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*Tegen de draad in*

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## *Tegen de draad in*

Koenraad Kuiper

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Looking back at how linguistics got to me it seems that there were a number of choices in a road where I turned, as the Dutch idiom says, *tegen de draad in*, 'against the thread'.

I arrived in New Zealand, through no fault of my own, when I was seven. This is a great age to arrive somewhere where the inhabitants speak a different language. You can pick up the new language in short order and become bilingual effortlessly. In New Zealand in the 1950s and as a seven-year-old immigrant you are not just a social curiosity to your classmates but a potential, and in the case of my brother and me an actual, source of amusement one way and another. He learned to walk inverted on his hands around a netball court, which kept him (and me) out of trouble some of the time. We learned that tickling an aggressor was an effective way of retaliation.

Being bilingual as a small person, you also note immediately the quirky nature of the new language. A young male immigrant we knew who told an amusing story to a family he was dining with got a response from the young lady next to him saying, 'You're pulling my leg.' His horrified response was, 'I didn't touch your leg.' Thus I developed an interest in idiomaticity, compositionality and the phrasal lexicon. Hot pies which were for sale in every dairy in Auckland provided linguistic amusement since the word /pis/ in Dutch is English *piss*. Much later my neighbour Adrian Tasman told me how he had changed his name by deed poll. He had been Adriaan Kok. Small boy humour. Such readings provided the kind of contradictoriness which lead to a warm appreciation of Spike Milligan. Dutch kiwi accents were also interesting with their inability, among other things, to produce dental fricatives. My linguistics consequently developed a somewhat detached view of languages and their vagaries.

By high school, following my paternal grandfather Koenraad's vocation as a biologist and director of the Rotterdam Zoo, I had determined to become a vet. In the upper sixth I had been to work with a rural veterinary practice and decided that, notwithstanding the profession's open-air environment and splendid beasts, it was boring: mastitis (treated with antibiotics), footrot (treated with bluestone and Stockholm tar), grass staggers and milk fever (both treated with bottles of intravenous fluid), putting down sick animals that were beyond help, autopsies in blood and bone works, which are amongst the worse smelling of human ventures. So where to go after physics, chemistry, maths, biology and compulsory English? What was left was English. So vocational aspirations changed to teaching secondary school English *tegen de draad in*.

VUW called and I took English and German, the latter being hugely assisted by my mother who was fluent in German (and English and French, and literate in Greek and Latin). In the second year (1964) a new course, English Language II, was offered by Frank Brosnahan. It was an introduction to American Structural

Linguistics. It fitted nicely with English on the one hand and all those high school sciences on the other. P. G. Morris, who was in charge of the future high school teachers at Vic, recommended it because he thought it would be a good course if you were going to teach English. So it turned out to be.

There was a turning point in Frank's course. During the syntax module there were weekly tree drawing exercises, otherwise known as immediate constituent analysis. Frank marked one of my answers as wrong. I remonstrated. Next week he said both his and my tree diagrams were right. All that high school physics suggested that if linguistics was a science then both answers could not be right. This sorted itself out at Honours where half of Frank's Modern Linguistics course was Hallidayan category scale grammar (which was just structural analysis with different labels) and the second half was Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures* and *Aspects of a Theory of Syntax*, which Frank called the old and new testaments. That was more like it.

Third year English Language III was with Harry Orsman on Old and Middle English, followed at Honours by papers in Old Icelandic and Old English with Nick Doane, Middle English with Ian Gordon, Chaucer with Ian Jamieson, Gothic with Harry Orsman, The History of Linguistics, and Modern Linguistics with Frank Brosnahan. (I was trying to get the set of Germanic languages and as much linguistics as possible. Third year German had already provided Old High German and Middle High German.) Those were the days. Seven papers for Honours with exhaustion at its end, examinations without water bottles but accompanied by handkerchiefs; handkerchiefs to assist with serious hay fever caused by the gorse and broom on the hills above the university. Why are the Vic colours green and yellow? The colours of hay fever.

And so to teacher training and a year high school teaching. During the year at the College of Education in Christchurch I had applied to grad. schools in Canada and the US. Other folks considered going to the old country but generative linguistics was North American. (Once more against the thread.) In the cloisters of the old University of Canterbury College there was an ad for TAs at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. I got in and got a TA and Alison (we were married while both teaching in Christchurch) was able to be gainfully employed in Canada because it was a Commonwealth country, which would not have been possible in the US. So, having successfully passed a Wassermann test, we settled in Vancouver for four years. Unlike in the old country, graduate programmes were a great preparation for university teaching: ten graduate courses, two five hour written papers followed by a two hour oral comprehensive examination, followed by writing a dissertation. Also SFU had more than thirty grad courses in linguistics.

