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Himalayan Linguistics

Title

Barbara (“Barb”) Frances Kelly: January 24, 1968-December 14, 2022

Permalink

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Journal

Himalayan Linguistics, 22(3)

Authors

Clancy, Patricia

Clark, Eve

Genetti, Carol

et al.

Publication Date

2023

DOI

10.5070/H922363269

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Peer reviewed

himalayan linguistics

A free refereed web journal and archive devoted to the study of the
languages of the Himalayas

Himalayan Linguistics

Barbara ("Barb") Frances Kelly: January 24, 1968-December 14, 2022

Patricia Clancy

University of California, Santa Barbara

Eve Clark

Stanford University

Carol Genetti

NYU Abu Dhabi

Kristine Hildebrandt

SIU Edwardsville

Aimée Lahaussais

CNRS/Université Paris Cité

ABSTRACT

This memorial honors Barbara Frances Kelly, our friend and colleague, who passed away on 14 December, 2022.

KEYWORDS

Barbara Kelly, Tibeto-Burman linguistics, Sherpa, Language and cognition, First language acquisition, Language documentation

This is a contribution from *Himalayan Linguistics*, Vol. 22(3): 1-8.

ISSN 1544-7502

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Barbara (“Barb”) Frances Kelly *January 24, 1968–December 14, 2022*

Patricia Clancy
University of California, Santa Barbara

Carol Genetti
NYU Abu Dhabi

Aimée Lahaussais
CNRS/Université Paris Cité

Eve Clark
Stanford University

Kristine Hildebrandt
SIU Edwardsville

1 Remembering Barb Kelly

We learned with great sadness of the sudden passing of Barbara (“Barb”) Frances Kelly on the 14th of December 2022, at the age of 54. Despite the dedication of our professional and personal lives to the study of language, it is actually quite difficult to find the right words to convey our emotional responses to Barb’s death, and our feelings towards her family— especially Lawrence and Alexander “Xander”, whom we all knew—and towards her bereft friends. We truly miss Barb, the warm, funny, generous, loving, spirited, adventurous, brilliant being that she was, and still is, in our hearts. Honoring her adequately requires that we recognize all of the ways and things that she meant to us.

As such, this memoriam speaks to the ways that our friendship with her has impacted us. But as a discipline, Linguistics has also lost an extremely talented and impactful colleague and collaborator, and we were fortunate enough to partner with her on many initiatives in her lifetime. For that reason, this memoriam also recognizes her contributions in areas of community-collaborative language documentation, cognitive linguistics and first language acquisition, and professional domains of attribution and data citation.

This memoriam is a collaborative endeavor, woven with stories from the five of us (Pat Clancy, Eve Clark, Carol Genetti, Kristine Hildebrandt, Aimée Lahaussais) of wonderful times together doing important work during the early stages of Barb’s career in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s, when she was living in California. At the end of this memoriam, we give an updated bibliography of all of Barb’s publications and accomplishments, but the following pages try to situate these achievements around the wonderful human being—collaborator, co-student, colleague, friend—who was Barb Kelly.

2 Barb the scholar and colleague

Barb first came into our lives in the larger environment of graduate studies in linguistics. Kristine and Aimée each met Barb as fellow graduate students, preparing for, embarking on, or completing field work in Nepal. Pat, Carol, and Eve mentored or collaborated with Barb during her pre- and/or post-doctoral studies on a wide range of topics within descriptive linguistics and language documentation, language acquisition, and gesture.

In her first year of graduate study at UC Santa Barbara, Barb plunged into language acquisition research on a grant titled “The Emergence of Communicative Action in the Social Life of Very Young Children” with Pat and co-PIs in Sociology, Psychology, and Education. With unusual maturity and confidence for a first-year student, Barb took on the responsibility of conducting regular data-collecting sessions at a local preschool, and videotaping toddlers as they interacted with one another and their teachers.

Barb’s career trajectory took an unexpected turn when an exciting opportunity arose to carry out field work in Nepal. Barb and Kristine were still first-year doctoral students at UCSB when Carol received a National Science Foundation grant (co-PI Michael Noonan) to send five students—three from the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee (UWM) and two from UCSB—to Nepal to study and document relatively undescribed languages with the aim of each producing a descriptive grammar. Carol selected Barb and Kristine to participate, then through the spring of 1998, gave them private lessons on linguistic analysis and description, Tibeto-Burman linguistics, life in Nepal, and beginning conversational Nepali. These were held in Carol’s living room in Santa Barbara with her newborn son Marcus in a bouncy chair on the dining table and her 3-year-old, Olivia, occasionally dancing through the room. These were intensive learning opportunities for Kristine and Barb, who left for Nepal in July of 1998, but they often included copious amounts of *dudh ciyaa* (the famous Nepalese milk tea) and a great deal of laughing.

