FIRST PERSON SINGULAR

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Boyd H. Davis & Raymond K. O'Cain (eds.)

First Person Singular:
Papers from the Conference on an Oral Archive
for the History of American Linguistics

FIRST PERSON SINGULAR

Papers from the Conference on an Oral Archive
for the History of American Linguistics
(Charlotte, N.C., 9-10 March 1979)

Edited by

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at Charlotte

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May 1980 B. D. & R. O.

ABBREVIATIONS

used in the present volume

DLZ	*Deutsche Literaturzeitung*
LBA	*A Leonard Bloomfield Anthology*, Charles F. Hockett, ed.

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FOREWORD

It is not possible to undertake here a survey of the rising interest in the history of linguistics, or an analysis of its roots. However, this volume is in part a response to several recent publications such as the historiographical essays in the Eleventh and Twelfth International Congresses of Linguists (Heilmann 1974; Dressler & Meid 1978); volume thirteen (1975) in *Current Trends in Linguistics* (Sebeok 1963-76), especially the essay by Hymes and Fought; the Golden Anniversary observances of the Linguistic Society of America (*LSA Bulletin* 64.25-36, March 1975; Austerlitz 1975; Hoenigswald 1979), and a number of other volumes of the series in which this collection appears. Like the papers in this volume and the conference which evoked them, we propose to outline yet another approach to the history and historiography of linguistics.

In one sense these essays are directed to readers and scholars of the present generation; in another, they are meant for scholars in the future, whether of linguistics, of social and intellectual history, especially American, or of the histories of science and ideas. Though these essays have historiographic content, they are, fundamentally, materials for the historian and historiographer. Their focus is not solely on the state of the art, though they often include that perspective. Instead, they are reflections, reminiscences, and retrospectives offered by a group of linguists who share a common interest in the history of American linguistics, and who came together to discuss that history and their role in it. Together, the resulting papers are a memorandum on themes and materials for an archive for the history

of American linguistics, especially one with a strong oral component, and a testament to the richness of that heritage.

What more fitting technique for linguists than oral history, for much of the history of American linguistics is accessible as a kind of 'tribal' memory. To consider the feasibility of some orderly means of exploring the sources, sixteen linguists were invited to give twenty-minute autobiographical statements at a conference held on 9-10 March 1979 in Charlotte, North Carolina. The invitations and proposals that went to each of the sixteen detailed a number of questions for their consideration; the answers, the interpretations to questions such as the following, took sixteen different forms:

> What makes a linguist? Is there any discernable ideological, temperamental, social profile that characterizes a linguist or attracts one to the field? What favorable conditions at particular institutions fostered teaching and research in linguistics? How and why did some institutions, but not others, develop programs or departments in linguistics? How was academic debate resolved: what was the impetus for certain papers, reviews, positions; what is to be read between the lines? What part did personalities play in shaping the profession, the directions of research, the dispensation of rewards?

Each speaker was asked to face, then, both challenge and irritation by being asked to review in twenty minutes some of the people and events which had shaped them, and some of those which they had influenced or set in motion. The resulting essays are evidence of the variety of approaches which may be taken in answering the questions posed; they are historical documents in and for themselves.

Various strictures, pecuniary and otherwise, made a truly comprehensive or highly representative conference impossible. List upon list of linguists was made: founding members or members of long standing of the Linguistic Society; officers, editors, and others who made the work of learned societies go forward; applied linguists; theoretical linguists; those who had been associated with cooperative research projects; students of particular language families; writers on the

history and historiography of linguistics from several perspectives; those who had studied with Bloomfield or Sapir, or who had been intimates of such recently deceased colleagues as Bernard Bloch, Martin Joos, Albert Marckwardt, Henry Lee Smith, and others. Linguists outside the United States are not represented, except for the skimming of the émigré experience. That not every theoretical persuasion is represented is partly accounted for by the decision to draw largely upon those at or near retirement; financial constraints forced the omission of numerous prominent scholars from this conference though not, we trust, from future meetings, convened perhaps by others, or with differing emphases. One purpose in presenting this collection of essays is to stimulate its readers to consider its format, identify its omissions, and move beyond that analysis to collect, interview, preserve, and interpret.

