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An interview with Anna Mauranen

Interview by: Karim Sadeghi



Since 2005 Anna Mauranen has been professor of English at the University of Helsinki. As Vice-rector of the University, Anna is responsible for both international and societal relations, together with personnel policy. In her capacity as Professor of English, Mauranen is one of the University's most internationally cited researchers. Over the last three decades Mauranen has made a strong showing among the elite of English-language researchers. She began work on her doctoral thesis at the age of forty, gaining her doctorate after three years, and then after a further three years took up the Chair of Translation Studies at the University of Eastern Finland. For the past fifteen years Mauranen has been fully engaged in research on English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). What comes below is an interview with her (AM) by the editor of IJLTR (KS) on Anna's past and present academic life and responsibilities.

KS: Thank you dear Prof. Mauranen for agreeing to talk 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?

AM: I am a professor of English, specifically contemporary English linguistics and applied linguistics, at the University of Helsinki. In principle I have retired, and work only part-time now for the university, where I run research projects, currently the most important ones focusing on language processing. I maintain research activity in English as a Lingua Franca as well. The rest of my time is largely spent on the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters, of which I'm currently the President, and various other activities in collaborating with other science academies, largely on an international scale. I'm also an editor of the journal Applied Linguistics. I did my Bachelor's and Master's degrees at the University of Helsinki. Finland maintains the Germanic tradition of including several subjects in their degrees, meaning that if you want to take a little initiative and effort, you can suit your degree to your interests. I did English, General Linguistics, and various behavioural and social sciences up to my Master's and then English Linguistics for my PhD at Birmingham, UK. This gave me a good grounding in many areas of study – or that's what I think now, looking back. Along the way it didn't seem so clear, I just followed my interests and intellectual passions.

KS: You did a PhD in English Linguistics at the University of Birmingham in 1992 and started your career as an associate professor at University of Joensuu in 1994. Does this mean that your employment didn't include the assistant professorship stage? Also you have three Docentships in 2005 (Tampere University), 1999 (Joensuu University), and 1994 (Jyväskylä University). Could you please explain what these mean (as Docentship in some countries like Turkey refers to an associate professor rank).

AM: You're right – I never was an assistant professor. But I did hold a researcher position before my appointment to an associate professor, and also served a year as an acting associate professor at Tampere before being appointed to the University of Joensuu. Docentship in the Finnish system is essentially an honorary position, thus unpaid, a little like Reader in the UK. It acknowledges the fact that you not only have a PhD but also a sufficient number of other publications that in principle makes you eligible for a professorial position, somewhat like the German system of "Habilitation". Some people like to translate it as "adjunct professor", but I think it's potentially a baffling translation, since it needn't involve any teaching, let alone a salary. Why I have the title in so many universities is that I moved on from each, and accepted this title because in principle it also lets you supervise people or teach courses. In this way, I was able to finish supervising my students even if I had already moved to a new position. I'm sure this sounds outlandish to someone not familiar with the system, but it's a very old one.

KS: Your most recent project (2020-2023) funded by Swedish Cultural Foundation in Finland is Project SEGMENT. Could you please elaborate on the nature of this project and what your research aims are? How do you compare this project with your earlier projects such as 'Chunking in language' or the 'Change'?

AM: Project SEGMENT is about chunking up, or segmenting, spoken language while listening to it. Speech takes place so fast and disappears so quickly that humans need to process it very rapidly in order to keep pace as a continuous stream of new speech flows in and past. Our working memory capacity is limited both in terms of space (how much information it can hold at any point of time) and duration (how long it can retain what was just heard), so chunking it up into smaller processable segments as we listen is a fundamental way of coping with this task. We first investigated this in the project 'Chunking up language', and involved also cognitive scientists and neuroscientists. It was experimental work, and especially the brain research stage was very exciting. The first project tested the basic assumptions, which were laid down in the theoretical model I had developed with John Sinclair in *Linear Unit Grammar* (2006), and we obtained very encouraging results. As we only

used English in that project, SEGMENT continues along similar lines, but looks into typologically different languages, such as Swedish and Finnish. ChangE was differently focused, and dealt mainly with how English is changing, but we did start pilot experiments with chunking English as a Lingua Franca during that project with some of my PhD students at the time. I'm very excited about this research, just as I have been with all my earlier projects. But this is special in that it involves both novel theoretical development and experimental work, which I always wanted to lay my hands on, and which has been very new to me.