In Nepal, Barb served as a critically important travel companion and de facto guide to Kristine, who had considerably less international travel experience. She helped instill in Kristine a sense of independence and autonomy, while at the same time modeling responsible collaboration and relationship-building with the language communities involved in the project. Kristine has fond memories of when she, Barb, and the UWM graduate students worked with Austin Hale and Balthasar Bickel to prepare for the 1998 Himalayan Languages Symposium in Pune, India. While only one of the graduate students presented at the Symposium, the rest used the opportunity to network with scholars in this international venue. Many of the professional networks and friendships established at that time persist to this day.

Back in Santa Barbara, Kristine recalls how Barb served as an important link in the academic networking chain (sometimes a spider’s web) by introducing her to some of the California-based conferences that graduate students should be keeping on their radar. Kristine’s first introduction to the Berkeley Linguistics Society’s annual meeting was via a road-trip to Berkeley on a shoestring budget: riding in a very unreliable car in the pouring rain, staying in a fleabag motel, and packing five graduate students into a single, dingy room. It was a transformative experience! Kristine also fondly remembers how, in later years of her PhD program, Barb acted as her personal trainer and study coach as she prepared for the intimidating oral comprehensive exams at UCSB.

Barb and Kristine’s fieldwork ultimately resulted in the publication of two sketch grammars and glossaries of Manange and Sherpa in a single volume, edited by Carol, published with Pacific Linguistics in 2004. While these were not the first descriptions of these languages, they employed

contemporary usage-based and typological methods to provide updated accounts of these grammars and lexicons, and the volume remains a standard reference that is cited widely. Another notable publication of Barb’s on Sherpa was her 2018 chapter in an edited volume on evidentiality and egophoricity (*Egophoricity*, 2018). Barb argued for the “egophoric (ego) evidential” in Sherpa, a system in which evidential forms are triggered by a combination of factors, such as temporal features as well as speaker knowledge and evidence.

With her dissertation research, Barb’s interest in language acquisition came full circle. With Pat as chair of her committee, she analyzed the interactions of five preschoolers from the Very Young Children project, zeroing in on their early gesture-word combinations. Barb’s insight and originality were very much in evidence as she made key discoveries and proposed bold hypotheses about the dialogic, multi-modal foundations of language development. She discovered, for example, that caregivers were significantly more likely to respond when children used gestures and words together than either one alone. In addition, caregivers consistently interpreted children’s gestures as verb-like requests for actions and their words as noun-like references to objects on which the actions were to be performed. Such responses, Barb argued, serve to mediate the transition from gesture-word to predicate-argument. The groundbreaking work in Barb’s dissertation, *The Emergence of Argument Structure from Gesture to Speech*, was the basis for several of her subsequent publications.

When Barb established her dissertation committee, Eve Clark (Dept. of Linguistics, Stanford University) was invited to serve as the external member. After finishing her dissertation in 2003, Barb spent the next year at Stanford, writing up some of her work on early gestures, doing some teaching in the Linguistics Dept, and collaborating with Eve on editing a book, *Constructions in Acquisition* (2006), in which Barb argued that gestures play a crucial role in children’s first constructions. This was just one of many visits Barb made to Stanford, often with Lawrence and Xander, as part of the extensive traveling Barb enjoyed so much. Over the years, Barb and Eve maintained their friendship over email, as well as at various linguistics meetings. Their exchanges culminated, in 2021, in a co-authored chapter on young children’s early construction of a communication system, built with gestures and words.

Carol remembers Barb as energetic, committed, and ready to embrace and enjoy any opportunity or adventure that came her way. She was determined to make life fun, for herself and everyone around her. Also, she was a trailblazer, eager to forge new pathways. This was true both intellectually, as seen in her fieldwork and her work on gesture, and on language acquisition in Nepal—topics that were, and still are, rarely explored. Barb didn’t choose between field work and first language acquisition, she did them both—and did them well. She also forged a pathway to industry, which was quite unusual for a doctoral student in linguistics in the early 2000s. In this day and age, people are eager to champion non-academic careers for graduate students, but at that time, this was almost unheard of, especially outside of computer tech fields. Carol remembers that Barb essentially argued her way into her job at Lexicon Branding, making the case that if the company wanted to be successful helping establish brand names, they needed someone with a background in linguistics. She then spent the last years of her doctorate flying around the US to run focus groups with different regional populations, all the while continuing her work on Sherpa, and writing her dissertation on first language acquisition at UCSB and at Stanford. When she left Lexicon Branding for a position at the University of Melbourne in 2005, her supervisor wept.

