

INTERVIEW: MICHAEL HOEY

TRUST YOURSELVES, DON'T HAVE HEROES

by Jelisaveta Milojević



Michael Hoey is a British linguist and Baines Professor of English Language. He has lectured in applied linguistics in over 40 countries. He has authored a number of textbooks on linguistics including *Signalling in Discourse* (1979), *On the Surface of Discourse* (1983), *Patterns of Lexis in Text* (1991) (which was awarded the Duke of Edinburgh English-Speaking Union Prize for best book in Applied Linguistics in 1991), *Textual Interaction*

(2001) and *Lexical Priming: A New Theory of Words and Language* (2005), which proposes a new way of looking at language based on evidence from corpus linguistics. It was shortlisted for best book in applied linguistics by the British Association for Applied Linguistics and described as being ‘a must for anyone involved in corpus linguistics or with an interest in what shapes the way we use and understand words’. Hoey’s research into lexical priming theory in Liverpool has been credited as signalling a shift in linguistics away from the theory of universal grammar espoused by Noam Chomsky. Hoey has also written extensively on coherence and cohesive harmony.

Hoey has had a long association with the University of Liverpool, where he began lecturing in 1993. He was Director of the Applied English Language Studies Unit between 1993 and 2003 and is currently Pro Vice-Chancellor for Internationalisation; between 2008 and 2009 he was Dean of the university’s Faculty of Arts.

He is co-editor of a series of books on corpus linguistics published by Routledge, and also serves as the chief adviser on the Macmillan English Dictionary, for which he also wrote the foreword.

Michael Hoey is an academician of the Academy of Social Sciences.

BELLS: It has been thirty years since we met at the University of Birmingham, with which I was affiliated as an Academic Visitor. I was then a happy beneficiary of your kindness and expertise and today, yet again, you continue to be unfailingly generous with your time and wish to talk to us.

MICHAEL HOEY: It is my pleasure.

BELLS: In the obituary published in *The Guardian* on 3 May 2007 you wrote that John Sinclair, Birmingham University’s Professor of Modern English Language, was a giant in English language studies and a world leader in three fields: discourse analysis, lexicography, and corpus linguistics, and that he was instrumental in building the university’s reputation as a world centre for English language studies. You yourself were a lecturer in the English Department at Birmingham University – however, in 1993, you decided to pursue your

academic career at the University of Liverpool. What were the academic challenges and reasons behind your decision to leave Birmingham?

MICHAEL HOEY: I have always wanted new challenges. I was very happy at Birmingham where I had excellent colleagues and an exciting research environment but I felt that if I stayed I would slip into complacency. Liverpool University is, like Birmingham, a world class university and offered me the opportunity to develop my leadership skills. John Sinclair's towering presence at Birmingham meant that such skills were less likely to be developed there. I certainly didn't leave, though, as a result of any tension between us and we remained good friends until his premature death.

BELLS: **What is the connection between your Birmingham academic background and your current academic work?**

MICHAEL HOEY: I learnt my corpus skills by working alongside such people as John Sinclair, Antoinette Renouf and Gwyneth Fox at Birmingham, and so there was a considerable degree of continuity between my work there and my work at Liverpool, a continuity strengthened by the fact that Antoinette Renouf's research unit moved to Liverpool at about the same time. My lexical priming theory builds, as you said in your generous introduction, on my corpus linguistic experience, particularly in connection with the Collins COBUILD project. It also builds, though, on the work of my colleagues at Liverpool, such as Mike Scott, whose Wordsmith software has been absolutely vital to my work, and Geoff Thompson, who has kept me connected with developments in systemic linguistics.

BELLS: **Your Birmingham colleagues have shown great respect and admiration, both implicit and explicit, for the academic success you went on to achieve. One book in particular caught my attention: Scott, Mike and Geoff Thompson, eds. (2001) *Patterns of Text: In Honour of Michael Hoey*. John Benjamins, vii+323pp. Antoinette Renouf paid homage to you in her article 'Lexical signals of word relations', and the last chapter of the volume, 'The deification of information', is by the very John Sinclair who pioneered work in discourse analysis and corpus linguistics. A book was written in your honour**

when you were only 53 years of age, and thus long before retirement, which is usually when such laurels are bestowed – what a great precedent! How does it feel to be so respected and admired?

MICHAEL HOEY: I am lucky to have such kind friends. I don't deserve respect or admiration.

