An anthropologist/psychiatrist looks at Southeast Asian (including Japanese) linguistics¹

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I must begin this talk with both a confession and an announcement. Two years ago I accepted a royalty payment and this past year I accepted another. The amount involved was not large - my wife recently totaled it up on her calculator and informed me that I am undoubtedly the lowest paid worker in the world, including even Haiti, Swaziland and other Third World countries. The fact remains, however, that I did accept the payments and am now a professional.

No one was more surprised by this turn of events than I, with the possible exception of the publisher. It means, of course, that I can no longer take refuge under the cloak of amateurism. I used to wonder why so many of my published papers went unnoticed. I finally came to realize that my colleagues were reluctant to criticize me because of my amateur status in the field. Figuring that it would not be fair. Not all of them, of course - I have occasionally run into an unkind critic but by and large I've led a charmed life. This has had a most unfortunate effect upon my writing, however, since it has allowed me to become more and more cryptic, even unreadable at times. I am pretty disorganized around my study and tend to lose track of notes on this and that. One day a great light dawned on me: why not put all these notes in articles and get them published - that way they can never get lost! This is not altogether true since sometimes I even lose the published articles themselves but it is a vast improvement over my earlier situation. It does mean, of course, that I've been turning out articles mainly for my own convenience, the idea being that (a) probably none will be read very carefully and (b) even if by chance one does get read I probably won't be criticized.

So much for the confession part. Some of you may even have thought that I can't write any clearer than that! Well, I can, and I hereby announce that from now on anything that I turn out will be readable. I've been practicing lately on my Japanese/Austro-Tai book, which I'm plugging here just as any of you professionals might. The book is simply loaded with tables, references, explanatory notes and all sorts of help for the readers. After the Austro-Tai book came out some 10 years ago an eminent linguist informed me that I had made the readers do far too much work - 'and they'll never do it'. He was right, of course, and in fact he is one of the few linguists in the field who appears actually to have read the book. I have learned my lesson now; the reader of my new book will do absolutely no work at all and, without even having to think, will put down the book with the firm knowledge that Japanese is simply another branch of the great Austro-Tai stock.

This talk has been advertised as a 'leap in the level of generality' and I shall attempt to make it just that. I'll be discussing several matters that have been of interest to me over the years: how did we all get to be linguists and why did we choose the specific field or fields in which we are working; how do we perceive what we are doing and it is possible that this perception plays a role in the results that we attain; how do doctrines become established in the field and how do they influence our findings; how to interpret the

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prominent role played by anthropologists in Southeast Asian linguistics; finally, how to explain what appear to be certain improbable happenings or 'mysteries' in the field.

I was a bookworm of sorts as a child and was even known to carry a dictionary about with me at times, all of which I did my best to hide from my friends. It was confidently predicted that I would grow up to be a professor or, perhaps, a writer. I originally thought that other linguists had similar backgrounds but was disabused of this notion years ago when traveling in the Far East. An English woman introduced herself to me as Miss Wolfenden and I made a remark to the effect that I was familiar with the work of a distinguished scholar of the same surname: Stuart N. Wolfenden. On hearing this she burst out, evidently in great surprise:

"Good old Stu! He's my cousin, you know. And the family never thought he'd amount to anything".

Miss Wolfenden then proceeded to question me at some length, as if to assure herself that 'good old Stu' had really made his mark in the world. For my own part, I found it difficult to believe that a great linguist like Wolfenden, after whom a society has been named, could somehow have remained so utterly unimpressive in his formative years. I've read how Einstein once got a C or D in chemistry or something but this was ridiculous. Or was it? The 'good old Stu' syndrome has haunted me over the years. Was he one of a kind, really? But how would one find out? Wouldn't most scholars with the syndrome not realize that they had it?

