

STUDIES IN THE HISTORY OF  
THE LANGUAGE SCIENCES | 52

**Otto Jespersen:**  
**Facets of his Life and Work**

Edited by  
Arne Juul and Hans F. Nielsen

JOHN BENJAMINS PUBLISHING COMPANY

# OTTO JESPERSEN

## FACETS OF HIS LIFE AND WORK

Edited by

ARNE JUUL and HANS F. NIELSEN  
*Royal Danish School of Educational Studies*      *Odense University*

JOHN BENJAMINS PUBLISHING COMPANY  
AMSTERDAM/PHILADELPHIA

1989

**Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data**

Otto Jespersen: facets of his life and work / edited by Arne Juul and Hans F. Nielsen.

p. cm. -- (Amsterdam studies in the theory and history of linguistic science. Series III, Studies in the history of the language sciences, ISSN 0304-0720; v. 52)

Includes bibliographical references.

1. Jespersen, Otto, 1860-1943. 2. Linguists -- Denmark -- Biography. I. Juul, Arne. II. Nielsen, Hans Frede, 1943-. III. Series.

P85.J4088 1989

410'.92 -- dc20

[B]

ISBN 90 272 4537 1 (alk. paper)

89-17797

CIP

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Randolph Quirk

## PREFACE

Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, whose very title it is fitting to recall on this occasion, contains the stanza

I care not in these fading days  
To raise a cry that lasts not long,  
And round thee with the breeze of song  
To stir a little dust of praise.

'I care not', because one of the remarkable facts about Jespersen is that the value of his writings has never shown signs of fading, and his insights continue to stir more than 'a little dust of praise' among students of many languages and of many different theoretical persuasions around the world.

But *In Memoriam* serves as a good starting point for another reason. It is a poem from which Jespersen himself quoted in one of his best known and best loved books, *Growth and Structure*, to make the claim that

words, like Nature, half reveal  
And half conceal the Soul within.

Of the contributors to the present volume, I think only Paul Christopher-sen had the privileged degree of face-to-face acquaintance that could reveal Jespersen's personality and something of the 'Soul within'. But all the other writers here assembled, along with the countless thousands who continue to draw inspiration from his work, feel as they read him that they are in touch with a warm and lively man, as full of concern for

humanity itself as for what he saw as the key to humanity, the faculty of language.

The two of course go together and he would not perhaps himself have recognised the distinction. Nonetheless it was the humane concern rather than the scientific that led him to devote so much of his enthusiastic energy to reform in the teaching of modern languages: with enormously influential results, as Knud Sørensen shows below – and not by any means only in Denmark. So too it was his idealism that drove him to make major explorations in devising means to facilitate international communication, even though 'towards the end of his life' he 'expressed some qualms about the time and energy he had invested in these projects'.

But even in areas such as these where the battle has either been won (as in teaching languages with emphasis on practical speech) or largely abandoned (as in this particular mode of artificial language), his work will go on repaying further study. The same can be said – even more emphatically – about his work on linguistic theory, such as his excellent 1917 study of negation and especially perhaps the reflective and challenging *Philosophy of Grammar* (1924), with his views put in a still broader context the following year in *Mankind, Nation and Individual*. Nor should we forget the more cryptic book a dozen years later, the *Analytic Syntax*, which he seems to have regarded as his last word on the distinctive aspects of his linguistic theory.

But for the majority of us, the work to which we have most frequent recourse, the work that stands out as being most irreplaceable, is the monumental seven volumes of *A Modern English Grammar*. With its wide range of data from literature of all periods and the illuminating explanatory comment, simultaneously along diachronic and synchronic dimensions, this book is a continual source of inspiration and value. It more than 'half reveals' what is specific to Jespersen – his Anglophil romanticism and belief in linguistic progress discussed below by Hans Frede Nielsen, for example – without our needing to fear that his scholarly judgment is ever relaxed, still less distorted. Whatever our occasional exasperation as we try to find our way through a work that was many

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decades in the making, the search is always rewarding. Nelson Francis tells us that he has 'frequently had the experience of hitting upon what I thought was an original idea, only to find on checking that Jespersen had been there before me'. It is not just *MEG* that produces, and will go on producing, this effect on generations of students.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The editors wish to express their gratitude to friends, colleagues and institutions for their kindness and their help. In particular:

British Library  
Danmarks Radio  
The Library of the Royal Danish School of Educational Studies  
The National Library of Education, Copenhagen  
The National Sound Archive, Copenhagen  
Odense University Library  
The Royal Library, Copenhagen,  
The Royal Library, Stockholm

for their goodwill and their unfailing patience. We are also most grateful to:

The British Council  
The Carlsberg Foundation  
Copenhagen University  
The Danish Research Council for the Humanities  
The Ministry of Education, International Relations Division  
The National Institute for Educational Media, Copenhagen  
Odense University  
The Royal Danish School of Educational Studies

for their generous support in countless ways.

