Faculty of Humanities
Amsterdam Center for Language and Communication

Summary Annual Report 2012

FULL DIGITAL VERSION: WWW.UVA.NL/ACLC-ANNUALREPORTS
Interview with Jenny Audring by Marlou van Rijn

Jenny Audring is a postdoctoral researcher at the ACLC. She is working on her NWO-Veni project: ‘The complexity of gender’.

Can you briefly describe what your research is about?
Briefly?! In a few words: my research is on complexity and learnability of grammatical gender systems in the languages of the world. The aim is to find out if the complexity of such a system correlates with the amount of formal marking it receives in the language in question. The idea is that languages with a lot of gender marking can maintain a complex gender system through time, because a child learning these languages receives a lot of linguistic cues as to what the gender system of his/her native language is like. Languages without a lot of gender markers, on the other hand, cannot develop a very complex gender system, since such a system would be too hard for the child to learn. I’m trying to find out if this is true by looking at the grammars of a number of unrelated languages. It is very interesting and exciting to test these predictions, because it tells us something about where the limits to learnability lie and what unlearnable languages look like.

Why did you choose the ACLC as your home base?
I wanted to work at an institute where they do a lot of typological research, since my project involves the comparison of different languages. The ACLC is known for this line of research. Another important reason is that learnability has recently become a research focus of the ACLC, and my project fits in very well with this topic.

How was 2012 for you?
I started working on my Veni project at the ACLC in January 2013. Before that time, I worked on a project called ‘Taalportaal’ at Leiden University - actually, I still spend one day a week on this work. Taalportaal is a joint project carried out by a number of universities and linguistic institutes in the Netherlands (among which the Meertens Instituut and the Fryske Akademy) which aims to create a comprehensive online grammar of Dutch and Frisian. Together with Geert Booij and Ton van der Wouden, I’m working on documenting the morphology of Dutch. I also taught courses on comparative linguistics and psycholinguistics to students of German linguistics at Leiden University, as well as a course on morphological typology here at the UvA.

Have you always wanted to be a linguist?
I have always been fascinated by the form of language: how people choose their words. Other people were always more interested in
the content of what was being said. However, at first I didn’t know that linguistics existed as a separate field of science. Only when I started to study English in Berlin I discovered that linguistics was a subject of its own, and I immediately took it as my second major. Interestingly enough, my first course was on morphology, which is now my field of research.

*What would you still like to achieve?*

My main goal for the short term is of course to successfully finish my Veni project. Another big project I am working on is editing the Oxford Handbook of Morphological Theory, together with my colleague Francesca Masini of the University of Bologna. The book will be published at the end of 2013. Editing a book of this scope is a very challenging and exciting enterprise.

In 2013, I would also like to collaborate more with other linguists. I thrive in collaboration and enjoy joining forces wherever possible. In particular, I hope to further pursue a second line of research I am involved in, which is Construction Morphology. This is a relatively recent morphological theory developed by Geert Booij, which I find promising, innovative and fascinating. Because it is not part of my Veni project, I’m making an effort to keep in touch with the linguists involved in this field and to participate in discussions.

*What would you do with a Nobel Prize?*

Wow, that’s a tough one! I would like to keep on working in science, but spend more time on my two great passions: photography and singing. But if the sky was the limit, I would like to create a place, like a salon, where people can come together and talk. This is because I enjoy talking to people. It is something I spend a lot of time doing, if I am not cautious. In my salon, I would organise meetings for people to discuss different kinds of matters; linguistics, but also other topics: philosophy, psychology, art. Perhaps I would even write a book about it, because that is also still a dream of mine.

New, new, new…

- (...) real multifunctionality does not involve lexical zero-coded derivation, be it root-based or word-based. Rather, it involves the possibility of using lexical material (whether simple or derived) in multiple syntactic functions with fully compositional semantic interpretation, under identical structural coding conditions (Van Lier, 2012).
Robert Cloutier is Assistant Professor of English Linguistics.

Can you briefly describe what your research is about?

I’m currently working on two different subjects. The first is about the evolution of the verb ‘haitan’ in the Germanic languages. This verb went through a very interesting development, both in semantics and syntax. In Gothic, it had three meanings, none of which is the modern Dutch usage: “to call for someone”, “to give someone a name”, and “to command someone to do something”. This verb later developed the meaning “to be called” in the Germanic languages, as represented by Dutch “heten”. So far, it seems that the only other language family in which a verb underwent a similar development is Sinitic. The other project I’m working on is about postpositions in Dutch, for instance: “ik loop het huis in”. Dutch seems to be the only Germanic language that has developed these postpositions, though scholars still debate whether these structures should be analysed as postpositions or as phrasal verbs. I am looking at this question from a historical perspective in order to determine which one of the two is the best analysis.

