In September 2009, Anne Baker’s seven-year term as director of the ACLC will come to an end. As director she worked hard to make the ACLC a place of co-operation and interaction for the many different researchers in the ACLC. After years of development and consolidation, 2008 was a year of looking to the future. Re-forming the new research groups this year was part of this process. Leading the ACLC took most of Anne Baker’s time, but she still manages to find time for her research.

Anne Baker is professor of Psycholinguistics, Language Pathology and Sign Language of the Netherlands. ‘Because of this broad responsibility I am involved in many different strands of research, also because I supervise many PhD students. My personal research focuses currently on two topics both involving bilingualism. In the BISLI- and BISLIPP projects (Bilingualism and Specific Language Impairment) the aim is to investigate the effects of the combination of being bilingual and having SLI (Specific Language Impairment). The second topic is the acquisition of sign languages, which are always in contact with a spoken language. I want to gain insight into the language acquisition process from two different perspectives: language pathology and cross-linguistic comparison.’

What does your average day look like?
‘I start work at 8 o’clock in the morning. I try to reserve Tuesdays and Wednesdays for doing research as much as possible.’

New, new, new...
How do children learning more than one language fare if they have a language problem? A European COST network Language Impairment in a Multilingual Society: Linguistic Patterns and the Road to Assessment, involving 20 different countries has just been awarded for four years to investigate this issue.
de Jong, Baker, Weerman
On other days I tend to have appointments and meetings all day. I normally have my first appointment at 9:00 so I try to do the things that require concentration between 8:00 and 9:00. Good days are days when I have time to write, when you get interesting research results or see a product finished. Bad days are days when the computer breaks down, or when you have to sort out a conflict. Fortunately, I do not have many bad days.’

How do you get any research done?
‘The two days I have for the ACLC is taken off my teaching duties, although I still do a little teaching and I supervise BA and MA students with their theses. I reserve two days for my research, although I must admit that this time is continuously in danger of being taken up by other things. Also, I scarcely have time anymore to get my hands dirty: I mean by that collecting data or doing in-depth language analyses. I really miss that.’

What would you do with a million euros? ‘I would definitely use it for collecting more data on sign language acquisition and having them fully transcribed. Beppie van den Bogaerde (Hogeschool Utrecht) and I work on a longitudinal database with data from children from 0 till 8 years, but we have managed to transcribe less than half. The problem is that we get funding for projects that last only three or four years; this is too short for collecting and analysing longitudinal data.’

Does your work relate to cognition and learnability? ‘All the research I am involved in is on language acquisition, so directly linked to learnability and cognition. What I really like about cognition as a unifying theme is the fact that it combines different disciplines. This ties in well with my scientific background in linguistics and psychology. I think the interaction between different disciplines is essential for scientific progress.’

Will you miss the ACLC directorship? ‘For sure. What I will miss most is knowing everybody and knowing what they had for breakfast, so to speak. As a director, it feels like you share a little in what people are doing and this is very rewarding and exciting. I hope the ACLC is and will remain an inspiring place for people to do their linguistic research.’

New, new, new…
The output of the ACLC is steadily increasing whereas the amount of staff is decreasing.
63% of ACLC PhD graduates are successful in continuing in academic work.
Wolfgang Kehrein has worked at the ACLC for two and a half years now as a post-doc. In the Franconian Tones project, it is his job to bring in the historical perspective. The historical approach to phonology is new to him. Kehrein’s PhD dissertation was about feature theory and his work at Marburg Universität was typological in nature.

Wolfgang Kehrein: ‘My research project is one of three projects that study the Franconian Dialects spoken in the Rhenish fan, an area that is at the heart of the Franconian Belt, covering parts of Germany around Cologne and Trier and stretching into Luxemburg and Limburg. Our topic is the so called “tonal accent” contrast, which is a very remarkable feature of these dialects. Standard Dutch and German varieties have one way of pronouncing stressed syllables such as huis. In this particular area, such words can be pronounced in two different ways. In Cologne, for instance, the nominative form of huus has a long vowel and a steady high tone with only a slight drop towards the end of the word. The dative form is also huus, but its vowel is much shorter (though still longer than short [u] in rus ‘Russian’), and there is an immediate fall in intonation. The tonal quality of a word is related to a particular grammatical feature in this case, but it can also distinguish lexical items: luus, for instance, means ‘louse’ if pronounced with a long, steady tone, but ‘clever’ with a short, falling tone. Such “tonal contrasts” are very surprising if we consider that Franconian’s closest relatives, German and Dutch, are typical “stress languages”. I am trying to explain how this phenomenon came about. On a very general level my research tries to find out to what extent tonal aspects of language are learnable.’

Are you travelling all day long to collect the data? ‘I do not wander around the area recording tonal accent contrasts. The field work is mostly done by Maike...
Prehn and Björn Köhnlein at the Meertens Instituut, who work on the other two sub-projects. I read a lot, old grammars and descriptions of the language varieties that we study. The Central Franconian dialects, for instance, have been documented quite thoroughly by the Forschungszentrum Deutscher Sprachatlas at Marburg.

