

7 *On the love of languages*

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In May or June of 1966, my wife, my daughter of two and a half years of age, and I arrived in Alice Springs, Northern Territory on the ‘Ghan’ from Adelaide and Port Augusta. On board, we brought up a Land Rover and a small trailer which was to be our home for seventeen months while I did fieldwork among the Pitjantjatjara in Amata and Ernabella, in the State of South Australia. I had heard that Ken Hale was also in Alice Springs starting work on Warlpiri, and we finally met. It was my first encounter with Ken, though I had heard about his remarkable linguistic abilities when I was at the University of Michigan, where I taught from 1963 to 1990.

This essay is in part personal and also, in part, deals with some of Ken’s writings on Aboriginal Australian languages as well as his theoretical pieces. These two parts are intertwined as a result of a friendship which has spanned a third of a century, through conversations, phone calls, meetings, and an exchange of letters. I still have the letters from Ken which go back to the late 1960s, most of which are filled with acute and perceptive insights into language and culture issues that we have worked on either separately or mutually.

During the 1966–67 period, my family and I would come up to Alice Springs, and there we would see Ken and Sally for days, talking about the miserable state of political affairs, with the United States getting further involved in the Vietnam War; the developing racism in Alice Springs; and the horrendous cost of vegetables and fruits in the local stores. Sally’s dinners were a godsend, and her cooking of Mexican food was always a high point during these sporadic visits. But Ken and I would squirrel away to talk ‘shop’, either at home or at the local pubs. It was in this context that I saw Hale’s remarkable skills at language. It was one thing for him to speak to Warlpiri speakers in Warlpiri, but it was another to watch him move from Warlpiri to Arrernte, Kaytetye, Warumungu, or Luritja. Each Aboriginal man was moved by his abilities. They would lean over and ask me if he was a missionary; I would say “No, he is a linguist”, and they would ask, “What is that?” All of this transpired at different times in the ‘old’ Alice, which had more space for Aboriginal people in the town centre.

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These were my first encounters with Hale's linguistic skills and his virtuosity in moving from one speaker to another—always done in a natural, self-effacing manner, low key, modest to an extreme, and humble beyond what the word means. Yet, for Ken this was also a great learning device: the speaker would respond to him in a more complex way, which in turn would push Ken on to explore why one construction was acceptable while another might be doubtful. For me, the myth of his skills was thus revealed as a hard reality that was truly exceptional in its implications.

Yet, this keen insight and understanding of particular language structures had still another aspect. Since Hale had worked on Warlpiri some years prior to 1966, he would note the kinds of grammatical parallels that Warlpiri had with other languages. In this case, I still note the comparisons he made between Warlpiri syntax and certain syntactic features in Gaelic. Although difficult for a linguistic novice like me to follow, his discussion of these features was lucid and informative. On another comparative note, Ken thought there might be some vague prehistorical connections between Australian Aboriginal languages and some of the 'tribal' languages of South India. Again, in his way of seeing connections, he patiently discussed this in a clear and impressive manner.

On his return to the States, Ken and Sally moved to New England, where Ken took a position at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. And from time to time I heard that he was tapping into the local Native American languages in a way reminiscent of his work with the native languages of the American Southwest. Ken, in all his modesty, would claim that he really knew very little about languages in the Southwest and that he worked only in a sporadic way, nothing really sustained. Yet, this kind of random fieldwork, whenever he had time off from teaching, has led to some of his most important work. Here I refer to his piece 'A note on subject-object inversion in Navajo' (1973), which is hardly a note. Hale, in his skillful combining of limited knowledge of Navajo and intuitiveness, dealt with a problem that had never been resolved by Sapir and Hoijer and the other giants of Navajo linguistics. And although labeled a note, this article revolutionised our thinking about the speaker in regard to levels of hierarchy as embedded in contrasts such as human/nonhuman/inanimate.

Sometime in the late 1970s, I was driving with Ken from the MIT campus to his home in Lexington. He needed gasoline, so he stopped at a gas station that he had frequented in the past. As the attendant was pumping gas, I heard Ken talking to him in a language that brought back my childhood. Ken spoke fluently; occasionally, he would make mistakes, they would laugh and continue. This went on for about ten minutes, and we left.

