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## An interview with Jean Berko Gleason

by Barbora Skarabela



Jean Berko Gleason

Jean Berko Gleason is Professor Emerita in the Department of Psychology at Boston University. Jean's career has been impressively productive and diverse: she has published on child language development focusing on socialization and the role of input, the interaction between language and cognitive development, language loss and maintenance and related second language issues, as well as narrative strategies of people suffering from aphasia. Since her last interview in the IASCL bulletin in May 2000, many things have changed. She has now retired, although she remains active in her research. Her article with Richard Ely on apologies in young children's discourse will appear in the next volume of the *Journal of Child Language*. Sadly, two of her close colleagues and collaborators died -- Zita Réger with whom Jean closely collaborated on socialization and child-directed speech in the Gypsy community in Hungary and Harold Goodglass whom she worked with on language breakdown in patients suffering from aphasia. I've asked Jean to reflect on her past years in academia, on her colleagues, the current state of the field and its future.

**Barbora Skarabela:** *Jean, you are now retired, but you are as you have always been -- very active. How do you spend time at this stage? What has changed?*

**Jean Berko Gleason:** The main change in my life is that I no longer have to get to the university on a regular basis to teach classes in developmental psychology and language development. I'm glad not to have to grade exams and read undergraduate papers, but I am busy working on research, getting ready for the 7th edition of our textbook, writing articles, and all that. I've always loved technology—fast cars, computers, gadgets of all sorts, and I've now had time to get into digital photography. Freedom from the course schedule made it possible for me and my husband to sail along the Mediterranean coast of Turkey in March and see the total eclipse of the sun, and I've had more time to spend at our country house on a lake in Maine, where we have been observing a pair of loons and their newly hatched chicks. So there's more time for non-academic pursuits, but I'm not spending a lot of time in the rocking chair the university gave me when I retired.

*Your close colleague, Zita Réger, has recently passed away. How would you describe your collaboration? How would you describe Zita? What sparked your original interest in the work on child-directed speech in Romani?*

Luck and coincidence are part of this story... I made the first of many trips to Hungary in 1981 on an exchange program that had just been set up between the American Council of Learned Societies and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. My trip came about as a result of a conversation I had in Washington with G. Richard Tucker, who was president of the Center for Applied Linguistics. He told me that the Hungarians were hoping the exchange would bring an American linguist who could collaborate with a member of their Linguistics Institute who was investigating language development in Gypsy kids. This person was Zita Réger. Oddly enough, I had written my undergraduate honours thesis at Radcliffe (in history and literature) on Gypsies. In addition, both of my parents were born in Transylvania, so I had multiple reasons to be interested in going to Hungary. After I told Dick Tucker all this he set the exchange in motion.

Hungary was behind the Iron Curtain in 1981, and very isolated, but Zita and the other members of the Institute were intensely intellectual individuals, amazingly current in their knowledge. Zita was very warm and really loved the families she studied—the children called her 'Zita Néni', Aunt Zita. She was also practically alone in her work, which countered the prevailing view in Hungary that Gypsy children suffered from cognitive and linguistic deficits and that Gypsy mothers didn't even speak to their children. I had already done a lot of research on child directed speech in English, so I suggested we collect some Romani CDS data. We had a delightful time visiting the homes of Gypsies in little towns in eastern Hungary, and we were able to document a specialized CDS register in Romani, as well as complex, creative language from the children. Zita's work is still helping to bring about a change in how the Romani culture is understood in Hungary, and I'm grateful that I had the chance to collaborate with her. I spoke at the memorial symposium in her honour in Budapest in 2002, and just recently gave a paper on her intellectual legacy at the annual meeting of the Gypsy Lore Society.

