# Language, the Mind and Everything.
# An Interview with Professor Sydney Lamb

*El lenguaje, la mente y todo lo demás.*
*Una entrevista con el profesor Sydney Lamb*

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**Abstract**

Sydney M. Lamb is the creator of the Relational Network Theory (RNT), a model of language structure developed with a strong emphasis on neurological plausibility (Lamb, 1999). Although the theory has undergone significant development since its early formulation (Lamb, 1966), it remains relatively little known among linguists today. In this interview, Lamb discusses the central principles of RNT, reflects on possible reasons for its limited recognition, and explores its potential applications to other fields, such as consciousness studies. The conversation also touches on several biographical aspects. Overall, the interview highlights Lamb's view of RNT as a model for understanding not only language but human cognition as a whole.

**Keywords**: Relational Network Theory; Neurocognitive linguistics; language structure; human cognition

**Resumen**

Sydney M. Lamb es el creador de la Teoría de la Red Relacional (RNT), un modelo de la estructura del lenguaje desarrollado con un fuerte énfasis en la plausibilidad neurológica (Lamb, 1999). Aunque la teoría ha experimentado un desarrollo

significativo desde su formulación inicial (Lamb, 1966), sigue siendo relativamente poco conocida entre los lingüistas en la actualidad. En esta entrevista, Lamb analiza los principios centrales de la RNT, reflexiona sobre las posibles razones de su reconocimiento limitado y explora sus posibles aplicaciones a otros campos, como los estudios sobre la conciencia. La conversación también aborda varios aspectos biográficos. En conjunto, la entrevista destaca la visión de Lamb sobre la RNT como un modelo para comprender no solo el lenguaje, sino la cognición humana en su totalidad.

**Palabras clave:** Teoría de Redes Relacionales; lingüística neurocognitiva; estructura del lenguaje; cognición humana

## Introduction

Sydney M. Lamb is the creator of Relational Network Theory (RNT), also known as Neurocognitive Linguistics, and "arguably one of the most underrated linguists of our time" (García, 2013). The inclusion of this interview in a special issue devoted to RNT therefore constitutes both a fitting choice and a distinct honor.

The interview was conducted on June 10, 2020, during my Fulbright Visiting Scholar fellowship at Rice University, Houston[1]. My research aim was to develop a model of bilingualism based on Lamb's Neurocognitive Linguistics, and having the possibility to discuss my ideas with the very creator of the theory was an extraordinary privilege.

At that time, Professor Lamb was no longer actively engaged in teaching, but, as he mentioned, he still enjoyed spending his winters in Houston. My stay at Rice began at the end of February, and I was glad to have at least a month before he was scheduled to leave town. Then the pandemic struck, everything shut down, travel stopped, and Professor Lamb decided to postpone his departure. For many people, those months were extremely

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difficult, but for me they represented an unexpected opportunity: I had the chance to engage in several long conversations with Professor Lamb about my relational model of bilingualism, and eventually he agreed to grant me this interview (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 – Sydney Lamb and Paul Buzilă during the interview (Houston, June 10, 2020)
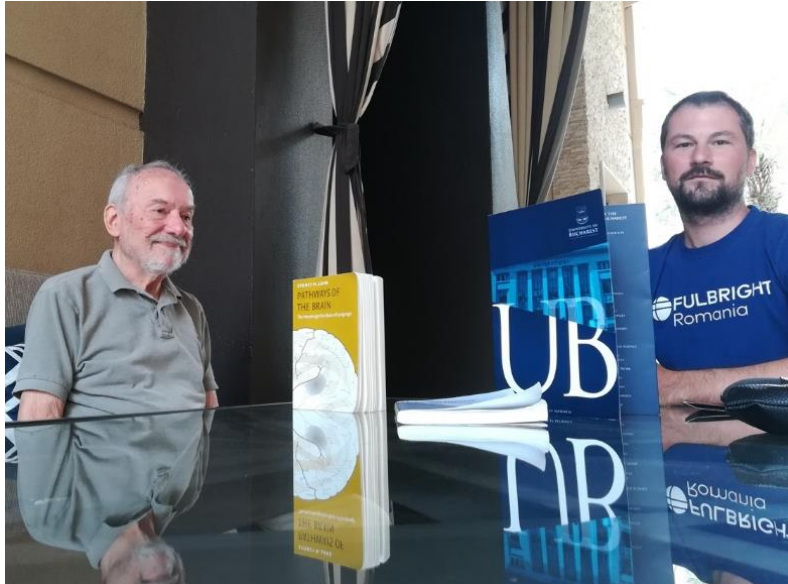


