

# Interview with Sigrid Norris

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**Professor Sigrid Norris was interviewed by Judie Cross, August 2017**

Sigrid Norris is Professor of Multimodal (Inter)action and Director of the AUT Multimodal Research Centre at Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand. Born in Feudingen Germany, Sigrid was conferred her PhD in Linguistics by Georgetown University in the United States in 2002. She is the founder of the theoretical/analytical framework Multimodal (Inter)action Analysis, and has edited and authored numerous academic books, journal articles and book chapters, written two poetry books, and is the Editor of the international journal *Multimodal Communication*. More information about her can be found at <http://www.sigridnorris.com/>.

**How did you decide to become a university professor? And was it a conscious choice on your part?**

From an early age I had wanted to become a scientist and a writer. I was fascinated by the idea of discovering something new, and at the same time I was enchanted by the ability of writers and poets to captivate people. As a teenager I set out to read everything I could find, including many things that I could not yet fully understand. For example, I read social theory, dove head-first into the nature-nurture debate of the mind and contemplated Western philosophy. In school I was most interested in biology and chemistry, which is the reason I first began to study chemistry at the University of Bayreuth in Germany. However, I continued to write poetry, short stories, and simply pages and pages of what I called *my thoughts*, since I was also fascinated by creative writing. In fact, writing became my way of understanding the world that I lived in and the society I was surrounded by. I moved to America and began to study languages, and then focused on Russian language and literature. Dostoevsky, with his ability

to describe a person and their deepest emotions, became my favourite author. My interest in the complexity of people, their doings, beings, and emotions increased as I read his works. During my studies of literature my creative writing continued and so did my appetite for philosophy, including Eastern philosophy. I also became increasingly interested in identity.

Once our twins were born my interest shifted to language acquisition, as both my partner and I are bilingual there was no question that the boys would grow up bilingual. I was immensely interested in how best to facilitate their simultaneous learning of two languages. This led me to read all I could find about bilingualism, from acquisition to language policy. The purpose of my studies, whether at home or at University, has always been to further my understanding. This mind-set continued when I entered Georgetown University to study linguistics. People sometimes asked me why I was doing a PhD and my honest answer was 'because I want to learn as much as possible'. However, in the last couple of years of my PhD study my thoughts turned towards the future and my career options. I realised that I had two equally interesting options: 1) I could open a Consulting business, offering a special kind of consulting where I would study the businesses and then make recommendations based on my findings (which I experimented with), and 2) I could start teaching and move into the direction of becoming a Professor (which I did). I finished my PhD, outlining a theoretical/methodological framework for the analysis of multimodal (inter)action and identity, and because of the recommendation by the examination committee I sent a book proposal to Routledge. In my business I studied and consulted businesses on intercultural communication, proposed a business plan to a funding agency, and was beginning to think about hiring people and opening offices. When Routledge accepted my book proposal, however, I found myself at a cross-roads: I could either continue with my business, *or* I could become a Professor. It was here that I

decided to take academia seriously and give it my full attention.

As a former philosophy major and aspiring creative writer, I can personally relate to the process you describe leading up to your decision to 'take academia seriously and give it [your] full attention'. Although it was apparently a conscious choice, I still imagine it must have been hard to turn your focus to one area; i.e. academia and a professorship, instead of your wide variety of interests, as well as finely developed skills, in creative writing, philosophy, language acquisition and business ... so, would you care to elaborate on how rewarding you have found this choice and how your role as a professor may have changed or "evolved" in this digital age?

Academia, I found, was the perfect way to combine my many interests. My interest in language acquisition is probably the most obvious link to my work. Nonetheless, all other aspects are also integrated in my Professorship. For example, when I opened my consulting business in the Washington D.C. area I devised a research-based consulting plan, where I included the study of interaction and identity formation, to then use these research findings when consulting my clients. Years later the Multimodal Research Centre was opened at Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand and what we do here is similar to what I had envisioned in Washington, DC when I devised a research -based plan. Here, I conduct research projects with research students and researchers to gain a better understanding of human interaction and identity.

