

Niels Danielsen in memoriam

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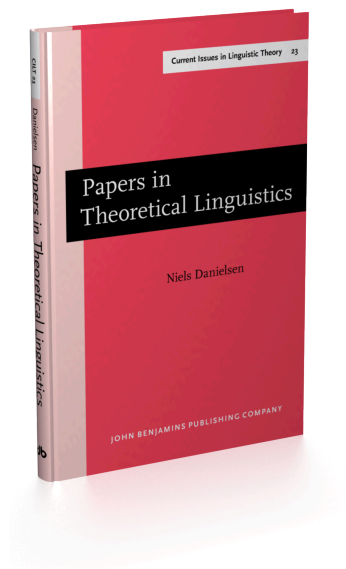
Niels Danielsen

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NIELS DANIELSEN IN MEMORIAM

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Niels Skovgaard Danielsen, by some held to be one of the most gifted Danish linguists since Rasmus Rask, was born on 20 May, 1933, some 100 years after his pioneering predecessor. Like Rask, he died prematurely, before he had realized his full potential, and, in a number of ways, his life and career resembled that of Rask: both were country boys who manifested their linguistic excellence at an early age, and, luckily, both were given a proper education, having competent teachers. Also, both set their course towards philological studies right away, developing their extreme talents for independent research, shaking free of the bonds of tradition to pioneer new methods and theories in their chosen fields. And both had to contend with disparagement and lack of appreciation, and, tragically, both had their brilliant careers brutally curtailed by malignant illnesses. Nevertheless, both left legacies of lasting value, and their achievements will long stand as examples to others.

To chronicle the life of Niels Danielsen is in itself a rather straightforward affair, because he knew only one way of movement, namely forward. From the outset he set his course straight towards his goals, never looking back, but forging ahead as long as his health permitted. Thus, this will mostly be a straight narrative, moving forward with Danielsen through his fast-moving career, with only a few comments here and there, to elucidate the development.

Although Danielsen was of old farming stock, he happened to be born in Hellerup, a northern suburb of Copenhagen (his mother was visiting with her mother there), but he grew up on his father's farm 'Hillestedgaard', which was situated in the flat but fertile sugar-beet farmland of Lolland, and it was here that he showed his foreign language acumen at an early date. Having been taught the alphabet at the age of three, 'Little Niels', as he was called (he was the youngest of three), was soon an avid reader, and before long he was absorbing large amounts of spoken Polish from the seasonal workers imported from across the Baltic. Owing to their illiteracy, however, they could not teach him the written language, a fact which he deplored — but a good

start had been made, and soon another foreign language intruded itself into the hitherto peaceful world of young Danielsen.

In the spring of 1940 (Danielsen was then seven) his homeland was occupied by the Germans, and some German troops were garrisoned in Maribo, the little town where Danielsen had entered school that same year. The bright boy soon began to pick up the German idiom, first from the marching songs echoing through the streets, and then from the daily language of the soldiers. Thus aroused linguistically, he soon set himself the task of learning more foreign languages, beginning to study, on his own, first Russian (he had discovered a Russian grammar in the local library), Italian (his father had given him a second-hand Italian grammar book for Christmas), French and Spanish (for which he bought textbooks himself), and in 1946, right after the end of the war, he was able to supplement his studies with some radio courses then introduced.

All this naturally gave him a tremendous head start before entering the gymnasium (high school), from which he, after ardent studies, graduated in 1951, a full year ahead of his contemporaries. His final score consisted of straight A's, except for one A-minus in written German — the reason for which was symptomatic of Danielsen's penchant for the unorthodox: at the final exam he decided to write his paper, not in the standard script, but in the old German hand, but in all the excitement he clean forgot that in this style a double -s has two forms, one for medial and one for final position, and he used just one form throughout!

Following this unique experience, Danielsen relaxed during his summer holidays by hitch-hiking to Morocco, taking his first look at Arabic at the same time, and then, at the start of the autumn term, he enrolled in Copenhagen University, to study German and French. Happily, among his teachers were found some of the most illustrious academic personalities of the university, such as L.L. Hammerich, professor of German, a giant among philologists, and the idol of the students, Danielsen not excepted. Another professor of German was Peter Jørgensen, who was an expert on Low German and Frisian, while Kaj Barr, professor of Latin and Greek, was a great authority on Turkish and Iranian philology. Close to this linguistic corner was Kaare Grønbech, professor of Central Asiatic languages, and last but not least must be mentioned the internationally acclaimed phonologist and expert on all things Baltic, Louis Hjelmslev, professor of linguistics and author of the theory of glossematics.