As you can see, I haven't got very far with that problem nor, for that matter, with a somewhat related problem: what intrinsic factors underlie our choice of this or that special area of linguistics? In medicine there are some fairly clearcut differences in the specialties, e.g. as an intern and later as a resident I discovered that if one wanted to engage in an intellectual discussion he'd better seek out a pathologist or a psychiatrist and, if he wanted it to be a rational discussion, he'd better stick to the pathologist. How about linguists - why does one become a comparatist, especially of the armchair variety, or a decipherer of oracle bones or specialist in Archaic Chinese reconstruction, or a grammarian or an analyst of 'deep structures'?

I spent some of my residency years in a research institute and became interested in the general field of intelligence and special abilities, which I pursued later in my career as a psychiatrist. I've always favored a radical position, which sees intelligence as a mosaic of pluses and minuses, so to speak, each to some degree independent of the others, as opposed to the prevailing view that so-called 'test scattering' is the result of psychological blocking in this or that area. This view came very naturally to me since I am grossly defective in the area of small mechanical manipulation and I refuse to believe that I am undergoing a psychological block every time I try to change a razor blade or open a small package of something in a restaurant. In fact, I have long argued that neuroticism is, to a considerable degree, the result of defective social intelligence: the neurotic suffers because he misinterprets the social world around him just as I and others of my tribe suffer because we fail to understand how these bastardsly little objects work.

To return now to linguistics, one would have to suppose that we all have 'verbal ability' but surely this in itself must be a complex mosaic. Howard Gardiner at Harvard and other cognitive psychologists now talk about 'multiple intelligences' but they are using the word in a much broader sense, e.g. one of several such 'intelligences' is described as musical ability. I'm not at all sure that musical ability has any genetically programed relationship with verbal ability, e.g. I've known linguists to show good ability in recording, in general, but poor ability in handling tones. The old view of a 'little g'
Intelligence Factor is still applicable, I believe, but it is very much influenced by input: in dealing with small mechanical objects it is my input that is at fault; once I see how the little sons-of-bitches work I'm pretty good at playing around with them, as in improving them for the benefit of defectives like myself.

How does all this relate to our choice of this or that special field in linguistics? My impression is that the principal differentiating factors are connected with input rather than with 'little g', with comparativists more under the influence of visual than of auditory factors. There is also an intriguing possibility that more than one 'little g' is involved, e.g. one concerned with synchronic and another with diachronic parameters. This would nicely explain, of course, why otherwise brilliant students of languages have on occasion produced idiotic papers in the field of historical linguistics. And, for all I know, perhaps the other way around.

In addition to the above there is also the matter of special abilities, which may even cut across other relationships. Some of these are likely to remain unknown except under very special circumstances, as I can testify to from my own experience.

Until some 10 years ago I had always questioned my own language ability, believing that my linguistic results had been achieved largely through 'little g' factors plus a lifetime of absorbing linguistic data of various kinds. I have often complained about having a terrible handicap as a linguist: poor language ability. And I haven't been kidding - I am abysmally poor in handling spoken languages and mediocre, at best, in dealing with written languages, e.g. I have been working on Chinese for almost 50 years and I still find myself baffled by it much of the time. I have it, on good authority, that the following kind of criticism has been leveled against me: Benedict can't be any good because he doesn't know any languages. True enough - but maybe I've been using a 'secret weapon' all these years.

About 10 years ago I attended a hospital seminar on hearing disabilities at which a special record was played to illustrate the problems faced by patients with hearing disorders in which various frequencies had been disrupted. In the introductory material on the record it is stated that the material being read will not be understandable because of the distortion produced by the dropped frequencies. I found, to my surprise, that I had no difficulty with it and, in fact, I was even thinking that I'd still be able to understand it with far more distortion. After the record stopped, I remarked to the lecturer that the company should be notified of the mistake in the introduction. The audience of some 40 to 50 staff members, looked at me in amazement and I suddenly realized that I had been the only one to have had this experience. I did my best to explain in terms of my being a linguist but later I discovered that the others felt I had only been kidding. Even as in the past, when I had told stories about languages called 'Miao-Yao'.

