Interview with Nick C. Ellis

Ryo Maie
Second Language Studies, Michigan State University
maieryo@msu.edu

Nick C. Ellis is Professor of Psychology and Linguistics and a Research Scientist in the English Language Institute at University of Michigan. His research interests include usage-based and cognitive linguistic approaches to second language acquisition, emergentism, and dynamic systems and complex systems approaches to language. His influence has been particularly prominent in advocating usage-based accounts of language acquisition and in explaining explicit and implicit learning/knowledge and their interface. He is the recipient of the Distinguished Scholarship and Service Award of 2019 American Association for Applied Linguistics.

Dr. Ellis kindly agreeed to this interview as he was giving a lecture on April 19th, 2019 for the Coffee and Cognition Reading Group.

Could you first tell us about how you became interested in SLA and usage-based approaches?

N: I did my PhD on developmental dyslexia. It was the time when cognitive psychology was beginning to prove itself by applying notions of information processing to investigate how reading involves recoding orthography into phonology or orthography into semantics. There were models of learning to read and skilled reading, and also of people who used to be able to read, who, as a result of strokes or other brain damage, became disabled readers. The study of

these acquired dyslexias showed fascinating examples of modularity and double dissociation. I wanted to know why otherwise intelligent children were having difficulty in reading, and to apply cognitive psychology to these individuals with developmental dyslexia. The results of my PhD led me to think that it made sense to think about reading as a skill that developed over considerable time on the task of reading – from interacting with many books and texts over years of experience. So, I was already a usage-based scholar then. When later, I became interested in learning a second language, it was therefore natural for me to adopt the same sort of approach, to think of learning a language using general cognitive mechanisms, that is, usage-based approaches.

Do you have any current projects or initiatives you are excited about?

N: The thing I'm most excited by at the moment is work with my PhD student, Wendy Guo, where we have been looking at L2 acquisition of morphology using elicited imitation tests. We are specifically focusing on statistical language learning and the nature of verbs carrying the morphology, to look for examples of things like the Aspect Hypothesis as it affects acquisition of verb tense. So, it's not just looking at the morpheme itself, but at the verb the morpheme is bound to, and which verbs show a particular morphological marking first. So far, we have done that in small populations, and I am now very excited to be working with Akira Murakami at the University of Birmingham, trying to replicate/ triangulate the findings Wendy and I got in two experiments with thirty or forty Chinese learners of ESL, but now using a learner corpus of a hundred and fifteen thousand learners or more! We will be talking about this at the upcoming SLRF here at MSU – it's going to be in the symposium on corpus-based approaches. Suffice it to say that I think it's really exciting now that the big data is starting to come in, where you can

look for phenomena across hundreds of thousands of learners from a wide variety of different language backgrounds, sometimes longitudinally. I am particularly happy that some of the findings that we found in the elicitation study are turning out to be robust in the corpus data. This type of triangulation research both strengthens our belief in the findings and broadens our investigations across disciplines.

Wow. I'm very much looking forward to hearing about it at the SLRF then.

N: Yes. The really exciting thing about this study is that it really makes you think, for example, of things like how you define "formulaicity". There are many ways to do it, on the basis of frequency, or mutual information, or…. There are many possible operational definitions. When you are faced with big datasets, they really make you think because you now have natural language going on in a wide variety of learners. You are not sitting and saying, "I've got to control my stimuli, my 36 stimuli!" So, it faces you with all sorts of questions which you haven't had to address before. It is hard, but also exciting, to be able to triangulate studies of twenty well-controlled learners with well-controlled stimuli across to hundreds of millions of words of learner language. That's quite good fun.

Thank you. I actually went to Wendy's talk at the last AAAL, on the elicited imitation study.[1] I thought that was just fantastic. Next, may we ask who the person is in academia you have been or were most inspired or influenced by?

[1] The annual conference of the American Association for Applied Linguistics in Atlanta, Georgia, on March 9-12th, 2019.

N: Oh, there are so many of them. You saw my list of important influences when I received the DSSA award at this last AAAL. So many of them, such good work. If I have to come up with one in particular though, it would have to be Brian MacWhinney. I think Brian has had a huge effect in the field, just astounding. I used to think Carnegie Mellon was the place to be – think of the people who were there: Herb Simon, Allan Newell, John Anderson, Jay McClelland, and then Brian. I learned later that many of them worked independently rather than together. But somehow if you have got enough people thinking on the edge, then the institution thinks on the edge too. Overall, so many people, so much innovation. They fundamentally changed to way we think about cognition.

Thank you. So many people. As with Brain MacWhinney, you are a proponent of cognitive linguistics model of language and language learning, which I think is something still new to the field of applied linguistics. What part of it do you think has a particularly novel contribution, something new, to our field?

N: 'Cognitive linguistics' and 'usage-based approaches' are two names for the same thing as far as I'm concerned. Cognitive linguistics emphasizes that every aspect of language is meaningful and has a functional intent. It is also an approach to language which allows us to put language alongside the rest of cognition. So, language essentially conjures meanings, and it is learned using the same cognitive mechanisms we use to learn everything else. From my perspective, cognitive linguistics and usage-based approaches are great because they bring 'learning' back into second language acquisition. For a long time before, probably due to a historical accident, learning had been denied from second language acquisition. After behaviorist approaches to language learning had had their day, learning was relegated to somewhere else. There was no

concern for learning in generative linguistics. But when I first went to a cognitive linguistics conference, there I saw people happy to talk about learning language. Nowadays, more and more people are adding learning into the pot, and it is going to be usage-based approaches / cognitive linguistics approaches which bring together language experience, meaningful social interaction, cognition, and emergence.

Thank you. At the end, could you tell us about some research gaps or future directions usage-based approaches should address?

N: There is so much to do. First of all, we need some decent learner corpora. I mean, wouldn't it be lovely to have some rich, dense, longitudinal corpora of L2 learner language? Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a large corpus of learners, tracking them from their earliest experiences of the language right the way through to proficiency in the language? We already have thin longitudinal SLA corpora like the ESF project of Klein and Perdue. That was a huge amount of work, and the study really broke new ground, but it's not dense enough. It influenced more recent studies by researchers such as Marianne Gulberg, Marzena Watorek, Rebekah Rast, and other 'learner varieties' researchers in Europe looking at the very early stages of language acquisition where they are trying to record everything. They are looking at acquisition of Polish from standardized lessons in Italian, Dutch, English, and French L1 speakers, but they're doing it for the first *fifteen hours* of exposure to Polish, not the first *one and half years* or more of exposure to Polish that we really need. We have lots of good models of dense corpora of L1 acquisition from researchers like Elena Lieven, Mike Tomasello, Heike Behrens, and Deb Roy, and now we need to extend that to L2A. That could be really exiting. I think the future lies in this type of big data project analyzing people's language exposure and their uptake, alongside parallel detailed

psycholinguistic experimentation. It is really exciting now that all sorts of disciplines are coming together to solve the problem of language acquisition; Natural Language Processing allowing us large analyses of language; Deep learning programs speed up things like automatic transcription or automatic language analysis; Computing power and storage becomes cheaper and cheaper. My first PhD experiment had 36 stimuli and 20 students. Now suddenly we're looking at potentially a learner's whole history of exposure and their productions over time. It seems quite dauting, but I believe it can come about through the language sciences with linguists, psychologists and computer scientists all coming together.