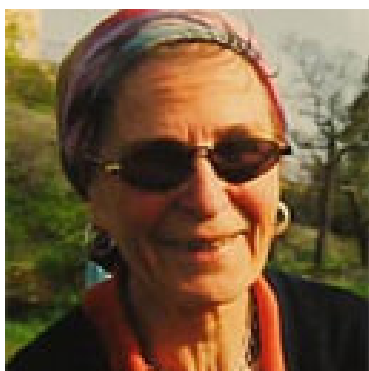


# Anna-Brita Stenström (1932–2023) Co-Editor of the *ICAME Journal* 1992–2024

In memoriam

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It is with great sadness that we received the news of the passing of our colleague and friend, Anna-Brita Stenström. I fondly remember the lively and enjoyable conversations we shared at various conferences and seminars. She was an inquisitive, energetic, and dynamic individual who inspired all of us in our linguistic endeavours. Anna-Brita stood out for her extensive contributions to the field, her remarkable ability to identify fascinating linguistic issues, her rigorous analyses, and her talent for drawing insightful comparisons across linguistic phenomena in different languages, namely Norwegian, English, and Spanish. Beyond her outstanding academic achievements, she was a person of extraordinary human qualities, modest, exceptionally gentle and kind, with an infectious liveliness and wonderful sense of humour.

Anna-Brita, born in 1932 of Swedish origin, graduated in English from Lund University, where she also earned her doctorate in February 1982. At that time, she was a mother of five children and a member of a project initiated by Jan Svartvik on the London-Lund Corpus of Spoken English. She worked on this project alongside other well-known highly prestigious corpus linguists, including Karin Aijmer, Bengt Altenberg, and Hans Lindquist.

Her thesis dealt with questions and responses in English conversation, which was published in 1984 as Volume 18 in the series of *Lund Studies in English*. This dissertation concerned mainly with the strategies for asking and responding to questions in genuine conversations. Questions and answers are described here using a hierarchical discourse framework, an extensive, modified version of the model for classroom interaction proposed by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975).

After obtaining her doctorate, Anna-Brita also worked for some time as Longman Fellow on the *Survey of English Usage*, University College London, and as Researcher on the *Survey of Spoken English* at Lund University. Having spent some time in Bø in Telemark, Norway, as well as in Stockholm, she then became Professor of English Linguistics at the University of Bergen, Norway, where she retired and later became Professor Emerita of Foreign Languages at this same university.

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During her academic career, she received several prizes and distinctions, including membership in the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters. She enjoyed engaging in research projects with other colleagues and supervised a large number of graduate and doctoral students who have since become leading scholars in the field. Her contributions to ICAME, both as a regular speaker at conferences and as the co-editor of the *ICAME Journal*, also deserve special mention. She kept herself active and busy until 2023 when her health began to deteriorate, and she passed away on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December of that year.

Anna-Brita Stenström's areas of research included corpus linguistics, sociolinguistics, pragmatics and discourse analysis. It is in the field of corpus linguistics where she made most outstanding contributions (Johansson & Stenström 1991; Stenström 1994; Aijmer & Stenström 2004). As noted above, her early work involved active collaboration on the compilation of the London-Lund Corpus. This led to the publication of her monograph *An introduction to spoken interaction* (1994), where she describes the general characteristics of spoken interaction, interactional structure and strategies, conversational structure and, in the final chapter, the connections between discourse and grammar. All these explanations therein are clearly illustrated with samples extracted from the London-Lund Corpus, and each chapter is followed by a number of tasks for readers to work on. Her style is very academic, but at the same time very pedagogical, with a fine balance between these two poles, turning what might be regarded as difficult and dull, into a simple yet interesting text. Although this was one of her first significant publications, the same tone and approach would be present in all her subsequent academic production.

