



## RELATIONAL MORPHOLOGY: AN INTERVIEW WITH JENNY AUDRING

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### RESUMO

Jenny Audring nasceu em 1977 em Berlim, então capital da República Democrática Alemã. Ela obteve um duplo mestrado em Linguística e Inglês pela Universidade Livre de Berlim em 2003. Logo após, mudou-se para a Holanda, onde recebeu seu título de PhD na Universidade Livre de Amsterdam em 2009. Depois de lecionar em várias universidades na Holanda, agora está permanentemente afiliada à Universidade de Leiden. Seus principais interesses de investigação são a morfologia, o léxico (mental) e a complexidade e capacidade de aprendizagem da linguagem. Ela tem especialização em gênero gramatical e teorias da morfologia baseadas na noção de construção.

**Palavras-chave:** Morfologia; Léxico; Construção; Aquisição; Gênero.

### ABSTRACT

Jenny Audring was born in 1977 in Berlin, then capital of the German Democratic Republic. She earned a double MA degree in Linguistics and English from the Free University Berlin in 2003. She then moved to the Netherlands, where she received her PhD at the Free University Amsterdam in 2009. After teaching at various universities throughout the Netherlands she is now permanently affiliated with the University of Leiden. Her main research interests are morphology, the (mental) lexicon, and the complexity and learnability of language. She has special expertise in grammatical gender and construction-based theories of morphology.

**Keywords:** Morphology; Lexicon; Construction; Acquisition; Gender.

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## Greetings

Professor Audring, we would like to thank you for your availability to answer the following questions. This is a unique opportunity to learn more about two theoretical models of morphological analysis (Construction Morphology and Relational Morphology) that are still little explored in Brazil. We hope the questions will be stimulating and allow you to explore the central aspects of the models you have worked with.

## Questions

### *Question 1*

**[Carlos Alexandre Gonçalves] Since 2005, your publications, done so by yourself or in co-authorship, have focused on the area of morphology. We have noticed that gender is your object of description in several works. What has changed in your research since 2005 from a theoretical point of view? What other morphological phenomena are also of interest to you?**

**Jenny Audring:** The main shift in my research interests was caused by the opportunity to collaborate on morphology and the mental lexicon with Ray Jackendoff. After years of thinking and writing about grammatical gender and linguistic complexity from a typological perspective, the work with Ray was an incentive to explore issues in theoretical morphology that seemed timely and relevant. Especially, the predominance of the generativist framework had resulted in a lack of theoretical attention for the lexicon and for un- or semiproductive morphology, where generative rules are of little or no importance. At the same time, the insight – coming from Construction Grammar – that a lot of linguistic knowledge consists of collocations, prefabs, multi-word expressions and other types of constructions made the study of the mental lexicon seem increasingly urgent. After all, the presence of such complex lexical items in memory makes it impossible to think of the lexicon as a simple list or an unstructured ‘bag of words’. But what structure do we imagine the lexicon to have? This was a question that crystallized into the focus of our work, which eventually resulted in the monograph “The Texture of the Lexicon” (Jackendoff & Audring 2020a).

### *Question 2*

**[Carlos Alexandre Gonçalves] Your main research partners are Ray Jackendoff and Geert Booij, with whom you have written several articles. How do you see this partnership with such eminent linguists?**

**Jenny Audring:** Ray likes to say that our collaboration started with an invitation to contribute to *The Oxford Handbook of Morphology* that Francesca Masini (University of Bologna) and I were editing, and him realizing that the morphological component of the Parallel Architecture was sorely underdeveloped (whether our editorial feedback had contributed to this realization depends on who tells the story). So our relationship changed from editor-author to collaborators, to mutual enjoyment. Since Ray’s main research is in syntax and semantics (as well as a multitude of other fields), he had not worked on morphology proper since his seminal *Language* article from 1975, “Morphological and Semantic Regularities in the Lexicon”. However, the theoretical landscape had changed a lot since then, so we could approach the issues together with fresh eyes.

