

## An Interview with Susan Hunston

### TRANSCRIPT

- AL This is Anna Linthe from Cambridge University Press and I'm here at Birmingham University in the UK talking to Susan Hunston. Thanks for taking the time to talk to us Susan.
- SH You're welcome
- AL Your main area of research has been corpus linguistics and you must have seen a few changes over the years. How does the discipline compare now to how it was when you first started working on corpora?
- SH Well, when I started working on corpora, really corpora tended to be general corpora and they were used really to describe English or whatever language in quite broad terms. And the people who did that were very specialised people. I mean, that's just what they did. I think if you look at it now, there's been a sort of democratic process in the sense that really nowadays anybody can build their own corpus, so there's lots of software available – in many cases, freely available – so really, a lot of language teachers and people who are just interested in language would build a corpus so that a lot of people would use a corpus who are not necessarily sort of *doing* corpus linguistics – in the sense that they're studying a particular area and they use a corpus as a back-up thing. And the corpora themselves have become much more specialised, much more specific and are used for, you know, to answer particular research questions as well as the big sort of writing a grammar, writing a dictionary kind of thing. But also of course there's been the big move towards spoken corpora, and not just transcripts of speech, but actually having the speech itself. And the multi-modal corpora – there are now corpora of sign language, for example, which, you know, a few years ago would just not have been possible.
- AL And what was it that sparked your interest in linguistics in the first place?
- SH Well, that's interesting. When I graduated from university – I'd done a degree in English Language and Literature, but it was mostly literature and I didn't understand or like the language bit. But then I went and did VSO as an English teacher and I just became very interested in the language because of having to teach it. And so, when I came back from that, I did a diploma in English as a Second Language, and that had a lot of language description in it. And I've always been more interested in that

side of things than the pedagogy and psycholinguistics side. So that's how I became interested.

- AL And what's kept you interested in linguistics throughout your career?
- SH For me, the interest in linguistics is always really the detail of how a language works and, in my case, how English works. I've kept interested, I suppose, because either new things have come along, or I've discovered new things. So there was a time when I remember learning about Systemic Functional Linguistics, for example, which I hadn't been introduced to before, and it was, you know, a wholly new way of looking at language as far as I was concerned. So that, you know, that kept the interest alive as it were, because, although it was still linguistics, it was like learning a whole new area. And then getting involved in lexis and lexical patterning and collocation and all that sort of thing that I did when I was working for Cobuild. That again was, you know, generating a whole new subject so it was like constantly, you know, having the discipline reinvented. And I always think there's a certain time when you hit ideas and you feel – it's as if you've got little rooms in your mind, you know, a little house in your mind and occasionally you come across an idea that sort of doesn't just move the furniture around but it actually moves the walls and creates whole new spaces in your mind. And I find linguistics quite often does that. It definitely keeps you interested in it.
- AL Is there any area of linguistics that you've always been very interested in, but you've never had the time to explore? That you'd – in an ideal world – that you would also want to have explored that more than you have done.
- SH I suppose, off the top of my head, Critical Discourse Analysis is an area that I always feel I've kind of touched on and found interesting without ever really being describable as a CDA person. And I think there's a lot there that I would have liked to have explored, or would like to explore at some point.
- AL And a final question: you're very active in Applied Linguistics generally – so you teach, you're a researcher and author, you're a series editor for Cambridge Applied Linguistics series – which role has brought, or brings you the most pleasure?
- SH Well that one's quite easy actually, because the thing I enjoy most is working with other researchers on their research. Mainly that's been as a PhD supervisor. More recently, and in a rather different way, working with authors on books that they're preparing for publication. But it's something that I find hugely rewarding, and it's a great privilege to be working with somebody while they're developing ideas. And you get magic moments when there is a problem in the research and you talk it

over together, and together you find the answer to the problem. And it's something that I would find very difficult to replicate in writing, I think, but it's part of that interaction between supervisor and student in particular that I enjoy very much indeed.

AL Ok, thanks very much for talking to us.

SH Thank you.