*You have written on many topics, including work conducted in collaboration with Harold Goodglass on language breakdown in aphasic patients. Do you find this work complementary to the research on child language development? If so, in what sense?*

Yes, I think that looking at language loss helps us to understand language acquisition. In the past, many scholars thought that these two processes were mirror images of one another, but we know that that isn't the case—for instance a severely aphasic adult patient who can only produce one-word utterances is not likely saying “Mommy” and “kitty”, and a patient with agrammatism may actually be better at producing the syllabic –iz form of the plural than the earlier-acquired –z or –s endings. But the very fact that agrammatism exists, that a patient can lose the ability to produce grammatical affixes while preserving the lexical forms, provides evidence that the linguistic units we identify have a psychological reality. I also think that linguistic theory has to be able to account for all of the varieties of language we encounter, including aphasic language. Aphasia gives us a lot to think about in our efforts to explain how language is comprehended, stored, accessed, retrieved, and produced. Harold Goodglass was a seminal thinker in linguistic aphasiology. He was a wonderful colleague who really got us thinking about what goes on in the process of naming. We published our first paper together in 1960, on agrammatism and English inflectional morphology, and we continued to have weekly research meetings, ultimately around his dining room table, until his death in 2002.

*Your research has included many different areas relating to language and cognitive development. Your range of interests is truly eclectic. In that sense, it is a bit surprising not to find articles on atypical language development. What is your view on the study of atypical language development? To what extent and in what sense do you find it important for the study of typical language development?*

I think I just answered most of this question in my comments about aphasia. I do think that it is important to study atypical language development, and that we need to understand a lot more about aspects of language that are not traditionally classed as ‘linguistic’ in doing this—the role of affect, for instance, in children’s language acquisition, their attachment to other people and their interest in what others might be saying, as well as cognitive capacities like working memory. Of course I think it is also important to study atypical language development so that we can find better ways to help children.

*Your early work on the acquisition of inflectional morphology is interpreted as evidence for children’s ability to generalize linguistic constructions and to apply rules. By some, this has been used as evidence for a subtle language-specific mechanism driving children’s acquisition. For others, the results are compatible with the workings of more general cognitive processes associated with children’s ability to recognize patterns and their sensitivity to input. Where do you stand?*

In my original paper in 1958 I talked about children knowing the ‘rules’ for how to make plurals, past tenses, and so on. At that time, we were not thinking about a controversy between ‘rules’ folks and ‘analogies’

proponents and I'm not sure that we have good evidence either way now. In other words, we can describe what children do, but we are at odds with one another in trying to explain how they do it. Are children making new plurals analogically, based on similar words they already know, or are they operating at a higher level of abstraction? And is there a separate language-making faculty that underlies these rules or analogies?

I am inclined toward a parsimonious view that sees linguistic behaviour as similar to other behaviour that relies in part on a general cognitive capacity to recognize patterns in input and to generalize. That doesn't mean that a part of our brain isn't, at some point, dedicated to language: Babies build their brains, strengthening some connections and pruning others out, based on their experience. The fact that babies can learn to talk and my cat Wolfie can't means that experience isn't everything—humans have some genetic capacity to acquire language that cats do not. This is also true of playing the piano and dancing the csardas. But when people talk about language 'mechanisms' or 'hard wiring' I think we need to remember that these are metaphors, and the human brain may not function like the machines they are based on.

*Let's stay in the late 50's and early 60's – you were part of the Harvard-MIT community. Can you describe the atmosphere of that time and place? The results of your experiment were excitedly welcomed by linguists like Chomsky and Lenneberg. Did you ever discuss your work and what it might mean with them?*

I worked closely with Roger Brown at Harvard and MIT during that period, first as a graduate student getting a joint PhD in linguistics and social psychology (Roger was a social psychologist), and then at MIT as a postdoc with Roger. It was, of course, the beginning of the cognitive revolution and there certainly was excitement in the air. People were talking about thinking. The group around Roger was a brilliant, funny, creative bunch, and many are now very distinguished scholars. But most of them came after I did, since I was his first doctoral student. Even Eric Lenneberg, who was older than I was, got his degree later. I don't recall speaking with either Noam Chomsky or Eric Lenneberg about my experiment. The first person I remember who was really excited about it was Uriel Weinreich, the editor of the journal *Word*, whom I met at an aphasia seminar at the Boston VA Hospital in the summer of 1958. He took a copy of the study from me and published it almost immediately, exactly as I had written it. It seems pretty primitive when I think about it now, but my paper was typed on a typewriter, with carbon copies, and I had to draw my own wugs. Luckily, I have a wug-making capacity.

