Maggie Tallerman

Research interests, April 2008

o Brythonic Celtic

Modern Colloquial Welsh was the subject of my 1987 PhD dissertation, and I have remained interested in Welsh (Modern and Middle Welsh) and Breton ever since. I have worked on the syntax, morphosyntax and morphology of these languages, and in particular have examined the morphosyntax of functional elements, the syntax and morphosyntax of Welsh soft mutation, and the syntax of infinitival clauses.

Together with Robert D. Borsley (Essex) and David Willis (Cambridge), I have recently published *The Syntax of Welsh* (Cambridge University Press, 2007). Here it is:

http://www.cambridge.org/uk/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9780521836302

o Language Evolution

I have worked quite a bit on protolanguage, on the evolution of syntax, and the origins of the mental lexicon. I've contributed a number of papers to the current lively debate in evolutionary circles over whether an initial protolanguage was likely to have been synthetic (putting words together) or holophrastic (consisting of non-compositional holistic utterances); research suggests the former is more likely. Currently, I am looking at recent proposals that kin selection is an important driving force behind the evolution of language.

Together with the biological anthropologist Kathleen Gibson, I am editing the *Oxford Handbook of Language Evolution*, to be published by OUP in 2010. Here is the outline:

http://www.staff.ncl.ac.uk/maggie.tallerman/OUP_handbook.htm

In 2005 I also edited a volume entitled *Language Origins: Perspectives on Evolution*, which appears in the OUP series *Studies on the Evolution of Language*. Here it is:

http://www.oup.com/uk/catalogue/?ci=9780199279036

o Language Typology

Some of my work on typology is reflected in my textbook *Understanding Syntax* (Second edition 2005, Hodder Arnold). If you teach a course on syntactic typology, or want your students to know more about syntax than merely what constructions are found in English, you can order an inspection copy here:

http://www.hoddereducation.co.uk/Title/9780340810323/Understanding_Syntax_2nd_Edition.htm

I also have a couple of papers in the volume *Constituent Order in the Languages of Europe*, edited by Anna Siewierska (1998, Mouton de Gruyter):

http://www.degruyter.de/cont/fb/sp/detailEn.cfm?id=IS-9783110151527-1

Some more details

My research in linguistics falls into several quite discrete categories. I have written extensively on the syntax and morphosyntax of modern colloquial Welsh, work which I started as a graduate student in 1980. People often ask how and why I became interested in Welsh. One answer to *how* is that I was an undergraduate (for a while) at what was then called the University College of North Wales, Bangor, in the 1970's, and started learning Welsh there – although the variety of Welsh that was then taught was not spoken Welsh at all, but the very high variety known as Literary Welsh. In fact, though, my interest in Welsh goes back quite a bit further. Though I have no family connections whatever (that I know of), I do have a Welsh middle name (discover it at your peril!), and as a (shameless!) small child, I would impress my friends by claiming to "speak Welsh". (Believe it or not, I had actually forgotten that when I started learning real Welsh – it only came back to me later on.)

As for *why*, well, Welsh is spoken natively by more than a quarter of a million people right here on England's doorstep, but until quite recently, it had been pretty well ignored by the modern academic discipline of linguistics. So it seemed like a good area to work on. And Welsh has all sorts of interesting – and fairly unusual – grammatical features. For instance, it's a verb-initial language, which puts it into a pretty small minority amongst the world's languages: only around 12% are VSO. Moreover, like the other Celtic languages, it has an extensive system of initial consonantal mutation. This means that the initial segments of words undergo various morphophonological changes, according to the morphosyntactic context. So as a simple example, the canonical form *cath* 'cat' appears as *y gath* 'the cat': 'soft' mutation (lenition) occurs on feminine singular nouns following the definite article. When, as a student, I realized that I had an actual consonantal mutation in my very own name, it seemed that the path of my future career had been pre-ordained for me in some mysterious way! I started looking at the syntax and morphosyntax of consonantal mutation for my dissertation, and I remain fascinated by this topic almost thirty years later.

My interest in language evolution is much more recent. In 2000, I was casting around for a topic to teach as the subject matter of a class at Durham called *Linguistic Controversies*. The best controversy of all seemed to me to be the question of how language originated and evolved, so I started teaching a class on that, and thus became interested in evolutionary linguistics. This is now a major strand in my research, and something that I teach every year. It's a huge topic, and one that no single scholar can really keep up with, as it covers so many different disciplines – from paleoanthropology to genetics, from archaeology to ethology, from neuroscience to psychology. There is a constant stream of new work, and it has to be (in my opinion) the most exciting area of linguistics to work in.

Although I am not actively working on language typology much these days, I was a member of the EUROTYP project, funded by the European Science Foundation, from 1989–1994. I worked in a group headed by Anna Siewierska which looked at word order in the languages of Europe. Largely as a result of that, I wrote my 1998 textbook *Understanding Syntax* (Arnold); there is now a quite different second edition (2005, Hodder Arnold). No doubt one day there'll be a third edition too. Meantime, I teach a course each year entitled *The Syntax of the World's Languages*, using my textbook, which has a large number of original exercises, as the set text.