

IN MEMORIAM:
ALLEN WALKER READ
(1906-2002)

JESSE LEVITT

OUR SOCIETY [The American Society of Geolinguistics] has been profoundly saddened by the death of Allen Walker Read on October 16, 2002.

Dr. Read was considered the foremost living authority on American English. He was a member of our Society for more than thirty years, during which he served first as a member of our Board of Directors and later as President. His lecture "What is Linguistic Imperialism?" which he gave in October 1968, appeared as an article in the first issue of our journal in 1974. He was a frequent speaker at our meetings. In January 1970 his topic was "The Geolinguistics of Verbal Taboo." In May 1974 he spoke on "A Planetary Perspective on the Migration of Words." In October 1978 he dealt with "The Evocative Power of National Names." His lecture in December 1978 was on "The Scope of Geolinguistics." In other talks he dealt with "The Cliché and Platitude in Language Economy" (November 1979), "The Westward Sweep of the American Vocabulary" (March 1981), "Milestones in the Branching of British and American Vocabulary" (January 1983), and "The Allegiance to Dictionaries in American Linguistic Attitudes" (December 1984).

* Jesse Levitt is Editor emeritus of *Geolinguistics*, the journal of the American Society of Geolinguistics. Reprinted with permission from *Geolinguistics*.

Regrettably, many of his lectures did not appear in our journal. Dr. Read was a perfectionist, and his many activities in other linguistics organizations probably prevented him from offering final texts for some of his lectures. Before Dr. Read's death, Leonard R.N. Ashley edited Read's unpublished onomastic papers (published by Mellen Press) and Richard Bailey edited Read's previously published papers on other aspects of the American language (published by Duke University Press). Dr. Read's geolinguistic papers have not been collected. However, his article "The Contribution of Sociolinguistics to the Peace-Keeping Process" appeared in our 1982 journal. Our 1984 journal carries the article "The Impact of 'Ethnicity' on Attitudes toward the English Language." At our twentieth anniversary conference in 1985, Dr. Read spoke on "The Embattled Dominance of English in the United States." He spoke again at our 1992 conference on "Problems of Speakers of English in the Naming of Foreign Countries." His lectures and articles were invariably models of scholarly integrity and at the same time remained perfectly clear to non-specialists, avoiding the technical obfuscation typical of many specialists in linguistics. In the nineties he was the genial host of the Society at meetings held at Columbia University. Unobtrusively, he was a generous financial backer of our Society.

Through the years he attended virtually every one of our annual luncheons. The last at which he appeared was on June 2, 2001, his ninety-fifth birthday. Until 1999 he sent out Christmas and new year's greetings to members of our Society and other friends listing innumerable trips with his wife Charlotte (a specialist in Korzybski's general semantics) to linguistics and onomastics conferences at various locations in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain.

Dr. Read was a member of many learned societies. At various times he served as President of the American Dialect Society, the American Name Society, the International Linguistic Association, the Semiotic Society of America, and the Dictionary Society of North America. He was awarded the degree of Doctor of Letters by Oxford University on January 23, 1988. That same year the North Central Name Society published an *Allen Walker Read Festschrift*. In his introduction to this *Festschrift*, Lawrence Urdang comments as follows:

He was — and remains to this day — indefatigable. There is scarcely an area of the entire spectrum of language that his papers have not touched on, and he seems to be possessed of an inexhaustible energy that takes him to major and minor conferences throughout the world, from international symposia in London to the most obscure regional names society get-togethers in the hinterlands of America. (*Geolinguistics*, 1988. p.viii.)

Allen Walker Read was born in Winnebago, Minnesota on June 2, 1906. His father taught all the sciences at Iowa State Teachers College, now the University of Northern Iowa, in Cedar Falls. Encouraged by his father, he decided on an academic career. He graduated from his father's college at the age of nineteen. The next year he earned a master's degree from the University of Iowa, with a thesis on some Iowa place names.

