THE YEAR OF LIVING SUNLESSLY

WILLIAM A. FOLEY

Born in 1949 in Providence, Rhode Island. 1971, A.B. Brown University; 1973, M.A. University of California, Berkeley; 1976, Ph.D. University of California, Berkeley. 1976–88, Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Department of Linguistics, Faculty of Arts, Australian National University; 1988–99, 2003–07 Head of Department of Linguistics, University of Sydney; 2009–11, Director of the Writing Center and Director of Academic Writing. Present position: Professorial Chair in the Department of Linguistics at the University of Sydney. Publications: *The Papuan Languages of New Guinea* (1986); *The Yimas Language of New Guinea* (1991); *Anthropological Linguistics: An Introduction* (1997); "Determinism and Universals: the Arguments from Linguistics." In *Complexities*, edited by Susan McKinnon and Sydel Silverman (2005). – Address: Linguistics F12, University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia. E-mail: william.foley@sydney.edu.au

By all accounts, the winter of 2012/13 was a particularly long and dark one, said to have been the darkest in some sixty years (although I note that some entries in previous yearbooks by former Fellows make similar observations). In the month of February, I understand, the sum total of sunlit hours was less than five. This presented an especial challenge for this immigrant from the bright, sun-drenched subtropics of the Antipodes, so used to clear blue skies and dazzling beaches. But I am pleased to report that the cold and darkness outside was more than compensated by the warmth and stimulation of Wiko, both from my Co-Fellows and the invariably helpful and inveterately cheerful staff of the Institute. My thanks to all of them and particularly to the kitchen staff, who five times a week prepared special meals for me to fit with my dietary restrictions. And, although it lacks real

beaches, the cultural and social life of Berlin dazzled me regularly, so that in spite of the climate, I learned to love this city and all it offers. I have Parisian friends who claim Berlin as the cultural capital of Europe, high praise indeed from Parisians, but in my view this claim is wholly justified.

I arrived at Wiko on a bright day in late August and immediately got into the rhythm of the place. The first three weeks were spent in intensive German. The only regret of my year here is that my spoken German never got as fluent as I would have liked; there were just too many other wonderful offerings to sample to give it the priority it deserved, and it does seem that English has become the de facto language of daily interaction among Fellows at Wiko. Following the three weeks of very enjoyable intensive German classes, the academic year at Wiko began in earnest, a rich and varied weekly diet of colloquia, concerts, occasional movies, and the always stimulating conversations over lunch or Thursday dinner with other Fellows, their partners, or Wiko staff. The colloquia exposed me to fields that I knew next to nothing about. Presenters made much-appreciated efforts to make their colloquia intelligible to non-initiates and for the most part succeeded. Lunch or dinner conversations ranged over topics in biology, anthropology, philosophy, history, or politics (often politics, there was an American election during my tenure here). Conversations continued in the hallways or offices. Such conversations will be my most treasured memories of my time here. They enriched my understanding of so many topics, with so many smart and accomplished Fellows and partners here: philosophy with Cristina, Axel, and Jonas, biology with Sonia, James, Jack, Rowan, Joanna, and Ulrich, anthropology with Kelly and Gillian, history with Froma, Daniel, and Tony, and politics with everybody, but especially Ulrich. And, of course, linguistics with Johanna, who was here from January working on a related and parallel project, and Ben Fortson. And the staff of Wiko with their own intellectual backgrounds provided still further riches; I especially cherished my conversations with Thorsten, who explained much to me about German history and culture, an area of endless fascination to the anthropologist in me. And who can forget that rich cast of extras, the guests, and the serendipity of chance meetings. Over one Thursday dinner with Luca, I met a psychiatrist who had done extensive fieldwork in New Guinea in the same area in which I work, someone whose publications I knew well, but had never met. An enthusiastic conversation ensued well into the night, sprinkled with Tok Pisin idioms. This is the way the academy should work, but unfortunately rarely does outside Wiko, as the current short-term horizon of academic institutions renders such rambling intellectual exploration next to impossible. Wiko is

such a unique and immensely valuable place, one where new and vulnerable ideas can be incubated and allowed to grow without the external performance measurements so much a hallmark of universities today. May it ever be so.

