

Jean Berko Gleason

- Born in Cleveland, OH
- Spouse – Andrew Gleason
- A.B. (1953) Radcliffe College, A.M (1955) Radcliffe College, Ph.D. (1958) Radcliffe College/Harvard University

Major Employment:

- Boston University – 1975-2004, Professor
- Boston University – 2004-Present, Professor Emerita

Major Areas of Work:

- Linguistics

SRCD Affiliation

- Editorial Board for Child Development (1971-77)



SRCD ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Jean Berko Gleason

Interviewed by Richard Ely
In Cambridge, Massachusetts
June 2, 1998

Ely: My name is Richard Ely and I'm here interviewing Jean Berko Gleason. We are in her home in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Today is Tuesday, June 2nd, 1998. We have some questions here; we will begin with questions addressing her general intellectual history. The first question, describe your family background along with any childhood and adolescent experiences that may be of interest. Include the educational and occupational characteristics of your parents, where you were born, where you grew up, what your schooling was like and any military experiences you may have. Also include earlier work experiences.

Gleason: Okay, my parents were immigrants from Transylvania; they were Hungarian speakers and I was born in Cleveland, Ohio and went to public school in Cleveland, Ohio. I graduated from Cleveland Heights High School in 1949 or thereabout and then came to Radcliffe as an undergraduate. My father was in the construction business, more or less. He was rather an unsuccessful businessman, but my mother and father did not go to college. I had one brother who was six years older than I was and he had cerebral palsy, but he was very, very bright and I think that my interactions with him probably had a substantial effect on my life.

Ely: Any early work experiences?

Gleason: No, not really.

Ely: Ever work for your father?

Gleason: No.

Ely: All right, what early adult experiences were important to your intellectual development, including collegiate experiences?

Gleason: I think my education at Radcliffe with a major in history and literature was quite formative. I had some wonderful classes as an undergraduate. I took a course in personality with Gordon Allport my

freshman year at college. I took courses with people such as Jerome Bruner, Roman Jakobson, a lot of very wonderful courses as an undergraduate.

Ely: And graduate school?

Gleason: In graduate school perhaps the most important people in my life intellectually were Roger Brown, with whom I wrote my doctoral dissertation, but also people such as Charles Ferguson, Dell Hymes, Susan Ervin-Tripp, whom I knew at the time, Eleanor Maccoby, with whom I took my first child development course, a long list of very distinguished people that had an effect on my thinking.

Ely: Who was on your dissertation committee? You had a prestigious collection of individuals.

Gleason: I don't remember exactly. That is a difficult question; I know that Susan Ervin-Tripp was there and I know that Joshua Whatmough was there and Charles Ferguson and Roman Jakobson. It was a long list of people along with Roger Brown because my dissertation was written in two different departments. It was a combination linguistics and psychology dissertation so I may not even have told you exactly who the people were.

Ely: What are the origins of your interests in child development? What individuals were important to your intellectual development? Who were your research mentors? We touched briefly on that. Who were your significant colleagues?

Gleason: The origins of my interest in child development really were my interests in language. I wouldn't say that I had an interest in child development to begin with. I was interested in how language works and then I became interested in how children acquire language and from that developed some interests in children themselves. But I would say that my basic interest was always in language rather than in children. Perhaps this is the wrong thing to say for the Society for Research in Child Development but--what were the other questions?

Ely: Individuals who were important to your intellectual development. You touched upon that.

Gleason: Yeah, I mentioned that I think Roger Brown at Harvard was certainly the most important intellectual force in my life, but as I said before, Jerome Bruner was certainly important. Roman Jakobson certainly had an influence, as did Charles Ferguson.

Ely: What political and social events have influenced your research and writing? Also, your teaching?

Gleason: That's a very difficult question to answer. I think that everybody who's of my generation was affected by World War II and was affected by the Vietnam War so that to some extent, I mean for instance in teaching child development I invariably mention something about Stanley Milgram's research and coming to try to understand how it was that the Nazis were able to do the things they were. And I think that just in general the Vietnam War colored all of our thinking about the role of the United States in the world. I can't specifically say how it's affected my teaching but I think it has.

Ely: All right. We will move on to the general heading, personal research contributions, and the first question in this category, what were your primary interests in child development at the beginning of your career? You've already said that they weren't primarily in child development. They were in language.

