

Editorial

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Remembering Geoffrey Leech

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This special issue of Text and Talk is dedicated to the memory and many contributions of Geoffrey Leech. Geoff was a great colleague and a hugely influential academic who, as this special issue will show, made significant contributions to an astoundingly wide range of areas of linguistics.

We will begin this guest editorial to the special issue by considering Geoff as a person and as a researcher. We will do this by outlining, based on our own memory and memories provided by others, what type of a person Geoff was. This will be followed by a series of papers linked, directly and indirectly, to work he undertook during his lifetime. The tribute closes with the ‘Afterword’ by David Crystal, who looks back over Geoff’s career both to celebrate it and to put the papers presented within this special issue into the context of Geoff’s long and productive academic life.

Let us begin, then, with a consideration of Geoff the man. As well as being inspired by his written works, many people were directly inspired by their experience of meeting Geoff. The reasons they were impressed were apparent both in direct interaction with him and in his writing. In what follows we try to draw out the features of Geoff’s character and, through that, explain his enduring appeal as a scholar. The key features of that character are, we would argue, humility, quiet determination, collegiality and inquisitiveness.

To begin with a personal recollection from one of the guest editors, Tony McEnergy recalls being struck by Geoff’s humility at a seminar in the late 1980s. At the time the work *The Computational Analysis of English* (Garside et al. 1987) had just been published, and Geoff was presenting the ideas from it at a meeting of the Lancaster Linguistics Department’s ‘Linguistic Circle’. Geoff gave a very engaging talk in which the ideas behind the probabilistic approach to linguistic analysis were outlined to a room which was bursting at the seams. Tony was hugely impressed that, in response to a question he asked about the relationship between what Geoff was talking about and some ideas current in information retrieval

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research, Geoff replied, simply and plainly, that he did not know the answer. The temptation in a situation like that is often to speculate, to improvise an answer or to try, effectively, to un-ask the question. Geoff had little truck with any such rhetorical tricks. He talked confidently about what he knew, and he indicated clearly when he did not know something. Rather than wishing to appear to be an all-knowing figure, Geoff encouraged others to find things out by making it clear to them when he did not know the answer. Yet Tony also remembers a later episode which showed how, even when Geoff believed he knew the answer to something, he was broad shouldered enough to accept that he might be wrong. In the discussion of the use of approximate string-matching techniques to identify possible translation equivalents between sentences in aligned parallel corpora, Tony argued that these techniques would prove valuable. Geoff disagreed and said that they were most likely to reveal ‘false friends’. The details of the discussion are unimportant – what is important is that the meeting finished with Tony saying he would go away and try anyway and Geoff saying that he would support him in trying. When the approach turned out to be very productive, nobody was happier than Geoff. Geoff’s humility was an inspiration.

However, Geoff could also be quietly determined. While Geoff may let others press on with their investigations, he was rarely pleased to be forced to go on the journey with them if he disagreed with it. Doug Biber remembers how, when working with Geoff in the team that produced the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Biber et al. 1999) he was ‘surprised how the gentle giant could become quite a force when he finally had enough – e.g. during some of the interminable discussions about terminology we had’ and that ‘when it came to grammar, he certainly had strong feelings!’. Yet the gentle giant was more often in evidence than the ‘force’. In part, this may be because Geoff was quietly determined in quite another way – he was a committed Christian, though he was never one to press his faith on others. Geoff was a quiet and thoughtful Christian who gave devoted service to his small parish Church in Cumbria, where he played the organ for services regularly and joined in, in a quite humble way, with all of the events that the Church put on for the local community. At Geoff’s funeral the vicar of his Church talked in glowing terms about Geoff’s commitment both to the Church and his community. Geoff was buried in pride of place, just outside the Church porch, to thank him for all that his gentle, quiet, determined faith led him to do for others.

While it has been apparent in the comments so far, Geoff’s collegiality was also remarkable. A highlight for his research team each year would be to go to Geoff’s house in Kirkby Lonsdale to be served a lovely buffet lunch by Geoff and his devoted wife (and fine corpus linguist), Fanny. Geoff was also a colleague of good humour – laughter was never far from Geoff’s mind and all who met him will, we

are sure, have experienced his exuberant, boyish and often quite uncontrollable laughter. Geoff was also more than willing to entertain as well as be entertained – as well as playing the organ at the local Church, he was a fine pianist and would play for others. Michael Stubbs remembers that once, when Geoff was waiting for his audience to assemble for an invited talk at Trier, Geoff spied a piano and went across, opened it, and started to play to keep people entertained while the audience gathered for his talk. As well as being collegial in these quietly moving, human ways, Geoff was also a fine colleague who valued people for their ideas, and not necessarily their rank. Geoff was hugely encouraging to junior scholars and was more than happy to talk to them on a peer-to-peer level. Doug Biber recalls just such an occasion:

I was invited to attend the Nobel Symposium on Corpus Linguistics, around 1990. I was a very young/junior faculty member, and feeling very timid being there and being surrounded by all of those senior/important scholars in the field (including Geoff!). So ..., I wouldn't dream of saying anything publicly, especially making comments after a talk. I don't remember the specifics about who had given what talk, but I do remember the discussion afterwards somehow concerned spoken-written/register/genre/text-type kind of differences. Anyway, the discussion went on for several minutes, and finally, when it became clear that I was not going to say anything, Geoff raised his hand and said something like 'I think Doug Biber has something to say about this'. Yikes! But I think that really captures the kind of person he was – he easily could have made comments of his own, but instead he just wanted to get me involved. He was such an amazing mentor and role model, and so supportive of junior colleagues.

Geoff maintained this spirit of encouraging junior colleagues to the very end – shortly before his death he engaged and encouraged Robbie Love, then an MA student, to do some work for him and Robbie remembers that afterwards, "Geoff emailed to thank me and said that he owed me a beer, but we never got to have that drink sadly".

Doug's memory neatly brings us to Geoff's inquisitiveness – he had a very open mind and was far from being averse to thinking in new, and at times challenging, ways. His acceptance of probabilistic approaches to language processing in the early 1980s was a good example of this. At a time when both linguistics and computational linguistics was embarked on a quest to fashion explicit, logical rules to account for language use, Geoff readily embraced the almost heretical idea of setting aside what we believe we may know about language and instead worked with computer scientists like Roger Garside and Ian Marshall to see to what extent we could 'guess' rather than 'know'. Another good example of his willingness to embrace new areas comes from Sylviane Granger, who recalls:

When I got the idea of collecting learner corpus data, Geoff was one of the first scholars I contacted. From the outset I got tremendous support from him. He encouraged me and provided extensive advice although learner corpora were not really his cup of tea. He welcomed me for my sabbatical in 1995 and agreed to write the introduction to the first learner corpus research (LCR) book, the volume I edited in 1998 (Granger 1998), which meant the world to me. Having the support of such an eminent scholar was a huge honour, and I'm sure it contributed greatly to the success of the book and, more widely, recognition of the emerging field of LCR. The introduction he wrote for the volume was truly visionary as he identified all the difficulties that LCR would have to face (and to some extent, is still facing!).

This is typical of Geoff, and resonates with other memories already recounted – he was supportive, he was inquisitive, but he could still be constructively critical at the same time.

The aim of this special issue is to celebrate Geoff's life and his work. The scale and depth of Geoff's contributions to linguistics are such that doing justice to all of them within the scope of a double special issue presents an almost impossible task. Nevertheless, the articles in this special issue reflect directly Geoff's enduring influence in many of the areas in which he was particularly active throughout his career, such as grammar and grammatical change, style and stance, pragmatics and politeness, and advertising language, as well as areas in which Geoff did not work himself, but where his ideas have found influence, such as readability studies. The articles in this issue also draw on corpora and samples developed by Geoff, and which implement principles put forward by Geoff for the development of new resources. This coverage is, of course, not comprehensive, and we are certain that readers will be able to provide examples of areas that could have been represented more directly within this special issue. This is testament, we feel, to Geoff's immeasurable influence within and beyond linguistics. With Geoff's supportive and collegial nature in mind, we have consciously brought together authors representing a mixture of established and emerging voices in the field. In the case of the latter, this reflects the enduring impact of Geoff's ideas and of his writing. We are grateful to the contributors to this special issue, all of whom responded to our proposal with a great deal of enthusiasm. This has resulted in an exciting and truly diverse series of studies which not only pay testament to Geoff's life and career, but which also offer exciting and important insights in their own right. We are also very grateful to David Crystal for agreeing to write the Afterword. By drawing on his knowledge and fascinating memories of Geoff and his work, David's account skilfully elucidates the thread of Geoff's influence that runs throughout this special issue, contextualising the papers within it in terms of specific periods and contributions of Geoff's long and illustrious career. We hope that this thread will be equally apparent to all readers navigating through this

special issue, and that the studies within it will not only inform but also inspire, much like Geoff's work has and continues to do.

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