



This volume is dedicated to the memory of

**Robert B. Lees**

9 July 1922 — 6 December 1996

First Head of the Department of Linguistics,  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
1965-1968

Photograph:  
Courtesy of the University of Illinois Archives



## Memorial Tributes to

### Robert B. Lees

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1965-1968

April 7, 1997

**Braj B. Kachru**, Center for Advanced Study and LAS Jubilee Professor of Linguistics, Education, English as an International Language, and Comparative Literature; Director, Center for Advanced Study, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Head, Department of Linguistics, 1969-1979.

My first meeting with Robert Lees was unexpected, dramatic, memorable and, in retrospect, far-reaching. We met in Edinburgh, Scotland, over thirty-five years ago — actually in December, 1961. Lees was on his way to Europe trying to connect with his daughter Susan. Geoffrey Ellis, a British linguist and a faculty member at the University of Edinburgh, invited him to give a talk to linguists in Edinburgh.

In his talk on the Roman Jakobsonian model of the Distinctive Features, Lees proved true to his reputation: he was devastating, condescending, ironical, and loaded with abrupt and prickly asides. There was a constant and intended prosody of caustic remarks. It was almost biting. The small group of participants — fifteen to twenty — included my teachers David Abercrombie, Ian Catford, and Michael Halliday. The talk was over and now there was time for discussion. One could cut the silence in slices. No one knew what to make of the brash American. I think it was David Abercrombie who broke the silence and asked: 'What did Lees think of the model of prosodic phonology as proposed by John R. Firth and his students?' Lees looked at David with a mischievous smile and twinkling eyes — the hallmark of Lees. Then he paused, and responded: 'Who is John Firth?' There was again silence. The discussion came to an end. The meeting concluded. It was past 5 PM. Lees slowly walked out of the seminar room. He believed that he had vanquished his enemies; he was the conqueror. He had cut the Brits to their linguistic size, in a casual way, by not recognizing their major British linguist — holder of the first Chair in the linguistic sciences in England. And later I learnt it was purposeful. Lees had the complete works of Firth on his shelves. He had read his works and extensively marked them. But that is another story.

In the hallway Jeff Ellis stopped; he wanted to know if Lees would like to go for dinner. All the others had quietly walked out. On my way out, Ellis asked me if I would like to join them, perhaps to reduce the awkwardness of the evening. Lees suggested that we go to an Indian restaurant. The Chicago years, and his Sanskrit studies had exposed him to Indian cuisine, said he. 'There is only one

Indian restaurant in Edinburgh and that is dismal,' I responded. 'You Indians are always apologetic about things Indian. Let's go there' Lees retorted. And we went to the Lodhian Indian Restaurant.

It was in that dark, dingy, smoke-filled Lodhian that we talked for three hours — I should say, we argued for three hours. Lees left the next morning to meet his daughter Susan. The Edinburgh group were left with a story — a legend. We talked of eccentric, arrogant, and oddly charming Lees for weeks. I never thought that I would see him again.

It was a few weeks later that Michael Halliday received a letter from Lees asking if 'that Indian student' would be interested in a position as a postdoc at UIUC with him. 'Yes, he would', wrote back Michael after talking to me, 'but only after a year'. Lees agreed to defer the offer so that I could keep my promise of initiating a linguistics program at Lucknow University in Lucknow, India. It was on October 16, 1963, that I came to Urbana, to a new linguistic culture in which my earlier experience of Lees, my earlier image of him slowly melted away. A variety of different images and different experiences replaced them.

In 1963, my appointment, as that of Lees, was in the English department. We shared a room, 300 English Building, with a part-time student help. The extended and active linguistic family in other departments included Henry Kahane, Howard Maclay, Ken Hale, and others. That is the backdrop of the period, the context of our beginning.

In the 60's and later, as is well recognized, Illinois was in the forefront of what is now called the Chomskyan Revolution. Much has been written on Lees as an apostle of that paradigm; his classic review of *Syntactic Structures* in the 1959 *Language*; his pioneering work in bringing Transformational Grammar to the classroom, and his contribution in gradually replacing, for example, Henry Gleason Jr., Robert Hall, and Charles Hockett as major sources of linguistics in the curriculum.