Ever since that day I've wondered whether I've been making use of some special ability without realizing it, running disconnected bits of linguistic data by an analyzer of some sort and asking it to fill in the gaps. Could it be that I've even arrived at certain reconstructions in this manner? If so, I must admit that my analyzer has made some terrible mistakes! But it also appears to be working even when I'm not aware of it, hence my experience at times of having solutions to problems pop up in my mind when I'm engaged in an altogether different thought process, e.g. discussing a psychiatric patient. I wonder how many of you are aware of similar abilities of one kind or another and, if so, whether you see any connection with your work.

And then there is the matter of how we perceive what we are doing and the possible influence upon our linguistic results. Here again I can only talk
about my own perceptions by way of illustration.

A lifelong fantasy of mine has been prospecting for treasures of one kind or another, perhaps diamonds or the like - 'goodies'. I've always regarded prospecting as an ideal occupation, particularly in unknown territories. I believe that this has led me into all sorts of strange places in Southeast Asia - linguistically, that is - turning out papers on a variety of subjects, to a degree not otherwise readily explainable. It may even have influenced my findings at times by enhancing the quality of a discovery - and I use that last word advisedly. So please keep this in mind when you read some of my publications. But it has been fun!

At a somewhat deeper level, it is undoubtedly significant that my father was an architect and that my mother wrote poetry, so that linguistics was something of a compromise for me. I am a 'natural' as an architect and have actually designed and built houses. My linguistic reconstructions are literally 'constructions' and I constantly find myself writing about 'frameworks' and the like. This probably explains in large measure my use of what I've called 'teledo-reconstruction' since this procedure affords an over-all framework within which one can operate at will, modifying here and there as one might move a wall in a building under construction. This underlying need to fit everything, almost from the very beginning, into a large framework probably also explains certain aspects of my approach to the reconstruction of Archaic Chinese. By way of illustration, the medial -r-line, which has just been presented to you in some detail, will not do for me since it cannot be fitted into Sino-Tibetan, in my opinion, e.g. the basic root for 'kill' simply does not have a medial *r- in Tibeto-Burman. A leading exponent of the -r- system once explained this to me along the lines of 'you can't win them all'; this is rather better than the method employed by other exponents of simply excluding the root, yet I can't have 'losers' like that in my edifice; it will all tumble down!

In addition, this facet of my background explains in large measure my opposition to what I call 'formulaic linguistics', as practised notably by Dyen and his students in the field of Austronesian studies. The position taken by these practitioners is that proto-forms are essentially unknowable and that one can only tag sets of reflexes with whatever symbols are convenient, and little matter that on occasion one can end up with several /s/'s and as many as five /w/ 's. I find it difficult to build linguistic edifices with material of that kind, however, hence my architectural bias leads me to try to resolve all such reconstruction problems. This does make comparative linguistics hard work, to be sure, but I believe that it enables one to arrive at reconstructions otherwise unattainable, e.g. in the case of Austro-Tai, the 'formulaic' approach failed to uncover a separate Proto-Austronesian alveolo-palatal series, as shown by distinct reflexes in Japanese.

The perception of my linguistic work as an art form is a far more subtle thing. I do find myself thinking of a given solution as 'beautiful' and saying to myself at times things like: if this is not right it ought to be right. It is quite possible that on occasion a 'beautiful' but incorrect solution has found its way into some publication of mine. I recall only one definite case of this type, however, and I'm glad to say that esthetics eventually triumphed here. I once outlined a 'beautiful' etymology for Polynesian tabu, based on the *t- prefixed *a(m)pu kinship term for 'grandparents' ~ 'uncles/aunts', etc. even though I knew about the apparently related Cham word: tabuq; it is now clear that final *-ŋ is widespread in Western Malayo-Polynesian as a kinship term suffix, thus restoring the viability of my original etymology for tabu. It is always a pleasure to see art triumph!