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&F Focus on... ... Linguistics Reference

Here we continue the 'reference' theme with contributions from **Dick Hudson** and **Andrew Carnie**.

One of the UK's foremost linguists, Dick Hudson talks from a personal viewpoint on the past, present and possible future reference resources available to linguists, from the "carbon paper" and "ink bottle" age to the "Virtual Linguistics Encyclopedia" of the future (readers might care to explore our own ScienceDirect as a significant step towards the latter!).

As a linguist and 'service provider', Andrew Carnie on behalf of the LINGUIST list provides a succinct review of current resources online, including the list itself. He also describes the challenges that lie ahead in trying to create fully searchable online databases for linguists.

The changing world of linguistics research

The researching linguist's world certainly has changed and is changing. Gone are the days of carbon paper and index cards, beautifully bound books and ink-bottles. Good riddance too, as far as I'm concerned. One of my first encounters with 'real scholarship' as an undergraduate was when my tutor told me to write an essay for which the essential reading was book X; I spent a whole afternoon trying to find book X, and failing - what he had not told me was that the only copy within fifty miles was sitting in his study. He thought this experience was in some sense good for me, a taste of the dedication that goes with true scholarship; I disagreed. My view was then, and still is, that one should spend more time reading than searching. Maybe the reverse ratio was acceptable in the Middle Ages when books were few and far between, but even in my early days this was not true, and it is far less true now.

Almost all the changes that have happened since then have tipped the balance in favour of reading time rather than searching time. From my desk I can minimize fruitless library visits by checking the university library; I can use a bibliographical database such as Linguistics Abstracts Online or the databases on BIDS; I can search the internet; and I can send messages round the world to people who know more than me. All this is due to a combination of new technology and initiatives taken by people with know-how and vision, such as the team that runs the Linguist list. But meanwhile old-fashioned publishing has moved forward too with tools that we could only dream of a couple of decades ago, and in particular the splendid encyclopedias that may turn out to have been the most important development in linguistics during the 1990's.

My fantasy for the future is the Virtual Linguistics Encyclopedia, a search engine just for linguists to which each linguist can present any material that they want to make generally available. The Encyclopedia will know about everything, and not just about the random 10% or so which current search engines find; and it will have a really sensible classificatory structure. It will give bibliographical details and perhaps a summary, but better still it will allow users to download the materials themselves, and best of all it will allow authors to make their own decisions about what to keep 'in print'. Everything will be freely down-loadable, which means that publishers may find it hard to sell books and even harder to sell journals; but publishers are clever people and will no doubt find other niches which will keep us all dependent on their good services. And maybe there will still even be a need for journals such as &Ampersand!

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Linking Linguists

Only 15 years ago, had I started to write a piece on reference materials for linguists, I would have listed only garden variety language dictionaries, published grammars, and the rare book of texts and corpora or tape recording of field notes. As we are all aware, the world is a very different place today, what with the explosion of electronic media that has come in with the web and internet. Now, when I want to find a piece of data, the first thing I do is turn on my computer and do a search. Sometimes, of course, I'm better off heading to my university library or picking a dictionary out of my own bookshelves, but there is an amazing amount of material now available on line. You can now get papers in every subdiscipline (both published and unpublished) online. Searchable corpora of spoken language, and texts of descriptive linguistics of many previously undocumented languages, as well as data from language acquisition and psycholinguistics such as the Childes database open up new venues for research. You can now search practically every email discussion list in linguistics from one web site. Not to toot my own horn here, but probably the best place to start in looking for these materials is to go to the web site I help coordinate: <http://www.linguistlist.org>. We now have links to major linguistics sources for every interest.

The picture that I've painted above is quite bright and rosy, but in practice it reflects only the beginning of a new era of research tools. The task ahead for linguists is not an easy one. Consider what is now involved in putting a text or dictionary data online: the raw data in the dictionary must be "marked-up" or "tagged" in such a way that it is accessible to searching tools. There is currently no agreement among linguists as to what basic categories need to be tagged (for example, linguists often disagree on what is a "noun" or even if there is such a category), let alone agree upon a standard for mark-up tags. The situation is made even worse by the variety of incompatible formats and fonts that data is currently stored in. Imagine the scholar who wants to search for case marking on count nouns in a wide variety of languages; will it be possible for her to do this with a single click? In the near future, the LINGUIST list will be starting a world-wide project to develop a standard for linguistic markup so that such a dream may one day come true. Stay tuned for more details on this project. The outlook for materials previously available only to a few with access to major research libraries can only get better. While I still enjoy picking up my hard copy of the Royal Irish Academy's dictionary of Old Irish, I will soon be able to enhance my research by searching online documents.

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