Gleason: Right, and more specifically, they were the subject of my dissertation. The question was, how do children internalize a working model of the language system that they are acquiring? Specifically, my dissertation was on how do children learn the English inflectional morphological system, how do kids learn to make plurals of words they've never heard before, past tenses or diminutives, or anything of that sort, productive language?

Ely: Can you give us an example of what that might be? How they've heard something—

Gleason: Just the standard example; you know a word like "dog". The question is, when you see another one, how do you know it's two "dogs" and not two "doges" or two "dogim" or some other kind of plural? How are you able to generalize and extend to new words the system of the language, and that was my dissertation, giving kids nonsense words such as a "wug" and how do you know when you see the two of them what they are? They are two "wugs" or two "?" or "??". That was basically what the dissertation was about and it did show that kids even by the age of 3 or 4 have a very complicated internalized inflectional system.

Ely: What continuities in your work are most significant? What shifts occurred? What events were responsible?

Gleason: I've had a—

Ely: Maybe best to phrase that, a brief overview or history of your work? Where you started and where you are now?

Gleason: I don't know, I think they ask those questions a little later maybe. But anyway, I think in terms of continuities, I think that I have continuously been interested in how children come to acquire language. The shift that has occurred in my own thinking was that in the beginning I was extremely cognitive, that is, my approach was almost completely cognitive. How do children internalize the system that linguists describe, basically how do they do it all by themselves? Beginning quite some time ago, beginning some time in the 1970s, I got interested in interaction between parents and children and became more interested in the effect that parents may have on children in terms of language development, and also broader questions of how it is that kids get to be the kind of people they are. I've become more interested in language and socialization, not simply language acquisition. That's been the trajectory of my own interests.

Ely: Please reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of your research and theoretical contributions, the impact of your work and it's current status.

Gleason: That's the kind of question that somebody should write in your obituary!! It's not something that I should be commenting on.

Ely: I don't think so.

Gleason: All right, what was the question again?

Ely: Well, why don't you talk about the strengths of your work?

Gleason: The strengths, all right.

Ely: And the theoretical contributions and the weaknesses too.

Gleason: All right, all right. I think the strengths of my work have been that I have had the great good fortune to be at the beginning of a couple of areas of our field, so that for instance my work on the acquisition of English morphology was probably the first experimental study of children's acquisition of grammar and the method I used, which is an elicitation method, that is, giving kids a frame and then they could plug in the thing that you were looking for. It has been much copied and much used by other people and the study itself has been replicated and duplicated in many languages around the world and with many different populations. So that, certainly, the original psycholinguistic work on the acquisition of language, has had an impact. You said, "What have you done lately?" I think that other kinds of things that I have done that have been useful have been in the social realm when we began to look at the acquisition of routines in child language, looking at more social aspects or looking at other ways that kids were acquiring language. I think that that was also at the beginning of not necessarily the first, but it was sort of at the beginning of a different way of looking at what was going on. So in some sense the fact that I was at the beginning and had some interesting ideas were the strengths. I think the weaknesses are that I'm not the

kind of person who particularly cares to pursue something at great length, so that while I might have done the child's acquisition of English inflection I didn't then decide to do everybody's acquisition. I didn't then go out and say, "Well, now let's look at retarded children, let's look at children from the south or children from the north." I didn't personally pursue that body of literature that's out there of doing permutations of my own work. I've never been much interested in doing endless permutations of my own work, which may mean that I dip in and dip out of a lot of areas and don't necessarily do them at great length so there's no great tome I have written on the acquisition of morphology. So that could be seen as a weakness I think.

Ely: In terms of gender differences you're known as a researcher who has focused on gender differences, has focused on the role of the father, the speech of the father.

Gleason: You're right of course. That's another that I think I was very early on. I had that interest early on, when nobody else was saying, "What role do fathers have in children's language development? What is there about fathers' speech?" Because as you know I published a paper in the mid 1970s on fathers' speech and made some suggestions there, that is called the Bridge Hypothesis, that fathers serve as a bridge to the outside world because they are not so closely tuned into kids and children have to extend themselves conversationally to make themselves understood by their fathers. And that again, I think it was a good idea. And I think it was basically right, but I'm not the person who has necessarily done a huge amount of work in that area. Some other very good people have. I'm happy to have said it.

Ely: What published or unpublished manuscripts best represent your thinking about child development? Which of your studies seem most significant? In some ways you've already commented on it. Which contributions are the most wrong headed, your worst mistakes?

