

Interview with Ulla Connor

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Introduction

I met Prof. Ulla Connor in the summer of 2006. However, Prof. Connor's work had been a common point of reference during my career. Probably, most scholars dealing with teaching English, writing, contrastive rhetoric, or similar subjects, have already known her work for several decades and consider it as a benchmark in those fields. I think she is one of the most prestigious and influential applied linguists in the last turn of the century.

As I said earlier, I met her two years ago when I was accepted at ICIC,¹ the center she runs, as a visiting scholar. My purpose was to meet her and learn as much as possible from her and her research team. The fact is that I got more than expected. I found a great working atmosphere led by Prof. Connor who, like many alpha-rated scholars, is more accessible than one might think beforehand. Apart from having very good feedback and help from her and the members of her team (especially Dr. Bill Rozycki and Alicia Añino), I had the unbelievable chance of working with them. We started a close collaboration on a new topic for all of us as it is health communication. This issue has taken us working together for two years so far, and I am sure this fact has placed the grounds for future and continuous academic collaborations in different ways.

Within this continuous contact, the research group I belong to (GRAPE - *Group for Research on Academic and Professional English*) and Universitat Jaume I had the opportunity to have Prof. Ulla Connor among us for a few days in November 2007. In the short time she stayed with us, she met our research group members and the Research Vicerector for possible future collaborations, she participated in our IV International Seminar LIFAP (*Lengua Inglesa con Fines Académicos y Profesionales – English Language for Academic and Professional*

1. For further information <<http://www.iupui.edu/~icic/>>.

Purposes) and she taught a session in the master ELIT (*English Language for International Trade*). Additionally, we found some time for interviewing her. For me, it was a pleasure and I think that the reader will find very interesting the deep thoughts and comments expressed by Prof. Connor in this excerpt from the one-hour interview.

MR: First of all, let me thank you for accepting our invitation to come to Castellón and to make you an interview

UC: Well, thank you for inviting me and for this interview.

MR: Let me start with a first question. I know that ICIC is a quite well-known reference centre nowadays, but for those people who hear that name for the first time, how could you explain what ICIC is?

UC: Thank you for the question. ICIC, the Indiana Center for Intercultural Communication, is a research and outreach center in Applied Linguistics at Indiana University in Indianapolis. We conduct research on language of workplaces and academia, and we translate the research results into practice for workshops in language teaching and language in intercultural communication in the community. I think that is the main point, translating research into practice or research about language use in a professional or academic workplace.

MR: When somebody reads about your work and your main contributions, it seems that your key contribution (I would even say your best-seller) is your book *Contrastive Rhetoric: Cross Cultural Aspects of Second Language Writing* (1996). It's been already over 10 years since it first appeared. How do you think cross cultural aspects of second language writing have evolved during these last 10 years?

UC: That's a very good question. It's a very appropriate and very topical question because indeed so much has changed about intercultural communication and writing in a second language, in English, for various kinds of purposes. There are several things that need to be addressed. The first one is the fact that earlier we were mainly concerned about writing in a second language for school and university purposes, writing of essays, and writing term papers, and so on.

More and more, we've seen that we are training students for specific contexts, like you are here (English for professional purposes or English for very specific academic purposes), and therefore the kinds of writings that our students need to do have changed. We expand the repertoire of second language writing products, that's one thing, so we teach writing for business purposes, writing for technical purposes, or writing for health sciences. There's been a big change in second language writing demands.

The second thing, and this is more related to the research paradigm of contrastive rhetoric, is that we tended to take written products and analyze them for features. For example, we talked about the ways Japanese people organize their writing, or Spanish people organize their writing and so on, based on students' writing. We were very interested in collecting corpora of various kinds and not so much coding them for their context: why was something done?, or is this a first draft? or is this a second draft? or fourth draft?, how many people have taken part in it?, and so on. There's much more recognition in Applied Linguistics in the last 20 years about the importance of context, and also about the importance of power relations and ideology. I think it's natural that those things, like power relationships, are included in studies of contrastive rhetoric.

Thus, the first issue deals with the kinds of writings that we need to be concerned about, the second is the way we study writing and written products, and third what's happening today in the world: communication in English taking place all the time. We all know David Crystal's work on global English and the spread of English, and his statement and other people's statements that 2/3 of English that's spoken today is spoken by non-native speakers of English. Interactivity of the communication is a key word. We don't send letters that would be in the mail for a month to someone in another country or culture; we're sending emails, we are writing this becoming much more like speaking in many ways in business communication or even in academic communication where you cannot indeed separate the product from what is around it. But related to that is also the changing norms of English which probably in business communication we've seen that already. The last few years we've seen local varieties of English; we've seen what we thought to be errors in English are becoming part of the usage of English for business communication. This is documented and researched in Applied Linguistics by so many people, so many of the European researchers, such Leena Louhiala-Salminen, Mirjaliisa Charles, Gina Poncini, and so on, that it doesn't matter if your English is correct; what matters is that you communicate. This issue is also supported by my own study on the fish broker: it doesn't matter if English is correct, or grammar is correct; what matters is that the fish is fresh and the orders are filled. That seems to matter.

