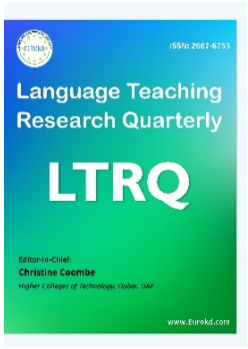

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AFTERWORD

In Honour of Brian MacWhinney: A Personal Account

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Abstract

While this volume and the writings have made it amply clear what significant contributions Professor Brian MacWhinney has made to the field at large, in this afterword, we begin with a senior member of our author team (Ping Li, PL) followed by a mid-career member (Helen Zhao, HZ) and an early career member (Zhe Gao, ZG), to provide our personal accounts of Brian not only as a leading scholar but also as a role model who touches and changes people's lives.

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[1]Ping Li:

I always tell people that if there is anything I have done well, that is because I have met the right person at the right time in the right place. This is so true of meeting and getting to know Brian as a teacher, a mentor, and a friend.

Anyone who knows Brian would describe him as an easy-to-talk, down-to-earth, and friendly professor. As one who has worked with him extensively spanning a 35-year period, this simple characterization is deeply grounded in countless experiences, impressions, and feelings, big and small. When I was in graduate school, I became one of the first cohort of users

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of the Child Language Data Exchange System (CHILDES), then a new idea and new system with some simple codes and a less-than-complete manual (note, that's 1988!). CHILDES allowed me to code all my child language data for my dissertation in a uniform format, and to learn about the convenient tools such as automatically counting of word occurrences in texts (e.g., "freq") – something everyone takes for granted today; more importantly, the use of CHILDES enabled me, then a young graduate student, to see the power of data and programming for language research, and it further inspired me to pursue a more computational oriented research agenda in my career. Over the process of my dissertation work I had asked Brian many technical questions, and I was amazed how helpful he was in providing the answers via emails and WOW, so promptly would this little graduate student (me not even as his own PhD student) get answers from a big professor! – an experience I'm sure many still have today.

Brian was also the gateway for me to know Liz Bates -- to study with Liz and later Jeff Elman was clearly the highlights of my academic career. Because of the inspiration of the Competition Model and my own interests in connecting first language (L1) acquisition (PhD work with Melissa Bowerman and Wolfgang Klein), second language (L2) acquisition/bilingualism (postdoc work with Liz) and computational modeling (postdoc work with Jeff), I had the good fortune to continue my discussions with these good people throughout my later years of research. And it's them who I met at the right time and the right place, and who showered me (and many others of my peers) with not only academic knowledge and skill, but also kindness and friendship.

Brian always has his students in mind. Like Liz Bates, he genuinely provides support to students and peers, for their welfare and success rather than for his own gain. He does not impose his ideas onto others but asks us to think collaboratively and creatively, whether it be a small idea or a big project, as also clearly attested by HZ and ZG below. As a scholar of many accomplishments, Brian is such a low-key person when it comes to honors and recognition; he cares only about science and education instead of fame. Interestingly, seeing this we sometimes did act with joint grassroot efforts to discuss how we could recognize him. My personal experience in this regard involved two events: The nomination of Brian for the Roger Brown Prize (with Annick De Houwer, Aliyah Morgenstern and Yvan Rose), and the organization of the Symposium Honoring the Impact of Brian MacWhinney on Language Research at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) (with Roman Taraban, Patricia Brooks, Rick Gilmore, Vera Kempe and Janet McDonald), both of which were the results of his colleagues and students spontaneously chatting at meetings and later taking actions.

Brian is not only a technically sophisticated scholar who has a strong interest in technical details (e.g., CHILDES and TalkBank), but also a theorist who wants to and can see the big picture, from the Competition Model to Connectionism to Emergentism. Many scholars are good at one but not the other, and it takes true dedication and hard work (and perhaps a bit of luck) to achieve excellence on both fronts. These are the qualities I aspire to have but never have had, and I have also kept reminding my own students to work on them. We will continue to benefit from Brian's academic insights, wisdom, and humor in the many years to come.

Helen Zhao

I embarked on my PhD journey at CMU with Brian in August 2008. Establishing the supervision wasn't without its challenges. For at least half a year, I struggled to define the

direction and topic of my dissertation. Brian's expertise spans a wide range of areas, from first and second language acquisition to experimental psychology, aphasia, corpus linguistics, computational linguistics, online tutoring systems, etc. On whichever topic I proposed for discussion, Brian would introduce me to at least three new researchers whose work was miles away from what I was familiar with. This led to extensive reading after each supervision meeting, yet I still lacked a clear dissertation topic. This period of uncertainty was marked by stress and anxiety. Eventually, Brian reminded me of my original intention to pursue a PhD: to assist millions of second language learners of English, particularly those from Asian language backgrounds like mine, in acquiring complex English grammatical features. This commitment won Brian's ultimate approval, and we settled on the topic of English article learning. This overarching theme has guided my research and teaching ever since. It keeps me focused on the important meaning and value of my work.