There is extensive mythology about Lees: Lees as a person, as a firebrand promoter of Chomsky's ideas, and as a devastating speaker at linguistic conventions with a proselytizing zeal. Watching Lees at the meetings of the Linguistic Society of America, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the American Oriental Society was an experience. That mythology kept on growing until the 1970's.

And now, this afternoon we — all of us — are celebrating both the myth and the reality. The contrived pose and the real person. We are celebrating Lees as a linguist, as a teacher, and indeed as an architect of our discipline at this university. Lees was, of course, all of this. But these facets miss Lees as a person.

When I think of Lees as a person it reminds me of a string of experiences of his kindness, of his ideological tolerance — yes tolerance — of his linguistic acceptance, of his free spirit and his innate cultural pluralism. It reminds me of Lees's willingness to recognize such spirit in others, and respect their convictions and principles. It reminds me of long chats with him on the stairs of the English

Building on Saturday mornings, and on the porch of his Washington Street house about the agonies of our small number of graduate students in the department, their difficulties and their strengths, and his concerns about each faculty person.

Let me make it a little more personal. Yamuna and I have been two of the handful of people who came to know Lees in most of these facets. In 1969, when he made a decision to move to Tel Aviv, it certainly created a void at the University of Illinois. I am thinking of a void that goes beyond a gifted teacher, and a dedicated and energizing scholar.

I am thinking of a compassionate human being whose home and office were always open for discussion, for counsel, and for lively arguments. The more vehement an argument, the more he enjoyed it. The range was wide: structuralism in anthropology, glottochronology, the rise of fascism, the Kamasutra and Tantrism. And all approached with seriousness and provocative interpretations. One lost Lees's respect if one agreed with him easily and did not challenge him. His cynicism was acute and intense — about all sacred cows, intellectual, political, social, and about the media. The magazines he subscribed to were, for example, *FR Stone's Newsletter*, the *New Republic*, and a variety of Libertarian papers. He would bring these to his office, mark passages in red, and pass these on to me. At election time he would quip: 'My candidate never wins since I'm the only person who votes for him or her!' (It was almost always a Libertarian candidate.)

We became part of the extended family. It was in 1965 — actually on the 22nd of January — that Lees gave Yamuna away in marriage here in Urbana. It was a complicated wedding: the stars, and the Hindu tradition, could not be compromised. The wedding had to begin at 8 AM. This was astrologically an auspicious time which our parents determined after complex calculations from the proverbial Seven Seas away. The ceremony would not be complete without a host of honorary relatives representing the family, since none from India was able to come. Bob Lees and Laura gave away the bride. Daud Abdo, a Palestinian instructor of Arabic, was the bride's brother. Henry Summerfield, a Jewish scholar from Oxford and native of Newcastle, England, acted as the groom's brother. The friends and relatives witnessing the ceremony — an essential part of the ceremony — included many practitioners of all major faiths.

The main problem was to find a right place for the Hindu rituals, for a sacred fire, a place where two Brahmin priests could recite the Vedic chants and make ritualistic offerings to the fire. 'Why not the Hillel Foundation on the campus?' said Lees. Yes, why not? All this was organized by Lees and his wife Laura. At 7 AM on the day of the ceremony there were three feet of snow and ice rain. It was in these conditions that Lees helped in bringing together four major faiths, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, in that small hall. In this ceremony Lees behaved like a devoted and disciplined honorary Hindu father observing two Hindu priests with respect and obedience.

There was yet another Lees. This Lees again was different from the myth. There are stories of him as an apostle of Chomsky, one who taught and argued about his chosen field with evangelical zeal. We would argue in his office on the

campus, at 201 W. Washington, on weekdays and weekends, and at other places including a variety of potlucks. That inflexibility was only one part of his character; it did not extend to his vision for the department.

