

MEMORIES OF J. V. NEUSTUPNÝ

It was with great sadness that I heard of the death of J. V. Neustupný on July 2nd 2015. As I sat in my university office in Tokyo staring at the email on my computer screen, it immediately struck me that I was only sitting there because of him. If I had never met Professor Neustupný, I probably would never have embarked on my research journey into *contact situations* (Neustupný 1985) and *Language Management Theory* (Jernudd & Neustupný 1987, Neustupný 2004). Without his continuous encouragement and support, I probably never would have even considered pursuing an academic career and without his persistent nudging I certainly would never have dreamed of publishing my first academic articles. Although they were tough at the time, looking back now on my student days, I feel so fortunate to have been taught by such an inspiring and passionate researcher and teacher, who always expected my best and more.

On the occasion of his 80th birthday, Björn Jernudd gave an in-depth account of his experiences working and collaborating with Professor Neustupný (Jernudd 2013) but here I would like to share my experiences of being his student. I first met Professor Neustupný in the summer of 1996 when I was looking for someone to take me on as a student as part of a Japanese government scholarship programme. After three years teaching English in rural Japan, followed by a year of intensive Japanese language studies, I was interested in doing a Masters in Teaching Japanese as a Foreign Language. Professor Neustupný was teaching at Osaka University at that time, after over twenty-five years teaching at Monash University in Australia. I had collected the prospectuses from various universities in Western Japan but it was the course outline written by Professor Neustupný that immediately caught my attention. In that brief course outline, he succinctly summarized his general theory of language learning and teaching based on linguistic, communicative

(sociolinguistic) and interactive (sociocultural) competencies (Neustupný 1995, 2004). This resonated strongly with me as it seemed to precisely match many of my own experiences of contact situations in rural Japan and my personal struggles to learn Japanese. I ordered copies of *Communicating with the Japanese* (Neustupný 1987) and *Gaikokujin tonō komyunikēshon* [Communicating with Foreigners] (Neustupný 1982) straight away and so began my interest in contact situations, or “intercultural contact as a process” (Neustupný 2004: 5).

Our initial meeting was very brief but I was given a written assignment and the possibility of following him to Chiba University, where he would start teaching in April 1997. I was to later learn that this initial meeting was very representative of Professor Neustupný’s teaching style: never let a student take more than 20 minutes of your time and always give them homework. During my time at Chiba, I learned some other important lessons from Professor Neustupný about dealing with students, which have helped me in my own teaching career. One of those lessons was to always push and challenge your students. I learnt firsthand that students are unlikely to do their best unless they are nudged. For example, when he first suggested that I try to publish my case study of a cherry blossom-viewing party, I really thought he must be joking. I was not even in the Masters programme at that time and had never written anything longer than about eight pages before. But thanks to his continuous encouragement, I decided to take the task on. After a great deal of editing and consultation finally the paper was published (Fairbrother 2000), and to my surprise eventually went on to win the Tokugawa Munemasa prize at the Japanese Society of Sociolinguistic Sciences, of which Professor Neustupný was one of the founders. Thanks to his persistence, I began to realize that despite my doubts I did have some abilities and that even I could become a member of the wider research community. However, it is unlikely that

I would ever have realized that without coming into contact with someone who always had such high expectations of me.

Another lesson I learned from him is that in order to be a good researcher and teacher we always need to be humble and open to new ideas. I was often surprised at how such a renowned scholar as Professor Neustupný would really listen to his students and be open to criticism. I remember many times that he would write down interesting points during student discussions and very openly admit that he had not thought about a certain point before. This was really motivating for me as a student because I always felt I was being included in the knowledge-creating process rather than being just an outside observer, even if it meant that sometimes I was jokingly called a “heretic” for questioning his ideas.