Her experience in corpus linguistics paved the way for further work in which she codirected three corpora of teen talk in three different languages, English, Norwegian, and Spanish: *The Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language* (COLT), *Ungdomsspråk och språkkontakt i Norden* (UNO), and *Corpus Oral de Lenguaje Adolescente de Madrid* (COLAm). This enormous task was carried out in the 1990s with the help of several colleagues, among them Knut Hofland, Gisle Andersen, Ingrid Kristine Hasund, Eli-Marie Danbolt Drange, Ulla-Britt Kotsinas, and Annette Myre Jørgensen.

This spirit of cooperation and teamwork was indeed a hallmark of Anna-Brita's work, evident in many of her publications, where she frequently collaborated with colleagues from diverse universities and backgrounds. These three corpora have been used as the data source for many research papers and publications in youth language, and have allowed for a range of contrastive studies across Spanish, English, and Norwegian by looking, among other things, at the use of slang, pragmatic markers, quotatives, vague language, swear words, and tags. The corpora are wholly comparable, in that they are of a similar size, about half a million of words each, and were designed with similar criteria. The compilation method used was also the same, that is, 13 to 17 years-old boys and girls from Oslo, London and Madrid self-recorded their spontaneous conversations when engaging with friends and people of their own age. The metadata relating to participants, contexts, and topics of the conversation were all registered. The recordings were all transcribed and annotated so that the sound files were aligned with the text, something which at the time was quite innovative.

The richness and authenticity of this material, combined with the rigorous and meticulous work involved in its compilation, represented a turning point in the study of the language of teenagers. Indeed, when the news of Anna-Brita's death was announced last Christmas 2023 via Twitter/X, Tony Thorne quickly responded by expressing his heartfelt condolences and observing that "she was one of the first to take young people's language seriously, I found her research hugely useful", and I could not agree more. In similar terms, Tony McEnery noted: "A real loss, bright, lively and with a marvellous sense of humour, she brought rigour and compassion to every conference she attended, I will miss her".

It is precisely in the prologue of her insightful monograph on adolescent language, *Trends in teenage talk*, written jointly with Gisle Andersen and Ingrid Kristine Hasund (2002), that the research on this specific area is completely justified despite traditional complaints by adults about the poor quality of adolescents' expression and its presumed lack of linguistic interest. As Stenström et al. themselves claim, teen talk is in fact fascinating and "is the nearest we can get to the vernacular" (2002: x). Similar arguments were adduced by Tagliamonte some years later, when she argued that "teenagers are the

innovators and the movers and shakers of language change and they are the hope for the future” (2016: xiv).

From 2002 onwards, Anna-Brita would devote herself almost fully to the careful exploration and characterisation of the language of teenagers by considering those representative features that differentiate teen speech from that of adults. Her academic contributions to this field are extensive, as demonstrated by her authorship and editing of several books (Stenström & Jørgensen 2009; Stenström 2014) and the publication of numerous papers in highly prestigious journals, often adopting, as mentioned above, a contrastive approach. Four main areas are covered: discourse/pragmatic markers, taboo words, vocatives, and vague category markers.

The study of pragmatic markers, often through contrastive analysis, is central to Stenström’s research. In addition to her monograph *Teen talk: From general characteristics to the use of pragmatic markers in a contrastive perspective*, published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2014, she authored numerous papers in this field, and listing them all runs the risk of being incomplete (2006a; 2006b; 2008; 2009a; 2012; 2013; Stenström & Jørgensen 2011).

Two basic principles must be considered to fully understand Stenström’s treatment of pragmatic markers. The first concerns the definition of this category, which is drawn from Carter & McCarthy (2006: 208). Pragmatic markers are described as items that operate outside the clause and express speakers’ intentions and interpersonal meanings. They include discourse markers, stance markers, hedges, and interjections, functioning across the Hallidayan division into the interactional, interpersonal, and textual levels of the conversation/discourse. More specifically, they include vocatives, which will be considered further below, intimacy markers (e.g. *you know*; *sabes*), invariant tags (e.g. *right*, *innit*, *eh*, *hunh*; *verdad*, *vale*, *eh*), reactives (e.g. *okay*, *come on*; *vale*, *venga*); intensifiers (e.g. *fucking*; *jodido/a*); hedges/fillers (e.g. *sort of*, *like*; *del tipo de*, *en plan*) and quotatives (e.g. *be like*, *like*; *en plan*).

