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IN THIS ISSUE

An interview with Prof. Gina Conti-Ramsden, the new IASCL President

by Barbora Skarabela

Prof. Gina Conti-Ramsden (Photo: Courtesy of Ludovica Serratrice)

The secret ballot at the IASCL Business Meeting at the conference in Berlin in July 2005 elected Gina Conti-Ramsden as the new President of the Association. Gina is Professor of Child Language and Learning at the University of Manchester. She is one of the leading researchers on child language development and language disorders, with primary interest in language development in individuals diagnosed with Specific Language Impairment (SLI).

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate Gina on her new post and to ask about her views on the past, present and future of IASCL.

Barbora Skarabela: *Gina, you are not new to the Association. You have been a member since 1984. You have served for the past three years as the Vice-President. Can you tell us about your first encounter with the Association? How did your involvement in the Association change over time?*

Gina Conti-Ramsden: First of all, thank you Barbora for providing me with the opportunity to have this interview and share experiences, plans and ideas with our membership.

My first meeting at the IASCL was at the Conference in Austin, Texas, USA in 1984 (yes, 21 years ago!). I was about to start my first academic post at the University of Manchester. I was able to make a paper presentation at the conference and meet a number of interesting colleagues and hear of their work. I very much liked the focus on language and the relatively small size of the conference which allowed for plenty of time for interaction.

In terms of changes over time, I continued my membership of the association since 1984 and have attended virtually all the meetings since then. I have felt involved with the aims of the Association and found the meetings very productive. I also became more actively involved in the Association's organization via membership of different committees and holding office last term.

BS: *Could you reflect on the Association over the past three years from the perspective of the Vice-President? Can you summarize for us some of the major accomplishments?*

GC-R: The key role of the officers is to keep the Association vibrant and to facilitate the delivery of a successful meeting every three years. Our focus was therefore Berlin 2005 and towards the end of the three years, Edinburgh 2008. In addition, we have been able to update the statutes of the Association to reflect more accurately current practice.

BS: *Can you share some of your concerns about the Association? For example, at the business meeting in Berlin, the members expressed concerns about the increasingly higher rates for registration fees. How does the Association intend to address this issue?*

GC-R: In a way I see concerns as challenges that need to be discussed and worked through. There is no doubt that as an Association we are growing larger with membership close to 800 at present. This inevitably raises a number of issues we need to consider including the size of our meetings, the number of parallel sessions, how much time there is for discussion and the sense of community as an Association. The issue of registration fees for the meetings is something we are keen to keep our eyes on. The good news is that in Berlin everyone who requested to have their fees waived due to specific circumstances was granted that request. We hope to be able to do this again in Edinburgh 2008 as well as NOT increase the registration fees from 2005 to 2008.

BS: *What is your view on making the Congress more accessible to students in the field? What are the steps the Association intends to take to allow more students to attend?*

GC-R: It is my opinion that the key to student participation is often financial support. Fee waiving can go some way to ameliorate the financial burden on students and thus encourage more participation. But as I just

mentioned, this only goes some way. At present we are considering the possibility of being able to sponsor student travel/accommodation expenses to attend the Association meetings through establishing student conference awards.

BS: *The mission statement of the Association clearly communicates promotion of international and interdisciplinary cooperation in the field of child language development. Even though the Association now attracts members from various countries of the world, the fact is that the primary research focus remains on English. Do you think that the Association's objective to promote international cooperation deserves more attention? Can you communicate your view on this issue and how the Association might be able to encourage more cross-linguistic and cross-cultural research awareness? Are there any plans to further the ties between different countries? Can IASCL be more instructive?*

GC-R: Let me start by saying that I believe IASCL's role is not to be instructive but facilitative. Thus, in terms of highlighting cross-linguistic and cross-cultural research awareness, the main avenues we have for fostering this is via the meetings themselves (every three years) and our publications/communications through the bulletin, TiLAR and our website. Our intention is to raise the issue with the Edinburgh 2008 organizers and suggest possible avenues for highlighting these such as special invited symposia.