My creative writing and literature interests have not been lost through my focus on social science research either, since I integrate creative pieces in my scientific work. You can find poems in my 2011 book, for example, which explicates multimodal identity production and (inter)action theory and methodology. Or, you can find poetry written during fieldwork in my new (2016) book called 'Love and Separation'. Here, at the centre, poetry and creative writing, along with music and

art, are integrated as forms of understanding and communication. They may be a part of data collection, data analysis, or a part of the interactions that we study. Consequently, I have found my choice to follow academia to be extremely rewarding, as it encompasses all of my interests.

Now to the second part of your question concerning how my 'role as a professor may have changed or "evolved" in this digital age'. Digital media has been so much a part of my work that I can only say that the advancement of digital technology has made my role more exciting. Without digital media my work would not have developed as it has. In 2000 we had the ability to easily digitise analog videos. Digital media, in turn, made it much easier to store and work with videos. This ease along with the ability to take screenshots, and the possibility to easily embed them in other files, resulted in new findings. For example, due to digital media I could determine that a clear relationship between the attention levels of a person during interaction and the modal density they employ to perform simultaneous actions exists. Micro-analysis using digital media also led me to discover what I call 'semantic/pragmatic means': Namely, the actions we perform to help change our focus and simultaneously indicate this change to others. These, and other discoveries that I have made, could not have been made without the advancement of technology. Digital media is continuously evolving, and video analysis is becoming increasingly easier due to the tools available. The more detailed the tools become, the easier it is to discover more detail about the complexity of human communication. However, digital media, of course, also has its limitations when we study human interaction and identity.

**My next questions follow on from a key focus in your work; i.e. "multimodal identity production and (inter)action theory and methodology". It's fascinating how you can explore an abstract concept, such as identity, using digital tools and a methodological framework.**

I would be careful and say that you *cannot* explore the richness of identity by simply using digital tools and a methodological framework.

Identity is one of those aspects in everyday life that is always present, but is often too ephemeral to grasp and hold. We know that we do the things we do because of the person we are – and yet we know that we are the person we are because of the things we do. Some identity researchers focus on the first part of this, trying to figure out who a person is by asking them questions about themselves; and others focus on the second part, trying, for example, to explain a person's identity through their pronoun or verbal uses.

I do not believe that you can grasp the depth of a person's identity through the sole use of questionnaires/interviews *or* by just analysing the way they speak. In my view, you can only really explore identity through ethnography (observing your participants, taking field notes, possibly jotting down impressions in poems or other creative pieces and/or drawings) in combination with interviews (about the selves) and audio-video recordings (of what the people you study do). You can then triangulate your data and make sense of the identity production.

**I thoroughly enjoyed reading your personal account of the process involved in developing a methodological framework for multimodal (inter)action as recounted in the book you edited with Carmen Daniela Maier: Interactions, Images and Texts (2014). You finished this chapter on a cliff-hanger, so I wondered whether you might care to elaborate on how you next worked out explaining participants' identity within your framework?**

I developed the framework *because* I had collected very rich data while trying to study *identity*. Thus my interest in identity was prior to my development of the framework. My data showed that the participants often co-produced what, in my PhD thesis (2002) and 2011 book, I called multiple *identity*

*elements*. They produced identity through the objects they owned, the TV programs they watched, the music they listened to, the food they ate, and the people they interacted with. While my data clearly showed this intricate complexity of identity production, no framework existed that could analyse this multimodal intricacy. Thus multimodal (inter)action analysis was born out of a pure need to comprehend my data and to demonstrate my findings in regards to identity production.