Now, for academic writing, on the other hand, for published writing, for published articles and things like that, I think that's still another story. There are some fields of study and some journals that are much more accepting of local varieties of English, what you might call non-idiomatic Englishes, but not in others. And those are the kinds of things that I think we need to address and that's what I and several others are working on.

MR: Have you thought of an update or second edition of your book?

UC: Yes, I'm working on it. This morning for example I was writing a section for my new book, which is the sequel of *Contrastive Rhetoric* and it will be called *Intercultural Rhetoric*. I've got a proposal and three chapters ready. I've been working on it for months now. There's also a new edited book *Contrastive Rhetoric: Reaching to Intercultural Rhetoric*, through John Benjamins Publishing. It has 14 chapters, contributions, empirical pieces, different genres studies, contrastive studies of many different genres including grant proposals, research articles, term papers, newspaper editorials, newspapers articles, and so on, but it also has chapters on looking at contributions, looking at the teaching of English writing. So there's the website, how students navigate websites in different cultures, how writing is taught in Mexico for example, some more ethnographic approach, plagiarism, and how we can study from an intercultural point of view. It's an up-to-date look at intercultural rhetoric and suggests many new directions.

MR: During the last years your research interest has focused on health discourse. How did you get involved in this field of research?

UC: Ok. That's a very big question. Research on life sciences and interest in people's health, and especially when population is ageing and baby boomers are coming into older age and always being very concerned and very conscious about their health, health care is a crucial societal issue. Recently the medical people have also realized that communication is an important part of delivering good services and encouraging patients to take good care of themselves and hear to their health regime or medication. My center got involved in health sciences in two ways: one, first from a very practical point of view, because we're at the medical school at our university. Some time ago, we were invited to teach English to the international graduate students and residents coming from overseas to get medical degrees, and we have offered English instruction and cross-cultural instruction for international medical residents for the last three years. We have also offered communication, intercultural communication workshops for all graduate students and residents in our medical school. These are Americans who are seeing increasingly the need to deal with diverse populations. That's how we got started, that's how we developed our interest in medical language and medical communication. And, you know, we're publishing, we're developing a test on interpersonal communication skills. That will be used to assess cross-cultural communication capabilities both international, new graduate students and residents and American ones. It's going quite nicely, and the medical school is recognizing our expertise in language and communication.

Then as part of that interest in health and medicine and the fact that I had an interest in written texts and comprehension and production of them, it was a natural extension for me to start looking at writings that patients need to read

and understand. And I was so fortunate to meet with one Miguel Ruiz. We were able to do true intercultural, cross-cultural communication study with patient information leaflets with our Spanish counterparts. What has been interesting about the project is what we talked about earlier, that one cannot take texts out of context and start comparing, texts across cultures, that the texts are actually comparable. For instance, we found that the information in the US given to the patient is distributed in a different manner than it is in Spain: information to the patients is stapled on to the medication package when they pick it up from the pharmacy by the pharmacist, while here in Spain it's in the medication package already distributed by the manufacturers, and so on. This brings so clearly to the forefront the importance of studying in a context. And then one thing leads to another, so the first study was looking at these patient information leaflets, i.e. the written information that patients get. That's a very important part of the information that patients do get but it's not the only thing. Therefore, in our latest project, we're also looking at the spoken language, the verbal communication given to patients about their medication, and how that relates to good health habits as well as adherence to medication. We're conducting a study where we are interviewing patients finding out about information sources and what works and what doesn't work. We're specially interested in the diverse, non English-speaking populations in the US and the language problems, language issues and low literacy issues ... and again I think that will lead itself very nicely to an intercultural comparison of where patients get good information, what is successful information across cultures. I think it will be very helpful. I mean again it's applied research that will help patients and it's also research that's a big interest by health professionals themselves, by pharmaceutical companies, etc.

MR: ICIC publishes regularly a newsletter. In the last issue of *Living Language* I read some topics which I think might be interesting to check. The first one, and the one we are especially interested in because of our current collaborations, (as you have already said) is your proposal of a New Division on Health Research. Can you explain a little bit more about it?

UC: Yes, ICIC has proposed and has already gone ahead with a New Division on Health Discourse. When ICIC first got started, ICIC's main interest was on business language, that was the need at that point in the community and at the university. After that we also did research on fundraising language, again, because of local needs and now we want to continue on this research we started on health sciences language, language use in health and health communication in a very concentrated manner. We feel that this Division, which will be the only kind of center of its kind in the US, will achieve international recognition.

There are a couple of research centers in the world, one in Cardiff (Wales), which is well-known for its health communication, and there's a research center

in Australia, which is also well-known for its health communication section. There are also few research centers in the US on health communication but they are very focused perhaps like on one condition, one type of issue like maybe health communication and cancer, end-of-life decisions, and things like that. Our center, on the other hand, would spread over different health conditions and diseases. We might be looking at diabetes, cardiovascular, metahealth, generic counseling, etc. Ours is different from some in that it's truly going to be interdisciplinary; we have a team which has medical doctors, lawyers, pharmacists, linguists, and communication specialists.