I soon realised, as I was listening, that the language was Turkish. The language of my family was Armenian, which all of us children spoke. But when my parents wanted to say something in our presence that we would not understand, they changed to Turkish. I had picked up a few words, and that was it. When we drove on, I told Ken about my memories of Turkish, and how it was used by my parents—and my limited knowledge of it. But Ken was fluent. He had worked on Turkish only with the attendant, adding vocabulary, becoming involved in matters of grammar, but always probing the various small, detailed nuances of the language that make it unique.

I suspect that anyone working with Ken at one time or another was able to observe the depth and intensity of this linguistic skill. Yet, from my experience, the learning of languages, be it Turkish or Gaelic, was even more importantly part of a generalised intellectual curiosity that Hale possessed, one that continually propelled him to seek new and different encounters.

If the beginning section of this essay has dealt with my personal ties to Ken, the last part will dwell on some of the theoretical and political points that I think underlie Hale's work,

both in Australia and the American Southwest. As a start, it must be noted that there are connections between the personal and the scholarly. In part, it was and is this personal interaction which I think permits me to deal with some of the long-range facets of his work and, in turn, to appreciate how my intellectual exchanges with Hale also have influenced my own work. Yet, it must be stressed that the mutual interchanges we have had over ideas and empirical work were only *minimally* mutual. There was little that I, not being a linguist, could contribute to Ken's store of knowledge; but again, we always moved the conversations to abstractions, which are fortunately open to all.

In this vein, I want to focus on three themes that I think make Ken Hale's work both unique and, even more, politically relevant. And in conclusion, I want to discuss some of the influences that he has had on my own work in central Australia.

One of the basic concepts critical to his work is the ability to move from the particular and possibly the unique to the universal or semi-universal and vice versa. Throughout four decades of writing on languages and language, Hale's writings have been able to move back and forth with the aim of showing how one level informs the other. The best insight into this process is seen in Hale's piece (1976) titled 'Linguistic autonomy and the linguistics of Carl Voegelin'. Here, he sets forth the contrast between Autonomous Systems and Dependent Systems views in the analysis of language. In the Autonomous category, "A language consists of a number of distinct systems, each possessing inherent principles of organization which are utterly independent of factors relating to any other linguistic system or to extralinguistic factors" (Hale 1976:120), while in the Dependent, "A language consists of a single unified system—or else a set of tightly integrated systems—whose inherent principles of organisation are often intimately related to factors belonging to conceptually distinct realms, including extralinguistic factors" (Hale 1976:121).

The contrast is critical for our understanding of how universals are to be comprehended. Universals are primarily found in generative principles as exemplified in the work of Chomsky, Halle, and others who were once labeled as transformationalists, or in the realm of typologies as characterised by the work of Hale's teacher Carl Voegelin.

What has been a lifelong concern for Hale is the determination of the loci of universals. He concludes that:

my feeling is the universals in this case belong properly to the category of *relative implications* within the typology which grows out of the Autonomous Systems view of language. That is to say, these universals are not to be represented directly in the grammars of specific languages. (Hale 1976:127)

By tracing the Autonomous/Dependent Systems distinction, Hale (1975) deals with the problem of embeddedness in language and culture. Here the paramount question is, does the absence of the universal in the particular refute the existence of the universal? In analysing Warlpiri forms of enumeration, Hale notes that the concept of counting is probably a universal, but its conventionalised manifestation or its empirical existence might be absent. The central issue is that the absence of the trait in the particular does not disprove the existence of the universal, which must be comprehended as a concept and not in its empirical existence. To move from the universal to an empirical existence, one must recognise that culture, like language, is a process of embeddedness. Thus on first appearance, cultural or linguistic features might be absent in the particular, but the investigator must keep in mind that certain features might be subsumed or subordinate to other correspondences.

