

An Interview with Regina Weinert

TRANSCRIPT

AL This is Anna Linthe from Cambridge University Press and I'm here talking to Regina Weinert. My first question to you is: how did you first become interested in linguistics?

RW By chance, entirely by chance. I was studying for a degree in French and Spanish at Edinburgh University and the degree structure there means that you have to choose another subject in your first year and I discovered linguistics that way. I became hooked quite quickly and ended up doing my whole degree in linguistics. I think what fascinated me about the subject was that it took language as its subject and it looked at the nature of language in its own right, not just part of psychology or any other subject and that was at that point entirely new to me.

AL Now, you've published research on numerous aspects of spoken English and German including syntax, formulaic language, discourse markers and pragmatics and in both native speaker language and second language acquisition. What is it about the spoken language that fascinates you so much?

RW It's interesting that you put the question that way round. You could argue that spoken language is language and I think I'm not the only one who's been trying to argue that. Spoken language is primary in human beings and to me it's therefore crucial to an understanding of the human capacity for language. Writing is very much a later development and if you want to know anything about the linguistic categories that human beings have or anything about the kind of linguistic generalizations that human beings operate with, then spoken language really should to my mind be the starting point. Another point about working with spoken language is that you cannot easily work just with intuitions or with created or constructed examples and this means that working with the

data and the theory become much more closely aligned and this makes sense to me in terms of linguistic theory. On a more personal note, I think some of my interest in spoken language may well be related to my history as well – my personal history. I myself prefer writing to speaking, but I'm very much aware how crucial language can be in terms of survival and I'm thinking in particular of one of my grandfathers who was fairly regularly interrogated during the Nazi regime for not being a member of the party and even though I don't think it was a very conscious decision or even conscious at all, a conscious role this played in my work on spoken language, but it's quite possible that my interest in it and my awareness of the possible consequences of spoken interaction have contributed to my continued fascination with it.

AL So how do you identify the areas which you want to research?

RW I no longer find that I actively actually go out looking for areas to identify. I usually find as I'm working on a particular phenomenon, I notice other areas alongside already and take note of those, but probably it's also the kinds of things that I look at – they do lead quite inevitably to more research being needed in related areas. I'm thinking particularly, for instance, recently I've been looking at pronouns, which is something that I hadn't really looked at before and I was looking at structural criteria for identifying demonstrative and personal pronoun use in spoken German and this led me to more pragmatic areas and the issue of involvement and detachment in the use of pronouns. So there's usually something within the area that I look at that will lead onto the next.

AL You currently teach linguistics in a Germanic Studies department; why do you think it's important that people studying a language have the chance to study linguistics as well?

RW I think there are two main reasons; one is that it's actually very common in most European countries in universities to have linguistics as a component of a degree, so I think it really is necessary for a British university to include it as well. But

much more in terms of the subject area, I think linguistics allows you to take a step back and systematically examine and reflect on language use rather than just looking for the right or the wrong way of expressing yourself in a new language. So it becomes less utilitarian as well, and it allows you to see it more as an academic subject and reflect on your own view of language more.

AL And a final question, do you have any tips for academics who are just beginning their careers?

RW It's very difficult now for new academics – there's obviously a lot of competition for posts and you have to be reasonably flexible and probably sort of diverse in your outlook. But I still think the most important thing really is to pick a research area that you can identify with and that you can be enthusiastic about, so that you can sustain that throughout your career. Your heart has to be in it, rather than picking a subject which you think may be useful in some way.

AL Thank you very much for talking to us.

RW Thank you.