ROBIN LAKOFF

Christina Maslach:
Okay. So we'll begin. And, we just like to start off with you saying your name and you know where you were born and raised before you got into the academic stream.

Robin Lakoff:
Okay. Yeah. Robin Lakoff. I was born in Brooklyn. I got my AB from Radcliffe. And PhD from Harvard. My first teaching job was at the University of Michigan from 1969 to '72. From '71 to '72, I was at the Center for Advanced study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford. And then I came here in the fall of '72.

Christina Maslach:
The fall of '72. Okay, great.

Paula Fass:
And, if I remember correctly, you were the only people, you and George were the only couple on the campus, that shared an FTE on campus.

Robin Lakoff:
And also, we integrated Berkeley. We broke the nepotism rule.

Paula Fass:
You broke that rule!

Robin Lakoff:
We were the first. Yes. We shared a position. I can tell you that whole story if you want.

Christina Maslach:
Yeah. Yeah.

Robin Lakoff:
Haj Ross, officially John Robert Ross, was part of our cohort at MIT. This was the mid to late sixties. And Haj was just wonderful. He was a terrific teacher, a brilliant theorist, great syntactician, wonderful in all kinds of ways. And, the way the MIT linguistics department was working then was that if you had the favor of God (aka Chomsky) and they wanted to hire you, you literally were hired to be an Assistant Professor the moment the ink on the title page on your dissertation was dry, and very shortly thereafter you got tenure.

Paula Fass:
Oh my goodness.

Robin Lakoff:
And in general, people got their degrees in a very short time. Linguistics in the mid sixties to mid seventies was extraordinary in the way it worked, very different from anything you see now,

anywhere or the way most departments did it back then. So Haj got tenure in about 1968. But a group (of which I was a member) was beginning to invent a form of linguistics that was very different from what Chomsky was doing. We eventually came to call ourselves "generative semantics." Chomsky, who is an anarchist in his political thought, is an archist in linguistics. He does not brook any argument: it was his way or the highway. Haj was a member of this group and it soon became clear that the work that he was doing wasn't what Chomsky wanted done, and over the next few years every year he moved further away from MIT into the Boston suburbs and became more and more estranged from MIT. So it was not unreasonable to suppose, by 1971, that he could be tempted away from MIT.

Robin Lakoff:
In 1971 in the linguistics department here, an Assistant Professor decided he didn't want to go up for tenure. So his position was offered to Haj, with tenure. Haj should have come here. It would have made a difference in the field and in his life, but his wife did not want to leave Boston. So, he turned down the position.

Paula Fass:
Well that's a story that none of us knew.

Robin Lakoff:
Haj should have taken the job here. But he didn't.

Paula Fass:
And you got it?

Robin Lakoff:
So there was this one job and George went to Wallace Chafe, who was then chair of the Linguistics department and said, Hey, we got a deal. The two of us will take that one job if you give it to us. And Wally went to the department, and rather amazingly they agreed.

Paula Fass:
I'm just trying to think who the chancellor was at the time. It must have been the Chancellor or the Vice Chancellor?

Robin Lakoff:
Yeah, they must've had to go to him. The name that's coming to me is Bowker.

Paula Fass:
In '74. So, it's interesting that Bowker...

Robin Lakoff:
Reagan was still governor and of course he was busy firing Clark Kerr, and stuff like that. So maybe there was more freedom for people below him in the chain of command to do unusual things.

Christina Maslach:

But Bowker's wife was a really well known statistician, so I think he may have been particularly more open to what might be done for...

Robin Lakoff:
It's possible he might have been, and Title IX was starting to stir up some angst: Golly, we don't seem to have women on our faculty -- what are we going to do about that?

Paula Fass:
And there was no woman in the Linguistics department...

Robin Lakoff:
Oh, there was actually... A tenured and very eminent woman, Mary Haas.

Among my regrets is that I never heard her story because who knows what she must have gone through to be an eminent tenured woman at Berkeley in those days. She retired in '75, so she was near the end of her career when I got here, since at that time Berkeley had a requirement of retiring at the age of 65. She was interesting because she was one of these women who in her life is absolutely a feminist, and in the way she deals with and talks about women, she was not. I remember one of the graduate students telling me a story about being in one of Mary's seminars, which had both male and female students in it. And one day it happened that all the men were absent, and Mary comes in and looks around at the women and says, I guess we're not going to get anything accomplished today. Was she being ironic? Was she being literal? I didn't ask. But if she meant it literally, you have to say she was no feminist, but look at her life. There were a number of such cases, there still are. You had to play some kind of game.

Paula Fass:
Well, it was a game that you could also convince yourself of.

Robin Lakoff:
You had to, yes.

Paula Fass:
At any rate, so you got here...

Robin Lakoff:
So we got here and we came with tenure, which was...

Christina Maslach:
I didn't know that part.

Robin Lakoff:
Yes. Well, George had already gotten tenure at Michigan, where we had been. When Berkeley made us the offer, Michigan immediately gave me tenure.

Paula Fass:
So you were on the faculty at Michigan?

Robin Lakoff:
Yes, though Michigan also had a nepotism rule, as did practically everybody. I once asked the chair of the Harvard Department of Linguistics, does Harvard have a nepotism rule? He replied, we don't need to, we don't hire women.

Paula Fass:
I had a feeling that that was going to be the punchline.

Robin Lakoff:
But it didn't really surprise me -- it was not new news to me.

Paula Fass:
And yet, you heard that and you came out of that context, and yet you pursued what you wanted to pursue.

Robin Lakoff:
Nevertheless, I persisted. But I worried about it. There I am in grad school at Harvard, and Harvard at that time had two tenured women. Both were peculiar cases. In anthropology it was Cora Blanche DuBois, if I recall correctly. And she had it because some rich person had offered Harvard a chair in anthropology that had to be given to a woman. I am sure they squirmed and struggled and...