As I've come to know Brian better over the years, I've learned that his academic journey is also one deeply rooted in his passion for exploring his language and cultural heritage. Many may wonder why someone with such a solid Irish name as Brian MacWhinney seldom publishes research on the Irish language but extensively covers Hungarian studies. In fact, fully half of Brian's heritage is Hungarian, with his mother's family having emigrated to New York in the early 20th century. Although Brian's mother spoke Hungarian as her first language, she did not teach it to Brian. It wasn't until Brian attended graduate school at UC Berkeley in the late 1960s that he began learning Hungarian. At Berkeley, where Chomskyan linguistics dominated during that period, Brian became fascinated with child language acquisition but struggled to reconcile the literature on this topic with Chomsky's theory. Encouraged by Dan Slobin, John Gumperz, and Susan Ervin-Tripp, Brian decided to do his PhD dissertation on the acquisition of a language whose structure was very different from English. Hungarian, his heritage language, became his natural choice. He was fortunate to receive a dissertation grant from the Ford Foundation, which enabled him to conduct extensive fieldwork in Hungary. This trip brought back approximately 100 hours of dialogues from five Hungarian-speaking children, resulting in one of the earliest and most valuable collections of spoken and transcribed child language data. It was this dataset that became the source for some of the most fundamental and influential concepts of usage-based approaches to language acquisition, including bottom-up item-based learning and input-driven syntactic learning. Alongside his academic pursuits, Brian never wavered in his dedication to learning Hungarian. Despite being an adult learner way past the critical period, he is now fluent in Hungarian and has authored one of the most comprehensive and widely cited English descriptions of Hungarian grammar.

Brian imparted to me a crucial lesson through his own academic journey: the importance of perseverance in breaking new boundaries in our work. I was initially educated as an English major at a Chinese university famous for cultivating language translators and diplomats. Before doing my PhD, my academic focus centered on linguistics and applied linguistics. The CMU PhD program that I enrolled in specialized in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), a sub-area of applied linguistics. I originally envisioned my dissertation to be safely enclosed within this sphere. However, this perception changed upon working with Brian.

Throughout his academic career, Brian consistently expanded his intellectual horizons across various disciplines. His undergraduate studies encompassed Spanish, Rhetoric, and Geology, followed by a Master's degree in Speech Science, and a doctoral degree in

Psycholinguistics. His initial academic position was not in linguistics but in Developmental Psychology at the University of Denver. Despite lacking a formal degree in general Psychology, he quickly adapted and managed to learn developmental psychology on his first job. He became more as a psychologist than as a linguist. In 1981, Brian secured a position at CMU Psychology and began to work with cognitive psychologists like Herbert Simon and John Anderson. He and Anderson proposed to collaborate on the construction of a computational model of grammar learning, which introduced Brian to the realm of computational linguistics. He started to learn to do computer programming. It was this collaborative project that triggered his idea of building a computerized corpus of English child language data, which later became one of the most influential corpora worldwide, CHILDES. This corpus solidified his global reputation in corpus linguistics. Brian remains a persistent pioneer in exploring new theoretical frontiers and creating innovative research tools. For him, that is just the way it is.

Under Brian's mentorship, I realized the necessity of transcending my limited comfort zone. Advised by Brian, I pursued coursework in both the Department of Languages, Cultures & Applied Linguistics and the Department of Psychology for my PhD, a departure from the norm among my peers. His support led me to join the Pittsburgh Science of Learning Center (PSLC), an interdisciplinary hub comprising scholars from psychology, computer science, natural language processing, and human-computer interaction. The exposure to diverse methodologies and perspectives at PSLC expanded my intellectual horizons beyond linguistics. As I engaged in stimulating intellectual exchanges with scholars from diverse fields, I recognized the value of interdisciplinary collaboration. These experiences during my doctoral studies greatly influenced my career trajectory and approach to mentoring students.

In an interview, Brian advised young researchers, "Learn how to expand your thinking gradually and purposefully. The world of thought is full of hundreds of bridges and valleys, each of which connects to other bridges and valleys. By slowly moving across these bridges and valleys without abandoning old territory, you will expand your understanding and consciousness." Over the years beyond my PhD life, I have come to deeply appreciate Brian's philosophy on life, work, and thought. Implementing this philosophy is not easy, but I am grateful to have Brian as a lifelong role model, a source of inspiration and citation, and a guiding beacon.

