

Tribute to John H. Esling, the Larynx Guru: Professor, Supervisor, and Friend

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I got to know John Esling literally from the inside-out. I first “met” him sometime late in my undergraduate phase. I was finishing my undergraduate degree when my interest in pharyngeals started to bud. It may have been because Darrin Flynn (Howe) had directed my attention to the peculiar case of Morley Stoney, where its Siouan-inherited velar fricatives had metamorphosed into pharyngeals. Or perhaps it was exposure to the rare Bzyb recordings stored on DAT tape in the University of Calgary’s Phonetic Inventory¹: this dialect of Abkhaz (Northwest Caucasian) has pharyngealized uvular fricatives – quite a treat for the ear. Whatever the case, Michael (‘Mike’) Dobrovolsky² must have taken notice. One day, he handed me a VHS tape entitled *John Esling, Pharyngeal Articulations, 1998*, and said, “you had better take a look at this”. Well that night I dusted off the old VCR and popped in the video, not really knowing what to expect. The articulatory ballet entranced me. There was John’s larynx, doing what I considered to be a miraculous performance of complex motions. Through each iteration of the carrier sentence <He hit i_i quickly>³, I saw new developments. First was the glottal fricative, nothing too shocking; then came the glottal stops. This is when I first became aware that these were more than just “glottal”. Next came the pharyngeals, and I could not quite believe what I was seeing. Those lesser known, upper parts of the larynx started to do *pliés* and *arabesques* in ways I never thought possible – and, wow, what a sound could be heard during the underscore of <i_i>! But the *pièce de résistance* was surely what followed: there was a lighting change (a stroboscope was engaged), and then John’s larynx started to perform a graceful *fouetté en tournant* – aryepiglottic trilling (although I do not think I realized what to call it at the time). At that moment, my fate was set: I had to learn more from this mysterious phonetician, whom I could only recognize from the inside.

I came to the University of Victoria in 2006 with the expectation of doing my Master’s research on pharyngeal sounds (essentially, I wanted to stick tiny cameras into peoples’ heads). I first met the outside of John during my introductory visit to the UVic Department of Linguistics. I was green, I was keen,

¹ Courtesy of Sean Fulop (Department of Linguistics, Fresno State University, California) much of the data can be freely accessed at
<<http://zimmer.csufresno.edu/~sfulop/UCPI/UCPI%20index.html>>.

² Michael Dobrovolsky passed away in October 2012.

³ A sentence carefully designed with vowels that optimize viewing of the larynx.

I was excited – I was ready to get my hands on the laryngoscope. I found John⁴ in the department kitchen preparing tea and introduced myself as his new MA student. John asked what I was hoping to do. I explained that I wanted to look at pharyngeal sounds using laryngoscopy. John looked dour. He said, “We’ve done that already. Now we’re listening to pre-babbling babies in O and P language environments.” My heart sank. I did not readily deduce what “O” and “P” languages⁵ were, and I certainly had not one iota of interest in being stuck for several years listening to the irritating sound of babies crying. I was thus struck with the horrible realization that I might have made the wrong decision of where to do my graduate research.

But all did not turn out so disastrously. After overcoming my initial disappointment, I tried to keep an open mind about the babies. However, it turned out that baby sounds were not to be part of my graduate school experience. On the first day of my first seminar in graduate-level phonetics taught by John, it came out that we (phoneticians) were in need of a good 3D model of the larynx. Like lightning my hand shot up – “I can do that!” I shouted, greedily not wanting any of the other students to have a chance at the opportunity. And so it came to be that John would sponsor me to develop just such a model: I was saved from the sound of screaming babies.

Working with John was always rewarding, but it was not always easy, especially for a student with an underdeveloped sense of self-confidence. When I took my first great step forward in producing a 3D rendering of the larynx, I ran to John excitedly to show him the progress I had made: he rather flatly remarked that it looked like a “deformed rabbit”⁶. As time rolled on, I had to develop a thick skin, as John was fond of making zoomorphic interpretations of my models and, later on, my other research endeavors (which usually involved some form of imaging). Surely my favorite of these observations is John’s statement that one of my later versions of the 3D larynx gave him the impression of a “vampiric turkey”.