Gleason: Well, actually I was thinking about that and I don't know any worst mistakes.

Ely: Yeah, I don't know any worst mistakes either.

Gleason: I mean frequently people do go off on tangents and I don't honestly know that I have. I think that what I didn't mention before was that I've become interested in cross-cultural work as well. So that if I am going to mention things that may have some impact, one of them is some cross cultural work on language development, and that's my paper with Zita Réger which was published in *Language of the Society*, on the Gypsy child's acquisition of language or language and socialization among Gypsy children in Hungary. So I think that the work on Gypsy children, that was the first paper, by the way, that reported a baby talk register among Gypsies. Prior to that time it was thought by many scholars, even in Hungary, that Gypsies didn't talk to their children. So, if we were to back up a little bit, that's another area where I got to be at the beginning, because it started a whole new branch of research in child language in Hungary, just looking at Gypsy children's language acquisition. So that paper I think is of interest. I think that the *Child's Learning of English Morphology*, which was my dissertation but which is still around, is a paper that has some enduring value, and I'm not sure what else I would point to. Some of the work on fathers' speech, but it's an early paper. The first paper was only a talk, really, so I don't think that it's a great paper. It just had a good idea. The other kinds of things, of course, that have made a large impact is that I have been writing textbooks for the past 15 years or so. And the textbooks have been--in language development, have certainly had an effect on the field, because what you decide to write about is what everybody else decides to learn.

Ely: So you have two textbooks, right?

Gleason: Yes, one is called *The Development of Language*.

Ely: And that's now in it's fourth edition?

Gleason: The fifth edition is already planned and I invite you to contribute to the fifth edition.

Ely: Certainly, and the other text?

Gleason: The other text is edited with Nan Bernstein Ratner and it is called *Psycholinguistics* and it's in its second edition, published by Harcourt Brace and of course it covers the whole field of psycholinguistics, not just child language.

Ely: And when were those first published, the first publication date of each?

Gleason: The language development book was first published in 1985 and the fourth edition was 1997 and the fifth edition is scheduled for the year 2000. And the *Psycholinguistics* was first published in 1993, the second edition 1998 is just out and whether there will be a third edition depends on whether people buy the second edition.

Ely: In terms of publications, when was your first publication?

Gleason: My first publication was instantly upon writing my doctoral dissertation. I wrote the *Child's Learning of English Morphology* in 1958. I got my degree at Harvard - Radcliffe in June of 1958 and the paper was published in the journal *Word* in August 1958, which I guess is some kind of record but what happened was that the then editor of the journal *Word* was Uriel Weinreich heard me give a talk at the Veterans Administration Hospital here in Boston and he basically just grabbed the paper away from me and said, "I'm publishing this," and it was published verbatim basically, minus its first chapter, just the way I wrote it.

Ely: So we are coming up on the 40th anniversary.

Gleason: This is, this year to be the 40th anniversary and as you and some of my other good friends know, a very nice volume is planned in commemoration of this in some sense, which I guess Erlbaum is going to publish. You know more about this than I do.

Ely: I know more about it than you do and that's where it will stay for the time being!

Gleason: Okay!

Ely: Please reflect on your experiences with research funding apparatus or apparatus over the years. Please comment on your participation in shaping research funding policy, implementation, securing support for your own work and related matters.

Gleason: Is this the question that also asks about my service on committees? There is one that talks about that?

Ely: Study sections, councils—

Gleason: Is that part of it?

Ely: It seems it--you certainly received funding and you certainly reviewed numerous grants.

Gleason: Well, I served for many years, like five or six, I don't know how many, on the mental retardation research committee of NICHD and that sent me all around the country looking at big center grants and I think I was helpful there. For instance, many of the big projects looking at mental retardation had people who didn't know much about language. They approached it from an almost primitive point of view and I think that I, and then my successor on the committee, Catherine Snow, really had an impact on the sophistication of the language studies being conducted with kids with mental retardation. In terms of my own funding, of course I've read millions of grants and my own funding experiences have been quite positive with the National Science Foundation. We had a quite large grant for several years and collected data that are now part of the Child Language Data Exchange System under this very nice grant from the National Science Foundation. My experience with NICHD, that's with the National Institute of Health, is a little more complex. As you know, we had a big grant together, myself, Catherine Snow, Brian MacWhinney and a number of other researchers, and then I think we ran into rather a buzz saw when it

came to renewing that grant and had such a negative experience that I haven't had the strength to reapply, although I keep saying that I am going to. I think I will reapply to NSF. I find the whole process terribly painful, onerous and painful. So much time is spent writing the grant and then so much time is writing the yearly reports with NIH in particular that your whole time is taken up being a functionary.