Paula Fass:
Because they never turned money down.

Robin Lakoff:
Exactly. If it has to be a woman, we'll take it. We'll take the money. The second was a very eminent astronomer whose husband was not quite so eminent. They wanted to hire him, but they couldn't hire him without her. So they hired her and she had to have tenure. Cecilia Payne Gaposchkin.

Christina Maslach:
Okay.

Robin Lakoff:
So, at Harvard I had one section lady, I think, which is what they called female TAs. (The males were section men.) I learned recently that Harvard only admitted women to its grad school in the 50s.

Paula Fass:
Oh, that's possible. When I applied to graduate school in '67, Princeton was still not accepting women. It was the only school I couldn't apply to. So Yale had followed suit. Columbia had for a long time, had women grad students. But yes.

Robin Lakoff:

Eventually Harvard had to admit women, but they were not quite used to it yet. And women tended not to get support such as section ladyships.

Paula Fass:
Yeah. But you saw yourself in that.

Robin Lakoff:
I had learned a sentence as an undergraduate. People said, what do you want to do when you graduate? And I learned the sentence, I want to teach at the college level. I had no idea what that meant. I went to class and I saw people doing so, but I didn't know what that entailed exactly. And of course the only people I saw doing so were men. And that meant that when I did become somebody who did that, I had no idea how you go into a class and talk like a professor when you've had no role models at all. You had to create yourself.

Paula Fass:
So you and George shared an FTE?

Robin Lakoff:
For a few years. Now, I remember Wally Chafe saying, in a few years we can regularize the positions. Other people in the department told me, no, that was never said. I don't know how they knew that -- it was just us and Wally in the room. But eventually it was made into two full positions.

Paula Fass:
And you gave a talk in '74, the two of you together, about sharing an FTE, because I had just come.

Robin Lakoff:
We did? I have no recollection.

Robin Lakoff:
I guess we talked about how well things were working. Of course we could have been pretending. But, I'm trying to remember when exactly the regularization took place, maybe '75 or so. But people in the department took pity on me after George and I separated, since we each only had half a salary. The idea of our sharing a position was that, since we were married, we can live on one salary, but then we weren't. So I taught a couple of courses in Women's Studies, and I think I taught a course in the English department, and that was very helpful. But eventually the positions were both regularized as full time.

Christina Maslach:
And full time, both in?

Robin Lakoff:
Both in Linguistics. When we came here, Wally did some searching around in related departments to see if he could find half positions for each of us, and he told me this story. He went to the chair of the English department who was an old time Southern gentleman, as they

tended to have at that time, and asked about me. And the chairman of the English department says, well, how old is she? And he said I was 29, and the English Department chair said, I'll be damned if we ever hire a 29-year-old tenured woman in our department. It was not reasonable but it was normal, and I was grateful to be able to teach at the college level at all, because when I was in grad school, it was pretty clear that women would find it very hard to get tenured or even tenure-track positions anywhere.

Paula Fass:
So when did you become aware that it wasn't normal? That there was nothing normal about being told I'll be damned if we hire a tenured 29-year-old woman.

Robin Lakoff:
Sometime in that whole period. Gradually, it occurred to me that whenever you substitute *woman* for *man* in professional contexts, it doesn't sound right. It sounds very peculiar. Women have no business in these contexts. This, by the way, is a good way to approach the understanding of the relationship between language and gender. If you can substitute "woman" for "man" in the utterance you're looking at and the meaning of the sentence has changed, you're onto some sort of inequality that is present. Something funny is happening.

Christina Maslach:
Yeah. So it came as much out of your work to become something that illuminated your experience.

Robin Lakoff:
Yes. Once you start thinking that way, and using language as a diagnostic, suddenly funny things show up all around you. The early 1970s was a very active period in academic feminism, women's studies departments were getting established. There was a lot of discussion around here about whether women's studies could or should move from being a program to being a department. There was a lot of resistance to it. But people were beginning to get together and actually no longer making polite requests: please, sir, could we have a department? Women were starting to make demands -- we need this and you're going to give it to us. So, these were exciting times, suddenly you could make demands and men in power would sometimes obey them, which women never felt we had a right to, of course, if we had had a decent upbringing.

Christina Maslach:
Yeah.

Paula Fass:
So we ask a whole series of questions about your social relationships with your colleagues. Do you want to talk about that?

Robin Lakoff:
Yeah, sure. I think by-and-large I never noticed anything. At Michigan, at the beginning my colleagues tried to get me to take minutes. I said, I can't take minutes, so they had the department secretary do it, which worked very well. But one interesting thing at Berkeley was that, if you were a tenured woman, you got put on every committee.... This was to make it look as if there

were actually lots of women with tenure. So for instance, very early on they wanted me to be the chair of an ad hoc committee in Philosophy, where someone was up for tenure. I had never been on such a committee in any capacity before. I remember calling up the secretary who was arranging the committee, and begging her to just let me be a member of the committee, not the chair. No, she said, you're going to be the chair. I did a terrible job of it, since it came with no instructions and I had never seen it done. It was only much later that I learned that you can say no – as I should certainly have done.

Christina Maslach:
Wow. Okay. Yeah. Usually you have to had experience being on committees….

Robin Lakoff:
It was not a woman by the way, who was up for tenure -- this was a man. The Philosophy department of course didn't have any women faculty at that time. Goodness gracious. How can a woman think?

Paula Fass:
And you didn't just turn it down.

Robin Lakoff:
I didn't feel I could. I think if I had held out and said, no, I'm not going to do this, they would have eventually come around. I did not realize that I could say no to things.

Christina Maslach:
Yeah.