Throughout his writings, Hale (1971, 1973, 1975) constantly stresses that the central task is to relate the particular to the universal and vice versa. But my impression is that, with all this entire range of linguistic skills at his disposal, Hale yet seems to prefer analyses that

probe the particular. While he is aware that details and facets of a language at one level may be relatable to generalisable and comparative (possibly universal) ends, he takes pleasure in turning his analysis toward a level of investigation that may yield findings that are unique to the given context but *not* amenable to generalisations. Much of Hale's work is guided, I think, by his quest to find why and how some languages possess so much internal variation and difference from other languages, at the syntactic and also the morphological level. The issue for him is not one of expanding the universal to account for internal variation, which would ultimately make the universal so general that all of its theoretical power would be lost. Rather, what he finds essential is to maintain the sense of language and its speakers as a creative phenomenon and of linguistic creativity as the ability of speakers to intellectualise their language using a sense of play that creates ever-new combinations.

The best examples of this process of intellectualisation and play are revealed in Hale's (1971) analysis of Warlpiri antonymy and in the various pieces on Lardil and Damin, the most notable being his (1982) discussion of kinship terminology (see also Hale & Nash 1997). Both cases are quite complex, yet in each, Hale was able to decipher a linguistic logic which formed the basis permitting young novices to learn *Jiliwirri* or *Damin* in an extraordinarily short amount of time.

Although Hale is cautious in discussing how these speech forms emerged, I would like to venture a few speculations. In both cases, these secret or semi-secret languages cannot be traced to borrowing from neighbouring languages. And in one, Damin, the phonological system makes contrasts unlike those in that of any other Aboriginal language. Antonymy, as a structural principle, is widespread in many Aboriginal languages, and in most cases it is the source of contrastiveness and difference. Yet it is imperative to recognise that to create a self-sufficient system of contrasts with minimal means, at some time in the past a few individuals played with their language. This can be done by establishing a sense of distance such that speakers step outside of their discourse, through a sense of distance creating contrasts as a form of play and inventiveness. The observations are a result of distancing and differentiations which might be minimal so they can be learned quickly by novices, and of a philosophical speculation which permits persons to reflect on what they do with speech and what kinds of elaborations can be created. In my own work with Pitjantjatjara speakers, I have noted how some speakers could rework principles of word order in ways that were still linguistically and culturally acceptable. Not only were these elaborations intellectual games, but also they elicited a strong feeling of pleasure among the speakers, as creative uses of language. Hale (1971) also notes the pleasure which Warlpiri men felt when they discussed how *Jiliwirri* as a form of opposition was not only creative but all-embracing.

Hale's interest in how linguistic play works and what it creates stands in a generation of linguistics and linguists which has stressed formalisms and abstract theoretical paradigms. Language games, of which Australian-language 'respect' registers, Damin, and Pig Latin are examples, have been among the kinds of often-overlooked particularities that have excited Ken's interest from the start. He has recognised that such games hold, in addition to their intrinsic interest, great interest for the linguistic theoretician because they place extraordinary reliance on generative rules to express thoughts that in ordinary language might require no act more sophisticated than the choice of a single word. This makes the rules more accessible to the examiner. And, unlike many linguists who focus their attention narrowly on the generative rules, Ken has always been alive to the social contexts in which these systems are used. Furthermore, I have always felt that the uniqueness of languages and their elements and small nuanced particularisms have continually whetted Hale's appreciation of the creativity of the games that speakers play with their language.

The idea of play was noted earlier by the anthropologist A.L. Kroeber (1952) and by the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, in *Homo ludens* (1949). What makes Hale's work remarkable is that he has recorded how this idea works, what is done, how far it can be expanded, and the kinds of implications that speakers draw from their own utterances and the respective structures. The process of intellectualisation which I am discussing might or might not be universal, but wherever it is found it is a result of differentiation, distanciation, and the ability of speakers to move outside their linguistic milieu and comprehend a speech pattern as a linguist might.

Language games are played in most societies, perhaps all. At one time or another, most Americans as children have been versed in Pig Latin. We learn this, often, at school but out of school, perhaps on the playground; we retain it for the rest of our lives but it is not a serious or important part of our culture. In school we learn to use language as a straightforward, exact, concise, and lucid mode of expression, and we learn to analyse language, usually for purposes of literary discussion and criticism, through the use of writing. Analysis of language as spoken rather than as written is not part of the mainstream educational process, and analysis of language games is often beneath notice. But in many languages, especially where the oral tradition is dominant, language games and linguistic creativity form a large and critical part of the data for assessing how language is internalised by speakers, who are able to reflect on what they are saying and on the processes by which they can form utterances which are new yet still meaningful to the speakers.