Zhe Gao

I studied as a PhD student with Brian MacWhinney and Seth Wiener (Brian led to my contact with Seth) at CMU from 2017 to 2022. Even though I have graduated from CMU for a year and a half, my experience and fast growth there have been so precious for me and made Pittsburgh my academic hometown.

Brian guided me to find hard but important problems and ways to solve them. This journey broadened my horizons, ignited my own passions, taught me to ask questions, and sharpened my problem-solving skills. Observing the challenges in learning Chinese compounds by my students from Chinese classes and considering the large number of the compounds in Chinese language, I chose Chinese compounds as the topic of my PhD research.

Brian's broad research interests have guided me to pursue a highly interdisciplinary approach when developing technology-enhanced innovations for language learners. He encouraged me to break the boundaries and define my own field. Human-computer interaction

provides human-centered designs with various platforms such as Apps, websites and virtual reality; cognitive neuroscience, psycholinguistics and learning science jointly lay a theoretical foundation; and quantitative experimental methods test my hypotheses. And I truly hope that the tools really help the learners. To prepare myself for such work, I took and audited courses offered by multiple departments, including Languages, Cultures and Applied Linguistics, Psychology, Statistics, Computer Science, Language and Technology Institute, etc. Despite the huge challenges of pursuing Grade As, I gained knowledge and skills in those fields and learned how to communicate and work with people from different backgrounds. Side but important effects were that I developed the ability to juggle multiple tasks, deal with stress, and make a lot of friends.

Brian truly cares about students' development and success, so he adjusted his advising approach based on our needs. I was so fortunate to have Brian and Seth as my advisors. They both adjusted their own styles to fit this co-advising team, and they were actually so willing to advise me in a collaborative way that I was able to take the most from their joint efforts.

Besides Brian's enormous scholarly work and broad research expertise, I have been inspired by working with him daily as a PhD student. My learning occurred in my email tradings with him, my countless stopping-bys at his office, going to conferences with him, and having coffee chats with him. To quote a lyric from a classical Chinese poem, Brian's influences on me are like spring rain, "moistening and nourishing the nature/me, exquisitely and silently" (润物细无声, run4 wu4 xi4 wu2 sheng1, moisten-object-gently-no-sound). Let me share two snapshots.

Similar to a lot of professors at CMU, Brian had an open-door policy: as long as his office was open, students could stop by his office and have a chat with him. But different from most professors, he seemingly scarcely closed his door, unless he needed to meet someone or do serious writing. I had benefited well from this policy. Whenever I had a question, I walked to Brian's office in Baker Hall. Brian usually shifted his gaze from his desktop screen to me, smiled and had a ten-minute chat with me. The topics of the chats were never limited to SLA and psycholinguistics. For example, I once mentioned that a lot of ground-breaking scientific findings that were counter-intuitive for the people in their initial eras have become common knowledge nowadays. Brian raised examples like the theory of continental drift and linked this claim with the development of psycholinguistic theories. Suddenly, the chat became a discussion on the history of science.

The punctuality of Brian's responses never decreased their quality because of his very careful thoughts. Right after the extensive reading period, as HZ mentioned, I started an experimental study on L2 learning of Chinese compounds. Without any experience of running an experiment with interventions, every step from problem formulation to writing was just tough for me. At the end of that semester, I told Brian in an upset tone: "I don't have confidence in surviving another semester like this." Brian responded: "The fact that you have done so well and overcome so many challenges this semester should in itself give you confidence." His words provided me a data-driven strategy of dealing with future difficulties and boosting my confidence. All account. The accumulated experience, knowledge and skills from previous setbacks and failures are my ladder to move forward. In addition, he reminded me that self-confidence came from my own hard work, not from anyone or anything else. Paying attention

to the process and enthusiastically learning from failures have become my way of practicing the model, “what does not kill you makes you stronger”.

For Brian, mentoring goes beyond teaching knowledge and guiding research. It is about students’ development as a person, and we all have greatly benefited from this philosophy.

Ending note from Ping Li

Brian is personable, unintimidating, and always open to new ideas. In a world where personal relationships and societies are rifting apart due to the pandemic, political conflicts and views, and different academic traditions and opinions, Brian sets a remarkable role model as a person on top of his scholarship, which is inspiring, and which I hope becomes contagious. We firmly believe that, for academic success as well as other domains, it is absolutely crucial to work with the right people, and therefore we all need to aspire to be that right person as Brian is.

Group photo at the Symposium Honoring the Impact of Brian MacWhinney on Language Research



Photos: Brian with Helen Zhao, Ping Li, and Zhe Gao

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