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An interview with Daniel Perrin

Interview by: *Karim Sadeghi*

Daniel Perrin is Professor of Applied Linguistics, Vice President at Zurich University of Applied Sciences, President of the International Association of Applied Linguistics AILA, Board Member of the Swiss Academy of Social Sciences and Humanities, as well as Editor of the International Journal of Applied Linguistics and the de Gruyter Handbook of Applied Linguistics series. His areas of research are media linguistics, methodology of applied linguistics, text production research, and analysis of language use in professional communication. Before his academic career, Daniel Perrin worked as a journalist and writing coach. This long-term experience in professional practice has fostered his transdisciplinary research. Today, he is still engaged in training and coaching media and communication professionals as well as leaders in education, economy, and politics in the framework of transdisciplinary projects. For more information see: www.danielperrin.net. What comes below is an email-based interview with Daniel Perrin (DP) conducted by the editor of *IJLTR* (KS).



KS: Thank you dear Prof. Perrin for agreeing to do this interview with IJLTR editor. As an entry question, could you please briefly introduce yourself, highlighting your educational and academic background as well as your current position?

DP: When I started my professional career in 1979 as a broadcast journalist, we never asked each other “What did you study at university?”, we asked “What university degree did you drop out of?” Practical application was the real world. Theory, in contrast, belonged to the ivory tower full of researchers lacking life-experience, unable to do what they knew about. We joined George Bernard Shaw in claiming that those, who can, do, and those, who can’t, teach. Later, when I then entered the domain of research myself I recognized that many people there thought exactly the reverse. Now, theory was the real world ... whereas practice was a wasteland of blind activism and a desert of ignorance. Thus ... knowing both fields from personal experience, some colleagues and I finally opted for a third way and set up the Institute of Applied Media Studies as a joint enterprise of researchers, experts, and professionals. This was twenty years ago. Today, the Institute of Applied Media Studies, IAM, is where 500 students learn that practice and theory always interact, where 94% of all alumni are working in their preferred positions, where external funding for research amounts to about half a million euros per year, and where graduate courses, mid-career programs, research, and consulting all focus on reflecting in practice and practical theory. And it is only one of many vibrant institutes at the Zurich University of Applied Sciences where I work as the University Vice President and the Dean of the School of Applied Linguistics.

KS: You started your professional work as a radio presenter and media journalist and then as a language teacher in the tourism sector moving up the ladder to a university professorship position. Could you tell us about the motivation for this career change and the challenges you faced along the way?

DP: After fifteen years of radio, TV, print and the emerging online journalism, I needed to dig deeper in order to find out what makes professional writers in general and journalists in particular tick. Research in journalism tends to reboot on a daily basis; ideally, research in academia is more sustainable. But what I dreamed of then was not yet reality so I decided to combine research lines from applied linguistics, media studies, and writing research to foster the emergence of a field in which professional text production in individual, organizational, and societal contexts could be investigated from theoretically and practically relevant angles.

KS: You have a long history of involvement in various societies and organizations the longest of which is your service at AILA. I am sure most of our readers will be somewhat familiar with AILA and its scope. Could you highlight the main responsibilities of AILA as well as your current and past positions within the organization and how you were selected as the chair of the most prestigious applied linguistics association?

DP: The goal of the International Association of Applied Linguistics AILA is to bring together thousands of applied linguists and 40 state associations from around the world. This organization gives researchers the opportunity to share their knowledge. They can do this at conferences, by joining the association's AILA research network, using the website or the association's mobile app. The International Association for Applied Linguistics helps language researchers and practitioners find people who are engaged in the same or similar, complementary work, no matter where they are in the world. The president of this worldwide organization is selected by delegates from all its national affiliates. Together, they form the AILA International Committee, AILA's decision-making body.

KS: What benefits does AILA offer its members? Some of our readers may wish to know whether there are national affiliates of AILA and/or how they can establish or link their current societies to AILA.

