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Morris Halle: An Appreciation

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Abstract

Morris Halle has been one of the most influential figures in modern linguistics. This is partly due to his scientific contributions in many areas: insights into the sound patterns of English and Russian, ideas about the nature of metered verse, ways of thinking about phonological features and rules, and models for argumentation about phonological description and phonological theory. But he has had an equally profound influence through his role as a teacher and mentor, and this personal influence has not been limited to students who follow closely in his intellectual and methodological footsteps. It has been just as strong—or stronger—among researchers who disagree with his specific ideas and even his general approach, or who work in entirely different subfields. This appreciation is a synthesis of reflections from colleagues and former students whom he has formed, informed, and inspired.

1. INTRODUCTION

The scope of Morris Halle's contribution to the field of linguistics is reflected in three festschrifts spanning 40 years: Anderson & Kiparsky (1973), Aronoff & Oehrle (1984), and Matushansky & Marantz (2013). A stream of widely cited publications, from *Preliminaries to Speech Analysis* (Jakobson et al. 1951) to *Counting in Metrical Verse* (Fabb & Halle 2012), records the development of his ideas. Seventeen presentations from "M@90: Workshop on Stress and Meter to celebrate Morris Halle's 90th birthday" are available on YouTube (<http://tinyurl.com/or4f6fm>), and Gary Marcus published a ninetieth-birthday appreciation in *The New Yorker* (Marcus 2013).

But those of us who have studied or worked with Morris know that a focus on his intellectual contributions, as important as they are, leaves out something at least as important: what we learned from him about how to approach problems and how to interact with students and colleagues. So I sent an email request to his former students and colleagues at MIT, asking for "a short anecdote illustrating an idea or technique or principle that you learned from Morris, or an observation about his approach to research, writing, or teaching." What follows is a thematic arrangement of the responses.

2. "ARGUE WITH ME!"

Many of Morris's students, now successful scientists in their own right, describe vividly the bracing and transformative effect of being treated, from the start, as intellectual equals.

Diane Archangeli (Professor, University of Arizona):

I first met Morris when I was getting my MA at UT Austin, and he came down for a conference that John McCarthy had organized. When I was giving my talk, Morris jumped up on stage with me and debated my analysis with me. It took me a few moments to get over the shock and awe so I could stutter out something, anything in response. The realization that Morris Halle took my work seriously was a turning point for me.

My second strong memory is from my early days as a student at MIT, when I was getting comments back from him on some paper I'd done. I dutifully took notes on what he said so I could go home and think about it, but he would have none of that. "Argue with me! Argue with me!" is something I imagine every one of us heard from him.

And there are the memories of going in to Morris's office week after week to talk about some new fragment of my research. Each week he had read it and made notes in the margins and then picked out a key point to challenge me on, arguing strongly for A where I had tried to make the case for not-A. The next week, I would come back set up to argue for A and Morris would then take the not-A position. . . oh, right. . . argue with me!

One of my most treasured compliments was when a graduate student of mine at [University of Arizona] who, after meeting Morris, observed that I "channel Morris" in my teaching. It is special to me to be able to stop and think about what an influence he had on who I am and how glad I am that my life unfolded in a way that I could benefit from him. I am a better teacher and a better linguist for his influence.

Tom Bever (Professor, University of Arizona):

In 1959, I thought I was a hotshot undergraduate at Harvard, working as the primary research assistant in a new project on early stages of language acquisition. I was also lucky that [Roman] Jakobson was my advisor—especially because it brought me into contact with Morris.

He met me as part of this, and immediately interrogated me with a ferocious focus that I still remember today: I was both terrifically frightened and complimented by being given such attention and respect.

Jennifer Cole (Professor, University of Illinois):

I had an interaction with Morris very early in my graduate studies, which was unnerving but ultimately transformative. It was my first-semester Phonology class (1983), and Morris assigned me to read an article. I read the article in advance and was prepared to demonstrate to Morris that I had grasped the essential point and the details of the proposed analysis. We were about 10 minutes into our meeting, and Morris finished telling me what he thought was important in the paper. He paused for my reaction, and I said I had understood the paper and I agreed with him about its significance. He seemed irritated, and put an abrupt end to our meeting telling me to “go away and think some more, and don’t come back until you’re ready to argue,” because (and here he chuckled) that was, after all, the whole point of an office appointment.

