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## Bertil Malmberg in memoriam

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# Bertil Malmberg in memoriam

Bengt Sigurd

Bertil Malmberg died on the 8th of October, 1994 at the age of 81. Illness had then for some time prevented him from visiting the Department of Linguistics, seminars and international congresses as he used to. He will be remembered as a phonetician, general linguist and romanist and as the leading linguist in Sweden, where he played an important role through his energetic involvement in questions of linguistics and language teaching.

Bertil Malmberg was born in Helsingborg where his father was a school teacher. He took Latin and Modern languages in gymnasium and continued his language and linguistics studies at Lund University. He defended a Ph.D. thesis with the title *Le Roman du Comte de Poitiers*, a text edition with philological comments. Malmberg served for a time as an adjunct at the Katedralskolan in Lund and later as docent at the Department of Romance languages at Lund University, but he was to expand his horizons. As a student, he met with the structural movements in Europe, above all the Prague school and Ferdinand de Saussure. He spent several periods as a student in France, Grenoble 1933 and Paris 1937, where he studied experimental phonetics. He was very much impressed by Ferdinand de Saussure's posthumous work *Cours de linguistique générale* and the great names of the Prague school Nikolai Trubetzkoy and Roman Jakobson.

Bertil Malmberg used to joke about the fact that he had been professor in two subjects without having been examined in either of them. The reason for this is that he was a pioneer in both subjects. He received the new chair in Phonetics at Lund in 1950. He was then offered the new chair in General linguistics in 1969 thanks to his pioneering work and great competence in this field too.

During the 1930s, Malmberg had become fascinated by the potential of phonetics and the structural approach to language. The previous period of historical linguistics had looked upon language merely as something which could be derived from an Ursprache by tracing the development of the individual sounds through the sound laws. Structuralism regarded language as

a structure of interrelated units at several levels, a system which the speakers and writers utilize for communication. Malmberg's views brought him intense polemics with several conservative colleagues in Sweden and abroad, but he would never give up his persuasion – this was evident whenever you met him.

Bertil Malmberg's early engagement in the new kind of linguistics is apparent from the article 'Vad är fonetik?' (What is phonetics?), published in *Moderna språk* in 1939 in which he introduced phonology (phonemics) in Sweden. This article also started a debate about the nature of the phoneme, experimental phonetics, and the role of phonology in teaching which was still going on when I began studying phonetics and languages in the 1950s. It is possible to follow this discussion as well as his other activities by looking at his publication list published by the Department of Linguistics, Lund in *Working Papers* 40 (1993) on the occasion of his 80th birthday.

Around the year 1950 all language students at Lund University met Bertil Malmberg, as his propedeutic courses were obligatory for all languages. We all read his introductory book *Kort lärobok i fonetik* (A short introduction to phonetics), which treats all the basic problems of phonetics and is still used although in later editions. We listened to his demonstration of different kinds of Spanish *r* and were surprised by the fact that speech sounds could be made visible on a greenish oscilloscope. Phonetics appeared to be a subject with practical applications and a bridge to natural science. It attracted new types of students.

Malmberg started to build a phonetics laboratory with the equipment which was available or could be constructed at the time: oscilloscope, oscillograph, kymograph, gramophone recording equipment, Meyer's intonation meter.

This laboratory – housed in a kitchen at Sölvegatan – is the embryo of the present Department of Linguistics at Lund, now with teaching and research in phonetics, general linguistics, child language and computational linguistics. Bertil Malmberg is – beside Gunnar Fant on the technical side – pioneer in Swedish phonetics. He was quick to employ the new possibilities which the sound spectrograph (Sonagraph) offered and managed to define the characteristic features of Swedish word accents manifested in e.g. the famous minimal pair *änden* 'the duck' : *anden* 'the spirit'. In his studies of word accents, e.g. 'Bemerkungen zum schwedischen Wortakzent' (1959), he showed that the difference between accent 1 (acute) as in *änden* 'the duck' and accent 2 (grave) *anden* 'the spirit' in the dialect of Southern Swedish lies

in the different placement of the intonation peak in the first stressed syllable: in the beginning of the syllable in accent 1 and at the end in accent 2.

