

**Jussi Niemi & Urho Määttä**

**Fred Karlsson:  
Innovations and Empirical Perspectives in Linguistics**

Fred Karlsson was born on February 17, 1946 in the south-western Finnish city of Turku/Åbo, where he also attended school and university, receiving



his MA degree at the Swedish-language Åbo Akademi University (Finnish Language, 1969) and his PhD degree “up on the hill”, i.e., at the neighbouring Finnish-language University of Turku (Phonetics, 1974). In between these two degrees he also studied at the University of Chicago where he was conferred a Master of Arts degree in Linguistics in 1972. Although we have no first-hand information of this, it is highly likely that the profession and career of his father, Göran Karlsson, a prominent linguist, and Professor of Finnish Language and Literature at the Åbo Akademi University in 1964–1980, must have had *some* influence on the career choice made by Fred.

The future sailing enthusiast

During his first academic years Fred was fortunate to study in Turku, which in the 1960's and 1970's was a bridgehead in Finland for several linguistic innovations, both at the Åbo Akademi University and at the University of Turku. During the scientifically formative years of Fred, two local professors mostly responsible for the propagation and dissemination of novel ideas were Nils Erik Enkvist (English Department, Åbo Akademi University) and Kalevi Wiik (Phonetics, University of Turku). As regards

Fred, we may, *inter alia*, note that he was a member in the Group in Text Linguistics led by Nils Erik Enkvist. The other members were Erik Andersson, Auli Hakulinen, Viljo Kohonen, Jan-Ola Östman and Marianne von Wright; project lasted from September 1974 to August 1977. As the informed reader will note, in addition to Fred, many of the junior members were later to hold high posts at language and linguistics departments in Finland. One concrete spin-off from the work of this group, *viz.*, *Nykysuomen lauseoppia* co-authored by Fred and Auli Hakulinen<sup>1</sup> was preceded by a first large-scale quantitative study of written Finnish sentences by Fred, Auli Hakulinen and Maria Vilkuna.<sup>2</sup>

Although Fred has since 1980 been Professor of General Linguistics at the University of Helsinki and also a resident of the Finnish capital, he and his family divide their time between Helsinki and the Åbo/Turku area: Since the mid-1950s Fred has spent his summers in the island community of Nagu (in Finnish Nauvo) where he and his two brothers now share a summer residence. It is at least here where Fred can carry out one his hobbies, *viz.*, mowing the lawn, during the long, long Finnish summer days, while one of the two remaining hobbies of the three recorded by him for the bibliography *Vem och vad 2000*, *viz.*, collecting old grammar-books, is likely to be a more urban activity.



Freshly minted high school graduate

<sup>1</sup> Auli Hakulinen & Fred Karlsson. *Nykysuomen lauseoppia* ['Syntax of Present-day Finnish'], 1979. For the exact bibliographical information on the Karlsson's texts mentioned here, see the Bibliography in the next section.

<sup>2</sup> Auli Hakulinen, Fred Karlsson & Maria Vilkuna. *Suomen tekstilauseiden piirteitä: kvantitatiivinen tutkimus* ['Features of Finnish Sentences in Text: A quantitative study'], 1980; see also his article "Finnish syntax in text: Methodology and some results of a quantitative study", 1980, co-authored with Auli Hakulinen.

### **Fred's PhD thesis: A pioneer study promoting a paradigm shift in Finnish grammatical tradition**

In May 1974 Fred introduced to the Finnish linguistic community the theoretical foundations and the first applications of concrete generative grammar in his PhD thesis.<sup>3</sup> During the long public defense he and his opponent Kalevi Wiik carried at places heated, but ever so polite argumentation about the pros and cons of the new *versus* the old generative approach. The debate was exceptionally vivid mostly because what Fred was vouching for in his thesis was directed against the Chomsky – Halle *SPE* type abstract “phonology“ that had been introduced to Finland seven years earlier by his opponent in monograph form. In addition to their common background in the Department of Phonetics at Turku, another aspect was shared by these two approaches (and by the two persons mostly responsible for campaigning for these approaches), viz., the vehement critique that they sometimes raised among the established tradition of Finnish-language studies (Fennistics), which in those days had been lagging behind in theoretical and methodological issues. The concrete generative view on the phonology and morphology of Finnish, adopted by Fred in his PhD thesis, later led to a comprehensive presentation on the topic,<sup>4</sup> which presents its readers with a new model of generation of Finnish word-forms.