I’m not sure I ever fully mastered the argumentation style Morris was after, but I did learn the importance of taking a proposal to its logical conclusions, measuring it against available evidence and, most importantly, articulating its success and failure. Those are the standards I hold for my graduate students, and I often tell them (though I hope less brusquely than Morris told me) to go away and think and come back with a critical perspective on the topic of discussion.

K.P. Mohanan (Professor, Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Pune):

My first culture shock at MIT came during an appointment with Morris, to discuss a problem for which I had no solution. I outlined the nature of my worry, expecting Morris to hand down a solution. After all, I had traveled all the way from India to sit at the feet of the all-knowing sage and learn. “That is a very interesting problem,” said Morris. “So how do we solve it?” I asked. “I don’t know,” Morris said, almost sounding annoyed. “I don’t have solutions to all problems. You go and figure out a solution and come back, and we will have an intelligent discussion,” he said.

I stared at him with total incomprehension. How could the Morris Halle not know the solution to a problem that I happened to find? And how could he expect me, just a first-year student, to solve it? It made no sense. But Morris shooed me out.

Coming from the Indian tradition, I had no idea that the responsibility of students was to investigate questions whose answers their teachers didn’t know. But by the same tradition, a student’s duty is to obey the teacher, so I set out to look for a solution. A few weeks later, I went back to him with a solution, drawing on the insights of the structure of sounds that was around at that time. And he was pleased. This was my very first taste of independent inquiry. My world has never been the same again.

François Dell (Emeritus, Centre nationale de la recherche scientifique, Paris):

I was in my first year as a graduate student. I don’t remember whether *The Sound Pattern of English* (*SPE*) (Chomsky & Halle 1968) had already appeared, but anyway, many students had read the book on proofs. One day I told Morris how much I admired X, another student who was close to finishing his dissertation. Morris nodded approvingly, but then he said there was a problem with X: “He’s read all of *SPE*, and he hasn’t managed to find a single place where Noam and I are wrong!”

Dick Oehrle (Chief Linguist, Ernst & Young):

The conversation took place in Morris’s office in the summer after my first year at MIT, while I was investigating patterns of English word stress in preparation for writing a phonology qualifying paper. I had a few tentative observations, rearranging in some minor way some of the details of the monumental edifice of English stress that Morris had constructed in *The Sound Pattern of English* (with Noam Chomsky) (Chomsky & Halle 1968) and *English Stress: Its Form, Its Growth, and Its Role in Verse* (with Samuel Jay Keyser) (Halle & Keyser 1971). Morris looked at me and said, “You know

as much about this as I do. Argue with me.” Never was a false sentence so liberating. Thank you, Morris—teacher, mentor, friend.

3. THE VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY

Morris’s mantra “Argue with me!” was not a challenge to debate for its own sake, but rather an invitation to join a systematic effort to understand the world of speech and language. Here is testimony from two eminent syntacticians about the inspirational effect of engagement with Morris’s exploration of new ideas, even in introductory courses.

Maria-Luisa Zubizarreta (Professor, University of Southern California):

Morris’s style of teaching was exemplified by a course for first-year graduate students. The topic was metrical phonology, with three parts to it: syllable structure, stress, and vowel harmony. Morris lectured a bit on each topic, outlining his general ideas on each of these topics within the framework of metrical/autosegmental theory. Students covered the rest of the course with presentations on primary research of their own on each of these topics. I never learned so much as a student as I did in that course—and I almost became a phonologist as a result. I spent my semester at the Harvard library researching languages with interesting syllable structure, stress systems, and vowel harmony, and finding cool things about the interaction between them, trying to figure out what it all meant for the theory that Morris was developing on those topics.