No wonder, then, that young Danielsen's academic studies soon progressed at a fast pace, also his extra-curricular research, which at ti-

mes led him to far-away places to find the needed guidance. Thus, most of 1956 was spent studying in Berlin, and in 1958 he stayed a full term in Perugia. In 1959 he studied for a term in Beograd, going on from there to pursue his Greek studies in Athens, and in 1960 he went to Munich. He was not idle at home, either; in 1957 he earned his first academical award as runner-up in a prize contest, gaining a *proxime accessit* for a paper on *Numeral Systems in Various Languages*. This, indeed, is a most amazing paper from a young student of 23, if for nothing else then for the languages treated: Indo-European, Gothic, Old Norse, Old High German, Old Saxon, Old Frisian, Latin, Classical Greek, Old Bulgarian, Lithuanian, Old Irish, Albanian, Armenian, Avestan, Sanskrit, Finnish and Chinese! Moreover, the budding young linguist has the temerity to deplore that he cannot include Old Turkish, Eskimo and some Semitic and Bantu languages within the framework! The 18 languages included show Danielsen's predilection for study in depth, for going back to the old forms, the very roots, so to speak, of human language. To him all languages were of equal value and worthy of diligent study. As for the paper itself, it is quite detailed and well structured, and if the presentation appears slightly stiff at times, it is no doubt because the youthful author stuck to his sources with meticulous precision.

Danielsen, however, never content with second place, soon won his academic spurs: in 1959 he was awarded the gold medal of Copenhagen University for a paper on *Negations and their Use in Middle High German*, an effort which marks his real breakthrough in linguistic research. The reason is not so much the number of languages studied (about 30 this time), but because here Danielsen sets the pattern for his future research: he is no longer content to stay within the boundaries set by others, but from now on he marks off his own limits and course, as he sees fit. He also aims high, trying for the universals of language as shown in this passus about one of his goals, which is

to arrive at an absolutely unambiguous method to be used in a concise comparative description of the structural and functional characteristics of the negating elements. The most profitable result of this study would be if this method could be used, essentially, not merely on the language treated in a given situation, but on any given language.

From then on Danielsen would pursue this course, and as in this case he would also coin new terms for the linguistic phenomena discovered, when such were not already available.

In 1961 Danielsen studied for nine months at the Sorbonne, and in 1962 he graduated from Copenhagen University as *candidatus magiste-*

rii, after which a UNESCO-scholarship enabled him to go to Krakow University for the first of four study periods spent there during the years 1962-64. The same year he also studied in Moscow and Warsaw, before returning to his old university, to teach German in the autumn term of 1962. At the same time he pursued his own special studies, i.a. taking lessons in Chinese, while concentrating on the completion of his formal education by taking his High School Teacher's Certificate in German, French and Russian. In 1963 his studies took him to Rumania and in 1964 to Hungary, and because of his achievements as a teacher of Turkish in the University Extension ('Folkeuniversitetet'), the Turkish government invited him to visit the country as its guest in 1965.

The sixties were a busy time for Danielsen, now an amanuensis (lecturer) in the German Department of Copenhagen University, as he also taught in the University Extension and worked as a free-lance producer for the Danish State Broadcasting Service. Life, however, is not all work and study, and finally its realities caught up with our swift-moving linguist: in 1964 he got engaged to a girl from his own island, and in 1966 they were married. Theirs was a blessed union, as a boy was born in 1967, and a girl in 1968; indeed, Mrs Dorrit Danielsen proved herself a devoted wife and mother, supporting and assisting her husband in all his activities over the years.

About this time Danielsen also changed his scene of work: a new university was being built up in Odense, the old city of Rasmus Rask and Hans Christian Andersen, and Danielsen now accepted the post as senior lecturer in the German Department there, besides assisting in teaching the classics. In 1967 he went on a study tour of Greece, and in 1968 he published his first major work, *Zum Wesen des Konditionalsatzes*, as No. 1 in the series *Odense University Linguistic Studies*. Having found this new base, Danielsen really got into his stride, and in the same year he defended his doctoral thesis *Status und Polarität im Gotischen, im Lichte des Kymrischen dargestellt*, at Aarhus University. Besides treating the languages given in the title, this was in reality Danielsen's first major presentation of his new semasio-semantic theory, of which a mere inkling had been noticed in his gold medal paper almost a decade before. It was very well received, by some even acclaimed as a masterpiece.

