our lives. You let us fall in love with Japan.
>
> We are honored to have been your students.

Getting something like this is the dream of every teacher, and it now is framed and hanging in my home office.

Dakota

The final aspect of Carleton Linguistics that I want to briefly discuss is the Dakota Language Project. For a number of years we looked for an opportunity to have our students work on an endangered language. We investigated a few ideas, but none of them seemed workable. But then we had contact with the Dakota at the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate at the Lake Traverse Reservation, which is just over the Minnesota-South Dakota border, so about a five-hour drive from Northfield.

They asked if we could write a nontechnical description of their dialect of Dakota for use primarily by the teachers of Dakota on the reservation. We immediately saw that this was a wonderful opportunity. Our students would have a chance to work on an under-studied language by interviewing some of the few native speakers still living. We could go to the reservation so they could see what life is like there. We invited a "treasured elder" to the Carleton campus for a couple of days of interviews. I wrote many grants and developed lectures on the history of the Dakota people, tracing the events from when the tribe occupied almost all the land in southern Minnesota, including Carleton's location, through the severe conflicts with European settlers in the early 19th century, culminating in the catastrophe, for the Dakota, of the 1862 war in southern Minnesota. The work the students did on the language was, to me at least, spectacular. But we discovered a problem. The elders we interviewed often disagreed with each other. We were also able to detect an influence of English, which was not surprising since English had been the daily language for most of the elders for quite a long time. But this influence showed up is somewhat different ways for different elders.

We, or at least I, came to the conclusion that we were too late. The language spoken by the elders when they were children was unrecoverable. However, this is not necessarily bad news for the tribe, since there are other instances of the recovery of suppressed languages resulting in an actively used modern language clearly related to but still somewhat different from the "classical" language. (Hebrew is the most commonly cited example.) So there remained a chance of Carleton's involvement in the revitalization of Dakota at the Lake Traverse Reservation. But then I retired, and I understand that my colleagues have decided not to continue the project.

Carleton linguistics major Luna Yee, Risa Stiegler, and Emma Ismail with Clifford Canku, a treasured elder from the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate.

As I said at the beginning of this essay, the chance to build a curriculum from scratch at an outstanding liberal arts college, with a (mostly) supportive administration, enthusiastic colleagues, and most especially, bright, hard-working, and intellectually brave students, was the opportunity of a lifetime, something very rare and precious. Next to my family, it was my life's work. I am grateful to everyone who helped me, and I hope the department will thrive as it evolves long into the future. The department will certainly change, but then, there are many ways to accomplish a goal, and most of them work.