Another facet of this kind of linguistic creativity is its connections to examples of linguistic drift (Sapir 1921; Eggan 1963) and to the general issue of involution (Goldenweiser 1936). In both drift and involution, a pattern becomes dominant and is crystallised; consequently, internal complexity within the pattern increases but the complexity cannot be transformed into a different or a new structure. Language games and the ensuing play can become extreme, enhancing the ability of speakers in these games to create utterances and oppositions which eventually might mystify others who have been excluded. Although we have little empirical evidence for determining the connections between games or play and drift or involution, one might speculate that games and play would be transgenerational and that over time, they might be crystallised as results of drift.¹

Hale's lifelong curiosity and polyglot abilities have always focused on the particular, which might or might not reflect universals or semi-universals. For those of us who have seen Hale work in the field, it is always a pleasure to watch him delve from the particular to the sub-particular as a means of participating in the nitty-gritty that makes a language truly unique. Surely the detailed nuances of language have little to do with communication per se, but they do reflect the creativity which only native speakers (and Hale) can pursue to their logical (and possibly absurd) ends with a sense of pleasure and glee.

Coupled with these interests has been Hale's lifelong concern for training native speakers to do linguistic analysis in their own languages. As early as the middle 1960s and early

¹ Ed. note: The 'drift' of more recent anthropologists differs from Sapir's (1921), but the author points out that Fred Eggan was a student of Sapir's at the University of Chicago in the 1920s. A possible example of the 'crystallisation' of a repeatedly created game-like process (a 'drift'-like tendency, in Sapir's sense) begins with the widely attested replacement, in the formalised 'baby talk' of a number of Aboriginal languages, of the flapped liquid /r/ with the glide /y/. See for example Mary Laughren's 'Warlpiri baby talk' in *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 4(1984):73-88. A sound change that has affected most of the Wik languages of Cape York Peninsula is the change of an original *rr to /y/. If formalised 'baby talk' is a kind of 'language game', then it is conceivable that this sound change is an instance of the crystallisation of a process begun in a game.

1970s, Hale (1965, 1972) expressed his interest and subsequent involvement with training native speakers in linguistics. Initially, Hale and Mr Albert Alvarez, a Papago speaker, worked together within a transformational grammar framework. However, it soon became apparent to Mr Alvarez that certain problems were emerging, one of which was the absence of the semantic domain in such an analysis. The virtue of this kind of collaboration is that the native speaker, *cum* linguist, can expand on abstract rules as well as clarify uncertainties that might emerge. This might be a minor point, but what is essential to note is that the inability of linguists to clarify uncertainties, or what Hale (1965:117) notes as a mystery, has usually led linguists to class uncertainties under the rubric of free variant, which is a way of combining things that cannot be explained or classified. Working with Mr Alvarez on the spot allowed Hale to deal with matters of uncertainty with an insight which only the native Papago speaker possessed. Throughout his work in Warlpiri and Lardil, Hale has worked closely with native speakers as a means of trying to deal with the ambiguities and the extent to which these can be comprehended within the existing structure or perhaps as manifestations of linguistic play.

In the early 1970s, Hale's commitment to native speakers addressed the question of the professionalisation of the discipline. Within the context of North American universities and their graduate programs, few native speakers have been able to pursue higher degrees. The professionalism and the top-heavy degree requirements have favoured a particular group of people who can afford the 'luxury' of spending five to nine years in graduate studies towards MA and PhD degrees. The intellectual, political, economic (and even moral) structure of the university goes against the idea of training native speakers in their language and in the kinds of work which might result from such training. And if they were able to achieve this (and some have), the very logic of academia works against it.