Robin Lakoff:
So I was always getting put on committees, whether I liked it or not. There was one committee I was on, Courses of Instruction...

Paula Fass:
A lot of work.

Robin Lakoff:
And one of the guys, an older guy, always addressed me as “young lady,” which I found irritating, but I never corrected him because back then...

Paula Fass:
Even in private. I mean it's one thing to correct publicly...

Robin Lakoff:
Back then I was very timid. I just didn't think you could say “Don’t” to an older white-haired, eminent guy.

Christina Maslach:
Yeah, but I think that's something that's sort of...

Robin Lakoff:
I was very young. I was 30.

Christina Maslach:
Yeah. But it's also part of that kind of non-conscious ideology, when you're raised as a woman. To be deferential, and to be polite...

Robin Lakoff:
And to be very grateful for what you get, you know, whatever it is, don't make an issue of it. You don't want them to notice.

Christina Maslach:
Yeah. You know, and always be smiling and...

Robin Lakoff:
Smile. Yes, yes.

Christina Maslach:
You know, with some of these kinds of exchanges, you're just not thinking.

Robin Lakoff:
I hadn't been fully radicalized. It took a while.

Christina Maslach:
But I just think we were in that generation bringing in a lot of other baggage which, we didn't really realize at the same time until...

Robin Lakoff:
You had to understand that gender was a thing which you had not been taught about. Nobody ever talked about gender. They talked about sex, but not in any helpful way.

Christina Maslach:
Okay. But once you and George both had regularized full positions, at that point you're still colleagues in the same department. Did it change what you were teaching, or the kind of role you were playing in the department, or...?

Robin Lakoff:
I did change what I was teaching fairly soon, though it had to do not with my marital status but with a new understanding about what language was and what was interesting about it. I started out teaching formal syntax, which I was hired to do. Gradually, I realized that I didn't like doing that any more: A, because what formal syntacticians did was much more formal than I could stand, and B, because I was moving into sociolinguistics, which itself was only just really beginning to get started. But I was gradually moving from formal syntax into pragmatics, which is sort of a bridge from syntax to sociolinguistics, and trying to find a way to talk about how language makes us who we are, how language creates personal and social identity. How do you

find evidence for that if you were trained as a syntactician – you have to develop this whole new way of thinking. And having been trained as a syntactician mostly at MIT, I somehow had to disentangle myself from the Chomskyan belief that syntax was linguistics, pragmatics was not, and sociolinguistics was (as I have heard him say in so many words a couple of times) "not interesting." And gradually I ended up teaching more and more of what I wanted to do, and less and less of what I didn't. Eventually I ended up teaching language and gender, once there was enough known about language and gender to put such a class together.

Paula Fass:
So you could pretty much teach what you wanted to teach. So I never had any problem.

Robin Lakoff:
Yeah. Yeah.

Paula Fass:
And the students that you taught, how did they respond to you as Professor Lakoff and there was this other professor Lakoff in your department?

Robin Lakoff:
I think some students, especially men, had to get used to the idea of a woman standing in front of them telling them things. And I would get evaluations that said, indignantly, she tries to tell us what she thinks is correct. Which I bet men did not get.

Christina Maslach:
And the professors are not supposed to be sort of doing that?

Robin Lakoff:
Not this kind of professor. No.

Christina Maslach:
Oh wow.

Robin Lakoff:
So, yeah, there was a difference. There were comments and evaluations about how you wore your hair and your earrings and stuff -- men did not get that -- even with earrings.

Christina Maslach:
Yeah.

Robin Lakoff:
But you know, I think the members of my department knew to ignore that stuff. Well, they had to because lawsuits were being brought about counting such evaluations.

Christina Maslach:
Yeah. I mean, and again, another example of what you were talking about before when you switched male and female or men and women.

Robin Lakoff:
Yes.

Christina Maslach:
It doesn't sound the same, it doesn't look the same...

Robin Lakoff:
We still are gendered creatures and that shows up because we have not become equal.

Christina Maslach:
Yeah.

Paula Fass:
So do you think using the word "they" is going to help do that?

Robin Lakoff:
We started talking about that in a different context back in the 70s, when it wasn't about nonbinary people, but about the use of the so-called neutral masculine. “Everyone take his seat,” “a doctor should listen to his patients,” that kind of thing. Many of the suggestions that are being made today were being made then. I said, you can't do that. You can't change pronouns because pronouns are part of the syntactic grammar, differently from nouns and verbs and adjectives and such that have their own semantics, and therefore we can become conscious of our choices in the use of them: If I don't want to say *girl*, but I want to say *woman*, I can remember to say *woman*, but when I'm using *he* or *she*, it's much harder to keep being conscious of pronouns. So as I said in *Language and Woman's Place*, I don't think *they* as a third-person singular equivalent is going to happen. And I particularly didn’t think invented pronouns like *ve* or *se* were going to happen, and they didn't. But we have made a lot of progress with *they* as a third-person singular indefinite. All that was fought out long ago. And now here we are again.

Paula Fass:
And you don't think it's going to happen again.

Robin Lakoff:
Well, I was wrong once and can be again. But there are relatively few nonbinary people, while everyone sooner or later has to deal with the “unmarked” masculine third-person.

Paula Fass:
I thought the idea was that in order to not leave non-binary persons out, to use *they* for everyone.

Robin Lakoff:
But not everyone is comfortable with the change, and in any case the great majority of speakers will continue to opt for *he/she.* I have been surprised by how many otherwise reasonable people get angry about nonbinary choices.

Robin Lakoff:

It was always tricky, with nepotism rules, to hire a couple in the same department. When we went to Michigan, they managed it through the English Language Institute. My position was technically there though I functioned as a member of the linguistics department. But you had to find ways of sneaking around the nepotism rule if you were a woman – it was always the woman who had to sneak around -- and if you were married to somebody in your same field, it was very tricky.

