

# John M. Anderson: A Brief Profile of the Man and his Career in Linguistics

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Phonological papers in honour of John Anderson**

**Edited by Philip Carr, Jacques Durand and Colin J. Ewen**

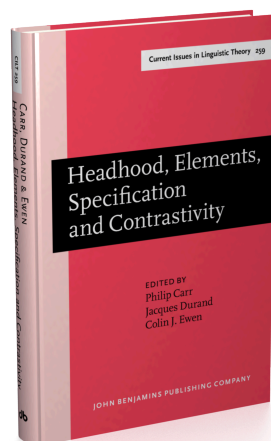
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## JOHN M. ANDERSON

### A BRIEF PROFILE OF THE MAN AND HIS CAREER IN LINGUISTICS

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*John Anderson, Emeritus Professor at the University of Edinburgh and Fellow of the British Academy, was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Toulouse II in 2003. What follows is an edited translation of the speech given at this ceremony by Jacques Durand, Professor at the University of Toulouse II.*

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In my view, an honorary doctorate should honour someone who has made a major contribution to the growth of knowledge, whether in the social, artistic, moral or intellectual spheres. John Anderson is an excellent example of someone whose life has been devoted to knowledge, without regard to self-advancement or personal benefit. I briefly mention here some aspects of his *curriculum vitae* in support of this claim.

John Mathieson Anderson was born in 1941 in the port of Leith, part of the city of Edinburgh. He has three daughters from his first marriage, Nicola, Samantha and Miranda, the youngest of whom is currently completing a Ph.D. at the University of Edinburgh. He is Scottish. We French tend to forget the historical links between France and Scotland. Other than historians, few French people (unlike all Scots from an early age) know that an “Auld Alliance” has always existed between France and Scotland, dating from the thirteenth century. At the time, Scottish noblemen refused to rally under the flag of the English king Edward I against the French, preferring an alliance with the latter to the tyranny of their powerful neighbour. One could no doubt object that these feudal conflicts have no direct bearing on today’s award, but we should also bear in mind that to speak of Scotland is to speak of a country which has always had to fight to retain its own identity, a country whose citizens are proud of their separate traditions and their intellectual autonomy. I will return later to the relevance of this point for John Anderson’s career.

John Anderson is an only son. His father was a manual worker in a Leith shipyard, with a very specific task: he was a riveter's 'holder on', charged with holding rivets with a large pair of pliers while the riveter flattened the end of the rivet. His mother was a housewife. Apart from a clear ancestral line from southern Scotland, his family origins are somewhat shrouded in mystery. There is a *soupçon* of Welsh and Scots Gaelic blood, as well as Scandinavian grandparents on both sides of the family. It is possible that the Scandinavians in question had fled Sweden in somewhat shady circumstances, but John Anderson has assured me that he has never been arrested when in that country! He attended the local primary and secondary schools in Leith, which are 'public' in the French, and not the British, sense, where 'public' means 'private'. Having obtained a student grant, he was the first member of his family to go to university; several cousins followed in his footsteps. Since then, student grants in Britain have been radically reduced, and many students are having to take out large bank loans in order to attend university. In this context, he expresses some doubts as to the educational future of young people from families of modest incomes.

After a highly successful secondary education, he was an undergraduate at the University of Edinburgh between 1959 and 1963, when he received an M.A. with first class honours in English Language, with British History and Latin as outside subjects. Between 1963 and 1965, he studied for a Diploma in General Linguistics at the University of Edinburgh. During this period, he received a grant from the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland in order to spend some time in the Spanish Basque Country, where he engaged in fieldwork on the Basque dialect of Sara, in the Navarra region. He acknowledges that he was fortunate in having as teachers such linguists as Robert Dixon, Michael Halliday, Rodney Huddleston, Peter Ladefoged, Angus McIntosh and John Sinclair. In turn, these teachers quickly noticed his eclectic scholarliness: at a very early stage, he was already familiar with the most technical work of Noam Chomsky, but had also acquired a profound knowledge of European Structuralism, including the work of Emile Benveniste, Louis Hjelmslev and Roman Jakobson. In addition, he had read most attentively the work of the nineteenth-century German philologists (the Neogrammarians or Junggrammatiker). From 1969 to 1971, he worked on a Ph.D. entitled *A Study of Grammatical Functions in English and Other Languages*. This groundbreaking thesis was to form the foundation of a large number of publications in the years to follow.