*Since the early 80's your research has shifted from children's early 'creativity' as sign of abstract grammar to the role and importance of socialization in child language development. What motivated the shift?*

The shift in my interests actually began in the 1970s with a linguistic question: I wanted to know when children first acquired various registers, for instance when they began to use 'baby talk' to talk to babies. So I began to visit people's homes to record children speaking to a variety of people. While doing this, I was quite amazed to see how much parents seemed to tailor their language to children. I reported these initial observations at the LSA summer meeting in 1972 in a paper called 'Code switching in children's language'. At that LSA meeting

Charles Ferguson told me that there was someone in the Netherlands I had to meet because she was also studying parental speech, and her name was Catherine Snow. There also seemed to be differences between mothers and fathers in their CDS. This was irresistible. I gave a paper at the Georgetown Roundtable in 1975 called 'Fathers and other strangers: Men's speech to young children'. In subsequent research we found that parents were using language to socialize their children, not just in the use of language ("Say 'thank you'"), but in other respects as well, some obvious (like "Don't kick the kitty") and some subtle, like the use of more diminutives to girls than to boys. So my interests turned to language and socialization, which led to research on routines, the lexicon, politeness, gender differences, diminutives, prohibitives, apologies, which my many colleagues and I found totally fascinating.

*How has your view of child language development changed since your early work in the late 50's? What do you think are the directions this field will take in the future? What do you think about the current trend to look for answers to how language works in the brain?*

In my early work I was interested in psycholinguistic questions related to how children come to have an internalized representation of language, and I saw them as solving an intellectual puzzle in acquiring language. I now see language acquisition as a much broader and interactive phenomenon, and I'm interested not just in the kids, but in speech to children as part of the interactive system. And I'm also interested in the role of language in children's psychological development, the acquisition of their gender roles, cognitive style, and ways of dealing with the world. As for the future of the field, I think language development will be covered at different levels in several disciplines. There is very exciting brain research going on right now—for instance the discovery of mirror neurons provides a new way of interpreting early imitative behaviour. Ultimately, we will understand how the brain works, and aspects of language will be included as a part of developmental neuropsychology. But that is just one level of investigation, and I am sure we will still need to have experimental and observational research on actual children.

*Finally, what advice do you have for newcomers to the field, many of whom aspire to become someone like you -- a person who has set the course of the field?*

Well, thank you for those kind words. Just about everything I have ever done has been in collaboration with other people. My colleagues and students have also been great friends and we've had a really rewarding time doing research together. I recommend this model—even tenure committees now understand that single authored papers are no longer the norm. My advice to newcomers is to find what interests and excites you, and to do that with energy and enthusiasm. You don't know what life will bring, so at least you should know that you followed your heart.

*Thank you for the interview.*

## UPDATE ON IASCL 2008: INVITED SPEAKERS

The Organizing Committee are delighted to announce the following plenary speakers for the IASCL 2008 Conference in Edinburgh: Marc Hauser of Harvard University, Rachel Mayberry of the University of California, San Diego, Andrew Meltzoff of the University of Washington, and Núria Sebastián-Gallés of the University of Barcelona.

**Dr. Hauser** is Harvard College Professor of Psychology, Organismic and Evolutionary Biology, and Biological Anthropology. His research interests focus on evolutionary and developmental foundations of the human mind, including work on learning mechanisms underlying language acquisition and other mental capacities as explored in populations of human and non-human primates.

**Dr. Mayberry** is Associate Professor in the department of Linguistics at the University of California, San Diego. Her primary research interests include critical period effects on language development and processing, and issues related to first and second language acquisition of both spoken and sign languages. She is also interested in the role of gesture in language communication.