BS: *Similarly, what is your impression on communication between different disciplines? How do you think the Association might be able to encourage more communication between different disciplines?*

GC-R: This is an interesting issue. As specialization increases, the need to interact with different disciplines becomes more crucial in order to have a wider (and very likely more accurate) picture of what is involved in the problem space we are examining. Successful communication between different disciplines is a challenge. In the case of IASCL, for example, there is a tension between keeping meetings focused, not too large, with plenty of time for discussion and opening up to other disciplines and inevitably growing larger. I do not think there are straightforward solutions. In terms of our meetings, we will be encouraging having in Edinburgh 2008 an invited speaker/symposia programme that is open and reflects the variety of disciplines involved in research in language development.

BS: *What are your plans for the next 3 years?*

GC-R: You probably do not want the long list, so here is a short list of some of the key areas we are planning to address:

1. Developing further our website to allow for more interactive facilities like on-line voting.
2. Changing the procedures for election of officers from nominations to a single candidate/single office system that is ratified by the membership.
3. Facilitating the development of a successful meeting in 2008 in Edinburgh.

BS: *How about telling us something about Gina the person?*

GC-R: You will find that Edinburgh 2008 is likely to have a social event that involves dancing! Gina the person likes all sorts of dancing although I have to confess to a weakness for Latin music.

BS: *Thank you for your time, Gina!*

Opinions

'Opinions' is a new column of the bulletin. It is a forum open to all IASCL members wherein they are encouraged to express their views on various issues related to the field of child language development. For the first opinion, I approached Paul Vogt, a computational modeller to share his experience of attending his first child language conference. How successful is the communication between computer scientists and other researchers in child language acquisition? Here is one opinion:

Paul Vogt, *University of Edinburgh*

Relevance of computational modelling to language acquisition

Paul Vogt

University of Edinburgh

As a cognitive scientist whose main research methods are based on computer simulations of language evolution and language acquisition, I found the 10th International Congress for the Study of Child Language in Berlin in July 2005 very fruitful and informative, particularly for learning what sort of research is currently carried out in this exciting field. Especially the invited speakers and various sessions on Theory of Mind and usage-based approaches were outstanding.

A second reason for me to attend the conference was to receive feedback on my modelling work from researchers in the child language community. Although I did receive some very useful comments and suggestions, my general impression was that many child language researchers were not particularly interested

in computer simulations of language acquisition. Of course, there are computational studies that receive attention, as the invited talk of Jeff Elman revealed, however the attention was not as widespread as I had expected. This is unfortunate, since I believe computer models can contribute a great deal to our understanding of how children acquire language.

Contemporary computer models are successfully used to investigate various aspects of language acquisition. Although they do not necessarily provide conclusive proof as to how children acquire language, they do allow us to study the effect of particular hypotheses proposed by psychologists, linguists, and psycholinguists studying child language. For instance, in one of my studies, which I presented at the Berlin conference, I have compared the effects that different learning mechanisms using different types of non-verbal cues (pointing gestures, corrective feedback and the absence of these) can have on the acquisition of word meanings. These studies suggest that such non-verbal cues to infer a word's meaning are indeed required to learn the correct meanings of words. Furthermore, they suggest that these cues should not identify a word's meaning too precisely, because otherwise the lexicon of one language community would contain more ambiguities than is observed in real languages.

I can think of a number of reasons why contemporary computer models are not as widely recognised in the child language community. One of the reasons is because many computer modellers – perhaps including me – might lack the ability to present their models in a clear fashion to an audience without sufficient computational background. Another reason is that computer models are often built with huge simplifications that no longer seem to reflect the problem of language acquisition in a realistic way. Although to some extent this is true, at the same time this can be seen as an advantage.