For the express purpose of going on record about the profession of linguistics, a small group met to foreground the personal, social, human aspects of their public careers: their dreams, their accomplishments, even their disappointments. There are common themes: an early interest in languages, the role of chance or fortune, the stimulating atmosphere of the Linguistic Institutes in the 1930s and 1940s, and the counsel of the dominant figures in the profession. Curiously enough, none seems to have set out deliberately to become a linguist, for few even imagined such a vocation. They characteristically did their graduate studies during the Depression, often mastering another discipline first or in addition to linguistics. World War II drew many into wartime language work, and special research interests became spare-time pursuits for the duration. As they established their professional identities in the postwar years, they fought for and secured the autonomy of linguistics proclaimed by their mentors.

The personal tone of the conference endures in the printed record. Though the proceedings were tape-recorded to serve as deposits for a proposed collection in the history of linguistics, the agenda did not

originally include the publication of the papers. As oral history documents, the presentations approximate verbatim transcripts; apart from minor alterations and corrections, the only departures are Carroll's elaboration of his relationships with Whorf and Skinner, and McDavid's addition of the roster of linguists in the Army Language section. The contributions have assumed something of the appearance of formally commissioned essays in conforming to the series in which they are published, but our emphasis has been on maintaining the informal tone of the conference. Transcripts of the taped presentations were sent to all speakers, so they could make editorial changes, resolve ambiguities, or make explanatory additions. Although these presentations were not in the familiar oral history format of the extended interview, all the contributors felt it necessary to adhere to the spoken word and the historical emphasis, whether speaking from brief notes or a prepared text. And this emphasis was preserved by each of the participants, some furnishing their own, additional transcripts, others locating photographs to match the time periods they chose to discuss. Moreover, the reader will discover dialogue and repartee among the papers, since they follow the original order of presentation. Allusions are thereby abundant, some that only insiders (not necessarily including the editors) will appreciate. For example, Hill's closing reference to "Happy Birthday" recalls his family's proprietary interest in the song, a reference understood by all the speakers, but possibly perplexing to readers in the future.

We have not presumed to present a context for these essays other than our suggestion of common themes and emphases: they are the context. Since these contributions are analogous to field records, we have declined to emend, seeing our role here as preservers of a record, and our purpose not to obliterate but to highlight differences of opinion or interpretation by letting the contributors speak for themselves in the first person. We have, however, ventured to explicate by providing citations for references or allusions, except to generic or

standard references (such as dictionaries).

The present contributions are but one kind of evidence for the historian, and they will require corroboration and interpretation; they will substantiate and illumine other kinds of evidence. One of the challenges of adopting an oral-history approach is that each reference or allusion opens its own line of inquiry and connections to the subject. One theme throughout the papers, for example, is the importance for American linguists of the wartime efforts centering on 165 Broadway, an address which alludes to the combined Army and American Council of Learned Societies language projects.

Each paper tells the story of the discipline in its own personal way; only occasionally do the participants assume the role of analyst to speculate on the need for or the nature of the evidence being preserved. We hope that these sixteen models will inspire self-appraisal, reminiscence, the collection of correspondence, the preservation of memorabilia and papers that illumine the discipline from a variety of perspectives. They should also stimulate appraisal, interpretation, explication, even as they indicate the rich variety of material uniquely recoverable through the oral framework, and suggest the kinds of written records that are needed for corroboration and interpretation. They are not a monument, but a groundbreaking.

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LINGUISTICS, THROUGH THE KITCHEN DOOR

RAVEN I. MCDAVID, JR.

Raven I. McDavid, Jr.

LINGUISTICS, THROUGH THE KITCHEN DOOR

RAVEN I. MCDAVID, JR.