The collaboration with Geert Booij goes back to the times when I was his PhD student in Amsterdam. We often find ourselves moved by the same interests, so there are regular incentives to seek each other out for joint talks or papers. My thinking about morphology is deeply influenced by his, though I am increasingly attracted away from derivational, productive phenomena to the quirks of listed knowledge.

I owe a great debt of gratitude to Ray and Geert, who are both wonderful and inspiring collaborators as well as personal friends.

### Question 3

**[Carlos Alexandre Gonçalves] Generally speaking, what are the main differences (and similarities) of Relational Morphology, a model that you have recently created, in relation to Construction Morphology, the theoretical framework with which you also worked? Do you think Relational Morphology came to replace Construction Morphology or to complement it? What are the advantages of Relational Morphology over Construction Morphology?**

**Jenny Audring:** Construction Morphology and Relational Morphology are indeed closely related – we like to call them sisters or cousins. Both theories are based on Jackendoff’s Parallel Architecture and are built on the following principles (I’m quoting from Jackendoff e Audring (2020b, p. 2)):

- “Rules of grammar” are stated as declarative schemas rather than as procedural rules.

“Rules of grammar” are in the same basic format as words: structured relations of form and meaning. Hence there is no distinction between the “lexicon” and the “grammar”; both words and rules are treated as items in an “extended lexicon” or “constructicon.”

- The basic combinatorial operation is Unification.
- Relations among lexical items are stated in terms of inheritance.
- Language acquisition is item-based.

The two theories can be contrasted on several points, though these reflect differences in focus rather than areas of actual disagreement. The first is that Construction Morphology, like Construction Grammar, basically assumes that every construction is a pairing of form and meaning. Relational Morphology, by contrast, also countenances meaningless constructions, especially in the more abstract tiers of the extended lexicon. Generally, Relational Morphology considers the link between form and meaning as just one of the many links between levels of linguistic structure. Hence, form-meaning links are not necessarily of greater theoretical interest than form-form links between, say, morphology and phonology or phonology and orthography. This is in line with the principles of the Parallel Architecture, which say that knowledge is organized in levels of structure that are *mapped* onto each other, but not *derived* from one another. As a consequence, no level of structure, and no link between levels, has automatic priority with respect to the others.

Second, Construction Morphology emphasizes the creation of new words or word forms, i.e. the productive potential of derivational and inflectional constructions. The name “Relational Morphology” was chosen to reflect a different focus, which is on the declarative nature of

linguistic knowledge and the relations within and between lexical items. This also meant paying greater attention to patterns that rarely or never generate new instances. As a side-effect of this shift in focus, Ray and I spent a lot of time thinking about the difference between productive and unproductive morphological patterns, since they come out highly similar in the theory. We think we've dreamed up a nice solution, which I will say more about below. The interested reader can find a fuller account in Section 2.7 of "The Texture of the Lexicon".

A common interest that got developed a bit more extensively in Relational Morphology is the role of non-hierarchical or 'sister' relations. Constructionist theories are inheritance-based, and hierarchical links between 'mother' and 'daughter' constructions are central to the model. Recently, links between 'sister' constructions on the same level of the lexicon have moved into the focus of interest, both in morphology and in syntax. Relational Morphology has, I hope, contributed to this development.

Finally, Relation Morphology offers a more detailed and explicit notation, which more clearly shows how the levels of structure within a lexical item are connected, as well as how one lexical item is linked to others. We have also spent more time on working out the connections to psycholinguistics, with preliminary forays into lexical access, including schema access, and acquisition.

After this brief summary of differences I would like to stress again that there are close ties between the two theories as well as between their proponents, so we do not consider each other rivals or competitors.