Why do you do this research?

My motivation for doing research in comparative Germanic is that I’m curious about how English became so different from all the other Germanic languages. It has lost much of its “Germanicness” over time, although it has also kept some features of Germanic. I like focusing on small things, like for instance the verb ‘haitan’, which is quite specific. It has had a very interesting development over time, but hasn’t yet been studied in a lot of detail.

How did you end up being a linguist?

I’ve always liked languages. I grew up speaking English, but heard a lot of Korean at home because my mother is Korean. Unfortunately, I was not raised bilingually. I later studied Korean at university, but only reached an intermediate level of proficiency.
I also lived in Panama for a while as a child, where I was exposed to Spanish. It has always fascinated me how people express similar concepts in different ways.

*Can you imagine doing something completely different?*

Although you wouldn’t say it by looking at my desk, I enjoy organising things, so if I wasn’t a linguist I think I’d be good at administrative work.

*What would you like to achieve?*

In the short-term, I hope to have a few publications. A long-term project I’m working on at the moment is a textbook on English historical morphology for advanced undergraduate and graduate students, for which I have four years to complete. I also hope to get funding for my research. I’m considering different ideas and currently working on two of them, for which I will publish articles and then hopefully expand these into a bigger project.

*What are the highlights of 2012?*

Two things come to mind: I was appointed as Assistant Professor of English Linguistics at the UvA in September. The first semester I was really busy preparing and teaching my courses, which were obviously all new to me, but now I have a period without teaching, so I can focus more on my research. The other major event of 2012 was the month I spent during the summer in Iceland learning Icelandic.

As yet, I haven’t done much research on Scandinavian languages, so I would like to focus on that. Icelandic is an extremely complicated language. Although Icelandic is such a difficult language to learn, I still had a great time in Iceland because it is a beautiful country.

*What would you do with a Nobel Prize, given that you can spend it however you like?*

That’s a difficult question. A lot of my education was done in the US where you accumulate a lot of loans, so the first thing that comes to mind would be to pay those off. Then I would put the remaining money toward research. I love teaching and believe it can complement one’s research, so I would only reduce my teaching load in order to spend more time doing research.

**New, new, new…**

- (...) experimental iterated learning can cause an artificial whistled language to become organized in a way that is reminiscent of how speech sounds and signs in sign languages are organized. (...) It supports the hypothesis that cognitive constraints cause a culturally transmitted system to become more structured and more learnable (Verhoef, 2012).
Interview with Lissan Taal-Apelqvist by Tessa Spätgens

Lissan Taal-Apelqvist started as a lecturer of Swedish in the department of Scandinavian Languages and Cultures and as a PhD researcher at the ACLC in 2012.

*Can you briefly describe what your research is about?*
I want to use second language learning to test Hengeveld’s theory on transparency, which states that the learnability of a language is connected to its transparency. The participants will be students from universities in the Netherlands, Sweden and Indonesia. The students in Leiden and my own students in Amsterdam are learning Indonesian and Swedish respectively, and the Swedish and Indonesian students in Stockholm and Jakarta are learning Dutch. I want to compare the learnability of specific grammatical structures in Indonesian, Swedish and Dutch, and see whether transparency is a factor in learnability.

*What inspired you to study this topic?*
Well, in principle it was the job offer! I had known for quite some time that a position would be available for a Swedish lecturer in 2012, and I was planning to apply for this position. When the job was advertised, it included both teaching and doing research as a PhD student, so I started to think about possible topics to study. For me it was quite natural that it would be about language learning, and that it would involve a comparison of Dutch and Swedish. I was curious about whether the ‘learning distance’ from language A to language B was the same as the distance from language B to language A. While I was forming my thoughts on this, I discussed them with several people, including Jan Hulstijn. He drew my attention to Hengeveld’s transparency theory and the idea developed further from there.

*Have you always wanted to do this?*
I actually started my university studies quite late, when I was thirty years old to be precise. Before this, I did all kinds of things. I worked in different types of health care settings and taught at primary and secondary schools while living in Sweden. Before my position at the ACLC, I worked at the INTT student information office and taught Dutch at the INTT courses for several years. Before all of this, I had initially come to the Netherlands to work with drug addicts.

When I met my husband I moved to Amsterdam permanently. At that time I was job hopping for a while, and then I decided to start studying at university. From then on, it was quite clear to me that I wanted to teach at university. Also, language and
language learning have always been a part of my life. When I was a child I would always try to communicate in the language of a country I was visiting, and when that didn’t work, I would switch to English, although I did not have a good command of that either! That is actually how I learned Dutch as well: when I came here I was about twenty years old. I just talked to people and learned from them without ever taking a course.

