

Ray Jackendoff

Another Self-Indulgent Report for the Yearbook



Ray Jackendoff was born in Chicago in 1945 and grew up in Philadelphia. He majored in mathematics at Swarthmore College, decided he wasn't smart enough to be a mathematician, and instead went to MIT to study linguistics, where he received his Ph.D. under Noam Chomsky in 1969. After a brief sojourn at UCLA and the RAND Corporation, he accepted a teaching job at Brandeis University, where he has taught ever since. His research is primarily concerned with the system of meaning in natural language and how it is connected with human cognition; his books *Semantics and Cognition*, *Semantic Structures*, and *Languages of the Mind* develop this approach. Along the way, he has delved into the forbidden topic of consciousness in *Consciousness and the Computational Mind*. He is also a clarinetist who has performed extensively in the Boston area and elsewhere, going so far as performing on one occasion as soloist with the Boston Pops. He has combined his musical and cognitive interests in a book coauthored with the composer Fred Lerdahl, *A Generative Theory of Tonal Music*. – Address: Brandeis University, Linguistics and Cognitive Science, Volen Center for Complex Systems, Waltham, MA 02454-9110, USA.

Professionally, the story of my year at the Wissenschaftskolleg is pretty boring: I came to write a book and I wrote it. I don't think this is what the powers that be like to hear. They like to hear about people whose intellectual lives took a completely unexpected turn while in Berlin, whose planned projects were shelved in favor of something far more exciting and interdisciplinary, and who ended up changed forever. In my case, none of these happened. Basically I just sat in front of the computer and wrote as often and as long as I could stand to, fortified by e-mail breaks, lunch and dinner breaks, and a steady diet of Beethoven, Bach, Lasso, Stravinsky, and so forth on the stereo.

When I first received the invitation to Wiko, my plan was indeed mind-bendingly interdisciplinary: to realize a decade-long dream of approaching social cognition from the perspective of my theory of conceptual semantics. But by the time I came to Berlin, another, more urgent project had come along, and the social cognition project had to be shelved. I did trot it out now and then in questions at lunches and colloquia; I'm afraid it became a bit of a joke when I recommended the literature on primate societies to everyone from Rick Shweder to Angela de Benedictis and even Eberhard Jüngel. Maybe I'll be able to get to that project in the next couple of years. But meanwhile the more pressing project had to be done. I suppose I have to say something about it.

The foundations of modern linguistic theory were set in place in 1965 by Noam Chomsky's landmark *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. Chomsky argued that language is best studied as a mental phenomenon and therefore that linguistic theory should be concerned with what goes on in the heads of language users. He further argued that linguistics should be concerned with how children learn language and hence with the cognitive predispositions that make language learning possible. This program places the study of language squarely in the interdisciplinary context of psychology, biology, and neuroscience, a place it has maintained until the present day. However, for a variety of reasons, linguistic theory proper has over the past decades lost its influence within the cognitive sciences at large, while at the same time it has fragmented internally into a collection of partially incompatible subtheories whose practitioners maintain only a dim awareness of one another's existence.

Over the last decade it gradually became clear to me that some of the disarray in the field can be attributed to errors in certain basic technical assumptions of Chomskyan theory: very roughly, the theory attributes too central a role to syntax in the organization of language and not a central enough role to semantics and to the lexicon. These assumptions seemed altogether reasonable in 1965 and in fact lie behind the exuberant flowering of linguistic theory in the subsequent years. However, as such things often do, they rapidly hardened into dogma and then slipped beneath the surface of awareness. My 1997 book *The Architecture of the Language Faculty* discussed these assumptions and proposed an alternative organization for the principles of grammar. My apparent success in discussing this alternative with psychologists, neuroscientists, and linguists of various theoretical stripes persuaded me that, for the health of the field, it was imperative to attempt a full-fledged re-evaluation of linguistic theory from this point of view. The goal was neither to accept Chomsky's program uncritically nor to throw it out altogether (as most of his critics have), but rather to integrate those aspects of it that have stood the test of time with

the new organization of grammar and with the flood of new evidence and theory arising from research in syntax, phonology, semantics, psycholinguistics, cognitive psychology, and neuroscience. It even proved possible to incorporate some speculations on the forbidden but newly fashionable question of the evolution of language, incidentally providing me with a sexy topic for my Wiko colloquium.

It was not hard to get a contract for the book, especially with a title as presumptuous as *Foundations of Language*. During the summer of 1999, I taught a course on the material at the Linguistic Institute at the University of Illinois, in which each successive lecture attracted a larger audience. So I arrived at the Wissenschaftskolleg with a substantial sketch of the book and considerable enthusiasm about its prospects for success. Still, when at last in October I sat down to write, I felt as if I were leaving all my companions behind to climb the mountain solo. Rather to my astonishment, it seemed appropriate to begin with the preface, which you're supposed to write last. And from there on, I basically trudged along all year, with only the occasional midcourse correction, until I reached the end on June 1. The other Fellows seemed envious of my progress; I only felt dogged, perhaps even grimly determined.