As I was trying to make sense of the multiplicity and multimodality of simultaneous identity production, I found that people almost always perform multiple actions simultaneously. You drive a car and you speak with your child. You watch the news and you eat dinner. These actions co-occur, they are in some ways linked, but they are distinct in the sense that each could also occur without the other. Simultaneity of action-production was not analysable at the time; all we analysed then was the focus of our participants. The rest was context.

When analysing my identity data I found that the context was always relevant and identity telling. I thought that a sleeping Baby in a mother's arms, as the mother is speaking on the phone, could hardly be termed context. The Baby is a person and the mother and Baby are certainly interacting, even as the Baby is sleeping. The mother feels the Baby's warm body in her arms and on her upper body, the mother rocks the Baby, she feels the Baby's heartbeat and breathing and smells the Baby. In turn, the Baby sleeps soundly because the Baby smells the mother, feels her arms, body and heartbeat. Sure, the mother is speaking with her friend and is focusing on the conversation, but the mother is also aware of, and is interacting with, the sleeping Baby. Here, the mother produces a friend identity element in her focus and a mother identity element in the mid-ground of her attention. As I was trying to explain how these identity elements were simultaneously and multimodally produced, I realised that we find this intricacy

of simultaneous action production in most interactions that we can study.

Thus, the importance of *analysing* the context of interaction became apparent. Context is not only relevant, it is of utmost importance when it comes to fully and truly understanding interaction. Through the framework that I developed what before had been termed 'context' has become analysable as an integral component of multimodal (inter)actions.

**Would you like to talk a little more about some of your mentors, or the people who have influenced you, in your research and teaching career?**

My biggest influence in every respect of my research and teaching was my father. From a very early age, he taught me mindfulness, taught me listening skills, and taught me how to see – not only to see minute details but also the connections between things. I learned from him that even the smallest detail plays a part in, or affects, the larger picture. This is something that comes out a lot in my research, where I often try to show the connections between micro actions produced in real time, practices on an intermediate scale (viewed as actions with a history following Scollon's point of view) and discourses on a macro scale. The way my father taught me to see the small details as well as the larger ones was in an exploratory way. He would never tell me what to see or hear, or which connections to make, but rather taught me *how* to see and hear, and *how* to discover connections both on one level and between different levels.

Later, I found other mentors who taught in similar ways; the most noteworthy of which was Ron Scollon. His style of teaching was very similar to that of my father. Ron guided his students to discover that which they were meant to learn. His classes were filled with discussions; opened with questions, often without answers. There, it was not about right or wrong, but rather about exploring various possibilities, which then would lead to more questions and new answers, and finally to

new findings. Outside of class, we would go on outings, taking day-long hikes in the Blue Ridge Mountains or spending time exploring Chinatown in Washington DC. We would also meet to cook or share food, and while having a lot of fun we would explore concepts, thoughts, and theoretical and methodological notions. Teaching, learning, and doing research was thus always integrated into everyday life, integrated with doing other things, and not just confined to a classroom.

### **What are you currently working on?**

I am currently studying interactions using videoconferencing technology. In one project we have filmed 82 family members interacting via video conferencing technology. In another project, we are looking at team interactions conducted via video conferencing technology.

The reason I am interested in this is that I find that we need to gain a much better understanding of what is actually going on in these kinds of technology mediated interactions. More and more workplaces are using this technology to conduct their work, the technology is used quite frequently now in learning and teaching environments, and most people use it in their everyday life. Yet so far, we know relatively little about this way of communicating. I think this research will be of great significance for education, workplaces and every person using videoconferencing.

Of course, you can imagine that I always have one eye on identity production that is going on in these technology mediated interactions. So far, I have been struck by how gender is produced and re-produced, how generational identities are re-enforced, and how interactions mediated by technology on some level seem to allow for new ways of acting, but on another level can enforce normative identity production.

Thus, with one eye on educational and work related purposes of videoconferencing technology in our multilingual and

multimodal world and the other eye on identity production in this environment, there are some interesting pieces of writing in the making at the moment. But before I give too much away, I will end here.

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