Phonetics is a two-sided subject by including the concrete articulatory movements and sounds which you can register and measure on the one hand and the study of the function of the sounds in the language system, in words, grammar and communication on the other hand. Malmberg was keen on studying both these sides. In his studies of word accents, a structuralist attitude is obvious when he stresses the importance of the opposition between accent 1 and accent 2 irrespective of their physical manifestations. There are great differences between the prosodic manifestations of accent 1 and 2 in the Swedish dialects. Malmberg particularly enjoyed telling the audience that accent 1 in one dialect could be realized as accent 2 in another part of the country.

With his broad knowledge of the Romance languages Malmberg had a wide field in which to apply his ideas. He became a world famous romanist and his publications include works on French, Italian and Spanish, including the Spanish of the New World. He visited South America several times and has also written about the linguistic and cultural situation of the South American Indians. One early publication is *L'espagnol dans le Nouveau Monde* (1948). He was asked to write the foreword to a dictionary of Guarani, which we may see as evidence of the appreciation of his engagement in the languages of the South American Indians.

The sign plays a paramount role in Saussure's thinking, and Malmberg tried to include the theory of the linguistic sign under the general theory of signs, i.e. semiotics. He is regarded as one of the forerunners of semiotics. He introduced semiotics in Sweden with the book *Teckenlära* (1972) and he shows how semiotics and linguistics can be integrated in *Signe et symboles. Les bases du langage humain* (1979). Malmberg often criticized generative linguists for their lack of a sign concept. He did not take much interest in Chomsky and the generative school, which is also evident from his history of linguistics published 1991, which has the subtitle *De Sumer à Saussure*.

Together with Stig Wikander in Uppsala, Malmberg founded *Studia Linguistica* in 1947, an international journal of general and comparative linguistics published in Lund, currently published by the international company Blackwell. Malmberg's name is to be found on the editorial boards of many journals, and he was long active as one of the editors of *International Review of Applied Linguistics (IRAL)*.

Malmberg's interests include child language, bilingualism, language learning and teaching, and he has been engaged in writing or speaking about these topics too. The phonetics chair at Lund was partly motivated by the demands of language teaching. He was also active in starting courses for speech therapists (logopedes). He has published many books on general phonetics and the phonetics of individual languages, and several have been translated into many languages and read by hundreds of thousands of students. The French version of his general phonetics in the series *Que sais-je?* has been printed in 200,000 copies and belongs to the best-sellers in the series. Many Scandinavian language students have also read his popular pocket book *Språket och människan* (Language and Man; 5th ed. 1970) and many remember the nice examples of the speech development of his Finnish foster daughter Sirkka.

Malmberg's most influential survey of linguistics is *Nya vägar inom språkforskningen* (1959; English version *New Trends in Linguistics*, 1964), which opened the eyes of many Ph.D. candidates. Inspired by the mathematical theory of information, a theory which attracted several linguists at the time, he also published *Structural Linguistics and Human Communication* (1963), where he associated linguistics to communication in a new manner. Malmberg has been honoured for his great learning, intellectual capacity and importance in many ways. In 1994 he was bestowed the great price of the Swedish Academy of Letters (Vitterhetsakademien), 'Ann-Kersti och Håkan Swenssons pris', the most prestigious prize a Swedish humanities scholar can receive. He was a member of many learned societies and academies and also received the French Legion of honour. He was visiting professor at the Sorbonne and became doctor honoris causa there. He has also taught at the universities of Aix-en-Provence, Bloomington (Indiana), Buenos Aires, Ibadan and Sao Paulo. Malmberg was offered the chair in linguistics in Geneva once held by Saussure.

Malmberg has given key note speeches at many conferences and congresses in the world. He had an impressive mastery of the whole field of linguistics. He was a linguist even in the sense of being a polyglot and mastered French, English, German, Spanish and Italian beside his mother tongue Swedish – he preferred to write in French. He was highly appreciated as a teacher, and like other great speakers, he did not want to be interrupted by questions. In his lectures, learning and rhetoric were combined in a way few modern students get a chance to experience.

Despite all his success and tokens of honour, Bertil Malmberg remained a humble person. Friends, colleagues and students all over the world miss him.