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Professor Kjersti Fløttum
Department of Foreign Languages
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Associate Professor Øyvind Gjerstad
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My Mentor & I:

Kjersti Fløttum & Øyvind Gjerstad

The collaboration between Professor Kjersti Fløttum and Associate Professor Øyvind Gjerstad started when Øyvind was Kjersti's student. Now the two work together on a project about the role of language in the climate change debate.

TEXT WALTER N. WEHUS PHOTO EIVIND SENNESET

Kjersti Fløttum: “The first time I met Øyvind was in 2004 when he took a master's course I was giving on linguistic polyphony – the theory that multiple voices can be present in one and the same utterance. He was working on a master's thesis on another topic, however we never completely let go. He developed a doctoral project with the main focus on the theory I had been teaching.

I was Vice Rector for International Relations from 2005 until 2009, an exciting function but also a hard-working period. It was important for me to remain up-to-date on my research interests and, in fact, Øyvind helped me in this. The reason was that he became interested in some aspects of the theory on polyphony that I did not consider to have been particularly well elaborated., and this I wanted to follow up.

What is important in a relationship such as ours is that we are able to develop good and open discussions. Øyvind has always been enthusiastic, bringing up new and interesting ideas which we refined during numerous discussions. His dissertation was incredibly exciting and marked a clear progress of the theory that I had been involved in generating.

During the work on a doctoral dissertation the supervisor often tends to take on a motherly role towards the doctoral candidate: Are you getting any sleep? Are you eating? Are you

ok? Can I do anything? During the final days before Øyvind submitted his thesis, I was worried: In his office I saw some very dry bread slices, a can of Nugatti and a half-finished jar of jam. Was this all he had to eat? However, at the same time, he was the one who cared for my well-being, through frequent and very polite e-mails. I remember he typically wished me a good weekend, also in his most hectic periods, and pointed out that I must not wear myself out!

I was very proud of his doctoral thesis defence. Nothing can please a supervisor more than when your candidate has surpassed you by miles. It was a fantastic experience. I hope I can motivate him to go on and to become the builder and leader of new projects.

In addition to deriving great pleasure from the research, Øyvind is also very precise. On many occasions when I write things alone or together with others, I think: “Hmmm, Øyvind would probably have objections to this.” He would not say anything directly, but would have asked whether it could be expressed in another way.

My master's degree was in French language studies. However, early on, I wanted to work more across disciplines. I took an interest in the study of political language and rhetoric and established good contacts with people at the Department of Comparative Politics. I also met friends and col-

leagues at the Bjerknes Centre for Climate Research, where many are interested in science communication. This combination developed into what became the research project Linguistic Representations of Climate Change Discourse and Their Individual and Collective Interpretations, or LINGCLIM.

The project concerns the role of language in the climate change debate and how language use on climate change is interpreted in different contexts. The issue of climate change is very complex and multifaceted, and we understood that we could not obtain answers to all the questions we wanted to ask through linguistic research alone. We therefore initiated a cross-disciplinary collaboration with climate, political, psychological and computational scholars.

It was a highlight when we had a paper published in *Nature Climate Change*. ”

Øyvind Gjerstad: “I would not have been a linguist today had it not been for Kjersti. I wrote my master's thesis on the French language in Lebanon, however this had a more sociological than linguistic approach.

One of the courses I took as part of the master's degree was on linguistic polyphony, a theory Kjersti was

>>> Read more about the publication in *Nature Climate Change* in a separate article on **pages 50-51**



involved in developing. The theory states that there are certain linguistic markers indicating other voices than the one that is speaking. If you say “this wall is not white”, you also signal that there are others who believe it is white. This is particularly relevant in political rhetoric in order to see the underlying debates.

The retraining I underwent when I took a doctorate was therefore in large part thanks to Kjersti. After I completed my doctorate I needed a job and I was given a post-doctoral position on Kjersti’s LINGCLIM project. Shortly after this, I was offered a permanent position as Associate Professor of French linguistics at UiB.

The project has many aspects, with experts from various disciplines. Much of this is based on psychological surveys and major social scientific surveys such as the Norwegian Citizen Panel. Among other things, my role is to analyse the linguistic properties of what are known as white papers.

I did not know Kjersti before I began my master’s programme, but we became very well acquainted in the second semester. My impression of her was most likely the same as most students have: Very open and inclusive, and someone who shows a personal and professional interest in everyone she meets. I quickly gained the impression that she was very enthusiastic and that she was passionate about her academic field.