KS: In addition to your academic roles as professor and research director, you have had management roles such as school dean and university vice-rector. How do you compare these academic and managerial roles and which ones do you find more challenging or more rewarding?

AM: They are very different roles, and without any doubt I find the academic role both more challenging and infinitely more rewarding. No question about it. I'm a researcher heart and soul, and the management and leadership roles have just come upon me as if by accident. Academia used to be a place where those who were power-hungry were kept at bay by their colleagues, and those reluctant to be drawn into management were dragged into it against their will. That's how it started with me. But I got used to it, and became curious about how these organisations actually work, and what happens when you shift perspectives first from a language department (what does the study of languages mean in this world? Which languages should we maintain, expand, contract, add?) to the Faculty level (what are the humanities all about?) then the Vice-President (what are high-ranking universities all about?). However, it all takes time, and it became quite a struggle to keep my research going while also playing a role in the university leadership. But I mustered all my tenacity and wouldn't give up my research whatever the cost (like loss of all free time), and now I'm so very happy I never did.

KS: One of the recent awards you received in 2017 is Doctor honoris causa from Norwegian Business School. Can you please provide more information on the nature of this award and who is entitled to receive it?

AM: It's something granted to you – by invitation, so I have little insight into the precise process in Norway. But I know how it happens in my university: every few years there is a ceremony where among other things *honoris causa* doctorates are awarded to distinguished academics whose work is relevant to the university and who have played a role in the university, usually by active and significant collaboration with the university's own professors. I regard it as a very nice recognition and hold it in high esteem. It is also possible to award an honorary doctorate to a non-academic who has distinguished themselves in society in a way that is relevant to the university and has had a connection to it. This is less common, but also I think a nice gesture.

KS: You have had the positions of President of Finnish Association of Applied Linguistics, President of Finnish Society for the Study of English; and are currently President of Finnish Academy of Science and Letters. Could you please elaborate on your roles and duties as President in each category as well the process of being selected as President of these important national associations?

AM: The Finnish Association of Applied Linguistics is a well-established learned society, which selects its president and board members in annual general meetings. In my time of office, they were not elected for a fixed term, but could be re-elected annually, but the mood was changing towards shorter periods. In the Finnish Society for the Study of English, the procedure was similar, election at a general meeting, but the rotation was more systematic; we each had our three years of presidency from one conference to the next, which we were responsible for organizing, after which the next president took over. Both of these are learned societies, which promote research in their own fields, organise conferences to bring scholars together, and the Finnish Applied Linguistics association is also very active in publishing research in its field. The Academy of Science and Letters

is quite different. It is much older, more traditional, eminently respectable, covers all domains of science and scholarship, and members are invited, much like in the Royal Society and similar academies all over the world. Although the president and board are elected at annual general meetings, their rotation system is clearly stipulated in the rules. Thus, for example, vice-presidency effectively means that in two years' time you'll be the next president. The humanities and the natural sciences alternate in the presidency.

KS: As for your publications, earlier in your career you seem to have an interest in teaching and testing issues as shown by your publications 'Teaching English abbreviated clauses', 'New directions in LSP testing' and 'Can gaps measure comprehension?' as well as the text books you have written on teaching reading and grammar; but as you move up in your career ladder, your publications take a more linguistics flavour and focus on English as a Lingua Franca, Language Change and Diversity as well as Academic Writing. Do you see this as a shift in your expertise after PhD or simply a change in interest? Which one of your publications do you like the best and why? And which one do you think have had more impact in the field?