In the late '60s, I initiated courses in sociolinguistics, stylistics, applied linguistics, and history of linguistics. Lees was supportive. In fact when we started the non-Western languages curriculum, Lees encouraged me to teach Hindi, and he taught a course on Sanskrit, and structural introductions to Gujarati and, of course, Turkish. He would narrate passages from the Sanskrit legend Nala Damayanti. At Chicago he had taken courses on Sanskrit with George V. Bobrinskoy.

Then there was Lees the international person, 'a blend of East and West'. I experienced this during his tour of India which I organized through the Ford Foundation. The idea was that Lees would teach intensive courses on contemporary linguistics in the Department of Linguistics at Delhi University and the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages in Hyderabad, and would take short trips to other places. The visit turned into a linguistic windstorm, devastating structuralism and attacking those linguists in the USA and UK who had trained a generation of India's linguists. But more important, he consistently and consciously talked of the traditional Indian linguistics of Pāṇini (end of the 4th century B.C.) and of Bhartrhari (7th century A.D.). He talked of reviving a link with this tradition. The Indians loved it.

Those who attended Lees's talks in India still speak of him — an encounter with Lees was an experience. The other linguist who came to India like a storm was Noam Chomsky in 1995 — but then during his whirlwind tour of the country he primarily talked of international politics. There is indeed no shortage of Western linguists visiting India, teaching there and researching there. There is a long tradition of that. But Lees was an experience, an intellectual story to pass on to your students. That is still true — almost a generation later.

The faces of Lees I am talking of are not necessarily those with which he is generally associated. He was a great believer in freedom of expression — independent thinking. We witnessed that in several ways on this campus. In 1968 a professor from the Classics department was removed from membership in the John Birch Society. The reason was that even for the John Birch Society he was too rightist, too extreme — imagine RIGHT of the RIGHT in the John Birch Society! He had repeatedly issued anti-Semitic statements which appeared in the national media, including the *New York Times*. A number of faculty were naturally upset and a few, including Henry Kahane and Bob Lees got together at our house to discuss the situation. The question was: What to do? What action to take? It was Lees who vehemently supported the professor's right to free expression and opposed any petition from the concerned faculty to the administration. He was keen that the professor's views be debated, challenged, but his right to present his views be defended.

Lees also successfully challenged the distribution of religious propaganda on University property. He wrote several letters to the *Daily Illini*. In the 1960's



there was a regular display of such religious literature outside the library. He was finally successful in stopping it.

I saw Lees well-dressed only three or four times during all those years. Once when I asked him what the occasion was, he laughed and said that he had just returned from Washington, DC, after participating in the protest marches against the Vietnam War. He wanted to be taken seriously; he said, 'Peace is a serious business.' And in such peace marches, how he looked mattered.

In celebrating the life of Lees — the person, the scholar, the teacher, and the friend, we are celebrating an institution who changed many lives, frustrated many administrators, and opened many minds to new visions. In some sense he was very eastern, in his mystic outlook on life, and in his adherence to Jewish traditions. He was curious about the mystic and spiritual values of other religions and other approaches to life and living. What appeared as arrogance and nastiness alternated with deep compassion — on the one hand for authority and power, on the other for those denied power. On my arrival, Lees had said, 'Braj, don't eat in the University's Colonial Room or the Ballroom. These are the only two places where you will see African Americans on this campus. Nowhere else. They are the servers and they are badly exploited.' That was in the 1960's. Less would never go to these places.

There is a Sanskrit word which I believe characterizes Bob Lees — *ananya* — which means 'incomparable, like no other', that is, one who is unlike anyone else. That is what Lees was as a scholar, a teacher, and a person. We are here to celebrate the life of that *ananya*, Robert B. Lees.

**Chin-Woo Kim**, Professor of Linguistics, East Asian Languages and Cultures, Speech and Hearing Sciences, and English as an International Language, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Chair, Department of Linguistics, 1979-1986.

It saddened me when I heard the news of the passing of Professor Robert B. Lees, for he is the person who invited me to come to Illinois and who had me stay on at Illinois when I had a chance to leave. I find it proper, therefore, that I say a few words to remember him and to memorialize him.