From my point of view, the plan for an informal history of linguistics is the brain child of Bill Austin, begot in the informal gourmet club composed of himself, Bill Card, Virginia and me. At irregular intervals during his years at IIT we would meet for a distinguished meal, and the conversation regularly turned to our experiences as linguists, and with other linguists. Realizing that much of what has happened was preserved only in the recollections of the participants, Bill proposed early in 1971 a project of recording this informal history of the profession; but he died that September. Haxie Smith — Bill's friend of forty years — endorsed the project early in 1972, but died that December. Al Marckwardt, likewise conscious of history, died in August 1975.

These proceedings remind me of an obligation to such friends as Bill. While cheerfully accepting the transformationalist opprobrium as a "dull cataloguer of data" (Lees 1957), I have chafed at revisionist interpretations of the public record of my teachers and colleagues. More than two decades after Lees, the corroborative testimony of the informal record is no less urgent. Wescott (1978) gives no hint that Swadesh was a genuinely tragic figure, whose recorded flaws destroyed his potential for greatness.

There is a kind of tribal memory here, as witnessed by the fact that I have been personally involved with every other participant. I first met Konrad Koerner in the fall of 1977; forty years earlier, at the 1937 Linguistic Institute, I sat across from John Carroll in Sapir's introductory course. Seduced by a couple of bottles of Carling's Black Label beer, I agreed to be an informant for Bloch's seminar in American dialectology, and was cross-examined by Harold and Haxie, Al and Grace Marckwardt, Dave and Barbara Maurer, Ken Pike and others. We have renewed our friendships at professional meetings, in the language programs of World War II and after, as academic colleagues, and in casual visits.

If my title puzzles, it is deliberate. I was dragged kicking and screaming into teaching. Often I would cheerfully have done something else, and even after I accepted myself as a linguist, I was some time in discovering what kind of linguistics I wanted to do. And like many linguists brigaded in departments of literature, I have had my share of difficulties and frustrations. But my work is based on human contacts in informal situations - and at least Audrey has often reminded me of my interest in the culinary vocabulary, an interest also apparent in the hundreds of field records I have made for various regional linguistic atlases - many of the best in the kitchens of my informants.

As much as any linguist of my generation, I came into the profession by a series of accidents - or misfortunes. I am struck by the number of times chance - or mischance - might have taken me away from what I am doing and enjoying, and by the thread of inevitability which has brought me here. In a real sense, I didn't choose my work; it chose me. So having attained some of Andrea del Sarto's old-age peace, how did I get here?

I grew up in the heart of Greenville, South Carolina, a small city whose mixed cultural strains would have made me call it a tran-

sition area, had I known the term. My own heritage was as complicated as any in the community. Childhood illness made me an observer; my father provided opportunities to observe, by taking my sisters and me to campaign speakings and to revival meetings, black and white; and later to all parts of the state on his lobbying trips for the Cement Association. Dr. James L. Mann - Ph.D. Grenoble, 1903, with work in Germanics at Berlin - ran a good school system, where I did well in Latin and French, and everything else but English; my first phonetics I learned in high school French, under Mary Kendrick, a niece of John Manly.

In 1929, when I went to Furman - a Baptist college in Greenville, previously attended by Maurice Bloomfield and John Manly - among my classmates were Sumner Ives, now retired from NYU, and Gordon Blackwell, later Howard Odum's successor in sociology at Chapel Hill, and still later, president of Furman. In that decade the college was blessed with students who later distinguished themselves: Tom Goldsmith, pioneer in the development of TV; Clement Haynsworth; Herman Lay, whose enterprises culminated in the building of Frito-Lay and the takeover of Pepsi; and the Townes brothers, Henry the entomologist and Charles the physicist. But I recall with particular affection Milledge Seigler, who preceded me as a Furman graduate, followed me to Duke, and has often involved himself in my career as a scholar, even as he achieved distinction in other ways.