My time as a graduate student at UVic under John’s supervision, first as a Master’s student and then as Ph.D. student, was filled with a bounty of opportunities to travel and rub shoulders with many of the great speech researchers. Almost all of these opportunities were because of John’s support and his encouragement to get the work “out there”. These trips afforded some of the most memorable moments in my time as John’s student. My most vivid memory is of my sojourn with John and Allison Benner in München in 2007. In my naïveté of German cuisine, I made the mistake of ordering a *Topf* (pot) for dessert one evening. What arrived at the table was a gargantuan cast-iron pan brimming with an *ungeheuerliche* mash of overly rich, calorie-laden ingredients. It left a

⁴ I must add that he was sporting a very dashing beard at the time.

⁵ Later I would discover that these were cover terms for languages with largely oral sounds (“O languages”) and those that also have sounds with active involvement of the pharynx and larynx (“P languages”), such as Bai and Moroccan Arabic.

⁶ Perhaps apropos for the UVic environment at the time which was swarming with bunnies.

deep impression on me. Not because it was delicious mind you. Rather it was because when one eats in the company of John, one is under duress to eat every last bite – and so eat every last bite is what I did. (Oh the crapulence!) That trip, I also had the awkward experience of sharing a bed with John. We had two hotel rooms booked, but there were three of us (me, John, and Allison). Naturally, Allison took one of the rooms for herself; John and I were left with the *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* experience⁷. But what is most indelibly burned into my memory about that trip is waking up to the sight of John’s face hovering eerily over mine and John saying, in an off-putting manner, “Wir haben Müsli”. So, yes, I slept with my professor. Life goes on.

Indeed, John Esling is an eccentric individual⁸. Spend a little time with him and you may find yourself bewildered by his desultory conversational style, his frequent and often obscure references, and his uncontrollable urge to manipulate his voice quality while speaking⁹. But he has a scintillating wit and he is an incredible wordsmith, even if his approach is somewhat oblique. I would often think of him as the phonetician version of the Delphic Oracle and his graduate students as the Pythian priesthood, frantically trying to record every granule of wisdom that he would utter. I often found myself contemplating the cryptic things he would say for some time afterwards, only to finally realize the profound insights they contained. His knowledge of phonetics and mastery of language has evidently allowed him to perform some unbelievable feats: I have witnessed him hold a conversation in Portuguese with a native speaker, even though (to my knowledge) John has had little, if any, formal training in the language. John also had a habit of playing with different accents whenever he would review a document I had written. Even though I think he was sometimes poking fun at my writing when he did this, I still enjoyed every minute of it.

I feel deeply proud to have been John’s student. His passion for the human voice is infectious and his scientific curiosity has done a great deal to push forward our understanding of the role of the larynx in speech and beyond. It was indeed a great honor that I was able to be part of his team. As a phonetician, John comes from a background that emphasizes the role of listening – auditory analysis, which is a tradition that I believe is fading as we become more and more reliant on technology to do the listening for us. While quantitative approaches to linguistic research are necessary and indeed essential to good research, I hope to also carry forward John’s emphasis on auditory analysis. Listening affords an opportunity for phonetic insight that cannot be found in numbers alone. It was John’s auditory attention to phonetic detail that led him to establish a very productive research program and to shed light on the less understood mechanisms of the larynx. He and others were then able to apply his findings to the very earliest sounds that human beings make on their journey to becoming linguistically enabled. I have little doubt that his contributions to the field will continue to resonate and drive research for many decades into the

⁷ Well, without the vibrating bed, cans of beer, and “pillows”, mind you.

⁸ But what linguist is not?

⁹ Although one might level this charge at any phonetician.

future. And even though, as his former student, I am biased in the matter, I nonetheless feel assured in my belief that he ranks among the very greatest of all phoneticians.