DP: AILA includes 40 national Applied Linguistics organizations worldwide, the so-called AILA national affiliates. All of their individual members benefit from the AILA global networks. In new affiliates, people tend to ask: But why AILA? What are the benefits of being or joining an AILA National Affiliate? – The answer is: emergence and global scale. Together, we are more than the sum of our parts. Together, we grow through intercultural and transdisciplinary practices in research on language and language use. Together, we leverage our impact as researchers, teachers, and enablers. And together, we can make a change and can make Applied Linguistics matter.

KS: A recent major course you completed in 2011 after your PhD is 'Habilitation in Applied Linguistics.' Could you tell us about the nature of this course and what habilitation is as well as showcase your findings/claims in the thesis that you wrote at the end of this programme?

DP: In some Western European countries, a habilitation tends to be required for academics who want to become university professors. The habilitation is kind of a second PhD procedure, similar to a PhD thesis and exam, but way larger in scope. Whereas the PhD thesis is meant to provide evidence that a researcher is able to dig deep and bring his or her field forward, the Habilitation thesis and exam are meant to show that an academic can go beyond his or her PhD research and make research matter in academia through excellent contextualization of the knowledge generated in a broader field as well as through inclusive teaching. In my habilitation, I took my PhD work to the next and higher level, transdisciplinarity. The habilitation thesis resulted in a book for both academics and practitioners interested in learning from each other how to sustainably improve practices of newswriting.¹

KS: You have been very active in attracting funds for research projects. One of the most recent international projects you were involved with was completed with the collaboration of five universities from Switzerland, Norway and the UK is titled "Innovative Data Visualization and Visual-Numeric Literacy (INDVIL)". Could you please briefly describe the content of the project and in what ways it is innovative?

DP: The main aim of the INDVIL project is to examine how innovative forms of data visualization can influence public access to and use of publicly available data. To achieve this aim, the project team has studied conditions concerning both the production and consumption sides of the communication process, as well as the semiotic, aesthetic and democratic qualities characterizing the data visualization.

KS: Almost all your writing and your co-authored and (co-)edited publications target writing itself from 'Writing strategies at the workplace' published in 2003 to 'The pragmatics of financial communication: (it appeared in 2018²). Could you share with us how you developed an interest in researching writing and how you have stuck to it for nearly two decades, dissimilar to what most applied linguists do moving from one branch to another? If you would like to nominate one of your works for an international best publication prize or would recommend it to our readers which one would it be and why?

DP: Writing has long been a relevant mode of communication. With digitalization and globalization, writing has become even more important. At the same time, writing in natural settings such as workplaces has remained widely underresearched. For example, little research has been done on the digital literacy shift from focused writing to fragmented writing by-the-way and the related change in mixing different varieties and languages.³ Focused writing is enacted in dedicated sessions of writing where writers try to focus sustainably on the production of one specific text. It requires a conscious use of language(s) and results in carefully crafted, coherent,

and mostly longer texts such as letters, articles, or monographs. In contrast, writing by-the-way is part of a communicative behavior by which writers use ubiquitous media to manage contacts on all available channels all the time and everywhere in a quasi-multitasking way. Writing by-the-way therefore results in highly fragmented interactions with micro contributions such as blog posts, status messages or likes on social media. In these products, semiotic codes, languages, and varieties from the writers' individual repertoires are combined at a fast syntagmatic pace and with a high paradigmatic density. Finding out more about how writing practices are enacted and can be improved is socially relevant and academically fascinating. It requires combining epistemes from various academic and professional disciplines. This is more than enough for one life of mine. It means digging deeper by reaching further. I would definitely recommend this approach to scholars who dare to ask – and repeat – a question that really matters.

KS: A number of your scholarly publications (both books and papers) are not in English. Do you have an idea whether any of these have been translated into English or other languages, given that you also have an active interest in translation? What are some of the main themes you have covered in these non-English manuscripts and how would English readers have access to the content of these works?