He also taught me the value of making research and teaching enjoyable and the importance of community and friendship. Professor Neustupný always included humour in his classes and although the point of some of his jokes might have been lost in translation at times, his light-heartedness helped to create a relaxed environment, enabling students to voice their views in class without hesitation (which is no small feat in the Japanese classroom). Research meetings were often followed by lunch at what was to become our local Indian restaurant, where he would share stories about his personal life and his days in India and Australia. He also participated actively in our student “research” trips, and I have fond memories of hiking through the mountains chatting about everything from Language Management Theory (LMT) to child-rearing and even dieting. Perhaps the greatest honour I received, however, was during one of our last email exchanges before he became ill. At the end of the message he signed his name, “George”, followed in parentheses with “which is what my friends call me and I consider you my friend”.

It was our intellectual engagement with LMT, though, that has become most relevant in my own professional activities. I remember my very first visit to his office hours at Chiba clearly. When I explained some of the issues relating to contact situations that I was interested in, his reply was short and simple: “You should use Language Management!”, and from that day onward he had me hooked. I have spent the past eighteen years

engrossed in norms, deviations, evaluations and adjustments. In my own research on micro-level interactions, the theory has always provided a steady framework for explaining all types of problems relating to language use. It is only now, after many years of empirical research in the field that we can genuinely appreciate Professor Neustupný’s foresight and see the potential of the theory to be applied to all types of behaviour towards language. At the 4th International Language Management Symposium, held recently at Sophia University in Japan,¹ it was clear to see that LMT research is still thriving and is being applied to a wide range of contexts both on the macro- and micro-level, and that many researchers are trying to demonstrate the links between multiple levels as part of the management cycle (Nekvapil 2009). I am certain that if he had been able to join us, Professor Neustupný would have been happy to see researchers from different parts of the world sharing their research findings, united in their quest for the removal of problems in discourse (Neustupný 1994).

Yet Professor Neustupný did not just teach LMT, he also lived it. He was always acutely aware of language issues and the norms and expectations that underpinned them. But rather than merely being aware of problems, he was also willing to confront them head on. One memorable event during my first year at Chiba was when he was asked to write a piece for the “foreign professors and exchange students column” in the Chiba University newsletter. He responded with a short article in Japanese strongly criticizing the newsletter’s editors for their automatic categorization of him as “foreign” and entreating them to get rid of the column and instead treat all teaching staff equally (Neustupný 1997).

He also practiced LMT in everyday interactions. Although very encouraging, he could be very strict, particularly regarding my use of Japanese (which admittedly is still a cause for concern). I remember a number of occasions when I was called out into the corridor after class and had my Japanese corrected. Although this was pretty nerve-racking at times, on the positive side, it meant that I was not just learning about

¹ See <http://dept.sophia.ac.jp/is/solific/en/lecture/lmt_2015/>.

the Language Management process, I was also experiencing it. I am also now in a position to more fully appreciate the value of being “corrected”. Especially for learners of Japanese, for whom correction occurs very rarely in daily life, it is crucial to have someone to help you manage your own language use. I am very fortunate that Professor Neustupný took on this role for me.

But perhaps the most important lesson I learnt from Professor Neustupný came from a speech he made at his farewell party before leaving Japan to go back to Australia. The message I took home with me that night was “don’t be afraid *not* to be mainstream”. He told us how he had benefitted greatly in his career by not being a central figure in the mainstream trends in linguistics, particularly those emanating from North America. Working outside the biases of the major journals had enabled him a considerable amount of freedom to pursue unhampered the issues that he had felt to be the most important, but which other researchers were paying little attention to at the time. Indeed, being on the fringes granted him the freedom to test out new ideas without the constraints of other disciplines and their preferences for particular methods and presentation styles.

To be honest, when I first started working at my current institution with professors with very different methodological and theoretical approaches to language, I felt very nervous about doing something different and I was very conscious that the work I was doing was not mainstream in their eyes. However, Professor Neustupný’s words have stayed with me and thanks to the growing strength of our international community, I can now appreciate the advantages of having a different approach. Undoubtedly, it is thanks to Professor Neustupný’s courage to work outside the mainstream that has enabled us to develop the ever-growing international LMT community that we have today. No doubt the greatest respect we can pay him is to continue our work and persist in our investigations of language problems and the development of LMT in general.

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