Faculty of Humanities
Amsterdam Center for Language and Communication

Summary Annual Report 2009

FULL DIGITAL VERSION: WWW.HUM.UVA.NL/ACLC-JAARVERSLAG2009
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 variation in languages across the world? The ACLC aims to come up with answers to these central questions in linguistics. 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.

Anne Baker

After leading ACLC for seven years, prof. dr Anne E. Baker stepped down as director of ACLC in september 2009. The ACLC community is very grateful to her for the work she has done, and especially for the results she has obtained through a system of quality control that has led to the best possible evaluations of the institute. Anne continues to contribute to the ACLC programme as a full professor of Psycholinguistics, Language Pathology, and Sign Linguistics.
Interview with Olga Fischer

Olga Fischer’s research is influenced by observations in everyday life. She approaches questions about language change in relation to language acquisition, referring to the general cognitive principles that underlie both. She is especially interested in the workings of analogy, and in how far language structures reflect structures in the natural world. This interest also led to a project on iconicity, which Olga set up together with the University of Zurich in 1997. In 2009, she co-organized the Seventh International Symposium on Iconicity in Language and Literature in Toronto.

Can you explain in a few sentences what your research is about? My main interest is language change, the question why English is now so different from Dutch, while they were once rather alike. More precisely, I am interested in the interplay between external and internal factors and how these lead to changes in the syntax of a language.

What do you mean by external and internal factors? External factors can be invasions, such as those by the Vikings or the Normans, which radically changed English, or the influence of the use of Latin in the Church. Internal factors are those coming from within the language system itself, related to economy on the one hand (e.g. ‘ease of effort’), and the need for expressiveness on the other, in order to preserve efficient communication. Language change can be driven by both external and internal factors simultaneously and these factors are highly interdependent.

New, new, new…
Monolingual Dutch children from 4-6 use the neuter pronoun *het* ‘it’ as an object pronoun to refer to mass nouns and *hem* ‘him’ for count nouns, regardless of their grammatical gender.

*Hulk*
Do you consider it conceivable that languages change without external influences? Currently, a popular theory used to explain system-internal language change is the theory of grammaticalisation. Grammaticalisation describes how lexical elements can take on grammatical properties. An example in English would be the verbal expression to be going to. The verb go has lost its referential meaning in this construction and now often functions as an auxiliary of future tense. Many linguists use the theory of grammaticalisation to explain and even predict language change. In my view, though, such a use of the theory is unwarranted. The theory describes processes of change, but cannot explain them. For example, the verb will has taken on grammatical properties in the course of time. It used to mean ‘to wish, desire’, and then became an auxiliary verb and even a clitic (I’ll). The next step according to grammaticalisation theory would be that ‘ll becomes an affix. But that seems highly unlikely to me, as the English grammar system does not allow for such affixation. What is wrong with the theory is that it looks at language as if it changes by itself, without speakers being involved.

What is your alternative? I am much more interested in the neurological and psychological processes that go on inside a language learner and adult user. Learners don’t grammaticalize, they simply try to grasp the language in their environment by means of general cognitive principles and the situational context, thus learning to become successful communicators. Analogy is a very important factor in my view. Every language-learning child has to find patterns in the linguistic input, and I think that, when a gap or problematic spot occurs in a language requiring a solution, new structures will arise which are inspired by, and analogous to, patterns that are already present in the language system. In this way, going to could take on grammatical properties because it often appeared in a position similar to that of the English auxiliaries.

Where do you think your field stands in ten years from now? I think that theories of language change involving shifts in parameter settings (which do have their use as a model to set up hypotheses) will be found to be less useful in explaining change because change starts out very much as a local phenomenon.
Theories involving an innate grammar have already started to lose terrain and advances in neuroscience and computer modeling will marginalize them even further, I would say. Within the context of language change the analogy-based model for language learning will probably become more prominent, in part because the theory lends itself well to be studied by means of computer models, and because analogy is such a widespread, basic principle, and evolutionarily very old.

*Is this the kind of research you have always dreamed of working on?* The love for language and reading has been a part of my life since I was a child. I started my academic career as a philologist, and I used to be much more focused on medieval literature than on language, but through a series of coincidences I ended up in linguistics. I still like to combine literature and linguistics. Our project on iconicity brings together people working on iconicity in literature and language. Iconicity is very closely related to analogy. Analogy is a very basic form of iconicity. In that sense everything that I do is connected and I am returning to where I started.

