

■ **Entrevista: Elizabeth Couper-Kuhlen & Marc Swerts**

MIGUEL OLIVEIRA, JR.

Doutor em Linguística. Faculdade de Letras,
Universidade Federal de Alagoas, Brasil.
miguel@fale.ufal.br

PABLO ARANTES

Doutor em Linguística. Faculdade de Letras,
Universidade Federal de São Carlos, Brasil.
pabloarantes@gmail.com

Elizabeth Couper-Kuhlen (EC) é pesquisadora de Linguística Interacional e Diretora do Centro de Excelência em Linguística Interacional, da Universidade de Helsinki, na Finlândia. Nos últimos vinte anos, o trabalho de Couper-Kuhlen tem estado cada vez mais centrado no campo de estudos que passou a ser conhecido como “linguística interacional”, que estuda o uso da linguagem na interação social. Duas linhas de investigação a que a pesquisadora vem se dedicando mais recentemente são o estudo dos recursos verbais, vocais e gestuais usados para a expressão de emoção e de estados afetivos na conversação e a reformulação do fenômeno da combinação de construções sintáticas como um processo dinâmico na conversação. Elizabeth Couper-Kuhlen publicou dezenas de artigos em periódicos de prestígio internacional e é autora de livros importantes na área da prosódia, entre os quais *Introduction to English Prosody* (1986), que se tornou uma referência clássica no campo, *English Speech Rhythm: Form and function in everyday verbal interaction* (1993) e *Language in Time: The rhythm and tempo of spoken interaction* (1999). Já ocupou posições como docente e pesquisadora nas universidades de Potsdam, Frankfurt, Freiburg e Konstanz, na Alemanha, Zurique, na Suíça e em Oberlin College, nos Estados Unidos.

Marc Swerts (MS) é professor Titular de Estudos do Discurso na Universidade de Tilburg, na Holanda, Swerts especializou-se no campo das relações entre prosódia e estrutura do discurso e em aspectos multimodais da comunicação. Os resultados de sua pesquisa colaboram para aumentar nosso entendimento de como as pessoas se comunicam através da linguagem verbal e não-verbal, e são relevantes para a melhoria dos sistemas

computacionais de conversação. Em função da natureza interdisciplinar de sua pesquisa, Marc Swerts tem colaborado com um grande número de pesquisadores ao redor do mundo, entre os quais Julia Hirschberg (Columbia University, EUA), Chris Davis e Jeesun Kim (Laboratório MARCS, Austrália), Yasuhiro Katagiri (ATR Advanced Telecommunications Research Institute, Japão), Diane Litman (AT&T - Research Laboratories, EUA). O entrevistado publica regularmente em periódicos renomados, entre os quais *Journal of Pragmatics*, *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, *Experimental Psychology*, *Journal of Phonetics*, *Computational Linguistics*. É editor chefe do periódico *Speech Communication* e membro do conselho editorial de vários periódicos internacionais, entre os quais *Language and Speech*, *Phonetica* e *Discourse & Dialogue*. Recebeu vários prêmios por artigos publicados em conjunto e pelo conjunto de seu trabalho.

Q: In your opinion, why is the research on speech prosody relevant? How does it contribute to the understanding of human language?

MS: Prosody has added value. It can qualify the information of a spoken message in a variety of ways. Consider a sentence like “My girlfriend is pregnant”. In principle, such a sentence could be uttered in very distinct contexts. It could be a happy, sad, painful, angry, surprised, or fearful message, depending on the situation in which it is produced. Intuitively, the way the sentence is uttered in these different contexts is quite different. Typically, speakers use prosody as well as other forms of nonverbal features to signal these different connotations.

EC: It helps us avoid a logocentric, written-language bias in linguistics (Linell 2005) by reminding us that language is, for the majority of us, something spoken and therefore much more than disembodied words assembled in syntactic formations.

Q: *Tell us a little bit about your research career, specially how prosody became one of your main research subjects.*

EC: I began my university career teaching English phonetics and phonology. However, I quickly came to realize that although prosody was occasionally referred to in the literature in passing, there was no book that dealt with it in extenso and/or that could be used in teaching it. That's when I decided to write that textbook myself.