### **Quantitative analyses of corpora, developmental activities within computer and computational linguistics**

If one is into concrete generative morphology, a pervasive variable of language use that is to be taken into consideration is the relative frequency of units (e.g., lemmas, stem allomorphs, affixes), since aspects of frequency of use do, for instance, affect the productivity of competing words and paradigms in, e.g., language acquisition and diachronic processes. Now we are able to tie the two threads of Fred's early research career and state that what first were, on the one hand, theoretical modelling

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<sup>3</sup> *Centrala problem i finskans böjningsmorfologi, morfofonematik och fonologi* [‘Central Problems of Inflectional Morphology, Morphophonemics and Phonology of Finnish’], 1974.

<sup>4</sup> *Suomen kielen äänne- ja muotorakenne* [‘Phonology and Morphology of Finnish’], 1983.

of generative morphology of Finnish and, on the other, frequency analyses of large corpora developed into spin-offs that were to have far-reaching consequences in language studies in Finland and abroad. With these consequences we naturally enough refer to the development of tools in computer linguistics in general and the development of the field of computer/computational linguistics as an academic subject in Finland in particular. A major institutional and educational repercussion of Fred's interest in quantitative analyses of language and computer linguistics and of his long-term co-operation with Kimmo Koskenniemi was the creation of the computational linguistics curriculum within the Department of General Linguistics at the University of Helsinki in the late 1980's.<sup>5</sup> Subsequently, alone and at times together with Koskenniemi and other colleagues in General Linguistics and related disciplines, Fred has further studied language parsing algorithms eventually producing a language-independent formalism for morphological and syntactic analysis called Constraint Grammar.<sup>6</sup>

Very much owing to the Humboldtian view of higher education, expressions like “our industrial and business partners”, or “technological applications of our theoretical research” were long felt as oxymora in the disciplines within the humanities, including linguistics, in Finland. However, in the 1980's Fred's close co-operation with Kimmo Koskenniemi also created what now in retrospect may be regarded as a natural outcome, but what must have been extremely challenging in those years: Eventually applications of University of Helsinki computer linguists were modified into concrete language processing programs by Lingsoft, Inc. (established 1986), a major language technology enterprise founded by the two “K's” of the Department of General Linguistics.

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<sup>5</sup> For readers interested in the history and state of the art of this discipline at Helsinki, we are now able to refer to the “companion volume” of the present Festschrift, viz. Antti Arppe, Lauri Carlson, Krister Lindén, Jussi Piitulainen, Mickael Suominen, Martti Vainio, Hanna Westerlund & Anssi Yli-Jyrä (eds.) *Inquiries into Words, Constraints and Contexts: Festschrift in the Honour of Kimmo Koskenniemi on his 60th Birthday*. Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Fred Karlsson & alii (eds.) *Constraint Grammar: A language-independent system for parsing unrestricted text*, 1995.

## Historiographical and sociological interests in language studies

All through his academic career Fred has both spoken and written about the historical paths and sociological patterns of language studies in Finland. An early milestone in this branch of his activities was an analysis of the explicit and implicit traditions adopted by Finnish language departments and their influence on research in Finland.<sup>7</sup> A later exposition and a landmark, not only in the historiography of linguistics in Finland, but also in the Nordic countries is undoubtedly the close to 700-page *History of Linguistics in the Nordic Countries* written by Nordic linguists Even Hovdhaugen, Carol Henriksen, Fred Karlsson and Bengt Sigurd.<sup>8</sup> On the Finnish soil, two interesting add-ons to this Nordic survey are, first of all, Fred's analyses of PhD theses in languages and linguistic disciplines in Finland.<sup>9</sup> A more focused analysis is to be found in his monograph on Finnish linguistics seen through a citation analysis.<sup>10</sup> In addition to these writings his contribution (shared by Nils Erik Enkvist) to the historiography of language studies in Finland is available in the four-volume history of Finnish science (in the sense of 'Wissenschaft') published in 2000.<sup>11</sup>

## Institutional activities

Fred has been an active participant in bodies of academic administration (e.g., Dean of the Faculty of Arts, University of Helsinki), various planning committees, teams of academic evaluators, and task groups as well as an agent in a number of linguistic associations. If we, as floor-level linguists, were given the possibility of presenting merely one of the many of his break-through and permanent contributions in this area, we would select as such the founding of the *Linguistic Association of Finland* in the late 1970's. The first public impetus to create such an association in Finland was expressed by Paavo Siro in his talk at the dinner held after the PhD

<sup>7</sup> See "Fennistiikan tieteenparadigmasta ja sen ohjausvaikutuksesta" ['On the Fennistic paradigm of science and its influence'], 1975.