I first met, or saw rather, Professor Robert B. Lees during the Linguistic Institute in the summer of 1965 at the University of Michigan. He made a brief comment on the paper I gave at the summer meeting of the Linguistic Society of America. It wasn't so much what he said as how he looked that made the initial impression on me. A bushy beard and a baseball cap were competing for attention, and as if that were not enough, he had a T-shirt with a colorful logo across the chest. I didn't know who he was then. Only later did I learn that he was the very person who wrote a book-length review of Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures*. If *Syntactic Structures* was a bible to all linguistic students then, Professor Lees's review and his *Grammar of English Nominalizations* were Saint Paul's epistles. I was belatedly awed.

I must have made a small impression on him as well at Ann Arbor, for in the following spring, he invited me to join his faculty at Illinois. But by then I had decided to spend a year as a postdoctoral fellow at MIT, and I politely declined his invitation, along with several other offers I had received. Everyone said 'best wishes' or 'good luck', but Lees called me in California several days later, and asked straightforwardly:

'Listen, Kim. Will you come to Illinois if we waited for a year?'

This is a near verbatim quote. I was flabbergasted. Who am I? Why would Illinois leave the opening vacant for a year for me? Humbly, I replied, 'Yes, of course.'

And that's how I came to Illinois in the fall of 1967. There was no written contract, no signed document. A verbal agreement was good enough.

I didn't know what I was getting into. If the flat prairiescape was not an enough disappointment to someone who climbed nearly every mountain in Colorado, California, and New England, the winter of '67 was long, harsh, and bleak. The topography and the weather conspired to give me a depression that first winter. Lees sensed it, and called me into his office. He tried to cheer me up. He consoled me by saying that there are two negative advantages in living in Urbana-Champaign. 'Negative advantages?' I asked, 'That's semantically anomalous. It's like saying 'colorless green ideas' or 'a married bachelor'. How can an advantage be negative?' 'Well, listen,' he said, and went on to explain. First, he gave me a long preamble about the relationship between topography and its product. How alpine countries produce good skiers, for example; how island nations produce good swimmers, and how northern countries with long nights produce good text analysts, and so on. I said, 'So?' He said, 'Well, there is nothing in and around this town. There is no mountain to climb or ski down; there is no lake; there is no sandy beach within a few hundred miles. So by default, you get to stay home, and read and write. You become more productive.'

I was amused, and asked, 'What's the second negative advantage?' He replied, 'Well, no matter where you go for a vacation, it will be a paradise. Would you come to Urbana-Champaign for a vacation?'

A year later, he put me into perspective again, this time another kind. I had been at Illinois barely a year and a half, and the University of Texas at Austin beckoned me to come with a fantastic offer. When I showed Lees the letter, he asked me bluntly: 'Do you think you are worth this much?'

I was taken aback, but I realized my worth. I was made humble again, and I decided to stay at Illinois, although the salary increase was nowhere near matching the Texas offer.

When Professor Lees decided to move to Tel Aviv University in 1971, I asked him why. His answer was that he had no longer a creative energy, that he could no longer make any original contribution to linguistics, and that, therefore, he decided to devote the rest of his life to teaching students.



In many ways, Professor Lees reminded me of my own father. Both were brutally honest, to the point of losing civility on some occasions; both were true Ivory Tower scholars who had neither a social ambition nor a greed for wealth or fame; both loved their students seemingly more than their own children; and both relished teaching.

In Spring 1968, I audited Professor Lees's Linguistics 300: Introduction to Linguistics. It was taught in the Gregory Hall auditorium to an overflowing audience. Many people may find it a bit strange that a linguistics Ph D would audit an introductory linguistics course. But there was so much talk about his dynamic teaching that I decided to check out, and I was not disappointed. In terms of teaching style and power of explanations, it was better than any course I took at UCLA for three years. I learned a great deal how to teach as well as what to teach. When I got to teach introductory courses later, I would consult his class notes more than anything else.