In most scientific fields, for instance physics, it is very common to simplify conditions in order to find a theoretical foundation for some observation. This also occurs in many child language experiments, where conditions are regulated in such a way that the experimental setting is incomparable to the real situation in which a child acquires language. The advantage of simplifying is that one can study certain aspects of language acquisition in isolation and by setting up control experiments or varying parameters that would be either impossible or unethical with children. For example, computer models can ideally be used to study the internal dynamics of language acquisition, which we currently cannot do with human subjects. So, for instance, we can record precisely what words an individual acquired, what these words mean and how different meanings compete to become a word's meaning. This, thus, allows us to track precisely how certain conditions influence the process of language acquisition.

Concluding, I hope that future conferences on child language will recognize more affinity and communication between computer modellers and researchers who work with children. Although we are all far from understanding how languages are acquired, I believe we can bridge the gap in our knowledge by maintaining to

communicate at an interdisciplinary level. The IASCL conferences might be the right place for such pursuits in the future.

IASCL 2008: Update

Even though the 10th meeting of the IASCL has just finished, the 11th meeting is already in the planning. For the IASCL 2008 Organizing Committee, Professor Antonella Sorace has kindly prepared the following update:

Antonella Sorace, *University of Edinburgh*

The 11th IASCL meeting: Edinburgh 2008
Antonella Sorace
University of Edinburgh

The University of Edinburgh will be the host of the next IASCL conference, which will take place from Monday 28 July to Friday 1 August, 2008. These dates immediately precede the annual Edinburgh International Festival, which usually begins in the second week of August and lasts for three weeks. Participants in the conference will have the opportunity to extend their stay to have a taste of what is, by universal consensus, the largest and best arts festival in the world.

The theme of the conference will be: "Language, cognition, and experience in child language development: interdisciplinary perspectives on monolingual and bilingual language acquisition". The programme will consist of a combination of plenary talks, special-focus symposia, papers, and poster sessions. The local organizers are planning to introduce some changes to the structure of the conference, so as to guarantee both the high quality of the presentations and the multiplicity of themes in the programme. Four plenary speakers will be invited in early 2006. It is envisaged that the conference will cover a wide range of topics, including:

- Bilingual and trilingual language acquisition

- Child second language acquisition

- Construction Grammar approaches to child language development

- Convergences between language development and language change

- Grammatical development in SLI

- Language development in autistic children

- Language evolution perspectives on grammatical development

- Neuroimaging techniques for the study of language development and disorders

- New experimental approaches to very early language development

- Prosodic bootstrapping

- Qualitative and quantitative input factors in language development

- Social cognition in language development

- The development of grammatical processing in L1 acquisition

- The role of linguistic theory and explanation in understanding child language development.

- The syntax-pragmatics interface in child language development

All the conference sessions will be in the central area of the University of Edinburgh, within walking distance from the Castle and the city centre. The plenary sessions will be held at the McEwan Hall, a prestigious building used for graduation ceremonies. All parallel sessions will take place in the Appleton Tower, a large building located across the square from the McEwan Hall. Both the McEwan Hall and the Appleton Tower will be refurbished during 2006-07, and will therefore offer state-of-the-art facilities for the conference.

Edinburgh offers a wide range of accommodation possibilities, although the proximity of the conference dates to the Festival will make it essential to reserve rooms early. Efforts will be made to secure rooms at special rates in a range of centrally located hotels and B&Bs, including the university's student halls of residence.

We are pleased to report that the local organizing committee has grown to include new researchers in the School of Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences, the School of Informatics, and Queen Margaret University College. A professional conference agency will be hired to handle the logistics of the organization. A number of agencies have already offered their services. They will be interviewed in early 2006 and a decision will be reached before the spring, with a view to securing the best possible rates.