Source: Paul Buzilă's personal archive

Upon completing the fellowship, family matters and other academic projects delayed my work on RNT and the preparation of this text. In retrospect, that delay turned out to be fortunate, since I cannot imagine a more fitting context than the present special issue on Neurocognitive Linguistics in which to publish it.

I am deeply grateful to Professor Lamb for the generous time he dedicated to our discussions during those months. If there is anything of value in my

relational model of bilingualism (Buzilă, 2020b, 2024, in press)[2], it is undoubtedly thanks to his insights, which helped me shape and refine my ideas.

The interview was conceived both as an introduction to RNT and as a means of getting to know its creator better. I therefore formulated the questions in such a way that the discussion oscillates between biographical details and clarifications of the main tenets of the theory. In doing so, I hope the result will be of interest both to newcomers—offering a clear entry point into Neurocognitive Linguistics—and to readers already familiar with the model, who may find new and intriguing insights, such as Professor Lamb's reflections on consciousness or his perspective on the COVID-19 crisis.

Overall, this conversation captures, in a concise form, Professor Lamb's mature reflections on language and mind, shaped by a lifetime of exploring their inner workings. Perhaps the most significant takeaway is his observation that RNT ultimately accounts not only for the structure of language but for the organization of human cognition as a whole.

I hope the insights he shares here help clarify some aspects of a theory that many of us, and Lamb himself, regard as a highly plausible account of how language operates in the brain.

The text presented here is a transcription of the audio recording of that conversation, edited only slightly for clarity and coherence while preserving the original meaning and tone. A video recording of this interview is available at https://youtu.be/ovSxwtLMxJ0.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank both Professor Sydney Lamb and his lovely wife, Susan Lamb, for welcoming me into their home and granting me the possibility of conducting this interview (see Fig. 2).

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[2] See also Buzilă (2025) in this volume.

Fig. 2 – Paul Buzilă, Sydney Lamb and Susan Lamb after the interview (Houston, June 10, 2020)



Source: Paul Buzilă's personal archive.

## 1. Language and linguistics

**Hello, everyone. Today we are talking to Professor Sydney Lamb, Professor Emeritus of Linguistics and Cognitive Science at Rice University. Professor Lamb has been teaching and doing research in linguistics for many years and is the creator of Relational Network Theory (RNT), also known as Neurocognitive Linguistics. Professor Lamb, thank you for accepting our invitation to talk about your theory.**

With pleasure.

**Let's start easy. First of all, where did you grow up?**

I grew up in Denver, Colorado. I never left the borders of Colorado until I was twelve years old, and then only for a trip. I left again when I went to college in Connecticut. I went to Yale.

**And then you went on to study linguistics. Can you tell us how you decided to study it?**

I was really interested in philosophy, but I didn't want to study academic philosophy. There was a saying at Yale that with every PhD in philosophy they also gave you a seeing-eye dog, because you had to read so much you went blind. I didn't like to read and I didn't like to write, and all the philosophy courses at Yale required a lot of writing. So, I majored in economics. At that time, I had never even heard of linguistics. It was not a well-known subject in those days and was taught at very few universities. I didn't learn of the existence of such a thing as Linguistics until my senior year. I had previously studied Latin and German and Russian, and I was always interested in them from a linguistic point of view, but the only way to take advanced courses in language was literature, which didn't interest me. I kept thinking there ought to be a discipline where one could study the structure of language itself. I just didn't know such a discipline existed—until, as I said, my senior year. After that, I went to graduate school in linguistics at the University of California.

**Once you discovered linguistics, what made you want to study it?**

As I mentioned, my main interest was in philosophy, particularly in how the mind works and in philosophical questions about the mind. I came to believe that language was the window of the mind, as people have said, the way to understand the mind. You need some entry point, and it seemed to me that language was the best, or at least a very good way, to approach the mind. So I thought linguistics would be an excellent path. But you see, it wasn't because my main interest was in language, as in language teaching or something like that, it was really in the mind.

