Interview with Dr. Judith Kroll

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Thank you to Judith Kroll, Distinguished Professor of Psychology, Linguistics, and Women's Studies, Penn State University, for agreeing to be interviewed for these working papers. Dr. Kroll specializes in psycholinguistics, bilingualism, and second language acquisition. She came to Michigan State University to give a plenary talk at the Second Language Studies Symposium on April 3, 2009. For more information about Dr. Kroll, please visit her faculty page: http://www.cls.psu.edu/people/faculty/kroll_judith.shtml. This interview was arranged by Emma Trentman.

Emma: How did you become involved in the field of Second Language Studies and Psycholinguistics in particular?

Dr. Kroll: When I completed my Ph.D. in 1977, I was working on a different question, which is how it is that we understand meaning based on language compared to our perceptual experience of just perceiving the world. That question is of course related to the issue of whether bilinguals and second language learners understand meaning in the same way for each of their two languages. In 1986, I was teaching at Mount Holyoke College and I had a student who was in one of my undergraduate classes who had just returned from study abroad in Germany. We had read a paper that had been published in 1984 by Potter, So, Von Eckert, and Feldman, that claimed that learners even at very early stages of acquisition were able to understand the meanings of second language words without mediating them through the first language. The student, Janet Curley, was beginning an honors thesis and she came to me and said that she didn’t believe their results. She had just returned from Germany and felt that English was always in her head. I thought this was a wonderful topic for her honor’s thesis. Her results in fact supported her phenomenology, with evidence that learners at low levels of proficiency appeared to rely on the English translations of the German words whereas more proficient learners did not.

A couple of years later I had an opportunity to be on sabbatical in the Netherlands, and the Netherlands is really a candy store for research on psycholinguistics and bilingualism. My research on this topic took on a life of its own after that point. We began with this question about second language learning, and then I started doing work on proficient bilinguals. Since then, the research program has developed in many different directions and with the influence and contribution by the many different students and collaborators who have worked with me. Many of our studies represent different bilingual language pairings, and different countries, and different experiences.

In 1994, I moved from Mount Holyoke to Penn State. By 2001 or 2002, the situation at Penn State developed so that a critical mass of faculty was hired with shared interests in language learning and bilingualism, and we began working
together and became what was then called the Language Science Research Group. In 2006 we became the Center for Language Science (http://www.clas.psu.edu) and together with our graduate students we approach issues of language acquisition in the first and second language and proficient bilingualism, from a variety of perspectives, including psycholinguistics, linguistics, language disorders, and cognitive neuroscience. So that’s a fast speedup to the present, and as you could see in the talk I gave this morning, one of the things that I’ve been really interested in doing is exploiting the power of having different perspectives. So now we’re doing ERP research and also acoustic analyses of speech. Working together with colleagues in a cross-disciplinary mode enables us to do research that none of us could do alone, and I find that thrilling.

Emma: How do you see the cross-disciplinary approach as having particular advantages?

Dr. Kroll: I think there’s always a tension in being able to develop the depth that’s required in each project but it gives you tremendous breadth that you wouldn’t otherwise have and new ideas because we each look at things in different ways. There’s also a tension in that the language that we use to describe our work is not always the same across disciplines, and I think that to create effective cross-disciplinary research requires a group of people who are really committed to trying to work [through] these differences with each other. If you have this, then terrific things can happen. The other thing that has been wonderful is that we have a fantastic group of graduate students, many of whom are co-advised by different faculty. The analogy that I sometimes use is that we are the pidgin and they are the creole. It really is a developmental process in which they are taking and running with the input from these different areas and many of them have gone on and really done fantastic things. I think that their training is very different from the training that the faculty had. Coming to your research with a very strong disciplinary bias and then trying to extend it is very different than being immersed in the joint influence of all of these things from the start.

Emma: What advice would you give to graduate students who are interested in psycholinguistics or interested in the same topics as you generally?

Dr. Kroll: I think the best advice is to really try to have an opportunity to be exposed to this breadth of research in terms of shaping your own research program. What I love about this area of research as a cognitive psychologist is that I think it provides a lens for asking almost any interesting cognitive question you want to ask. One of the things that my cognitive colleagues often do is to invent tasks that create competition in artificial ways. The thing that’s beautiful about studying bilinguals and second language learners is that that competition is absolutely a natural facet of their experience so you don’t have to induce anything special. Research on bilinguals is sometimes messier than what traditional cognitive experimental psychology tolerates, but I think that we’ve been able to bridge that gap and demonstrate the contribution of research on bilingualism to mainstream psycholinguistics.

Emma: Do you think that the new presidential administration will provide more opportunities for your interests and research?

Dr. Kroll: I hope so. Although I think that there will be more openness to exploring
these issues, I think that we have to be the ones to set the agenda. I don’t think that we can expect that it’s necessarily going to come top down, but I think there are certainly going to be opportunities that are enabled by Obama’s presidency. In some instances I think that there may be less resistance. For example, I can’t see how the English Only movement is going to survive in this context. Hopefully there will be a more sophisticated understanding of why bilingual education is important and how it should be crafted.

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