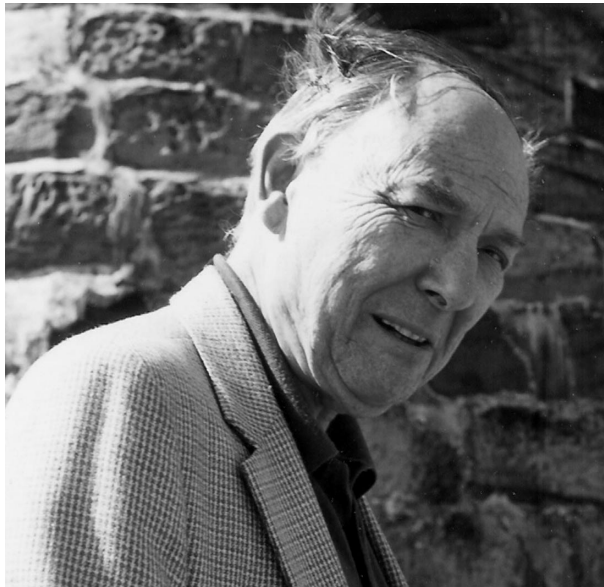


Leigh Lisker

1918–2006

An important force in shaping the field of experimental phonetics was lost to us March 24, 2006 with the death at the age of 87 of Leigh Lisker, Professor Emeritus of Linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania, scientist at Haskins Laboratories, and Fellow of the Acoustical Society of America. He was born to Ephraim and Sarah Lisker December 7, 1918 in Philadelphia, Pa., USA. He had all his higher education at the University of Pennsylvania, earning the BA degree in German in 1941, as well as the MA in



1946 and the PhD in 1949, the latter two in linguistics. He was a US Army veteran of the Second World War, having served in Italy and North Africa interrogating German prisoners of war. He married Sara Starekow in Philadelphia in August 1947.

I first met Leigh in the fall of 1955 when he spoke as a guest lecturer one evening at a new Columbia University graduate course on acoustic phonetics given by the late Franklin S. Cooper at the Haskins Laboratories, then in New York City. He spoke about research that he had recently begun at Haskins. I was so taken with the clarity of his presentation along with his unassuming manner, pleasant demeanor, and wry sense of humor that this turned into the precursor of a collegueship and strong friendship that lasted until his death.

In the early years of his academic career at the University of Pennsylvania, Leigh Lisker sat astraddle two programs, Linguistics and South Asia Regional Studies. Two Fulbright-Hays fellowships in India added to his standing in the latter. His positions

as Assistant Professor (1951–1959) and then Associate Professor (1960–1964) of Linguistics and Dravidian Languages gave him a certain amount of stress by pulling him in two directions. His full professorship (1965–1989) was just in the Department of Linguistics, where he also served as Chairman for 8 years (1970–1978). The doctoral candidates who did their dissertations under his guidance, most of whom I came to know, were grateful for his patient, kind, and insightful supervision.

Although known internationally primarily as an experimental phonetician whose research bore on phonological issues, Leigh also had general linguistic interests [e.g., Lisker, 1951] and pedagogical concerns [e.g., Lisker, 1963]. He was an avid learner of languages, often pressing casual acquaintances, in a kind of informal fieldwork, for basic words and expressions in their languages.

Leigh's first publication in experimental phonetics [Lisker, 1948] is, for its time, extraordinary. The major books and articles that influenced us all so much did not begin to appear until a few years later. The groundbreaking textbook *Acoustic Phonetics* [Joos, 1948] appearing the same year was a valuable source, as were comments on Leigh's work by Martin Joos himself. Happily, Leigh was welcomed to the facilities of the Bell Telephone Laboratories in nearby Murray Hill, N.J., where he had valuable guidance from such luminaries as Ralph E. Potter, John C. Steinberg, and Gordon E. Peterson. Using the still new sound spectrograph, he did a meticulous, theoretically well-motivated analysis within a limited consonantal context of the distinction between the vowels /æ/ and /ɛ/ of his own Philadelphia dialect of American English. It was this pioneering work that caused Pierre Delattre a few years later to bring him to the attention of Franklin S. Cooper and Alvin M. Liberman, who had no trouble in persuading him to become affiliated with the research staff of Haskins Laboratories.

Although Leigh's record shows considerable breadth of interest in phonetic questions, the major focus of his career has been on the way that languages exploit glottal control over phonological distinctions between consonants along dimensions traditionally labeled voicing and aspiration. He began this line of work with a study of English intervocalic stop consonants [Lisker, 1957] and those of Tamil [Lisker, 1958] before entering into discussions with me over laryngeal control of the timing of glottal gestures to yield voicing, turbulence, or silence, as well as combinations of the first two. Word-initial position appeared to be the environment in which most languages exploited these properties along a plausibly temporal dimension for phonological contrasts of consonants. Given our focus on initial position, we labeled the dimension voice onset time (VOT), a label we later came to realize could better be replaced, because of relevance to other positions in utterances, with something like 'laryngeal timing'. Examining languages that varied in the number of distinct categories to be distinguished – two, three, or four – we found acoustic support for our temporal hypothesis, even though certain categories required, not surprisingly, one or another dimension in addition to VOT for part of the system [Lisker and Abramson, 1964]. Immediately thereafter, we began to obtain perceptual validation of our findings with synthetic speech [Abramson and Lisker, 1965]. Aside from the fact that this led to a further long and rich collaboration between Leigh and me, it was also gratifying to see so many other investigators exploit the notion in interesting and revealing ways.

Given my own shifting interests, our serious collaboration in VOT and related matters was not very active after 1987, but Leigh did much further work on the topic [e.g., Lisker, 1999]. At the same time, he ventured into other phonetic areas and arguments on theories of speech perception [e.g., Lisker and Rossi, 1992]. His last

professional public appearance was for the giving of an invited talk in Zagreb, Croatia at the 5th Scientific Conference with International Participation: Speech Research, December 9–11, 2004. His topic was ‘To Reliably Voice an Initial English [b], Nasalize It’. Back home, in spite of repeated attempts, he was never well enough to write up this work to his satisfaction for publication.

Leigh shared a deep interest in the arts with his late wife Sara. Indeed, prompted by his love of music, taking lessons in playing the violin, cello, flute, and sitar was a prominent part of his life of learning. He is survived by his son Roy Lisker, his daughters Lisa J. Lisker and Carol Lisker Kennedy, with her husband Donald, and two grandchildren, Daniel Kennedy and Susan Kennedy. His keen intellect, his sensitive and benevolent response to people with problems, and, for me, his lasting friendship and concern, will be sorely missed.

Arthur S. Abramson, New Haven, Conn.

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