From October through December, my old friend Merrill Garrett was a calm and steady source of consultation, solace, and laughs. On a number of occasions when I got stuck, David Olson was kind enough to hear me out, sometimes over coffee, sometimes more interestingly over scotch. Aside from that, it was somewhat of a shock to move from my home environment, full of neuroscientists, computer scientists, and experimental psychologists, where a theoretical linguist is regarded as the next worst thing after a literary historian, to a place where I fell very clearly on the dreaded hard science side of the spectrum. Merrill and I often felt like engineers. What was nevertheless familiar was the near-universal skepticism toward a cognitive approach to human affairs. The only difference was that at home the alternative was Neurotransmitters, while at the Kolleg it was Culture and the ever mysterious *Bindung*. It was fascinating to learn what the other Fellows have spent their lives studying, but I fear my ignorance of the ancients and of Max Weber – as well as my struggles with the veil imposed by the German language – impaired my appreciation of many subtleties. Nevertheless, whatever the differences of intellectual culture, many members of my cohort became good companions and valued friends.

There was however an unexpected turn of events in the formation of *Schwerpunkt Kammernmusik*. Valentina Sandu-Dediu had studied my book on music cognition and was eager to meet me when she visited in November. When she said her project was to be Romanian music of the last fifty

years, I jokingly suggested that, when she returned for her three-month stay in January, she should bring back some contemporary Romanian music for clarinet and piano that we could play together. And she did. Neither of us having any idea how good the other was, we approached the prospect of reading through the music as simply a friendly gesture, with no particular expectations. But in fact we clicked, rather spectacularly, and the pieces by Negrea and Nicolescu (not to mention the Berg pieces) were really worth working on. After a couple of rehearsals we decided it would be fun to make a little concert for the Kolleg. And then her husband Dan Dediu decided to write a piece for us. Every couple of days another few pages would turn up in my *Fach*, and Valentina and I would learn them at our next rehearsal. In the end, the concert was a great success, we performed again in a concert of Dan's music at the Romanian Cultural Institute, and plans are underway to make a CD in Bucharest next summer. So if the Wissenschaftskolleg changed my life in any way, it was in reviving my opportunities and long dormant desires to make music at the highest level.

As a consumer of music, I gorged myself on Berlin's three opera houses and the Philharmonie, though I was less impressed by the orchestras of Berlin than I had expected to be (does any clarinetist in this city play in tune?). At the other pole of culture, Heike Wiese, Karen Wiese, and Kai Reimers did their best to acquaint me with the pubs and ethnic restaurants of Kreuzberg and Schöneberg, the *Biergarten* in Tiergarten, and the vibrant Karneval der Kulturen, providing a jolly counterweight to the sometimes stuffy life of the intellect.

My other major diversion from the Kolleg was the experience of Jewish life in Berlin. After trying out services at five of the seven synagogues in town, I eventually settled in as a Saturday morning regular at the Rykestraße Synagogue in Prenzlauer Berg, a survivor of *Kristallnacht* and the DDR period and now frequented predominantly by Russians. Cantor Oljean Ingster "adopted" me, invited me to his home far out on the eastern border of the city, and on many occasions offered me the honor of chanting haftara. Hermann Simon of the Centrum Judaicum and Joel and Carol Levy of the Ron Lauder Foundation were warm and welcoming; Rabbi Chaim Rozwaski became a good friend. Every week someone different would sit down beside me and tell another fascinating life story. Among them was Irene Runge, director of the Jüdische Kulturverein in Oranienburgerstraße, who invited me to the JKV's joyous Chanuka party and Passover Seder. What I found surprising about all this was its normality: gossiping and complaining and politics just like anywhere else, not what an American might have expected of a community with such tragedy in its recent past. I was moved by Rabbi Rozwaski's repeated injunction to

rejoice that we are still here, although recalling the even worse fate of the communities to the east did tend to dampen my enthusiasm.

The constant backdrop was of course the vibrance and optimism and livability of the city, the cafes, the construction and reconstruction, and the muted but still exciting clash of East and West – all tempered by the weight of recent history. Most Americans come to Europe to see Old Things, but in Berlin one can never escape the last eighty years: the memorial to Walther Rathenau on the corner of Wallotstraße, Gleis 17 in the Grunewald Bahnhof, remnants of the Wall, postcards of the Gendarmenmarkt on fire in 1944 and of the bustle of prewar Potsdamer Platz, and, quietly tucked into the Technology Museum among the steam locomotives and first-class sleeping cars, a boxcar from the transports. Still, it was not hard just to forget it all and to give in to the sheer sensory pleasures of Hackescher Markt, Prenzlauer Berg, Kreuzberg, Charlottenburg, and the precious peaceful Grunewald.

And weaving through all of it was the pleasure of belonging to such an exceptional institution as the Wissenschaftskolleg: the luxurious surroundings, the luxurious care taken of us by *Empfang*, library, kitchen, housekeeping, computer department, Fellows' services, and Eva Hund's German classes. I never ceased being impressed by how much the staff members seemed to like each other and to really enjoy their collective task of tending this curious collection of scholars. Every day I felt honored and privileged to be part of it, to have people like Christine von Arnim, Andrea Friedrich, Barbara Sanders, Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus, Britta Cusack, and Katharina Biegger as my friends and to have Wolf Lepenies as my Boss.

A day after arriving home I was already outside clipping shrubbery away from the house to make space for the painters' ladders. One of the painters mistook me for a landscaper. Welcome back to Real Life.