*What are your academic hopes and dreams?* I am not ambitious in the sense that I dream of large sums of money to start a big project. Perhaps I could use some money to solve the shortage of teachers here at the department. That would also free up much of my time. Delicate and fine work is more up my alley. What I enjoy most is what I do now: observing and explaining change. Sometimes I hear a phrase I never heard before. That makes me think. Where did that phrase come from? Why did the person say it like that? Such observations sometimes result in a new research question. Fascinating!

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**New, new, new…**
An efficient grammar is organized in a top-down and depth-first manner.

*Hengeveld & Smit*
Interview with Dirk Jan Vet
Technician Phonetics/ACLC

Working at the ACLC is a party for Dirk Jan Vet. Enter his office and you will see electronic machinery piled to the ceiling and a huge tent frame spanning the room like an arch. Cabinets filled with wires, gadgets and small electronic devices can no longer be opened because new hardware fills the aisle. In the middle of all this, Dirk Jan is joyfully soldering, programming, designing and testing custom-made research equipment.

What does your job at the ACLC entail exactly? I am a technician, affiliated with the phonetics department of the ACLC, but I also assist other members of the ACLC. On request I design and build research tools and software that is customized for specific experimentation. This entails electronic devices, for instance to aid precision in reaction time experiments, but also software programming. I can build PRAAT scripts or other software needed to collect or analyze data. In addition, I am responsible for the maintenance of the studio, which provides recording equipment in combination with a soundproof room that is used for many experiments. Our newest assets include EEG (Electroencephalography) facilities, for which I am currently fitting out the studio. In a nutshell, I try to supply whatever technological needs researchers have for their studies. My work varies from writing small scripts to designing complete custom-made experimental set-ups.

Why are you building a tent in your office? The tent will be used by Titia Benders, who is going to test babies in their homes. The tent is to avoid distraction. For me, this is one of the more laborious projects. The babies are going to watch stimuli on a big screen and then two cameras will record their eye movements. For this we needed to adjust the tent so that a big screen and a beamer can be attached. The video needs to be projected at a very small distance, so we had to buy a special short-throw beamer. To be able to synchronize the

New, new, new...
ADHD children have problems both in the pragmatic and the morphosyntactic domain.
Parigger
recorded video with the exact moments that sounds were played, I built a device that shows an infrared signal at the moment the sound starts. The camera records this signal and is also synchronized with the other camera, to make sure the frames don’t shift.

What do you find most exciting about being a research technician? My heart belongs to electronics; I was trained as an electro-technician at the TU Delft. What I enjoy most is building a complete system from scratch, developing an interface that combines both electronic design and smart software solutions.

Can you give an example? Our custom-made reaction time measuring device is a good example. I developed this device to check how precise experimentation software is. It includes a light sensor directed at a screen that records exactly when a stimulus appears. The button of the keyboard is also directly connected to the device, so that a person’s reaction time can be measured extremely precisely. Our device does not suffer from imprecision caused by background computing processes or by delays in the keyboard and screen. Such delays are not a big problem if they are stable, but it appears that there is much variation in it. It is very exciting to solve this with such a custom-made solution.

Is this your dream job? Absolutely! It is a job with much variation: I never know beforehand what colleagues will need and I am usually working on several projects simultaneously. It is also a wonderful feeling to finish a project, to see that it works and to hear that people are satisfied. Before, I worked as a supervisor at IBM in the laptop repair branch, but it suits me much better to be working with the materials myself and to build things from scratch. Working together with Ton Wempe, our retired technician who is still visiting the lab once a week, is also very fruitful and pleasant.

What is your advice to ACLC researchers? Often I find that people still have naïve views of what is technically possible. We can do more than most people think. I certainly encourage everyone with technical needs to drop by! We have our studio with recording equipment, a modern eye tracker, EEG on the way and who knows what else is possible. I may be able to realize your experimental ideas and wishes.

New, new, new…
A language’s phonology influences the way in which that language is perceived.
Boersma & Hamann
For Lotte Henrichs, the year 2009 was intense, but successful. She visited the Harvard School of Education and she finished her PhD thesis. On top of that, she managed to get a position at Utrecht University as post doctoral research fellow.

