Dr Graeme Trousdale and Dr Pavel Iosad

Linguistics for everyone

This is Forward Thinking, I'm Isabella Melking.

Linguistics is the scientific study of language and its structure, it looks at the nature of language and communication – which is integral to being human. So why don't more people know about it?

Here to discuss are Dr Graeme Trousdale and Dr Pavel Iosad, both lecturers in Linguistics and English Language at the University of Edinburgh.

Both are interested in language change and Graeme's research also centres on grammar and sentence structure, whilst Pavel's interests lie with historical linguistics and phonology (which is the organisation of sounds in languages).

Both Pavel and Graeme are keen supporters of the Linguistics Olympiad, which is a competition, where students of all ages and abilities can compete to solve linguistic data problems. They are also working on introducing Linguistics as a school subject.

Pavel:
Hello, I'm Pavel Iosad. I'm a Lecturer here in the Department of Linguistics and English Language.

Graeme:
And I'm Graeme Trousdale, I'm a colleague of Pavel's in the same department.

So we're going to talk about Linguistics I suppose partly in the wider public but also particularly in how it's important for schools.

Pavel:
Yeah, I mean obviously this is, as we know, this is a subject that people don't really have at school: it's not a school subject.

Graeme:
Mm.

Pavel:
And you, you know, you would expect people to get bits and pieces in English or in Modern Languages but that's not really happening.

Graeme:
No.

Pavel:
And we'd probably like to do something about it.

Graeme:
Yeah. I mean one of the things that strikes me is that people, when we've talked about

this before, people are really interested in… in language generally. They like to know about things like, you know, where do words come from and why do people from this area seem to speak so badly and things like that…

Pavel:
[Laughs]

Graeme:
… which of course leads on to these huge misconceptions that people have.

Pavel:
But then on the other hand, it is really tied in with this idea that lots and lots and lots of people have, that language is mostly really just about words…

Graeme:
Mmm.

Pavel:
… and also that there is a, kind of, right and wrong kind of language. And of course this is a part of linguistics, but it's quite a small part of linguistics and in fact, there are huge and huge and huge swathes of the field that are not about that at all…

Graeme:
Mmm.

Pavel:
… and there's this mismatch between what we do and what people think linguistics is.

Graeme:
Yeah… it's quite hard to think about ways of kind of overcoming that, I suppose.

One of the things that, you know, we've both been involved in is the Linguistics Olympiad, which is terrific, but it's sort of the combination of trying to get things that are in the school system, but also trying to, more generally, make the public aware of, you know, the right way of thinking about language, correcting the kind of misconceptions that people have.

Pavel:
Yeah, I think in many ways it's the label, it's not very familiar and in many ways it's just sort of slightly prohibitive in the sense that it's badged as this quite arcane field.

Graeme:
Uhuh.

Pavel:
And for a lot people when you say you're a linguist, then the expectation is that you're someone who knows languages and is a translator and a lot of us are like that, a lot of us do know languages.

Graeme:

Yeah.

Pavel:

But that's not really what linguistics is, and, kind of, bridging that gap between the field and the stuff that, actually, people know about and want to know about that is within the field, that's the challenge that we have.

Graeme:

Yeah. And I think starting at school is a pretty good way of doing it. So…. I do kind of want to plug the Linguistics Olympiad – that's alright, isn't it? We can do that.

Pavel:

Yes [laughs]!

Graeme:

For people who don't know anything about it, there's a competition that you can enter if you are at school, which is basically puzzles - problem solving - but applied to languages.

Pavel:

And you don't have to know the languages themselves to take part.

Graeme:

Exactly, in fact, in some cases we'd be very surprised if you knew the languages because they are so… unfamiliar, shall we say.

Pavel:

But in yeah… But also in other cases knowing the language might actually hurt you because you're trying to rely on your knowledge rather than the logic of the puzzle.

Graeme:

Mmm, mmm, exactly. So if anybody'd interested in finding out more about UKLO the website is www.uklo.org. There's loads of information there about how to sign up, how to get your school involved, if you're a teacher what kind of things you need to do. It's completely free for schools as well, that's an important thing to know as well, it's not going to cost the school anything to take part even if they do, you know, the entrants do really, really well and end up representing the UK in the international competition. It's entirely free of cost to the schools.

And I mean, you are… you should admit this!

Pavel:

[Giggles]

Graeme:

I think you are an ex International Linguistics Olympiad Champion yourself!

Pavel:

Uh, yeah, almost.

Graeme:

Yeah, well you are. I mean okay I know it was before the IOL officially started but you are…

Pavel:

But [to] pick up on the topic of the IOL, which is the International Linguistics Olympiad which has just finished, this year's instalment has just finished in Prague this year. And contrary to some of the stereotypes you sometimes get about British not being good linguists, in fact the UK team did exceptionally well.

Graeme:

They did, and one the people was the first person ever to get 4 gold medals in consecutive years which has never been done before. And that's one of the really exciting things about UKLO compared to other countries, one of the things that the UK is doing is getting children interested in linguistics from a very young age. So we have primary school pupils participation which I think is great, I mean the more… the more we can get people when they're really, really young, the better.

Pavel:

Then another way of doing this, and this is circling back to this idea that we should maybe introduce the material, if not the name, quite early on, is, you know, we should probably talk about the fact that there is not a lot of linguistics material in schools, even in subjects where you'd expect it to be and I think this is a huge missed opportunity because this stuff is really, really teachable, in the sense that it's quite easy to teach. It's something that you don't need any sort of special equipment or even any sort of special knowledge, it's just a matter of curiosity and wanting to learn and wanting to reason about… things you know about! We all know a language…

Graeme:

Yeah.

