

EDITOR'S NOTE

I am saddened to report the death of Alton L. Becker, whose writing and teaching were an important source of ideas for me and for many other readers of and contributors to this journal. The following appreciation was written by Editorial Board member Deborah Tannen.

Barbara Johnstone

Alton Lewis Becker, who published as A. L. Becker and was generally known as Pete Becker, passed away on November 15, 2011, succumbing to complications of Parkinson's Disease. Born April 6, 1932 in Monroe, Michigan, and holding both a B.A. in English and a Ph.D. in linguistics from the University of Michigan, as well as a master's degree from the University of Connecticut, he had been professor emeritus of linguistics and Southeast Asian studies at the University of Michigan since 1985. Throughout his professional life, including post-retirement visiting positions at Princeton and Yale Universities, Becker worked on and taught the Southeast Asian languages Burmese, Old Javanese, Indonesian, Malay, and Thai. In meticulous linguistic analyses of texts in these languages, Becker provided a theoretical framework for understanding language and its inextricable relationship to the cultural foundations of its speakers.

The title of his 1995 book, *Beyond translation: Essays toward a modern philology*, holds keys to Becker's approach to language and culture. In calling for "a modern philology," Becker envisioned and instantiated a "humanistic linguistics" which he characterized as "a linguistics of particularity"—that is, based on close analysis of particular texts. He referred to his writings as essays because "an essay is predominantly a genre of ... describing and exploring a particularity rather than supporting a generality" (310). The goal of his essays was to discover and describe the "text-building strategies" that enable an aesthetic response to texts and thereby contribute to the sense of coherence in the world that people derive from culturally familiar texts. This process of analysis and elucidation entails moving "Beyond Translation." Drawing on the philosopher Ortega y Gasset, Becker noted that any rendering of a text from one language to another is inescapably exuberant and deficient. "The exuberances," he explained, "are those things in your translation that are there only because your language demands them, and the deficiencies are the things in the original language that don't get across" (424). For example, any translation from Burmese to English is exuberant because it adds meanings carried by tenses, articles, and the copula which are requisite in English but absent in Burmese. And it is deficient because English lacks the morphological classifiers that place Burmese nouns in relation to each other and to other nouns similarly marked. Translation, then, is not an end point but a starting point: examining the exuberances and deficiencies between the original and the

translation offers insight into the text-building strategies and, ultimately, the cultural frameworks of both languages.

The conviction that changing the words that express ideas fundamentally transforms the ideas expressed led Becker to reject the practice, common among linguists, of referring to language as a code, as if words were inert vessels containing meaning that can be poured from one vessel to another. Suggesting that the very word “language” reinforces this misleading image, Becker preferred to speak of “linguaging,” which more accurately reflects the active, emergent process by which speakers use words. Linguaging, for Becker, is “context shaping” (9) where context is not pre-existing but rather created by speakers in interaction. Essential to that process of creating meaning is “prior text,” because, Becker explains, “Linguaging is shaping old texts into new contexts” (9). In other words, “All linguaging is what in Java is called *jarwa dhosok*, taking old language (*jarwa*) and pushing (*dhosok*) it into new contexts” (185). In this sense, Becker’s “prior text” is similar to Bakhtin’s dialogicality and the contemporary notion of intertextuality: “*Everything* anyone says has a history and hence is, in part, a quotation” (286). Thus, “The actual a-priori of any language event—the real deep structure—is an accumulation of prior texts” (86).

In keeping with his conviction that “The problem many of us have with science is that it does not touch the personal and the particular” (422), Becker often related his insights as personal intellectual journeys. In one such story, he recounted that when he was first learning Burmese in Taunggi, Burma, he wrote Burmese words in phonemic script. When his teacher U San Htwe said he must write the words in Burmese script, Becker resisted, claiming it made no difference. But his teacher insisted that he was “hurting” his language, and Becker, reluctantly at first, learned to write Burmese script. Eventually he came to understand that the design of the script reflects a configuration (in Becker’s terms, “a figure”) that is fundamental to Burmese and other Southeast Asian cultures. He illustrated the enormous difference made by the writing of a single syllable, the Burmese word for “speak,” represented in phonemic transcription as /pyɔ/. In Burmese, the consonant corresponding to /p-/ is situated in the center, with the /-y-/ wrapped around it and the vowel /-ɔ/ placed before and after it. The linear representation imposed by the alphabetic transcription obliterates the Burmese figure: “a center and marks above, below, before, and after it”—a figure, Becker eventually learned, that “was for many Southeast Asians a mnemonic frame: everything in the encyclopedic repertoire of terms was ordered that way: directions (the compass rose), diseases, gods, colors, social roles, foods—everything . . .” It was, for Burmese, “a basic icon” (195).

Put another way, the design of the written Burmese syllable reflected a “coherence principle” underlying Burmese language and culture. Much of Becker’s work was devoted to discovering such coherence principles in Southeast Asian texts. In his classic paper, “Text building, epistemology, and aesthetics in Javanese shadow theatre,” he explained that “The goal of the philologist is to guide outsiders (here non-Javanese) to what might be called *aesthetic*

understanding of a text" (60)—that is, leading them to see coherence otherwise made opaque by their own cultural constraints. (For example, a plot in which a character is killed in one scene then reappears in a later one seems incoherent to Westerners, for whom temporality is a coherence principle). He co-authored with his wife Judith Becker, a professor of ethnomusicology at the University of Michigan, a number of papers exploring the coherence principles linking Javanese language and gamelan music.

Returning to Becker's insight that science must take into account the personal, I will close on a personal note. My own decision to seek a life in linguistics was inspired in part by the good fortune of taking an Introduction to Linguistics course with Pete Becker at the 1973 Linguistic Institute in Ann Arbor. His vision of languaging—of particularity, of text-building as a series of relations, of the inextricability of language and culture, and of the role their inter-relationship plays in providing a sense of coherence in the world—has remained a guiding vision for me in the many years since. I know that I speak for many colleagues and students who will remember and treasure him for his personal qualities of kindness, gentleness, and wisdom, which were utterly coherent with the humanism of his approach to language in society.

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