

A Prelude to Word Play

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A couple of years ago I was invited to write a story about myself for the ACL Lifetime Achievement Award. I called it “Word Play.” [1] You can read it on my PARC web page or in the December 2007 issue of *Computational Linguistics*. That piece starts with my arrival in Bloomington in 1964 but it doesn’t tell the story of how I got here and it quickly skips to my stay at the RAND corporation in Santa Monica, CA and at UT Austin. So I will take this opportunity to tell you a little bit about how I got here and some of the things I still remember about my short stay in Bloomington.¹

I graduated from high school in Tampere, Finland in 1959 and spent a miserable year doing my military service in the Finnish Army. Arriving at the University of Helsinki in the Fall of 1960, I had no idea what I wanted to study. In the Finnish university system at the time, there was no notion of a general undergraduate education. One had to choose a small set of fields of study from the start. I ended up majoring in the Finnish language with a minor in Psychology.

But I wasn’t interested in either of those subjects. My passion at the time was poetry. I discovered that two of the girls in my entering class of students of Finnish, Maija Turunen and Anja Kosonen, had just published collections of poems right out of high school [2, 3]. Maija was a daughter of Aimo Turunen, one of our professors of Finnish. I had a hopeless crush on Anja. Another friend I made at the time was Auli Hakulinen, the daughter of Lauri Hakulinen, the most senior professor of Finnish in the department. It was thanks to Maija and Auli that I landed in Bloomington in the Fall of 1964. They both preceded me here. I will come to that shortly.

I did not attend many classes during my first two undergraduate years in Helsinki. I wrote a lot of poems, among them a wedding poem for Anja who

¹This is the written version of the speech the author gave in accepting the “Distinguished Alumni Award” of the Linguistics Department of Indiana University, Bloomington on April 24, 2009 with added bibliographical references and an epilogue about some of the people mentioned in the text.

married the composer Erkki Salmenhaara. Some of my poems came out in the journal *Parnasso*[4]. I published some translations such as Hans Magnus Enzensberger's "Schaum" in *Uusi kirjallisuuslehti*[5]. I even managed to sell my translation of a poem by Yevgeny Yevtushenko about Stalin to *Kansan Uutiset*, a newspaper close to the Finnish Communist Party.

But it dawned on me after a while that I did not have enough talent or ambition to make it as a writer. So in my third year in Helsinki I started attending courses more regularly. University of Helsinki had an exchange program with a German University in Münster and I got twice a scholarship to go there for a semester. I took courses in General Linguistics with Prof. Peter Hartmann. Like every German linguistics professor at the time, Hartmann had his own theory of language, elaborated in books that I found incomprehensible [6, 7]. But I liked very much the two seminars that I took with him, one devoted to reading Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures*, the other about Wittgenstein's *Blue & Brown Books* and *Philosophische Untersuchungen*. These were the best courses of my undergraduate years.

Actually I had already read *Syntactic Structures* on my own in Finland in the Fall of 1963. Maija Turunen had spent a year in Bloomington with her father and told me that all the linguists there were talking about that book. You should read it, she said, and I did. Maija had served in the same role in Bloomington that Auli and I occupied in succession after her.

In the sixties IU had a booming cold-war business teaching "strategically important languages" to American students. That included all the languages spoken in or near the Soviet Union. Every Fenno-Ugric language qualified for support under that charter. IU had established a department of Uralic and Altaic Languages that offered courses on all levels in Hungarian, Estonian, and Finnish, among others. The department was the creation of Thomas A. Sebeok. By the time I arrived Sebeok had handed the reins to Denis Sinor, another Hungarian. Alo Raun, an Estonian professor, was in charge of teaching Estonian and Finnish. Sebeok, Sinor and Raun had good contacts with their colleagues in Finland who supplied them with native informants for Finnish. Before me, there was a succession of professor's daughters from Helsinki, including my friends Maija Turunen and Auli Hakulinen. However, with Auli the professorial line of available daughters had come to an end. Auli wrote to me in Münster asking if I would like to become her successor. I agreed right away because I had realized by then that if I wanted to pursue linguistics, I had to come to the US.

So in the Fall of 1964 I left Helsinki on an Icelandic Airlines DC-6, a four engine propeller plane, bound for New York. We landed in Keflavik for fueling and proceeded to JFK. The weather in New York was as hot

and humid as in a sauna. I managed to find my way to the Port Authority Bus Terminal in Manhattan and boarded an overnight Greyhound bus for Indianapolis. After a 24 hour ride, I got off the bus with my single suitcase and called Professor Alo Raun from a phone booth to inform him in English that I would be arriving later that afternoon. Raun greeted me at the bus station in Finnish. As he had noticed on the phone, I could barely speak English at all at that time. Raun drove me to a hotel in his big American car. When I made a comment about the size of the car, Raun explained that he drove a big car because, the bigger the car the more likely you are to survive when you have a crash. In that first conversation he also mentioned that he and his wife were looking for a grave site in Indianapolis or Chicago where they would be buried in the midst of other Estonians. So I learned right away two things about Estonians. They have a pessimistic outlook on life and a wry sense of humor. Good traits for Estonians to have in their present circumstances.

On the first day of the Fall 1964 semester Raun took me to my beginning Finnish class, introduced me to the students and left. I was on my own. In many of the language courses taught in the Uralic and Altaic department at that time, all of the teaching was done by so-called “native informants.” The professor nominally in charge of the course often did not do more than administer the final exam and assign the grades. At least that was my experience.