<sup>8</sup> Hovdhaugen & alii *The History of Linguistics in the Nordic Countries*, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. *Kielitieteiden tohtorinväitöskirjat Suomessa 1840-1997* ['Linguistic PhD Dissertations 1840-1997'], 1998; and his article "Kielitieteiden tohtorinväitöskirjat Suomessa 1992-2001" ['Linguistic PhD Dissertations 1992-2001'], 2003.

<sup>10</sup> *Linguistics in the Light of Citation Analysis*, 1994.

<sup>11</sup> Karlsson & Enkvist, "Kielitieteet" ['Linguistic Sciences'], 2000.

defense of Auli Hakulinen in Turku in May 1976. As early as the fall of that same year Fred, together with Auli Hakulinen, made concrete plans and preparations to found a linguistic association in Finland, and eventually, the founding meeting, open to all Finnish linguists, was held in Helsinki in conjunction with Fifth Finnish Conference of Linguistics in Helsinki in February 1977 with Fred as the convener and chair of the meeting.

### **Research ethics**

In recent years Fred has given talks in the ethics of science, e.g., at the annual Summer Seminar of General Linguistics, a nationwide institution initiated by him at the turn of the millennium. However, as is typical of him, the principles for which he campaigns have not remained at the level discourse only, but he has also actively applied them in his own activities as well. It may be rightfully claimed that two major events related to these concrete activities are the following: The earliest of the two is the disclosure of a post-graduate degree sham in Literature in 1995. A more hefty blow, and this one targeted on language research in Finland, was yet to come. In 2000 it came, and it came in the form of a 300-page monograph.<sup>12</sup> In this book Fred unveils to his readers in a detective story-like, step-by-step fashion how he disclosed unethical aspects in the career of one of the great names in the research of the Finnish language, viz., in the career of Emil Nestor Setälä (1864–1935) who, in addition to having been Professor of the Finnish Language at Helsinki, was influential also in many other walks of public life in the early and mid 20<sup>th</sup> century in this country. Needless to say, very much like the Literature degree sham, the book about Setälä also raised a discussion not about the case per se, but also about the ethics of scientific activities in general.

### **Text-books in linguistics**

Although the Finnish academic scene does not—strangely enough—highly merit the writing of university-level text-books, Fred has chosen to be active—among his other commitments—also in this field. His 1976 book *Johdatusta yleiseen kielitieteeseen*<sup>13</sup> was a much-needed filler of a vacuum in Finland. 1994 saw a totally re-written introduction to linguistics in the

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<sup>12</sup> *E. N. Setälä vaarallisilla vesillä* [‘E. N. Setälä in Dangerous Waters’], 2000.

<sup>13</sup> *Johdatusta yleiseen kielitieteeseen* [‘Introduction to General Linguistics’], 1976.

form of *Yleinen kielitiede*,<sup>14</sup> and in 1998 this book was subsequently revised and expanded into a version that is currently widely used in Finnish universities as *the* introduction to linguistics. This introductory book in linguistics has also been found to be useful elsewhere as in 2002 its Estonian version was published.<sup>15</sup>

Although his discipline, General Linguistics is sometimes regarded by linguists working in the other language departments as highly technical, abstract or theoretical, Fred has given part of his time and effort to writing more practically oriented text-books about the basic aspects of Finnish. The target population here is mostly non-Finnish-speaking readers. The first texts in this category were written as early as the 1970's in Swedish.<sup>16</sup> His *Suomen peruskielioppi*<sup>17</sup> has since been translated into English,<sup>18</sup> German,<sup>19</sup> Spanish,<sup>20</sup> Chinese<sup>21</sup> and Vietnamese.<sup>22</sup>



Fred with colleagues at the Department

<sup>14</sup> *Yleinen kielitiede* [‘General Linguistics’], 1994.

<sup>15</sup> *Üldkeeleteadus* [‘General Linguistics’], 2002.

<sup>16</sup> *Finskans struktur* [‘The Structure of Finnish’], 1976 and *Finsk grammatik* [‘Grammar of Finnish’], 1978.