In a lengthy article entitled "First Person Singular II: A Personal Journey Through Linguistics," published in 1991 by John Benjamins as volume 61 in the series *Studies in the History of the Language Sciences* (a copy of which Dr. Read sent me with the inscription "To Jesse Levitt, with all good wishes — Allen") Dr. Read recounts the main events of his professional life and his views of linguistic science. He writes:

One of the idols of my teen years was H.L. Mencken, and while I was an undergraduate at a small college in Iowa, my bedside reading in 1925 was his volume *The American Language*. It led me to take my major in English language when I went to the University of Iowa for an M.A.

His formal study in linguistics began in 1927 when he took a summer course at the University of Chicago called "Comparative Philology." His first academic position, in 1926 at the University of Missouri, Columbia, at the age of twenty, was teaching freshman English. He joined the Linguistic Society of America in 1926 and attended its first annual meeting in Cincinnati in 1927. From 1928 to 1932 he was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University. There he specialized in lexicography.

In 1932 he went to the University of Chicago to join the editorial staff of the *Dictionary of American English*. There he was converted to physicalism, which he regarded as a scientific revolution.

In place of a physical realm plus a mental realm, a single unified realm was postulated, and the so-called mental realm was explained as the working of the abstracting process, developing out of and on the physicalist base.

He found it very "saddening" that Noam Chomsky, reverting to his old dualism, went back to "untenable scientific foundations." He cites, with disapproval, this statement by Chomsky: "It becomes necessary ... to postulate a second substance whose essence is thought alongside of body, with its essential proper ties of extension and motion."

Dr. Read again criticizes Chomsky's approach to linguistics in an article entitled "The Contribution of Sociolinguistics to the Peace-Keeping Process."

He quotes Chomsky as having written in 1965: "Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener in a completely homogenous speech community who knows the language perfectly." Read comments:

When do you have an 'ideal' listener-speaker? When is any speech community completely homogenous? What person in the wide world knows even his own language 'perfectly'? To escape those deadening restrictions, many of us, as Chomsky's authority became more overbearing, moved over to the field that allowed us to deal with language, as found on the tongues of real people. [i.e. sociolinguistics]

Dr. Read then refers, with approval, to Mario Pei's formulations of the methods of geolinguistics in 1965 in his *Invitation to Linguistics*:

The American Society of Geolinguistics got under way in the same year and continues now with an annual journal, deserving more support that it has received. The findings of sociolinguistics, supported by geolinguistics, have great relevance to the pursuit of sanity and peace in the world. (*Geolinguistics*, 8, 1982, 3-4)

Dr. Read showed his preference for structuralism when he stressed the importance of Bloomfield, who brought into linguistics the physicalist paradigm "that makes scientific rigor possible." ("First Person..." p.279) Among other linguists who influenced him, he lists Kenneth Pike, Henry Lee Smith, Bernard Bloch, Charles Hockett, Eugene Nida, Robert A. Hall, Allan Gleason, Dwight Bollinger, Uriel Weinreich, and Alfred Korzybski. He declared his "first allegiance" was to the American Dialect Society and the Present Day English section of the Modern Language Association.

In 1938 he received a Guggenheim fellowship to work on a lexicographical project of his own. He was scheduled to read a paper in October 1939 before the British Philological Society on "Briticisms." The paper was never presented because of the outbreak of war. But Dr. Read later learned that his topic outraged some members of the Philological Society "who vowed that an upstart American should never be permitted to speak on such a ridiculous subject." ("First Person..." p.281)

Dr. Read, however, in later years undertook to write a comprehensive dictionary of Briticisms, and in time turned over his materials to John Algeo. A London *Times* article on June 25, 1988, commenting on the project, says:

“The British may not like the idea, but for the majority of those who use English, we speak a rather quaint dialect.” For Dr. Read, that was “turning the tables on the English.” (*Geolinguistics*, 14, 1988, p.vii)

In a short story entitled “Rhodes Scholar,” published in *The Best Short Stories of 1931*, edited by Edward O’Brien (Dood, Mead and Co., New York, 1931), Dr. Read presents an American freshman from Iowa at Oxford University. He names him Ross. Ross, who is obviously Dr. Read himself, meditates on his Iowa heritage and wonders how he will answer the roll call of the freshman class. Should he try to ‘fit in’ and answer “*heah*” like his British fellow students, or should he pronounce the final “*r*” of “*here*” as is done in Mid-Western American English? The story ends without an answer, as Ross “rumbled his throat in a preliminary way.”