At Furman, two teachers stand out in my recollection: Rosser H. Taylor in American history - not the most popular of instructors, but a meticulous social historian - and A.T. O'Dell, a dynamic and demanding teacher whose section of composition I chose because it was the hardest, and I wanted to overcome my weakness in English. Because of O'Dell, I became an English major, as did Sumner; both of us still feel that the teaching of writing is the most important business of an English department.

As I left for Duke in 1931, Dr. Mann advised me to take Anglo-Saxon as soon as possible, and Gothic when I had a chance. I did. But there was no program in the English language, and I knew only three students interested in language problems. J.C.H. Burch - an older town student having little contact with us on campus - did as his dissertation *A lexicon and concordance of the English poems of John Gower, letters A-C inclusive*. Don Lee, who left after his M.A. but remained my friend till his death in 1977, reminded me dryly that the study of literature is really derivative from that of language. Mary-Celestia Parler, fresh from the Providence seminar on Southern dialects, joined us my last year, and took her doctoral prelims as a step toward her study of Wedgefield, South Carolina.

Anglo-Saxon was an ordeal. Frank Brown, head of the department, taught it from the yellowing notes he had taken under John Manly at Chicago in 1903. In Middle English, Paull Baum - who had sent Freeman Twaddell to Harvard some years earlier - was Mephistophelian with his immaculate attire, his well tended Van Dyke beard, his soft voice and his apparent omniscience. He was the first person I ever heard utter the word *phoneme*. Actually, Baum was a very shy person, and both he and Brown helped me financially at rough moments.

I worked on Milton's political thought with Sir Allan Gilbert, who later gave me good advice about field work in his Upstate New York. Unblushingly retaining his Allegany County accent, he is happy that he taught well enough for me to succeed in another field. But it was my language training that won me my first job, at The Citadel, in Charleston. I was hired by Hugh Swinton McGillivray, whose field was Old English and who had done his dissertation under Lorenz Morsbach, at Göttingen.

I enjoyed my years in Charleston (1935-38). I was delighted with the varieties of local speech, and seafood. I had many fine students

and sent one, Bill Barrett, into Germanics; another, Jim Thorpe, is now director of the Huntington Library. Such older friends as John P. Grace and Msgr. Joseph O'Brien gave me a practical social perspective I could never have gained otherwise. But the strongest impetus to my career came in 1937 when I received a reprimand from the President of The Citadel, four-star General Charles Pelot Summerall, ordering me to a summer school to refresh myself in teaching methods and in e-lo-cu-ti-on.

I went to the Linguistic Institute. Wayne Tyler lured me into Bloch's seminar; and Bloch discovered in me a talent for phonetics. Wayne also lent me his well-annotated copy of Mencken's fourth edition - including Miles Hanley's notes - and thus started spinning another strand of my career. Sapir spent an hour with me on the 'M' bench, sounding me out and suggesting I study Catawba - a suggestion shortly reinforced by Swadesh. Bloch and Fries and Edgerton emphasized the importance of usage; Marckwardt introduced me to systematic detailed work in historical linguistics; a course in the speech department, in 'stage and radio diction' (prescriptive pronunciation for the most part) while speaking to the rubric under which the General had ordered me back into the trenches, failed to impress. Although the experience could not save my job at The Citadel, it provided an excellent foundation in linguistics.

The Institutes of 1938, 1940, and 1941 strengthened this foundation, especially in phonetics, dialectology, and lexicography. I met most of the great people in the profession - Bloomfield, Sturtevant, Kent, Malone, Haugen, Trager, Kepke, Hockett, Harris, Voegelin, Whorf, Adelaide Hahn - as was easy when a whole Institute could fit into a large classroom. From them I learned two lessons, not in any formal curriculum. With the leaders accepting a beginner as one of themselves - before the day when linguistics was torn by ideological *Schrecklichkeit* - I could do no less for those who later came to work

with me; learning first hand about their own professional tribulations, I was prepared for what I encountered later.