The second principle to bear in mind is concerned with the function of pragmatic markers in teen talk. Far from being mere indicators of teens’ poor and sloppy language as many linguists once claimed, Stenström postulates that they serve “to create and maintain an intimate contact between speaker and hearer” (2014: 14). In line with this, pragmatic markers can perform different functions across the interactional, interpersonal and textual levels.

The study of taboo and swear words has also benefitted enormously from Stenström’s research. In a paper published in 2006 (2006c), the use of expressions by London and Madrid groups of teenagers of both genders is closely compared. The most common words used by these young speakers had sexual connotations, these followed by lexical expressions related to bodily functions. A comparison between the two sets of speakers also indicates that taboo words were more frequent in the language of London girls while those from Madrid had a higher preference for sexual words and made use of a limited number of words containing religious references. In the qualitative part of this study, Stenström explores the factors contributing to the high frequency of these taboo terms. Beyond their intensifying and emotive functions, and their role as tokens of teenagers’ rebellious attitudes toward adult rules and impositions, the study focuses on their use as phatic elements; in other words, these terms and expressions serve to create and maintain communication between speakers while playing a key role in colloquial speech. Considering individual items such as *fuck*, the English equivalent of Spanish *joder*, it was found that both swear words occur in similar proportions in the two languages. However, *fuck* is more versatile in English, serving a wider range of functions than *joder* does in Spanish. More recently, Love & Stenström (2023) have gone a step further by analysing the evolution and pragmatics of *fuck* in teen talk over the last thirty years, more specifically, 1990s to the 2020s, by comparing data from COLT and BNC2014.

Address terms, more in particular, familiarisers (*man*, *boy*, *girl*, *baby* in English, *tío/a*, *tronco/a*, *chaval/a* in Spanish) and offensive vocatives (*bastard*, *asshole/dickhole*, *son of a bitch* in English, *cabrón/a*, *gilipollas*, *hijo/a de puta* in Spanish), have also received special attention by Stenström and colleagues (Stenström et al. 2002; Stenström & Jørgensen 2009; Rodríguez & Stenström 2011; Stenström 2014; 2020), who have often adopted a contrastive perspective by comparing data from Spanish and English teenagers. These address terms in teen talk mainly fulfil a social function to the extent that offensive

or taboo vocatives are not regarded as something negative but as mechanisms to strengthen group dynamics and create solidarity among young speakers.

The use of vague words and expressions (Channell 1994) is considered a distinctive feature of teen talk due to its highly informal character. It is therefore no surprise that Stenström has studied this issue in great depth (Stenström et al. 2002; Stenström 2008; 2009b). According to her findings, vague language in the speech of both English and Spanish teenagers is expressed through hedges (e.g. *like; en plan*), set markers or general extenders (e.g. *and things, and stuff, or something; y esas cosas, y eso, o algo así*), and general reference nouns or placeholders (e.g. *thing, stuff, thingy/thingie, whatsit; cosa, coso, cacharro, chisme*). Her findings reveal that, contrary to her initial hypothesis, adults use more vague language overall and, in addition to vagueness and imprecision, these words and expressions frequently serve a wide array of pragmatic functions, such as indicators of intersubjectivity by denoting familiarity, rapport and solidarity, as well as acting as markers of group identity.

A close consideration of Anna-Brita's extensive research and remarkable contributions to academia highlights the significance of her legacy to both the scholarly community and society as a whole. Her work expands our knowledge of corpus linguistics as a research methodology, deepens our understanding of everyday oral exchanges, and sheds light on teen talk and the factors shaping adolescents' expression and personal identity. Moreover, it enriches us not only as linguists but also as human beings. Finally, as noted earlier, her personal qualities and outlook on life equalled, if not surpassed, the excellence of her research. She will certainly be greatly missed by most of us.

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