WE CANNOT KNOW WHAT THE ANSWERS ARE, BUT THAT IN ITSELF IS AN ADVANTAGE: AN INTERVIEW WITH DR ALAN FIRTH

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Introduction

Dr. Alan Firth joined Newcastle University at the beginning of the summer term 2007 from the Department of Languages, Culture and Aestetics at Alborg University, Denmark. His work in the field of discourse and communication has gained him a high reputation, particularly his view of a "reconceptualized" Second Language Acquisition – developed with Johannes Wagner - inspired controversy and lively discussions and made him one of the well-known and influential experts in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research. The following interview aims to give a brief idea of his area(s) of expertise, some first-hand information, to arouse interest and promote more detailed reading about the research of Conversation Analysis (CA) and Second Language Acquisition; finally the reader's attention might be drawn to interesting research activities to join and explore.

Dr Firth's areas of expertise include a variety of different activities; he wrote the textbook *On Location* for Teaching English as a Second / Foreign Language (S/FL), was a regular columnist on the Danish language teachers' magazine *Sproglæreren*; he dealt with Sociolinguistics particularly investigating the language used in telephone helplines, and Pragmatics, with conversation analysis and intercultural and international communication and – as mentioned above - made a most influential contribution to the reconceptualization of SLA. Of course only a limited number of

topics could be touched here; the conversation will be divided into three topical blocks.

Firstly, some central concepts of Dr Firth's writings focussing on English language use and learning will be addressed; keywords such as "learning-in-action" and "acquisition of language on the fly" that shed new light on the vision of English as a Lingua Franca will be considered. In 1997 Dr Firth introduced the expression of "monolithic elements in SLA" which will be the next aspects to focus on; the Second Language User would be a prominent topic of concern in this context, particularly as regards his / her use of the language, the teaching goal / target language combined with it and the question, if competence and performance can, or even should, be considered as separate entities. Following the " possibility that greater emic sensitivity towards identity categorization may, ..., prove to be profitable for the SLA researcher" (Firth and Wagner 1997, 297) instead of confining the observation focus on the non-native speaker viewed as a "defective communicator" (ibid, 288), the categorizations "Second Language Learner" ("L2 Learner") and "Non-Native Speaker" should be replaced by the term "Second Language User" ("L2 User") as introduced by Cook for a person who "uses the second language for real-life purposes" (Cook 2001, p.12).

In the second topical block Dr Firth's engagement as the manager / editor of the Internet forum *LangUse*, as the co-founder of the *Micro-Analysis of Verbal Interaction Network* MOVIN (with J. Wagner and J. Steensig) and the newly-founded *MARG* data group at Newcastle University (with Dr Chris Jenks) will be addressed.

The last but definitely not least focus of attention lies on two children's books Dr Firth published in the 1980s, *The Bermuda Triangle Mystery* (1987) and *The Loch Ness Mystery* (1989), both published in Copenhagen.

For a time reference frame, it might be interesting to know that the interview was carried out on 30th April 2007.

Interview

A.F. = Dr Alan Firth

I. = Interviewer (Petra Schoofs)

I. Dr Firth, as early as 1990 you already emphasized the importance of interaction in discourse study. In your latest paper (together with J. Wagner, to appear in December 2007) you are employing the expressions "learning-in-action" and "acquiring language on the fly". What would you consider to be the basic characteristics of language learning labelled like that?

A.F. Well, I think I have used these terms to emphasize the kind of situated and local feature of language learning as an alternative to conventionalised conceptions of learning in SLA, including SLA studies which are centrally interested in interaction, including in fact some of the SLA studies which use CA (= Conversation Analysis) in some of the very latest SLA studies. The idea is that we need to think carefully about how we conceptualize the notion of learning. Normally what happens in SLA is that we conceive of learning as something that is witnessable across time, in other words, it is recurrent and it looks as though there exists evidence that it has been established through this recurrence across the temporal scene and on this basis the research of SLA learning is taking place. But what is not explicated is: What do we mean by temporality? To what extent are we talking about recurrence? What I am saying is an alternative to that. I am not rejecting that; I am saying that we also need to