After completing her Ph.D. in 2003, Barb continued on with her usual boundless energy and ambitions. She didn’t choose between the academy and industry; she made them both work for her. In other words, she was a person not to be fenced in by the social boundaries that most of us blindly

conform to, and by doing so, she made them visible for others. We continuously learned from her and even benefited from her creative problem solving. For example, after Aimée finished her own PhD and had been offered a postdoc in Paris, she worried about supporting a three-person family on a tiny salary. Barb promptly arranged to have her hired as a consultant for France by Lexicon Branding, greatly easing Aimée's fears about making ends meet as she transitioned into the life of a professional academic.

After graduate school, Aimée was only able to see Barb when conference trips made their paths cross. However, a funding opportunity intervened to bring them together as research partners. During one of Barb's visits, she and Aimée brainstormed an answer to a call for CNRS-Uni Melbourne collaborative schemes. In less than five minutes, Aimée recalls, they came up with a project on meta-grammaticography, and the influences that personal and bibliographical criteria could have on the way linguists wrote descriptive grammars. Aimée works in a research group focused on the history of linguistics, a field Barb gamely decided to take on through this project, alongside all the rest of her varied interests. The grant allowed them to go back and forth between their institutions, and to sit down together in a room with grammars and computers and write. Aimée recalls that she had never had such an easy time working with someone: things flowed in a way she had never experienced before, and they also spent a lot of time laughing. It was an example of the very best type of collaboration: simultaneously professionally and personally rewarding. The collaboration yielded a publication in *Linguistics*, and spawned a database project involving additional researchers which is ongoing.

3 Barb the friend

If the above recollections of Barb seem to blur the line between collaboration and friendship, that is simply because for her, such a line was artificial and fluid.

For many graduate students, their first fieldwork experience can be very stressful and even personally traumatic. Kristine remembers those first few weeks in their rental house in Samakushi, Nepal: getting the house set up, navigating the *bazaars* (marketplaces) of Kathmandu, adjusting to new sights, sounds, and cuisines, sitting up at night, drinking beer or coffee or tea, discussing the elicitation sessions they had with their community language partners, comparing notes, and brainstorming ideas for the next day's work. Their friendship created a calming oasis in an otherwise chaotic environment. When they were not working with community consultants or visiting those consultants and their family members in the more far-flung traditional towns and villages, Kristine and Barb would often embark on day trips around the Kathmandu valley, practicing their conversational Nepali and discovering the natural and cultural beauty of the region outside the hustle-bustle of the city. Lawrence joined Barb in Nepal after their first couple of months, and Kristine has vivid memories of the both of them being extremely excited to set off on their Solu Khumbu trek together. They made perfect hiking and adventuring companions, which remained the case throughout their lives together.

Again, blurring the line between "work" and "friendship", Aimée notes that one thing she particularly loved about Barb was her ability to combine fun and work, insisting that they be given equal footing. As a result, their collaboration also involved excursions, such as a very memorable weekend to Wilson's Promontory with Lawrence and Xander, with a night spent at Nick Thieberger's generously offered house partway.

With Barb, the line between work and friendship was blurred not only when it came to having fun, but also in time of crisis. One day, Pat was checking her email before an appointment with Barb when she came upon shocking news: a dear friend in Japan had committed suicide. Just then, Barb knocked on the door. Distraught and in tears, Pat could barely blurt out what had happened. Without hesitation, Barb took Pat in her arms and held her as she sobbed. Then she firmly informed Pat that there would be no meeting that day and sent her off with instructions to walk the beautiful maze by the lagoon on campus. It was quintessential Barb: a rock in time of need, always ready to take care of others. Her inner strength, emotional wisdom, and warm heart have left an indelible impression on those who knew her.

Barb was a great storyteller. As Aimée recalls, Barb's ability to craft excellent narratives meant that even her dreadful heart attack and resuscitation at a children's birthday party were turned into a gripping story—with a thankfully positive outcome, that time. Even now, Aimée keeps expecting Barb to write to her with a riveting account of her final health drama. It still seems completely inconceivable that she couldn't overcome yet another huge obstacle and turn it into the stuff of great narratives.

Barb had to leave us all far too soon. Of course, we each have our treasured mementos and photos of our time with Barb. Kristine has a photo of Barb and herself sitting together outside of the Himalayan Languages Symposium in Pune, India in between sessions. She cannot recall exactly what they were talking about at that time, but presumably they were imagining what culinary adventures they would embark on together at the end of the day! Aimée particularly cherishes a copy of Thomas Payne's *Describing Morphosyntax*, which Barb gave her upon leaving Nepal in 1999. When Aimée gets particularly sad about Barb's sudden disappearance, she can open the cover and admire Barb's neat signature—a small but tangible reminder of a delightful, creative, brilliant, larger-than-life friend and colleague.

What follows is Barb's academic legacy, in the form of a comprehensive bibliography. But her personal legacy as a travel companion, confidante, and true friend will have an equally profound and lasting impact on us all.

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Kristine Hildebrandt (corresponding author)
khildeb@siue.edu