

In memoriam Ken Hale (1934–2001)

By David Nash

Ken Hale was a linguist's linguist: he was a polyglot who combined an extraordinary language learning ability with exceptional clarity and insight in linguistic analysis, and he is remembered for his humanity and respectfulness as much as his contribution to linguistics.

Hale grew up on his parents' ranch near Canelo in southern Arizona, where the family moved when he was six, and never lost his attachment to the South-west and rural way of life though most of his adult life was spent at a university when not researching languages in a remote corner of the world.

Hale was widely known for his unusual ability to learn languages. Overcoming characteristic modesty, he came to acknowledge that he did have an extraordinary linguistic gift, comparing it to an unusual musical talent. He discussed this in two interviews before his retirement. In the *New York Times* interview he says that he could speak about 50 languages, although in *Glott International* (2/9-10) he insisted that while he could express himself in dozens of languages, he really could only *talk* three languages: English, Spanish, and Warlpiri. In these interviews he passes over his extraordinary phonetic ability and linguistic memory, for he was able to absorb intensely not only the grammar and vocabulary of a language, but also precision of pronunciation. Linguists around the world share 'Ken Hale stories' which highlight some situation which showed quick and accurate acquisition or memory, a flash of insight, or where he was taken to be a fellow native speaker of, say, Japanese, Warlpiri, or Dutch. It was not uncommon for the context to be away from academia, such as winning an eisteddfod prize for his Gaelic public speaking.

Hale did not do too well at high school because he paid attention to local languages rather than his school work, but he did well enough to enter the University of Arizona in 1952. In 1955, at the Tucson rodeo, he won a belt buckle which he wore the rest of his life. He entered graduate study in linguistics at the University of Indiana, Bloomington, gaining his M.A. in 1958 (with the thesis 'Class II Prefixes in Navajo') and in early 1959 his Ph.D. with the thesis 'A Papago grammar', drawing on his knowledge, gained in his teens, of these two very different languages of the USA Southwest. His thesis adviser was Carl Voegelin who had been an associate of the great American

linguist Edward Sapir; Carl and Florence Voegelin founded the Archives of the Languages of the World at the University of Indiana.

Hale's first teaching job was in 1961–64 in the new Anthropology Department established by Joseph B. Casagrande at the University of Illinois, Urbana. From 1964–66 he worked at the University of Arizona, Tucson. In 1966, Hale was recruited by Morris Halle to the Department of Linguistics newly founded by Halle and Noam Chomsky at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Hale was not simply a remarkable polyglot. He coupled his facility for language with a creative theoretical imagination that has had a major impact on the shape of linguistic studies over the past quarter century. His work on so-called "non-configurational languages" set an agenda that is still being energetically explored. So, too, with his work with Jay Keyser on "lexical argument structure", an interest which was rekindled with Hale's involvement in the Warlpiri Dictionary Project at MIT's Center for Cognitive Science from 1979.

Hale's work on endangered languages was as important to him as anything else. It took off in 1959 when he went to Australia on a US National Science Foundation grant administered through the University of Sydney. He stayed for two years and in these two years he documented at least the basic morphology and core vocabulary of around seventy languages, and made a more intensive study of many of these, notably varieties of Arrernte (Aranda), Warlpiri, Lardil (of Mornington Island, Gulf of Carpentaria), Ngarluma (at Roebourne), northern NT languages Kunwinyku, Mara, Garrwa, various Wik dialects and Linnghithigh (on western Cape York Peninsula), and Djabugay (near Cairns). In March–April 1961 he teamed up with Geoff O'Grady from Sydney University and the pair documented some 26 languages in a two-month survey from Port Augusta around the coast to Broome; in the NT Gulf country he teamed up with La Mont (Monty) West, a fellow student from Indiana University. Hale visited Australia five times after the first two long visits, each time only for a few

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weeks and without his family. The visit in mid-1974 was exceptionally packed, and stirred fresh thinking about Australian languages, parallel with exciting developments in general linguistics. The new government had engaged Hale and O'Grady to advise on the prospects for bilingual education in the Northern Territory, and their report is regarded as the founding document of that great innovation, and also resulted in the School of Australian Linguistics near Darwin. Many publications on the languages, especially Warlpiri, resulted, and without him works like the 1997 *Lardil Dictionary* would never have been published.