Paula Fass:
Were there other women at Michigan at the time who had tenure track jobs?

Robin Lakoff:
There were a few. Nobody in linguistics.

Paula Fass:
And you were there for two, three years?

Robin Lakoff:
Three years officially, but the third we were at CASBS [Center for Studies in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford].

Paula Fass:
And then you came directly to Berkeley, and you had tenure.

Robin Lakoff:
And I had tenure.

Paula Fass:
Both of you had tenure.

Robin Lakoff:
Yes.

Paula Fass:
And how were you greeted in both the linguistics department and among other colleagues too? 'Cause after all, you had been a classicist, and and George had worked in English. Were you greeted the same? You and George?

Robin Lakoff:
I think so. I never really looked at our statuses closely: this was before I became a feminist. While I was at the Center, I started to write *Language and Woman's Place*. Bruno Bettelheim was there that year and he would sneak up behind me at the lunch line at the cafeteria and say, "You don't believe in this women's lib nonsense, do you?" And I, being a major coward, would quaver, "Oh no, Dr. Bettelheim." But he was terrifying. He was horrible.

Paula Fass:
Well, I mean, as we now know anyway... So, you were beginning, it was actually the Center at

Stanford now called CASBS?

Robin Lakoff:
That's right.

Paula Fass:
...that began to bring some of that out in you. And you arrived here with another manuscript or not quite?

Robin Lakoff:
Not quite. In '73, the first part, the part I had written at the Center was published in the journal *Language in Society*, and then I wrote a second section, and the whole book came out in 1975. You might look at the book as the moment I crossed over from syntactician to sociolinguist: I didn't think of *Language and Woman's Place* as being about women and feminism primarily, but rather as an an anti-Chomsky argument about what has to be present in the deep, or underlying, or logical structure of a sentence: all sorts of things a speaker knew in order to speak meaningfully, or only information that was very close to what was present on the surface. While I think we were onto something, the theory we had developed to do the work was not able to link language, the mind, and society and culture. I wanted to do that. So the book was really intended first of all as an exploration of what speakers have to know about gender to use English meaningfully. The Chomskyans objected: if you put everything speakers know into the deep structure, you will have a very ungainly syntactic theory. Grammar will be impossible to deal with. We said, well not everything would be in the deep structure, OK, they replied, what won't be in the deep structure, and what will be? Well, we said, what would receive grammatical representation are ideas that have direct linguistic correlates that show up on the surface. So for instance, the relative power between speaker and hearer might need to be grammatically encoded in deep structure, because there are languages where you have the equivalents of "tú" and "Usted," in Spanish, where power is one thing that makes a speaker choose between those two forms. So you might have to encode second person pronouns in the deep structure, but (for instance) eye color would probably not need to be encoded there – it doesn't figure directly in the decision to use one linguistic form or another.

Paula Fass:
There you go...

Robin Lakoff:
So they said, well, OK, cases like these where gender is the relevant distinction show up in exotic languages but not in normal languages like English. And I said, I think they do. They said, Oh yeah, they said, where does it show up in English? Well, there were a few papers in the literature, one of which had been written long ago by Mary Haas, "Men's and Women's speech in Koasati," a native American language. In languages that seem to English speakers to be "exotic," language may incorporate explicit gender distinctions, Japanese being a clear case; and it had been claimed that Arawak, a Caribbean language now extinct, was so precise about gender distinctions that men and women literally spoke different languages. This obviously can't be the case – children of both sexes hear their mothers and learn their language, for one thing. And while men may pretend they have a secret language all their own, women always learn what men

try to keep to themselves. But I said, I bet there are gender differences even in English, No, they said: English is a logical and reasonable language. We speak English. We know there's no difference between the way men and women speak. I said Hmm. And started looking at it and what I found ultimately appeared as *Language and Woman's Place*.

Christina Maslach:
Okay. Okay.

Paula Fass:
So you came with that, the beginnings of that?

Robin Lakoff:
I had the manuscript in my hand.

Paula Fass:
And did being here affect you as well? Did you get involved with other women on the campus?

Robin Lakoff:
When I came, I think you could have counted the number of tenured women on the Berkeley campus on the fingers of one hand, maybe a couple extra.

Christina Maslach:
Would that have made it kind of doubly difficult or challenging - let's put it that way - for you to be in linguistics, tenured, a woman, but have a position that you're sharing? I mean, it's such a unique...

Robin Lakoff:
It was tricky. It was treated as a normal teaching job, though half time. When I came in '72, I think we were still on the quarter system.

Christina Maslach:
Yes.

Robin Lakoff:
It's interesting because we had two secretaries in the department and they were known as Mrs. Odegaard, and Mrs. Siegmiller, and they called me Robbie -- they called the younger members of the department by first names and diminutives. They were older women, and they were very strict Mormons. And they thought it was their job to keep faculty members off the street where we could get into trouble. Faculty were always trouble. So they organized our teaching schedules so we had to teach every day of the week. It never occurred to me that you could have a Monday- Wednesday-Friday schedule.... The idea was to keep you from getting any research done, I suppose. That could be trouble.

Paula Fass:
And when you had a child, which you did at some point...

Robin Lakoff:
Well, Andy was born in 1970, while I was still at Michigan. The whole business of finding childcare was not easy.... When I was at CASBS, Stanford had a very good childcare center and we would bring him there: he was between one and two that year. It was very good and very convenient and I don't know how we would have done it without. And then we came here. There was no form of childcare available to faculty whatsoever on campus. And we really had to scurry around, but fortunately our jobs allowed us a lot of discretionary time.

Paula Fass:
So the baby came with you.

Robin Lakoff:

Yes, he is a native of Michigan.

Paula Fass:
An academic brat.