conceive of learning as a temporal occurrence that can be conceived as a "here and now" occurrence. People can demonstrate that they have learned something and indeed are learning something within the interaction itself. This is normally not seen as evidence of learning; you normally need to see something repeatedly and across repeated interaction. This is why it is so common and seen as critically important in SLA-studies to have longitudinal studies and in the 2004 special issue of the *Modern Language Journal* where CA was discussed as a way into SLA, longitudinality was a main theme of the discussion, specifically the extent that CA could deal with longitudinality. And again I think we need to think about longitudinality as something that takes place over days or months but also sequentially in an actual conversation. In my own research – and I have shown this in one of my latest papers, that one to be published in MLJ with Johannes Wagner – we can actually see learners or users using new language not only within an interaction but selectively using new forms of language and the selection criteria are in our particular case the interlocutors, so they take into account what the interlocutors know or what they assume the interlocutors would know and also what they experience the interlocutors to know. So they adjust their syntax or lexis according to certain referential terms according to the interlocutor's presumed knowledge. You can actually see different forms of language being used in line with the various identities and assumed knowledge of the interlocutors; this is quite new in SLA.

I. If I have understood your point correctly, this does not only refer to the time the interaction takes place in but also to the surroundings.

A.F. Yes, it also refers for example to the identity and to what has been established discursively in the actual previous conversation, they are taking into

account many different factors. One of the reasons why this is so important is that, and I think this is really something pretty new that could emerge from this, we tend to see learning in a close approximation to the native speaker norms whereas some of the data I have been looking at show that second language speakers will on occasions adjust their language in such a way that it even looks as though it is moving away from native speaker forms. They do this as a way of recipient designing their language performance. They choose to - and this is an expression I am using in the paper with Carolyn Baker and Mike Emissen in 2005 – *calibrate* for competence. They calibrate their language production in accordance with the perceived competence of their interlocutor. Which means that learning happens contrary to the Interlanguage conception of learning which says that it is linear; that it is progressive in the sense that it gets closer to the native speaker norm. The linear metaphor could be replaced by a kind of patchwork or quilt metaphor one might say, where learning occurs in different areas and in some cases it looks as though it is unlearned. It is not being unlearned in fact; this is I think where more traditional SLA scholars might turn to some instances where non-standard forms were adopted, whereas previously we have had evidence for standard forms being used. One might refer to this as "regression" for example or "unlearned" whereas what we had were perhaps instances of not unlearned forms, but of quite the opposite: learning how to use various forms in accordance with local demands of this particular interaction with this particular interlocutor in which case non-native or non-standard forms may be deemed by both participants to be more appropriate than standard forms. Our examples of foreign language users show that they can use standard forms and non-standard forms. Instead of calling these examples "Interlanguage" or

"unlearning" it would be more appreciative to call what they are doing using language resourcefully in accordance with the requirements of the interlocutor. This is what we meant by "acquisition of language on the fly" or "learning-in-action". It is a different conception of learning; we still have not come up with a metaphor that captures the full meaning of it yet, but it is certainly an alternative and a challenge to this kind of linear Interlanguage idea.

I. The idea of linear learning leads us to another question, the question of "markedness / unmarkedness" and "appropriateness". In other words: if we do not accept the so-called native as the standard or as the target, what would be the measure that we could have? What would be called "right" or "wrong" if somebody tries to learn a language?

A.F. Well, that is a very hotly debated question - it just depends on who you ask. If you ask interlocutors, again that depends on who they are interacting with to a certain extent - because language is about communication ... If you are taking members of this process and pose this question, you can say that language is a self-regulating system. In other words: if you are not clear, if the norms you are using, if the norms you are abiding by or even creating, are not meaningful or transparent, then that will render the communication process problematic. So, to a certain extent from the members' / users' point of view and certainly if you look at this analytically, if you consider language empirically, you can see that interlocutors as well are much more resourceful, inventive and creative - because of the nature of language you have to refer to a certain set of norms in order to be understandable. There has to be a framework within which you can refer to and collectively draw upon. But also within that kind of framework there is an element of invention and creativity and a certain amount of

movement. We are interested in certain circumstances such as workplace interactions, where interlocutors will not see themselves as being users of language for evaluation purposes - in contrast to learners who would be using language essentially to practise it, to be assessed, to be evaluated – who conceive of their own language use as something which is learner-based. I am really talking about people who are using language to get on with "real world real things", selling or buying, being interviewed for jobs and so on.

