

# How I became a linguist – and why I remain one

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When I meet a new person in the field, I often like to ask them how they came to be a linguist. Very few children include “linguist” along with “doctor”, “fire fighter” and “astronaut” on their list of early aspirations. As a result, the answer often includes a twisting and indirect path, and is therefore interesting. Here, in case anyone is interested, is a synopsis of my own story. Perhaps it will be useful to someone who is deciding whether to find their way into the field themselves, or who is deciding whether to stay in it, or who is simply curious about where I come from.

I am a bit embarrassed that I never really considered being anything but a professor. I grew up in Madison, Wisconsin, home of the University of Wisconsin, so this was a prominent profession in my environs (although neither of my parents was connected to the university). I always enjoyed school and was good at it, so I figured that I might as well take all the school there was to take, and then crossover to the other side of the desk. That way I would never have to leave and get a real job. I considered the pursuit of “pure Truth”, without much regard for practical concerns, to be the most noble occupation. My father was an electrical engineer, but he died of a brain tumor when I was nine. I sometimes wonder if I would have turned out to be more practically minded if he had lived longer. But he didn’t, and I didn’t.

It was in no way obvious in advance that I would be a professor of linguistics, however. I remember five great “A ha!” experiences in my pre-college education that seemed to make life worth living (or at least school worth going to), but these pulled me in different directions. The first was learning to do a particular kind of blot painting in kindergarten, something I had never imagined was possible. The second was in fourth grade; I will come back to that later. The third was in high school, when I learned Euclidean geometry, and was fascinated with how one could start with five or six simple axioms and derive from them a whole world of unexpected truths and beauties. The fourth was in physics, where one could use the equations of parabolic motion to predict with uncanny accuracy where a ball bearing that was moving at a certain speed would land. The fifth was in high school English, where I learned that I loved the insight into people and the human condition that could be found in what I had thought were dusty old classics like Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. (I also had less nerdy joys, like table tennis, canoeing, and Batman comic books, but they aren’t so relevant here.) It wasn’t so obvious

what one should do with these divergent interests. But the quick answer was that one should go to college, so I did.

The influence of Euclidean geometry was the strongest at first, and I ended up at MIT studying mathematics. But this sadly never led to a sixth great intellectual experience. As I sampled the various subfields of mathematics, I would enjoy the first class on each topic well enough, but would lose my way by the second class, having reached the limits of my interest (and probably also of my ability). My teachers seemed to be bored with the material they were teaching, and I became bored with it as well. This feeling spread to my whole life, which seemed rather sterile, abstract, and dull to me at that time.

Toward the end of my undergraduate career I underwent two life-changing conversions. At first it was not so obvious that they had much to do with each other, but in retrospect they were interrelated in many ways. The first was that, to the great surprise of everyone who knew me—including me myself—I became a Christian of a relatively traditional sort. In other words, I became the kind of Christian who believes that Jesus Christ is God become man, that he really died on the cross and rose again on the third day to prove it, that his forgiveness can take away the guilt of my many failings and character defects, that his spirit living in me can begin to undo those character defects, and that God answers my prayers (sometimes). (I have never held up a “John 3:16” sign at a sporting event, and probably never will ... but I don’t rule it out entirely.) It all began as a kind of sociological experiment one quiet summer, when I wanted to find out why some otherwise intelligent and reasonable people went to church. In the course of my investigation, I decided that it was true—and that my love of pure Truth for its own sake should include this as well. The details of how that happened are not directly relevant here, but the change started to affect my values in subtle ways. I became more interested in the real world in general, and in people in particular. And it started to make sense that I should pray for God’s wisdom and direction for my life.

My second conversion, which happened at roughly the same time, was from Mathematics to Linguistics by way of a short detour through Cognitive Psychology. Now it is time to go back and fill in the second great intellectual experience of my pre-college days. This occurred in fourth grade, when I had a student teacher for English who was a 1970s counter-culture kind of guy. He liked to protest against the elitist system by teaching his fourth grade students the same things his professors were teaching him at the university. It so happened that he was taking his one required class in English linguistics at the time, so for two weeks he taught us Chomsky’s *Syntactic Structures*. In the interactions of negation-

placement, subject-auxiliary inversion, and *do*-support, I saw mathematical-style reasoning applied to the surprising domain of human language to reveal astonishing patterns that I used everyday of my life and without ever realizing it. I thought that was one of the coolest things I had ever seen (and still do).

And then I promptly forgot about it. Not surprisingly, I had no further contact with linguistics that could foster the interest in the rest of my pre-college education. Nor did my experience of studying Spanish in high school particularly encourage in me a love of languages for their own sake, as I aced grammar tests but struggled to learn vocabulary and make my tongue do all the things it was supposed to do in a reasonable amount of time. In these circumstances, other intellectual loves came in to bury that old interest.

But my mother did not forget those two weeks of English transformational grammar. It so happens that she was an English major too, and she had the same textbook my student teacher had used. When I went to MIT, she was afraid that I would bury myself in mathematics and never see the light of day again (not an unrealistic fear, I'm afraid). She encouraged me to explore other interests as well, telling me that the people who had developed that kind of linguistics were from MIT and I should look them up. Since I could both humor her and pick up some needed humanities distribution credits at the same time, I decided to do it. This finally did lead to my sixth great intellectual experience—when in my introductory linguistics class, we puzzled out the regularities of Turkish vowel harmony, and saw how harmony domains could be used to identify word boundaries even if you had no clue what the words meant. At first, this was just a curiosity, but my linguistics professors seemed much more interested in what they were doing than my math professors did. They gave the impression that one could get in on the ground floor of an exciting new field. Thus, as my interest in mathematics waned, this alternative started to come to the fore.

