ALF AXELSSØN SOMMERFELT

Alf Axelssøn Sommerfelt, Emeritus Professor of General Linguistics at the University of Oslo and an honorary member of the Linguistic Society of America, died on 12 October 1965, as the result of an automobile accident at Nes, Norway. He was born in Trondheim, Norway, on 23 November 1892.

At the time of his death Sommerfelt was internationally known as one of the elder statesmen of linguistics, being president of the Permanent International Committee of Linguists (CIPL), vice-president of the International Council of Philosophy and Humane Sciences (CIPSH), editor of *Lochlann, a Review of Celtic Studies*, and review editor of *Norsk Tidsskrift for Sprogvidenskap*. He was president of the VIII International Congress of Linguists (Oslo, 1957). His services to linguistics included the recognition of our field by UNESCO through CIPSH, thanks to his membership first on the commission that planned the establishment of UNESCO in 1945, and then on its council from 1946–1952.

Sommerfelt's career as a linguist was marked by an unusual breadth of interests, supported by a well-nigh incredible diligence. One may gain some small impression of this by glancing at the selection of his articles printed as *Diachronic and synchronic aspects of language* (The Hague, 1962), hereafter abbreviated as *DSAL*. He made weighty contributions to the study of Indo-European comparative grammar, to Germanic (especially Scandinavian), and above all to Celtic languages. But he also went outside Indo-European, to the Caucasian and Australian languages. He wrote on all aspects of linguistic theory, synchronic as well as diachronic, from phonetics and phonemics to grammar and lexicography. He appears to have read virtually everything of any consequence in the field, as one may judge from the innumerable reviews which appeared over the years, especially in *NTS*.

The field which was closest to his heart, however, was the one which some are now calling 'sociolinguistics'. As a pupil of Meillet and Durkheim, he emphasized from the beginning of his teaching and writing the importance of social structure in explaining linguistic structure and its evolution. The total acceptance of language as 'un fait social' was a cardinal tenet for him, and one to which many of his researches were directed. In this respect he differed widely from his friend and contemporary Louis Hjelmslev, whose aim it was to establish an 'immanent' linguistics, from which all such 'transcendental' considerations would be eliminated. Although Sommerfelt was sometimes criticized for his too-ready identification of some linguistic structures as 'archaic', for example in his treatment of the Aranta language (*La langue et la société*, Oslo, 1938), his views on the problem were considerably more sophisticated than his critics supposed. One need only compare his early statements on the relationship of society and language (say in his response to the neo-grammarian criticisms of Hjalmar Falk, *Bulletin de la Société de linguistique de Paris* 25.22–33, 1924; reprinted in *DSAL* 18–25) with his last statement (in lectures delivered at the Linguistic Institute in Ann Arbor in 1954, 'Language, society and culture'; reprinted in *DSAL* 87–136) to see not

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only the unity in his outlook, but also his capacity for growth and sympathetic understanding of other points of view.

Sommerfelt's earliest and most enduring interest was in the area of Celtic languages, stimulated by his teacher Carl J. S. Marstrander. He spent extensive periods doing field work in Brittany, Ireland, and Wales, and the resulting publications may be said to have founded the field of Celtic dialectology. They included his French doctoral thesis (1921), *Le breton parlé à Saint-Pol-de-Léon* (Rennes, 1921; Paris, 1922), *The dialect of Torr, Co. Donegal, I: Phonology* (Christiania, 1922), *Studies in Cyfeiliog Welsh, A contribution to Welsh dialectology* (Oslo, 1925), *Munster vowels and consonants* (*Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 37.175–244, 1927), and *South Armagh Irish* (*NTS* 2.107–96, 1929). At the time of his death he was once more at work on his early notes, both in order to bring his earlier studies up to the level of his more mature insights and also to make available precious information on dialects now virtually extinct in their homelands. Volume III of *Lochlann* (Oslo, 1965) contained five such contributions, plus six shorter notes and five reviews.

While these studies were primarily descriptive-structural, he demonstrated his skill in historical linguistics with the thesis *Dē en italo-celtique* (Christiania, 1920). This was a study of the evolution, in these branches of Indo-European, from the use of an ablative case to the analytic structure of preposition plus noun. As a pupil at once of the historical linguist Alf Torp and the phonetician and Slavicist Olaf Broch, he was thoroughly trained both in historical and descriptive method. His bias toward French linguistics, however, meant that he always remained to some degree in opposition to the prevailingly neo-grammarian climate of Scandinavian linguistics.

As a pioneer in structural linguistics, he was close to the developing Prague school and participated actively in the linguistic congresses that resulted from its emergence on the international scene at The Hague in 1928. Among his contributions to the structural approach in historical linguistics may be mentioned his article on Scandinavian umlaut (*NTS* 7.355–62, 1934; reprinted in *DSAL* 292–8), which established the phonemic nature of that change. Another pioneering and provocative article was his rejection of the neo-grammarian concept that grammars cannot be mixed, in his article 'Un cas de mélange de grammaires' (*Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi, Avhandlinger*, No. 4, Oslo, 1926; reprinted in *DSAL* 26–31).

In the long run, it may be that Sommerfelt's most enduring contribution will be one that he himself valued the least, namely his lifelong work with the classical Norwegian dictionary, *Norsk Riksmålsordbok*. Appointed editor of this work in 1922, he devoted a constant share of his time to it during the rest of his life. He wrote a considerable portion of its 7,500 columns himself, completing his work in 1957. He then was engaged in the preparation of a supplementary volume, which has not yet appeared. Some of the theoretical problems involved in such a lexicographic enterprise were discussed, jointly with his fellow editor, Trygve Knudsen, in 'Principles of unilingual dictionary definitions' (*VIII International Congress of Linguistics, Proceedings* 92–98; reprinted in *DSAL* 277–81).

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He wrote judicious accounts of the Norwegian language problem for an international audience. He was one of the few Norwegians of whom it could be said (quoting an obituary by Professor Magne Oftedal) that 'he was able to keep linguistic science and language politics clearly apart in a country where the two have been almost indissolubly interwoven for a century' (*Dagbladet*, Oslo, 13 October 1965). He also wrote several popular books on language for Norwegian readers, successfully combining exact scholarly knowledge with a readable presentation for a literate public.

The extension of Sommerfelt's influence beyond the circle of international linguists was initiated during World War II, when his patriotic impulses led him to join the Norwegian government in its escape from German aggression on 9 April 1940. During the Norwegian government's residence-in-exile in London from 1940 to 1945, he functioned as director of the Educational Section in its Ministry of Church and Education. He was the recipient of an honorary doctor's degree from Oxford University in 1942. In 1962–63 he was a Fellow of the Center for Advanced Studies in Behavioral Science at Stanford, California. His home at Sandbakken, near Oslo, was a haven of hospitality for visiting linguists from many countries, not least for the many Americans who had come to know him and his gifted wife Aimée over the years.

A partial bibliography of Sommerfelt's writings appeared in the series of *Biographies et conférences* published by Sever Pop (No. 3, Louvain, 1957); it is to be hoped that a complete list will now be compiled.

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