MR: As you have already said before, ICIC is also involved in intercultural communication assessment and training. I know you have a course for international medical residents. Why is this topic relevant for them? Do you think this training course could be of interest for international medical students?

UC: A medical doctor according to the latest American Medical Association guidelines has to accomplish certain competences, and one of them is communication competence. So, more and more medical doctors in the US and in the medical schools are getting communication skills training. They are taught effective bedside manners, empathy towards the patient, what's called relationship centered care, so that the patient would also have more of the say in their care. That's happening for native speakers of English in the medical school at our university. And the ICIC thing is that good and intercultural communication for American residents who deal with people from other countries and cultures with the growing population of immigrants even in Indiana, it's very much needed. We have large numbers of Mexicans, Bosnian, or Somalis, that are coming into the community, Russians, a big issue. Therefore, I think that all this is applicable to your own situation. While talking to you earlier, you said that you also have large numbers of immigrants, Romanians, Africans, and so on. So there may be a need to train medical doctors to deal with native and non-native speakers of Spanish or your regional language to communicate effectively.

MR: How do you see research in intercultural communication in the future?

UC: I believe in the future we need intercultural communication research that examines the language use in real-life communication settings. Especially in English, more and more varieties of English are used for communicative purposes – selling, buying, promoting, informing, etc. Speakers of different varieties of English and of different proficiency levels need to learn to understand each other through better listening and discourse strategies.

MR: Another field you have worked in quite a lot is corpus linguistics. How is corpus linguistics contributing to Applied Linguistics research? What is important about corpus linguistics when doing research?

UC: Well, corpus linguistics encourages looking at actual language use, forces us to look at actual language use and not to theorize about language. It helps us find tendencies in language use across different genres, across different modes of communication, oral versus written, across different situations. It allows us very quickly to come up with linguistic features that characterize certain styles. For example, you can push the button and you get to see all the hedging in someone's speech if you're interested in if they are hesitant or not. You can also study politeness features in spoken language or written language easily, so that you can identify what those features are in English (*please, would you, or whatever*). So that's very very useful. That's what we in Applied Linguistics and Sociolinguistics should be looking at and then we would be able to translate results into teaching too. Let's take a business communication class for example, a business English class. It would be very helpful if we had actual authentic data, corpus data, from actual business meetings, or business negotiations that we could use with our students, rather than often unauthentic materials which have been written by language materials or textual material writers. So, things like that would be very useful.

As for the considerations in the designing of a corpus-based study, you should have several considerations. One, I would say, is representativeness. Then, for what purposes you are going to be using it. Because, if you think of spoken language corpora, for example, you have to make a decision on your transcription, for example, how detailed are you going to be with it?, are you studying just for content? In a cross-cultural study, like the one we did on patient leaflets, are we collecting data that are truly comparable from their cultural context? We wanted to have equal numbers, and we did. So, there are several things to taken into account when conducting this type of research. You have to plan it carefully before you start collecting the data.

MR: It is a fact that English is considered to be a *lingua franca*. Taking advantage of your European origin and your wide teaching experience in Europe and Asia, what do you think about the role of English and ELT (*English Language Teaching*) in Europe and in the world? Do you think its hegemonic role will last long?

UC: Yes, English today is the language of business, industry, and academia. However, what about in 50 years? Maybe Chinese?

MR: Every time I check ICIC publications, I realize that you take part in almost every project and that the production of presentations, articles, and books is continuous. How is it possible? I'm telling you that because I know you are not only a researcher, but you have also teaching and administrative duties which, from my knowledge, may even require more time than teaching and research. How do you manage to have time for everything? Do you still have time for yourself and your private life?

UC: I have a very supportive family – a husband and a grown-up son. They have always encouraged me in my career and professional life. They have helped out in all aspects, including cooking, cleaning, and most importantly, cheerleading.

MR: That's the end of the interview, Ulla. Thank you once more for sharing some of your thoughts with us, and I hope you enjoy your stay with us.

UC: Thank you, Miguel, for inviting me and giving me the opportunity to spend some time with you and your colleagues. It's been a pleasure.

Selected publications by Prof. Ulla Connor

- ATKINSON, D.; U. CONNOR** (2007): "Multilingual Writing Development" in **BAZERMAN, C.** (ed.): *Handbook of Research Writing*, Mahwah, Lawrence Erlbaum.
- BIBER, D.; U. CONNOR; T. UPTON** (eds.) (2007): *Discourse on the Move. Using Corpus Analysis to Describe Discourse Structure*. Amsterdam, John Benjamins.
- CONNOR, U.; E. NAGELHOUT; W. ROZCYKI** (eds.). (2008). *Contrastive Rhetoric: Reaching to Intercultural Rhetoric*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins.
- CONNOR, U.; M. RUIZ-GARRIDO; W. ROZCYKI; E. GOERING; E. KINNEY; J. KOEHLER** (in press): "Intercultural Study of Patient-directed Medicine Labeling: Text Differences between the United States and Spain", *Communication & Medicine*.
- HALLECK, G.; U. CONNOR** (2006): "Rhetorical Moves in TESOL Conference Proposals", *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 5(1): 70-86.