**Once you began studying linguistics and understood what it was about, were there moments when you considered quitting—leaving linguistics behind? And if so, what made you return to it?**

Yes, there were times when I became frustrated and thought about giving it up. As an undergraduate I had majored in economics and studied things like corporate finance and the stock market and things like that. I sometimes wondered why I wasn't going into business or heading to Wall Street instead. From time to time I entertained that idea, but I always came back to linguistics.

**Since we're now talking about linguistics, let's clarify a bit what we mean. I remember that when asked to define language, you once said you didn't like that kind of question. So I'll rephrase: what is linguistics, Professor Lamb, and why should anyone bother to study it?**

Well, nobody has ever successfully defined linguistics. Some people have tried, but no definition has been universally accepted—and I think that's a good thing. Linguistics is often called the science of language. But language covers everything. We use language to deal with almost all aspects of human experience. So language is as broad as human experience itself.

Different people in linguistics have studied an enormous variety of topics. I wouldn't even try to cover them all, but they range from methods of language teaching and fieldwork, to writing grammars of previously undocumented languages—that's what I did for my dissertation—to philosophical issues like the nature of cognition, the mind, and the relation of language to the world. So, linguistics is everything. And I think that's a good thing. Different fashions come and go in linguistics, with people focusing on different topics at different times, but the field itself is as broad as the academic world.

**With so many branches and subfields of linguistics, can we actually say they all share a common object of study, or is that just an illusion? And related to that, could we group these subfields into broader categories or approaches to the study of language—say, two or three large clusters?**

Well you could say that language is the object of study, but since, as I say, language is so broad, that doesn't really narrow it down very much.

**So should we think in terms of clusters?**

Yes. There are many ways of classifying the subfields. Michael Halliday once proposed a really good classification at one time[3]. If you try to classify all the subfields of linguistics, you end up really with a classification of all the subfields of knowledge. Hjelmslev also discussed this in his *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language[4]*, especially near the end. It turns out that we start out studying language and you end up with Semiotics, the broader domain of which language is a part. Once you go into semiotics, you discover yourself involved in the full range of human experience. As I say, I think that's a good thing. Most linguists probably don't see it that way—but I do.

**2. Language and RNT**

**In this broad panorama of different subfields, where would we place RNT, your own theory? Where does it fit?**

In one sense, it's a kind of specialization because it's interested in language as related to the mind. And in particular, I think, its greatest effectiveness has been in the study of mind. That's something that's not necessarily of interest to linguists in general, but I think that's where it is most fitting. For example, people have often wondered why we don't have grammatical descriptions in relational networks, and I think that it is appropriate that we don't. I used to think that relational networks would be effective for language description, but actually they are very difficult to read, because the human mind is trained to read words written on a page, in linear fashion, and it takes special effort to read information that's presented in

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[3] Lamb probably refers here to Halliday's early Scale-and-Category Grammar as developed in Halliday (1961). In that framework, he proposed four "fundamental categories" – unit, structure, class, and system – which operate along three abstract scales: rank, exponence, and delicacy.

[4] Lamb most probably refers here to the first English translation (Hjelmslev 1953) or the slightly revised second edition (Hjelmslev 1961).

network diagrams. But network diagrams are very useful in understanding how the mind works.

**I was actually going to ask you about the diagrams. But before that—although you've explained this many times in different ways—could you briefly update us on the main, basic ideas of the theory? What are the main tenets of RNT?**

Well, in the first place we… No, I will start with the second place. The RNT ends up with the conclusion, or perhaps I should say it even starts out with the conclusion that, after a little bit of preliminary investigation, it turns out that what we used to think of as objects, like words and phonemes and so on, are not objects at all when viewed from the point of view of the information system of a human being. It's all relations. So the entire linguistic system is nothing but relations. I would say that's the main finding and the main tenet. Shall I go on from there?