I. In one of your articles you say that "real Danish cheese" and "real big money" is made. (Firth and Wagner, to appear December 2007, online version pp 4/5)

A.F. Absolutely. So what tends to happen in these particular cases is that the message substrate becomes the primary focus in the communication rather than – say – the surface characteristics of the discourse and as shown also in my 1996 *Journal of Pragmatics* paper. What we found is that interactants are extremely skilful at being able to adapt to the local demands even when that entails using non-standard forms of English. From a member's / user's perspective I think there are differences. There are differences in who is using the language. Are they learners – particular if they are learners in an educational setting - in which case there is going to be perhaps more of a reference to native norms. Again that would be heavily influenced by teachers' attitudes and some of the debates within the Englishes of Lingua Franca are trying to examine to what extent we as teachers can try and bring across the message that English is no longer owned by native speakers and therefore norms are something that can be negotiated also by non-native speakers, thus giving rise to different kinds of Englishes, not only that kind of national English such as Nigerian English or

Singaporian English, also perhaps the English of journalists or tourists in certain areas, or cheese sellers. There are different forms of English arising. Students themselves often defer to native speaker norms which may result in some kind of mismatch between the message or the conviction of the teacher who is trying to emphasize a more liberal idea of normativity in language wheras the students themselves defer to native speakers and have this ingrained belief that sounding more like a native speaker is something that is most desirable and therefore what they should be aiming for. Then there are the teachers themselves; if you ask them the question that you posed you will see what some researchers have found recently – and this is coming out in Jennifer Jenkins' book at the end of this year on English as a Lingua Franca - you will find that teachers – especially EFL teachers - on the whole were found to be much more conservative and defer again to native speaker norms.

I. You had a very interesting image for that. You referred to the native speaker as the "seemingly omniscient figure" in SLA (Firth and Wagner, 1997, 291) and then you borrowed a phrase of Mey who called the native speaker the "uncrowned king of linguistics" (ibid).

A.F. Yes, I think the native speaker in linguistics is regarded essentially as an omniscient figure and it certainly serves as a figure who has a stable and all-encompassing knowledge of language. The native speaker in linguistics is assumed to have certain characteristics, certain levels of knowledge whereas if we actually look at language in use we see that native speakers use new forms of language according to situations of learning involved and so on. I think throughout so many SLA publications there is a hugely dominant viewpoint that the native speaker norms should be the target despite the rise of English as a

global language, particularly in the last fifteen or twenty years. Take the Cobuild dictionary project where the tag-line of the dictionaries is 'Teaching learners *real* English', where *real* means naturally-occurring and native-speaker English. They use recordings of native speakers - that is one example of many where the native speaker is seen as unquestionably the target.

I. But again the question is: who is that native speaker? It could be a British or an American person ...

A.F. Yes, that's absolutely right. If you start looking under the surface at the language models that are often recorded, they seem very often to be UK-based and US-based and the gradations there continue to be middle-class, educated and speakers of accepted standard forms of English, normally RP or standard British or American English. It has come to awareness though in EFL textbook productions that it is necessary to also expose learners to different forms of English, regional accents within the native speakers' countries but also there is a new development to use the forms of English from people who use English as their foreign or second language, the English of Danes, the English of Germans, the English of Argentines, Japanese and so on where we are using the category of an "expert", so the determining factor is no longer that of a "native speaker" but it is moving to that of a very skilled communicator or expert. This notion of "expert" transcents both so-called non-native and native speakers. I think very slowly textbook writers are beginning to become aware of this idea. It is necessary to seriously embrace this idea of "English as a global language" or "English as a world language" and therefore expose learners to many different kinds of English including so-called non-native types, regional and non-standard forms. But of course at the same time there has to be an

acknowledgement that teachers work with limited resources, a limited amount of time and therefore there has to be some rationalization – you cannot spend all of your time exposing learners to many different kinds of English. I think there is a kind of pragmatic acceptance that on the one hand one has to acknowledge a certain base standard and at the same time also expose learners to different forms of English and particularly non-native forms and try and challenge and bring across to the learners themselves that the native speaker is one speaker of many and that they are all forms of English even if they have an accent. It should not necessarily be the accent and the syntax that is the defining factor of quality in terms of language, but how skilful one is as a communicator according to the local context that we are in.