*Can you explain in a few sentences what your research is about?* I investigated to what extent parents prepare their children for the academic discourse practices that are common in educational settings.

*Did you say ‘Academic’? Your subjects are three years old!* The term academic refers to the language of instruction that is typical of school situations. I actually based my operationalization on concepts from the written domain. Academic language tends to be more abstract, new words or concepts are introduced, and topics outside the here-and-now are discussed. Also, the ‘instructor’ assumes a position of authority. I found that parents make use of this academic register too. In my data, for example, this was illustrated by a conversation over lunch between a little boy and his mother about a crack in the tabletop. Upon noting that the table was broken (‘Tafel kapot’), the boy’s mother explained that the wood had started to *warp* (werken), and she explained what that means. In my study, I investigated to what extent parents make use of this register, and whether that helps their children succeed at school.

*How did you investigate this?* I video-recorded parent-child interactions when reading a book, drawing, building a marble slide alley, and when having lunch time conversations. I followed 25 families in total.
Luckily, the children weren’t fazed much by the fact that they were recorded. The children were all monolingual, went to day care centres for a maximum of two days, and had a maximum of two older siblings at most.

What did you find? I found that there is a relation between skills often associated with later school success and the use of the academic register at home. For example, we found the children’s vocabulary scores to be positively related to their mothers’ lexical diversity. Also, if the mothers’ language was more complex, their children would score higher on our syntactic awareness measure. The use of academic language really does seem to make a difference, and this effect does not have a one-to-one relation to socio-economic status.

What is most exciting about your research? I studied a phenomenon that has not been clearly defined in the literature. Finding operationalizations was the most tricky part of my study. There were times when I had doubts: What am I doing? Is early academic language a real phenomenon? I think I managed to make a reasonable case for the existence of different registers in early infant-directed speech. It gives me confidence, but also great joy, that my results seem to resonate with the ideas of people working in the field. They have shown a lot of interest.

New, new, new…
Even though children with SLI perform much more poorly compared to the control children, they are sensitive to the morpho-phonological constraints on past tense production.
Rispens

What are your academic hopes and dreams? I would really like to follow children for a longer period of time. I would like to know, for example, to what extent early experience with academic language will lead to better comprehension skills, at say, 8 or 10 years old. I also hope that studies such as mine will raise awareness that different registers exist, and that people can prepare their children for school by making use of those registers every now and then. For many children, that would probably make the transition from home to school easier. Fortunately, my involvement with this topic does not stop when I finish my PhD. I have already started working as a postdoc in Utrecht, on a project that investigates to what extent kindergarten teachers seize a science lesson (talking about air pressure or reflection) as an opportunity to use academic language.
In 2009, Jan Don managed to publish two papers in *Morphology* (both co-authored with Suzanne Aalberse), his favourite journal, and together with his colleagues he won the ‘facultaire onderwijsprijs’ (the annual award of the Faculty of Humanities, for excellence in education). Another highlight was Marian Erkelens PhD defense, where he acted as co-promotor.

Can you summarize your research in one sentence? The overarching theme in my work is morphology. One of my interests, for example, is conversion, the notion that you can convert a noun into a verb (‘de loop’) or a verb into a noun (‘het feesten’) in Dutch without morphologically marking them as such. I am working on a paper together with Eva van Lier, in which we compared Dutch conversion with a similar phenomenon present in flexible languages.

What are flexible languages? Samoan and Kharia are examples of flexible languages. These languages appear to lack the distinction between nouns and verbs. In Dutch and English, derivational morphology identifies a word as belonging to a particular syntactic category. In Dutch, a word ending in *-heid* has to be a noun. Flexible languages also have morphology, but the morphology does not serve to categorize the word syntactically. This means that in Kharia, you can string together a number of root forms that may be marked for number and case, but that cannot be identified as nouns or verbs until the phrase reaches the final stage of derivation. For example, the string ‘India+GEN’ ‘person+pl’ abroad+GEN’ ‘person+GEN+PL’ ‘appearance’ can either function as a noun or a verb depending on its syntactic context. We call such languages late categorizing languages. In our paper, we ask ourselves to what extent flexibility in Samoan and Kharia and conversion in Dutch are the same phenomena: our conclusion is that they essentially are the same, but in ‘late categorizing’ languages, the element that is categorized is generally much larger than in ‘early categorizing languages’. The implication for languages such as Dutch is that, although it may seem as if all lexical words have a category, in truth they only receive such a category in the syntax, just as in flexible languages.
What sources do you use in your research?
For our conversion study we depend on existing grammars of Kharia and Samoan – a fantastic grammar of Kharia has been produced by John Peterson – and on our intuitions about Dutch. In the work that I am doing together with Suzanne Aalberse on inflectional paradigms, we make use of the dialect databases that have been put together by The Meertens Institute. And I also make use of psychological experimentation. For example, together with a student, I am investigating by means of a priming experiment whether forms like *breken* and *breuk* share the same root form.

