

AUTHOR'S CORNER

When you mention the name Jean Aitchison to colleagues they often say things like “Oh! The one who wrote that excellent Teach Yourself Linguistics book!” or “She’s the only person I know who can make Linguistics interesting!” or “It’s not just the things she says about vocabulary, it’s how she says them!”.

Jean Aitchison is Senior Lecturer in Linguistics at the London School of Economics. She is the author of Linguistics (Teach yourself books, Hodder and Stoughton, 3rd edition 1987), Language Change: Progress or Decay (Fontana, 1981), The Articulate Mammal (Unwin Hyman, 3rd edition 1989) and Words in the Mind (Basil Blackwell, 1987). In order to find out how she manages to be a good academic without sounding or writing like one, I went to interview her one day when she had finished marking exam papers, the wind was wrong for windsurfing (the passion that takes her out of town a lot) and the video was set to catch a good tennis match on T.V.

T.W. Jean, have you always been an academic?

J.A. Yes, but mainly because no one would give me any other job! I would by preference have been a journalist, but I had a first class degree in classics. No one would employ me as a journalist because they said I had no experience, and that people of my academic background were never any good. So then I went out and did some freelance reporting and writing until I had produced some competent cuttings books. This time people said, “You can obviously do journalism already, but a person with a good mind like yours.....well, you’ll just be bored!” So really you can’t win. It’s Catch 22! Also, I discovered that some of the journalists whose writing I admired most were actually rather unpleasant people – pushy alcoholics and under such pressure. And I do like teaching and reading about language, so.....

T.W. So you became an academic. Why did you start writing books?

J.A. Well I have to admit I wrote the first one, the Teach Yourself one simply to clear debts – to avoid selling my car. I just meant it to be clear and efficient and pay my bills. Then I gave an evening class at Goldsmiths College. I took on the class again to clear more debts! There wasn’t a book I could set on Psycholinguistics. It was early years then for Psycholinguistics. All I could say was “read a chapter of this book and a chapter of that”. Somebody in the audience was a publisher, a very insightful person called Irene Fekete. She had a real talent for spotting gaps in the market. She asked me if I’d write a book on Psycholinguistics. Initially I said, “No!” I thought I must do some “Serious Research” first before I wrote another book. Fekete said “Let’s discuss it over a Greek meal!” By the end of the meal I’d said “I’ll only write it if you get me a big enough advance to pay my debts”. You can see I was broke for much of my early life. Anyway, she managed to get this extra advance so I was stuck! But meanwhile, I had found this little quote in Ogden Nash “I find my position as an articulate mammal bewildering and awesome, Would to God I were a tender apple blawssom (blossom)!” So you see I had found a good title and that made me more enthused about the book!

T.W. So sometimes a happy title gives you the spirit to do the book. Would you like to say anything else about your process?

J.A. Yes, I was interested to find that although I thought it was a very personal process, I’ve actually found that novelists and musicians and others talking about the creative process share some similarities. I can only explain it by a metaphor which is “looking at clouds in the sky”. If you stare at the sky on a summer day you see a lot of cloud shapes about in different corners of the sky. And in my mind there are different ideas around, changing into one another. Suddenly these ideas start getting firmer. It’s as if you say the cloud might be a horse or it might be a camel. Then suddenly you’re absolutely certain that it’s some sort of magnificent, mythical animal and you actually see its shape. It’s absolutely clear! It’s really there! And then you must rush and capture it. It’s a matter of waiting for the fluffy clouds to get into a firm shape. I have to try hard to “goof off” a bit, (try not to do too much), while the clouds



are gathering, otherwise I'll never see the vision. You see, what I think is different about my books is that they approach things from a slightly different angle.

T.W. What I found attractive in "Words in the Mind", especially was the large number of different processes or formats you use e.g. cartoons, diagrams, quotes, catchy chapter titles like "Globbering Mattresses", bits of poetry, questions and answers, summaries and so on, as well as a very straight forward accessible style. Is this how you work as a lecturer too?

J.A. Well, with lecturing there's more pressure, there's no real time to "re-write". I can re-write a chapter 7 times. I can't really do that with lecturing. I'd never get through the year if I made each lecture perfect!

T.W. So in fact you feel you can get more variety of process into a reading text. That's interesting. You can use more varied formats with your readers than with your students.