The Uralic and Altaic department had a very resourceful secretary by the name of Deirdre, who somehow had managed to enroll me as a Graduate Student in Linguistics. The newly established Linguistics Department had not yet set up any official admission procedures. I don’t think I would have been admitted if I had sent in an application. By the time the department caught on that I was actually their student, I had learned enough English not to get kicked out.

Being a graduate student in the US was a very different experience than what I was used to in Finland and Germany. There was homework like in high school. There were term papers to write, exams to take. In short, no academic freedom. Two term papers were due at the end of the first semester, who would have thought that I could do it?

Just before I came, Bloomington had hosted LSA’s Linguistic Summer School that marked the beginning of Chomskian revolution. I was taken by transformational syntax, wrote a paper on existential sentences on Finnish. I thought I would do my dissertation on that topic. The transformational evangelist of the department was the fiery Andreas Koutsoudas. But we didn’t get along, so I became a student of Fred Householder, a sceptic of

new fads. Was transformational grammar “God’s truth or *hocus pocus*?” There was no doubt where Householder stood on that issue. I remember Householder’s critique of MIT phonology [8] and the severe putdown by Chomsky and Halle [9].

It was in Bloomington that I met my first wife Frances, a fellow Linguistics student. We married and had a baby in our second year of graduate school, my older daughter Jaana. Taking care of Jaana required tight scheduling. We sometimes handed the baby from one to the other on campus between classes. My office in Goodbody Hall was our diaper changing station. A few times I had to take Jaana in a baby carriage to my Finnish class. I put her out of sight behind the podium. Jaana was always asleep at those times and never made sound. But one day I got summoned to the office of Thomas Sebeok. I had heard bad stories about Sebeok before I came to Bloomington.² I thought of him as evil. This was the only time we ever had a one-to-one conversation. He said: “Mr. Karttunen, it has been reported to me that you have taken a baby to a class you are teaching. Is that true?” “Yes, it is true,” I said.” He jabbed his finger at me and said: “You do that one more time and I’m going to fire you. Is that understood?” “Yes,” I said, and he dismissed me with a wave of a hand.

There was no follow-up to this threat and I wasn’t the least worried about getting fired. There were only a few weeks of the semester left. There was no one else to teach my courses and I had already lined up another job for the following year with the help of Robert E. Wall at the Research Computing Center. I took my first computer course with him and with Bob’s help Frances and I got scholarships in 1967 at the Rand Corporation in Santa Monica, California. I am sure Bob also had a hand in getting me my first job at UT Austin the following year where we became colleagues. Bob was a wonderful mentor. I may have been his only protégé during his three-year stay at IU but there is a generation of Linguistics students from UTexas who benefited from his guidance as much as I did in Bloomington.

Having arrived in Bloomington in 1964 with one suitcase and plans to stay a year, three years later I left Indiana for California. The *Word Play* [1] paper tells in more detail what happened next. I had a wife and a baby daughter but no dissertation yet. I was driving a pink 1956 Buick, just as big as Alo Raun’s car, pulling a U-Haul trailer with all of our possessions. Frances and Jaana flew to L.A. a few days later after I had found an apartment for us in Santa Monica, close to Rand and the ocean.

I wrote most of my thesis at the Rand Corporation. I had switched

²from a female Ph.D. candidate, “sexual harassment,” we would now call it.

the topic from syntax to semantics. The stuff I was writing about, discourse referents, crossing co-reference, definiteness, I had come up with on my own. It was not of much interest to Householder. I benefited from his benign neglect. I finished the dissertation in Austin.

It was almost exactly forty years ago that I made a quick trip to Bloomington from Austin to defend my dissertation before my committee. It was a quick pro-forma affair. I don't remember anything else about it. I slept the night on the couch of a friend and flew back to Austin the next day. A few months later I received my Ph.D. diploma in the mail. I am sure I still have that red leather-bound document somewhere but in forty years no one has ever asked to see it.

I am happy that this time around coming to Bloomington I am greeted with all this pomp and circumstance. Thank you for this honor and a wonderful experience!

References

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Epilogue

Here is what happened to some of the people mentioned above. *Maija Turunen* became a Finnish teacher and has written many books under her married name *Maija Larmola*. *Anja Kosonen's* marriage to *Erkki Salmenhaara*, who became professor of Musicology at the U. of Helsinki, was dissolved in 1978. She moved on to a French composer, *Henri-Claude Fantapié*. Anja died in Paris in 2011. *Auli Hakulinen* ascended to her father's chair as professor of Finnish three decades after his retirement in 1963. Auli's work on conversation analysis has been very influential. *Fred Householder*, well known for his reviews, was the president of LSA in 1981. He died in Bloomington in 1994 at the age of 80. *Andreas Koutsoudas* left Indiana for Iowa, and eventually for Crete. His textbook on transformational grammar [10] was not appreciated by the MIT crowd. *Robert E. Wall* published the first textbook on mathematical linguistics [11], a precursor to [12]. Bob retired from UT Austin many years ago but is still teaching computer science courses at San Francisco State. *Frances Karttunen* (IU Ph.D. 1970) and I divorced in 1984. We have two daughters, *Jaana* and *Suvi*. Both of us have remarried. Frances is the wife of *Alfred Crosby*, a historian. My wife, *Annie Zaenen*, is a linguist.