Where will the study of morphology be 10 years from now? I hope that theoretical linguistics will have gained a more prominent position within cognition research. Over the past few decades, linguists have gained a wealth of knowledge about the structure of language, but we are not always being heard.

It is sometimes painful to see how work in cognitive science is based on naïve conceptions of language: I’ve seen definitions of a ‘word’ as: that which is between two spaces. Money and resources are being invested more and more in (neuro)cognitive research. I think such methods can be fruitfully employed to test some of the hypotheses that theoretical linguistics has on offer. I particularly like the work of Alec Marantz in this respect. He exemplifies how the methods of cognitive science can be used to test hypotheses from theoretical linguistics. We should all follow Alec Marantz!

What is most exciting about your work?
First and foremost, I enjoy solving a linguistic puzzle, analyzing a set of data to try and find structure and patterns in it. It is such a great moment when you suddenly see how the language works. But I also enjoy simply reading articles, learning new things. And I have a passion for teaching. I must say that I am very happy to work here. I have the perfect job that gives me the freedom to take my research in the directions I want to go, and the ACLC is a stimulating place where people from very different backgrounds meet, respect each other, and work together.

New, new, new...
SLI children, whether bilingual or monolingual, are far better at producing verb inflection in Dutch in verb final contexts (embedded clauses) than in verb-second (main clauses) due to the complexity of the additional verb movement operation.

*Baker, de Jong & Weerman*
Judith Rispens is working as a post-doctoral research fellow on a Veni-project, and 2009 was a year of harvest. After a long period of data collection that did not allow much time for producing scientific output, last year was marked by data analysis, writing papers and attending conferences. A fruitful year, culminating in an accepted paper at the Boston University Conference on Language Development and three additional manuscripts in the pipeline.

What are the questions you try to answer with your research? I would like to gain a deeper understanding of SLI (Specific Language Impairment), and I would like to tease apart SLI and dyslexia. The term SLI refers to a range of different impairments that all lead to a delay in linguistic development while non-verbal development is unharmed. Children with dyslexia have severe problems with the acquisition of orthography but often also show some mild oral language delays, whereas children with SLI have prominent difficulties with oral language development, but often also show problems in literacy development. The two syndromes thus show an overlap and one of the questions that is often posed is whether dyslexia and SLI are two separate syndromes or actually the same disorder.

What is your approach? Before, it was assumed that SLI could be clinically diagnosed with a non-word repetition task (NWR). However, in earlier work, I found that this is not necessarily true. Also, there is mixed evidence on whether children with dyslexia are impaired on NWR. In this study, I have tried to isolate the skills needed to repeat non-words successfully. In the task, children have to identify phonemes properly, remember their order of appearance, retrieve them from memory, and articulate them. I tested 100 six-year old children on a number of tasks tapping into these skills. This way, I am hoping to find answers to questions such as: Do children with SLI have smaller vocabularies? Are their lexical representations underdeveloped? Do they have problems with phonemic awareness? And importantly, do I find differences in response patterns between ‘normal’ children, children with SLI and children with both SLI and dyslexia? A second aim is to study the interaction between phonology and morphology: do their
phonological deficits impact on processes such as past tense inflection and plural noun inflection which are driven by phonology?

What did you find? First of all, I found that children with language and reading impairments actually resemble younger, typically developing children. This suggests that children with language and reading impairments do not use a different mechanism for non-word repetition, but that their system is developing more slowly. Secondly, it turns out that children with SLI-only do not have serious problems with non-word repetition, just like the children with dyslexia-only. Especially children with SLI and additional dyslexia have problems. This suggests that there is an interaction between learning how to speak and learning how to read and write, which is a fascinating finding. Uncovering this interaction is a main aim for future research.