Q: *The classical "An Introduction to English Prosody" was first published 27 years ago. What's changed since then with regards to the study of speech prosody?*

EC: It has become easier to acquire audio and videotaped data, especially from everyday conversation. Large digitized corpora of naturally occurring informal interaction are now available. There are now computer-based speech analysis programs that are able to handle larger chunks of input data. We now have more sophisticated methods for linking prosodic form to prosodic function in conversation.

Q: *Most of your recent work deals with the interface between prosody and interaction. Is there any particular reason why you chose this specific topic for your current research?*

EC: I have come to see that prosody is not relevant

per se but only insofar as it contributes to meaning-making in communicative situations.

Q: *Most of your recent work deals with the interface between prosody and emotion. Is there any particular reason why you chose this specific topic for your current research?*

MS: I guess it depends on how you define emotion. I have actually not done a lot of work on what has been termed basic emotions, but have concentrated more on socially relevant emotions, like the display of frustration, uncertainty, and specific kinds of feedback that addressees send to each other. I guess that the reason why I have started to look at such phenomena, is that they play a crucial role in our daily interactions. That also includes research into correlates of deception. People tend to lie for a variety of reasons, also for legitimate reasons (e.g. in the case of white lies, when they show appreciation after having received a present that they do not really like).

Q: *How will technology will benefit from the research on speech prosody?*

MS: Ideally, prosody could be useful to improve the smoothness of human-machine interactions, in particular spoken dialogue systems that can interact with human users through spoken language. People have been aware that text-to-speech synthesis systems need a module that generates adequate prosody in order to make the generated speech sufficiently natural. However, the prosodic component of these systems has for a long time been the most poorly developed. Maybe that was due to the fact that – in order to generate an adequate prosodic structure –

a system should ideally have a good model of higher-order discourse structures (e.g. given/new information, emotional content of the messages, etc.). It is probably more challenging to derive such information automatically from a text (compared to a specification of syntactic structures). In automatic speech recognition, prosody has long time been ignored as a useful resource, even when people have more recently started to explore the possibility to include prosodic analyses in the recognition process, for instance to help the parser or re-rank n-best recognition hypotheses. In the future, when more advanced dialogue systems will come into being, prosody could also be useful to generate contextually adequate system responses, and to detect paralinguistic information from dialogue users, for instance to detect frustration in users or to check whether the dialogue is running smoothly or not.

Q: *What are the research topics in the field of prosody that need further investigation?*

EC: I believe that all of the dimensions of conversational organization need to be examined carefully with an eye to determining whether prosody has a contribution to make and if so, what kind. This includes the prosody of turn construction, turn-taking, action formation, sequence organization, repair and possibly more.

Q: What are the main skills that a novice prosody researcher must acquire to be successful in his/her research?

EC: A good ear is not indispensable but is highly recommended. (N.B. Ears can be trained!). A

thorough understanding of how conversation is organized. Familiarity with the basics of acoustic analysis and with Praat as a computerized system for “doing phonetics”

Q: In what direction do you think that the research on speech prosody is moving to and what should we expect, regarding this matter, in the near future?

MS: I notice that there is an increasing interest in multimodal approaches to language. Whereas linguistic studies in the past predominantly focused on the analysis of language as a unimodal phenomenon (so only looking at features that can be heard), researchers have become aware that dialogue partners also exchange information through visual cues, like facial expressions, eye gaze behaviour, hand and arm gestures, or body posture. Previously, it has been shown that intonation, and other prosodic features like variation in tempo, loudness or voice quality can be used to mark a range of pragmatically relevant information (e.g. emotion, discourse status, turn-taking, utterance type, ...), but more recently, it has become clear that people also mark such information through the visual modality.

EC: I would hope that research on speech prosody would become more sensitive to (a) what actually transpires on actual occasions of language use, and (b) which prosodic aspects participants actually treat as relevant for meaning-making in social encounters.