Robin Lakoff:
Yes. But Berkeley was not particularly interested in doing anything for female faculty in the event that there were any. I think they are better now, aren't they?

Paula Fass:
Yes, they are. Yes. Things have developed over time.

Robin Lakoff:
That's life. A long time.

Robin Lakoff:
But we had to make our own arrangements as best we could.

Paula Fass:
It was pretty bad. So, what did you do?

Robin Lakoff:
Well, we found people who were doing childcare in the community and made arrangements that worked out reasonably well. When Andy was sick, somehow one of us managed to be at home. Sometimes we tried to arrange childcare at home, but that tended not to work well. I always worried because the experts of the day proclaimed that children who had non-parental caregivers would come to ruin, but in retrospect I think Andy did perfectly well. He learned to be properly social and deal with other kinds of adults and kids.

Paula Fass:
But in terms of the pressure that was on you to constantly find something...

Robin Lakoff:

Yeah.

Paula Fass:
I remember that.

Robin Lakoff:
Things happened that were not ideal. Once Andy brought home a drawing all covered with swastikas. What's that? I asked. Oh, you know, this child of the people who ran the daycare center was showing me how to do this. I said, “We do not draw swastikas.”

Paula Fass:
Did you raise the question with the daycare provider?

Robin Lakoff:
I didn’t really. I mentioned the swastikas. But she as I recall shrugged it off. But Andy seemed happy there, and I didn’t think it was worth having an argument over. And when he went to school, things became simpler.

Paula Fass:
Yeah.

Robin Lakoff:
Because it is very important to create an identity for yourself, particularly when you're coming into a line of work for which there are no instructions – how to teach, to write, to interact with students and colleagues as a woman.

Christina Maslach:
Right.

Robin Lakoff:
You don't have role models. The way men did all of that didn’t seem to fit. But there was nothing available that did.

Paula Fass:
And your parents were not involved in academia?

Robin Lakoff:
No. My father was ABD in economics, he would have gotten his dissertation finished but economics took a mathematical turn which was not to his liking. So for that and for other reasons, he never got his PhD and he ended up teaching social studies – history, economics, and such -- at the High School of Performing Arts in New York.

Christina Maslach:
Oh, okay.

Robin Lakoff:

And my mother taught elementary school, so they weren't academics. But they were well educated: They both had MAs. So...

Christina Maslach:
And they were both teaching?

Robin Lakoff:
Yes, yes, yes.

Christina Maslach:
And so you're thinking, well, I'm going to teach...

Robin Lakoff:
Yes, I think my parents functioned for me as role models.

Paula Fass: How did you meet George?

Robin Lakoff:
I met him on a blind, not a blind date exactly, but a double date that a high school friend of mine arranged. She was dating one of his roommates and arranged for us all to go to a Chinese restaurant, the House of Roy in Boston, for lunch. The first thing George did was grab my fork and say, you're going to learn to eat with chopsticks. So I fell in love. He was at MIT as an undergraduate in the humanities, a very odd thing to be.

Christina Maslach:
Okay.

Robin Lakoff:
And, so he was a year ahead of me, and after he graduated from MIT he went to graduate school in English at Indiana.

Paula Fass:
That explains a lot, actually.

Robin Lakoff:
It does.

Paula Fass:
Yeah, I really think it explains a lot in terms of his work.

Robin Lakoff:
So as soon as I met him, this was the beginning of my sophomore year, he was starting to go to linguistics classes at MIT. Chomsky was just becoming CHOMSKY. And so, we would sit at Chomsky's feet and hope to be recognized. And I started going too, and so I would hang out at MIT starting as an undergraduate continuing through my postdoc. But I was theoretically at Harvard as an undergrad and grad student. So what I would do, my classes were at Harvard, in

Sever Hall and at noon, I'd emerge, run across Mass Ave, get on the bus, get off at MIT and walk through it to Building 20, a building rich in history and associations. Linguistics at MIT during that period was a cult in all but name. Nobody ever handed you the literal Kool-Aid, but you had to be totally dedicated, a true believer. There were several other linguistic theories around, and you were taught to make fun of them, which was a pity, since each had something to contribute. Transformation grammarians spent an inordinate amount of time reinventing the wheel. You had to be faithful, and deviation was strongly discouraged. When people started to break away, Chomsky took it very badly.

Paula Fass:
So then you actually did break away and you defined your own sphere and realm.

Robin Lakoff:
We did, a bunch of us did...

Paula Fass:
Yes, I understand. And how, how was that related to your coming to Berkeley? Or was it not related?

Robin Lakoff:
Well, it was because suddenly, transformational grammar as done at MIT became very hot. It also became or had always been very argumentative. If you went to meetings of the Linguistics Society of America, huge, nasty, awful fights would always break out between -- not Chomsky, he never went to those meetings -- but the MIT graduate students and visiting scholars, horrible fights between them and the remaining American structuralists. By the mid sixties, transformational grammar had pretty much won the day. But there were relatively few people getting degrees, and a lot of places who wanted an MIT-trained PhD linguist. Now at that time professors were not paid much money, but suddenly transformational linguistics was a hot, hot field. And it's the 60s, and there's tons of money being given to universities in the form of government grants and new departments are being established left and right. Everybody wants someone with that MIT PhD. Suddenly there's money in university teaching, which there had not been. I remember there was one guy at MIT who got an offer from Texas, which at that point had tons of money. The statement was repeatedly made, in tones of wonder, He's getting $10,000 a year. I was particularly impressed since several of the people that I studied under at Harvard were from great new England families who got a dollar a year from Harvard because their families had more money than Harvard.

Paula Fass:
Yeah, there were people at Yale, who would take a token sum.

Robin Lakoff:
Yes, yes, yes.

Paula Fass:
They were often in the Art History department.