What is most exciting about your research? This kind of research can be rather trying at times. A big challenge, for example, is to create tasks that are suitable for children with normal language development and those with severe SLI and/or dyslexia. It is not unlikely to obtain ceiling or floor effects. Also, children are prone to drop out; they sometimes press anything but the `no' button. On top of this it is not easy to find test subjects. When all these hurdles are overcome, it is very exciting to find new patterns in the data, especially when these patterns match your intuitions.

Where does SLI research stand in 10 years from now? Researchers will no longer speak of SLI as one heterogeneous group. There will be much more diagnostic differentiation so that more specific impairments can be identified. Paradoxically, more differentiation also means that it will be increasingly difficult to create a sufficiently large sample for scientific experimentation. Genetic approaches also seem promising for future research: SLI appears to be genetically transferrable. Furthermore, I expect this field to become less modular due to the interactions found between linguistic processes and more general executive functions. SLI research will no longer be restricted to the field of linguistics, but will move towards cognitive science.

What is your academic dream? I would really like to do a large longitudinal study into SLI. However, this dream is very difficult to accomplish. This was actually my goal within the current project, but it was not possible within the available time. Much can be learned by following children with SLI from 3,5 years old until the age of 10. Another dream would be to have an ERP lab. Measures of behavior are quite coarse. ERP data is much more detailed and this would greatly help me to find out more about what fascinates me most: what causes language impairment and what can we do to help these children?
Scientific Output in 2009

- Refereed journal articles: 56
- Non refereed journal articles: 7
- Refereed book chapters: 63
- Non refereed book chapters: 15
- Books: 6
- Books edited: 22
- PhD theses: 12
- Other publications: 54
- Lectures, posters, reviews: 299

Staff in 2009 (in fte’s research time)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Tenured</th>
<th>Non-tenured</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full professors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Senior lecturers</td>
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<tr>
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<td><strong>Total research staff</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Supporting staff</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>-</td>
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A choice of excellent publications in 2009 (ACLC authors in boldface)


Many more excellent publication to be found in ACLC’s full annual report, to be found at **www.hum.uva.nl/aclc-jaarverslag2009**.
## Finances

Budget 2009: € 2571850  
UvA contribution: 57%  
External: 43%  

## Research groups

The ACLC is organized in research groups. These are of different sizes and some focussed 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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<th>Co-ordinator(s)</th>
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<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>
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<tr>
<td>3. Comparative Slavic Verbal Aspect</td>
<td>Janneke Kalsbeek &amp; René Genis</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Crosslinguistic Semantics</td>
<td>Frank Veltman (ILLC)</td>
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<td>5. DP/NP in the Germanic and Romance languages: structure, semantics, acquisition and change</td>
<td>Harry Perridon &amp; Petra Sleeman</td>
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<td>6. Franconian tones</td>
<td>Paul Boersma</td>
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<td>7. Functional categories in analytic languages (SinoKwa)</td>
<td>Enoch Aboh &amp; Umberto Ansaldo</td>
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<td>8. Functional Discourse Grammar</td>
<td>Evelien Keizer</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Iconicity</td>
<td>Olga Fischer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Language Creation</td>
<td>Norval Smith &amp; Umberto Ansaldo</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. Modelling the evolution of language</td>
<td>Bart de Boer &amp; Jelle Zuidema (ILLC)</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. Multiparty Discourse and Anthropology of Education</td>
<td>Anne Bannink &amp; Jet van Dam van Isselt</td>
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<td>14. Oncology-related communication disorders</td>
<td>Frans Hilgers</td>
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<td>15. Parts of Speech</td>
<td>Jan Don</td>
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<td>16. Praat</td>
<td>Paul Boersma</td>
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<td>17. Revitalizing older linguistic documentation</td>
<td>Otto Zwartjes</td>
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<td>19. Tundra Yukagir</td>
<td>Cecilia Odé</td>
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<td>20. Typological Database System</td>
<td>Kees Hengeveld</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Typology of Focus and Topic</td>
<td>Enoch Aboh</td>
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New, new, new…  
L2 learning is both a matter of knowledge accumulation and of an increase in the efficiency with which that knowledge can be processed in knowledge-access tasks (listening and reading) and in knowledge-retrieval tasks (speaking and writing).  
_Hulstijn, van Gelderen & Schoonen_
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