In parallel with this, his career at the University of Edinburgh progressed steadily: he started as Assistant Lecturer (from 1964 to 1966), then became Lecturer (from 1966 to 1976), was promoted to Reader (from 1976 until 1988)

and then became Professor, holding a prestigious Chair in English Language until 2001, when he retired. He was subsequently awarded the title of Emeritus Professor, in recognition of his scholarly contribution to the University of Edinburgh. His entire career thus had the capital of Scotland as its backdrop, although other universities tried in vain to lure him away. When I was myself a young university teacher at the University of Essex, I recall the enthusiasm among the 'Young Turks' of the Department of Language and Linguistics when we learned that John Anderson had been encouraged to apply for a Chair in General Linguistics there. What impressed us most was the extent of his publications for someone still only 35 years old: several books and around 30 articles in prestigious international journals. What was even more surprising was that he had completely forgotten to include in his *curriculum vitae* a book on Basque published in 1973, namely *An Essay Concerning Aspect: Some Considerations of a General Character Arising from the Abbé Darrigol's Analysis of the Basque Verb*. While we were struggling to put together a convincing *curriculum vitae* from a few papers published here and there, here we had an application from someone whose modesty allowed him to ignore a major publication in his.

With hindsight, I can now better understand this forgetfulness. John Anderson is the author of ten important books published between 1971 (*The Grammar of Case: Towards a Localistic Theory*) and 1997 (*A Notional Theory of Syntactic Categories*). In addition, he has edited eight volumes and has published more than a hundred papers and chapters in prestigious international journals and with internationally renowned publishers. One must, therefore, realise that, for John Anderson, the publication of a book is nothing out of the ordinary, rather in the way that the ascent of one of our Pyrenean mountains is no great event for someone who has already scaled Everest. You will therefore understand why I shall not even attempt to list all his other activities: for example, the fact that, with Colin Ewen and Ellen Kaisse, he founded *Phonology*, the leading journal in the field, or his editorship of the major international journal *Lingua*.

This attitude to formalities is perfectly healthy. John Anderson is convinced that scholarly value is not to be assessed on a quantitative basis, and that the great flaw in many current systems of evaluation is the emphasis placed on quantity, rather than quality. We all know that brilliant academic careers have been based on a relatively small number of publications; in France, the case is often cited of the mathematician Evariste Gallois, who died at the age of 21, or of Blaise Pascal. The question is: what mark will a scholar's work leave in his field of enquiry? When it comes to the humanities, the question is a thorny one. There are those who feel that in the humanities there is never anything

genuinely new under the sun, that everything has already been said, if not by Socrates and Plato, at least by Aristotle, and that all of the major questions relating to the universe and our place within it have all been eloquently posed by the Pre-Socratics. There are others who believe that the scientific and technological advances of the past fifty years have created an infinite distance between us and the past. John Anderson, displaying the intellectual freedom characteristic of the Scottish tradition, dismisses these two opposite points of view. In linguistics, advances in our understanding of language are certainly possible, but they are inevitably based on thinking which stretches back sometimes over several millennia. Let me present a single example of this, which will allow us to come to grips with some aspects of his approach.

Like many specialists in general linguistics, John Anderson postulates, behind the diversity of languages, primitives which underlie the structure of all languages. In that respect, his general project resembles that pursued by the Port Royal grammarians Claude Lancelot and Antoine Arnauld in their *Grammaire générale et raisonnée*, published in 1660. This work contains, as stated on the title page 'les fondemens de l'art de parler, expliquez d'une manière claire & naturelle, les raisons de ce qui est commun à toutes les langues, & des principales differences qui s'y rencontrent'. One of the areas on which John Anderson has focused, and in which his work remains important, is the grammar of case in the languages of the world. Those who have studied Latin, Greek or German will be familiar with case markers. One would say, for instance, that the cases of Latin are nominative, accusative, dative, ablative, genitive and vocative. But the grammar of case pursued by John Anderson concerns a more general, more abstract system of semantic relations. In common with other researchers, he has postulated that, behind the case systems attested in the world's languages, there lies a set of universal semantic relations such as 'agent', 'patient', 'locative', 'source' and 'goal'. The originality of his work in this area is twofold.