One requirement is a means of accreditation that will be geared to native speakers, who can seldom afford the lengthy period of graduate work. Hale has on a number of occasions worked with native speakers at MIT with the aim of training them in linguistics so that they could return to their communities and continue work on their languages. In some cases, they have been able to receive a PhD. A real concern, however, is to provide a means of training which would be recognised within the profession but which would avoid the lengthy time commitment currently demanded. This appeal was voiced by Hale in the early 1970s, but American universities and their graduate programs have been extremely slow or reluctant to meet the challenge. As Hale was well aware thirty years ago, addressing the issue of the value of the languages of small indigenous groups in larger industrial societies required much more than the granting of doctorates: there is among other problems the enormous matter of the economy that these educated persons, PhD-holders or not, are to come home to. The failure of the universities to act with energy and original thought on the matter of linguistic training for non-university-trained people from nonliterate traditions is part of a much larger picture of lack of concern, by no means limited to the universities, for the intellectual riches of these traditions and for the dilemmas faced by those who wish to continue to cultivate them while at the same time earning a living. The consequences of this contempt are now visibly and permanently damaging. Globally, many languages are endangered, the remnants of their native speakers having been reduced to a half-dozen or fewer speakers. In many cases, it might be too late to rectify the situation or even to record anything. If Hale's appeals of thirty years ago had been even partially addressed by the profession and also the universities, an important signal would have been sent that might have made a difference, however token at first, in this regard.

Another facet of language endangerment is what local people themselves might feel about what is happening. Linguists, like other social scientists, have long argued over the age-old adage, "If you want to kill a culture, you first kill its language". The trend of global history and imperialism would support this, though there might be exceptions. And while many social scientists may have debated the validity of this kind of discourse, for almost all indigenous people I have worked with in central Australia and in the southern Philippines, as well as from what I know of the native peoples of northern California, this is not a debatable issue; it is a manifest truth.

This brings me to the last point, on how Hale's work over the past four decades inverts the normal career paths that linguists in general have pursued. In linguistics, like most of the social sciences, an academic is known by his or her theoretical, comparative, or interpretive pieces that address the intellectual concerns and paradigms central to the scholarly profession at the time. The writing of abstract grammars, transformational rules, arguments over binding and government, etc., have dictated what a scholar was all about. If one worked on an 'exotic' language, one usually worked on the deep structure as it reflected universals in such matters as clause structures. All of these activities were done in the prime of one's scholarly writing. But dictionaries and vocabularies were different. Compiling of word lists into dictionaries and lexicons was something that one normally did in the twilight of one's scholarly career. Again, the assumption behind this kind of division of labour was that dictionaries and lexicons could be done by anyone; they were something which was routine and mundane; they did not require any deep analytical thinking; and last, they only required a sorting out of 3x5-inch file cards into some alphabetic logic.

Hale started compiling dictionaries and vocabularies at an early phase in his career. In fact, the Warlpiri dictionary project was started in the 1970s and, with intense native-speaker participation, is nearing completion. Hale et al. (1981) issued a preliminary Lardil dictionary a few years later, and that project was finalised recently (Ngakulmungan Kangka Leman 1997). A close reading of Hale's *vita* also indicates that his fieldnotes, which he would always generously allow others to use, were the basis of vocabularies and word lists for a number of languages such as Warumungu, Ngarluma, Warlmanpa, Yindjibarndi, and others.

But, as any reader would acknowledge, there are dictionaries and there are dictionaries. In both Warlpiri and Lardil, the meticulous analysis of roots and compound forms has made the entire endeavour a project of intense care and detail, combined with a dedication that is truly unique. Furthermore, Hale has always been concerned with producing dictionaries that can be used by native speakers. The detailed treatment of each entry includes the various meanings of the word and its linguistic category, each designation followed by illuminating examples. Each entry is fully explored in regard to its potential nuances and the conditions of its use. Browsing through the Preliminary dictionary of Lardil, a reader finds any number of entries nearly equivalent to an encyclopaedia article.

