

## GEORGE W. GRACE: AN APPRECIATION

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When the person we are honouring came to Hawai'i to accept a professorship in 1964, he soon learned that he was not the only George Grace in the islands. Time and again he received bills for goods he had never bought, creditors' notices for loans he had never taken out, and menacing letters of various kinds. Patiently, he returned all of these with the explanation that the clamouring mob was after the wrong man. That other George Grace is now well known to the local population as the inventor and developer of the Grace portable flush toilet – his bills paid and his profits handsome. Unlike George Grace the toilet king, our George Grace toils on in relative anonymity, knowing that even his greatest stroke of genius will never touch the queued-up masses as closely as that simple invention by his more entrepreneurial namesake. In recognition of this fact (and others) we have contrived to pay homage to him with this volume.

George's life and work appear rich in irony and incongruity. Born near the northern border of Mississippi in 1921 and raised on the gulf coast of that state, he received his first university degree in Switzerland at the age of 27. Almost thwarted in his efforts to obtain the PhD by an outside committee member who refused to accept his dissertation, he published the work, which became an instant landmark in the field of Austronesian linguistics (Grace 1959). A linguist of exceptionally broad knowledge, interests, and intellectual scope who has made lasting contributions both to historical linguistics and to the philosophy of language, he has remained almost unknown to the general community of linguists.

Following his return to the United States after receiving his Licence-ès-sciences politiques from the University of Geneva, George accepted a position as Junior Research Anthropologist at the University of California at Berkeley. During the summer of 1951 he carried out fieldwork among the Luiseño Indians of southern California, an experience which formed the basis for his collaboration with Alfred L. Kroeber in preparing the Sparkman grammar of Luiseño. By 1953 he was a Research Associate with the Tri-Institutional Pacific Program (a consortium of resources from Yale University, the University of Hawai'i and the Bernice P. Bishop Museum of Honolulu), and the following year a Research Assistant in Anthropology at Yale University. He spent the period 1955-1956 conducting a linguistic survey of New Caledonia, the Solomon Islands, and both the Australian- and Dutch-administered portions of New Guinea, in which areas he collected field materials for scores of Austronesian languages. It was this experience perhaps more than any other which committed him to the study of Austronesian linguistics, and more particularly to the study of the processes of linguistic change in Melanesia.

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After completing his fieldwork in the Pacific George spent the year 1956-1957 as an Associate in Malayo-Polynesian Linguistics at the Bishop Museum in Honolulu. In 1958, despite the untoward incident alluded to above, he completed his doctorate under Joseph Greenberg at Columbia University. From 1958 to 1959 he was Assistant Professor of Sociology at the Women's College of the University of North Carolina; from 1959 to 1960 Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Northwestern University; from 1960 to 1963 Assistant Professor of Anthropology, and from 1963 to 1964 Associate Professor of Anthropology at Southern Illinois University. In 1964 he arrived in Hawai'i as a Scholar in Residence at the East-West Center. Before he had completed his term with the East-West Center he was hired as Professor of Linguistics by the University of Hawai'i, where he joined the newly formed Department of Linguistics, headed by Howard McKaughan.

George Grace's professional career encompasses at least four distinguishable roles: those of editor, administrator, scholar and teacher. In 1961, while he was still employed by Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, George became editor of the new journal, *Oceanic Linguistics*. The first four issues of this journal, dedicated to the study of Austronesian, Papuan, and Australian languages, were modest in scope and cost. George carried the editorship of *Oceanic Linguistics* with him to Hawai'i. This transition of employment is reflected in the journal, which in 1964 graduated from stapled to bound format, grew noticeably in size, and began increasingly to attract the contributions of leading scholars concerned with languages of the Pacific area. George has contributed both articles and review articles to *Oceanic Linguistics*, but above all he has remained its editor for the past thirty years (making his editorial tenure probably one of the longest on record). During this time the journal has grown into the primary forum for publications concerned with the Austronesian languages, and one of the major outlets for publications on both the Papuan and the Australian languages.

From 1966 to 1969 George headed the Department of Linguistics at the University of Hawai'i after its first leader, Howard McKaughan, moved into a deanship. I have never spoken to him about the matter, but have always had the impression that being department chair was not his favourite position in the world of linguistics.

George's publications include descriptive studies, most notably dictionaries of two of the languages of New Caledonia, comparative studies of a substantive nature, and works of a more theoretical-philosophical character which cover a range of topics from the nature of language change to the nature of language as an object amenable to scientific study, translation theory and the relationship of language to thought. The interconnectedness of this body of work may initially elude some readers, but I believe that a basic unity of purpose underlies the seeming diversity of interests reflected in it.

George's comparative work has two salient foci. The first of these centres on issues of subgrouping. The second focus concerns the nature of language change, and in particular the issue of how the languages of Melanesia can be divided impressionistically into two groups that he has charmingly compared to birds (drastically altered in the transition from an archosaurian ancestor) and crocodilians (barely changed in the transition from the same ancestor). Any Oceanic linguist who has read his unforgettable discussion of the subject can readily classify, for example, Aneityum as a bird and Fijian as a crocodilian. And, at the same time, anyone who knows George will be aware how far he is willing to push the comparison, given his general distrust of rigid categorisation.

George's dissertation dealt with issues of subgrouping, and he has returned periodically to problems in the genetic classification of the Oceanic languages. His interests in this area have been both substantive, as in his 'Subgrouping of Malayo-Polynesian: a report of tentative findings' (1955)

and *The position of the Polynesian languages within the Austronesian (Malayo-Polynesian) language family* (1959), and theoretical, as in his 'Problems in Oceanic linguistic subgrouping' (1962), 'On the scientific status of genetic classification in linguistics' (1965) or 'Oceanic subgrouping: retrospect and prospect' (1985). Indeed, it is one of the hallmarks of George's work that he rarely discusses issues of substance without at the same time examining the assumptions which underlie their interpretation. A good example is his 'Austronesian lexicostatistical classification: a review article' (1966), a meticulous dissection of the conceptual basis of Isidore Dyen's *A lexicostatistical classification of the Austronesian languages* (1965), and in my view one of the finest review articles ever written in the field of historical linguistics.

