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Jørgen Rischel

1934-2007



Jørgen Rischel died on 10 May, 2007, 72 years old, and so we have lost one of the finest Danish linguists, phonologists and phoneticians ever.

Jørgen was born on 10 August 1934 in Kullerup on Funen to the reverend Ejner Rischel and organ player Gunnild Rischel, the third of four sons. He started his school years in the public school in Kullerup where a gifted primary school teacher awakened a keen interest in the past, historical as well as pre-historical, an interest which, coupled with an equally early and deep curiosity about exotic tribes and cultures, continued through Jørgen's university studies and carried over to his linguistic research, as it turned out. Late in his second school year he moved to Nyborg Private Realskole. Among his many extra-curricular interests there was chemistry. He conducted various experiments at home, e.g. in gunpowder production – which on one fateful occasion cost him his eyebrows. Chemistry developed into biochemistry and thence into an interest in the life of animals in general and birds in particular. There were many different species of birds in the Kullerup rectory garden, and he took down in musical notation each species' characteristic song and its variations. He thus produced musical scores for more than 20 different melodies. Jørgen's scientific interest in prosody may therefore also be said to go back to his childhood.

The young boy had a vivid interest in what later became known as electronics. From scrapped radios he assembled his own crystal radio receiver and transmitter. His mother was thus heard over the air one day, playing Schumann on the grand piano. However, Jørgen had not yet quite

penetrated the secrets of transmission frequencies, so inadvertently his radio programme interfered with a national Radio Denmark transmission. Again, we have an early manifestation of what later became a serious research activity, namely the construction of the analog parallel synthesizer at the Institute of Phonetics in the late sixties.

Jørgen had a life-long and deep interest in music, particularly classical music. At some early point organs caught his fancy and the young man thought he might want to become an organ player. For many years he played the violin in amateur orchestra and quartets. He played other instruments too: the viola, the guitar, the lute, and the piano. He also sang well; and he developed one truly extraordinary skill: he could whistle and hum a tune simultaneously – and in two parts! – a performance which delighted colleagues and students at a number of christmas lunch parties at the former Institute of Phonetics.

It will have become apparent that Jørgen had an extraordinary number of rare talents. He could have become anything he wished and he would have excelled in it. Fortunately, he was drawn, more than anything else, towards language. To begin with he was interested in the local Funen dialect. An excursion with his school to Norway inspired an enthusiasm for Norwegian. While still at school he read Bernhard Karlgren's introductory Chinese textbook and a grammar of Old Norse, and he studied Danish runic inscriptions: He raised and sold rabbits in order to be able to buy, with the profits, a comprehensive, three volume edition on Danish runes.

Jørgen commenced his university studies in 1952, studying Danish and French. He later dropped French in order to concentrate on Nordic Philology, with a specialization in West Nordic. He obtained a Government scholarship to study in Reykjavík in 1956-57, and in 1958-59 in Oslo where he met Einar Haugen whose ideas about linguistics greatly influenced him. Jørgen also took classes in Danish dialectology with Poul Andersen and in phonetics with Eli Fischer-Jørgensen. During his student years he completed an analysis of Lepcha. In 1958 he was awarded Copenhagen University's Gold Medal for a treatise about morphophonemics; and in 1960 Jørgen obtained the Danish *magisterkonferens* in Nordic Philology. The following academic year he spent in Bergen as a lecturer in Danish language and literature; and in 1961 he left for Wisconsin where he was to be assistant editor on Einar Haugen's Norwegian-English dictionary project. While there he came into contact with American linguistics, and he gave his first international paper – a very important one on prosodic structure – at The International Congress of Linguists in Boston in 1962. During his stay in the United States Jørgen also found time to study phonetics with Gordon Peterson and Kenneth Pike and – upon returning from the US – he continued with explorations into electronic circuit theory and synthetic speech with Gunnar Fant at KTH in Stockholm.