At this time I began to publish, tentatively at first. Even in its expurgated published version, my glossary of Citadel slang - however mild by the standards of the 1970s - was a sort of *succès de scandale*. With the help of Swadesh's notes, I collected some data from the last speaker of Catawba. At the 1940 Institute, during the conference on non-English dialects, Kurath - meeting me for the first time - regretted lacking funds to put me to work on the Atlas. The next summer, when I had received a Rosenwald Fellowship to study Greenville County speech, he invited me to use my grant toward completing Atlas coverage of South Carolina; a month later, after Guy Lowman's death, the invitation became a request. But by the summer of 1942, when I would have gone to full time field work, there were more pressing assignments for linguists. Meanwhile, at Southwestern Louisiana (1940-42) I had had my first experience with teaching English to speakers of other languages, and at the 1941 Institute Sumner's career and mine intersected again, adding to personal friendship a long professional association.

World War II brought a brief first marriage, a briefer stay at Yale -terminated by my first ulcer - and nineteen stimulating months with the Army Language Section at 165 Broadway. For over three years I spent more time on Burmese than on anything else; but between informants - Burmans were in short supply and in great demand - I was one of Chazz's assistants on the dictionary of spoken Chinese, helped with the courses in English as a second language, and like everyone else I did whatever odd jobs came to hand.[1] Our practical work involved us in continuous dialogue on a variety of theoretical matters. With some twenty linguists on the floor and others passing through, there was no shortage of topics to discuss; political feuds between factions of Poles, Greeks, Hungarians, and Siamese among our informants and cleri-

cal workers provided headaches and comic relief; the challenging presence of Jakobson and his disciples in New York kept us refining and reexamining our statements.[2] The classic 9x3 Trageremic analysis of English was one of the products.

After the section closed (June 30, 1945), I joined Bill Austin, Jeannette Dearden and Norman McQuown at the brief Hunter Continuation Unit. With the exception of a few months in 1947 at the Board on Geographic Names, I was in the field from November 1945 until the summer of 1950. By the time I left it, I had done some 550 interviews (averaging over six hours in length) in 225 communities. Another highlight of the period was my correspondence with Mencken, until his disabling stroke in 1948. But the field work was the most important part of my development.

An unlikelier candidate for field work could hardly have been imagined. Ill at ease in the classroom, diffident about approaching strangers - and for a year and a half without an automobile - I was saved by only two things. (1) Since there was nowhere to retreat, I had to become competent; (2) my father put at my disposal his wide network of contacts in South Carolina, from Congressmen to coroners, whose business it was to know their communities and the voters, and who for the most part obligingly arranged for me to meet the kinds of informants I needed.

Somehow I learned to make a virtue of my handicaps. If I couldn't get out into the countryside as I would have preferred, I could exploit in depth the resources of a small town; sometimes I was conducting four interviews at a time, spaced around the clock according to the hours when the informants were available. Diffidence about asking questions made me a good listener, reluctant to interfere while informants told their favorite yarns, and alert at catching responses in free conversation - sometimes an embarrassment of riches to us now, as we edit the

records. I never got so I could approach an interview without trepidation (I understand veteran actors share this feeling), but I discovered I enjoyed the interviews once they were under way; and more to the point, the informants generally shared that enjoyment. And after I had finished my work in South Carolina and its southern dependencies, I found that the same kinds of contacts and the same approaches worked just as well in Michigan, New York state and Kentucky. Knowing the kinds of contacts was half the battle.