Robin Lakoff:
Yes, the ones I knew were often in Sanskrit (ancestors ran the Raj) or Classics (ancestors ran Rome). So if suddenly every linguistics department or program in the country wanted someone from MIT it was very much a seller's market (a very rare situation in academia, then and now) and therefore salaries went up. I was a postdoc at MIT, so I counted as being sort of in the in-group. In general, I was very fortunate: MIT treated me very well.

Paula Fass:
How did that manifest itself?

Robin Lakoff:
Well, first, in 1967, MIT press published my dissertation, which was a speech-act theory of Latin subjunctives. Went right to the top of the best seller list….

Christina Maslach:
Yeah.

Robin Lakoff:
Which was a very great honor, which I didn't realize at the time.

Paula Fass:
So, you got identified with MIT through the publication.

Robin Lakoff:
Yes, yes. Then the next year I had an NIH postdoc from MIT. They gave me whatever I could have asked for. And you know, here I am, a woman and everything.

Paula Fass:
Yeah. Yes. And not even being one of theirs...

Robin Lakoff:
Well by then it was already becoming clear that those who were not doing what Chomsky thought you should do had no future in Cambridge. George had a kind of nonexistent position at Harvard. He was working for Susumu Kuno. Susumu let him teach a course, but he never had any Harvard position, you know, he was never an instructor or an Assistant Professor or anything. I don't think he was paid for doing this.

Christina Maslach:
Yeah.

Robin Lakoff:
And MIT would not give him anything because Chomsky didn't approve of him. Too dangerous.

Paula Fass:
Chomsky didn't?

Robin Lakoff: (10:55)
Yeah. If you've encountered him, he can be charming. But if you don't agree with him, you are automatically in the out-group and beneath contempt.

Paula Fass:
So, in some ways, George threatened his identity?

Robin Lakoff:
I think so. I never spoke to Chomsky about this, but there was clearly animus of some kind. Possibly you could say, well, the reason why MIT gave me all this nice stuff was to stick it to George, but nowadays I like to think that just maybe they thought I deserved it. Could that be, could that be?

Paula Fass:
But still, there could have been an additional motive...

Robin Lakoff:
Ah, there's always something. But I finished my dissertation in '67. My dissertation was published in '68, and we realized at that point that we had to get out of there -- our careers were never going to happen in Cambridge. So we got two or three offers, which was even then pretty impressive, though I didn't know it then. When you think how it is for graduate students today in linguistics or pretty much any other humanities or social science field, if a grad student with a PhD in hand is offered a two year postdoc that is a wonderful, unusual thing. But then there were jobs to be had. Today linguistics is just as bad as any other branch of the humanities. But back then at least if you were identified as an MIT transformational generative grammarian, you were in very good shape. So we were made offers and went to check them out.

Now something had happened between George and me a couple of years before. George's first job offer was from the University of Connecticut in '66 or '67. One day George comes home and says, we've been made offers by the University of Connecticut. So I've been asked to go up there and give a job talk, and they want you to come. Okay. I have no idea what job talk means or how such things are done, and I don't think it even occurred to me to wonder why I hadn't received a letter, much less an offer. You know, there was no proseminar where students were told how academia worked, here's what you do as a graduate student, which thank God they now have. And so we go up to Storrs, and immediately George is taken off to meet the Dean and other important people. And I get to meet somebody in the Classics Department who says, yes, you can teach first year Latin. And I'm taken to meet somebody in the English composition department who says, yes, you can teach English comp. Something is starting to dawn on me. These are not equivalent. This cannot be right – or can it? George gives his job talk and we were entertained at dinner and blah blah. And he was made an offer and I am made nothing. A couple of weeks later (I am a good wife), I take my husband's clothes to the cleaner since that's the thing a good wife does. And I know to go through a jacket's pockets before you take it to the cleaner to see if there's anything there. In one pocket I find a letter from Arthur Abramson, the chair of the department at the University of Connecticut. And I should not have done this, I suppose, but I opened it and read it, and it was addressed to George and it said, we'd like you to come to Connecticut and we'd like to make you an offer. And we'd like you to give a job talk. And yes,

you can bring your wife.

Christina Maslach:
Wow, what an interesting story. You weren't recognized as a potential academic hire and colleague.

Paula Fass:
There are difficulties people had when they had to adopt new forms of address and reference to women. For instance, how would you speak of a woman when you wrote a letter of recommendation?

Robin Lakoff:
Yes, right. Yes, and certainly I think people should change when reality changes, it's not that difficult to do except that the language change forces you to acknowledge real-world changes you would rather resist. There's an analogy to what happened to Southern politicians when the Voting Rights Act became law and you couldn't safely use the n-word, when speaking of such people, in public. And they might be interviewed on national TV programs, and if they said the N word, that might not go over too well up north, among people they wanted to impress. But if they said the polite word, "Negro," that would outrage their white constituents. So they came up with "nigra."

Paula Fass:
Uh huh, I remember that.

Robin Lakoff:
But some people said, that's not really a whole lot better. Why can't you say Negro? (African American and Black had not yet come into existence.) They had an excuse: My poor, thick Southern tongue can't get itself around Negro. We would if we could, but we just can't pronounce it. Okay. So we sort of left them alone in, eventually after the voting rights act passed, suddenly the context shifted and soon they could say the word. Similarly, there were many people, male and female, who found "Ms." Impossible to pronounce. Their poor, thick, manly tongues could not get around the word. And you pointed out to them that they can say "Mrs.," which is twice as hard, and you can say "Liz" and "buzz" and "frazzle." So what's the problem with "Ms."? But it was, and in many circumstances, it still is. But the problem, whatever it is, isn't phonetic.

Paula Fass:
Oh, it's definitely not "Ms."