At this point in the early '70s, generative semantics was "in" and the rumour was that Chomsky was "out" or at least going out. My supervisor, Richard De Armond, trained at Chicago with James D. McCawley. Consequently he knew what was "in". But I had the same intimations about generative semantics as I had had about structuralism. It proposed untestable, i.e. vacuous theories. I read *Logik der Forschung* by Karl Popper. I also read Wittgenstein's *Philosophische Untersuchungen*. Three years of German had to be good for something. Popper's book became a touchstone. As my colleague Kate Kearns said once, after a particularly messy meeting with humanities colleagues, 'At least we are answerable to the facts.' Wittgenstein's book suggested that, if you needed a priesthood to decode the gnostic utterances of your guru, you should turn to religion.

So compounding provided a clear way to test generative semantic theories to show that Chomskian lexicalist theories made better predictions than generative semantics in that empirical domain. Dick De Armond was very accommodating about this. We doodled tree diagrams on serviettes in the student caf., SFU's staff common room having been 'integrated' as part of the student protest movement.

The viva was interesting. The head of graduate studies wanted his friend, a structuralist, to be the external examiner. I suggested some alternative names he had not heard of including Ray Jackendoff and Joseph Emonds. Joe Emonds it was after the OK from Morris Halle had been sought. Two examiners didn't like the contrary views expressed in the dissertation but Joe Emonds did, which helped.

So what then? The logical thing would have been to stay in Vancouver where both of us had jobs or job offers. Instead we went back to Christchurch and I back to school teaching. They were a tough two years, and then a job came up at the University of Canterbury. (John Pride had by this stage done for the formal study of the English language in high schools and only oracy remained.) The high/low point, I guess, was saving one reprobate from getting knifed in my class. (Observation: 4<sup>th</sup> formers tend to turn pale when a classmate has a pocketknife ready to insert just under their jugular.) Some teaching also happened and maybe some learning. I do hope so.

When I joined the English Department at the University of Canterbury, comparative (Germanic) linguistics was still taught, but the Head of Department, John Garrett, thought that the linguistics thing was a coming discipline so Elizabeth Gordon, who preceded me by some years, and I taught the new thing, later joined by Derek Davy, Kate Kearns, Andrew Carstairs-McCarthy, Lyle Campbell and a succession of young syntacticians. Already present were Robin Barrett, who was a comparative linguist by training, and Tony Deverson, who became a lexicographer. Colleagues are great to have in a shared enterprise.

When there were five linguists and a sixth was in the offing, a divorce from English became possible. (My view is that you cannot teach a coherent linguistics curriculum without at least five continuing staff.) So we divorced and consequently were able to offer linguistics as a science subject for the BSc. There was a strong core set of courses teaching generative approaches to phonology, syntax, morphology and semantics, and sociolinguistics. Derek Davy, for one year, and then I, for six years headed the new department through its first years. I was fortunate that, some years before, I had been shoulder tapped (literally, by Frank Tay who stood behind me at morning tea doing the tapping) to be Dean of Arts. (This figure of speech, the literal use of a figurative expression, has still to get a decent technical term. Some Germans call it a *literalismus*.) Having been Dean makes being HoD easier, since you know where the side and back doors are.

The third conference of the Linguistic Society of New Zealand in Auckland was another turning point. For some years following on from Nick Doane's Old English course at Honours, I had been working on the way in which oral formulaic theory could be applied to vernacular oral traditions. Embryonically Robert Lord's book *Singer of Tales* was a theory about speech production under processing pressure, i.e. a psycholinguistic theory. Could that also explain what happened in other forms of talk? The data for this came about in a serendipitous way. In stage 1 at Canterbury Derek Davy taught a section on English style based on his book authored with David Crystal, but all the examples were British. So when Derek was not taking this section

of the course it seems a good idea to collect some vernacular kiwi examples. That was done by bugging conversations at the Canterbury Sale Yards. Here farmers gathered to chat while their livestock was being sold. Bugging was OK. There was no human ethics committee and there were no informed consent forms. A number of farmers were recorded but so were the auctioneers. It was clear that the auctioneers were heirs to an oral tradition. Douglas Haggo and I wrote a paper which I gave at the third NZ Linguistics conference and which appeared in *Language in Society*. At the same conference Andrew Pawley gave his and Frances Syder's paper on *Two puzzles for linguistic theory: nativelike selection and nativelike fluency*, probably the most widely cited paper in what in Continental Europe is termed phraseology. We were clearly onto the same set of phenomena, particularly the significance of phrasal vocabulary in facilitating speech production and producing socially idiomatic speech.