I In one of your articles you are referring to this bipolarity that de Saussure already spoke about – "langue" and "parole" – which was taken up by Chomsky as "competence" and "performance". (Firth and Wagner, 1997, 287). If I have understood you correctly before, your idea does include breaking down the border between competence and performance, doesn't it?

A.F. Yes, it does. This came out in the paper Johannes Wagner and I wrote in 1998, published in the Modern Language Journal where we replied to S. Gass, for example, and also in the Modern Language Journal in 1998 or to G. Kasper in MLJ in 1997 about Second Language Acquisition not being about language use but about acquisition. I think there are certain parallels between "langue", "parole", "acquisition" and "use". Of course many people have critizised the de Saussurian idea that was later developed by Chomsky and analysed as "competence" and "performance" – Volosinov in his "Marxism and the Philosophy of Language" for example produced a very trenchant critique of de

Saussure and then of course you have people like Hymes and Gumperz who have attacked the Chomskyan idea of "competence" and "performance". I think there are certain interesting parallels between those; the distinction between "acquisition" and "use" as we pointed out in our 1998 article is in fact counter-productive. We were quite surprised at how adamant some of the more conventional SLA-researchers supported this distinction between "acquisition" and "use". But I think it is becoming more common now to deconstruct the distinction between "acquisition" and "use". I think we need to do that because to my mind, acquisition is not going to occur without use. One could now say: what is the actual empirical validity of making the distinction between acquisition and use? I think that is a very good question and I think the answer is that there is very little validity in distinguishing between acquisition and use. There is something which reflects what is going on when people use language, when people learn. They got to do and to demonstrate it through use.

I. I am exaggerating but does that not say that we have in a way returned to Plato's idea of the image of language as a tool – a tool for a purpose; we use language to achieve something as a sort of value of its own?

A.F. Absolutely. That view has particularly become prominent within sociolinguistics and in terms of sociology and even in speech to a certain extent, "language as action", anthropological ideas of "language as action" from e.g. Malinowski.

I. My last question in this block would refer to your latest publication. There you are referring to the latest development in SLA: "We are, then, witness to a natural progression, an intellectual evolution, if one will, where successful paradigms evolve (and sometimes fracture) through both support and critique."

(Firth & Wagner 2007, p.38). I was wondering where you would see yourself and your position in this development.

A.F. Well, obviously my interests are in SLA from a social perspective, from a social-cultural angle although I do keep my eye on developments from a cognitive perspective. We did say in our 1997 article that we were not rejecting the cognitive work in SLA; we were not calling for an end of that work. Not at all. Some misunderstood that. Nanda Poulisse misunderstood us and to a certain extent Mike Long, but we were actually asking for greater attention to social and interactional perspectives and to reconceptualise learning along those lines. I think within the last ten years there have been changes in the direction of the arguments we were making in our 1997-article. Incidentally these arguments were not only made by us but by other researchers as well around the same time, people like David Block, Claire Kramsch, Leo van Lier and others. They also called for similar changes. I would see my own work and that of J. Wagner as being in line with this change where we would like to see more interactional oriented studies that are using a data base that is broader than traditional classroom learner interaction. More work is being undertaken in this direction and has begun to emerge in the last five or six years and I think SLA is really benefitting from these developments. I think this is a really exciting time for SLA because it is beginning to develop a certain side of SLA that was clearly underdeveloped ten years ago as regards a more social, a more socio-cultural approach to SLA. (The individual contributions of this debate mentioned above can be found in Seidlhofer 2003, Chapter 4, 169-267)

I. I would now like to address your engagement as the manager / editor of the Internet discussion forum *LangUse* wich has currently about 900 subscribers

worldwide. Could you please give us a brief explanation as to the focus and work of this forum?