AM: I originally thought that by studying English you become a teacher. I was also interested in behavioural sciences, originally even more than in English, since there was more theory in general psychology, for example, so the combination seemed to cater to my interests. But then I took a course in general linguistics, and a whole new world opened up for me: our young American lecturer told us that linguistics is there to answer the question "what is language?" I was thrilled, as for the very first time it dawned on me that there could be theories of language, and that you could see a grammar as a model of language rather than just a collection of norms and rules. From then on my perspective shifted: I saw English as an example of a language, so it acquired new interest value. With these newly discovered intellectual possibilities a PhD was a natural step, although getting to that stage took a while, because life interfered, and I only started my PhD when my third child was about eighteen months old. Of my publications I like my 2012 monograph *Exploring ELF*, and the book we wrote with John Sinclair (2006), *Linear Unit Grammar*. I think both have something very original to say. So far, I know my 1993 article on Metadiscourse in *ESPI* has been very influential, and it seems my 2018 paper in *World Englishes* on ELF is getting lots of citations, too. The former was the first paper to look into a discourse phenomenon in a contrastive light, and although the topic and approach have become common enough, it was pioneering and influential. I like the latter, because it captures pretty succinctly what I think of ELF in relation to multilingualism and language learning.

KS: In addition to your books and articles (both in English and Finnish), you also have two dictionaries in Finnish. Could you please tell us what these dictionaries are about and whether they have been translated to English or other languages?

AM: Oh, no, it's actually the other way around: these dictionaries are themselves translations, or rather adaptations. Both are bilingual versions of COBUILD dictionaries. They originated in my long-standing collaboration with my colleague and friend John Sinclair. COBUILD dictionaries were his creation, and at some point he wanted to have one of the student's dictionaries turned into bilingual versions in all European languages. So he persuaded me to take on the Finnish version, and as I was working in a Translation Studies department at the time (my first professorship), I found colleagues and students to collaborate with. Later I also did a similar version of a CUBUILD idiom dictionary – I can't remember how that started, but it must have been John's idea, too.

KS: You have served on the editorial board of some well known international journals such as European Journal of Applied Linguistics; Nordic Journal of English Studies; TESOL Quarterly; International Journal of Corpus Linguistics; Studies in Corpus Linguistics; Languages in Contrast; English for Specific Purposes and the journals that I edit: IJLTR and RLE. In addition to these you are currently the co-editor of a flagship journal in the field:

Applied Linguistics. The remaining questions will be devoted to your role as co-editor of AL. Given that your PhD was in English Linguistics which is more theoretical in nature, how do you find editing a journal which has a more practical or applied orientation?

AM: I have this dual interest in behaviour and linguistics, and applied linguistics is a vast field these days. Anything that relates language and social or ‘real-world’ concerns can be seen as applied linguistics, and some of the research is quite theoretical, too. I’m very proud of the journal, because it covers such a huge area and attracts many excellent papers. It is a challenge, but also makes it dynamic. It is also a global journal, and I’m aware that different questions interest people in different parts of the world. This soon transpires when you look at the submissions. In some countries people treat applied linguistics as if it was only concerned with language learning and teaching, while in others, issues of language policies, ideologies, language rights and equality, translation, or multilingualism seem to be at least equally important. I also seriously believe that applied concerns feed ideas into theoretical thinking. An eye-opening example for me was Sinclair’s early work on the COBUILD dictionary: he wanted to solve a practical problem of compiling a dictionary with the help of a newly available technology, the computer, and a large database of authentic language. What he discovered in the process was surprising patterning in language that was not really visible before computer corpora. Thus, theory and practice inform each other.

KS: Could you talk about the process of being selected/appointed as the co-editor of this prestigious journal? What are some of the challenges and the benefits of editing a top-tier periodical like AL? Do you remember any nice or bad memories (of for example authors persisting to get an acceptance despite their rejected paper)?

AM: About the process of being appointed I know little, because it is the publisher that decides, although editors can make suggestions about the next editor. The challenge in a high-level journal is the large number of submissions, and in a journal with a broad scope it is maintaining a balance between different domains of interest. It is also both a challenge and an advantage to try to be open to new developments in the field. One of the real benefits is seeing the field take shape and change, new questions emerging, and new perspectives on old questions. Sometimes really interesting submissions come in, which influence your own thinking, and that’s very rewarding. Other pleasant memories come from positive exchanges with authors who feel they’ve benefited from the editor’s comments and questions. Less pleasant memories arise when, as you suggested, authors feel wronged or get angry and aggressive because you reject their contributions. I suppose that’s something editorship has in common with university management and leadership: people can be such a delight to work with, or they can be demanding and aggressive, making them difficult from your perspective. At the same time, clearly from their perspective it’s you who are difficult, and you just have to live with that if you cannot amend it.