Firstly, he bases his conclusions on an impressive array of languages. Certainly, English plays a prominent role, but he has also put through their paces languages as diverse as Basque and Modern Greek, or Caucasian and Amerindian languages. Moreover, his reflections happily mix contemporary thinking (what we linguists call 'synchronic linguistics', after Ferdinand de Saussure) with a historical dimension (diachronic linguistics, in Saussurean terminology). Old English and Middle English, in which he is an internationally recognised expert, figure alongside Classical Greek, Latin, Sanskrit and reconstructions such as Proto-Indo-European.

Secondly, he postulates a restricted set of case relations on a principled basis, since, if the list of such relations is indefinitely long, the theory lacks

predictive power. The restriction in question derives from the localist hypothesis, also advocated by Sir John Lyons, a colleague of John Anderson when he was Professor of General Linguistics at the University of Edinburgh. Sir John expresses his deep disappointment at being unable to attend this ceremony but has explicitly asked me to stress that it is in John Anderson's work that he first came across the localist hypothesis. The latter, expressed in simple terms, claims that the expression of spatial relations is fundamental to human languages, both lexically and syntactically, since it forms the basis for the way in which other sorts of relation are structured. We know, for example, that the expression of temporal reference in most languages is parasitic on expressions denoting spatial relations. For example, this ceremony was fixed *at* 4.30 *at* the Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail (with the same preposition *at* being used in both cases). But since time and space are expressed in the same way here, how do we know which is more basic? Support for the localist hypothesis comes from the fact that temporal expressions in many unrelated languages derive historically from locative expressions, whereas the opposite is rarely, if ever, attested. For instance, *for* and *since* (two words which strike terror in French learners of English), which are exclusively temporal expressions in present day English, both derive historically from locative expressions. What we have just said also applies to grammatical aspect. Thus, progressive forms in English, such as *She is always complaining*, derive historically from expressions which are clearly locative, marked by prepositions such as *at*, *in* or *on*. There are still traces of this in present-day English, as in *She is always complaining, and she's still at it* (with resumptive use of *at*). There are also dialectal, or stylistically marked, forms such as *He's a-courting Ann*, where the *a-* derives from *at*. (Incidentally, numerous examples of this use can be found on the web; for example, I discovered *Bill Gates goes a-courting for .Net.*) Without going into further detail which would tax the patience of non-linguists, suffice it to say that John Anderson has formulated the localist version of case grammar with great precision, using some of the most advanced logico-mathematical models available, and drawing evidence from a large number of languages. However, unlike some researchers in linguistics who appear to suffer from intellectual amnesia, he has never failed to note that, in this area of inquiry, we are the inheritors of a rich scholarly tradition, and that some of the central ideas which he proposes were first expressed by a scholar from Byzantium, Maximus Planudis. For details, see John Anderson's article, which I had the honour of translating into French in 1975, entitled "Maximi Planudis in Memoriam".

These few remarks on John Anderson's work should have enabled you to gain some idea of what his research is about. It will be obvious that John

Anderson is first and foremost a specialist in general linguistics. What I have not yet underlined is that there is no structural aspect of language which has escaped his attention. He is equally at home with phonology (sound systems), morphology (the internal structure of words), syntax (sentence structure) and semantics (the construction of meaning). The technical complexity of many linguistic theories and the ever-increasing specialisation within linguistics means that most of us, unlike John Anderson, work exclusively on some specific sub-area of linguistics (such as phonology). To be sure, some of the greatest linguists have succeeded in working on all aspects of the sound–meaning relation, but this is rare. John Anderson is one of those rarities: he will, I believe, leave his mark on all areas of linguistics. I will restrict myself to a few remarks on his work in the field of phonology, since the first part of the conference currently taking place here in Toulouse (*Des représentations aux contraintes*, organised by Philip Carr, Elsa Gomez-Imbert, Laurence Labrune and myself) aims at celebrating John Anderson’s contribution to phonology. John Anderson is the originator of Dependency Phonology (first developed in the early seventies in conjunction with Charles Jones and Roger Lass). This model claims that phonological systems are based on perceptual primitives or atoms which are organised into asymmetrical structures, containing heads and their dependents. This idea has been extended by a substantial number of researchers, including John Harris (University College London), who is one of our invited speakers at this conference, and whose work has demonstrated the value of these core aspects of Anderson’s work.