#### **Question 4**

**[Juliana Soledade] The morphology-semantics interface is an aspect that stands out in Construction Morphology-based studies. In the history of morphological studies, this interface has not always been much explored or accepted. How do you see the relationship between morphology and semantics? What can Relational Morphology offer in this regard?**

**Jenny Audring:** Thanks to principles of the Parallel Architecture, Relational Morphology is, I think, especially well suited for situations in which the semantics of a word is not compositional. Idiomatic complex words such as English *under-stand* or *minute-s* (as in 'meeting minutes, notes of a meeting', where it is not the plural of *minute*) can be accounted for by listing the idiomatic meaning and linking it to the complex word in its entirety. The segments of the words are visible in phonology and morphology, but remain unlinked to the semantic layer. The same principle – pieces of phonology and morphology that are not connected to any piece of semantics – can be applied to words that are clearly derivations but lack a lexical base, such as *ug-ly*, *reck-less* or *plumb-er*. The segments *ug-*, *reck-* and *plumb-* are not themselves words in present-day English and hence cannot contribute to the meaning of the complex word. Thus, they only matter on the levels of phonology and morphology, not on the level of semantics. Within the Parallel Architecture, no special machinery is needed to take care of such phenomena.

Generally speaking, the declarative approach to linguistic knowledge means that full compositionality is not expected and not necessary, as we are often dealing with existing rather than novel words, which can have all kinds of idiosyncratic quirks. Compositionality only matters where words are assumed to be actively generated from their parts. I believe more inclusive accounts to be an advantage.

**Question 5**

**[Natal Almeida Simões Neto]** The debate regarding productivity is recurrent in morphological theories. Depending on the approach, productivity can be seen as applicability, generativity or frequency. In July 2020, you gave the lecture “Unproductive Morphology” at the *Abralin Ao Vivo* event, showing how processes and so-called unproductive morphological products can be approached in Relational Morphology, therefore opposing several models that tend to discard what is unproductive. That being said, what is the understanding of productivity when it comes to Relational Morphology? What can the study of unproductive morphology bring of relevance to the general framework of morphological studies?

**Jenny Audring:** One of the things that make morphology interesting is that the productivity of morphological patterns cannot be taken for granted. Especially in word formation, we find patterns that are formally regular and semantically transparent, but nevertheless resist expansion. If such patterns are disregarded, an awful lot of morphology is thrown out like the proverbial baby with the bathwater.

In our model, unproductive schemas have an important function: they do not *generate new words*, but they *motivate existing words*. In fact, the motivating function is shared by productive and unproductive schemas alike. This brings the two types of schema more closely together than in other theories. They also ‘live’ in the same mental ecosystem which we call the extended lexicon. Moreover, the two types of schema are highly similar in form: both are understood as templates with variables. Compare, for example, the productive English plural schema [N -s]N and the unproductive derivational schema [N -ship]N as in *friendship* or *membership*. Both are nominal and both have a variable slot for a noun and a suffix. So what is it that distinguishes the productive from the unproductive pattern? From the perspective of Relational Morphology, the difference is located in the variable, i.e. in the degree to which it is open to new lexical material. This offers a hypothetical answer to a question that is important but not often asked: What does it mean to know that a pattern is productive or unproductive? What kind of knowledge does this entail?

I’m convinced that we are still at the foothills of truly understanding productivity. Even the role of frequency is contested, as not all productive patterns are frequent and not all frequent patterns are productive. Theories don’t even agree on the most basic issues, such as whether full productivity is the default situation, so unproductivity needs to be explained, or vice versa. In Relational Morphology we treat productivity as an upgrade: first you discover a pattern and then you find out whether it can be extended to new words or phrases. Hence, our model assumes a conservative rather than a creative speaker. This is a marked difference from the generative perspective that is still dominant in the research community. I hope this change in perspective will inspire new empirical and experimental research and help us in our understanding of these fascinating phenomena.

**Question 7**

**[Juliana Soledade]** The proposals for the morphological description of languages, in general, turn at first to the synchronic framework of morphological phenomena, whereas only later diachronic approaches are seen. In what concerns Relational Morphology, is the diachronic study of morphology a challenge? How is the historicity of languages handled within this model?