The task was then to see how this idea could be generalised. So the next several years' research was conducted on a variety of auction traditions in four countries and on sports commentators who were subject to the same range of processing exigencies; what my colleague Pim Levelt calls, 'doing psycholinguistics in the wild.' This led to the publication of a monograph and a number of case study papers subsequently revised and systematised in the book *Formulaic genres*. These studies are still on-going.

My connections with LingSoc grew as I organised two of its conferences and later took over the editorship to *Te Reo* from Scott Allan for eight issues. The University printer was very helpful in the annual printing process, as was the mailroom for its distribution. *Te Reo* was brought up to date from being two years behind, which had been much to the distress of institutional subscribers. An editorial board was appointed and *Te Reo* was brought on line through EBSCO. After Scott died, the 50<sup>th</sup> issue was devoted to the teaching of linguistics in his honour. He was a great linguistics teacher, a firm friend, and we co-operated on a first-year text which is still in print, now in its fourth edition and has passed its 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. The 50<sup>th</sup> issue of *Te Reo* was expanded with more contributors and became the first book on teaching linguistics.

The head office of LingSoc moved to the University of Canterbury and needed a secretary and treasurer. Its membership list was on the backs of a set of old library cards and its financial records were in a little book. All up, everything was in a cardboard box including some unbanked cheques which, fortunately, were not yet out of date. The membership records were gradually put onto a purpose-built database which allowed for the printing of annual dues notices and mailing addresses for *Te Reo*. The financial records were converted to an accounting package, which allowed for easier auditing and accounts management. Robyn Lewis was very helpful in this, she being an accounts person and I not.

There were also a number of subject conferences originally sponsored by NZ Vice Chancellors' Committee. Two important ones led to a concerted and coordinated approach to the study of New Zealand English which led in turn to the *NZ English Journal* being established. Another consisted of a survey of what was thought by the various linguistics programmes in NZ to be central to an undergraduate curriculum in linguistics. Whether there is now the agreement that there was then on what should be in such a curriculum is doubtful. After the 1984 revolution in NZ, the consequential gradual erosion of resources has involved increased competition for enrolments both internally within institutions and externally between institutions. There may be some worthwhile elements to such

competition but there are doubtless downsides and curriculum fragmentation is one. Unlike our colleagues in the humanities, I have not heard linguists making a virtue of this necessity.

LingSoc conferences continued to be a great opportunity to present material in a non-hostile environment. I had seen first hand what could and did happen in North America. Academic massacres are not pretty.

I also joined the American Folklore Society for a period to see how they handled oral traditions. They were kindly folk and great colleagues, many with senses of humour and proportion.

As teaching went, after Robin Barrett retired it became possible for me to teach generative syntax at undergraduate level, up to that point Robin having taught systemic functional grammar. Consequently Kate Kearns was able to teach more advanced syntax at third year. At Honours I taught a course on the generative lexicon.

The big first year classes were always a challenge. How do you make your subject interesting to first year students who know nothing about the formal side of language? Lots of experimentation ended up with on-line resources courtesy of teaching and learning colleagues and learning management systems, resulting in a pretty, sterling silver teaching medal in a nice wooden box for their designer. I look at it from time to time. The resources still exist on-line courtesy of Palgrave who published the associated textbook.

<https://www.macmillanihe.com/companion/Kuiper-And-Allan-An-Introduction-To-English-Language/student-zone/>

As well as the main direction of research on oral formulaic performance and its relationship to the phrasal lexicon, there were various excursions. On study leave in Amherst, MA, I worked with Barbara Partee on a paper on constraints on fictions leading to a paper co-authored with Vernon Small who is a chess international Master and who became a political journalist. (I take no responsibility for his change of direction.) At the height of the Death of the Author movement in literary theory I wanted to knock that notion about a bit and wrote a paper on the nature of satire supposing that something can only be a satire if the author intended it to be a satire and the reader actually figured that that was the actual author's actual intention. So the actual author might now be dead, but when he was alive, Jonathan Swift did actually intend his *Modest Proposal* to be a satire.

Study leaves at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Bard College in upstate New York, The University of Utrecht and the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies were wonderfully stimulating times. They each provided time to write. They also allowed our daughters to be part of other communities, go to school, go cross-country running in the grounds of the summer home of the Stuyvesants and the Vanderbilts on the Hudson River, take a bus tour of Europe. I am hugely grateful to my own institution and the host institutions for making these times-out (or timeouts) possible.

As far as my own central areas of research were concerned, however, it was hard to find like-minded folks. The only club that fitted the bill was the European Society of Phraseology (Europhras). They met and meet every two years in Europe and so I joined and went. They were, in part, a continuation of German taxonomic linguistics and lexicography. Many members knew an awful lot about items in the phrasal lexicon and various semantic systems for sorting them, but they were often

not theoretically inclined. Early conferences were almost entirely in German and no keynote speakers came from outside the Society. I was an unofficial translator for the lovely English lexicographer Tony Cowie at one of the conferences.

