

INTERVIEW: MICHAEL McCARTHY

‘ALWAYS TRUST THE DATA’

Interviewer:
Jelisaveta Milojević



Michael McCarthy is Emeritus Professor of Applied Linguistics at the University of Nottingham, UK, Visiting Professor of Applied Linguistics at Newcastle University, UK and Adjunct Professor of Applied Linguistics at the University of Limerick, Ireland. He is author of *Vocabulary* (Oxford University Press, 1990), *Discourse Analysis for Language Teachers* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), *Language as Discourse* (with Ronald Carter,

Longman, 1994), *Exploring Spoken English* (with Ronald Carter, Cambridge University Press, 1997), *Vocabulary: Description, Acquisition and Pedagogy* (co-edited with Norbert Schmitt, Cambridge University Press, 1997), *Spoken Language and Applied Linguistics* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), *Exploring Grammar in Context* (with Ronald Carter and Rebecca Hughes, Cambridge University Press, 2000), *Issues in Applied Linguistics* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), *The Cambridge Grammar of English* (with Ronald Carter, Cambridge University Press, 2006),) *The Routledge Handbook of Corpus Linguistics* (co-edited with Anne O’Keeffe, Routledge, 2010) and *English Grammar Today* (with Anne O’Keeffe, Ronald Carter and Geraldine Mark, Cambridge University Press, 2011). He is also co-author of *English Vocabulary in Use, Elementary, Upper Intermediate and Advanced levels* (with Felicity O’Dell, Cambridge University Press, 1994-), co-author of *Touchstone Levels 1-4* (with Jeanne McCarten and Helen Sandiford, Cambridge University Press, 2004-), co-author of *Viewpoint 1* (with Jeanne McCarten and Helen Sandiford, Cambridge University Press, 2012) and author/co-author of more than 90 academic papers. He is Academic Consultant to the *Cambridge International Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs* and the *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms and Phrases*. From 1994 to 1998, he was co-editor (with James Lantolf) of *Applied Linguistics* and is co-editor (with John Hawkins) of the *English Profile Journal*. He is co-director (with Ronald Carter) of the 5-million-word CANCODE spoken English corpus project, and the one-million word CANBEC spoken Business English corpus project, both sponsored by Cambridge University Press, at the University of Nottingham. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. He has lectured on language and language teaching in 42 countries, and has been involved in language teaching for 46 years.

Professor McCarthy submitted his answers to the following questions as an audio file which is available in electronic format on the CD attached to the back cover of this volume. It is also available at the following website address: <http://www.belgrade.bells.fil.bg.ac.rs/>

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—as I am again today, thanks to your unflinching generosity with both your time and wish to speak with us.

BELLS: In your interview with *ELT News* editor Mark McBennett at the JALT national conference in November 2004, you said: ‘I was very fortunate to get a job in 1982 as a lecturer at the University of Birmingham in the UK. I became a (rather junior) colleague to an inspiring and fantastic group of people headed by Professor John Sinclair, who, to this day, is the most brilliant linguist I have ever encountered. Associated with him were legendary names such as Malcolm Coulthard, Michael Hoey, and David Brazil, and it was where I met my writing partner of so many years, Ron Carter.’ However you decided to pursue your academic career at the University of Nottingham. What were the reasons, and possible academic challenges, behind your decision to leave Birmingham?

BELLS: I could not help but notice that among the faculty at the University of Nottingham’s School of English, are four non-native speakers of English—the Professors of English Language and Linguistics, Psycholinguistics, Applied Linguistics, and Stylistics: Svenja Adolphs, Zoltan Dornyei, Norbert Schmitt, and Violeta Sotirova. It is a common fact, paradoxical as it may seem, that some of the best English grammars have been conceived and written by authors whose mother tongue is not English, such as Otto Jespersen, Ian Svartvik, Knut Shibsbye, R. W. Zandvoort, and J. A. Van Ek. Is there a linguistic argument you could put forward in support of this?

BELLS: As a member of the University of Birmingham ELR (English Language Research) team, you were part of the legendary project in lexical computing that resulted in the *Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary* (Collins, 1987). Since then, you have served as Academic Consultant to the *Cambridge International Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs* and the *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms and Phrases*. What experience in lexicography gained while at Birmingham did you incorporate in the Cambridge dictionaries?

BELLS: You have pointed before to the power of lexis in the organization of language, reiterating your creed that language is lexis-driven, not syntax-driven; grammar is the ‘trace’ that is left behind once lexical choices have been made. It is not the case that we choose syntax then slot vocabulary into it. As a lexicologist, I take the same stand. What are some of the trends in how this debate is being approached by British linguists?

BELLS: If language is lexis-driven, vocabulary learning is crucial to second language learning. Is this a generally accepted premise in present-day methodology in Britain?

BELLS: In 1981, you published an article entitled, ‘What Language Teachers Would Like of Language Researchers.’ Today, your practical experience includes lecturing on language and language teaching in 38 countries and a total of 40 years of language teaching. Have teachers’ priorities changed in terms of what they would like to see from language researchers?

BELLS: At the Toulouse Conference in 1999, you enumerated ‘Ten Top Principles in the Design of Vocabulary Materials.’ Which of these principles do you still observe?

BELLS: You said on one occasion that the author who influenced you most in your professional reading was your mentor, Professor John Sinclair. I have no doubt that you have, in turn, inspired many of your own colleagues and doctoral students, but my question for you now is: which of your doctoral students’ dissertations have inspired you most?

BELLS: In 2012, you were among the faculty from the University of Nottingham to receive the highest royal honour and most prestigious national recognition for university research: the

Queen's Anniversary Prize for Higher & Further Education. The prize is part of the UK's national honours system, celebrating excellence, innovation, and impact in the UK's Higher and Further Education sector. They recognise and celebrate work which is 'making a real and practical impact for the benefit of human progress'. Would you say that those prizes have made an impact on you, either through academic networking or through giving you a new perspective on how others see the practical application of your ideas?

BELLS: Having known you to be a charismatic linguist and professor, I would suppose that you consider your profession a calling. Is there a message that you feel moved to share with us, your academic audience in Belgrade?

BELLS: Professor McCarthy, it has been a privilege to speak with you. Thank you very much.

Jelisaveta Milojević
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