DP: English as a lingua franca allows us to connect with academics worldwide. The price non-native speakers of English pay is a loss of linguistic – and therefore cultural – rootedness. So, I aim at combining both the local and the global approach of doing research. My publications in German and French can hardly be translated into English since they are closely connected to local data and contexts. For the publications in English I draw on data that can easily be recontextualized and understood in transcultural academic contexts. Such transcultural approaches and publications of mine have been translated in many languages, for example Chinese, Finnish, and Greek.

KS: You are currently the co-editor of International Journal of Applied Linguistics. How challenging and rewarding is this role? What are the major themes covered by the journal and does the journal follow the policies set by AILA?

DP: I consider co-editing the *International Journal of Applied Linguistics (InJAL)* an opportunity to serve the research communities interested in our field. *InJAL* publishes articles that focus on the mediation between expertise about language and experience of language. The journal seeks to develop an awareness of the way language works, how it affects people's lives, and what interventions are desirable and feasible to make in differing domains of language use and learning. In contrast to the *AILA Review*, *InJAL* operates completely independently from AILA. However, it has long offered the AILA Research Networks some publication space in each issue.

KS: As the president of AILA, what do you think are some of the hot topics in applied linguistics that have so far been ignored and should accordingly be given further attention both by members and researchers? How do you predict the future of AILA and applied linguistics?

DP: I consider Applied Linguistics a genuinely transdisciplinary endeavour. Exploring the proximity of Applied Linguistics and Transdisciplinarity, for the benefit of both language researchers and practitioners, could become one of the very strong developments in the field.⁴ Transdisciplinarity (TD) means to start research from a socially relevant question, include all the relevant stakeholders and disciplines and head for mutual learning throughout the research process. This helps find theoretically, empirically, and practically grounded answers to the research question and can foster sustainable solutions to problems that matter. Science brings in tools that enable organizations to identify experts' tacit knowledge and make it explicit and available to the entire organization. Together, they shape research questions, develop new conceptual frames that help them think out of the box, capture and analyze data, build theories

and compose data-based good practice case stories that help them implement the findings in the organization and beyond. In such an approach, stakeholders from academic and practical fields collaborate as researchers to learn from each other and develop theoretically and practically relevant knowledge and skills.

KS: AILA's major event in 2020 will be the world congress. Could you please give us a bit of information on how decisions are made about where and when to hold this prestigious event and what the major differences are between AILA2020 and previous congresses?

DP: Every three years, AILA World Congresses bring together two to three thousand applied linguists from all over the globe. The venues are selected by the AILA International Committee, based on national affiliates' applications that have to follow the AILA World Congress bidbook. The AILA 2020 World Congress, in Groningen (Netherlands) features novel presentation and discussion formats that foster academic discourse and mutual learning between established researchers and their new colleagues bringing in fresh ideas and approaches.

KS: Are you happy with being an applied linguist and the president of AILA? If you were given a second chance to select your career, would you choose to be an applied linguist again? Why?

DP: What a question! I would definitely do it again, same field, same way. In a globalizing world with our present challenges, language matters more than ever: the language of the mind, the language of the listening, and the language of heart. This is what Applied Linguistics is all about.

KS: Thank you again Prof. Perrin for the time and the input. Anything else that you would like to share or any advice to IJLTR readers/members?

DP: Yes. Dare to be different. And do make a difference.



¹ Perrin, Daniel. (2013). *The linguistics of newswriting*. Amsterdam, New York et al.: John Benjamins.

² Palmieri, Rudi, Perrin, Daniel, & Whitehouse, Marlies (Eds.). (2018). The pragmatics of financial communication. Special Issue of the *International Journal of Business Communication*, 54 (4).

³ Hicks, Troy, & Perrin, Daniel. (2014). Beyond single modes and media. In Eva-Maria Jakobs & Daniel Perrin (Eds.), *Handbook of Writing and Text Production* (Vol. 10, pp. 231–253). Boston: De Gruyter.

⁴ Perrin, Daniel, & Kramsch, Claire. (2018). Transdisciplinarity in applied linguistics. Introduction to the special issue. *ALLA Review*, 31, 1–13.