**And then we get to the diagrams you mentioned earlier. One thing that might put newcomers off—or even scare them a little—are these diagrams, this notation system, which is quite different from what they're used to. Could you talk about this notation system a bit, and explain why it's not something to be afraid of?**

Yes, I know, it can be off-putting. People have said that the first three chapters of my book[5] are very interesting and readable, but by the time you get to chapter four, where the network diagrams appear, things suddenly become difficult. Well, that's too bad. But you see, language is a system of relationships.

That, by the way, is something that was first proposed, as far as I know, by Louis Hjelmslev, the Danish linguist, who was influential in my thinking, but he never proposed a network notation. It is all relationships and the

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[5] Lamb refers here to his book (Lamb 1999) in which he presented the complete version of the Relational Network Theory.

relationships are organized in a network, and you cannot understand that without having a notation system for it. So you need a network notation.

Now, I admit it can be difficult at first, when you first approach it. But it's very well motivated and you see that as you go into the study of it. It's the only way for the human mind to really grasp what's going on. You need a notation system to support these observations about the relational network of the structure. And, after one has become accustomed to the notation, and it doesn't take very long, then it becomes easier and easier to read these network diagrams.

**In *Pathways of the Brain* you refer to two different kinds of notations, an abstract one and a narrow one. But then, in an update to the theory, in an article from 2016, you actually discuss several layers, each with its own appropriate notation. You go from Halliday's systemic networks, through the abstract and narrow notations of relational networks, all the way down to the level of cortical columns, and even to neurons. So, at this point in the development of the theory, do you think that devising a notational system for the cortical column level would be needed? Would it even be possible? And would that belong to a theory of language, or rather to a more general theory?**

Well, okay… What you say is entirely correct. But let me back up a little bit. I elaborated on this in a paper I published in 2013 with Cambridge University Press. The paper is called "Systemic Networks, Relational Networks, and Choice", and it appeared in a volume entitled *Systemic Functional Linguistics. Exploring Choice*, edited by Lise Fontaine, Tom Bartlett and Gerard O'Grady[6]. In that paper I talk about these various levels. The level of network that you arrive at originally is the one that is mostly described in this 1999 book. That's what I called the abstract notation. When you get to narrow notation, it turns out that there are degrees of narrowness. It is a notation that shows greater detail. It turns out that the

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[6] Lamb, S. M. (2013). Systemic networks, relational networks, and choice. In L. Fontaine, T. Bartlett, & G. O'Grady (Eds.), *Systemic functional linguistics: Exploring choice* (pp. 13–35). Cambridge University Press.

nodes of the broader notation are complicated, they have internal structure which can be represented in the narrow notation. But you can add more and more detail to the narrow notation until it gets narrower and narrower until you finally reach the level of neuronal structure. So when you get down to the very fine level, you get to the cortical columns. They have been described very well in a book by Vernon Mountcastle published in 1998 at Harvard University Press, it's called *Perceptual Neuroscience*[7]. For a notation at that level you are really getting down to neuroanatomy, and there are plenty of diagrams in that book that show what kind of structure we are talking about, down to the actual neurons. There are various kinds of neurons and each of them has diagrams that are shown in that and other books on neuroanatomy. Now, you can imagine using such a notation for representing things like linguistic structure, but it's not feasible. Because there's a trade-off. If you want to describe such things as grammatical relationships and syntax and so on, you need to have a very broad notation. Even Halliday had his systemic notation, which is at a less refined level than the relational network notation, even in its abstract form. So it comes to that hierarchy: from the systemic networks to the relational networks broad notation, to the narrow notation. The narrow notation comes in several degrees, getting at the ultimate degree down to the cortical columns. The narrower degrees add kinds of information that are left unspecified in the broad notation. But… if you are doing linguistic descriptions, even Halliday's networks are not actually useful. I mean, if you look at what the systemic linguists have done in describing language, they make very little use of networks, because it just gets too complicated. And so, even more so with relational networks: they provide more detail than the systemic networks, but that makes them more unfeasible for doing language description. They are very good for understanding the structure of what you are talking about. And with that understanding you can do language description using ordinary words, and symbols, and lists, and things like that.

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[7] Mountcastle, V. B. (1998). *Perceptual Neuroscience: The Cerebral Cortex*. Harvard University Press.