BELLS: In his Collins English Dictionary Annual Lecture, 'The dictionary of the future,' delivered at the University of Strathclyde on 6 May 1987, Professor John Sinclair commended Collins for their remarkable contribution to the practice of lexicography and for establishing a new standard and style in monolingual lexicography. In introducing the Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary, he referred to it as a radically new type of dictionary – the dictionary of the future. You yourself were once a keen member of the ELR (English Language Research) COBUILD team involved in the project in lexical computing and producing the COBUILD dictionary, and I remember your valuable theoretical contributions to the ELR colloquia. Twenty five years ago, John Sinclair masterminded this dictionary of the future – and today you are Chief Adviser on the Macmillan English Dictionary, for which you wrote the foreword. In what way do you find these two dictionaries related? What, in your opinion, is the dictionary of the future?

MICHAEL HOEY: I think that the Macmillan's English Dictionary is a truer successor of the Collins COBUILD dictionary than recent versions of the COBUILD dictionary itself. Its editor-in-chief, Michael Rundell, its associate editor, Gwyneth Fox, and of course myself as its chief consultant all were members of the original COBUILD team, and we have incorporated into the Macmillan's Dictionary all the most successful features of the original COBUILD dictionary along with a number of extra features that we regard as improvements. The dictionary of the future is clearly going to be on-line, though no publisher has yet worked out how to make an on-line version sufficiently profitable that it will cover the very considerable development costs of what is in effect a huge and very detailed on-going research project into the lexicon of the English Language. The dictionary of the future will continue to draw upon corpus research but will allow direct access to the

corpora and will also make use of the immense textual resource available on the Internet. This means that it will be possible to move from single examples to hundreds of examples, from one-line examples to paragraph-length examples, from instances drawn from a designed corpus to instances drawn from all over the world.

BELLS: The development of international education has had a major impact on universities globally. Over the past decade, it has become a cornerstone of governmental higher education strategies as well as a force of change for most institutions around the world. You have lectured in applied linguistics in over forty countries. At the University of Liverpool between 2008 and 2009, you were Dean of the Faculty of Arts and you are currently the Pro Vice-Chancellor for Internationalisation. On 12 March 2011 you participated in the British Council's 'Going Global' session, *Internationalising higher education: unattainable dream or sustainable reality?* What was your stand on the issue?

MICHAEL HOEY: My view is that Higher Education is following the world in becoming internationalized, and that the sustainability of internationalisation depends on how we understand what it means to be international. If an institution is internationalizing in order to make money, or to improve its world ranking, then it will not succeed for long. There have got to be moral principles underpinning any international strategy – these principles include ensuring that all parties in any international arrangement genuinely benefit from the arrangement, recognizing that every student's international experience is unique to him or her and that therefore nothing less than 100% student satisfaction is good enough, and identifying those research questions that require international responses if they are ever to be answered. If an institution aims to make sure that everybody benefits, that students have a life-changing experience and that the research it does is of the highest importance and caliber, paradoxically it will probably also be profitable and well ranked in the international tables as well, but those are by-products not goals. That, at any rate, is the view we hold at the University of Liverpool.

BELLS: According to an old Latin proverb, *docendo discimus*, we learn by teaching. What is it that you have learned from your students?

MICHAEL HOEY: I have learnt from every one of my Ph.D. students and I could fill a book with examples. At the undergraduate and taught masters levels I have been inspired by my students' enthusiasm. I have also benefited from trying out ideas on them. I have always valued their intelligence and have always argued that CLEARLY expressing an idea doesn't make the idea less valuable – my students have helped me express my ideas more clearly.

BELLS: You have lectured in forty countries. Is there a message that you feel inclined to deliver to us - your academic audience in Belgrade?

MICHAEL HOEY: To my shame, I've never been to Belgrade despite all my travelling. What I would say to any audience, though, is: trust yourselves. Don't let the Anglo-American tradition suppress your own original thinking and don't have heroes. Even the best linguists have weaknesses in their thinking, and while we all build on the work done by great people before us, we also have sometimes to rebuild afresh. And the idea is more important than the person. We all get forgotten within a generation, if not considerably sooner, but good ideas can last much longer, even though the people who had the ideas are no longer remembered. And in the end, that is all that is important.

BELLS: Having known you as a charismatic linguist and professor, I would suppose that you consider your profession a calling. So, finally, it remains to be known: is there a question that you would like to have been asked?

MICHAEL HOEY: I certainly don't think of myself as charismatic! But I think your questions have been very good. I have already sung the praises of John Sinclair but I should have liked the excuse to sing the praises also of Eugene Winter and Randolph Quirk, both of whom also influenced me hugely in the earlier part of my career.

BELLS: Professor Hoey, it has been a privilege to talk to you. Thank you very much.

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