She is an excellent motivator, who makes learning enjoyable and has a lot of positive energy. She gives people a belief in what she is doing and that they themselves can push themselves and contribute to something great. So Kjersti has been an important figure for many students in French language studies in Bergen. There are a number of students in French language studies who went on to get a doctorate and she was often their supervisor.

The LINGCLIM project is an example of how completely new paths

can be travelled in connection with interdisciplinary work. I have been influenced in that direction myself and think about what is possible to study and how to achieve that based on what she has done. Kjersti is not restricted by any preconceived notions of how things should be done, but manages to combine creativity with a systematic and structured approach in everything she does. She is very generous academically and she does not jealously guard ideas.

The manner in which we collaborate is very open and honest. There is a high level of tolerance for saying something that perhaps has not been completely thought through and this is a major advantage because this does not inhibit creativity. You dare to expose yourself to those you know best.

At times I have struggled to keep pace with her capacity for work. What she has achieved has been and continues to be a huge source of inspiration for me.” ●

FACTS

LINGCLIM

- Linguistic Representations of Climate Change Discourse and Their Individual and Collective Interpretations, or in short LINGCLIM.
- Research project headed by Professor Kjersti Fløttum at the Department of Foreign Languages, University of Bergen (UiB).
- The project’s running time is from 2013–2015.
- Financed by the Research Council of Norway through the SAMKUL programme.
- The first primary objective is to generate new and integrated knowledge about the role of language in climate discourse through developing an innovative multidisciplinary methodology.
- The methodology used includes an opinion survey and a psychological experiment in addition to comprehensive linguistic and discursive analyses.
- The second primary objective is to investigate climate discourse in a micro-analysis focusing on specific linguistic features, and in a macro-analysis based on contextual factors established through the multidisciplinary approach.
- The third primary objective is to explore the role of the perspectives of “gloom-and-doom” vs. “opportunities-in-a new-sustainable-society”.
- For more information visit uib.no/en/project/lingclim

Ambivalent about climate change

Researchers in Bergen have discovered that so-called climate sceptics are more ambivalent than previously assumed.

TEXT **SVERRE OLE DRONEN**

In early June 2015, the remarkable results were published in *Nature Climate Change*. It is not an everyday occurrence to find a linguist published in what is usually the preserve of the natural sciences.

The linguist in question is Professor Kjersti Fløttum from the Department of Foreign Languages at the University of Bergen (UiB). She and social scientist Endre Tvinneim from the Uni Research Rokan Centre have worked across academic

disciplines to better understand what the average Norwegian thinks about climate-related issues.

The duo discovered that the so-called climate sceptics have far more nuanced views than the often heated debate in the media between the different camps in the climate debate may suggest.

According to Professor Fløttum, the researchers were excited about the public’s response to the question: What do you think when you hear or read the term ‘climate change’?

“It was the very openness of the question that attracted us,” she says. “The fact that our survey gave people options to provide us with ideas and emotions, using words of their own.”

The survey was conducted in 2013 and the researchers received 2,115 responses

to the question of what people think when they hear or read the term ‘climate change’.

The results showed that people’s associations with ‘climate change’ can be divided into four topics: Weather/ice, future/consequences, money/consumption, and causal effects. By combining the results with other variables, connections were found such as those who expressed more concern were also found among those who placed most emphasis on future consequences, while those who were less concerned typically placed more emphasis on causal effects.

“What is particularly exciting about this collaboration is how we have combined the quantitative and qualitative aspects and thereby obtained new and research-based knowledge,” says Professor Fløttum who

heads the LINGCLIM project, which examines how language and rhetoric influence the climate debate.

She praises her collaborative partner Tvinneim, who is also first author of the *Nature Climate Change* article and a partner in the Norwegian Citizen Panel project at UiB.

“The method that was used as a basis for the study is something Tvinneim is an expert on. At the same time, there was a need for more semantic and qualitative analyses. This is where the linguistics and knowledge from LINGCLIM was essential,” she explains.

She believes that the dynamic between the different academic communities that were involved in the survey was decisive for the remarkable findings that were published.

“The Citizen Panel collaboration provided LINGCLIM with a fantastic infrastructure and has allowed us to think across academic disciplines,” says Kjersti Fløttum, who now looks forward to building a strong interdisciplinary climate research cluster in Bergen. ●