J.A. One person whose books I have learnt an enormous amount from is Michael Holroyd. He wrote a biography of Augustus John. I always thought Augustus John was a swollen-headed, pain-in-the-neck but the book was fascinating! Michael Holroyd said, when I happened to meet him that, he'd always wondered why fiction was so much easier to read than non-fiction. He decided it was because fiction had dialogue. He said he thought that quotation was the nearest he could come to an equivalent of dialogue. So that's an idea I took from him. I was also helped by a colleague at the London School of Economics who read the first draft of my first book and said "It's too jumpy". He suggested that I do the old thing of "saying what you're going to say, saying it and then saying what you've said". I said, "but that's so boring, saying it three times!" He advised me to read Bertrand Russell and this is what Bertrand Russell does in his book on the history of Western Philosophy. And it's why you find that you understand philosophy at the end of the book.

Another thing I do with each new topic..... I have 3 different run downs of organizations of material. The Logical Organisation, The Traditional Organisation, The Interest Organisation. You're lucky if they correlate. They very rarely do. What you've got to do is organize it in terms of interest without wrecking the logical order. And also having a few little nods at the traditional organisation so people don't get lost.

I really would like people to write better books, because badly written ones with lots of jargon tend to be intimidating.

T.W. If I can come to 'Words in the Mind' now. You have presented a wonderfully readable account of the main research on and models for the ordering of the mental lexicon. But how does knowing this affect language teaching and teacher training?

J.A. Well, the first point is an obvious one, and that is I've tried to stress just how many words we know. There's still a bit of a hangover from the view that all you need is a basic vocabulary of

a few hundred words and that it's structure that really matters. The fact that people's vocabulary is very much larger than we have assumed (50,000 words at least, though some say 250,000) means that we have to reverse the order and concentrate on vocabulary, lots and lots of it! Then it seems very clear that putting words in context is very, very important..... rather than having lists of isolated words that foreign speakers then have to somehow string together. Also I think mind maps or diagrams or word-webs are useful. There is a hard core of relationships between words that most native speakers have, for example, antonyms and co-ordinates but outside that, these personal webs or networks are very important. You can start with simple word association with common core translatable subjects like 'food' and 'animals'. Then at a higher level when students are doing lots of reading and listening they can build on this by making their own word-webs in the target language from these stretches of text. It's not just a purely arbitrary form of brainstorming but is a way of mapping semantic connections between words in a text.

Also, I think it's important when learning a word to allow people to get only partly there and slowly. You know if a student says "antidote" instead of "anecdote" the teacher tendency is to say "No, not antidote". Don't be silly You mean anecdote....." rather than saying "Yes, well done, you mean anecdote!" You know, allowing people to get there slowly and not expecting students to be right about all the multiple bits of a word at once. After all, in the antidote/anecdote example, the student has got most of it right: number of syllables, stress pattern, beginning and ending.

I think 'prototype' theory is very important too. If you take the word "vehicle", and give people a list of words like skis, cars, buses, elevators, bikes etc., most native speakers will pull out certain words and rank them as "good" vehicles, "bad" vehicles, or "medium" vehicles. There is a ranking. The interesting thing is that these rankings will be different from language to language. French people will say that "skis" are medium good vehicles because "vehicle" doesn't have such a strong emphasis on "wheels". It's just something that carries you around. Everyone knows that there is no absolute equivalence between words in different languages, but I feel teachers need to be more explicitly aware of these rankings. It needs to be thought about more.

- T.W. Do you feel that the theories and models in your book are 'safe' and 'known' or that they may all be thrown up in the air tomorrow? In other words, should teachers and trainers start changing their practice or should they be more cautious yet?
- J.A. I feel there has been a bad divide in the past. There have been the "clever academics" who rave about a particular theory. Then there is a filter process or tunnel at the end of which are the "practical teachers" who are expected to swallow the new theory and come up with brand new teaching ideas to cope with it. This is a rather sick point of view. What I'm hoping to do is not to be dogmatic but to hand over stuff which can help teachers and trainers to know more about language. Then they can assess the new theories critically, not go down blind alleys but be more inventive in their own work and be researchers themselves. You know there's not such a big divide. I do deplore the old attitude of researchers 'on high'. I think this is parallel to what is going on in other ways. We used to eat "meat and 2 veg." without thinking about it because that was what was put on our plates but now we want to find out about vitamins and pesticides and preservatives in our food. We have a more critical attitude now towards things. So it's definitely not a handing down from academic research on high. It's an information process so that teachers and trainers can make their own, informed decisions.