**So, you are talking about cortical columns and neurons, and that's actually because your theory tries to meet the requirement of neurological plausibility, right? Which is something not many theories—or even many linguists—think about. Could you elaborate a bit on this idea of neurological plausibility[8]?**

Well, this requirement comes about because I'm interested in reality. And so, we have to be realistic, and that means realistic about language, if we really want to understand language. So, in being realistic about language we first have to understand that the idea of a language like English, or Spanish, or Romanian is a very abstract abstraction, and if you look for something in the actual world that corresponds to it, there is nothing. There is no such thing as the "English language" as an actual object in the world. That's an abstraction formed by our conceptual systems. What we have in reality are individual linguistic systems. Every person has his or her own linguistic system, and these systems correspond more or less with each other, but no two are exactly alike. It is just because there are some broad similarities that we can recognize this idea of language. But it is a very tenuous idea, and the only way to relate it to actual reality is through the individual linguistic systems of people. Now, this individual linguistic system, if it is real at all, it has to be located somewhere, and the only place it can be located is in the brain. And the brain is a network of neurons. We know that from neuroanatomy, from many years of study in that field. And so, ultimately, it has to be the case that the language is represented in the neural networks of the brain. And so if we want to be realistic, if we want to set for ourselves a goal of being realistic, we have to adopt a principle that the linguistic account has to be neurologically plausible. It has to have some plausible way of being related to actual neural structures.

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[8] In RNT, "neurological plausibility" refers to the methodological requirement that any model of linguistic structure should be compatible with what is known about the neural organization of the brain. This principle distinguishes RNT from most linguistic theories, which remain at a symbolic or purely abstract level without explicit concern for neurobiological implementation.

**So, trying to wrap this up, what would be the strongest and the weakest points of RNT in your opinion, at this moment.**

The strongest point is probably that it has successfully satisfied the principle of neurological plausibility. We can show in great detail how the linguistic relationships are represented in neural structures… to considerable detail. That has been a very strong success, I would say. And I guess… the first thing that comes to mind when you talk about the weak points… The weak point is that it's being very complex, it is very hard to understand. And so, there have been very few people around the world who have actually understood it, and that's too bad. What can we do about it? But, anyway, it is a weakness.

**Do you think it is really that complex, that it is that difficult to understand or is it difficult to understand for linguists who have already decided on another view of language? What do you think about that?**

Yes, that's a very good point. Probably, that is the case. Yes, to somebody new, coming to it… Well, in the last few years at Rice[9], while I was still teaching, I taught neurolinguistics and students did not have much trouble understanding it. Most of them had no previous background in linguistics. They were interested in general topics, or in the brain and so on, and they didn't find it so hard to understand. So I think that's right. For people who have come from a linguistic background, it's rather different from the ways of thinking that they are accustomed to.

**So then, why isn't RNT a theory that linguists in their regular track come across, that is, why isn't it as famous as others, like the generative grammars or even cognitive linguistics?**

Yes, well I think that the main problem is that back in those years when those theories were getting established and well-known, I was not publishing very much. I was already active and trying to figure things out, but I didn't publish very much. I didn't want to publish until I was pretty

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[9] Sydney Lamb moved to emeritus status in 1998. He is the Agnes Cullen Arnold Professor Emeritus of Linguistics at Rice University, Houston

sure of what I was talking about. And that took many, many years. And so, meanwhile, the other theories gained popularity and mine didn't. To get a theory to gain some traction in the world of… in the audiences of academics you have to have a lot of publication, and we didn't have very much. So, that's probably the main factor. Now, most people who are interested in language are not so interested in the brain, an so… You know, there are some things like language teaching or language learning… the practical sides like that. Well, they don't need neurocognitive linguistics for that. And so, fine. It's not for them.

**I just remembered part of a question I had on my list… Since you mentioned this, and I also brought up Cognitive Linguistics earlier, could you briefly explain the difference between RNT—also known as Neurocognitive Linguistics—and fields like Neurolinguistics or Psycholinguistics, which have a similar focus? And then, how does RNT also compare to Cognitive Linguistics, which has a similar name? Are there connections between these approaches, or important differences?**

You know, the funny thing is that the term Cognitive Linguistics as a term for a field of study, was actually first used by me back in the early 1970's for this approach and then… It was so little known, I guess, that when the school that is known as Cognitive Linguistics came around, they haven't even heard about my cognitive linguistics, and so they thought the term was available, so they started using it for their work. People like Langaker and others like that. Well, actually the work they do is rather compatible with mine. The ideas they come up with are compatible. And so, Neurocognitive Linguistics could be considered part of the whole of Cognitive Linguistics.