The local organizers intend to benefit from the feedback received after the Berlin 2005 conference, and will rise to the challenge of improving on what already was an outstanding event! We regard it as a priority to raise funds to offer a number of travel grants that will enable more graduate students to attend the conference, and we would like to maintain registration fees as low as the local budgeting constraints will allow. As we are about to enter a crucial planning and budgeting stage, we will fully liaise with the President of IASCL, who has planned a first visit to Edinburgh in January 2006. We will also consult with the national committee, which includes

distinguished scholars from all the major UK universities. In short, Edinburgh has the best possible set up for a prestigious conference, and we are confident that IASCL 2008 will meet the highest expectations.

NEWS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

NEW RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Yeled V'Yalda Multilingual Development and Education Research Institute

Directors: Isabelle Barriere, PhD and Garey V. Ellis, MD

For more details, see http://www.yeled.org.

NEW CORPORA

Professor Brian MacWhinney announced two additions to CHILDES on Info-CHILDES in August 2005:

- **The MOC corpus**

  This corpus provides the first and only longitudinal data of a deaf child exposed to cued speech. The child was observed between 18 and 24 months, during the first 6 months of cochlear implantation. The corpus was contributed by Ignacio Moreno-Torres and Santiago Torres Monreal of the University of Malaga and Rafael Santana of the University of Las Palmas.

- **van Oosten: Italian-Dutch bilingual children**

  This corpus is a picture description study of subject ellipsis in Italian-Dutch bilingual children from ages 5 to 13, contributed by Antje van Oosten of the University of Utrecht.

UPCOMING CONFERENCES, SEMINARS, AND WORKSHOPS

(Organized by date)

Latis colloquium of the University of Geneva: Early language development and disorders

January 26-28, 2006

Geneva, Switzerland

http://www.unige.ch/fapse/PSY/LATSIS

Workshop on on-line methods in children's language processing

March 21-22, 2006

New York, NY, USA

http://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/~efernand/childlang

Language acquisition and bilingualism: Consequences for a multilingual society

May 4-7, 2006

Toronto, Ontario, Canada

http://www.psych.yorku.ca/labconference

Workshop on acquisition and impairments of inflectional morphology

May 25-28, 2006

Budapest, Hungary

E-mail contact: wolfgang.dressler@univie.ac.at and dabitt@zas.gwz-berlin.de

International conference on development and learning: Dynamics of development and learning

May 31- June 3, 2006

Indiana University Bloomington, Indiana, USA

http://www.icdl06.org

The 27th Annual Symposium on Research in Child Language Disorders

June 1-3, 2006

Madison, Wisconsin, USA

http://www.srcld.org

Child Language Seminar

July 19 – 21, 2006

Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom

http://www.cls2006.visitnewcastlegateshead.com

BOOK NOTICES

Hegarty, M. (2005).

A feature-based syntax of functional categories: The structure, acquisition and specific impairment of functional systems.

Mouton de Gruyter.

Jaeger, J. J. (2005).

Kids' slips: What young children's slips of the tongue reveal about language development.

Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Kroll, J. F. and De Groot, A. M. B. (eds.) (2005).

Handbook of bilingualism: Psycholinguistic approaches.

Oxford University Press.

Menyuk, P. and Brisk, M.E. (2005).

Language development and education: Children with varying language experiences.

Palgrave Macmillan.

Minett, J.W. and Wang, W. S-Y. (2005).

Language acquisition, change and emergence: Essays in evolutionary linguistics.

City University of Hong Kong Press.

Unsworth, S. (2005).

Child L2, Adult L2, Child L1: Differences and Similarities.

Utrecht Institute of Linguistics/ LOT Netherlands Graduate School of Linguistics.

Yamamoto, K. (2005).

The acquisition of Japanese numeral classifiers: The case of Japanese children.

Mouton de Gruyter.

FROM THE EDITOR

The Child Language Bulletin is the newsletter of the International Association for the Study of Child Language. It is distributed free to all members of IASCL and it is published twice a year. The Bulletin is available on the IASCL web-page at http://iascl.talkbank.org and all members of the association will receive an e-mail message each time a new issue of the Bulletin is published. A hard copy of the Bulletin will only be sent to those members who ask for it by sending a message to the editor.