*Can you imagine doing something completely different?*

Yes and no. This is what I really want to do. But I know that I could do all kinds of things, because I already have. So, if I was forced to, there is a multitude of things I could do, but I really prefer to do what I am doing at the moment!

*What would you like to achieve?*

Of course I would like to say something really impressive here but I believe a research project is often a small part of a greater picture, and a PhD project is extremely small in that bigger picture. But small parts are important as well, and I want to be a part of thoughts on language and language learning, contributing to knowledge in this area and inspiring people to make the most of their abilities. To me, it is a privilege to be a part of this relatively new topic of investigating learnability by using transparency.

*What was your highlight of 2012?*

It was definitely getting this job!

*What would you do with a Nobel Prize, given that you could spend it on non-scientific things as well?*

I would spend it on science, but also probably on education. Assuming my position would be extended if I end up winning it, I would use it to set up a new project on something I had always wanted to do. I do not have any examples at the moment, but it would have to be something for which it is difficult to get funding. Other than that, I would spend it on educational projects somewhere in the world, for people who are less fortunate. I would like to give them the opportunity to study and start reaching personal goals, which they might not be able to reach otherwise as a result of social or economic factors. I would set up something for myself or, if there were to be projects that appealed to me and that fitted my vision and goals, I would invest effort and money in those.

**New, new, new...**

- It has been proven that the focus markers of Tundra Yukaghir are multifunctional, fulfilling also the role of contrast markers and serving as signals of emphasis (Schmalz, 2012).
Interview with Enoch Aboh
by Eva van Lier

Enoch Aboh is a newly appointed professor and he holds a special Chair on Learnability.

Can you give a brief account of what your research is about?

My work has developed around two main themes: linguistic variation and typology and the structure of creole languages in relation to their source languages. In exploring these matters, I developed a strong interest in issues of language acquisition and change. One of the things I learned from creole languages is that learners are endowed with a basic capacity of selecting different language elements out of a varying input and recombining them into a coherent new grammatical system. And this is of course related to my current position.

Can you tell us something about your new position?

I have been professor of Learnability since September 2012, which involves three concrete aspects: One is to develop a new working hypothesis in terms of learnability of languages, as well as introducing new courses that address issues of learnability in human languages; the second is to formulate new research proposals and secure funding. The third aspect is to act as an ambassador of the Learnability programme; to make it visible to the international community.

How was 2012 for you?

It was actually a fantastic period for me, because I was on sabbatical leave at the NIAS. I wrote a book on what I call ‘hybrid grammars’. What I try to say in that book is that every single grammar is a hybrid system; that it is a universal property of grammars, even though some languages may show this property more than others. I use creole languages to motivate this idea.

One reason why the NIAS-period was fantastic is because I felt like – this probably sounds a little bit weird – a real Dutch person, because I could ride a bicycle to work. And it was really rewarding to experience life differently than from the NS perspective!

Also, the NIAS is an incredible place: I could just enter my office and focus on what I wanted to do. The result is that I finished and submitted the manuscript to the editor; the book should appear in 2014. So that’s great. At the University, you always combine various things: you do your research, your teaching, some administrative work, you collaborate with colleagues and students… and you don’t necessarily have the time to think about just one thing. That’s a luxury I had in 2012. I wish everyone had this opportunity and my dream is to one day have a similar kind of intermezzo in my life!

What would you still like to achieve?

The idea that every grammar is hybrid raises a number of questions with regard to how we envisage language acquisition, which is part of my current position. But it also affects other areas in our field; our conception of grammar. Generative linguistics has for a
long time taken it for granted that speakers have a homogeneous grammar; if you notice variation in a community, it is variation across speakers, but not variation within the linguistic system that speakers have internalised. Now, if what I’m saying is right, then the default situation is that there is variation across speakers but also within speakers. Every single speaker develops a hybrid system. And that, I think, is mind-blowing, as it very much increases the width of variation that new learners are exposed to. Then the question comes, similar to what we find in typological variation, why do we see certain patterns more frequently than others? How do new generations manage this variation? Why don’t languages vary indefinitely in all imaginable domains of grammar? Is this related to cognitive processes available to learners? Clearly, when we assume that all grammars are hybrid, then all speakers are multilingual in a sense. And that has a huge impact on our conception of how to study language, both as a subject of enquiry and as means of communication. For instance, in language teaching it implies that learning methods should be designed for multilinguals, not for monolinguals as is traditionally the case. But before we get there, we obviously have to understand better how, on the individual level, grammars come into existence. I see many opportunities for new collaborations with various people including linguists, cognitive scientists and computational scientists.

