Akira Ota (1917–2015)

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Akira Ota, Advisor and the first chair of the editorial board of the English Linguistic Society of Japan, died on December 31, 2015 of aspiration pneumonia at the age of 98. Ota was one of the world's preeminent linguists and educators. His career spanned more than 70 years, during which time he produced original and influential works in linguistics and also contributed greatly to English education, training many able linguists and English teachers in Japan.

Ota was born in Kanagawa Prefecture on July 21, 1917, and upon graduation in 1935 from Yokosuka Middle School, a high school under the old system, he entered Tokyo Higher Normal School (THNS, later Tokyo University of Education, now Tsukuba University). At THNS, he was given strict training in the use of English, especially in oral communication, by earnest teachers including A. S. Hornby, a collaborator of Harold Palmer. As a result of daily drills in oral communication at THNS, Ota was able to make himself well understood in English when he attended a meeting of the Japan-America Student Conference, which was held each year, alternating between Japan and the U.S. After graduating from THNS in 1939 at the age of 22, he was appointed assistant professor of English at Otaru College of Commerce. While teaching there, he translated several Japanese novels into English, including *Seibei and a Gourd* by Naoya Shiga and *Takasebune* by Ogai Mori. His talent of English translation blossomed into the translation of Yoichi Nakagawa's love story, *A Moonflower in Heaven*, which was published in 1949. Returning to Tokyo in 1942, he became a full-time lecturer at Tokyo University of Commerce (now Hitotsubashi University) until 1944, when he entered Tokyo Bunrika University (TBU). Until the end of the Second World War, however, normal classes at the university were held for only four months, the other seven months being spent working in a small factory following wartime emergency regulations and serving in the Imperial Marines in Yokosuka. After the war, when he returned to the university, he began to translate *Die Sprache Shakespeares in Vers und Prosa* by W. Franz into Japanese, which was later published in 1958 with S. Saito and H. Yamaguchi as co-translators. At TBU he read many linguistic works including those by Saussure, Bally, Spitzer, Brentano, Marty, and Deutschbein. The linguistic

theme he was most interested in was the comparative study of English and Japanese. In 1944 he graduated from TBU and in 1948 he became a lecturer at his alma mater and was promoted to professor in 1950.

Ota's full-fledged linguistic study began in July 1950 when he went to the University of Michigan (UM) as a GARIOA exchange student. He received an MA degree from Michigan in 1951. He also studied at Yale University until June 1952. What he saw, heard and experienced in the U.S. during this period is described in two books, *Present-Day Things American* (1954) and *A Garioan in The United States* (1955). Under the guidance of prominent scholars such as C. C. Fries, K. L. Pike, and A. H. Marckwardt, he devoted himself to the study of structural linguistics, which was in its prime at that time, especially the field of phonemics. From his academic adviser, Fries, Ota learned how to carefully select a large corpus of linguistic data and give it an objective statistical analysis without mentalistic explanations. One of the fruitful results of his study at UM appeared as *Phonemics of American English*, a structuralist work characteristically original and rich in content, which was published in 1959 and for which he received the Bunrika University Award. Another result was his Ph.D. dissertation, *Tense and Aspect of Present-Day American English*, which he later submitted to UM in 1962 and which was published the following year. It received an enthusiastic review by Martin Joos in *Language* and has become established as a modern classic in the field; when Joos published his own book on English verbs in 1964, *The English Verb: Form and Meanings*, Ota wrote a review of it in *Language* the following year.

Ota became an associate professor at Tokyo University of Education (TUE) in 1952 and a professor in 1962. During Sept. 1960 and Jan. 1961, on a fellowship from UNESCO, Ota visited laboratories and research institutes in India, Denmark, Sweden, the U.S.S.R., West Germany, the Netherlands, France, and England. Forty years later, he published the records of his grand tour in a volume: *My Grand Tour: Resources for Reconsideration of English Education* (1999). After this grand tour, he studied linguistics again at UM for 14 months under the sponsorship of the Ford Foundation, receiving a Ph.D. degree in 1962 as mentioned above.

During 1962–1966 Ota belonged to the Modern Language Institute of TUE, which was established in 1960 with the aid of UNESCO. In May 1966, he returned to the Department of English. Soon after that, three of his former students, M. Ukaji, T. Nakao, and M. Kajita, were received into the same department, and with their help Ota started a linguistic circle at the university in 1968; four years later, the first issue of a new linguistic journal, *Studies in English Linguistics*, with Ota as editor, was published. This journal continued until 1983, when the English Linguistic Society of Japan was established and its journal began to be published with Ota as chair of the editorial board for the

first four years. Helping the first President, Minoru Yasui, and other members of the society, Ota greatly contributed to laying the foundations of the English Linguistic Society of Japan.