In 1963 Jørgen obtained a three year research scholarship with Paul Diderichsen, the famous professor of Danish language. However, Diderichsen felt that Jørgen belonged in phonetics and after a year he was reallocated to Eli Fischer-Jørgensen. At this point in time an opportunity arose for a tenured position as assistant professor in phonetics. Jørgen consequently gave up the scholarship for the security of the permanent post (advancing to associate professor in 1968). In subsequent years the phonetics staff at Louis Hjelmslev's Institut for Lingvistik og Fonetik grew in numbers. In 1965 Hjelmslev died. In 1966 a new chair in phonetics was inaugurated for Eli Fischer-Jørgensen who then created her own Institut for Fonetik. That was probably a good thing in and of itself, but it actually created a schisma for Jørgen, because since then he always felt divided between linguistics and

phonetics. He taught mainly phonetics in the mid sixties but his research activities were primarily within linguistics, with one major exception: Jørgen's interest in technology and his studies with Gunnar Fant led him in the late sixties to embark upon what was to be a very significant project, the construction of a terminal analog speech synthesizer. It was a successful endeavour in so far as the synthesizer produced speech of high quality, but only two seconds at a time, which was a distinct limitation. The synthesizer has, however, been used in a number of research projects in speech perception. In more recent years it has been superseded by digital speech synthesis, of course.

In 1974 Jørgen was awarded the doctoral degree for his *Topics in Westgreenlandic Phonology*. In 1978 he became professor of linguistics and accordingly left the Institute of Phonetics for the neighbouring Institute of Linguistics. That was a deeply troubled department at the time, marred by personal conflicts, and Jørgen never felt at ease there. He therefore agreed, in 1981, to let himself be called to the chair in phonetics, vacant after Eli Fischer-Jørgensen's retirement in February of that year. In 1998 Jørgen took early retirement in order to be able to concentrate on his research.

The most striking aspect, perhaps, of Jørgen's œuvre is its truly enormous scope: there are major, seminal contributions within nordic philology, eskimology, theoretical linguistics, phonology, minority languages, and experimental phonetics.

If we are to highlight specific areas, it will be Jørgen's work on Greenlandic and on Mlabri. After the dissertation in 1974 Jørgen performed penetrating analyses about Greenlandic dialects and language history. He was also deeply involved in the orthographical reform in Greenland in the early seventies. But more than anything, perhaps, Jørgen will be known and remembered for what he accomplished with such determination and energy in the final stages of his research career, namely his description of the language and culture of the Mla Bri. There is his book from 1995 about *Minor Mlabri*, a dialect spoken then by less than 20 people, who are now all dead. Another book is under publication, *Mlabri and Tin: Ancient Peasant Vocabulary in a Hunter-Gatherer Language*. The manuscript for *A Pan-Dialect Dictionary of Mlabri* needs only the incorporation of Jørgen's hand-written corrections to be ready to go to the publisher's.

Characteristic of all Jørgen's work is his reverence for empirical language data. Theory is always presented and discussed on a background of concrete materials. It is equally remarkable how Jørgen was able to assemble results from different fields of research and make them into a coherent theoretical framework. Two of his most recent papers are prime examples. One is "A unified theory of Nordic i-umlaut, syncope and stød" (to appear in NOWELE) which presents a well documented series of arguments that creates an integrated framework out of three major changes in the phonology of early North Germanic in a completely new way. That paper which draws upon Jørgen's insight, formed over many years, has the potential of influencing the overall picture of a central period in the formation of the Nordic languages. A specific morais analysis plays a crucial role in Jørgen's interpretation of the sound changes discussed, and the interplay between phonology and morphology is explored from a new perspective. Among a wealth of information he also sheds new light on an old dispute, namely whether Danish stød developed from word tones or vice versa, arguing convincingly that word tones and stød developed in parallel, independently of each other. The other paper was given at the workshop on Historical linguistics and hunter-gatherer populations at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig in 2006,

“The Mlabri Enigma: is Mlabri a Primary Hunter-Gatherer Language or the Result of an Ethnically and Socially Complex Founder Event?” Jørgen’s linguistic data, backed up by evidence from mitochondrial DNA, suggests that the Mla Bri appear to be the only hunter-gatherers who with certainty can be shown to have come into existence in recent times, whereas all other such populations have been with us for millenia.

