

Welcoming Remarks

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On behalf of the organizing committee, it's my great pleasure and privilege to welcome you all to this scholarly celebration of Alec Marantz's 60th birthday. I don't have much claim to being part of the organizing committee, except primarily by virtue of being perhaps the first person (of many) to suggest some kind of celebration of Alec's 60th birthday, a couple of years ago. (When I was Alec's grad student, I actually suggested doing a Festschrift for his 40th birthday, but in retrospect it's possible that that was just the tiniest bit premature!)

At any rate, the first thing I'd like to do is to thank the NYU members of the organizing committee—Maria Gouskova, Hagen Blix, and Yining Nie—who did all the real work. And I'd like to thank all of you for coming from far and wide to be part of this event. A 60th birthday is of course an arbitrary milestone in a career that began prodigiously early, and that continues to generate a steady flow of insights into the foreseeable future and beyond. But so what? It's a good excuse for a party.

I remember Alec once commenting on the different artistic periods of Picasso, observing that every career has its own trajectory. Perhaps he was thinking of his early faculty position, teaching undergraduate composition at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill—albeit a position appearing on his CV alongside a Harvard junior fellowship, an early teaching stint at MIT, and the publication of his dissertation by MIT Press. There aren't many people with a career trajectory quite like Alec's, but his observation on the subject is a perennially encouraging one, offering all of us a limitless potential of unexpected discoveries and serendipities—a characterization of academic life that I have found to be quite hearteningly accurate.

It's almost unnecessary to review Alec's scholarly accomplishments, well-known as they are throughout the field, and certainly to us as his friends, colleagues, coauthors, and current and former students. But just to observe the formalities, I'll mention a small handful of them.

Alec has really made enough contributions for at least two or three highly respected linguists. His work in syntax and morphology has already inspired the research directions of generations of marvellous linguists, including many of you who are here today. As a syntactician, he's brought mainstream recognition to a range of key insights—like the generalization that direct objects, but not external arguments, combine with verbs to form phrasal idioms (a crucial step towards the now widely accepted view that theta-roles are compositional); or the discovery that apparently atomic units like simple “nouns” and “verbs” are syntactically assembled from more basic elements; or the recognition that idiosyncratic restrictions on sound and meaning cut across the word/phrase distinction, in refutation of the Lexicalist Hypothesis.

In their tremendously fruitful collaboration on Distributed Morphology, Alec and Morris Halle laid out an elaborate and deeply grounded theory of the architecture of the grammar, which permits a newly principled account of morphological regularities in a variety of different domains, such as syntactic and semantic feature content, syntactic constituency and locality, linear position, morphological form, and interactions with encyclopedic meaning and phonology. For those of us raised on less descriptively adequate theories, Distributed Morphology was like some kind of sophisticated new 3D imaging technology for morphological analysis—simplifying the task of penetrating and separating the layers of linguistic information, allowing us to identify regularities concealed within the noise of arbitrariness and variability.

And speaking of imaging technology...

Back in the 1990's, a Research Training Grant at MIT was funding doctoral students in Linguistics to do an extra year of coursework and research in the Brain and Cognitive Science department, and vice versa. Alec seized this opportunity to embark on a completely new intellectual venture for him: using MEG to investigate the representation of linguistic knowledge in the brain. The MEG research began in earnest as a collaboration with the medical school at UCSF, but eventually the Kanazawa Institute of Technology saw fit to give Alec a machine of his own. And, of course, the rest is history, with labs in Boston, New York and Abu Dhabi, and a string of wonderful supervisees—again, including many of you here today. One of these is, of course, Liina Pyllkkänen, who has made major contributions both to syntactic theory—particularly her work on applicatives and causatives—and to neurolinguistics—such as her work on the neural representation of linguistic semantics. As well as enriching Alec's life in other important ways, needless to say!

Of all the revelations that came from listening to Alec think out loud—and there were many—the one I remember most vividly was his description of the process of identifying multiple sources of neural activity, recorded (for example) by a single sensor on the scalp, as comparable to the process of identifying the epicentre of an earthquake, as measured by a seismograph on the earth's surface, or the different sound waves generated by a violin, a viola and a cello, recorded with a single microphone. It was one of those moments when the scattered categories of everyday reality suddenly coalesce and manifest themselves as facets of a single unitary whole. Language—linguistic theory—the brain—music—the earth's crust: *all one thing*. For me, anyway, watching Alec launch the analytical insights of linguistic theory into the sphere of neuroscience was kind of like finding myself in a window seat on the space shuttle.

The truth is, working with Alec is tremendous fun, if sometimes rather exhausting fun. I'm sure we've all had the opportunity to appreciate his rambunctiously galloping logic, his genius for describing complex ideas in vividly comprehensible ways, his mischievous sense of humour, and his firm grasp of the value of food and beer in building a scholarly community. He's a wise and compassionate mentor to students and junior colleagues, at any stage of our career paths. And his inexhaustible patience has exercised itself on probably hundreds of thousands of student questions—as well as on his student house-

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sitters, who were known to host parties in his absence, or shatter the glass lining of his thermos with boiling water... no need to dwell on the time he returned home from a conference to find his front door handle broken off... well, with any luck it was good preparation for parenting a young child.

There's far more that could be said about Alec and his work, and the research he's stimulated throughout the field, but I'll leave it to you to demonstrate that throughout the rest of the day. Because, even more than his published work, Alec's contribution to the field resides in the enormous wealth of knowledge, creativity, intellectual courage, integrity, and indeed humility that he embodies and shares with students and others he works with. Over the years, I came to understand that his sometimes daunting critiques are based on a deeply respectful assumption—that everyone can see just as clearly, and reason just as keenly as he can. Would that it were so, Alec; but anyway, thanks!