**Dr. Meltzoff** is Professor at the department of Psychology at the Institute for Learning and Brain Sciences at the University of Washington. His research topics include the development of infants' understanding of other people, with particular focus on memory, imitation, and nonverbal social cognition.

**Dr. Sebastián-Gallés** is Professor of Psychology at the University of Barcelona. She has conducted research on speech perception and production, bilingualism and language development in infants.

## IASCL 2011 will take place in Montreal

We are very pleased to announce that the venue for the IASCL meeting in 2011 will be Montreal, Canada. The planned location will be at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM), located in the city's urban core and the tentative dates are from Monday, July 18th to Sunday, July 24th, 2011. The downtown location allows for an easy access to the conference via public transportation and the dates were chosen according to the long tradition of IASCL conference holding in mid-July. In addition, at this time of the year, Montreal is home to a number of vibrant festivals (Just for Laughs comedy festival, International Fireworks competition, Nights of Africa music festival, to name a few), all of which can be explored by the conference participants.



Montreal

### **Why Montreal for 2011?**

Montreal is an attractive venue for the IASCL meeting in 2011. There are four universities (UQAM, McGill, Concordia and Université de Montréal) in this Canadian city, all with vibrant research in child language cutting across the disciplines of cognitive science. Researchers from several university departments are interested in various aspects of child language and have strong links to other research centers in the city and abroad. The Cognitive Science Institute, the Center for Research on Language, Mind and Brain-CRLMB and the Center for the Study of Learning and Performance (linking all four universities) are well-known research centers focusing on language and cognitive science.

Over the past years, there have been sixteen international annual conferences held at UQAM (1990-2005): TENNET (Theoretical and Experimental Neuropsychology) with a strong linguistic component. In addition, there are several national and international conferences in all areas of cognitive science held each year in Montreal (this year, Canadian Association of Applied Linguistics is hosting their annual conference in Montreal, ACFAS conference (Association francophone pour le savoir), with an important linguistic section was hosted at McGill University in 2006 and at UQAM in 2004, and Generative Approaches to Language Acquisition North America (GALANA 2) Conference is to take place at McGill University as well. In addition, the 2003 Summer School on Categorization in Cognitive Science was held at UQAM. All Montreal universities are quite familiar with and expert at hosting quite successful international conferences.

Montreal is a most pleasant town at this time of the year. It is also one of the least expensive places in North America. The city has a rich cultural heritage with French, English and other ethnic roots, making it one of the most popular destinations in North America.

### **Organizing Committee (partial list)**

#### **Henri Cohen, Ph.D. (Concordia, 1981).**

Professor, Department of Psychology; Cognitive Neuroscience Center; UQAM. Editor, *Journal of Neurolinguistics*; Associate Editor, *Brain and Cognition*; Section editor (clinical linguistics and phonetics) *Compass*.

Organization of 12 international meetings in the past ten years; special journal issues; books; numerous journal articles; funded research.

From UQAM: Henri Cohen, Claire Lefebvre, Lucie Ménard, Rushen Shi. In addition, the Cognitive Science Institute at UQAM will be a sponsor of the event.

From UK (Birbeck College): Mayada Elsabbagh.

From McGill: Shari Baum.

From Université Descartes (Paris V): Maya Hickmann, Monique Plaza.

In addition, colleagues in Israel, US and Canada (University of Toronto, University of British Columbia) have been contacted to help assist with aspects of the conference. Other colleagues in the UK and Europe are being contacted as well.

More information about general and specific themes, proposed and invited symposia, invited speakers, instructions for poster submissions and about the conference venue will be posted.