I last saw Professor Lees and his wife Laura in Tel Aviv in July 1974. I was on my way to Tehran, Iran, as Director of what was called the Illinois-Tehran Research Unit. I decided to stop in Israel, as much to see him as to see the Holy City. When the Pan Am plane made a refueling stop in Rome, I bought for him a bottle of Cinzano at the airport. We chatted late into the night sipping Cinzano. Little did I realize that it would be the last time together.

In closing, I would like to quote a few lines from Shakespeare's *King Henry VIII*:

He was a scholar, and a ripe and good one;  
Exceedingly wise, fair-spoken, and persuading;  
Lofty and sour to them that lov'd him not;  
But to those men that sought him, sweet as summer.

Indeed, Professor Lees was a good, wise, fair-spoken scholar; somewhat arrogant and sour to those who did not understand him, but sweet and warm to those who knew him. I feel fortunate that my paths have crossed his. May he rest in peace.

**Noam Chomsky**, Institute Professor, Professor of Linguistics, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Just returned from travel, and in working through masses of mail, found your letter about the memorial for Bob. Awfully sorry I can't be there, or even find a few moments to write some sensible words. As I'm sure you know, Bob was a close and dear friend from more than 40 years ago, also a very highly valued colleague, even long before he became our first 'student' — technically. The last time I saw him was in Israel, in 1988. It was a delight to spend at least a few hours again with him. He's left a wonderful legacy, from his personal as well as professional life, both rich and productive, and I hope as rewarding to him as they surely were to his family and friends, and others lucky enough to have contact with him.

**Kenneth L. Hale**, Ferrari P. Ward Professor of Modern Languages and Linguistics, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

I first met Bob Lees in 1961 when we both took up jobs at Illinois. I had just come back from two years' fieldwork in Australia and had basically missed out on generative grammar. My first conversations with Bob were painful, but I knew I had better listen to what he said. One day everything changed for me. I was explaining to him how I was analyzing the phonology of Papago, and I told him how I was able to avoid 'mixing levels', 'overlapping phonemes' and various things like that, and he told me 'you're just tying your hands behind your back'. I suddenly felt a great weight lift off my shoulders. I knew immediately what he meant and I began then to see the business of doing linguistics in an entirely new way. I went a little crazy, I'm afraid, and began hearing myself say all sorts of arrogant anti-structuralist things. One day, to show Bob that I had 'grown up', I made a disparaging remark about fieldwork. Then is when I really understood what Bob was all about. He said: 'Listen, fieldwork and descriptive linguistics are absolutely essential to the field. We are nowhere without it.' I learned a lot more than linguistics from Bob Lees. I owe to him most of what I have been able to do in the field.

**Frederick J. Newmeyer**, Professor of Linguistics, University of Washington in Seattle, completed his PhD under the direction of Robert B. Lees at the University of Illinois in 1969.

It is really upsetting to me that I'm unable to be with you to attend the memorial service for my advisor and friend Robert B. Lees. Actually, though, there is some irony that I'm writing this message from my office at the University of Washington in Seattle. Accepting the job here — the same job that I've had for 28 years — was the only thing that I ever did as a student against Lees's advice. Not that he thought that there was anything wrong with the University of Washington as an institution or with the Linguistics Department here. No, the problem was, according to Lees, that people in Seattle WATER-SKI — the ultimate in decadent self-indulgence in his austere way of looking at things. He was afraid that if I took the job I would get distracted by the hedonistic temptation of water sports and my career as a linguist would be ruined.

The last time I saw Lees was at a conference in Israel in 1988. I reminded him about his concerns for my welfare if I moved to Seattle and couldn't resist pointing out to him that his son Jonathan was at that time a graduate student in Seattle. How could he sleep at night, I asked him, knowing that his son was being exposed to all the horrors that he had warned me against many years earlier. The next day he gave me a shekel to bring back to give to Jonathan. He explained that carrying the coin from father to son would make me a 'messenger of mitzvah', protecting me on my trip home and, more importantly, protecting Jonathan, not just from water skiing, but, as he told me, from the entire constellation of dangers that midwesterners might be subject to in Washington State, from mountain

climbing to scuba diving. Since Jonathan is now a professor at Yale, the shekel transfer obviously worked. If I were with you today, I could talk on and on about Lees's big heart, his great sense of humor, and, above all, his support of me when I was his student. I miss him terribly.