**How about Neurolinguistics?**

Yeah, okay. Neurolinguistics is a broad field, basically the study of language and the brain. The Neurocognitive Linguistics is more specific. It's a label for this particular theory. You could say it is a part of Neurolinguistics, but it's a part of Cognitive Linguistics as well. It provides an account of the structure of language. It's a way of understanding what a language is. And

what a language is turns out to be a neurological system. There's no escaping it.

**So, could we say that RNT essentially just provides the theoretical framework for all the experimental data from Neurolinguistics?**

Yes.

**So, we've seen that RNT is not mainstream, but we consider it a scientific theory of language. Any scientific theory, of course, has to be testable—or falsifiable. What kind of predictions does RNT make, and how can they be tested?**

You know, usually, people think of science as a type of endeavor in which you do experiments to test hypotheses. However, not all science is based on experimental research. Geology, for example, or Astronomy or Paleontology. You can't do experiments in those fields. Instead, it has to be based on observation. Now, people do experiments in Neuroscience, but the kind of experiments available don't really provide the kind of information we need for Neurocognitive Linguistics. Nowadays, the most popular kind of experiments are done with brain imaging machines: functional MRI and things like that. They don't provide the kind of information we need. They show certain areas of the brain lighting up when you're doing certain things. It is very crude information. The problem with fMRI is that it has a very crude spatial resolution. The kind of events that we're talking about in linguistic structure, when you talk about the nodes of a network, they are represented in cortical columns. Cortical columns are very tiny, there are thousands of them beneath every square centimeter of linguistic surface, and fMRI gives you spatial resolution only down to about a few millimeters, and that's not enough to tell you anything about what's going on, of interest. So, experiments are not feasible, so we have to base our science on observations. And we can make predictions. And I'll give you an example. In RNT, it turns out, when you explore the nature of the network that is necessary to account for the linguistic structure, it turns out that you have to have both inhibitory and excitatory connections. And not only that, but it turns out that, in relational networks,

based only on linguistic evidence, you have two kinds of inhibitory connections: there's the inhibitory connection that attaches to a node and there's the inhibitory connection that attaches to a line connecting two nodes. Now, you can use observation from Neuroanatomy to test that. And sure enough, you find that there are connections between neurons, there are some axons… Axons are the output fibers of neurons… Some axons connect to cell bodies of other neurons, while others connect to axons of other neurons. And so it's an exact correspondence, in the neurological terms, of that prediction from RNT.

**How about predictions that could be tested with the kind of experiments done in psycholinguistics, like reaction time studies? Are those experiments relevant to RNT?**

Well, they are, there are experiments… I don't do experiments myself, but again, we can find information from psychological experiments that have been done which support ideas from Relational Network Theory. One of them involves priming. An area where many experiments have been done involves priming. Priming is a phenomenon that occurs when activation in the network spreads, over existing connections, to nearby nodes, but without sufficient activation to actually activate those nodes. But it provides a semi activation. At a delicate level of Relational Network Theory, we talk not just about a node being activated or not activated but of degrees of activation. There are thresholds, and it's not just a threshold, but it's a threshold function such that you have different degrees of activation and certain degrees of activation provide the possibility of a strong degree of firing or a weaker one and so on. Now, those proposals, or we can call them hypotheses, from RNT turn out to be verified by various experiments on priming that have been done. There are experiments by a Psychology professor, I think is his name is Bargh, he used to be at New York University, now he's at Yale University, in the Psychology Department. He's got an experiment[10], for example: people were shown television

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[10] Harris, J. L., Pierce, M., & Bargh, J. A. (2014). Priming effect of antismoking PSAs on smoking behaviour: A pilot study. *Tobacco Control*, 23(4), 285–290.