A field worker can't be choosy about the places he works: monstrous urban aggregations like Chicago, lonely farms at the end of a county road on a windswept Adirondack hilltop, old cities like Charleston, mining towns first settled in the 1890s. Informants might be illiterate or well-known artists; Ku Kluxers or citizens of the world. Interviews could begin before seven in the morning, or last till three at night. The same questionnaire might take two hours to complete (with the matter-of-fact township historian outside of Galt, Ontario) or twenty-seven (with a Beaver Island, Michigan, lighthouse keeper of legendary garrulousness, who found me the first person to outlast him in conversation). I never met bedbugs; but I had to make friends with dogs of all kinds. Once I helped dig a new privy and fill up the old one; frequently I attended local churches of various flavors, and once the closing service of a Baptist revival - the evangelist using the term *jackleg preacher*, which my talent scout had insisted was unknown in the community. Some of the small town restaurants I had to patronize made me feel that the proper decoration for a field worker was the Order of the Purple Stomach. Needless to say, when invited to share an informant's meal I did: Georgia corn (perhaps made on the estate), squirrel stew, overcooked hog liver dredged in black pepper (the informant's sister 'lowed as how I didn't want to be treated like no preacher), hot doughnuts with homemade maple syrup, and sometimes meals which Bill Austin would have envied. One of my best interviews resulted from being snowbound three days with an old bachelor in the

Finger Lakes area. As I went along, not only the interviewing but the finding of informants became easier; several times I went into a community cold and within an hour had found a good informant and had an interview under way. In the process I discovered America's grass roots - and my own; as Hans says about his first field trip, I learned a lot in the process - and not only about dialects.

As I was working in the field, I met another generation of scholars: Al Davis, Jim Downer, Edith Crowell, Dave Reed and especially Virginia Glenn. I found Bill Barrett and his wife Madie working with Lane and Eliason at Chapel Hill. Like me, Sumner and his mentor Bagby Atwood frequently attended the Ann Arbor Institutes and worked with the Atlas materials.

I grew closer to Hans: in spite of his full-time commitment to the *Middle English Dictionary*, he found time to smooth off some of my rough edges; he looked on me as his associate editor for the Middle and South Atlantic States, when editorial funds might appear, and made me his partner in writing the *Pronunciation* (1961). Al Marckwardt was making the first of his subtle interventions in my career; his invitation to do field work in Michigan came when I had finished the South Atlantic and had been rejected for work with Haxie in the language program of the State Department.

Marrying Virginia was the single most important event of my life. She brought not only new light and strength and inspiration to me, but through her precept and example a new standard of excellence in my work. In the public sphere, anthropology replaced literature as my ancillary interest.

Three visiting summer appointments, a year with the ACLS English program at Cornell, and an ACLS scholarship ensued before I found myself once more in a regular teaching position, at Western Reserve in

the fall of 1952. I had just taught two seminars at Ann Arbor, with students whose names are well known such as Wally Avis, Bob Van Riper, Tom Wetmore, Clyde Hankey, and Juanita Williamson.

My five years at Western Reserve found me with an unfamiliar array of courses; I continued to do field work at odd times, and spent part of every summer at Ann Arbor, working with Hans on the *Pronunciation*. In this period I also began work on the Mencken abridgment. But most important was the opportunity to work out a teaching style that suited my temperament and experience.

It was hard turning back from field work to the classroom; and not until I had children of my own - and they were somewhat special - did I feel comfortable with those of undergraduate age. But I gradually began to use what I had learned in the field, so that the classroom became a laboratory, with each student a partner in a research project to which we were equally committed. Unlike some of my colleagues, I enjoy correspondence courses where success depends on establishing a personal relationship. I like to feel that everything a student writes - from term paper to dissertation - is the product of a contract between us. Perhaps for this reason I have had good luck with older students, and with those who had troubles finding their way.

This interest, as I see it, is simply repayment for the concern my own mentors had for me. Certainly it worked with my first Ph.D. candidates - Priscilla Tyler, John Hagopian, and Saunders Walker; all had previously lacked a focus for their work - but all not only finished their degrees but went on to distinguished careers. Keeping long office hours made me available when students or prospective students dropped by. Two of those were Bill Stevens - one of many who'd started under Miles Hanley at Wisconsin - and Roger Shuy, whose parents' health demanded that he find a graduate school nearer his Akron home than Ohio State was. Though I left Western Reserve before they finished, I