Robin Lakoff:
In the Senate, why is Dianne Feinstein "Mrs."? Why is Hillary Clinton "Mrs."? It's a choice they make, but other women are "Ms." I think Kamala Harris is, and several of the more enlightened people are, and maybe the problem with Dianne is that she is not enlightened, but even so that shouldn't be a choice because the choice projects the same old, same old -- either you're married or you're not, and that's the most important thing about you.

Christina Maslach:
I remember when Herma Hill Kay became chair of the academic Senate and I went to a meeting the first time she was running it and, somebody stood up and said, well, you know, how are we going to address you? Because we can't say, "Chairman."

Robin Lakoff:
Oh my God.

Christina Maslach:
And she very politely said, well, I think it's fine just to say, "Chair Kay."

Robin Lakoff:
Yeah, chair is just fine. Oh, I can't say that. That is too hard. Yeah...

Christina Maslach:
But I mean, she was...

Robin Lakoff:
Yeah. That was good that, you know, you have to insist on it because people find "Chair" harder to say than "Chairwoman."

Paula Fass:
I remember when that transition took place. And actually it took place very quickly.

Robin Lakoff:
Once people started insisting, then suddenly you were an old, sexist fuddy duddy when you couldn't do it.

Paula Fass:
And the initial reaction was, well, this is a Chair.

Robin Lakoff:
Oh yes. And words never have more than one single meaning, you know? But somehow they managed to do it when it became advantageous to do.

Christina Maslach:
Okay.

Robin Lakoff:
Though there are still women who call themselves chairwomen. There are women who call themselves chairperson, which is essentially chairwoman because no men call themselves chairperson.
But you know, old ways die hard.

Christina Maslach:
Yeah.

Paula Fass:
But they're on the way out.

Robin Lakoff:
They're on the way out. Academics are often the first to adopt new things. I've been told that on the barricades in Paris, in '68, the younger professors and the students started to fraternize with each other as they were in revolutionary solidarity. So, they called each other *tu.* Before that, at the Sorbonne, professors were Monsieur le Professeur, and *vous,* and students were just Monsieur or Mademoiselle, also usually *vous*. So mutual *tu* between students and professors was very new and weird. When they all went back to their classrooms, the students continued to call those professors with whom they had been in solidarity, *tu*, which before that would have been an intolerable insult. But now it was a form of respect, a sign of camaraderie. The other professors, the old guys who weren't on the streets were still *vous*, as they had always been, and that then became a new form of disrespect -- a way of differentiating between faculty members we really like and those who are old fogies. And so the older guys started to say, why can't you call me *tu,* too? But the students wouldn't.

Paula Fass:
Oh, that's fascinating.

Robin Lakoff:
And the same thing happened in many European languages, in all of which their grammars make distinctions between polite and familiar forms of the second person.

Paula Fass:
That's a very interesting idea. Did you spend time in France?

Robin Lakoff:
No, my French is non-existent to execrable.

Christina Maslach:
Are there any other issues or topics that you wanted to specifically raise, or talk about? We wanted to make sure that we aren't leaving something out.

Robin Lakoff:
No, you're asking me about all the things that I like to talk about...

Christina Maslach:
Okay. But you know, if there are any particular experiences or incidents or particular people that you know, made a difference in terms of your career, or whatever. I'm going to just mention this, I'm not trying to force it.

Robin Lakoff:
Just having even a few other women professors here when I got here was very important. It was quite different from Harvard and it said, Yes, you can do this too. And gradually you figure out

how to teach and write as a woman. It's the same problem that Elizabeth Warren and other politically prominent women have, as we saw in the Democratic primaries earlier this year: how to be a woman in a man's place? You get criticized for being schoolmarmish or overbearing or a scold. And only women are criticized for that. A woman using a public voice is in trouble.

Christina Maslach:
Yeah.

Robin Lakoff:
We get the same things on evaluations: who is *she* to tell us anything?

Christina Maslach:
Yeah. Yeah. So there came a point in your career that you became a public spokesperson too. I was mentioning before that you've been interviewed on Michael Krasny's "Forum" program many times...

Robin Lakoff:
A few times.

Paula Fass:
And I'm sure that's not just there. So what about that dimension?

Robin Lakoff:
That started after the publication of *Language and Woman's Place*, which sort of took off...

Paula Fass:
So, it took off and you brought this book to a larger public.

Robin Lakoff:
Yeah. And, I didn't do it well, at least at first. Had I but known what it means to be a public figure and how to use your voice in a public way, I would have done so. I think today I do it better, but there were so many things I didn't know and had to learn. Things that seem obvious or simple are not. The small talk you start or end conversations with are not the same on media as they are face to face: How do you talk on the radio? One thing I've been noticing, for instance, is, how guests respond at the beginning of talk shows. When the host says Thanks for coming, what do you say? In a face to face conversation, you might say, "You're welcome." But radio guests say, perhaps, "It's a pleasure to be here," or maybe, "Thanks for having me." Often they say that at the end, which you never say in other kinds of conversation. So when you start to engage in this new kind of talk, you have to figure these things out in advance. How do you answer, when people ask hostile questions, how do you deflect that? You have to learn.

Paula Fass:
That's a harder one.

Robin Lakoff:
It's a hard one, especially for women.

Paula Fass:
As I've learned.

Robin Lakoff:
You've done a tremendous job of being a public speaker! I love watching you on television.

Paula Fass:
But, at any rate, and you're... when you look back on your career here at Berkeley, are you glad that you came?