It is this tendency to lay bare the philosophical underpinnings of linguistic arguments that provides a bridge between George's earlier work, which is overtly substantive (but often 'philosophical' by predisposition) and his later work in translation and world-view (collectively 'ethnolinguistics'), which is overtly concerned with an examination of the most basic assumptions underlying contemporary theories of language. From my days as a graduate student studying Austronesian linguistics with George I can vividly recall his frequent, only half-facetious references to the 'good', or 'well-behaved' Melanesian languages (= the crocodilians; i.e. those which show relatively straightforward sound changes and respectable cognate densities with other Austronesian languages) and the 'bad', or 'aberrant' Melanesian languages (= the birds; i.e. those which show extreme lexical and phonological divergence which does not seem to be connected in any very straightforward way with differences of separation time). I suspect that it was his desire to come to grips with the reasons for such differences among languages which appear to subgroup together that led George into the philosophical concerns of his later years: What are the units of language structure and of language change? What is the relationship between a language and 'its linguistic description'? What is the relationship between language and thought?

The foregoing are not commonly asked questions in linguistics. Indeed, one of George's most distinctive and engaging characteristics is his incorrigible indifference to fads and fashions. Let me hasten to add that such a statement can easily be misunderstood. George is exceptionally well read, and keeps abreast of the general literature in linguistics and related disciplines far more conscientiously than most of his colleagues. But his research interests are self-driven, rather than inspired and guided by the light out of the East. By asking the questions that intrigued him rather than the questions that were fashionable to ask he has simply charted a course of his own. To a large extent the questions that George has tended to find meaningful in his career have been concerned in one way or another with the integration of synchrony and diachrony. As a linguist who entered the field in the 1950s with strong interests in problems of language change, he has had relatively little to say about syntax, and for this reason his searching examination of the foundations of linguistics in his books *An essay on language* (1981) and *The linguistic construction of reality* (1987) has yet to link up in any decisive way with the main thrust of theoretical work in our field over the past three decades.

It is not easy to summarise in a few words the goals that underlie George's work in linguistic theory, and I am not at all sure that I am qualified at this point to do so. Perhaps most fundamentally, he appears to ask his readers to reconsider the almost universally unquestioned view that linguistics must properly be concerned with language as code (or form) and not at all with language as message (or content). The pivotal term relating to the new perspective he introduces is *content form*. The content form of an utterance is "The way in which the **idea** which it expresses is analyzed (**construed**) for expression – the way it is put into words. This construction in fact creates a model

of a bit of reality (or *as-if* reality)" (*An essay on language*, p.172). From here the train of investigation leads naturally into the role of communicative competence in grammatical description, into problems of translation and translatability, and inevitably into issues of the kind most commonly associated with the name of Benjamin Lee Whorf. To the average working linguist George's discussions of language may appear closer to philosophy of language than to linguistics, while to the average working philosopher of language the reverse may appear true. In short, George Grace is a pioneer who is blazing his own trail in the wilderness between the disciplines.

When I studied with George in the late 1960s it was common for graduate students to be almost overawed by the breadth and depth of his knowledge. In the words of one of these students he was "amazing Grace", and to many of his colleagues George was considered something of a scholar's scholar. In committee work, thesis supervision, or general comments in conversation he has a way of penetrating quickly to the heart of things and expressing solutions in clear and simple terms. Perhaps for this reason as much as any other George has probably been more sought after as a 'general' member of dissertation committees than anyone else in his department (39 times between 1966 and 1990). Not being committed to any particular theoretical doctrine, yet never satisfied with poorly thought-out arguments, he is an ideal sounding-board for any kind of intellectual proposal. At the same time George has chaired a number of dissertation committees, including (in chronological order) those for John Lynch, myself, Kay Ilkanagara, Sheldon Harrison, Frantisek Lichtenberk, Joel Bradshaw, Suzanne Scollon, Amara Prasithrathsint, Anne Pakir, and Hiroshi Sugita. When George presented the keynote address at the symposium on Austronesian linguistics which was held in conjunction with the XV Pacific Science Congress at Dunedin, New Zealand in 1983, it was pointed out that he had been instrumental in training an entire generation of Oceanic linguists. What had been a tiny and arcane discipline in the 1950s had become an arena of lively debate between a number of well-trained, independent scholars in the 1980s, virtually all of whom had been touched directly or indirectly by George's teaching.

I would be remiss to leave the unbalanced impression that George Grace is nothing more than an intellectual giant who has made major and lasting contributions to several branches of linguistics. He is also a former tennis champion (he and his doubles partner Robert McGlone were ranked second in the state of Hawai'i for their age bracket in the 1970s; he repeated this distinction with doubles partner Frank Miller as recently as 1986). Finally, George probably is one of Hollywood's greatest missed opportunities for a challenger to Woody Allen. Anyone who has ever heard a Gracian public presentation, with the inevitable opening barrage of disclaimers, apologies, advance qualifications, etc., will have experienced that impossible mixture of emotions I have felt – not knowing whether to rush up to offer him one's assurances, or to laugh out loud. Most people who work with him on a daily basis have a very hard time keeping a straight face in talking to him (I have always made a special effort). In the subtlest and most inimitable way George gives one the distinct impression that he believes the world is out to get him, and that his only defence is humour. If this is so, he defends himself extraordinarily well.