We would like to thank the following: Paul Christophersen, Cambridge; Arne S. Arnesen, Hans Berggreen and Ruth Bentzen of the Royal Library, Copenhagen, for never having failed to respond constructively whenever we needed expert help; Leif Grane and Anne Vibeke Vad of

## Acknowledgements

Regensen, Copenhagen, for their kind assistance while we were hunting for photographs of Jespersen from his time at Regensen; D. Yde-Andersen and Ebba Dahlstrøm of the National Sound Archive and Poul v. Linstow of Danmarks Radio for their indefatigable efforts to help us in our attempts to find early recordings of Jespersen; and especially E. F. K. Koerner of the University of Ottawa and John Benjamins Publishers for kindly accepting this book for publication in the SiHOLS series.

A final word of thanks to Peter Collier, Pangbourne, to Povl Skårup and Knud Sørensen, Aarhus University, to David Stoner, Bromley, and to Bent Sunesen, Charlottenlund, for their editorial comments and to Henny Eriksen and Birthe Færing, Odense University, for their outstanding secretarial help.



## EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

One day in the spring of 1985, while working on *Our Changing Speech. Two BBC Talks by Daniel Jones*, which was published later that year,<sup>1</sup> we began to wonder why recordings of Otto Jespersen's voice appear to be so rare today. Whereas Jones's voice has been left for posterity in a variety of recordings,<sup>2</sup> we seem to have only three recordings of Jespersen (1903, 1913 and 1941).

This regrettable fact reminds us of what David Lance said a few years ago in a publication on sound archives:

Until quite recently, ... the relationship between sound recording and historical documentation was haphazard. Most collected material had been recorded – often by broadcasting organisations – for immediate practical ends. Any subsequent preservation by archivists aware of its permanent historical value was generally incidental to the reasons for which the recordings were originally made. In the field of historical sound documentation – as with many other classes of records – archival collections, therefore, traditionally consisted of recordings that were created without objective regard to historical considerations and which survived, very often, only by accident and good fortune.<sup>3</sup>

Jespersen was 65 years old when broadcasting on a regular basis began in Denmark in 1925. It has proved impossible to ascertain the extent to which his voice was recorded by Danmarks Radio over the following eighteen years. What we do know is that, strange as it may seem, only one interview exists in Danmarks Radio's Sound Archives. By the irony of fate, the voice of the Danish phonetician *par excellence* only just survives.

In 1938, five years before his death, the 78-year-old Jespersen looked back. It is true that nowhere in his autobiography, *En sprogmands levned*, does Jespersen mention recordings of his own voice and on the whole he says very little about sound recording. But he was certainly an ardent advocate of the then embryonic *talemuseer* ('speech museums'), as he called them: in the recording from 1913, as we pointed out in 1985, Jespersen recommended that sound archives should be established in which linguists and others would be able to study voices of the past.<sup>4</sup>

We consequently decided to see to it that at least two of the recordings (1913 and 1941) would be made available to the general public in Denmark and abroad. The recordings will be published separately by the National Institute for Educational Media together with an introduction by one of the contributors to the present volume, Paul Christophersen.<sup>5</sup>

A further outcome of our considerations was the idea of publishing a book on Jespersen which would enable students and scholars to receive a detailed impression of some important facets of the Dane who is still a household name in the world of linguistics. And it seemed natural to let the book begin with the general introduction by Paul Christophersen, who knew Jespersen well.

Jespersen was enormously productive. A complete bibliography exists in two parts: the first covering the period from 1883 to 1930;<sup>6</sup> the second the period from 1930 to 1943.<sup>7</sup> The total number of publications listed here is 487.

How did he manage to do all this while at the same time – as once observed by Christophersen – he 'never seemed in a hurry and always had time for visitors'?<sup>8</sup>

Jespersen himself would no doubt have answered that he was simply unable to bridle his passion for intellectual activity. In 1938, several years after he had retired from Copenhagen University, he remarked that had he not written a single word after 1925, nobody would have blamed him, and he asked himself why he had kept on working. Perhaps, he said, because working had become an inveterate habit, as

indispensable as the hypodermic needle to the morphine addict. He continued:

With me, thinking may have become a chronic disease. There is some truth in what Oscar Wilde says, 'Thinking is the most unhealthy thing in the world' (Intentions 4), and in Bertrand Russell's words: 'Thinking is not one of the natural activities of man; it is the product of disease, like a high temperature in illness' (Freedom and Org. 93).<sup>9</sup>

Christophersen has drawn attention to other important factors behind Jespersen's impressive list of publications, such as his working method (cf. Jespersen's 'little slips of paper' described below, p. 8) and his working conditions, in particular the financial support from the Carlsberg Foundation at the end of his career, enabling him to concentrate his efforts on *A Modern English Grammar* and other major projects.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, a few words about the illustrations:

It is only natural that a book on Jespersen should contain photographs, and we originally intended to present a substantial number of pictures collected from a variety of sources. Since we are, however, currently preparing an English translation of Jespersen's autobiography, we have deemed it more appropriate to reserve the majority of illustrations for that purpose.