What would you do with a Nobel Prize?
It’s an interesting question! I would do two things, which might on the surface look unrelated but are perhaps actually conceptually related. One is: I would start a restaurant, where I would cook for my friends. And the other one, close to my heart, is develop a linguistic school in Africa, where students can come for free to do language description based on theoretical premises that are broad enough to allow people from different backgrounds, so that we have a better typological characterisation of some African areas. This idea is related to the effort I’m currently making with colleagues from Rutgers University and New York University: every two years we organise the African Linguistics School, where we give African students the chance to be exposed to current linguistics. Western linguistic work is simply not visible in Africa. And it is a real pity that African speakers are not participating in our debates, given the very high rates of linguistic diversity in Africa. I think that the input of these speakers will have a huge impact on our characterisation of the languages of the world – there is still a lot to be learned. Right now as linguists, we describe languages like we describe the voices of people, but the people themselves are not producing these voices. That’s one of the things that we have not succeeded with in our field: bringing in more native speakers of non-Western languages, from countries that don’t have the resources… we want this multi-voiced research.

New, new, new...

- Vowel categorization depends not only on the acoustic properties of the target stimulus, but also on its broad and local acoustic context. The influence of such context is in turn affected by the number of internal referents that are available to the listener in a task (Benders et al, 2012).

Can you imagine doing something else?
I can imagine myself as a cook. And, talking about hybridisation, when I cook I typically mix ingredients. Together with my wife we develop what could be called Eurafrican cooking. So yes, I could be a hybrid cook!
What does the ACLC do?

The Amsterdam Center for Language and Communication (ACLC) is a research institute for linguistic research within the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Amsterdam. Language is part of the cognitive system of human beings. Almost every child can learn a language effortlessly despite the variation that the languages of the world display. What makes a language learnable? What are the limits on variation in languages across the world? The ACLC aims to come up with answers to these central questions in linguistics. In other words, what is the 'language blueprint'? In doing so the ACLC also deals with many socially relevant topics such as language development in children and adults, multilingualism, language disorders in children, sign languages of the deaf, and new and endangered languages.

Scientific Output in 2012

Type of publication
Refereed Journal Articles 53
Non refereed Journal Articles 7
Refereed book chapters 39
Non refereed book chapters 26
Books 3
Books edited 15
PhD theses 4
Other publications 53
Lectures, posters, reviews 225

Staff in 2012
(in fte’s research time)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Tenured</th>
<th>Non-tenured</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full professors</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior lecturers</td>
<td>1.34</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lecturers</td>
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<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Post-docs</td>
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<td>5.57</td>
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<tr>
<td>PhD candidates</td>
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<td>19.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total research staff</td>
<td>11.16</td>
<td>25.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting staff</td>
<td>1.20</td>
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A choice of publications in 2012, first-authored by PhDs or post-docs (ACLC authors in boldface)


**Finances: funding in 2012 (in k€)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>k€</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UvA contribution</td>
<td>1422,80</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External</td>
<td>786,89</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2209,69</td>
<td>100</td>
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**Research groups and co-ordinators in 2012**

The ACLC is organised in research groups. These groups are of different sizes and some are focussed on an externally funded project. They are regularly evaluated and approved for a limited period in order to keep flexibility in the organization. In 2012 the following research groups were active.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research group</th>
<th>Coordinator(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Bidirectional Phonology and Phonetics</td>
<td>Paul Boersma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Cognitive Approaches to Second Language Acquisition</td>
<td>Jan Hulstijn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Comparative Slavic Verbal Aspect</td>
<td>Janneke Kalsbeek &amp; René Genis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Crosslinguistic Semantics</td>
<td>Hedde Zeijlstra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. DP/NP: Structure, Acquisition and Change</td>
<td>Harry Perridon &amp; Petra Sleeman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Functional Categories in Analytic Languages</td>
<td>Enoch Aboh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Functional Discourse Grammar</td>
<td>Hella Olbertz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Grammar and Cognition</td>
<td>Anne Baker, Fred Weerman, Judith Rispens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Iconicity in Language use, Language learning and Language change</td>
<td>Olga Fischer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Institutional Discourse</td>
<td>Anne Bannink &amp; Jet van Dam van Isselt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Language Creation</td>
<td>Enoch Aboh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Language Description and Documentation</td>
<td>Cecilia Odé</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. Modelling the Evolution of Language</td>
<td>Bart de Boer &amp; Jelle Zuidema (ILLC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Oncology-related Communication Disorders</td>
<td>Michiel van den Brekel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Revitalizing Older Linguistic Documentation</td>
<td>Otto Zwartjes</td>
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<tr>
<td>16. Sign Language Grammar and Typology</td>
<td>Anne Baker &amp; Joke Schuit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Unlearnable and Learnable Languages</td>
<td>Jan Don &amp; Sterre Leufkens</td>
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