Unlike many other Fellows who came to Wiko to complete a project in progress, I came to commence one. Although initially trained as a linguist, I have for at least the last twenty-five years worked with an interdisciplinary focus. My work has been mainly in anthropological linguistics, a hybrid discipline of linguistics and anthropology, obviously, but also I have been interested in research findings from cognitive and developmental psychology. My status on the border of linguistics, as an outsider with an anthropological gaze, gives me pause when I look at the current status of the discipline. Although the Chomskyan revolution in the 1960s provided a much-needed rigor and new direction in linguistics then, it has become increasingly obvious to me that the Chomskyan paradigm had been largely exhausted by the 1990s and is now more of a hindrance to new breakthroughs in linguistics than a productive research strategy. The extreme subjectivism and abstractness of the Chomskyan paradigm, for which the goal of linguistic description is to describe the competence of an idealized speaker/hearer in a completely homogenous community, seems to me to cut linguistic inquiry off from any real engagement with language as spoken in any actual, inherently diverse community and in ongoing communication within such communities. This subjectivism, not surprisingly, is tied to psychologism, the idea that language is what goes on inside the heads of speakers/hearers, that it is essentially a mental phenomenon, but again this view jars with my anthropological understanding of language as a social and cultural phenomenon, as an assemblage of practices for the expression of meaning in a publicly disclosed sphere. Nor can I, as someone highly influenced by American pragmatist philosophers like Dewey and Peirce and phenomenologists like Heidegger and Charles Taylor, accept a view, as any Chomskyan framework must, that reduces public behavior like the communication of meaning to private knowledge or mental representations: meaning does not transmit information between heads or minds; rather it discloses things in a public space between interlocutors through the medium of the body. It is not minds that talk, but bodies, that is, human organisms in a sociocultural environment, and this skill cannot be reduced to mental knowledge without both excessive abstraction from and simplification of the actual phenomena under study. In my view, linguistics must now move on from its patrimony from the period in the 1960s and 1970s when the methodological assumptions of the Chomskyan revolution bore rich fruit in understanding the grammatical properties of

human language; they no longer seem to offer a way to glean deeper understandings of the rich diversity of human linguistic practices.

So, in light of this insight that it is bodies that talk, in a word, organisms, it seems the discipline that may offer the most as a way forward for linguistics is not psychology, but biology. This was the first principle behind my project at Wiko. Researchers in the "softer" social and cognitive sciences are often cited as having "physics envy". I must admit that, before coming to Wiko, I had an incipient case of biology envy, but I must also report that a year of fortnightly meeting with an evolution reading group that consisted of a core cluster of biologists has cured me of it: there seems to be as much disagreement about fundamentals in that discipline as in linguistics. Still, I learned a great deal about biology, evolution, and their controversies from that reading group and its often raucous meetings, which will stand me in good stead as I continue to work on my project. Thanks, Ben, Bob, Bruce, Emily, Franco, Jack, James, Joanna, Johanna, Rowan, Shakti, Sonia, Tanja, and Ulrich.

The Chomskyan paradigm argues that the universality of language acquisition regardless of genetic background supports its claim for a pan-human innate mental foundation for language, and as a consequence, research within this paradigm downplays variation in favor of the universal cognitive substrates for language. But it is not language that is acquired, but individual languages, and the world's languages exhibit great diversity, so any adequate approach to linguistics must take variation as basic, not marginal. Furthermore, the world's pattern of linguistic diversity closely matches that of biological diversity; most of the world's languages, like species, are in the tropical zone and in particular in the rain forest countries of Central Africa, Southeast Asia and Australasia, and the Amazon Basin. So the second principle behind my project at Wiko was that the subdiscipline of biology most likely to be relevant to linguistics was ecology or population biology, the study of the diversity of species in a habitat, their variation and demographic changes, and their niche interactions with the environment. I began to think of languages, their interactions, and their changes in time in a similar way. Questions of linguistic variation became central: how it develops and propagates, how languages interact and affect each other, and, most importantly, what constraints operate on variation. Linguistic variation cannot be unconstrained. Languages have to be learnable, so neurological and cognitive structures do impose constraints on what languages can be like. Still the great diversity of human languages indicates a good deal of latitude here, a large space in which a great variety of possible languages is permitted.

My third principle was methodological: I wanted to study a linguistic property for which there was good cognitive and developmental psychological research that would give me grounds for proposing cognitive constraints operating for that property. The proposed universal distinction between noun and verb was perfect, as there was already a good deal of work on the conceptual categories underlying this distinction, that of objects versus events. Awareness of a cognitive category of object has been well attested for very young prelinguistic infants, as young as two and a half months. An early robust cognitive category of event has proven to be much more elusive; only around age one is there any evidence for it and even that is equivocal. This tallies with linguistic evidence: all languages have much larger inventories of nouns than verbs. All languages have at least several thousand nouns, but there are languages in New Guinea with under a hundred verbs. But even more striking is that languages of the Southeast Asian region across various families often lack a sharp noun-verb contrast; many words are flexible, i.e., function as both parts of speech. Among the languages of the world this is a rare trait. Most languages have sharply contrasting noun and verb classes, with either no overlap, or a very small one, like in Latin, the paradigmatic case for our tradition of grammatical description, which has 10 % flexibility, mostly for words that describe properties like "cold". But Tagalog of the Philippines has 77 % flexible words.

