

# Foreword

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**First Person Singular II: Autobiographies by North American scholars in the language sciences**

**Edited by E.F.K. Koerner †**

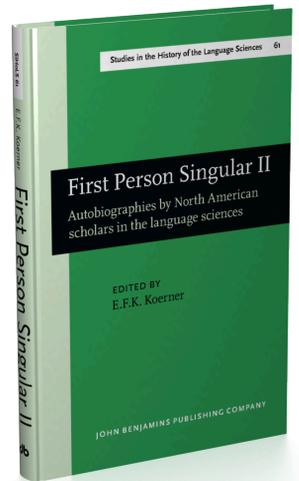
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## FOREWORD

My files tell me that I started work on a sequel to *First Person Singular: Papers from the Conference on an Oral Archive for the History of American Linguistics* (1980)<sup>1</sup> as far back as January 1982. It has taken many more years to complete the present volume than I had ever imagined. There are many reasons for this, and most of them will remain untold. When I sent out letters to a number of scholars during the early 1980s, the response was not at all encouraging. Some never answered the mail, others were prevented from writing up their story because of other commitments or for failing health. This may explain why, despite the many years that the present undertaking has been underway, I did not manage to obtain a manuscript from persons that I knew and admired, such as Carl Voegelin<sup>2</sup> and Fang Kuei Li<sup>3</sup> for instance.

During the past few years, and owing to the cooperation of several people who served as go-between, as conduits, and as oral historians, I eventually did manage to bring a sufficiently large number of autobiographical sketches together that made the production of a volume worth the effort. At the risk of failing to mention someone of those who helped me in my endeavours, let me list, in alphabetical order, the names of all those whom I do remember: Paul Friedrich (Chicago), Victor Golla (Washington, D.C., now Arcata, Calif.), Robert A. Hall, Jr. (Ithaca, N.Y.), Rulan Chao Pian (Cambridge, Mass.), Lynette B. Spencer (Buffalo, N.Y.), and William S-Y. Wang (Berkeley). A special acknowledgement is due to my part-time assistant during the Spring

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<sup>1</sup> It was organized by Boyd H. Davis of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, with the assistance of Raymond K. O'Cain of the University of South Carolina at Columbia, S.C., in Charlotte, North Carolina, on 9 and 10 March 1979, and subsequently published as volume 21 of the "Studies in the History of Linguistics [since 1984: ... of the Language Sciences]" (Amsterdam: John Benjamins).

<sup>2</sup> On Voegelin, cf. Victor Golla's obituary in the *Newsletter* of the Society for the Study of the Indigenous Languages of the Americas 5:3.1-2 (Oct. 1986).

<sup>3</sup> On Li, the reader may be referred to his reminiscences as recounted at the 1984 Sapir Conference, published in *New Perspectives in Language, Culture, and Personality: Proceedings of the Edward Sapir Centenary Conference (Ottawa, 1-3 October 1984)* ed. by William Cowan, Michael K. Foster & Konrad Koerner (Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1986), pp.380-384, and Robert Austerlitz' obituary in *IJAL* 55:4.468-471 (Oct. 1989) and references to other appraisals found therein.

and early Summer of 1989, Nancy Alessandra Remondi, for key-boarding the bulk of the texts; several others were put on diskette by our departmental secretary, Yolande Thériault, and again others had been submitted in electronic form. To all these various collaborators, including several of the contributors, who patiently responded to my various queries on matters of biographical detail, my heartfelt thanks.

If truth be told, I must admit that, originally, I did not favour the main title given to the 1980 publication, but I eventually realized that hardly a more appropriate one could have been found for a volume of autobiographical accounts by linguists.<sup>4</sup> Where the subtitle is concerned, I toyed with several, in particular “History of North American Linguistics in Autobiography”, inspired by Carl Murchinson’s (1887-1961) 3-volume *History of Psychology in Autobiography* (Worcester, Mass.: Clark Univ. Press, 1931-1936), which also contains contributions by major European scholars and scientists. It appeared to me, however, that my present undertaking was far too modest in scope, though I hope that it will one day be regarded as a useful source for historians of North American linguistics. Indeed, apart from very few laudable recent efforts in this direction,<sup>5</sup> it must be said that the historiography of American linguistics is in a sorry state. It seems that we are still suffering from the fallout of Chomsky’s *Cartesian Linguistics*, which appears to have been taken by many of his followers as a model of what use the history of a field can be put to and how our linguistic past is to be treated. In extreme cases, it has led a number of North American linguists of my generation to conclude that the history of the subject has no place in a linguistics department, with the result that we are at best *training* our students to perform analyses according to prescribed rule but not *educating* them to become discerning members of the discipline.

May the present volume be regarded as a modest, though not timid, attempt to resist the tides.

Hull, Quebec, 31 October 1990

Konrad Koerner

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<sup>4</sup> In the meantime, others appear to have found the title similarly attractive, like a certain A. Robert Lee, who in 1988 edited a volume (not seen by the present writer) entitled *First Person Singular: Studies in American autobiography* (New York: St. Martin’s Press).

<sup>5</sup> For instance Julie T. Andresen’s *Linguistics in America 1769-1924* (London & New York: Routledge, 1990) and several papers contained in *North American Contributions to the History of Linguistics* ed. by Francis P. Dinneen & Konrad Koerner (Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1990).