Robin Lakoff:
Oh, absolutely. I would not be anywhere else. We could've stayed at Michigan. But I was beginning to have visions of zipping a small child into a snowsuit every day, remembering how my mother had done that with my little brother and sister. Having a child in cold climates is a real pain... Trying to put on mittens...they resist. They lose mittens every chance they get. Coming out here, I would never have to buy a mitten again. And another important thing that started happening when we arrived -- Chez Panisse had just opened the year before and serious restaurants were starting to proliferate. Good restaurants! The Gourmet Ghetto was coming into existence. Before about 1972, there wasn't much, here or anywhere.

Paula Fass:
A couple of Chinese restaurants.

Robin Lakoff:
Omei, and King Tsin. But problems arise. There are so many great restaurants that you can't make up your mind, and worse – you can never leave Berkeley, you're spoiled.

Christina Maslach:
Yeah.

Robin Lakoff:
And it's also, just by the way, a great university and gives faculty a lot of freedom when there are lots of places that do not do that, and that's extremely important. Many places wouldn't have hired us because we were bad and dangerous. As we remain. Linguistics, like many departments here, had exciting people doing revolutionary things: Chuck Fillmore. Jim Matisoff. Many others. The 1970s was a glorious period of Berkeley linguistics. And there may be a connection when, for a long period that I was here, Berkeley has always had a smallish linguistics department -- 12 to 15.

Paula Fass:
Is it still the same size?

Robin Lakoff:
Probably might be a little bit larger. I remember I was on a death penalty jury in the mid-eighties. And when it came time to deliberate -- it struck me that the jury of 12 was the same size as my

department. Comparing the two, I thought the difference between a faculty meeting in my department and the jury, consisting of non-intellectuals, was that the jury was doing it so much better.

Paula Fass:
That is great. That's wonderful stuff for the jury system.

Robin Lakoff:
Absolutely.

Christina Maslach:
Okay. I want to ask about your graduate students?

Robin Lakoff:
I've had a remarkable number of creative students. Deborah Tannen, Mary Bucholtz who is at Santa Barbara and does extremely interesting work on the intersections of language, class, race, and gender. Linda Coleman, who is at Maryland, and Catherine Davies, at Alabama. Yoshiko Matsumoto at Stanford. Although I have not had that many students, all have gotten tenure track positions and gotten tenure.

Christina Maslach:
And they've done good work.

Robin Lakoff:
They've done very good work -- interesting, cutting edge, beyond the beaten path.

Paula Fass:
So that's your influence.

Robin Lakoff:
I like to think so because there's a reason why people choose to come to study with you.

Paula Fass:
So you've had only a few students, but they've all been successful.

Robin Lakoff:
They've all been very good. They've done very well.

Christina Maslach:
And do you stay in touch with them?

Robin Lakoff:
Most of them, yes. I hear from them. They show up in Berkeley on some excuse, which is always a delight.

Christina Maslach:

Do you see them at professional meetings?

Robin Lakoff:
I don't go. As soon as I realized that since I had tenure, I didn't have to do that anymore, I stopped doing it. It's just that a lot of people are packed in together making small talk, and I do very badly at such gatherings. When I first started going to LSA (Linguistics Society of America) meetings while I was a grad student, they were almost all male. You would hardly see a woman, and the men would all be strolling the halls between papers, wearing white shirts -- it had to be a white shirt -- and black or dark suit. And they'd have their arms tucked behind them. I thought of penguins. I like penguins. It was the saving grace of professional meetings.

Paula Fass:
So you haven't been at one of these recently?

Robin Lakoff:
I go if I am invited to give a plenary lecture. But mostly I don't. I hate planes and hotels. And the wonderfulness of tenure is that a lot of the things you hate, you don't have to do.

Paula Fass:
But, you do do that.

Robin Lakoff:
Yes, I do on occasion. Because when I give a plenary lecture, somebody is going to come to the airport and meet me and take me away in their car and I am not going to have to worry about how to do unfamiliar things: can I get a taxi and what do I do about luggage and so on. So as long as somebody can do everything for me, because I am a helpless child in any of these contexts, I'm okay. And yeah, I like people to make a fuss over me and go, Oh God, your work is so wonderful. So I like giving plenary lectures but I have not given an uninvited lecture in a long time.

Paula Fass:
Yeah, I think that happens to a lot of people after awhile, that they don't really want to...

Robin Lakoff:
Do you submit papers to your academic society? You have better things to do, right?

Paula Fass:
Sometimes I am invited to chair.

Robin Lakoff:
Yeah. Well that's a different kind of thing. Yeah. My son is always chairing anthropological meetings. Though that's a field he really isn't in anymore because he crossed over to the dark side, which is sociology.

Paula Fass:
Oh, he's doing sociology...

Robin Lakoff:
Well, he's been being a Dean, which is problematic for him because it makes it hard to do research. But his appointment covers anthropology, sociology and the Annenberg school at USC. His mommy and daddy might be linguists, but he doesn't officially do that. He has a wonderful linguistic ear, though.

Paula Fass:
I should tell you, Christina, that I know Robin's son because he was a History major as an undergraduate.

Robin Lakoff:
Yes. As I remember when the faculty in the History Department were meeting to decide which undergraduates should get honorary degrees. When it came time to decide about Andy, a great kerfuffle burst out because the people who knew his work wanted to give him highest honors. And the other said look, his grades were not straight A's. We only give out summas to people with straight A's.

Paula Fass:
He did get high honors. Right?

Robin Lakoff:
Yes. He got his degree with highest distinction. You know what was annoying? He didn't tell me in advance. So there I am sitting with my parents at his graduation in the Greek Theater and his name is announced "with highest honors." And I said, "He's getting a summa!" And my father said, "What's a summa?"

Very great kid. I have no idea how I produced it.

Paula Fass:
Wel,l we all say that.

Robin Lakoff:
Perhaps we should.

Paula Fass:
Well, thank you again.

Robin Lakoff:
Thank you. I like talking and thinking about all of this, and they were great questions.

Paula Fass:
Wonderful.

END.