Ely: All right. That ends the section on personal research contributions. We move on to your institutional contributions. First question, in which institutions have you worked: dates, capacities?

Gleason: After I got my doctoral degree I got married almost instantly and then had three small children, so I didn't work full time for perhaps ten years or nine years until after I had children. I always worked at least part time and I worked at the Harvard Graduate School of Education during the late '60s and I was working at the Harvard Medical School in the Department of Psychiatry in the Laboratory of Social Psychiatry in the early 1970s and it was in 1972 that I went to Boston University. And I have just completed 25 years of service in the Psychology Department at Boston University where I began as a visiting assistant professor and I am now professor and have served in various capacities as department chair and such things. Is that the whole question?

Ely: I think that's the whole question. For persons connected with well-known research sites, e.g. NIMH, the various universities, free standing research institutes or foundations, please describe your role? Describe the changes in this unit that occurred during your time there. What objectives were being pursued? What achievements and frustrations were encountered in the role you believe was played by that unit in the history of child development research?

Gleason: That's an impossible question. All right, in the psychology department at Boston University, when I first began, the graduate program was divided into five different groups, into developmental, clinical, personality, social, experimental. During my time as department chair I helped to combine the personality, developmental and social programs into one overall program called the Graduate Program in Human Development. When I first went to Boston University the developmental program had a couple of well-known people in it; it had people such as Freda Reblsky in it who has done some work that I think is known. It's hard to say what has happened to this unit over time, people such as yourself, Richard Ely, have joined. Kim Saudino has joined, who works with behavioral genetics. Al Caron has joined, who works on infancy. We have had a number of researchers who do good work in various parts of the profession. I think that we've changed as the profession has changed really.

Ely: Describe your experiences as a teacher of child development and/or trainer of research workers. What courses have you taught? Please comment on the tension between teaching and research in the field of child development. I could comment on this as a former student of yours!

Gleason: I'll begin with the last. The tension obviously is that there are so many people taking developmental psychology courses that we spend a huge amount of time dealing with such students. You and I were just discussing this; I just had a class with 113 students in it in developmental psychology and obviously if you are assigning term papers and exams and teaching you can spend all of your time dealing with these students. The courses that I teach in developmental psychology tend to be either a life span course, which I teach along with a physician, and this course carries credit in our medical school, or a stand up simple developmental course, and then at the graduate level, courses in developmental psycholinguistics, and I also teach courses in language development. That is basically what I teach. What was the other part of the question?

Ely: The tension between teaching and research.

Gleason: That's basically it.

Ely: Describe your experiences in so-called applied child developmental research and applied work; please comment on your role in putting theory into practice.

Gleason: I think that's easy. I haven't done any. I don't think so, have I?

Ely: Applied child development research—

Gleason: I don't think so. I think some people have taken what I have done and applied it. That is, there are people who test kids to see if there is something wrong with them using some variety of the morphology test but I have not personally been involved in applied research.

Ely: All right. We move on to the section called your experiences with SRCD. When did you first join SRCD? What were your earliest contacts with the society and with whom? Describe the first biennial meeting you attended.

Gleason: That is a very difficult question because I don't really know the answer. I've certainly belonged to SRCD for at least 20 years, perhaps 25 years, but I'm afraid SRCD knows better than I do when I first joined. The same thing goes for the first meeting, that is, I certainly remember going to a meeting in New Orleans in 1977 and that was more than 20 years ago, and I met some interesting people there that I have known ever since. I remember talking to John Neil Bohannon, who was at that meeting, but in general I've tried to go to meetings, but haven't made all of them. I have not served as an official with the organization. While serving on the Mental Retardation Research Committee I came to know John Hagen, who has been an official of SRCD for quite some time, and certainly had many interactions with him, including a visit to the University of Michigan where he invited me to give a talk, but I haven't had many official kinds of contacts with SRCD.

Ely: That may address the third question, the second question focuses on your participation in scientific meetings and publications of the society. You presented papers at SRCD?