John Anderson has collaborated with numerous researchers, among whom I am proud to be included. But if two of them must be singled out today, it should be Fran Colman and Colin Ewen. Fran Colman (Mrs John Anderson), who is here today, was, until recently, Reader in the English Language Department at the University of Edinburgh. Her international reputation in the history of English, her passion for her field of inquiry, her kindness and her untiring devotion to John have allowed him to pursue his work at a very high level, especially when serious health problems almost led to our losing him. Happily, those health worries now belong to the “past historic”, and their new life in Greece, under the Mediterranean sun, among the olive groves and vineyards, is full of promise. We are all delighted that they continue to pursue their collaborative research, and publish as much as ever, for the pure love of their subject: linguistics for linguistics’ sake.

The other major collaborator present today is Colin Ewen (University of Leiden), who co-authored with John Anderson *Principles of Dependency Phonology* (1987), a piece of work which is, in my view, one of the best books on phonology published in the last quarter of the twentieth century – a book

advocating some of the most elegant solutions to classical phonological conundrums. In expressing this view, I have deliberately introduced an aesthetic element. Mathematicians frequently speak of elegant solutions, and so do linguists. In postulating axioms, primitives, representations and combinatorial rules, the linguist constructs formal systems which, as well as describing the facts as exhaustively as possible, have an internal cohesion and equilibrium. This kind of equilibrium can be found in a principle proposed and defended by John Anderson: the principle of structural analogy, the idea that all levels of linguistic representation have essentially the same structure. This is a hypothesis which he has pursued recently with Roger Böhm (University of Bremen), and which has proved extremely fruitful. It allows one to view language, not as an amalgam of disparate properties, but as an edifice where each element has its proper place, “un système où tout se tient”, as the structuralists used to say. The child does not have to construct a linguistic system arbitrarily, but will acquire subsystems which, from sound to meaning, have the same constituent characteristics. These characteristics are not, according to Anderson, supplied by a separate module of mind (as proposed by Noam Chomsky). Rather, linguistic knowledge is grounded in more general cognitive abilities which underlie perception and action. If, for example, the localist hypothesis is plausible, this is because spatial capacities are at the heart of human cognition and play a structuring role in ontogenesis (or, in less technical terms, the psychological development of the child).

I have spoken a good deal of John Anderson the researcher, and have thus far said little about him as a person. I have mentioned his application for a Chair in Linguistics at the University of Essex in 1978, when he forgot to include one of his books in his *curriculum vitae*. I could have added that he appeared before the appointments committee dressed in a totally unconventional, but perfectly *recherché* style, the focal point of which was a pair of pink tennis shoes. This mode of dress was not a gesture of defiance, but simply a reflection of an admirable, some would say naive, vision of the university world: it is what we have to say that counts, not stereotyped images of how we should appear, which are anyway so variable across time, space and social groups. As it happened, John Anderson was offered the job, but was unable to accept it for family reasons. We young researchers were thus sadly denied a professor from whose tutelary presence we would have greatly benefited. But he continued to give us his friendship and his advice, since among the great qualities of John Anderson are his generosity, dependability and openness to others. When I was a young student in Scotland, I had the opportunity to meet him in Edinburgh in 1970, thanks to a recommendation from Sir John Lyons. The passion with which he shared his interests, ideas and



his sense of wonderment at things linguistic was immediately striking. I know from many people who were his students, including Philip Carr, Mike Davenport, Anita Heijkoop and April McMahon, present here today, that he has always made himself available to his students, whatever their level, and that he has helped generations of students along the way, without dogmatism. There are few researchers who have led the field without dominating, or even crushing (perhaps unwittingly), the young researchers who they were supervising. This was never the case with John Anderson. It gives me great pleasure to end my speech on this note, since learning cannot grow and flourish without the sharing of knowledge with the younger generation, who represent the lifeblood and future of our universities. For all these reasons, Mr President, I recommend the award of an Honorary Doctorate of the University of Toulouse-Le Mirail to John Anderson, Emeritus Professor at the University of Edinburgh and Fellow of the British Academy. If you are willing to grant him this honour, the Toulouse university community will in turn be honoured to welcome among its members 'a true scholar', a gentle man of learning able to guide us through the sometimes mysterious maze of the world of knowledge.

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