Basically, my answers come from books. Another thing that keeps me busy is the study of intonational phonology. Tonal differences often depend on the role and position of the word in a sentence, which means we cannot study words in isolation. We need to look at how tonal differences interact with the position and role of words in their linguistic context. Traditional dialectologists have neglected this aspect, and it is only due to recent work by Carlos Gussenhoven and his colleagues from Nijmegen that we know about the interaction of tone and intonation in various (mainly) Limburgian dialects. Finally, I am also looking at the various prosodic and phonological changes that occurred over the last 1000 years or so to see how they factor into the equation.

The topic you are investigating seems quite narrow, but you make it sound rather complex. ‘At first sight, you would not think that this tiny dialect thing could keep you busy for so long, but after two and a half years it sometimes still feels like I know nothing! There are many interacting factors, vowel quality and ‘schwa’ presence for example. But there are also strange regional differences that I have to take into account. In one particular area within the Renish fan, people do the exact opposite: you get short-and-falling where you’d expect long and the other way around. Another complicating factor is the great decline in the use of dialects in Germany, much more than in the Netherlands.

If I had the money, I would set up a system that documents the Franconian dialects as they are spoken now, just like they did in earlier days. But I am afraid a million euros wouldn’t be enough.’

New, new, new...

In modern Russian the use of the locational prepositions v ‘in’ and na ‘on’ is determined by conceptual differences between types of locations. Diachronic and dialectal variation can be explained by assuming slightly different conceptualisations.

Peeters-Podgaevskaja
Looking at babies who listen

Titia Benders
Research Group: Bidirectional phonology and phonetics

The year 2008 was an eventful year for Titia Benders. She went to Calgary for a couple of months where she conducted her first baby-study. She wrote her Master’s thesis on speech perception development in infants. Meanwhile, she applied for - and was awarded - an NWO Toptalent grant. This allows her to study her topic for four more years. She started her PhD study in September 2008.

Titia Benders: ‘I’m trying to find out how babies listen, how they discriminate between sounds, and whether this differs from how adults do it. My entire study will be devoted to one particular vowel contrast: the long and open /a:/ sound and the short and much darker /A/ sound.

These sounds differ in both duration and spectral quality, but Dutch adult native speakers mainly rely on spectral quality to discriminate between the two. My question is: what cue do babies use, and to what extent is this congruent with the cue that is dominant in signaling the distinction between the two vowels in the input?’

How will you do that? ‘I will use the visual occlusion paradigm. The idea is to train babies to associate /A/ with a concurrent visual reinforcer on one side of a computer screen and /a:/ with a reinforcer on the other side. Once trained, I will play sounds to them that vary systematically in duration and spectral quality. A video camera should catch the babies’ eye gaze direction, telling me whether they categorized the sound they heard as /A/ or /a:/.

This experimental component will be supplemented with an investigation of the input that these babies receive. What /A/’s and /a:/’s do their mothers produce, and does the input explain the baby’s cue-use?’

Are you setting up a baby-lab in the Bungehuis for these experiments? ‘No, because that would mean my participants have to travel to get here. I will make use of a mobile lab. This means I will have to bring along a computer, a video camera, a big screen, and speakers. I will also need a tent that I can erect in the parents’
living room. It is absolutely essential that the babies are not distracted by any toys lying around, as these would be infinitely more interesting to the children than my experiment. Obviously, I am going to need a car, as this is too much to take with me on the train, but more importantly, I will need a driver’s license. I am taking lessons now, so that I can actually start collecting data in January.

What does your average day look like? ‘Besides taking driving lessons, I am currently busy trying to synthesize the /A/ and /a:/ sounds that I need for my experiment. I am generating these sounds with the Praat program, that allows me to manipulate spectral quality and duration, but the sounds that come out sound unfriendly. I am afraid they will make my participants cry. So now I am trying to make them sound sweet and friendly, which is not an easy task, I can tell you. With a million euros... I would set up a baby-lab with eye tracker somewhere in Noord-Holland. Or even better, I would go for a truck driver’s license, buy a truck and set up a truly mobile baby-lab. But hiring someone to recruit babies would be great too.’

Does your work relate to cognition and learnability? ‘One component of my research is actually a learnability simulation on a computer. In my study, I will combine information about cue use by babies from the experiment with information on the availability of these cues in the input. I would not be surprised to find that babies lean on duration as a cue more than spectral quality. However, that cue may not be clearly present in the input, as adult speakers of Dutch rely more on spectral quality. That would tell us something about the cognitive biases babies bring to the language learning task.’

www.fon.hum.uva.nl/titia/

New, new, new...