## **NEWS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS**

### **UPCOMING CONFERENCES, SEMINARS, AND WORKSHOPS**

(Organized by date)

**What: Generative Approaches to Language Acquisition North America (GALANA)**

**When:** August 17 - 19

**Where:** Montreal, Quebec, Canada

**Details:** <http://www.arts.mcgill.ca/linguistics/events/conferences/galana/>



**What: The Romance Turn**

*When:* September 7-9

*Where:* Utrecht, Netherlands

*Details:* <http://www.let.uu.nl/romanceturn>

**What: Making New Connections 2**

*When:* September 13-4

*Where:* London, UK

*Details:* <http://www.city.ac.uk/makingnewconnections>

**What: Emergence and Evolution of Linguistic Communication (EELC)**

*When:* September 30-October 1

*Where:* Rome, Italy

*Details:* <http://www.bdc.brain.riken.go.jp/eelc2006>

**What: Session on Lexical Bootstrapping at the Second International Conference of the German Cognitive Linguistics Association**

*When:* October 5-7

*Where:* Munich, Germany

*Details:* <http://www.kognitive-sprachforschung.lmu.de/event/events.html>

**What: 5th International Conference on the Mental Lexicon**

*When:* October 11-13

*Where:* Montreal, Quebec, Canada

*Details:* <http://www.mental-lexicon.mcgill.ca>

**What: Lisbon Workshop on the Acquisition of Functional Elements**

*When:* October 30-31

*Where:* Lisbon, Portugal

*Details:* <http://linguistlist.org/callconf/browse-conf-action.cfm?ConfID=32749>

**What: Boston University Conference on Language Development**

*When:* November 3-5

*Where:* Boston, Massachusetts, USA

*Details:* <http://www.bu.edu/linguistics/APPLIED/BUCLD/>

**What: Experimental Methods in Language Acquisition Research (EMLAR III)**

*When:* November 7-9

*Where:* Utrecht, Netherlands

*Details:* <http://www.let.uu.nl/~Frans.Adriaans/personal/emlar06.html>

## **CALLS FOR PAPERS**

*What:* **2007 Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development**

*Call deadline:* July 28 (posters), August 4 (all other formats), 2006

*When:* March 29 – April 1, 2007

*Where:* Boston, Massachusetts, USA

*Details:* <http://www.srcd.org/submissions2007>

*What:* **The Eighth Tokyo Conference on Psycholinguistics (TCP2007)**

*Call deadline:* November 30, 2006

*When:* March 16-17, 2007

*Where:* Tokyo, Japan

*Details:* <http://www.otsu.icl.keio.ac.jp/tcp/>

*What:* **Children's Cultures: Universality and Diversity**

*Call deadline:* September 30, 2006

*When:* March 15 -17, 2007

*Where:* Nantes, France

*Details:* <http://linguistlist.org/callconf/browse-conf-action.cfm?ConfID=32910>

## **BOOK ANNOUNCEMENT**

**Un JE en construction: Genèse de l'auto-désignationchez le jeune enfant**

Aliyah Morgenstern

Paris, Ophrys, 2006 ([www.ophrys.fr](http://www.ophrys.fr))

ISBN: 2-7080-1139-1

Children do not learn to say "I" overnight. From the day they are born until about their third birthday, they gradually get to grips with this little pronoun which lies at the heart of linguistic and cognitive development. Aliyah Morgenstern's book 'Un JE en construction (constructing I)' tells the story of the child's journey towards the mastery of first person pronoun within the general context of language development.

À la croisée de la linguistique de l'énonciation et de l'acquisition du langage, cette étude a pour objectif d'élaborer des hypothèses sur le cheminement de l'enfant apprenti-énonciateur, à partir d'une analyse de la genèse de l'auto-désignation.

Il s'agit bien sûr d'observer et d'analyser le processus de mise en place du marqueur de première personne JE, mais aussi de le resituer au sein du développement général du langage de l'enfant et de le corrélérer à d'autres phénomènes. L'étude d'Un JE en construction est tout simplement un lieu pour observer l'émergence des facultés énonciatives.

On montre que la maîtrise du pronom sujet de première personne passe par une disjonction entre les différentes valeurs que peut prendre l'auto-désignation, notamment le marquage du sujet grammatical, et celui de sujet énonciateur. À la fin du processus, l'enfant conjoindra toutes ces dimensions dans un marqueur unique, JE, montrant qu'il s'est approprié la parole de l'autre et construit sa place dans la coénonciation.

### **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 it 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](mailto: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](mailto: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:

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We look forward to hearing from you!