**Arnold Zwicky** was a faculty member in our department from 1965 to 1969. He is now Distinguished University Professor of Linguistics (Emeritus) at the Ohio State University, and Visiting Professor of Linguistics at Stanford University.

By the time I met Bob Lees in 1964, I knew a lot about his work — the resources of MIT's Research Laboratory of Electronics included cabinets full of offprints of papers by members, present and previous, of the lab — and had heard some tales of his public exploits. His bluntness and passionate attachment to ideas and doggedness in pursuit of them were legendary. But by then I was in my third year at MIT, and disputatiousness and intense commitment to ideas had come to seem perfectly ordinary, even if they sometimes made me uncomfortable. Lees hired Ted Lightner and me to teach at Illinois starting in September of 1965. (I remember Ted's and my job interviews as being conducted by Lees simultaneously, in a diner in Kendall Square in Cambridge. Memory is a shifty thing; this seems preposterous, but in those days it might very well have happened that way. I am perfectly sure, however, that Lees told us pointedly that if either of us arrived in Urbana without proof of having defended his dissertation and handed it in, he would simply not have a job at Illinois; we were needed to serve on graduate student committees, and, indeed, within a couple of weeks of defending our dissertations and arriving in Illinois we both were examining other people on \*their\* dissertations.)

As it turned out, Ted left for Texas and I left for Ohio State at the same time Lees left for Tel-Aviv, after the 1969 Linguistic Institute. Ted and I were interesting choices, bracketing Lees in style: Ted was even more intellectually intransigent than Lees, while I was more inclined to quiet reason and negotiation (properties that Lees respected, to the point of asking me to act as head of the department in 1966-67, though he sometimes lost patience with my blandness; 'You know,' he once growled at me, partly in jest, 'linguistics used to be a really interesting field, until you damned \*Episcopalians\* got into it.') I was often challenged, but never bullied, by Lees. To the extent that my work in linguistics developed some edge to it, Lees had a big hand in that. I believe he affected other colleagues, and certainly graduate students, in a similar way. He might ask you in blank incomprehension why the hell you believed something or other, but you always knew he was on your side. (Students might have found this hard to believe when they were confronted with his dissertation-defense question, 'In what way — in no way whatsoever' is a possible answer — is your dissertation a contribution to our knowledge about anything?') And he would, famously, do battle with administrators to get what was right for his students and colleagues, for our department and for linguistics.

Snapshots: Lees explaining radioactive decay and glottochronology. Lees interviewing prospective grad students while wearing (from bottom to top, and in toto) sandals, short shorts, bright blue donkey beads on a thing around his neck, and a baseball cap. Lees punching random holes in student registration cards so that they'd be rejected by the system and the students would actually have to speak with human beings — the linguistics faculty — about their programs. Lees advising me that when you were in charge you could threaten to quit your job on a matter of principle, but you could get away with that only once. Henry Kahane, shaking his head sadly at Lees during a set-to over a Ph.D. exam and sighing, 'You will never be a Mensch!' — a statement that was both part of a game Lees and Kahane played together over the years and also one of Henry's tactics for attempting to educate Lees. Lees telling the story of his own dissertation defense, where, with question after question, Roman Jakobson exposed Lees's ignorance of much of the history of linguistics, but still gave him a Pass. Lees maintaining that he could never move to California, because it was 'the land of the lotus-eaters'. It would simply be too pleasant for him to get any work done there. Now \*Chicago\*, there was a place where you could \*work\*. Years later, Lees congratulating me when he learned I'd fallen in with Gerald Gazdar and Geoff Pullum and the program of phrase structure grammar, adding that if he were my age that's just what he'd do.