How does a human learner’s brain create the categories of language such as the sound “k”, the word “cat”, or the morpheme “-ing”? How are the connections between these categories made? For example the fact that “-ing” can combine with verbs but not with nouns, and that words can start with the sound sequence “kn” in Dutch but not in English. Paul Boersma with his team will develop a theoretical model of such issues using a mutually feeding exchange with computer simulations of virtual learners and with laboratory experiments involving human participants.

Boersma NWO VICI grant
Evelien Keizer does her research within the framework of Functional Discourse Grammar (FDG), a new version of Functional Grammar that takes discourse acts as the basic unit of analysis. The year 2008 was a very good and fruitful year: the biennial International Conference in Functional Grammar in London was a big success, and Oxford University Press approved a proposal to write a textbook on Functional Discourse Grammar, which means she will be able to spend a lot of her time doing what she likes most: writing.

Evelien Keizer: ‘FDG-based research has a strong typological basis. Many are looking for broad patterns in language use by means of cross-linguistic comparison. This is not my approach: I am not a typologist. I try to add to the picture by investigating the nuances and subtleties of one language, English, to see whether these agree with the model. FDG should be able to account for differences between languages as well as language internal subtleties. What I like about FDG as a framework is that it is ambitious: it wants to make use of every level of linguistic analysis, syntax, pragmatics, semantics, etc. to explain language use. However, working within this framework does not mean that I ignore good ideas from other research traditions. It is good to be eclectic and open-minded.’

Can you give a concrete example of something you examined in FDG? ‘At the FG-conference in London I presented a paper with Kees Hengeveld about approximation. An example in English is

New, new, new...
Languages in the cold: Cecilia Odé is going to document and investigate an Eastern Siberian language, Tundra Yukagir, that is threatened with extinction. In Northern Canada Joke Schuit has started studying the Inuit Sign language also threatened with extinction.
sort of’. You can use this expression literally, to say that something is of a certain kind. It is also possible to use ‘sort of’ to indicate that it is only by approximation the thing mentioned. An example is ‘a sort of car’ meaning not really a car, but something like it. Obviously, if you want to investigate phenomena such as approximation, you need to know the language well. Luckily I do and so I can test the validity of the model at a deeper level of analysis. Testing specific examples and then the model is typical for how I work. The model has to be learnable, and ties in with the ACLC learnability theme.

I find the English examples in corpora and on the internet. I do not make much use of statistical testing, since I tend to be more interested in the exceptions than in the rule; I try to find many different instances of the phenomenon I study and use them to illustrate the points I want to make. I make much use of the BNC (British National Corpus) and a much smaller but syntactically tagged corpus, the ICE-GB (International Corpus of English, Great Britain).

What does your average day look like? ‘That depends on whether I have many practical things to do. If I do, then I prefer to start with those. If not, I like to write all day. During the semester, teaching takes up quite some time. I teach five courses a year. Some courses are given every other year, for example Functional Discourse Grammar and Fuzzy Grammar. In a way, these two courses are each other’s opposites, content-wise. In FDG, you have to draw strict boundaries between categories and pigeon-hole everything clearly, whereas in Fuzzy Grammar the main idea is that there are no such strict boundaries.

You do not really need a lot of money to do this kind of research. If I got a big grant, I would probably start a large project and hire several PhD’s. Or I would travel all over the world and give guest lectures at places where people are interested in FDG, but have no money to hire someone.’

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Scientific Output

Articles in refereed journals 54
Refereed book chapters 73
Non refereed book chapters 24
Books 5
Books edited 17
PhD theses 10
Other publications 38
Lectures, posters, reviews 339

Finances

Budget 2008: 2.68 million euro
UvA contribution: 64%
External: 36%

Staff in 2008 (in fte’s)

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<td>Professors</td>
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<td><strong>Total research staff</strong></td>
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<td>Supporting staff</td>
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Selected publications in 2008


New, new, new...
Adult speakers of Dutch can identify nonce words as nouns on the basis of the fact that they have a richer possible syllable-structure than verbs. This may help children in acquiring Dutch to make this categorization distinction.

Don & Erkelens
What does the ACLC do?

The Amsterdam Centre 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 the variation in languages across the world? The ACLC works on more than 80 languages including sign languages in order to come up with answers to these questions. 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 threatened languages.

The ACLC is organised in Research Groups. These are of different sizes and some focus on an externally funded project. They are approved for a limited period and regularly evaluated in order to achieve flexibility in the organization.

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<td>4. Encoding grammatical information</td>
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<td>6. Franconian tones</td>
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<td>7. Functional Discourse Grammar</td>
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<td>8. Iconicity in language use, language learning, and language change</td>
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<td>9. Integration of information in conversations</td>
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<td>10. Language Creation</td>
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<td>15. Praat</td>
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<td>16. Revitalizing older linguistic documentation</td>
<td>Ottto Zwartjes &amp; Norval Smith</td>
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<td>17. Sign Language Acquisition and Processing</td>
<td>Anne Baker</td>
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<td>19. Typological Database Systems</td>
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<td>21. Xlinguistic SemantiX</td>
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