In later years he developed similar interests in Nicaragua, where he worked for the preservation of Ulwa and Miskitu, two Misumalpan languages there. All his career he continued his special work on Navajo and O'odham, and other Native American languages such as Hopi and Winnebago, which deserves more attention than this brief mention.

Both in Australia and Nicaragua, he did more than simply documenting the languages. He was always interested in and involved with the communities that spoke the languages. This work had a moral dimension for him. He wanted to help people who were helpless. In a tribute to Hale, Noam Chomsky referred to him as "a voice for the voiceless". Hale was also an active member of the anti-war organization, Resist, for thirty years.

Over the course of his life a number of honors fell on Hale's shoulders, uncomfortably so. In 1981 he was appointed the Ferrari P. Ward Professor of Linguistics at MIT. Jay Keyser was department head at the time and it was his duty to confer this honor on him. Keyser: "I knew that were he to hear of it before the fact, he would refuse it on the grounds that others were more deserving. Since his appointment to the chair was unanimously recommended by his colleagues in an informal poll, I was able to confer the chair without his prior knowledge. When the appointment was finalized, I told him there was good news and bad news. The good news was that the Ferrari P. Ward Chair had a new recipient. The bad news was that he was it." In 1989 he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and in the following year to the National Academy of Sciences. He was elected President of the Linguistic Society of America for the years 1994–95 (which he saw as an opportunity to promote work on endangered languages).

Hale's speciality was an annual course 'Topics in a Non-Indo-European Language' (later 'Topics in the Grammar of a Less Familiar Language'), where he would lead the class in investigating the knowledge of

a linguist-speaker of a particular "exotic" language, a different one each year. These classes attracted numerous extra participants, and all tried to keep up with Hale, absorbing and appreciating universals and particulars of Basque, Amoy, Finnish, Malayalam, Tamazight, Yoruba, or American Sign Language. He would even manage to take these classes into an area where he excelled, monolingual elicitation: using the language as a vehicle to find out more about it. At the same time he somehow instilled a respect for the speaker of the language and with it the essences of their language. Time and again he displayed sensitivity to the intricate details of a complex phenomenon (such as pronominal marking in clauses) and at the same time would "strip away complexity" and reveal simpler principles and modules at work in combination.

At MIT Hale supervised numerous doctoral students, including four on Australian languages. He perhaps took the most pleasure in fostering several Native American graduate linguistics students at MIT (speakers of Navajo, Hopi, and Winnebago, and more recently the Wampanoag revival project) and many more at summer schools in Arizona and New Mexico. The paramount quality which runs through tributes from his students and colleagues was the encouragement that flowed from him: he was always able to genuinely enthuse over some aspect of a person's work, generous with insights which they could take away and develop.

Hale wrote no magnum opus. He did publish over 130 linguistics papers and reviews. Just two months before his death Hale managed to finish the only book he ever wrote, *A Prolegomenon to a Theory of Lexical Argument Structure* (MIT Press, forthcoming; with Jay Keyser). It was also the last linguistics he was able to do.

Since Hale's retirement from teaching at MIT in April 1999, he was presented with three separate linguistics volumes made in his honour: one from his MIT colleagues, one from linguists in the USA Southwest, and one from Australia.

For details on Hale's work in Australia, and on the *Festschriften*, go to <http://www.anu.edu.au/linguistics/nash/aust/hale/> and for links to other obituaries, <http://www.anu.edu.au/linguistics/nash/aust/hale/memori.html>.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Jay Keyser for his contribution to this obituary.