In this context, the decision to apply to graduate school in linguistics was the first major life decision that I made prayerfully, seeking God's wisdom. And I gratefully believe that I found it. A career in linguistics brought together my various disparate-seeming interests and abilities in a way that I couldn't appreciate at the time. At its best, formal linguistics has something of the purity and elegance of Euclidean geometry, with many consequences following from a few simple assumptions. But it also has an empirical side to it, where one can (occasionally) have the joy of making a prediction and having it match reality spot-on, like I had with my ball bearing and the parabolic equations back in high school physics. There is

also some data to look at, which can help inspire creativity when new ideas are not just coming to you out of the blue. And linguistics has a human component: one is relating to people as one does it, understanding something about human nature and the human condition—not quite like Shakespeare and Dostoevsky did, I admit, but not completely different either, especially when one can poke into their myths and traditions a little. Analyzing linguistic patterns has for me something of the fun of solving a puzzle, with the possible grand prize of learning about the human mind at the end of it. It is also science for those who are not good with machines. I am very thankful to have found my way into it, to have become pretty good at it, and to have been privileged to earn a living at it. (I am not sure where my early love of blot painting fits in, but perhaps it does somehow.)

Why I have remained a linguist is perhaps as complex a story as why I became one. My Christianity and my academic linguistic profession have not always fit together quite as smoothly as they did at first. There was a time in graduate school when my Christian activities seemed very important and meaningful to me, and my academic activities did not. Christian ministry seemed to offer the opportunities to honor God and help people, whereas academic studies seemed to offer the opportunities to learn a lot about parasitic gaps and quantifier scope (those are acquired tastes, even for me). One point when that disconnect came to a head was when I graduated and did not get an academic job offer immediately. (I don't count the one offer to teach four courses a semester as a sabbatical replacement with little salary and no future.) Encouraged by some friends, I began to wonder if I should leave linguistics and take up some kind of ministry or missions work—and some thought it was a no-brainer that I should use my linguistic training in some kind of Bible translation project. But as I prayed about this, I did not feel at liberty to give up so quickly. Through a variety of experiences, I gradually realized that God wants people to participate in all legitimate areas of human activity, and this includes research and higher education as much as it does more churchy kinds of work. At the same time, my teachers generously gave me the chance to stay in the business for a year, supporting myself as a part-time lecturer. (I do wish I'd kept that alphabetized list of MIT staff phone numbers, with my name immediately above Chomsky's!) I didn't get rich, but the arrangement had the added perk that I could pursue a promising relationship with a lively young Italian-American woman with warm brown eyes who I had met at church named Linda Ann DeGiovanni—now named Linda DeGiovanni Baker.

The next year I did slightly better on the job market: I got a one year offer at McGill University in Montreal, teaching a mere two

classes a semester, replacing a retiree who would not be wanting her office back after the year. At first I was not keen to leave Boston, where I felt I had grown so much both professionally and spiritually. But it was time to learn that I could grow somewhere else, both professionally and spiritually. And they offered me a paycheck, which seemed like a good thing to support not only myself but my new wife. I was given the permanent job that opened up there the next year, and my twelve years in Montreal proved rich in many ways: I had great colleagues and made great friends, had a cross-cultural experience (I have a vague idea how parliamentary government works now), became the father of three wonderful children (Catherine, Nicholas, and Julia), honed my skills at teaching Sunday school, learned enough French to follow a hockey game (barely), and had many great teaching and research experiences. Notable among these was my chance to work at Kahnawake, Quebec with the Mohawk people and language, thus putting all that I had heard about Universal Grammar to the most severe test I could find. This was a formative experience, getting me hooked on fieldwork and confirming my fascination with understudied non-Indo-European languages (in contrast to my high school Spanish). It was also the perfect fieldwork opportunity for the family man—where I could study an “exotic” language in its natural setting every week and still be home in time for dinner.

We were about to settle in Montreal permanently when I learned how much more fun it is to apply for jobs when you already have a job you like. Then the employer has to please you, rather than the other way around. First NYU, and then Rutgers University came courting, and I discovered that I was ready to try something new, face some new challenges, meet some new people, and try to learn how to teach some new courses. I was also interested in getting more involved in Cognitive Science again, to see how what I was learning about the language faculty fit into a bigger picture of the human mind. And my growing family of five was definitely ready to move from small urban rented flats to a nice four-bedroom house with a backyard in the suburbs. So we accepted an offer from Rutgers University, came back to our homeland in 1998, and here we are now.

Although I have emphasized the joys of what I have been doing, I have also found a periodic need to renew those joys. Sometimes they begin to get lost in the grinds of grading, of committee work, of administering budget cuts, of dealing with the politics and fads of the field, of waiting for anonymous reviews, of reading those anonymous reviews, and of falsifying my own theories. When this happens, I have found my Christianity to be an important source of renewal for me. I can remember that (I believe)

God called me to this work, and created me for it, that I have enjoyed it in the past, and he can give me new joy in it in the future. And he does. God has been faithful to give me new opportunities and new ideas, sometimes when I least expect them. Therefore, I anticipate continuing on this track as long as he wills and provides, in this life and perhaps even beyond it. I confess that I am intrigued by the idea of having tenure someday in the great linguistics department in the sky. All the hard grading will have been done by then, and there will be access to redeemed speakers of all kinds of languages. Maybe the anonymous reviews will even come in more quickly, and the angels will be willing to help with checking all the references! We can only hope...

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