Pavel:

…at least one, and we can reason about it but we just don't have the skills, in the sense that we're not taught the skills but it's actually something you can very easily do and we think we should be doing it.

Graeme:

And I think that's one of the things about… about the misconceptions, is that people think it's all about the labels, you know, that you should be able to label this kind of clause as belonging to this category or this word class or whatever. And I'm not saying that that's not important but I mean one of the things that I think about grammar is that it's something to explored, it's something to be discussed, it's not something that's sort of out there as a set of rules to learn, it's a thing to debate about and to ask well, you know are we right in thinking about language in the way that we have. Obviously that's at a bit more than an advanced level but the basic idea that you have been talking about there, the idea that this is about skills and learning skills to think about how to solve puzzles is a massively transferrable skill as well. I mean everybody wants people who are good at

dealing with data and thinking about data and analysing it and that's what linguistics is kind of about, right?

Pavel:
It is. That's the feedback that I get from you know some of my own teaching on the undergraduate programme, you know, I teach this course which is called phonological theory which is just about as dry as it sounds but a lot of it is also analysing data from unfamiliar languages but the feedback from the students is very very consistently that they really like that component and they feel that it's a really transferrable skill although what you've learned is why does an 'e' before an 'r' in Latin behave differently from an 'i' before an 'r' in Latin which is the kind of thing I spend my nights thinking about.

Graeme:
[Laughs loudly]

Pavel:
[Laughs] Uhm, also I'm just thinking back to my own school education where [linguistics] was a bigger component than it is I think in many of the UK systems and one of the really, really good things that I really liked about my teaching in my Russian language lessons was that there is also grammar and a way of thinking about language but the way I was taught we were indeed given the tools and we were asking questions why is it the case that this grammatical fact is treated in this particular way, how could we justify it and could we justify some sort of alternative analysis and to do that you just need to know language, which you do, and to have the reasoning skills which you can acquire.

Graeme:
Yeah, I think that's one of the things that has happened with our first year course as well since we've introduced this… kind of language analysis UKLO style puzzle into the LEL 1A course. And [it] looks like students have enjoyed it, at least from some of the feedback we've been getting.

Pavel:
But at schools you know, this is also something that, you know, you really can introduce it very early on, again, without giving it the prohibitive name 'linguistics'.

Graeme:
Mmm.

Pavel:
But children are, as we know, are very, very sensitive to all sorts of linguistic facts, and we know that. In fact, you know, as research from Scottish communities such as Buckie has shown, people are sensitive to language variation from a very, very early age, so they notice things. And you know… language is all around us and language varieties are all around us, some of us speak some local variety that's just different from this other language, we are all surrounded by place names that might come from a different language or a different variety of, you know, English. And this is all there, it's all out there

for the children to think about and it's all out there for us to treat it as a way of teaching about language and not just think that language is about commas and you know..

Graeme:
[Giggles]

Pavel:
When is an imperative not an imperative?

Graeme:
Yeah, I've been trying to think about why it is that the term linguistics tends to put people off, and there's always this sort of like "oh is it a science, is it really science-y?" as if that's a bad thing…

Pavel:
[Laughs]

Graeme:
[Giggles] Science is great! And you know the thing that I love about linguistics is that it's that perfect combination, for me, of humanities and science. It's got everything really. I don't know if you think the same way or? [Laughs]

Pavel:
No, I think I found… I remember again in my school, the way we were taught not just Russian but also foreign languages, and in many cases or for most people that was English. And I remember speaking to my teacher, and this is Russia, so everyone is streamed by subject, so there was this kind of more maths-y class and the more arts-y class.

Graeme:
Mmm

Pavel:
And what she was saying was that the maths-y class is actually better at English because they can see the logic and they think through it in many ways.

Graeme:
Mmm.

Pavel:
And you know that's really bad, it's the kind of segregations we don't want.

Graeme:
Yeah.

Pavel:
But on the other hand I think it does help to have an approach that recognises that there is a structure to language.

Graeme:

Mmm.

Pavel:

And we can learn all sorts of things, that are not just very science-y things but actually, you know, things about how the human brain works

Graeme:

Mmm.

Pavel:

And, if you want, things about the human condition by studying this structure in a very, very rigorous way.

Graeme:

Mmm. And it's so fascinating I think just to spend some time reflecting on the fact that we can talk to each other. You know what we are doing now, the actual process that we are engaged in now… is pretty amazing!

Pavel:

[Laughs]

Graeme:

You know, and it makes us so different from other species. You know the specific things about human language are just so intriguing and obviously that takes us beyond a kind of analysis of a given language and that's the other thing that I think I would like… I hope that people get more intrigued by and want to find out more about the bigger questions that thinking about language forces you to address, you know "what makes us human?," those kinds of things are also there in thinking about communication and so on.

Pavel:

Yeah.

Graeme:

Okay, well this has been really interesting… to talk [laughs].

Pavel:

[Laughs] yes, I think so!

Graeme:

I know we do it quite a lot but it has been really interesting to talk about this and thanks very much, it's been really good to be part of this Forward Thinking podcast.

If you want to know more about the topics discussed in this podcast, follow the links on the Forward Thinking blog at forwardthinking.ppls.ed.ac.uk

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