<sup>17</sup> *Suomen peruskielioppi* [‘Basic Grammar of Finnish’], 1982.

<sup>18</sup> *Finnish Grammar*, 1983; and updated version *Finnish*, 1999.

<sup>19</sup> *Finnische Grammatik*, 1984.

<sup>20</sup> *Gramática básica del finés*, 1991.

<sup>21</sup> *Fenlanyu yufaxue*, 1994.

<sup>22</sup> *Văn phạm Phần-Lan bằng tiếng Việt*, 1995.

### More personal observations

It is typical of Fred that he questions the established ways of doing things and blind adherence to deeply rooted formulae and codes, whether they involve the subject-matter of linguistics or not, and, furthermore, that if he finds it fit, he will do things differently, but always with his superb style. The following example of this code-breaking attitude of his may serve as a relevant example: Anyone attending a Finnish PhD defence has observed, and literally felt on their skin, the effects of the rigidly regulated procedures that are characteristic of these events. In addition to the formal dress code and the rules of when to sit down or when to stand up, the final moments of the defence are opened by the author of the thesis, i.e., the defender, who (now standing, of course, how else!) turns to the audience and admonishes—strictly following a pre-set verbal formula—those in the audience having any comments against (sic!) the thesis to ask the chair for the floor. It is customary that an embarrassing moment of silence will fall in the auditorium following this request since nobody dares to say anything about (*verbatim*: ‘against’) a work that has taken circa 5 to 10 years of the author's life! It appears that Fred has taken as one of his duties, first of all, to attend as many PhD defences in languages and linguistics as possible, and furthermore, to present each author with an insightful and pertinent question at the final moments described above.

Reverting now to the offices and lecture-rooms of the Helsinki General Linguistics Department, we are pleased to say that it has been whispered to our ears from many sources that Fred is a teacher and a supervisor who is really interested in the well-being and success of his students. May the following brief anecdote by Maria Annala, a student of Fred's, show the “Fred way of doing things” in relation to his students:

It was my first year at the university, and I was at a student party organized by the association of the students of General Linguistics and Language Technology. Some department staff members were also attending the party, and Fred Karlsson was among them. At some point of the night I ended up talking alone with him in the kitchen, and I mentioned that I was interested in the Basque language and that it would be great to learn it. The conversation was very nice and Karlsson seemed to be truly interested in what I was saying, but nevertheless I was quite surprised when I saw the list of courses for next autumn: there was a beginners' course of the Basque language! I never found out if it was all just a coincidence, but I was nevertheless left with the feeling that our conversation had something to do with it. That made me feel very welcome at the Department of General Linguistics; it's nice to study in an environment where the students' opinions matter.



Formal speeches in a frequently recurring chain of events is an area of public activities that tests the speaker's ability to show that s/he regards each of the events in the series as a unique occasion. Orvokki Heinämäki, a long-term colleague of Fred's, recounts her impressions of the monthly graduation ceremony held while Fred was Dean of the Faculty of Arts:

Fred also served as the Dean of the Faculty of Arts for several years. One of the numerous duties of a dean is to conduct the graduation ceremony: to give degree certificates to students and make a speech. I attended this ceremony every time a student of linguistics graduated. Official speeches in Finland are not exactly that part of a programme that the audience is looking forward to. But Fred's speeches were different: they were informative, they were entertaining, they were delivered with style—and they were never long! The variety of topics he dealt with was impressive, as was the lack of repetition of topics—in spite of the fact that these ceremonies took place about once a month during each term.

In addition to being a splendid speaker Fred is also a good singer, as has been attested by many of his colleagues and students: It is not rare that at the right moment during a dinner party or a similar gathering Fred asks for the floor and delivers songs with a high number of stanzas, and depending on the occasion, the general mood and the song itself the lyrics can be heard (at least) in Swedish, Finnish, English or German. In an interview (August 2003) in *Åbo Underrättelser*, an Åbo/Turku newspaper, Fred modestly calls singing as a hidden talent of his. However, those having heard this talent unveiled would be inclined to say that some hidden abilities should be more often exposed.

With the writings following the present text only but a small portion of Fred's colleagues, students and friends are able to express their gratitude to Fred for his active part in the advancement of language research in its many forms, both on the national and on the international scene. If not anything else, may this tome remain a concrete means of congratulating Fred on his sixtieth birthday with our warm wishes that we will for many years to come see him in academia as well as in town (and Nagu).