The development of this trait of flexibility was then an excellent site to study variation over space and time. Flexibility is a rare trait. What favors its preservation or attenuation? What is its distribution across both geographical space and semantic space within languages? What happens when languages divergent for this trait interact? Tagalog is a member of the Austronesian language family, the world's largest in both number of languages, over 1200, and geographical extent, from Taiwan and Southeast Asia all the way to Hawaii and including Madagascar, but excluding most of New Guinea and all of Australia. In particular, in New Guinea there are languages of some 40 distinct language families, the so-called Papuan languages, which I know well, and these are languages typically with no flexibility at all. So what happens when Austronesian languages that inherit high flexibility from their Southeast Asian homeland come into long-term contact with Papuan languages with no flexibility, especially given that flexibility is already rare cross-linguistically, an indication that it is cognitively disfavored and hence subject to easy attrition?

Most of my time at Wiko was spent developing a database of Austronesian languages that addressed these questions. I needed to know the flexibility rates of basic words across

a range of semantic categories in a number of Austronesian languages in different genetic subgroups and geographical areas, from Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, New Guinea, Polynesia, and Micronesia. Johanna Nichols and I developed a list of some 180 basic words across a range of semantic and ontological categories, such as properties, animals and plants, artifacts, body parts, kin terms, natural phenomena, bodily events, postures, emotions and psychological states, activities, and caused accomplishments. All the forms derived for each of these words were entered into the database to ascertain their degree of flexibility. This was a very labor-intensive task and involved many hours of careful sifting through grammars and dictionaries for each language. Week after week, and then month after month, passed by, while I built the database with languages drawn from across the Austronesian-speaking world. By the end of my fellowship in July I had completed this task for fourteen Austronesian languages, and, by smiling fortune, my Wiko colloquium took place in late June, so I was able to report the results of my yearlong research to my Co-Fellows there. The final output of my project will be a detailed monograph, but here are a few summarized findings: 1. Flexibility rates drop as a function of distance from Southeast Asia. This makes sense from an ecology point of view: without reinforcement from interaction with other languages with high flexibility rates as in Southeast Asia, the rates drop as a result of being cognitively disfavored. 2. Flexibility almost disappears among the Austronesian languages of coastal mainland New Guinea that are in long-term intensive contact with speakers of Papuan languages with no flexibility. 3. Flexibility is surprisingly high again in Polynesia although ancestral Polynesian populations migrated through New Guinea on their journey to Polynesia. Mitochondrial DNA indicates that Polynesian populations descend from Asian-origin, Austronesian-speaking women, who transmitted the typical Southeast Asian trait of high flexibility. 4. Flexibility is not uniform across all semantic or ontological categories. Rather, regardless of a language's base rate of flexibility, some categories such as kin terms or artifacts always show higher rates, while others like animals and plants or caused accomplishments exhibit significantly lower rates. The latter provide evidence for what might be called "natural ontology": animals and plants are individuated objects par excellence and hence must be nouns, while caused accomplishments strongly favor being construed as events and so verbs.

I believe this approach modeled on ecology and population biology holds great promise for a recasting of how we do linguistic description and theorizing. This project was just a small first step; other people elsewhere, particularly in Europe, are working on parallel or complementary approaches. After some fifty years of dominance by America-based

researchers, the best and most innovative work in linguistics is now done in Europe, at the two Max Planck institutes that focus on this discipline and at various universities and research centers in northern Europe. Given the central role that the lexicon plays in all current theories of grammar, studies of how the lexicon is structured in languages, especially when structured in cross-linguistically unusual ways, as in these Austronesian languages, is a crucial step in rethinking how to do linguistics.

Finally, I need to admit that around the middle of February, when the lack of sun was really getting me down, and the making of a database for Tongan a bit tedious, Joanna Masel-Monti, Oliver Monti-Masel, and I went off to Tropical Islands, a former Zeppelin hangar in Brandenburg converted into a tropical resort complete with beaches, lakes, waterfalls, Thai restaurants, and a constant 26 degrees (it was minus 8 and snowing outside), for a day of fun and frolic on the beaches and in the saunas and steam rooms. It got me through to mid-April, when the sun returned. I strongly recommend it to any future sun-starved Fellows.