I encourage members to submit news and information that might be relevant to our research community. I would especially like to hear from doctoral students on new theses being completed. They are often a wonderful source of new data and new ideas that are not always easily accessible before publication.

Please do send any items to the address below. I am looking forward to your submissions!

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IASCL DONATION DRIVE

The IASCL is a worldwide organisation, which means that is aims to serve child language researchers in all countries of the world. Child language research is important everywhere, both from a theoretical perspective (cf. for instance the significance of cross-linguistic evidence) and from a more applied point of view (cf. for instance the need for good description to allow for the assessment of language learning problems). Unfortunately financial considerations are often a hindrance to the development of scientific disciplines in countries with severe economic problems. The IASCL has always been supportive of would-be IASCL members working in such countries by waiving membership fees for them.

IASCL funds are limited, though. In the past, donations from regular IASCL members have been very helpful in supporting colleagues from economically disadvantaged countries. In order to continue offering that support, your donations are very welcome indeed. Each donation, whatever the amount, will be acknowledged by a receipt signed by the IASCL Treasurer (useful perhaps for tax purposes). You may send donations in either pounds sterling or American dollars.

(1) Cheques in pounds sterling payable to IASCL can be sent to:

Dr Anna Theakston

IASCL Treasurer

University of Manchester

Department of Psychology

Oxford Road

Manchester M13 9PL

UK

Cash payments in pounds sterling can also be made by prior arrangements with Dr Theakston (theaksto@fs1.fse.man.ac.uk) at the above address.

(2) For American dollar amounts, please send your donations to:

Prof. Judith Becker Bryant

IASCL Assistant Treasurer

Department of Psychology, PCD 4118G

University of South Florida

Tampa, FL 33620-7200

U.S.A.

The IASCL as a whole will be sure to benefit from the more diversified nature of its membership as a result of your donations. Many thanks in advance!

Anna Theakston, IASCL Treasurer

theaksto@fs1.fse.man.ac.uk

MEMBERSHIP

Memberships normally EXPIRE at the beginning of each congress, and congress registration includes membership for the next three years. If you did not attend the Congress in Berlin in July 2005, you are invited to (re)join the IASCL for 2005-2008. In addition to the congresses, the IASCL produces the Child Language Bulletin twice a year, with directory information, book notices, interviews, a conference calendar, and other useful information. The Bulletin is included in the membership fee. Members will also receive a free copy of TiLAR5 and TiLAR6 as part of their membership. Members are also eligible for a substantial discount for the first four volumes of TiLAR, and for a reduced subscription fee to the following journals: Journal of Child Language, First Language, and the International Journal of Bilingualism.

Membership (US$75 or £50 for regular members; US$40 or £27 for students) is for three years, and expires on the first day of the next triennial Congress, to be held in the summer of 2008 in Edinburgh. If you wish to (re)join, please send in the following information together with your payment (on how to pay, see below):

Name:
Institutional affiliation (if any):
Complete mailing address, including institution (if applicable):
Phone/Fax:
Email/web page:
Major research interests (one or two lines max):
I would like to donate: Yes / No

Members in countries with nonconvertible currencies or currency transfer restrictions or other economic difficulties should request a waiver of the membership fee. Please write to the Treasurer (see below).

Donations for the support of colleagues and program in countries with currency and/or economic difficulties are welcomed. You may pay either in US dollars, or in pounds sterling.

- **Payment in dollars:**

  Please send your check payable to Judith Becker Bryant for US$75 (regular members) US$40 (student members*) and your information slip to:

  Prof. Judith Becker Bryant

  Department of Psychology, PCD 4118G

  University of South Florida

  Tampa, FL 33620-7200

  U.S.A.

- **Payment pounds sterling:**

  Membership fees are £50 (regular members) or £27 (student members*). Please contact Anna Theakston for payment information:

  Dr Anna Theakston

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We look forward to hearing from you!