After some urging over a decade, the Society agreed to publish a yearbook and I became the first managing editor. Having edited *Te Reo* helped but in this case it also meant negotiating with a German publisher, setting up a new editorial board and persuading members of that board that it might be good to have some people from outside the Society on the Board. It was problematic getting double blind reviewing accepted. One senior member didn't know what it was, and another was concerned that such a refereeing process would mean (s)he wouldn't know if it was an important person's submission which therefore shouldn't be turned down. The Society's senior members did not believe that the copyright of the Yearbook rested with the publisher. After four years, the Yearbook was established. The resistance to foreign interference grew so the next managing editor was a Belgian and the following managing editor is now one of the senior (German-speaking) members of Europhras. Normal transmission has resumed. Venture into such a web at your peril.

The Europhras conferences, on the other hand, were often in interesting places and enjoyable. The last one I attended was in Kazan and if you think academics in 'the West' have it hard, try Kazan. No offices and no computers, a huge teaching load and a requirement to publish in Western academic journals. Kazan does have a lovely statue outside the nineteenth century neo-classical university building of young Lenin in traditional dress and with hair. He was a law student there who did not graduate. I asked students what they thought might have happened if he had actually graduated and their view was that things might have turned out better. The Bolsheviks in the neighbourhood shot Orthodox priests and Stalin turned the Orthodox monasteries into gulags. I guess the students might have had a point.

Editing is, it seems to me, an important service role, as is reviewing both of books and manuscripts. I've done a lot of both and learned a lot as a result.

Teaching has been central to my professional life, and publishing textbooks has been part of that. There is a general view of textbooks in the academy that they are of lesser worth. Those who can, do research (and write for prestigious journals); those who can't, write textbooks. You will find this view tacitly validated in the promotion criteria of your institution, funding agencies, and by your more outspoken colleagues. Thorstein Veblen would recognize this prejudice since textbooks are regarded as lesser because they are useful, and to write a good one you have to have dirtied your hands with the business of teaching.

The notion that textbooks are lesser is, of course, nonsense. They are different but at least as demanding as an academic paper to produce (if they are to be any good) and, on top of that, they have to meet standards of clarity, utility and readability which monographs and papers in prestigious journals sometimes don't. So I have a *tegen de draad in* view of textbook writing.

There has also been PhD and MA thesis supervision and examining. These are considerable responsibilities. Much can go wrong. Some of it can be the result of poor supervision, some just accidents of history. In one case all the informants of a great PhD project withdrew their permissions en masse. Bang goes years of work and a great project. Somewhere the recordings are still sitting but unusable.

Over the years I have gradually learned more about my academic antecedents. My paternal great grandfather and one of his sons were professors of Classics at the

University of Amsterdam. Koenraad Kuiper, the paternal great grandfather, sensibly married the daughter of a leading Dutch publisher.

Well, classics then, and linguistics now, are not that far apart.

Last but not least, the connection with literature from three undergraduate years of German and four of English remains in the form of four books of poetry published at ten-year intervals. Miriam Meyerhoff asked me what difference being a linguist makes when you are writing poetry. The answer is probably not much when you are writing but quite a lot when you are editing. Hearing sound patterns is easier if you know how they work. You might sense how a rhythm develops and how the syntax flows. Later you can analyse these linguistic traits and maybe sometimes improve them under analysis. Being bilingual has also helped with the (co-)translation of poems by a Dutch poet some of which have now been published and others are being supported by the Dutch Literary Fund.

Let's now suppose these are the last minutes of another Grand Designs programme and thus time for the homily.

So where has this academic work got to? It started with work on the lexicon, the unfashionable appendix (with some regularities to be noted). But just as the grammar has its idiosyncrasies so do dialects, idiolects and genrelects. At the first world tobacco auctioning championships in Danville, Virginia where I did field work all the contestants sang the blues when they were calling the bids, but each did the call in his own way. I guess as time has passed, my work has become more miniaturist. I have become a little suspicious of big generalisations although I hugely admire them when they turn up. I am suspicious of big data in part just because it is big. Careful study of idiosyncrasies means one gets to know them better and gets to appreciate them. Why, asks a small child learning a second language, do I catch a cold. Why catch? What kind of tree is a lavatory? There are answers to such questions but they don't satisfy, and don't take away from the fact that the answers to such questions are often inexplicable. As Edward Sapir put it, all grammars leak. The unholy bits of grammars are fascinating, but so are the holes.

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