**Jenny Audring:** Our work, I have to admit, confirms the pattern that you describe: we have started at the synchronic end and have not yet worked out how historical data can be brought to bear on the model (and the other way around). We would gladly invite other researchers to expand the research in this direction.

**Question 8**

**[Natal Simões Neto] In morphological studies, there are phenomena that end up being marginalized, since they are not as regular as flexion, derivation and composition. Some of these include blending, clipping, reduplication, splinters, acronyms and hypocorization. Does Relational Morphology offer special tools to address such phenomena?**

**Jenny Audring:** For “The Texture of the Lexicon” we worked out many of these phenomena in detail: the book has a section on blends, truncations, and reduplication (Chapter 4), as well as on infixation which fits here as all of these patterns involve fragmentation of the word stem. Hypocoristics like *Elizabeth – Liz* and clippings like *mathematics – math* were included in the discussion of truncation. The most important tool we bring to bear on these patterns is the “sister schema”, a relation between two schemas (also referred to as a “second-order schema” as it is, in a way, a schema of schemas). For example, we can assume a highly underspecified schema for proper names and a sister schema that picks out the stressed syllable plus the following consonant in this schema, which constitutes the hypocoristic form. Other nickname patterns, like the one that created my given name “Jenny”, also make use of the stressed syllable but contains a suffix in addition. What is important is that a chunk like “stressed syllable plus following consonant” is only relevant within the sister relation between the schemas. Moreover, it is limited to phonology and has no link to the morphology or the semantics of the proper name. The formalism allows us to specify all of this with precision.

The book also discusses splinters and other phenomena that straddle the boundary between phonology and morphology. Such cases offer interesting challenges for linguistic theory – also within the context of productivity, as splinters can burst into productivity for a brief period and then disappear again. A unique opportunity for study and theorizing.

**Question 9**

**[Natal Simões Neto] What innovations can Relational Morphology offer for the understanding of the human mind and the study of language architecture?**

**Jenny Audring:** In Chapter 8 of “The Texture of the Lexicon” we widen the scope to cognitive domains outside of language and offer what we hope are new incentives for thinking about the human mind. In general terms, we urge that theories ask about representations: what knowledge needs to be stored in the mind and in what form? This is as important for language as for any other domain. How does my mind represent the place where I parked my bike this morning, and how does it distinguish today’s location from yesterday’s? What does it mean to know a song, or how much power to apply when opening the dishwasher door? Obviously, these questions are not for us to answer, but we hope to point out what is needed: a ‘lexicon’ not only of words but also of spatial, temporal, haptic, and musical knowledge, and an explicit and detailed theory of the representations it contains.

**Question 10**

**[Carlos Alexandre Gonçalves, Juliana Soledade and Natal Simões Neto] Professor, we appreciate your availability to answer the questions. To finish we ask you to make some final remarks. We would like, if possible, to ask you for the recommendation of at least five references (articles, chapters or complete books) that you consider relevant to the understanding of the main ideas and developments of RM.**

**Jenny Audring:** Many thanks for the stimulating questions. Here are a few suggestions for further reading:

AUDRING, J. Mothers or sisters? The encoding of morphological knowledge. *Word Structure* 12(3). p. 274–296, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.3366/word.2019.0150>

CULICOVER, P. W.; JACKENDOFF, R.; AUDRING, J. Multiword Constructions in the Grammar. *Topics in Cognitive Science* 9(3). p. 552–568, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tops.12255>

JACKENDOFF, R.; AUDRING, J. Morphological schemas. *The Mental Lexicon* 11, p. 467–493, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1075/ml.11.3.06jac>

JACKENDOFF, R.; AUDRING, J. Relational morphology in the parallel architecture. In AUDRING, J.; MASINI, F. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Morphological Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 390–408. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199668984.013.33>

JACKENDOFF, R.; AUDRING, J. *The Texture of the Lexicon*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020a.

JACKENDOFF, R.; AUDRING, J. Relational Morphology: A Cousin of Construction Grammar. *Frontiers in Psychology* 11, p. 22–41, 2020b. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.02241>