Like the articles, the photographs in the present volume speak for themselves. But perhaps one of them deserves special mention.

It has been said of Julia Margaret Cameron, one of the pioneers in nineteenth-century British photography, that she 'had the real artist's gift of piercing through the outward appearance to the soul of the individual ...' although the impressiveness of her portraits 'in some cases undoubtedly owes much to the strong personality of her sitter'.<sup>11</sup> It seems to us that this statement could also be said to apply to Heinrich (Henry) Carl Hugo Buerger Goodwin (1878-1931), the artist behind the intense portrait of the vigilant 47-year-old Jespersen.<sup>12</sup> Goodwin, who began his career as a philologist and ended up an exceptional photographer, had

been fascinated by photography in his youth and apparently met Jespersen at Ermelundsly<sup>13</sup> in 1907. This was at a time when Goodwin was working on phonetics and the psychology of language and only a few years before he published two articles on the idea of an international language. Whatever may have been the occasion of this meeting between two extraordinary personalities having interests in common, an outstanding result lives on in the world of art.

*Frederiksberg and Sorø*  
*January 1989*

## Notes

1. Juul & Nielsen (eds.) 1985.
2. See the discography in Abercrombie *et al.* 1964:xviii-xix.
3. Lance 1983:177.
4. See Juul & Nielsen (eds.) 1985:ix.
5. Further information is available from the National Institute for Educational Media (Landscentralen for Undervisningsmidler), Ørnevej 30, DK-2400 Copenhagen NV. Tel. (+45) 31 10 77 33.
6. Bodelsen 1930.
7. Haislund 1944.
8. Christophersen 1972:18.
9. Jespersen 1938:224 (our translation).
10. Christophersen 1972:18.
11. Gernsheim 1965:124.
12. For further information on Goodwin, see *Svenskt biografiskt lexikon* (1918-), Wigh 1984 and Auer 1985.
13. For Ermelundsly, see below, p. 20.

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Paul Christophersen

## OTTO JESPERSEN

The first time that Otto Jespersen may be said to have come into my life was in 1922. In that year I started learning English in school, and naturally we used Jespersen and Sarauw's English primer. This book, published in 1895, continued in general use in Denmark for many years, and several generations of Danes owe their introduction to English to Jespersen's book and to the rhyme with which it began:

I can hop, I can run.  
See me hop, see me run.  
It is fun, fun, fun.

Originally this book represented something entirely new in language teaching. When one looks at it now – and I still possess a copy – the illustrations understandably strike one as very old-fashioned, but in other respects the book is still surprisingly modern in its approach and possibly better than some of the things that have since appeared on the market.

The most revolutionary feature of the book is its use of phonetic transcription. The texts are given throughout in both ordinary orthography and phonetic script, facing each other on alternate pages, and for the first few weeks, I remember, we were only allowed to look at the phonetic script while we practised the various new sounds, a *w* and a tongue-tip *r* and a dark *l*, and generally accustomed ourselves to the sound of English. Nowadays, with radio and TV and films and cassette recordings, there is infinitely more opportunity for foreign learners to hear normal English speech than there was in those days. Even so, I think, phonetic transcription has by no means outlived its importance.



Phonetics engaged Jespersen's attention a great deal as a young man. Later he switched to other areas of linguistic study, and it is amazing how many different areas he managed to cover and to write about in the course of his long life. To the end, however, he was interested in speech sounds. I spent the Christmas of 1939 in London, where I met a number of students from different countries; when I told Jespersen about this in a letter, he wrote back and said, 'How I would have enjoyed this in my youth ... I would have revelled in the possibility of hearing the sounds of all those languages. But that sort of thing, I imagine, doesn't interest you so much'. I think Jespersen did me an injustice there, although my interest in phonetics may not range so widely as his.

It is not always realized that in his youth Jespersen was regarded primarily as a phonetician, and his contribution to the study of general phonetics is in fact considerable. His great textbook on the subject appeared in a Danish edition in the 1890s and in German in 1904. Jespersen has also written about the phonetics of Danish, for the study of which he prepared a special system of notation, and Danish phonetic terminology is largely his invention. Nevertheless, interest in the practical application of phonetics to the teaching of foreign languages was not peculiar to Jespersen. He shared it with various contemporaries, members of the European movement for a reform of language teaching in the 1880s and 1890s. The pioneer in this field was the Englishman Henry Sweet, to whom Jespersen looked as a shining example. Jespersen's participation in this work was an example of how his mind was open to new ideas. By temperament he was a reformer.

Let me return for a moment to Jespersen's English primer. The way grammar is smuggled in gradually is an example of the new approach to language learning that was being advocated at the time, the so-called Direct Method. In one respect, though, I think Jespersen introduced something essentially new. He uses a number of English nursery rhymes in his book: 'Doctor Foster went to Gloucester' and 'Ding, dong, bell, Puss is in the well' and 'Little Jack Horner sat in a corner', and so on. A basic idea in the Direct Method is the close link between a language and the thoughts and emotions and general culture of its speakers. This is