In 1969 Ota was invited to read a paper at the International Conference on English Verbs which was held at the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, D.C. on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the foundation of the Center. The title of his paper was "Modals and Some Semi-auxiliaries in English," which appeared in *ELEC Publications*, Vol. 9 (1972). Also in 1971 he was invited to the Pacific Conference on Contrastive Linguistics and Linguistic Universals at the University of Hawaii. The papers he read at these conferences were influenced by the new approaches of transformational generative grammar. In 1974 he was invited to the socio-linguistic session of the World Conference of Sociology, which was held in Toronto, and he submitted a paper for discussion with the title "Language Problems in Science and Technology Education in Japan."

Ota devoted his energies for more than 20 years, starting from its planning in 1967, to a grand linguistic project in 15 volumes titled *Outline of English Linguistics* (1971–1990). As editor of these volumes, Ota himself wrote the following three with other linguists as co-authors: *Grammar I* (1972) with A. Ikeya and Y. Murata, *Grammar II* (1974) with M. Kajita, and *General Index* (1990) with Y. Kato.

With the closing of the Faculty of Literature of TUE in 1977, as a result of the university's final decision to move the university campuses to Tsukuba City in Ibaraki Prefecture, the base of the linguistic circle which he had started moved to Sophia University, where he had begun to teach as a full-time professor after retiring from TUE in the same year. While he was teaching at Sophia University, Ota edited with his colleague, F. Lobo, the first four volumes of *Current Trends in Overseas Linguistics* (1982–1987). He also edited with M. Kajita 12 volumes of *New Selections in English Grammar* (1985–1990). After teaching at Sophia University for ten years, he was offered a position at Kyoto University of Foreign Studies, where he spent the rest of his teaching career until 1996.

His prominent linguistic approach of reconsidering very fundamental assumptions or leading ideas on the basis of actual analysis of empirical data was also extended to the field of negation. His interest in negation had begun to deepen since around the time when he was studying modal auxiliaries in the 1970s, and after spending two years writing, in 1980 he published his magnum opus, *Semantics of Negation: A Prolegomena to Semantics*. This book, highly original and challenging, consists of two parts: the first part, with the title 'Methodology,' critically scrutinizes various theories of meaning, and the second one, 'Semantic Interpretation of Negation,' formulates basic ideas and principles needed

for semantic interpretation of negation. For this monumental work he received the Japan Academy Award in 1982. He was also awarded the Order of the Rising Sun by the Japanese Government in 1988. In 1997, on the occasion of his eightieth birthday, Ota was presented with a festschrift containing 90 papers by his colleagues, friends, and students.

Besides producing his own influential books and papers, Ota also introduced abroad the study and teaching of English in Japan, as shown in his papers “The Study of English in Japan” (1967) and “The Teaching of English in Japan” (1962), respectively. As another contribution to linguistics and English education, he introduced in Japan new ideas and developments of linguistic theories with his lucid comments and explanations. His other work is contained in more than one hundred scholarly articles, most of which were collected by Ota himself and reprinted in three separate books: *About English Linguistics and English Education* (1977), *My Pilgrimage: Concerning English Studies and Education* (1997) and *Collected Writings: On the Study and Teaching of English* (1998). We are fortunate that through these books we can still listen and talk to this great linguist and educator who loved language and linguistics.

One of the world’s eminent linguists who greatly influenced Ota was Noam Chomsky. Ota had a high opinion of him, saying that he had made linguistics such an interesting and significant field of inquiry, and that he had kept it lively, exciting, and ever more challenging and demanding by constantly introducing fresh, fruitful, and stimulating ideas and insights. Linguists who are really worthy of such high praise are rare. The students of Ota, including myself, know that he himself was one of those rare linguists, as well as a stern but warm-hearted and estimable teacher.

In October 2015, when I visited him in the hospital a few months before his death, I found on the table beside his bed two of Chomsky’s books, *Knowledge of Language: Its Nature, Origin, and Use* (1986) and *Generative Grammar: Its Basis, Development and Prospects* (1988). I was very impressed with his everlasting great interest in linguistics. It reminded me of Matsuo Basho’s haiku poem:

tabi ni yande
yume wa kareno wo
kake-meguru

Sickness on a journey,
My dreams go wandering round
Withered fields.

(trans. by Donald Keene)