If Jørgen was remiss in anything it was in his publication policy, or perhaps rather lack of same. Some of his most significant papers appeared in rather obscure journals or in informal conference proceedings which are no longer available. We are very happy to say that this unsatisfactory state of affairs will soon be remedied. Oxford University Press have agreed to publish a collection of 20 of Jørgen’s major papers. This volume will document Jørgen’s supreme mastery of the research methods in the European structuralist tradition and show how far these methods can be brought to bear, specifically as regards the relation between the whole and its parts. Another recurrent theme is Jørgen’s view of language structure: that it is not linear but hierarchical, organized as it is in a complex interplay between its individual layers. His arguments are based on fundamental insights in the nature of stress and stress gradation, and the complex way syllables, segments and tonal phenomena interact. Finally, the book will contain some of Jørgen’s studies of the intricate relations between language structure, language use, social structure, and the pre-history of its speakers.

Jørgen was well known by linguists from many subspecialties and uniformly respected for his wisdom, his detailed, yet incredibly broad, knowledge, his independence and his honesty. He could appear shy and would always present his views with elaborate apologies in case he would tire the listener, but he invariably failed to do so.

In looking back upon his œuvre, we cannot fail to notice that his was both a late flower of the blooming structuralism of his formative years and a personal reaction to it. He integrated variation – historical, dialectal and sociolectal – within his view of structure and thus abandoned the strict notion of autonomy without abandoning relative autonomy in the guise of structured relationships between layers or strata of language. In this, he fulfilled the promise of an empirically based complex structuralism which may well point to future investigations rather than end an era.

Jørgen was a member of several important scientific administrative bodies, inter alia Statens Humanistiske Forskningsråd (The Danish Research Council for the Humanities) and Academia Europaea. He was a member of the editorial board of the International Journal of American Linguistics and of Acta Linguistica Hafniensia. He was chairman of Selskabet til Udgivelse af færøske Kildeskrifter og Studier (The Society for the Edition of Faroese Written Sources and Studies). He was a member of the board for Societas Linguistica Europaea. He was chairman of Lingvistkredsen i København (The Linguistic Circle of Copenhagen). He was vicepresident of Selskab for Nordisk Filologi (Society for Nordic Philology). He was vicepresident of the international board for A Critical Pali Dictionary. He was a member of Kommissionen for Videnskabelige Undersøgelser i Grønland (The Commission for Scientific Investigations in Greenland). He was a member of the executive committee for the Permanent International Committee of Linguists. He was a member of the International Phonetic Association and of the Permanent Council for the Organization of Phonetic Congresses. Jørgen was elected to the Royal Danish Academy of Science and Letters in 1978. The queen conferred upon him the Cross of the Order of Dannebrog in November 1991.

Five years ago Jørgen was diagnosed with cancer. He underwent four major operations first to one leg, later to his lungs. He knew from the outset that he might not die of old age and from then on he did his utmost to complete his research on Mlabri; and he did in fact manage to bring it to a final stage, putting the finishing touches to his last article – for the proceedings of the conference in Leipzig in 2006 mentioned above – two days before he died.

He had many ideas and lots of material for several books. There was one in particular that it irked him, in the final months, that he did not have time to write, namely a history of linguistic science in the 20th century. He had very strong points of view about the detrimental effects of the way the generative grammar paradigm has dominated linguistic theory for nearly 50 years – and of the often not very fruitful discussions of that particular theoretical framework.

Jørgen's vita would not be complete if we did not briefly touch upon the inestimable role his wife of 46 years, Anna-Grethe, has played – not only in his private life, of course, but also in Jørgen's work. She accompanied him without complaint, with three young children, to Frederiksdal, near Kap Farvel in Greenland, for almost a whole year in the early seventies. She has been an astoundingly acute observer, an unbelievable aide-memoire, and lately a eminently loyal companion on some of his travels to Northern Thailand. Thus it was Anna-Grethe who, when Jørgen was no longer able to fly, travelled to his field station in Thailand and brought back home all his invaluable field work material.

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