

## Adam Brandt interviews Dr Alan Firth

## TRANSCRIPT

- AB Welcome to an Applied Linguistics podcast from Cambridge University Press. My name's Adam Brandt and I'm here at Newcastle University talking to Dr Alan Firth. Alan – can you tell us a little bit about yourself, about how you became interested in second language research in particular and in Applied Linguistics in general?
- AF Yes, hello Adam. I am senior lecturer in the School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences at Newcastle. The reason that I became interested in Applied Linguistics was because I actually began learning a foreign language at the age of about 21, when I'd met my then girlfriend, who was Danish. And I was very intrigued to learn a foreign language in that way where it was all self-taught. And I developed from that an interest in teaching foreign languages. At that time I was a school teacher, teaching English to English kids.
- AB Oh right.
- AF So I took the TEFL diploma and that was going alongside me developing my Danish. And I was very fascinated – I've always been fascinated by language. You know, I was an English teacher before that and took a degree in English and A-levels and so on. So, you know, language has always had a fascination. But second language acquisition, well I think that's such an important part of Applied Linguistics – you know, in some ways you might say it's the cornerstone of Applied Linguistics. And, of course, working in Denmark, teaching English in Denmark for many years as I did – there was ample opportunity to experience people learning English as a second language, foreign language and, you know, when you're surrounded by it like that, you think it's very fascinating and in some ways an obvious career choice I think to work in Applied Linguistics when you're teaching English in a place like Denmark.
- AB That's kind of the background of how you became interested in language learning and language teaching – at what point did you decide to pursue a career in researching this kind of area?
- AF I remember that (I'm going back a few years now!) – I remember that I was commissioned to write a few articles while I was in Denmark as a EFL teacher for the language teaching magazine in Denmark which at the time was called *Sproglærer*, which means 'the language teacher'. And they had asked me – because they'd seen me doing some teacher training – they'd asked me to write a few articles on some of the teacher training courses that I'd run. And I remember that I particularly enjoyed that process of writing articles. And at that particular point I was beginning to work as a lecturer part-time at Aalborg University, just doing conversation classes really. And I became interested in spoken interaction, because I

was teaching conversational English. So I began to read a lot about conversational skills, you know – what does it actually mean to develop competence when you're having conversations. And there wasn't very much out there, although I remember I read Crystal and Davy, who had a collection of transcripts – I think the book is called *Advanced Conversational English*<sup>1</sup>, or something like that – I can't quite remember the title of the book now. So I was teaching English – spoken English proficiency. I was enjoying it! I enjoyed it so much that I decided that I wanted to take a Masters degree in Applied Linguistics, so I started that at Birmingham University, where Malcolm Coulthard and John Sinclair and Mike McCarthy were quite active at the time and they – of course, the Sinclair/Coulthard model of interaction is based on spoken interaction. And Mike McCarthy's always been very interested in spoken interaction. So, you know, I got more and more involved in spoken interaction, wrote my thesis on that, began at that point in Birmingham – that's where I came across Conversation Analysis really. And it was Mike McCarthy who showed me and a few other students a turn-taking paper by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, and it just developed from there really. I wrote my PhD on spoken interaction, and it's all been downhill since then.

AB [laughs] Yeah and I guess, jumping ahead just a little bit, your 1997 paper with Johannes Wagner<sup>2</sup> was one of the kind of cornerstones for promoting a move towards research on Second Language Acquisition based upon spoken interaction – can you just talk a little bit about that paper and the research that you've done since then?

AF You're right – that paper has attracted a fair amount of attention. We – Johannes and I – had been discussing writing a piece, a kind of critique piece on SLA for quite a few years before we finally got round to doing it. I felt at the time that there wasn't really – I felt that SLA was in such a – it was being dominated by cognitive approaches to, you know, to learning and to language learning. And we just really felt that there was a whole other side that hadn't been represented very well and this was even by scholars who were interested in spoken interaction, you know, like Færch and Kasper, communication studies scholars. Johannes and I were both interested in ethno-methodology and CA and in many ways we brought with us those interests – particularly theoretical interests, such as an emic perspective, participants' perspective, not regarding speakers as being deficient, you know, and looking at the relevances that are created in context. So we were in a sense trying to import some of those ideas into SLA. And I didn't realise it at the time, but that was quite a radical move in SLA. Although the paper came out in a special issue in 1997, in *MLJ Modern Language Journal*, it didn't really begin to attract attention until about four or five years after that, when suddenly Johannes and I were aware that this paper had attracted quite a lot of attention. And then it appeared in the *Controversies in Applied Linguistics*<sup>3</sup> series that Barbara Seidlhofer edited in 2003, which gave it again quite a lot of exposure. And then the special offer – special issues, not special offer – special issue came out in 2007 of *MLJ*<sup>4</sup> which again sort of revisited the paper ten years on. So, yeah, it's been seen I think, as we've written in the 2007 article, it's been seen as a kind of rallying cry really for people who want to try to work with second language, other language interaction from a more

socially informed and interactionally informed perspective. And it's – I think it's – it came out at the right time.

