

## In memoriam Geoffrey Leech

Christian Mair

Like many others in this audience, I have been saddened by the news of Geoffrey Leech's death last week. I last met Geoff when he delivered an accomplished paper on the demise of the connector *for* in the recent history of English at this year's ICAME conference in Nottingham. The freshness of his ideas and the vigour of the presentation belied his 78 years, so that – in spite of his age – the news of his passing away came as a shock.

It is entirely fitting to dedicate this ISLE conference to his memory – not only because Geoff Leech has been one of the most prominent members of our association since its inception, but also because he is one of the founding figures of the linguistics of English.

Geoff Leech has shaped our field through his many seminal contributions to the study of English grammar, pragmatics and stylistics. In addition, he has left a permanent legacy as a pioneer of corpus linguistics. He was a member of that legendary group of visionaries who met in Stig Johansson's kitchen in February 1977 to found what was to become ICAME, the International Computer Archive of Modern English. By adding the British English LOB Corpus to match the American English Brown one, he created the foundations for the extended Brown family of small corpora which has made possible the integrated study of ongoing diachronic change and regional variation in World Englishes.

While the linguistics and English departments at UCL, in particular the Survey of English Usage, inspired him as a young scholar, Lancaster became his permanent academic home. In the framework of an oral history of linguistics in Britain undertaken for the British Academy,<sup>1</sup> Geoff summarised the atmosphere in the early years of this young university with his characteristic note of gentle irony:

As early as 1970, before linguistics became a separate department, the small group of young linguists at Lancaster got together round a table, and considered how Lancaster could make its mark in the world as new

---

<sup>1</sup> "Geoffrey Leech." In Brown, Edward K., and Vivien Law, eds. 2002. *Linguistics in Britain: Personal Histories*. Publications of the Philological Society, 36. Oxford and Boston: Blackwells. 155-169.

centre for research. I suggested we should develop a computer corpus of British English, one which would match in every possible respect the Brown University Corpus of American English [...]

Similar visions may have been entertained at the time in plenty of other places, but at Lancaster, Geoff Leech and others laid the institutional foundations for one of the leading centres for research on the linguistics of English in the world.

I first met Geoff Leech in 1986, and I have had the privilege of working with him on various corpus-related research projects in subsequent years. At first, I approached him with tremendous respect because of the excellence and wide range of his scholarly work. Over the years and in addition, I have come to admire him for his many human qualities, which – to me – have made him a worthy role model for younger scholars.

I shall remember his almost boundless generosity when working in teams, in particular with younger scholars; his calm and graciousness as deadlines became pressing; his unassuming modesty, not to be taken for granted in an “academic star” of his calibre – in sum: his general kindness and sense of tact as a human being.

He concluded his personal narrative quoted from above with the following wish:

[...] I have become ‘typecast’ as a computational grammarian. But I still hope that, in my remaining years at Lancaster, I will have the opportunity to return to stylistics and pragmatics – two other areas of research I have found to be both challenging and fulfilling.

I sincerely wish there had been more years remaining. ISLE dedicates this meeting to the memory of Geoff Leech. In my own research, I will continue to build on Geoff’s work and ideas, and I will always cherish his memory.