KS: What are an editor’s main duties? What difference is there between being a co-editor and an associate editor and how do you share editorial tasks with your co-editor?

AM: Editors basically deal with manuscript submissions and decide whether they are to be turned down out of hand or sent out for review, then find suitable reviewers, and if the reviews are reasonably positive, make their own comments on the manuscript, then check if they and the reviewers think revisions have made it publishable, and either accept or reject papers after one revision, or ask for more revisions. After a couple of rounds papers ought to have improved sufficiently for publication or they will be rejected.

In Applied Linguistics we have no assistant editors or editors in chief, only two co-editors. With my co-editors we’ve often talked about editorial policies and individual submissions as well as editorial board member selections. We also plan and prepare editorial board meetings, and swap notes and consult each other on difficult cases.

KS: Who decides on the Journal policies as well as its aims and scope? How are editorial board members selected? What are the roles and duties of editorial board members?

AM: Essentially the general policy, aims and scope of a journal are joint decisions between the publisher and the editors, and these live and change with times. The field moves on, even though some themes tend to stay. Editorial board members are invited after consultation with the editors and the publisher, and we invite suggestions from our various contacts, too. Editorial board members are expected to help out with reviewing papers, and offer their expertise when submitted manuscripts fall outside editors' domains of expertise. It is important that the editorial board members represent the field and different regions as widely as possible, because it cannot all be covered by two co-authors.

KS: Could you briefly explain what happens after a paper is submitted for publication? Does it go through initial screening, for example, for scope and style fit, etc.; and who does this? Does the journal screen the paper for potential plagiarism and breach of ethical issues? If so, how is this done? How many papers do you receive and process each month on average?

AM: The very first screening for formal and technical properties (appropriate length, form, basic style, general topic area, etc) and plagiarism is done by the editorial office. The more content-related work falls upon the editors. Ethical issues can arise at either stage. In these cases, we usually consult ethical codes and discuss these among the editorial team, and occasionally, though rarely, lawyers need to be consulted, too. The number of submissions we receive varies throughout the year, but annually we tend to receive between four and five hundred.

KS: How are reviewers selected? What instructions do they receive for reviewing? What percentage of papers is sent out for external review? What percentage of papers is accepted for publication? Are any papers accepted for publication without being sent out for external review? Why are review reports so divergent sometimes, with one reviewer recommending publication and another rejection? What do you do when you receive such contradictory reports?

AM: Reviewers are selected based on their special expertise in the topic area of the manuscript. Applied Linguistics normally invites three reviews for each paper, and I try to look at different aspects of the manuscript in reviewer selection, so that for example methodology would be covered, and the approach and framework, in addition to the topic area. Reviewers get instructions to look at the scientific quality of the manuscript on various dimensions, and its suitability for the journal. We probably send between a fifth and a quarter of the papers for external review, and publish less than 10% of all submissions. Basically you can accept papers without review, but that is extremely rare. I don't think I've accepted a single one without review. Different reviewers think differently on papers, and although it may be baffling for the author, it also reflects the way the paper is likely to be received in the field: not everyone thinks the same. If there is a major discrepancy between the reviewers, I re-read the paper with particular care before making up my own mind about it. If one reviewer recommends rejection, I'm likely to reject the paper, but not always, because the reviewer may just be hostile to the general approach, or not give very good reasons for rejection.

KS: Who makes final decisions as to accept or reject a reviewed paper? Sometimes reviewers recommend revision but the editor rejects the paper (and the reverse may also be true). Are there any reasons for this? Can authors appeal against editor's decisions, and if yes, are these taken seriously and attended to?

AM: The editor always makes the final decision. Editors have their own policies and conceptions about what is a good quality paper, and what might be of interest to a worldwide audience, or what is novel and can move the field forward. Sometimes editors go against reviews for these reasons. For instance, I have found some papers interesting and innovative, but reviewers can be more

conservative and think that it is strange and not really within our field. There is no appeal, really. Every now and then authors protest, but it rarely leads to a change of mind. If they just vent their anger, I don't always even bother to reply, but if they present arguments against my judgment, I do, and engage in discussion. I do not see much point in appealing against editor's decisions – there are so many journals in the field, in any academic field for that matter, that it's much better to try another journal rather than bang your head against the wall of one.

KS: Which one of the following affect an editor's decision at different stages of processing the paper (from sending it out for review to a final accept/reject decision): a professional cover letter; authors' names and affiliations; authors' geographic origin; authors' academic qualifications; paper having single or multiple authors; authors' citation from your journal; study's novelty and significance of contributions; design of the study; standard of language? Any other important criteria not named here?

AM: Above all, the paper itself: the novelty, quality of the design and methods, interesting findings (and it's worth bearing in mind that zero findings contradicting established 'truths' can be very interesting, if the study is solid). Our journal does not have to be cited, but it is important that the submission must be relevant to recent discussion in the journal, or start an entirely novel (though relevant) thread of discussion. I get a few submissions relating to a topic much debated and investigated a decade or two ago without the authors apparently realising that the field has moved on and the questions are no longer relevant. The geographic origin can matter, too: not of the author but of the data and study. I'm keen to get papers from all over the world, so tend to look favourably at submissions from regions that tend to be less well covered. However, if they simply use mainstream Anglo-American frameworks and premises and just run a similar study in their location it's not all that interesting. The interest value of rarer locations lies their special features, something that we ought to know in other parts of the world. I think contextualisation is important and of wide interest. Language must be clear and effective, but not necessarily Standard English. This is an international journal, the majority of the readership will not have Standard English backgrounds, and little glitches can be put right at the copyediting stage.

KS: Some authors think journal policies are not transparent enough and there are some 'hidden' policies that some journals follow or that editors employ their personal preferences in accepting/rejecting papers. Do you also follow similar unwritten principles?

AM: Journals have general policies, and while these try to be transparent, it is impossible to list every detail, and this would also mean that editors wouldn't be able to exercise their own judgment. I know in certain science fields there have been moves towards editors who are managers rather than experts in the field, and come from outside. The argument is that they don't have personal preferences or biases because they're not experts. Their job is to send all technically acceptable submissions for review and trust the reviewers. This may be unbiased on the part of the editor, but not transparent at all, because it just pushes the responsibility entirely to reviewers, who may exercise whatever prejudices or preferences they may have. I prefer the practice of specialist editors. But your question made me think that it might be a good idea if journals gave more publicity to their editors so that each of them made statements about their editorial policy. Now they're simply names, and kind of hidden from sight.

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

AM: Well, I'm happy to do my bit in applied linguistics, because that was an early interest, I have a lot of relevant background, and the field is broad enough to fit happily in. Whether I actually *am* an applied linguist is another matter. I don't think it's my primary identity. This is a temporary post (Applied Linguistics has 5-year editorial rotation, and I'm on a slight extension now), and I've

found it very interesting and intellectually rewarding. However, it's not central to my career, because my passion lies in research. If I could choose my path again, I think I'd do what I have done: follow my interests and intellectual passions. It might be different at this point of time, though. One looks towards fields where intriguing and important developments are taking place. Starting out now, one might choose anew.

KS: Thank you again Prof. Mauranen for the time and the input. Do you have any specific recommendations for junior researchers wishing to get published in your journal? Some novice researchers may feel that AL and similar high ranking journals are only for big names and established researchers. Do you have a policy of mentoring juniors or offering special allowances for young scholars?

AM: Thank you for interviewing me. It may not be easy for junior scholars to publish in top-tier journals, but they clearly do. I do not look at the academic age or career stage of authors, but at the study and what the paper has to say. Sometimes it turns out exciting papers are by relative novices, and I think that's great. However, the courage to say something new and of general interest is missing in many novices. This is natural in all Humanities and Social and Behavioural sciences fields, which tend to be more reliant on experience and wide reading than natural sciences, which basically solve specific research problems. If you want to publish in Applied Linguistics, you cannot just follow authorities and big names: you must challenge them as well as the established views, and that takes courage. I don't mentor novices, I do that with junior members in my own research group, but if I think a paper has potential but is not putting its points very well, I'll try to help the author develop it. My advice is that don't try to start right at the top, but don't be too modest either, and if you're turned down don't be discouraged but publish elsewhere. Above all, never give up!