A.F. It has very little involvement from me really, I helped to set it up actually: I think I coined the terms *LangUse* when I took over this forum from Anita Pomeranz when she began working at the State University of New York. I cannot even remember when exactly that was – might have been 1998 or 1997 and then I hosted *LangUse* at Aalborg University in Denmark where it is still hosted. And I have been able to just keep my eye on the contributions and occasional problems, spam or flaming going on – but I think *LangUse* takes care of itself. I just watch with interest and occasionally intervene when things go wrong but fortunately they do not go wrong very often. I think it is very successful. It produces extremely interesting exchanges and I am sure it is going to continue to grow. We started out with about 350 and have now reached about 900 participants.

I. Another thing you are engaged in and that you have established together with J. Wagner and J. Steensig is the Micro-Analysis of *Verbal Interaction Network*, Denmark, short *MOVIN*. Could you also please elaborate on that?

A.F. Well, this was an idea that Johannes, Jakob and I had again about ten years ago when we felt that it would be of benefit to people in Denmark who are interested in micro-analysis and interaction to be able to just join a group which had a website, could host meetings, apply for grants and so on. So we set up the *MOVIN* Network. I think Johannes deserves credit for establishing it. Its reputation and its activities are mostly concentrated at the University of Southern Denmark where Johannes is working. I do not want to take credit for *MOVIN* apart from originally being involved in establishing it a few years ago.

I. There additionally is a quite new data group you are involved in, the *MARG* Network that you established together with Dr Chris Jenks. Could you tell us something about that as well?

A.F. Well, I mean there are obvious parallels between *MOVIN* and *MARG* and we feel that many people of many schools at Newcastle University and neighbouring universities would benefit from coming together, across disciplines, in order to talk about their research in a very informal way, including PhD students, maybe Masters students. I think it is very refreshing to be able to get together around a shared methodology one is interested in, analysing language and interactive phenomena while using recording of actual language use. We are looking at contextual, interactional dimensions of language. We are not tied to a particular paradigm. It is not as though we are all discourse analysts or conversation analysts, but we are interested in language from a kind of micro-analytic perspective. We have had only one meeting so far but it was really useful and extremely interesting and I hope that *MARG* Network will continue to grow and establish itself. And who knows what might come out of that ...!

I. By now we are arriving at our last topical block: your children's books. They were published in the 1980s, *The Bermuda Triangle Mystery* in 1987 and *The Loch Ness Mystery* in 1989. Both were published in Copenhagen and I saw that the *Bermuda Triangle Mystery* was published in 4 languages. In Swedish, English of course, Danish and ...

A.F. In Dutch, too. Actually I think the *Bermuda Triangle Mystery* was technically a best seller; it sold over ten thousand copies in Denmark alone, so that was really successful. I was actually able to write that quite quickly, one

summer, many, many years ago. I have always written stories, even when I was a boy, I loved to write stories, I particularly had a penchant for conspiracy theories and fiction and I think there was a great lack of stories for 13 – 16 year olds. J. K. Rowling certainly noticed the same gap and filled it. It was very illuminating to write that.

I. Have you solved the mysteries?

A.F. No, let's leave the mysteries unsolved. It is interesting to say that we can neither fathom the Loch Ness nor the Bermuda Triangle and it is a great thing to ponder and to feel that one does not have all the answers to nature or the workings of the world particularly at that age. I would like to encourage teenagers – I have two teenagers myself – to develop a sense of wonder and a sense of curiosity. A questioning and openness towards matters relating to – whatever it is – scholarship, nature, science in general. This is really what these books are about. They say: something is there, let's explore it; we do not really know what the answers are. We cannot know what the answers are, but that in itself is an advantage and something that we can take as an opportunity to rethink and explore different ways of thinking.

I. A nice thought to come to a close. Dr Firth, thank you very much for that very inspiring and thought-provoking interview.

A.F. You're very welcome.

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