

From: Hannu Reime [mailto:hannu.reime@helsinki.fi]
Subject: An interview with Ken Hale from 1989
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Dear friends,

I noticed with delight that you have started publishing texts and other material by Ken Hale at your department's web-side. Attached, you find a short interview I did with Ken in May, 1989, at his office in the old Building 20. It's freely available for you to add into your new page.

The interview has not been published anywhere as such, but I have used parts of it as material for a couple of radio documentaries on language, languages, and linguistics that I compiled for the Finnish Broadcasting YLE (a public institution in Finland, a bit like BBC in Britain). Ken sent me later a tape where he speaks some of the "exotic" languages that he knew so well, and I used them for the same documentaries. I'm a journalist by profession, and kind of a part-time linguist.

The interview itself was done in a funny way, which surely tells something about the sympathetic character of Ken Hale. I was in the US to do some interviews, mainly on politics, because at the time I was covering foreign and international affairs for the Finnish Radio, and I met Chomsky at his home in Lexington. The next day, Monday, I had an appointment with Morris Halle at MIT, and I interviewed him on linguistics, on his life in prewar Latvia etc. Somewhere during our discussion Ken Hale's name was mentioned, and Halle said that he's here right now, go and see him. So after that chat, I went to the next corridor in the old building, and knocked at Ken Hale's door. I was a complete stranger to him, but he just asked me to sit down. I took a tape-recorder from my rucksack, and so we did that interview. Perhaps that tells also something about an easy-going atmosphere in that building, at least that was my impression.

All the best,

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HR: Generative linguistics has for many years concentrated on a small number of selected languages like English, then French and Italian, and a few others. You are a specialist on various so called "exotic" languages, American Indian languages and Australian languages and so on. Do you think that the empirical basis for linguistic theory is going to broaden?

009 KH: Yes, it will broaden if large numbers of speakers of these so called "exotic" languages become members of the linguistic community. It's been one of the concerns of a number of people in this country, myself included, to try to get speakers, say, of Navajo, and Hopi, and Miskitu from Nicaragua, and various other languages that have a lot to offer to linguistic theory... there's been a concern to try to get people from those communities into the field of linguistics. We've had a couple of speakers of such languages here at MIT. We had a Navajo speaker, who got his Ph.D. here, and a Hopi speaker, and a number of people have come for shorter periods of time to study linguistics. I think that these people will probably... it will require people of this sort to bring these languages into the field completely. And I think that's important, because languages like Navajo, for example, are sufficiently different from English. They can tell us something about... certain aspects of linguistic theory. That's not to say that the linguistic theory that has been developed through the study of English and French and German and Japanese, say, is inadequate in any sense. The point is that there are aspects of the general theory of language and in particular the issues having to do with the ways in which various parameters are set that require the study of languages that are very different from English. I think it will be possible to do this to the extent that we can get detailed and very extensive studies of these languages. So far the study of native American languages, for example, has been done very much by outsiders, and the number of native speakers of those languages who are in the field, is so far quite small. It must increase in order for these languages to really come in, to make their presence and importance felt in the field.

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HR: Because the linguistic theory has become so sophisticated that you have to know very subtle differences between expressions... is it so, for that reason?

077 KH: Yes. That's the reason. The primary reason is this: as the field of linguistics, technical linguistics, the theoretical investigation of grammar, as that becomes more and more advanced, the questions that need to be asked in different languages become more and more difficult, and we're always having new questions as well. The efficiency of the field will depend on having people who can... who have the training but are also native speakers of a wide variety of languages, who can answer these questions as soon as they come up. So for example myself, I've worked on Australian aboriginal languages, for example, and native American languages here. But when a new question in the field comes up, for example a new conception of the Binding Theory or a theory of anaphora, that arises or is suggested by someone, it immediately requires testing in a variety of different languages, of course. As a field-worker

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who has collected a certain amount of information about languages, I can't necessarily answer those questions, because they may or may not... the data, the necessary data may or may not be in my body... the corpus that I've collected. But if I were a native speaker, then I could answer the questions quite readily. So it's important to get native speakers into the field, of course.

HR: So for example data like parasitic gaps...

119 KH: Yes, the question of whether a language has parasitic gaps can be answered quickly by a person who's a speaker of the language. In some languages, of course, it's an irrelevant question. In Navajo, for example, the question of parasitic gaps cannot arise, because it's a language that has extensive use of pro-drop, and it's not possible to tell whether you've got a parasitic gap phenomenon. However, there are many other questions that can be asked, for example the question of whether certain constraints on movement and Logical Form, that is, questions of whether certain constraints on movement are observed in the Logical Form component, can be asked about a language like Navajo, since all of the movement rules in Navajo are in the Logical Form. Moreover, Navajo quite handily has a set of markers to indicate the point of departure of an element which is moved in the Logical Form, and it's possible to use quite overt elements in Navajo to determine whether constraints like Subjacency or something of the order of Subjacency is observed in the Logical Form of Navajo. But the answers to such questions come best if they're given by native speakers of the language, who know what the questions are. So it's important to have native speaking linguists.

HR: Do you think that the approach that Mark Baker took in his dissertation¹ can also be fruitful, that is, an analysis of a wide variety of languages of which you're not a native speaker?