commercials on smoking. And the idea was to explain to people why smoking is dangerous, in order to get them to quit smoking. In this experiment they took, I'm possibly not describing it with full accuracy, but they had three groups of people. One of them watched a public service announcement that was made by… it was either the public broadcasting or the Government or some neutral organization, giving information to persuade people to stop smoking. And there was another one that was prepared by a tobacco company. And the third group was shown something that was not related to smoking at all. Now, they showed each of these groups of people, all of whom were smokers, by the way. They divided them into three groups, each one saw one of the commercials. Then, after they saw the commercial, they were given a five or ten minutes break and they were given the opportunity, if they wanted it, to go outside and smoke a cigarette. And so, the question is: how many people in each group went out to smoke? The control group was the one who saw something not related to smoking at all, and I don't know what the numbers were, but there were very few of those. And then there were more in the group that saw the announcement that had been prepared by a neutral agency, and the group that watched the ad prepared by the tobacco company smoked the most. Now how do we explain that? It is also a matter of priming because watching these announcement about smoking primes the connections in their brain connected to smoking. And that, in turn, primes the people's desire to smoke, which is also registered in the brain, and so, when given the chance, those who have watched things about smoking were more inclined to want to go out and smoke. That satisfies a prediction made by Relational Network Theory.

**3. Language and the mind**

**However, in this experiment, there's not a strong connection with linguistic structure. Would you then say that RNT is a theory that could be applied to any kind of cognitive system, not just language? Could you elaborate on that?**

Yes, definitely. It turns out that we can look at this in two ways. First way: having elaborated, having investigated and figured out this relational network structure, you see that it applies not only to language, but to all of human cognition. Now, another way to look at this is if you try to find a boundary within the theory or in any way, a boundary between language and the rest of human cognition. No such boundary can be found. The description of a language, to be complete, has to include the semantic structure of the language, that is, you have to go into the meanings of all your lexical items. And so, the description of the language has to include the description of the meanings of the lexical items. Well, if you go into that, there is no end. Another way to say this is that if you are trying to write a dictionary and express meanings in a dictionary, if you go all the way and try to express the meanings fully you end up not with a dictionary but with an encyclopedia. And there is no boundary anywhere along. There is no boundary between that dictionary and the encyclopedia. So, the structure of language, actually, looked at broadly, is the structure of all of human cognition. And therefore, RNT as applied to language, actually applies to all of human cognition. So, we are talking about the mind, in general, and the whole world as represented in the minds of individuals.

**Yes. So, what other areas of study, as they're approached today, could RNT be applied to? And, on a related note, in what areas would you personally like to see RNT being used or developed further?**

Well, the answer to one is that there is no limit. It can be used at anything of interest, anything that is studied in Humanities, the Social Sciences and even the Sciences. You know, they all use language. It's their primary means of not only communication of the results of their work, but also the thinking about their work. All is language. Hjelmslev said this back in 1943. And so, what would I like to see done? Well, you know, it fulfills a dream of mine, that I had many many years ago, before I even got into linguistics: the dream of understanding the mind, how the mind works. Now we are getting there.

**I know that lately you've also been interested in Consciousness Studies. So, is there a connection between RNT and that field? And if so, how are they related?**

Well, it is. It's related because it's a way of understanding the mind, how the mind works, and part of understanding the mind is understanding consciousness. Now, earlier I was talking about how the relational networks are based on neural networks. You can reduce everything in the structure of relational networks to neural networks. This does not necessarily mean, however, that everything mental is physical. There may be other aspects of mind that are not physical. We have to be open to that possibility. In that case, such aspects of mind may not be representable as relational networks. That is also something we have to be open to.

**I think we'll leave it there, because otherwise I think we will open too big of a discussion. So, we have discussed a lot about how RNT conceives language, and it's mainly a relational network. How about… let's do a thought experiment. What would be your reaction if some new information, some new data undoubtedly showed that language was, at a more fundamental level, actually based on manipulating symbols and rules and stuff like that. So what would be your reaction to that?**

I can't really react to it because it is utterly impossible. All symbols can be shown to be related to relational structures and so, I can't even think about such a possibility.