Gleason: I've presented papers at a number of meetings, at a number of symposia. Essentially whenever I have gone to a meeting I have presented a paper, but again, to give dates and all of those things, I don't have them at hand. I have published in *Child Development* but not frequently. One of my earliest publications was with Roger Brown in *Child Development*, but specifically in language development. I tend to publish much more in linguistic journals or language development journals of some sort.

Ely: Question number four in this section may also be difficult to answer. What do you believe are the most important changes to occur in SRCD and its activities during your association with it?

Gleason: I can't answer that.

Ely: All right. Let's move on to the next to last section on the field. Please comment on the history of the field during the years that you have participated in it, major continuities and discontinuities and events related to these. Have your views concerning the importance of various issues changed over the years? If so, how?

Gleason: I think that the field has changed. Partly it's changed because there has been such an influx of women into the academic world, although child development was always one area where women were allowed, so to speak. But still, the preponderance of women at meetings, you know, even in our classes, there are classes that I teach that are filled with women, including my language development classes. Last time I taught it there were perhaps 32 women and 2 men taking the course, so that has changed. I think certain emphases have changed as people become much more interested in real world problems. That is, I think child development and public policy is something that we see more interest in than when I was first a student. That is, people were not talking about implementing policies for children. Pressing issues, what to do about children who were homeless or children with AIDS have certainly come to the fore since I have been in the field.

Ely: I think that covers it. There is a second question. What are your hopes and fears for the future of the field? But in a sense you've touched on that.

Gleason: Well, my hopes would be that people would take seriously what child development researchers

know. Out in the world it looks as though everybody is an expert on children and people who knew nothing about development are making pronouncements and making huge decisions. These, including things like decisions about bilingual education, are decisions being voted on today I believe in California, where the proposal's made by a businessman who knows nothing about language. I would hope that people in the field of child development would organize and articulate their views in a way that the rest of the world could use them. My fears are part of the same picture, which is that we are all going to be so trivialized that nobody is going to pay attention to what goes on.

Ely: Please tell us something about your personal interests and your family, especially the ways in which they may have had a bearing on your scientific interests and contributions, on your applied contributions.

Gleason: They want to know about my family?

Ely: Yeah, personal interests and your family.

Gleason: All right. Well, first my family of origin, I should say that I think that my brother had an influence on me because among other things he was very smart and he had trouble speaking. I was always the person who could understand what he said, because as I said earlier, he had cerebral palsy. So I think an early interest in language really stems from my interest in communicating with him. He also had an influence just because my family was not an intellectual family, but because he had intellectual interests and he was six years older than I was, I think I learned a lot from him. My current family--I am married to Andrew Gleason, who is a mathematician, and our work does not overlap in any sense really, but interestingly enough, his brother, Henry Allan Gleason Jr., is a well-known linguist and his brother's work had a profound effect upon me. In fact, it was his brother's textbook that I used in graduate school, and it was his brother's textbook that I used for information on the English morphological system, and I used that in designing my doctoral dissertation. So the Gleason's certainly had their effect on me. I have three daughters, Katherine and Pam and Cynthia, and having children also had an effect on me. In fact, there are a couple of articles which quote what one of my kids said, "My teacher held the baby rabbits and we patted them." I wrote a paper on imitation early on and that's actually a quote that has appeared in many different places, so having children has been of great interest to me, not that I use my kids as subjects because that would be wrong. But I think I got a lot of insights from having children. What was the other question?

Ely: That was it. It was just a question about personal interests and family.

Gleason: Personal interests? I guess my personal interests are so broad so that I've had a good time being able to study a lot of things that I find of interest. It's wonderful to be interested in the Gypsies and get a chance to go to Hungary and go to little Gypsy villages and sing and dance with the Gypsies because you have an interest, and then you can turn it into a nice paper about language and socialization among the Gypsies.

Ely: Anything else you want to provide for the record?

Gleason: I guess just--we were talking a little earlier about my hopes and fears. I think one of my fears about the future of the field, not only the fear that we will be trivialized, is that there is such an emphasis now on the neurosciences that I fear in some sense that people won't take seriously efforts to look at human interaction and will move more and more toward looking toward circuits in the brain, and that's only part of the picture of what is going on with child development.

Ely: All right. Thank you very much. That ends the interview with Jean Berko Gleason. Again, it's June 2nd, Tuesday and we were talking here in Cambridge, Massachusetts.