For Dr. Read, an important element of language is the “play spirit.” In this area he has produced “a cycle of studies ... dealing with adult baby talk, pig Latin, mock Latin, double talk, intentional mispronunciation, the sportive naming of non-existent objects (beguilers) and the like.” In a 1941 paper he dealt with the spelling bee, showing how “the intractable problem of English spelling, with its social pressure toward uniformitarianism” was turned into a game. The spelling bees started in Elizabethan England. In New England about 1800 they became evening entertainment; later they moved westward. The confederate “rebel yell” was another part of the play spirit. But the play spirit in war was destroyed by the Nazis (“First Person...,” pp.285-286).

The well known Americanism “O.K.” was motivated by the play spirit. In Boston in the late 1830’s a craze for abbreviations developed, sometimes based on incorrect spellings. Thus “all correct” became “oll korrekt,” and it was abbreviated as “O.K.” The earliest known written use of “O.K.” was in the Boston *Morning Post* of March 23, 1839. Discovering that, Dr. Read’s research demolished much contemporary speculation.

Examining the different words used in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for an inhabitant of Connecticut, Dr. Read cites Connecticutian, Connecticutensian, Connecticutter, Connecticutan, Connecticutian and (for a pretty woman) Connecticutie. “In its most generalized form,” Dr. Read has written, “the play spirit is the exuberance characteristic of all healthy human beings. This exuberance may well have been the prime mover of language itself. It is possible for us as linguists to pursue our studies in this same exuberant spirit, as I have found in my personal journey over many decades” (“First Person...,” pp.286-287).

Among Dr. Read’s many interests were graffiti, which he collected from public rest rooms during a 1927 trip to the western states. His findings were

privately printed in 1935 as *Lexical Evidence of Epigraphy in Western North America: a Glossorial Study of the Low Element in the English Vocabulary*. In this book he declared that any case of someone who “should pass up the well established colloquial words of the language and have recourse to the Latin ‘urate,’ and ‘have sexual intercourse’ is indicative of grave mental [ill] health” (Read Obituary, *New York Times*, October 18, 2002, Metropolitan Section, p.9). In 1935 the book was considered unacceptable for publication in the United States. So it was printed in Paris in only 75 copies, issued privately to scholars. In 1977 the book appeared in the United States as *Classical American Graffiti*, reprinted by Dr. Reinhold Aman.

Dr. Read traced the origin of the term “blizzard” with the meaning of a snowstorm. He also traced the origins of Dixie and Podunk.

During the Second World War, in 1942, he was drafted and assigned to a lexicography group on the lower tip of Manhattan in New York City. The group collected citations for a dictionary of military terms. In 1943 he was assigned to the language section of the War Department at 165 Broadway, New York City. The group created language guides for over forty languages, although some translators were contemptuous of systematic linguistics. Dr. Read never discovered what eventually happened to the group’s materials (“First Person...,” pp.280-281).

From 1945 to 1974 Dr. Read was a professor of English at Columbia University and continued his work in numerous language and linguistic societies. He pursued his research, giving lectures and writing research papers well into the nineties, long past his retirement. He married Charlotte Schuchardt [Korzybski’s literary executrix] in 1953. The marriage was childless and Dr. Read appears to have no survivors. His wife predeceased him in July 2002.

We mourn the passing of Allen Walker Read. He was a pillar of strength for our Society for over thirty years. He will be sorely missed.