## 4. Language and everything

**Ok, right. So, after all this time of studying linguistics, if you were to go back and started all over again, what would you study nowadays, if you were a student in these days. What would be interesting to get into?**

I would say… The first thing that comes to mind is Physics and especially Quantum Physics and particle Physics. I wish I understood more about them. What I do understand is very mysterious. And also, Astrophysics. Because when we get into this study of mind, viewed broadly as I have been

viewing it, it is very closely related to the study of the Cosmos in general, and so, I wish I had studied more Physics.

**So, in other words, what you're really saying is that you'd like to understand, to borrow Douglas Adams' phrase, "life, the universe, and everything," right?**

Yes.

**So, speaking of life, we're living through some rather unusual times with the whole Coronavirus situation. What has helped you stay focused and grounded during this period? What's your secret for not getting caught up in all the craziness in the world?**

Most of the craziness in the world is illusory. For one thing, this whole response to the Coronavirus has not affected me very much because I'm retired. It has affected people who have jobs and can't go to their jobs anymore. In my case, I don't have a job anymore anyway. So it hasn't had that big effect on me. Now, I know there's a lot of distress in the world and especially now, more recently, we have this racial distress[11] going on, but you know, beneath it all is really peace, even though at the surface there seems to be a lot of turmoil. Most of the turmoil is based on fear and most of the fear is based on illusion, and so… The world is still really peaceful.

**Even beyond the health crisis, the pandemic has brought waves of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. People are saying the world won't be the same as it used to be. Do you agree with that, and how do you think things might change after this?**

Well, there will be some changes, you know, getting back to the surface level. People have slowed way down on the amount of travel they do. I think it's going to be a very long time, maybe not ever, before the extent

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[11] The interview took place on June 10, 2020. Lamb's reference to "racial distress" alludes to the killing of George Floyd, a black man who died on May 25, 2020, after a police officer kneeled on his neck for over eight minutes, sparking global protests against police brutality (Al Jazeera, 2020).

of travel comes back to where it was a year ago. We'll have to see, but there will be things like that, you know, like sporting events… People are learning that they can live without going to sporting events. Now that they have learned that, maybe they won't be as motivated as they were. I can't tell, but these are possibilities.

**And what about the economy? Since you also have a background in that field, how do you see the economic impact of all this?**

We are at the beginning of another great depression. If you look at the current state of the stock market, you see that investors don't seem to be very worried, but that was also true in 1929. There was first a big dip in the stock market and then stock rose for a while and optimism came back. And then, they went way down. They recovered two or three times on the way. There was a huge bear market. But along the way there were these rallies, when stocks went up and people were optimistic and they thought "Oh, it's all going to be ok now". Well, we're in that phase now. People think it's going to be ok. But, in fact, there are so many drags on the Economy worldwide that we have not seen the worst of it yet. I'm afraid we're in for a very long period of economic decline. This is another thing, that people are going to have to learn to get along without prosperity, because it's going to be many, many years.

**All right, I'll end with a question that could have a very short answer or a very long one — it all depends on you. Is there any question you wish someone had asked you, but that no interviewer has ever thought to ask?**

I can't think of anything, I think you have done a very good job coming up with questions. I had enough to say today, As much as I care to say.

**Thank you professor Lamb, It's been a real pleasure talking to you and I hope we can do this again sometimes soon. Thank you!**

Thank you!

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## Biographical Note

**Paul Buzilă** is an associate professor at the University of Bucharest, where he teaches Hispanic linguistics, general linguistics, sociolinguistics, and neurocognitive linguistics. He earned his Ph.D. in Philology in 2015 and an M.A. in Cognitive Science in 2020. He has been a visiting professor (Erasmus and CEEPUS programs) at several universities in Spain, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and the Republic of Moldova, and in 2020 he was a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at Rice University in Houston.

His research focuses on language contact and bilingualism, which he investigates from sociolinguistic, demolinguistic, and neurocognitive perspectives. He is the author of several articles on the speech of Romanian immigrants in Spain, the demolinguistics of Spanish in Romania, and the neurocognitive bases of bilingualism. He has also authored two books on these topics: *El rumano hablado en España* (2016) and *Senderos del cerebre bilingüe* (forthcoming). He participated in the international project Spanish in Europe and, as a result, co-authored the volume Demolingüística del español en Rumanía, Bulgaria y Moldavia.

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