159 KH: Some linguists are extremely good at this. Mark Baker is one of those who can quickly assess the nature of the data that exists in the literature and ask important questions of it and is also able to see what the data are giving by way of an answer. That's one kind of linguist who works for large numbers of "exotic" languages. I'm a different sort. Myself, although I work on so to speak "exotic" languages, these "exotic" languages are exotic, I suppose, to English speakers but they're not exotic to the speakers of the languages themselves, of course... My approach is quite different. I find it very difficult to read about many, many languages and make sense of it. I have to hear the language spoken, and I have to, you know, sort of have learned some of the language myself, know how to pronounce it, and do some work on it myself. So the range of languages that I can work on, is very limited. It happens to be the small set of languages that I have worked on directly. ^{however,} Although I think that both kinds of linguists are very important, because the contribution that Mark Baker has made in generating an enormous range of important discussion about the phenomenon of incorporation and other grammatical function changing rules, rules like the causative and so on... As a matter

and incorporation

¹ A Ph.D. dissertation at the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy, MIT, published as Incorporation: A Theory of Grammatical Function Changing. University of Chicago Press, 1988.

of fact, during the past year and a half, I've been working almost exclusively on such questions myself, inspired by Mark Baker's work on these topics.

HR: Do you think that there are enough native American language speakers who are interested in becoming linguists?

198 KH: In some communities yes, I think, there are. The question is how can we achieve this in a way which satisfies a number of requirements that native American people themselves place on this, namely: the work has to be meaningful to the communities from which they come. So for example, an ideal situation would be one in which a center existed in which native speakers of North American Indian languages and languages from Mexico and South America and Central America, Canada and so forth, could come for long or short periods and be fully supported to do the kinds of work they think are most important for their own... you know, to develop as scholars and for the contribution that they themselves want to make to their communities. Such a center doesn't exist in this country. They do exist in other countries but are usually on a very struggling basis. In Guatemala, for example, there's a beautiful institution. It exists in Antigua. It's a linguistic center dedicated to a person called Francisco Marroquín. El Proyecto Lingüístico de Francisco Marroquín, that's the name of it. It was set up to train speakers of Mayan languages in linguistics. It's self-supporting. It supports itself, curiously, by teaching the conquerors' language. ~~That's~~ that's a case where the language of the people that came in and came to be the dominant political and economic force in the country, basically suppressing the local population, that language, Spanish, is now supporting a group of people who champion the advancement and continued health of the local native American languages by training speakers of those languages to do the various tasks that have to be done in order to develop language programs in the communities in which they live.

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HR: Is that connected also with their struggle against the regime there?

247 KH: Yes, during the recent period of violence, la violencia, as they call it, this center had to basically shut down and all linguistic work among these native speakers of Mayan languages had to cease for a long period, and it was only recently revived, a couple of years ago, and is now at work again.

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HR: How do you see the future for these languages?

256 KH: Well, that depends very much on a large range of other issues. Each country, each local community has a unique history, of course. Their survival, linguistic and cultural and intellectual wealth of the community, will, of course, depend very much on all the factors that impinge on the community. To cite an example, a number of linguists, two of them from MIT, myself and Wayne O'Neil, who's the head of the Department, and linguists from other parts of the country, Colette Craig from the University of Oregon and Judy Kegl from Swarthmore and Susan Norwood from San Diego have formed a group called Linguists for Nicaragua, whose purpose is to work as linguists in Nicaragua to perpetuate whatever programs are felt to be necessary in that country, particularly on the Atlantic Coast, where you have minority languages, that is, langu-

ages that are spoken by local ethnic communities, one of which is English, by the way, a Creole English; the other communities are the Rama, a small group of people called Rama, the Miskitu, the largest of the native American groups there, and two groups of Sumu. In that country, there's great potential for not only survival but also development and their perpetuation in some kind of position of dignity of the languages to the extent that they're still spoken. So for example, in the case of Sumu, the two Sumus, and Miskitu, it's quite possible within the Autonomy Project of the Nicaraguan government. It's in many ways a shining light in the darkness throughout the world. In the relation to these kinds of questions their purpose among other things is to permit the development and perpetual use of the local languages to the extent that this is reasonable or is seen as reasonable by the people themselves. The Northern Sumu, for example, have actually staged what might be termed an important comeback. There was a period when the Sumu people felt completely sort of submerged by the other populations on the Atlantic Coast, the Miskitu and mestizo populations. They were almost at the point of saying that, well, we'll give up our language from the point of view of things like writing a language and so forth: we'll just give it up and do everything that we do in Miskitu, which they speak as well. However, under the Autonomy Project of the Sandinista government, a complete reversal of this idea among the Sumus has developed and they have become an extremely strong linguistic community in the past four or five years and begun to write a lot of things in Sumu. It's quite a good example of a success in policies of this sort.

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HR: How do you see the future for the North American Indian languages? 17'35"

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KH: Well, this again depends on a particular situation. In some cases, the situation is good by virtue of the fact that the number of speakers is quite large. However, it depends very much on the ability of the people to, so to speak, stay together economically. Often economic pressures are at work in basically making it impossible for the language to continue as a viable entity, because people have to move away and get jobs at other places. There are, however, small communities like, say, Jemez Pueblo in New Mexico, in which although the population is very small, everyone in the village speaks the language, and it looks as if it will continue forever just by the nature of the situation. As long as the economic situation does not shift somehow for them, then it will be possible for them to stay within a relatively small area and continue to live as a community. That is, the key thing is that you have large enough population living together and continuing to speak the language. That's the situation that exists now for the Jemez but it could shift at any time. And the situation of other communities depends on the community itself to the extent of which the pressures to abandon their own language completely sometimes become great enough to spell the end of the language. In some cases, the influence of television and other bombardment of English from various directions makes it very difficult to continue the language. But each situation is distinct, and each community will develop some kind of attitude toward the situation depending on the circumstances they find themselves in. The continued use of the language will depend on the whole variety of distinct factors. 18'19"