AB Yeah.

AF It came out in the right place, and it was made, you know, centrepiece of a collection which at the time was very very interesting, how you could see the different perspectives and different arguments by people like, you know, Mike Long and Gabi Kasper, Nanda Poulisse – it was an interesting forum of a cross-section of views on SLA.

AB Certainly since that paper there has been a huge growth in the amount of papers that have followed that kind of approach or taken similar approaches.

AF Seems so and that paper is regarded I think by many as, you know, being in some ways an instigator or at least a beginning of a serious case being made for pursuing research which started with a different set of assumptions, you might say, from those that were prevalent; in fact, from those that were perhaps the only set of assumptions at that time in SLA. And I think SLA now has changed – it's, you know, if you look at what's happening now then the field is broader. Some would say that that's to its – it's a disadvantage that SLA's like that, but I don't see it that way. I think we need to bring to bear different perspectives and different approaches. And I think there's all kinds of very interesting work coming out now from different angles.

AB Yeah. So moving forward with maybe a tougher question: what kind of direction do you think that this will follow in the future for SLA research or Applied Linguistics research?

AF Well, I think there's a lot to do based on what we already have. I think we need to understand not only language as a social phenomenon and as an interactive phenomenon, but also second foreign languages and how they are used outside educational settings. There's been almost an exclusive focus on the classroom, which is of course important, but we also need to consider what's going on beyond the classroom, in the manifold settings where people are learning and using other languages. So I would think that that's going to be something that will continue to generate new research. And I think – the work in English as a Lingua Franca has also emerged as a dynamic and ever-growing it seems research field. And then the bringing together of various ideas in SLA, such as socio-cultural theory, various learning theories, with conversation analytic methods of analysis. Obviously this is already emerging now as a very dynamic, new area of study.

AB OK, just to close with one equally tough question: in what ways do you think that this kind of research and other research in Applied Linguistics can be applied to knowledge and practice outside of academic circles? In, kind of, real life, if I can use that term.

AF I think that's always a key question that is often not addressed by academics. And I think it should be addressed though – not least those who go into the so-called real world to gather their data, you know, we also have to ask what do we give back to those people who are in those settings, who are working in settings, and that kind of thing. I've had a bit of experience with this, when I've done work with Microsoft in Sydney Australia. We got about 70 or 80 hours of audio tapes of them on the phone with their customers on the Microsoft technical support helpline. And I've also done some work with the Helpline Association in London where we – my colleagues and I who were doing the research – we actually produced a report for them, we had a workshop where we were raising consciousness of what they were doing and really handing observations on to them to – these are the practitioners – you know, to let them look at them and make of them what they will. And I think in some cases they've used the observations to develop training courses. And Microsoft – that also led to a change in their working procedures on the helpline. I think that was a good example of where you can take Applied Linguistic research, which is then produced first and foremost for an academic audience, which we've done – published papers and chapters and a book came out in 2005 called *Calling for Help*<sup>5</sup> – but we also went the other way as well, we went back to the workplace and we communicated with them, told them what we were doing, and made them aware of what we were observing. So I think it's a really healthy practice and an exercise for us as researchers, academics, not only to relay our findings to an academic audience in publications and our students, but also to actually get back with – go back to the original source and keep that kind of, you know, ongoing dialogue with them. Because I think also their insights and their feedback on what we're noticing can be fed back into our own research. And I think that Applied Linguistic researchers could benefit greatly from doing that.

AB OK Alan, thanks very much for talking to us today.

AF You're welcome.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Crystal, D. and Davy, D. (1975) *Advanced Conversational English*, London: Longman.

<sup>2</sup> Firth, A. and Wagner, J. (1997) 'On discourse, communication and (some) fundamental concepts in SLA research', *The Modern Language Journal*, 81/3, 285–300.

<sup>3</sup> Seidlhofer, B. (2003) *Controversies in Applied Linguistics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Firth, A. and Wagner, J. (2007) 'On discourse, communication and (some) fundamental concepts in SLA research', *The Modern Language Journal*, 91/5, 757–772.

<sup>5</sup> Baker, C. D., Emmison, M. and Firth, A. (2005) *Calling for Help*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins.