



INTERVIEW WITH ROBIN TOLMACH LAKOFF

University of Berkeley, California 15/02/2005



Robin Tolmach Lakoff is Professor of Linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley. Widely regarded as the founder of language and gender studies, she writes extensively about gender and power and is the author and coauthor of seven books and nearly one hundred articles. Her most prominent works are: *The Language War* (2000), *Talking Power: The Politics of Language in our Lives* (1990), *Face Value: The Politics of Beauty* (1984), and *The Language and Woman's Place* (1975). She also wrote nearly one hundred articles.

Slavica Perović is Professor of Linguistics and English at the University of Montenegro, Podgorica. She was among the first ones to introduce the study of language and gender into Montenegrin linguistics. She wrote *Discourse Analysis: Theories and methods* (introductory study) (2014), *The Language i Action* (2009); edited *How to Tame a Text* (1999), *English and Serbo-Croat: Indirect Questions in Contrast* (1996) and translated Deborah Tannen's *You Just don't Understand* into Serbian. She is the author of numerous articles.

Slavica Perović: *I understand that your linguistics is your philosophy, the way you see and explain the world. Am I wrong?*

Robin Lakoff: No, you're absolutely right. Those of us who got into linguistics in the 60's got into it through Chomsky's transformational grammar and we were kind of lured into it by Chomsky's promise that language was a window into the mind. If you were interested in studying the human mind and you knew the problem of the black box – that you couldn't get into the mind – then language was what you wanted to study. Now, I also got into it because I had started out back in high school as a classicist and the language I studied was Latin. I got into college and I was a classics major and I kept being frustrated because there were questions you couldn't ask and they couldn't be answered, there were no native speakers left. The undergraduates were treated more or less like graduate students, which meant that they didn't get to read the actual works immediately but they studied a lot of things about manuscript tradition, antiquity, paleography which, now that I look back on it, seems very fascinating, but at the time I was impatient. I wanted to read Virgil. At that time, Chomsky was coming into great prominence and he was at MIT which was just down the street and I was then going out with someone who was an undergraduate at MIT and into Chomsky. He would hang out with Chomsky and I would go with him. We would go to Chomsky's classes and lectures. MIT was an incredibly exciting place at that point. It was almost a kind of religious cult of people. They absolutely believed and felt they were changing the world, changing the way you think about language and changing the way you think of language as related to everything else that you need to know about people.

S.P.: *Did you feel a sense of intimidation – Chomsky was a star linguist then, you were students, beginners in a way?*

R.L.: Remember that this was a cult and one of the things you expect in a cult is that the leader is the boss and you don't argue with the leader. Chomsky projected and still projects an incredible kind of authority, and not only intellectual authority but moral authority too. And, when you were in his ambiance, you just wanted to partake of it. You just tended to want to believe what he believed. So, at least at that point, and I'm talking about the early period, there really wasn't a feeling of

intimidation. This is what you want to do; this is what's right; this is what we want to learn to do. And it was exciting and it was comforting. MIT at that point was really a place where you wanted to be. You felt you were just... people were just reinventing everything, just doing all kinds of work. Back then there weren't Xerox machines, so if you weren't at MIT you wouldn't get a copy of the papers that were coming out. So, you just had to be there in order to be a part of it. It really was the center of the world.

S.P.: *But you were not at MIT, you were at Harvard.*

R.L.: I was at Harvard, but you could just take the bus and go there.

S.P.: *When was the earliest point that you noticed your interest in linguistics and how did it show itself at that time? Was it in childhood or later on?*

R.L.: I think I always was. When I think back to my childhood I remember noticing things about language and not knowing what to do about them because I didn't know linguistics existed until late in high school. So those are just the sort of things you pick up on. My family sort of traded in secrets. I mean, they didn't talk about all kinds of things. And I think if you look at people who do the kind of linguistics I do, they will tell a similar kind of story. That in order to survive in their families or to figure out what was going on, they sort of needed to know how to get to that indirect level. They had to learn to do interpretation of a rather sophisticated kind early on, and so they developed it because that's what you have to do. And, only years later you say, "Oh, I can study this as a scholar!" But the seeds were sown early. When I talk about the Generative Semantics Revolution, this was kind of indicative of what happened... We saw ourselves, all of us, as member of a single group working together to solve all the problems of language. But when Chomsky said, "language is a window into the mind", we kind of took him at his word and we thought, okay, that means that if you really understand his notion of deep structure properly – this was the early 60's and he was talking about deep and surface structure – and if you really understand deep structure, there's a direct link between it and mental structures and social structures. And even though Chomsky was still working on a relatively superficial syntax, we would go deeper and

started looking at things that aren't said explicitly but are a part of language and a link between language and mind. So we started to do that.

S.P.: *When you say 'we', who do you have in mind?*

R.L.: People started even in the mid 60's... practically no sooner was *Aspects [of the Theory of Syntax]* published that people were starting to say "How close do we have to stay to this?" and were developing alternate models. This was a group of people: George Lakoff, of course, John Robert Ross, Paul Postal and Jim McCawley are the names that are the trans-formationalists. Standard theory people later took to calling them the 'Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse'... But they each in their own way were taking ideas that were latent or they thought were latent in Chomsky's model as he articulated it, especially in *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, and were kind of developing it further, trying to nail them down. What if we really try to formalize the notion of deep structure? What if we make explicit this notion of language and mind? So it was they and several of the rest of us – over time it became a good sized group. As Jim McCawley started to teach at Chicago, he was one of the first to get his degree, he got a bunch of students in his circle and they became a part of the same group. So, by the early 70's, if you went to a meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society there would be a couple of hundred people. Most of all, women were slowly beginning to realize there was an alternate model. Now again, if you read some of the histories of this period like the stuff that is written by Fritz Newmeyer, they sort of suggest that these were the generative semanticists and the suggestion is sometimes made that these people were blindly ambitious and out to undo Chomsky for their own personal gain. But, really, what we were trying to do was develop Chomsky's ideas and carry them out as fully as we thought they should be, and it was only very late in the process really, that we were forced to realize that what we were doing was antithetical to Chomsky's view of language. In essence, we were kind of thrown out of Eden and told, if you are going to go around eating apples that I haven't told you that you can eat, you can't stay here.

S.P.: *So it's my way or the highway?*

R.L.: Exactly. That's Chomsky. We used to play a game half-seriously

called 'if Chomsky is Freud, then who am I in Freud's circle?' There were great similarities in the way the Freudian, early psychoanalytical circle, and Chomsky's circle were organized and in particular this notion that there are certain ideas that you cannot controvert. There is the Oedipus complex, there is Chomsky's deep structure and so on.

S.P.: *Yes, you made the comparison in **Father Knows Best** between Chomsky and Freud. So you decided to deconstruct that authority and go your own way?*

R.L.: Yes, in the 60's one of the things that young people liked to do was experiment with overthrowing authority, especially the authority of the father. Now Chomsky, of course, is always represented as this great liberating figure, a political anarchist. He describes himself as an anarchist and certainly in politics Chomsky is an anarchist, but in linguistics he is an archist.

S.P.: *When did you decide to introduce social and psychological elements into language analysis?*

R.L.: That was a part of the same generative semantics logic – if we say that language is a window into the mind, what do we need to know in order to understand how language does this? We started to look at cases where things were implicit or inferred in some way. Maybe presuppositions, maybe later we talked about conversational implicature and illocutionary force but not quite at the beginning. Actually, here is how it went. Way back early on, Paul Postal was one of the originators of this counter-discipline. He wrote a paper that was published in the Harvard Educational Review in about 1964 called "Underlying and Superficial Linguistic Structure" and that's really the only example until much later in the textbooks and it's really the only example of an illustration of method, how you argue for something such as deep or underlying structure. Postal took imperatives in English and showed that imperatives had an underlying full sentence. So 'go home' was really a shortened form of 'you will go home', this was an economical formulation even though you had to do those deletions of 'you will', but it could account for many other things in other kinds of sentences. This was the basic tenet of transformational grammar – that you can posit things present in deep structure when that allows you a

more parsimonious explanation of something that you find in surface structure. The notion of economy is very important... and generality is one case. So we started asking 'how far does this go?' Here is something that is new which isn't present anywhere visible in surface structure and yet because it allows you to have a deeper understanding and save steps, ultimately, you're allowed to postulate it. A number of papers were written which carried that idea even further – the things that you had to make a little more believable, more complex transformational relationship. So, what we were doing was deepening and extending the notion of transformation in order to get from deep structure to surface structure. There were more steps needed because you had to do more deletions and reorganization and whatnot. But, our argument was that even if it looks as if you are complicating the grammar, in the long view you're simplifying because you are gaining a greater understanding of those different kinds of utterances. Somebody might suggest that a sentence such as 'I cut the meat with a knife' was derived from the same deep structure as 'I use the knife to cut the meat'. Even though those are very different on the surface structurally, but that way you could account for the fact that the same kinds of things don't occur in both sentences. So you can say, 'I cut the meat with a knife' but you can't say, 'I cut the air with a knife' or something like that. And similarly, you can't say 'I used the knife to cut the air'. If you start out from the same deep structure, your constraints on what nouns and verbs can occur in that deep structure are stated once and for all; then that same fact about co-occurrence constraints carries over to both kinds of sentences. So you're economical in the long run, you save more and you also achieve understanding about the complexities of structure and you understand that there are often two ways to do approximately the same thing and you're also exploring the notion of paraphrase and synonymy of, say, two utterances that are essentially similar. We started talking about abstract structure, underlying structure, and finally logical structure. Now, Chomsky said deep structure was universal but when he represented deep structure in his writing it often looked a whole lot like English. Like it would have articles, it would have tenses (of an English kind), it would have word order that looked a whole lot like English. We said this couldn't really be very universal and we worked more and more to develop at a very base level what we ultimately called logical structure at a universal base. So that at their root, when it started out, all languages would be the same because all languages are developed by

human cognitive systems and you recited Descartes, 'all people think the same'.

S.P.: The concepts that caught your attention were language, gender, power, politics, and all that. Why didn't you go into conversational analysis or politeness phenomena?

R.L.: I did eventually, but not immediately, in part because that was not what was being done in Cambridge in the late 60's. Conversational analysis came into linguistics with the publication by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson in *Language* in 1974 and that came from anthropology and sociology. But what we were doing or why I did what I did – well, we started to say that you needed to know things about the social and psychological context of the utterance in order to be able to represent its logical structure completely and accurately. And in fact, in order to account for what you could and couldn't say and for the forms that you chose, you really needed to build into this level of underlying structure a whole lot of information that was extra-linguistic or seemed to be what people wanted or what they desired out of the communication. Or maybe, what their relationship was to one another, were they intimate, was there a power difference, all kinds of things that played into the linguistic form that had a direct relation one way or another to what showed up grammatically on the surface, but not necessarily in a direct linguistic form. A linguistic underlying structure has to represent a great deal of the real world within which the utterance takes place. The Chomskiyates said, well, that is all very well, but if every sentence has to represent or build in everything about the world then your underlying structures are going to be infinite and you can't have that because you never get done and you don't have a system of structures and rules. We said, well, we don't mean that everything about the world needs to be encoded in the underlying structure, but only those things that have a direct linguistic reflex on the surface. You need to talk about titles of respect, just for instance. So you might want to encode relationships of power. On the other hand, the speaker's eye color per se doesn't figure as far as we know in any grammatical system directly affecting the output so we wouldn't have to encode that. You really have to look at each case and they say, that's fine but give some idea of which cases. So we started looking around. Now, at the same time that this was going on in linguistics the women's movement was happening in the larger world.

S.P.: *So, what happened next?*

R.L.: In the late sixties, when the women's movement was coming together, which was a very exciting period, it was politically a civil rights movement that happened... it was really a whole new world and a lot of people were looking at men's and women's behavior towards each other and asking the question: what is going on, why are things the way they are, why do some people seem to have all the goodies, how do you study it? Is it a kind of field that was just beginning to develop because nobody had ever really looked closely at this from a woman's point of view? At that time I was within linguistics, we were asking questions about the aspects of a person's identity and the context in which discourse takes place and what aspects of those things need to figure in the logical structure. We still thought about ourselves as basically good Chomskyites, maybe better Chomskyites than Chomsky. So the question I asked was what about gender?

S.P.: *Where does gender fit in?*

R.L.: Does it have to be represented at this deep level in order to account for something about the way language shows up on the surface? Everybody said, well maybe in Arawak, maybe in Japanese, but certainly not in English, and yet everyone knew that there was a separate woman's language and separate man's language in English.

S.P.: *Was there something in your own experience that kindled the interest in gender or was it the spirit of the time?*

R.L.: I think those of us who got involved in any way with the women's movement did so because we had the slogan 'personal is political'. What we meant by that was that your personal experience politicizes you. In fact, people get into feminism because they've noticed that there is some kind of inequity, there is some non-parallelism between what men do and what women do that can't be explained without bringing in the categories of status and power differential. How can we demonstrate this? A lot of the academic women's movement of the 70's really had to do with finding ways to make it clear that there really is a discrepancy between genders which needs to be addressed and has to be explained. The power differences between the genders was a logical way to explain

a lot of it. You know, Radcliffe was the women's branch of Harvard and in those days we lived in dormitories that were about three-quarters of a mile from the campus and the guys had big houses that were much closer and we all paid the same tuition. The guys' living quarters were much nicer than ours, their food was better than ours, they lived closer, which in the nasty weather of Cambridge was an important thing. Also, they really didn't have much of a dress code, but we, no matter how nasty the weather was, could not wear pants outside of our rooms.

S.P.: *At that time it was forbidden?*

R.L.: Absolutely. My room-mate was a dangerous person. She actually broke the rule and wore pants in and during classes and nothing happened, but the rest of us were still too scared. We noticed these inequities, it's just sort of amazing that it was the early 60's...

S.P.: *What was the most hateful of those inequities?*

R.L.: Well, most things. We must have perceived the boys as more valuable than the girls because they got so much better stuff. There was an undergraduate library and a graduate main library, but the books that were on reserve for undergraduate classes were in the undergraduate library. Radcliffe also has a mini campus several blocks away and there was a library there and books on reserve were also kept there. Let's say you had an hour between classes and you wanted to nip into the library and get a little 'quick' reading done and if you were a man you would go to the male library on the Harvard campus. Reading the way the Harvard administration read the will of the guy who had given the money was that it was to be used only by Harvard undergraduates, that is, not by the Radcliffe undergraduates and therefore we were barred from using it, but they could use ours. Cold, snow, rain every day – the weather in Cambridge is worse, worse – than the weather in Leningrad, the worst weather in the world... just dreadful. We were in our little skirts and we wanted a place that we could read. The boys can use the undergraduate library but the girls can't. It was saying you are not really equal. You don't deserve it. You don't belong here. There was a lot of overt and non-overt sexism in classes and professors saying in so many words, "I expect the men to be serious scholars and to follow in my footsteps".

S.P.: *Were there women professors at that time?*

R.L.: Not one. I went through all my entire undergraduate and graduate career at Harvard without a single woman professor at all. Harvard had two tenured women professors at that time. One because it was anthropology and a chair given exclusively for a woman, so Harvard either had to give up the money or hire a woman in a tenured slot. They coughed and choked and it was terrible but Harvard did not get a zillion dollar endowment by turning down money, so they took it. The other was an astronomer, a very noted one, and the wife of an astronomer. They wanted to hire him and they couldn't make a case for it without hiring her too because she had done all the work. So they hired both of them and those were the two tenured women.

S.P.: *So it virtually started with your generation?*

R.L.: That was it. There were one or two women at Harvard when I came here in 1972. I think you could count the number of tenured women on the faculty on the fingers of maybe even one hand, but certainly no more than two. There was Sue Tripp, Lauren Nader, there was Louise Clubb in Comparative Literature, and probably a few others, maybe two or three around the whole campus. If there were ten in a faculty of a thousand, that was a lot and then I became one of the very few, of the ten.

S.P.: *Did you start with a full awareness of the situation, resolved to pursue your interest in linguistics and leave something valuable for posterity?*

R.L.: It is all part of the same thing, you know, and I think one of the things that makes for doing interesting work is that you are driven by some sense that things aren't the way they ought to be and that maybe you have been a victim of things not being the way they ought to be and you want to fix them, if not for yourself then for the next generation that's coming along.

S.P.: *So, you were fixing things...*

R.L.: We were going to change the world.

S.P.: *What was it that you were fixing in the first place? Your personal life, your professional life, your career, your social environment – what?*

R.L.: Well, in a sense you change everything at once. If you ask, 'How do men and women relate to each other' or 'What's the role of women and the role of men in this culture' and 'Is there a problem' you become involved. It's very difficult not to become involved in fixing things or at least thinking about how you might fix them because if you simply try to be academic and objective and say, 'Well, there seems to be this discrepancy and I'm leaving it there,' that's more respectably academic, but how can you do that? How can you turn your back on something that is not the way it ought to be?

S.P.: *And you thought you might give an answer or at least your answer?*

R.L.: I thought that I could do so by using language as a diagnostic. And one of the things a linguist could do is show that in language, in English, let's say, there are non-parallelisms between the way language refers to men and the way it refers to women, just to take one sort of case. Then that non-parallelism has to be explained. Why is it that in English there is only one title of address for men – 'Mr' – and at that point a choice of two for women, 'Miss' and 'Mrs'? And you have to mention a woman's marital status, but you don't have to mention a man's? It's a very simple case and when you understand it you understand something about the role that men play versus the role that women play in the society and you have to explain it, because language is not supposed to have non-parallelisms for no reason.

S.P.: *How did those linguistic revelations reflect upon your private life?*

R.L.: Well, I guess one of the things that happened during this period was a new perspective on what women had always seen as their own individual personal battle to be fought. Once the word *sexism* was created, which was, I think, in 1968, we were able to see when bad things happened to us. It wasn't because we had behaved badly or we were asking for it. Well, we couldn't have created the word *sexism* until we saw the situation as a political one rather than as an individual issue. And once you did understand that it's not you and you alone, but it's you and a whole bunch of people like you who have similar interests and

similar rights and issue rights that comes into it which it hadn't before, then you can start thinking about getting angry, changing things and taking action. So all the stuff I was mentioning about the way women were treated at major universities, the kinds of things that professors would say to women: "Well, maybe we will let you into grad school, but you won't be supported the same way as men", "We won't give fellowship support to a married woman... that's her husband's job to support her". And they'd say, well of course we don't hire women because women will only quit to have babies so there's no point in doing so, besides women just aren't as smart, aren't as productive and everybody knows this. My first reaction was, well, of course they are professors, they must know this, they must be right and there is something very wrong with me for wanting to be one of them. And once you understood the notion of sexism, once you saw why it was and how it was and why women were relegated to certain roles, then you'd no longer feel that you were a bad, anomalous, immoral or weird person. You could take steps to question it and change it.

S.P.: So you were changing it in the *Language and Woman's Place* and later on, as you said, in *Face Value*.

R.L.: Really everything that I've done.

S.P.: *You questioned things pertinent to women constituting the women's world. We could say you were among those women 'who had it all' at that time: career, marriage, a child. How was this regarded?*

R.L.: Well, you know, the women's movement first said, 'Men have it all, why shouldn't women have it all'? That would be equal, that would be paralleled and so a lot of us said, sure, why not, you know, our husbands will do half the work of home and childcare, the laws will change to make it possible, and they did to a remarkable extent. Women were kicking and screaming so things changed and we thought there was no reason why we couldn't have it all. We understood that there would be sacrifices but that we could.

S.P.: *What kind of sacrifices were there in your case? What did you sacrifice at that time?*

R.L.: Sleep, I suppose. You have a baby and you have a career, you have a baby and you try to get tenure and... something's gotta give. You can't do everything and have twenty-four hour days in which you get eight hours of sleep, so for a number of years it was exhausting. Oh, and if you are married to someone who is an academic and is also in your same field. There are decisions to be made about which job, who's gonna get it and how you're gonna divide everything up and that makes it in some ways more difficult.

S.P.: *Well, everybody knew about Robin and George Lakoff, but I did not know how you two were related.*

R.L.: We were married.

S.P.: *Yes, later on I learned you were married.*

R. L.: We got married very early. I was twenty years old.

S.P.: *Twenty years old and you decided to get married?*

R.L.: Well, back then people did get married very young and it was not such a good idea.

S.P.: *Was there pressure from society to get married and to get settled?*

R.L.: See, first there was the assumption that the woman had to be married, then there was this certainty that I would never be able to have a real career because I was a woman. I thought perhaps I'd better get married. Then there was the fact that George came along and wanted to marry me and I said 'I had better do that because who knows, there may not be another opportunity and we do have all these good things in common, and so we did. But, there was a lot of... it wasn't all that subtle... the pressure. For instance, Radcliffe is an elite university, elite college within Harvard, and Radcliffe is even more elite because back then, it was smaller, so only a quarter as many women could get in as men could get into Harvard. It was very selective on an intellectual basis. So, it was sort of that there were all these messages being given out about getting married as being what you were here to do... something referred to as

'getting your Mrs'. Radcliffe had a tradition then, I hope they still don't, called Strawberry Breakfast and this was held during the spring and part of the deal was that there were strawberries and strawberry jam and I also remember scrambled eggs with chicken livers – the sort of fancy food that you never got as a rule. And at this breakfast, every married senior would receive a red rose and every engaged senior a pink rose bud. Now, you can imagine a university in which every senior who is a Fulbright would get a red rose and every senior who is accepted to the graduate school of choice would get a pink rose bud, which might make sense. Here's an instance of the kind of message that was all around and we didn't think it was particularly strange. It's only looking at it from later on that you say, 'What the hell did being married and being engaged have to do with being at Radcliffe?' Well, obviously somebody thought a whole lot.

S.P.: *So where were you living exactly?*

R.L.: Oh, I was living in one of the dorms.

S.P.: *That means you were not living together when you got married?*

R.L.: Let's see. . . George and I got married in June of '63 which was the end of my junior year and he was already in graduate school at Indiana. He was off at Indiana and I took more courses so that I could graduate or so that I could finish my course requirements a semester earlier in December of '63, although I officially graduated in June of '64. And for that one semester, they, the Radcliffe administration, gave me the special dispensation of being allowed to live in the dormitory even though I was a married woman, but they didn't usually. You weren't supposed to get married until you graduated anyhow.

S.P.: *What happened next after your graduation? It was your master's, your doctor's?*

R.L.: The usual.

S.P.: *And your first job?*

R.L.: Let's see... I got my post doc at MIT, but my real first job was at

Michigan in '69, Ann Arbor.

S.P.: *Let's go back to the category of power. How did you see it?*

R.L.: Well, I think I saw it as everybody needing to have some kind of personal power, or at least the right to some kind of autonomy, the right to define yourself and the right not to be trampled on by other people. To the extent that you can pursue happiness – if you want to put it like that. If you don't have those minimal things, you really can't define yourself. You can't experiment, you can't play with the world, you're confined. So power is really the ability to be autonomous where you can be autonomous to make important decisions for yourself.

S.P.: In *Face Value* you wrote a lot about how you gain power and how power is tricky, especially power coming from beauty. Can you tell me something more about it?

R.L.: This is one of the arguments sometimes men make when they say, 'It's not true that women have less power than men.' They say, 'Look at the sexual power that women have over men,' which is certainly true. The reverse is also true. Certainly a woman who has beauty can, if she has any kind of brains at all, use it to get things she wants from people – and not only from men but also from women. So, beauty is what women have traditionally had as their economic goods. Half of the fiction in the world is about how a beautiful woman of no stature and no money transforms or parlays this beauty into stature and money, maybe even love. So beauty is something that a woman has at her disposal if she has it, and if she uses it properly she can use it as a medium of exchange to get other desirable things. But, the reason why it's tricky, first of all, is that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. It is not something that a woman does herself but she is given, she is granted certain attributes. Of course, this is less true now when you can fix everything in surgery and with other devices but it used to be so when you have what you were born with. It's something that you have but you can't control it, you're not the one who is responsible for it. You can't really take pride in it in the same way as you can if your source of power is something that you've achieved on your own. And secondly, it's something that will certainly fade and in different societies it fades in time – by the time you were thirty it was over and if you hadn't used your beauty to

accomplish everything you needed and to buy whatever you needed to buy, it was over. And it might be over anyway because what you had bought would be traded in when you no longer had it for the new model that had it.

S.P.: *What was the reaction of the American public to that book?*

R.L.: None.

S.P.: *How do you mean none?*

R.L.: I don't think anybody read it. (*laughter*) As far as I know.

S.P.: And *The Language and Woman's Place*?

R.L.: That had a readership, but mostly among academics. Well, no – that's not so. Because a lot of people have told me they have read it and told me it made a difference. That is because it gave examples of what we were talking about. People would say, yes, I've heard that. Yes, I've said that. Yes, that's happened when I've done that. So, more than anything else, language has a kind of probative value. It served to radicalize people.

S.P.: *I certainly think the book was influential. What is the situation in today's women's lib – if indeed it is called women's lib, or feminism?*

R.L.: It's such a problem. We don't say 'women's lib' anymore. You know, I talk in *Language and Woman's Place* about euphemistic substitution, about 'black' going to 'colored', going to 'darkie', going to 'Negro' and so on, and this is why it is a problematic thing and similarly with 'woman' going to 'lady' or 'girl'. Feminism has the same problem. It's another of these concepts that people are always hoping to make respectable by changing the name, but you can't make it respectable that way because it just isn't respectable. So, first people talked about women's liberation, which was shortened by the media to women's lib. The fact that it was shortened made it trivialized; especially since some people referred to 'ladies lib' which trivialized it even more. So, people started talking about feminism. But, more recently a lot of younger women have been

saying, I am not a feminist and when you question them, it turns out they have all or most of the beliefs that you would think a feminist would have. But, they disassociate themselves from feminism because somehow this has been represented, again by conservatives in the media, as a bunch of men-hating, lesbians, I don't know, not very feminine women. Young women of college age often say, well, I'm not a feminist because I don't have to be, because I get what I want, my needs are all met. And they don't realize that as they get older and particularly in the job world as opposed to the college world that's not going to be true. Their boyfriends say 'Oh yes, when we are married, I will do all the dishes and half the childcare'. It almost always turns out not being so at all. When they are young they believe these stories and they don't have to be a feminist. So, they disavow feminism. People have tried other words like 'womanism' and other kinds of things. But it's a kind of avoidance.

S.P.: But the fight is ongoing?

R.L.: Again, it isn't feminism, there are about a thousand feminisms. There is, I guess, some people call my era, the 70's, second-wave feminism and now you have third-wave feminism. We really had to change opinions on things that had been assumed to be true for thousands of years. Sometimes we did say things where we didn't always think carefully about the effects of what we were saying and sometimes we would say things that had negative consequences. You know, we talked about how wearing make-up and worrying about your clothing and wearing very high heels and that sort of thing wasn't a good use of a woman's soul... not a good use of her time and energy and so on. We talked about how it was important for a woman to have a career, to work outside the home, to find some of her identity there. Again, I think the conservative media had a lot to do with this, and the complaints fell on fertile ground. We tried to overturn things that had been true for millennia. Changing the whole notion of what it meant to be a man and meant to be a woman and sort of merging them - creating havoc with people's personal identities. I mean, it was scary. A great many people were never really happy with a lot of the things that emerged from the women's movement. So one of the things you get is what is sometimes called the third-wave feminism which is the younger generation.

S.P.: *Which means what?*

R.L.: For instance, there is... some people say, well I really want to wear lots of make-up and tight clothing and high heels. I want to look as sexy as possible. And that's okay. That's part of being what a woman could be and there are even anti-choice feminists, although I hardly think that's what they ought to do. But, you know, women who say that the women's movement derogated the importance of family. Really, the most important thing for a woman is her marriage and her children. A woman ought to stay home, and they say, this is feminism because it understands that women have a unique role, different than that of men. In a way, a lot of what we were saying was: we wanted to be as much like men as possible.

S.P.: *Okay, sort of egalitarian.*

R.L.: Yes, we wanted to fuzz up that line. We wanted to say that everything a man could do a woman could do, and *vice versa*. With a few biological exceptions. We wanted women to have the same range of opportunities in the public and private spheres that men had.

S.P.: *But that's mission accomplished in today's America, isn't it?*

R L.: We thought so, it seemed like we were coming awfully close. And what's sort of depressing now is that there are signs of it being rolled back.

S.P.: *Is it Larry Summers' words, what he said?*

R.L.: If he had made them ten years ago in just the same context, not too much notice would have been taken. But then, of course, he was what, Secretary of the Treasury? Let's say he'd been President of Harvard (Radcliffe) ten years ago and made the same statement. I don't think it would have been paid as much attention to because back then women were more confident of what we had achieved. What's happened in the last five years has revealed that there is a threat in a lot of ways and people reacted very strongly. Not because Larry Summers himself said anything that was that terrible or that strange, but because

of the fact that the President of Harvard made this kind of statement signified to people that the world was moving backwards. We were powerless to stop it, so it was frightening.

S.P.: *What is your stand on that?*

R.L.: We really don't have a clue in terms of gender what is innate and intrinsic and what is acquired by culture. People have all these theories but we really don't know. It is almost impossible to separate our genetics from social and psychological context. Summers made this kind of extraordinary statement in which he sort of put these two things together. He says, well, maybe there's this innate predisposition that women are not so good at science, and then in practically the same breath he says women don't want to spend eighty hours a week being scientists. The first is an attempt at a genetic explanation and the second has much more to do with context. Maybe the scientists feel that it's a macho thing and that it shows they are rough and tough and eighty hours a week becomes a way of keeping women out. But maybe if there were forty hours a week they'd get just as much done.

S.P.: *In my country we have to catch up with the feminism. What would you advise us to do?*

R.L.: It's so hard because every place is unique. We have our own history and you have yours and we used to think that America really was the best place for women. We are as close to being equal as anywhere and then you look at a place like France where it looks like women aren't equal at all and men really are in a much higher position. And then you notice the funny thing that politically women are much better represented, both in the president's or the prime minister's cabinets and the legislative body, in all kinds of other positions of power in the sciences, in France, than they are here. It's not that clear anymore exactly where equality is most located or how you represent it. So, act and *vive la difference!* Think of what are the really important things that you have to change in any particular culture. What are the things that are changeable? What are the things that you can't change and shouldn't even try. What should you do first? And, I guess, the only kind of advice to give is general advice of trying not to be too dogmatic and doctrinaire. Try to understand that slogans are great but you can't live by them. Try

to go gradually. Try to get a sense of where the culture is and not to ride rough-shod over the most crucial things.

S.P.: *We started in our socialist society with the idea that genders were nominally equal, which meant we had equal salaries, we had nominally equal status, we could be represented in political and social bodies. Nominally.*

R.L.: That's nominally.

S.P.: *But in essence you could see the dominance pattern everywhere.*

R.L.: It was like in the Soviet Union where women were constitutionally guaranteed equality and those Americans who visited would come back with glowing reports about the Soviet Union: half the doctors are women, half the professors are women, but if you looked more closely, the doctors who were running the medical institution were men and the women were in more subordinate positions and had much less prestige. The problem is always the same. Can you legislate from above? Can government legislate equality if the people are not ready? No, you can't do it. You can go slowly, you can change words like *Ms.* or *chair person* or that kind of thing.

S.P.: *Ms* is alive today in English.

R.L.: It's alive but it didn't do what we wanted it to do. What we wanted was that if you had to have titles of address and you had to have one for men and women, have just one for men and one for women. So *Ms.* was designed to replace *Miss* and *Mrs.* But what it now is, is sort of a shadowy third place. If you look in the New York Times you will see that even Hillary Clinton is referred to as *Mrs* Clinton and she's a feminist. So some people in the Times are referred to *Mrs* and some as *Miss* and there may even be some referred to as *Ms.* So, it's all very confusing. What we wanted to do was eliminate the issue of marriage as part of the public identity of a woman. Men don't have to have *married* or *unmarried* as part of their public identity in terms of their title of address that you use in public, so, why not the same for women?

S.P.: *Yes, why not?*

R.L.: Americans have in the last generation or so gone through two great upheavals of American identity. The first being gender identity – they have been thrown into conflict and have compromised with the women’s movement. The second has been the gay rights movement. It refers to the whole notion of what it is to be a man and a woman, how to have different gender roles where somebody is on top and somebody on the bottom, where it was always easy to tell who was which. To us as women, in particular women who have been active in the women’s movement over the last thirty years, it has seemed that it’s a done deal, we’ve won, look at all the changes we’ve accomplished, we’ve overcome that problem. I think what we are going through now is the retrenchment and it shows that we haven’t. And one reason is 9/11, in which the notion of being an American, I think, was very much put in question. America is identified as the winner, the country in control, the economic, political and cultural superpower of the world. You know, we’re number 1 – it was a little ‘iffy’ when the Soviet Union was around, but we always felt they were number 2 and we were still number 1. And then when the Soviet Union fell, for about a period of ten years, we were unquestionably number 1 in the world. And so the identity as Americans was as people who had nothing to fear from anyone, who were in control and in command and nobody messed with us and then suddenly 9/11 happened. Suddenly we were vulnerable and our identity as Americans, as members of this invulnerable group, was suddenly called into question, and still is. We still get frantic every time there seems to be some kind of threat. We don’t know how to handle it, which most European countries, most countries in the world, I imagine, think of as kind of ridiculous because every other country always had to worry about its national boundaries. We have never had to worry about that really. Especially in the 20th century, we don’t worry and suddenly there it is... we’re like every other country in the world, we suddenly have to think about enemies and what can they do to us. Can they get us at home on our own turf? So we’ve had this two-pronged attack on our identity; one our individual gendered identity and the other our national American identity. And the two together, I think we just are not dealing with very well. And so when you have that kind of two-pronged thing getting smacked around your only recourse is to retreat, so we’re kind of going back into earlier time, maybe back into

the 1950's when men were men and women were women and Americans were secure.

S.P.: But what about all these liberties that were gained in the meantime? Are you just leaving them behind?

R.L.: Going back... I used to think that when you gained something there was this thing called progress which was a very American thing. Because many cultures look back to a 'golden age' – a time in the distant past when everything was good and it's been a sort of falling-off ever since. America... in our social mythos, we have always looked forward and it's sort of quintessentially American this notion that we are always getting better and we make progress, that things go from good to better to best. And I had believed that, particularly with the extension of freedom, civil rights, women's rights, gay rights and all the other rights that came into being in the 60's, 70's, and 80's. We really were moving forward. We were becoming a more humane society, a more egalitarian society and we had done it and couldn't move back. And now there are all these signs that, oh yes you can.

S.P.: Fear is very much the major factor?

R.L.: I think fear and insecurity. It's amazing how quickly that can happen.

S.P.: You mentioned 9/11. The narratives have changed since 9/11. In what respect have they changed?

R.L.: Just this kind of thing that I'm talking about. That if we had an internal narrative before that it was first this notion of progress, and things always getting better and things becoming more open as a society and as individuals. One of the things we learned in the 70's was to be open about ourselves and not have deep secrets. During the 60's and 70's we opened up our immigration. It had been essentially closed to everyone but northern and western Europeans since the 1920's, and we opened it again, kind of saying we don't have anything to fear. And then we suddenly closed back in, we became afraid, our narrative became 'watch out for yourself', 'loose lips sink ships', which was a World War II

motto, and you actually started seeing that same motto out again: be careful who you talk to, be careful what you say, don't give anything away. We sort of withdrew into ourselves and became much more conscious of, you know, we're surrounded by enemies, rather than we're surrounded by friends. And so you show off your defenses.

S.P.: *Were such narratives inspiration for your book *The Language of War*?*

R.L.: Yes, I've been interested in them. The texts in the book seemed to me to form a group, again they were about people who didn't use to have access to language rights: women, African Americans, people like that. Getting access, getting to define themselves, define their language, maybe insist on how they were to be talked about by other people. So, what I was saying was, language is politics – getting interpretive rights, getting meaning, making rights by having access to language is the root of political freedom and power. So that was why I chose the particular cases I did.

S.P.: *You opened the text about Hillary Rodham Clinton with a couple of jokes. When did it occur to you to use jokes as a starting point?*

R.L.: A professor from the Anthropology Department has been a folklorist for many years. He collected jokes claiming that we can tell truths about ourselves in the jokes we make. And in the case of Hillary Clinton, what the jokes were really about was fear about a woman who wasn't playing by the accepted gender roles. In particular, a woman who with her husband was crossing over that line, and how frightening it was to a lot of people, and one of the things you do when something is frightening you is make up jokes about it to dispel the fear. So she was kind of a lightning rod and the jokes were a way of throwing off the power.

S.P.: *Recently in his State of the Union Address George W. Bush used the phrase 'friends and allies' ten times. Is that a new vocabulary? How much does it reflect reality?*

R.L.: In the case of Bush I would just take it as a linguistic exercise. It's in response to, well, first the fact that we've had to fight in Iraq all by

ourselves because we have offended everyone, pretty much, who used to be our allies. So a lot of the countries that were supportive to begin with now don't want any part of it, partly because I think that they are right that we shouldn't have been doing it, but then we've mismanaged things further by offending just about everybody. Except maybe for England – there's nothing you can do to offend Tony Blair apparently (*laughter*) – because of Iraq or any other future adventures which we seem to be planning. We are going to need allies, we are going to need friends. We can't do it by ourselves. We can't invade Iran and Syria and whatever else we're planning to do next month and so on. We have to make nice to the Europeans whether we want to or not and I think that what was going on in the State of The Union Address was Bush throwing out crumbs and making nice saying we want to be your friends. Of course this is as long as you do what we want. You can be our friend as long as you bring the toys and try to play with my toys and play by the rules that I set up.

S.P.: *So, no real friendship?*

R.L.: It's all about power. We say whatever we want to whomever we want because we can.

S.P.: *It is awe-striking in a way.*

R.L.: Sure, every country except us practically has always had some level of fear and people adapt to it. And we seem to be having a great deal of difficulty adapting. I'm sure that countries in Europe say you're making a much bigger deal of it than any of us do. It's interesting because suddenly we understand why Israel does what it does. Suddenly we maybe understand why England does what it does (because of the IRA), but we haven't really taken the final step of understanding that this is the norm. That for certainly 50 years we were in a blessed and extraordinary position that allowed us to have an incredible self-confidence and develop in very promising and interesting ways. Then the question becomes when that promise, when that possibility is compromised, how do you live with it? What's the best way to deal with threats and at the same time not lose your soul?

S.P.: *Palestine, Iran, you mentioned Iraq and Syria. Is this series of*

countries going to stop somewhere?

R.L.: I don't know what's with these guys. It's hard to know what their theory is on what they are doing because they keep coming up with theories and then denying them. Oh, we're going to Iraq because of weapons of mass destruction or because Saddam is such a bad, bad boy. A lot of people think we're going into Iraq because we want to control the oil. So the latest theory I guess, from our administration, is that we want to see democracy over the Middle East.

S.P.: *That will be the dominant narrative?*

R.L.: That's what they're trying to impose. Unfortunately we have problems with it.

S.P.: *Spreading democracy, spreading freedom...*

R.L.: Sowing democracy.

S.P.: *Is it really possible?*

R.L.: These guys have never taken an Anthropology course. They couldn't spell *anthropology*. And they don't get that cultures are different and that what works here might not work in Saudi Arabia. It's just too different and in fact it wouldn't even work here. We didn't suddenly have democracy. We had a revolution, we freed ourselves from a monarchy but for a very long time, really until the beginning of the 20th century, this country was not democratic in the sense of direct election – one man, one vote. Democracy was very slow in coming and we didn't really achieve democracy until the 1960s with the Voting Rights Act. First you have the abolition of property rights in the 19th century, direct election of senators around 1912, Women's Suffrage about 1920, black voting rights in the 1960's. Only after all that do you have anything that could be considered democracy and that's a very tiny time and we still are not fully at ease. It isn't as though blacks and women are fully represented in the political system, not to mention poor people etc. In a way you say, who are you Americans to sow democracy? How are you going to sow? Are you going to sow a system like yours? Well, I don't

know, that has a lot of problems.

S.P.: Media manipulation in this is huge. Arthur Miller said in an interview that 90% of the American population did not detect manipulation. That it's only 10% of the enlightened ones that did not want to be manipulated. Was he exaggerating?

R.L.: I don't know exactly if the figures are 90 and 10, but it's pretty close. Most people want to be comfortable. Most people don't want to be bothered. America is probably much less political than most other countries. I mean the American populus is less politically interested. Until this last election, voting even for the presidency was hovering maybe around 50 or 60% of eligible voters. Which says a lot of people really don't give a damn.

S.P.: Sort of 'I'm fine, I don't need to be bothered'?

R.L.: That's part of it. Another part of it is, my life is rotten or things are so bad I can't do anything about it, the country is so large, the system is so corrupt, Washington is so far away, there's no way that anything that I do could reach them or anything they do could have any impact on me so why do I bother? So it's despair, I think, in a lot of cases.

S.P.: Is there a way for the media to be less manipulative?

R.L.: There is less and less independence in the media. In recent years channels and newspapers and radio stations have all been bought up by the relatively few major corporations. So there is really less and less independence. The second thing is it's tremendously expensive to run a radio station, a TV station or a major newspaper. People aren't willing to run risks. They need to get as many viewers or readers as possible and they will do anything to get them. And if that means to homogenize what they say to try to make sure everybody is happy and everybody watches and nobody gets mad and turns it off. That's what they'll do. It's partly money and partly people don't want trouble. The media are manipulated partly by the government and there's been a lot of talk about how this administration in particular fools around with the media; they hardly ever hold news conferences and when they do, they

misrepresent and lie. Those reports write and say the things readers and viewers want to hear. Money is very important. So all those things together mean the media is not free.

S.P.: When people from this country or from Western Europe come to my country and say, your media are not free, you have to liberate your media, it turns out to be a little hypocritical.

R.L.: Our media are not literally under the control of the government. It doesn't look as if the government says you can or can't put this on the air. It's economic censorship as opposed to political censorship. It has to do with sponsors and advertising rates, but it comes to the same thing.

S.P.: I'm very interested in you as a person. What about the part that isn't in books, in classes, or in lectures? What are the biggest life battles you have had?

R.L.: I guess the hardest thing that I had to do, and this was back in the 1960s, was convince myself that it was okay for me to have this career. When I started out there were no women teaching in major research universities in any tenured position. And one was always getting messages from faculty members that you shouldn't be here, you had no business here. You should be happy to be in a menial position and, basically, you should be home having children and supporting your husband emotionally and otherwise. And looking back on it I think it was really amazing that I didn't pay attention to that and I went on anyway. I think it's much easier now because they don't get those kinds of messages or at least not obviously. That was probably the hardest thing I had to do.

S.P.: Your marriage?

R.L.: Oh, that. [*laughter*]

S.P.: Well, a woman scientist, a man scientist, in a marriage; was there competition?

R.L.: It was hard because I think people who are in the same field

shouldn't get married or live together or if they do they should be very mature individuals who come into it both with equal amounts of self-confidence. So, you really shouldn't do it until your forties or until you are accomplished. Now George and I were very young when we got married. I was twenty. I was an undergraduate.

S.P.: *Was he a bit older?*

R.L.: He was a year-and-a-half older. Neither of us had careers and we certainly had no idea of who we were or what we would ever become. We brought a lot of our insecurities coming from wherever into the marriage and it did become competitive. I think it's very hard for two people in the same field not to get competitive with each other when they are in very close proximity. Also I think when you get married, it's good for each member of the marriage each day to bring something from outside into the home so that you have something to talk about. Whereas we, always being in the same department, shared practically everything. It gets kind of incestuous in a way. There is no fresh air.

S.P.: *Andy was born in 1970. Did you know how to bring him up?*

R.L.: Not at all.

S.P.: *What does that mean?*

R.L.: You do the best you can. People always have theories about how to raise children before they have children and how you will never speak a word of anger and certainly you will never raise a hand in anger and everything will be sweetness and light and total reason. And then you have them and it turns out that they have annoying minds of their own. They will test your theories in every way and you have to abandon one theory after another. I will say he turned out alright, but not thanks to me.

S.P.: Whenever you mention him you always smile.

R.L.: Yeah, he's a great kid. He really is. He's thirty-four but he's still a good kid.

S.P.: *What was your major drive that brought you to be 'a national treasure' as Deborah Tannen said?*

R.L.: I think I was just nosy, curious what people were up to. I think in my family there were secrets of odd kinds or that I didn't know whether they were secrets or not so you couldn't ask about them and things were always communicated in indirect ways. So, one of the things I was always interested in was how people communicate in indirect ways and how do they understand when other people did that. I became interested in language very early because I had to learn how to deal with language, the kind of language that I encountered. And I was very glad that there was a field out there that enabled me to do this in a serious kind of way.

S.P.: *One more thing. What were your major fears in life?*

R.L.: I don't know. I'm not sure I have major fears. I just have a lot of minor fears. You know, you worry about how your children are doing and if they'll be happy. As you get older you worry about mortality. One is not as young as one used to be.

S.P.: *So why these questions, is it philosophical or what?*

R.L.: You see you're approaching that age and you start reading obituaries of people who are the same age as you and you realize that you are not immortal. Your child is approaching middle age – where does that put you? I remember teasing my father years ago and saying, how does it feel to have a daughter who is a member of the AARP? You know, the American Association of Retired Persons? Which you sort of join when you are fifty. But I was teasing him and now I think he maybe didn't think it was all that funny. There's that and, you know, when you're younger you worry about questions like can I have the kind of career I want, the personal relationship that I would like, do I have enough money to survive, just all the usual things.

S.P.: *Do you live alone in your house?*

R.L.: No there's the cat.

S.P.: *Is he good company?*

R.L.: Well if you like that sort of... if you like somebody waking you up half an hour before you want to get up and being demanding.

S.P.: *Do you have people over?*

R.L.: Yeah, I have a bunch of friends and they come over. I like to cook. That's probably my major thing when I'm not working. And they seem to think I'm reasonably good at it. I sort of enjoy doing it so there is that. It's nice because you produce something real. The thing about linguistics is you never know... you think you've got it right and ten years later it turns out you were wrong.

S.P.: *And what do you do in your free time?*

R.L.: Watch garbage on television, read, meet friends, see movies.

S.P.: *And the one you've most recently seen?*

R.L.: 'Sideways'. It was good.

S.P.: *Dear Robin, thank you so very much for this interview. Thank you for your time, for your effort to answer all these questions and the good spirit that was behind every word. Thank you for your wisdom and especially for being my mentor during my Fulbright year at Berkeley.*

R.L.: Thank you. Thank you for doing this.

N. B. The above is the transcript of the recorded interview with Robin Tolmach Lakoff shortened and adapted to the written register. I cordially thank René Radević for the helping hand in this endeavour.

Slavica Perović