For Hale, the dictionary has not been a venture of the twilight. His work on dictionaries has clearly been done in conjunction with the wide range of theoretical grammatical and semantic analyses that have always been central to his scholarship and converge in the study of the place that the lexicon occupies in formal grammar. Furthermore, dictionaries, over and above the involvement of native speakers in their production, have a critical role in Hale's political stance. Speakers of 'exotic' languages, endangered or not, have long felt that dictionaries and useful vocabularies are the most important contribution that linguists can provide to their social life and to the succeeding generations, for each of whom language loss threatens anew. Throughout many areas of Aboriginal Australian societies as well as the

southern Philippines, the dictionary has had a high emblematic as well as a practical value. Again, we find similar demands made by speakers of indigenous languages of northern California. This call for vocabularies over abstract theoretical grammars has inverted the appearance of a normal career trajectory for a professional linguist, where name and fame are linked to theoretical pronouncements, not dictionaries. Hale understood this need very early in his career, and it was his way of giving something back to the speakers of languages whom he had so closely worked with. What has been Hale's very special achievement here is the wrapping up of the practical, the political, and the intensely theoretical into a single genre.

The demand for dictionaries will in all probability increase as native speakers feel that they must leave something for their children and grandchildren. This desire has been clearly voiced:

At the 1992 Athapaskan Linguistic Conference in Flagstaff, Navajo linguist Paul Platero ("Language Loss among Navajo Children") challenged the audience, "You who make your living off our language and culture, do your theoretical work, yes, but do something that will encourage our language." (Daniel McLaughlin, cited in House 1991:217)

Hale's politics and scholarly production understood this message nearly four decades ago. Dictionaries, lexicons, vocabularies, and word lists should be the lasting legacy which will encourage language reproduction and diversity.

Returning to my personal interconnections with Hale, his letters, writings and conversations over the past three decades have inspired some of my own work among the Pitjantjatjara. In comparison to what Hale has published on similar topics, my work is most rudimentary. In a paper on linguistic and cultural dualism, I explored the differences between the past tense and the imperfective in regard to events which the Pitjantjatjara consider as sacred and/or secular (Yengoyan 1989). Linguists have long debated how the past tense is constituted in some of the Western Desert languages, and even whether it exists. In this work, I followed up on the idea that the past tense is normally used for events and situations that have no sacred counterparts, but are simply activities that are mundane and nonexistent once they are performed, such as eating or taking a trip. But sacred events either in the most ancient past or in the recent past must be conveyed as a continuity, events which have no finalisation. In such cases, the imperfective is used to maintain the continuity of action which links the ancient past into the present and possibly into the most distant future.

In 1990, I followed up some of Ken's suggestions regarding negation and the problems of translating negation from English to Pitjantjatjara (Yengoyan 1990). Through an analysis of Pitjantjatjara dreams which I had collected in 1966–67 and in 1970, differences in the use of negation were interpreted in terms of the language of dreams as opposed to everyday conversation. By demonstrating that the absence of negation in dreams relates to different societal contexts (*prescriptive* rule structured societies in contrast to *proscriptively* structured societies), one is able to assess the expression and degree of conjunction and disjunction between the waking life and the dream life in particular societies. Although this paper was inspired by Freud's and Benveniste's thoughts on negation, Hale's early insights and conversations were the original impetus for developing what became a very complex issue.

This essay has no final summary; instead it should be read as a set of reflections on Hale as an individual and as a scholar. One of his letters to me, dated October 30, 1978, is a two-page detailed interpretation of central coincidence and terminal coincidence as they relate to various clause structures, the perfective and the imperfective. The letter is full of detail, which again supports my earlier premise that it was these detailed nuances which were Hale's

particular love in languages. In developing this position, I am more and more convinced that the essential creativity of languages, in all its facets, is what Hale wants to understand and convey.

Surely his concern for understanding language creativity is also enhanced in the kinds of linguistic context which Hale has pursued throughout his life. I suspect that there is some sort of elective affinity connecting his impressive polyglot skills and those languages which he has analysed. Language creativity is an emergent reciprocal bond between himself and what he encounters, either in central Australia or in a gas station in Lexington.

The love of languages as it combines nuances and details of languages in the plural with a strong moral commitment to language diversity (Hale 1992) can best be captured (or encapsulated) in Hale et al.'s (1981:294) opening discussion of Damin vocabulary.

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