After this Danielsen was made the first full professor of Germanic languages and Medieval philology at Odense University, but now he also faced an entirely different problem. In 1965 he had been taken ill with some mysterious ailment, which the doctors found it hard to diagnose, but in 1968 he had another attack, and now the true nature of the illness was determined: Danielsen was suffering from dissemina-

ted sclerosis. This was a heavy blow to a man who had always enjoyed perfect health, being able to do what he wanted, in work and in play, as well as in travelling — but who was now destined to become more and more dependent on others. Here his wife stood him in good stead, and, assisted by her and his friends, Danielsen decided to go on with his work as long as possible, teaching and researching, even travelling abroad, almost as before. Indeed, in 1972 he received an honorary grant from UNESCO, making it possible for him to attend the XIth Congress of Linguists in Bologna, and the following year saw him in America where he, *inter alia*, studied the language of the Menomini Indians, who requited the visit by making him an honorary member of their tribe! At long last he was able to visit Iceland in 1974, to study the favourite language of Rasmus Rask on its own home ground. Besides adding this 'world language' to his collection, he also became the life-long friend of Kristján Eldjárn, the late president of Iceland, who invited him to write the syntax of Modern Icelandic according to scientific principles, a task he did not live to complete.

As the bibliography of this volume shows, Danielsen did not let his gradual incapacitation deter his production, and during the seventies he wrote a number of scholarly articles and books, including two of his major theoretical works. First came the only comprehensive presentation of his new language theory ever to appear in his own native Danish, *Fokus på syntaksen* ('Focusing on Syntax'), published in 1974, and then, in 1976 *An Essay on Nomos and Human Language*, published by the Royal Academy of Sciences and Letters. Years earlier Professor Hamme-rich had stated that he had found it 'heavy going' to read Danielsen's thesis (he was one of the official opponents), but this *Essay* is very much heavier! Not because of the language, though, for it is written in Danielsen's usual lucid style, but because here he goes all out to show what his semasio-syntactic theory contains, making use of his entire array of new grammatical terms, and of almost his whole arsenal of exotic languages, to illustrate the linguistic phenomena described in the book. His close friend, the noted Swedish sinologist Olov Bertil Anderson, says:

His greatest work, *An Essay on Nomos and Human Language*, is a unique effort with examples from more than 40 languages. This means that no little energy is required just to read through it. But the strange thing about it is that apparently all the examples are correct and appropriate in all these fields. (I can handle only something like twenty-odd languages, but I feel confident that all the other examples are equally correct down to the last comma).

No doubt this assessment is correct, but the count of languages is not: Danielsen uses more than 80 languages to exemplify his linguistic theory!

During this period Danielsen received *Handelsbankens Forskningspris* ('Research Prize of the Bank of Commerce', 1977), and various grants for his studies and travels. In 1977 he also served a full term as visiting professor in the University of Firenze, and in 1978 he lectured on Baltic (esp. Lithuanian) syntax in the University of Toronto. In 1979 he lectured on linguistics in Galway, and the same year he initiated Frisian studies in his own university, arranging for a regular *Frisedag* ('Day of Frisian Studies') to be held, alternating with visits by scholars and students from Odense to the North Frisian region. From this emanated a series of *Friserstudier* ('Frisian Studies'), being collections of the scholarly material presented at these conferences, including Danielsen's own original contribution (cf. 1982 in the bibliography).

Then, in 1980, he undertook a most ambitious project, as he accepted an invitation from the Austrian universities to lecture in Vienna, Graz, Klagenfurt, Innsbruck and Salzburg. For the planning, funding and execution of this tour he had the assistance of a number of friends and institutions, being sent off in grand style in a specially equipped Mercedes car, driven by a trained ambulance driver. This eleven-day trip was a great success, as Danielsen was acclaimed everywhere, not so much for his remarkable ability to overcome his severe handicap, but all the more for his lucid exposition of modern linguistic theory. When later on the Danish Sclerosis Society produced a film about this illness and its victims, Danielsen had the leading part, and not a few pictures from the grand tour of Austria were included.

In 1982 Danielsen made his longest journey ever in the service of modern philology, as he attended the XIIIth Congress of Linguists in Tokyo, delivering a lecture later published by his hosts (cf. 1983b in the bibliography). This time he was escorted by his wife, who better than anyone else was able to minister to his special needs. The next year he assisted in starting a new linguistic journal at Odense University, namely *NOWELE*, which honours him with this volume, and he was on its Editorial Board from the start to his death. Here he published his final major effort, fittingly called 'A Final Wrest' (cf. 1985a in the bibliography). By this time, however, Danielsen's health had deteriorated severely, and in 1986 he was hospitalized, necessitating extended sick-leave. It soon became clear, that he would no longer be able to handle the strenuous work at the university, and so he was forced to retire from his post. While he continued to show great fortitude in his increased sufferings, it soon became evident that this was a fight not