Howard Lasnik (Professor, University of Maryland):

It was July 3, 1968 (I remember the exact date because that’s my birthday) when I first met Morris. I had just finished my first year as a graduate student in English Literature at Harvard, and taken the required six (!) two-hour closed-book general exams. In one of them, History and Structure of English, I didn’t achieve the minimum acceptable grade of B, so [I] had to take a course to expiate my guilt. I mentioned this to an engineering friend of mine, who said “They do interesting stuff with language at MIT, so take a course there.” I made an appointment with Morris, then the Department Chair, to discuss the possibility, and was overwhelmed by his encouragement and openness, two traits we have all come to know so well. In striking contrast to my experiences at Harvard, Morris made it clear that what he was engaged in was a voyage of discovery, and anyone interested was welcome to be a covoyager. I took introductory graduate syntax (“Baby Syntax”) in the fall of 1968. Morris cotaught it with Haj Ross. Both were (and I assume still are) spectacularly good teachers, and I was hooked for life.

4. BEING THERE

An essential ingredient in Morris’s recipe for intellectual success is the opportunity for frequent personal contact that comes when groups of people spend long regular hours in the same space. He always encouraged students to come see him regularly about their work—but he would also hail students passing by his office, and invite them in to hear (and argue with him!) about his own current work.

Bruce Hayes (Professor, University of California, Los Angeles):

Together with Noam Chomsky, Morris installed at MIT a culture of Being Around. The two of them were on the scene, ready to engage intellectually with those who were also there. This practice encouraged other people, so that those who might not otherwise have been around were around. And of course with the spread of MIT Linguistics PhDs throughout the world’s research universities, the culture spread very widely indeed. It is a wonderful legacy.

Will Leben (Professor Emeritus, Stanford University; Chair of Linguistics, Lexicon® Branding, Inc.):

In the early 1970s, Morris's door was always open. In fact, I'm not even sure there was a door. He'd stay till late in the day. If you caught him late in the afternoon, he'd be answering his mail explaining that the mail only got tougher if one waited before answering. About 2004, I was in Cambridge with some free time and decided to check out the new Stata Center at MIT. I went up to the Linguistics Department to have a look and there was Morris. He had been retired for 10 years, it was a Friday afternoon close to 6 PM, and he was the only one there.

Colin Phillips (Professor, University of Maryland):

My main impression from being a student is probably something that you'll hear from many others: He loves to argue about linguistics, and made it quite clear that engaging in a hard-fought argument with somebody was a sign of respect. I would go in to meet with him early/midafternoon in his office in the old Building 20; he was likely a bit drowsy from his recent nap; but once we found something to disagree about he would perk right up, and by the end of the hour he would have a broad smile and make it clear that the jousting had been great fun for him.

San Duanmu (Professor, University of Michigan):

When I entered MIT, I had little idea of the style of graduate teaching. I was awed by Morris and Noam and was determined to work hard. I took classes and did the readings, the assignments, and the qualifying papers (called "generals"), all very diligently. I rarely made appointments to see Morris (or other professors), though, because I wanted to wait till I have something big to say.

Sometime in the third year, Morris called me to his office. He started by giving me a stern reprimand. "What have you been doing all this time? How come you rarely come to see me [or other professors]?"

I was surprised, because he sounded as if I failed some expectations. I said, "I didn't want to waste your time. I was waiting till I work out a theory." "You would be kicked out of the program before you work out your theory!" he shot back.

I must have looked puzzled in the ensuing silence. Then he started to explain something that is all too obvious in hindsight. "Look, you didn't understand what graduate education is. You don't see professors after you work out a theory. You see them while you are working on a problem, and you work out the solution together."

Then he added something that really opened my eyes. "We learn from students, too. Chomsky and I would know very little if we did not meet students. Students are an important source of ideas for us."

After that, I started meeting Morris almost every week. Each time I would write up a few pages of a problem or analysis to discuss. I learned enormously in my last year. I am grateful Morris put me on the right track.

5. RESPONSIBILITY TO THE PHENOMENA

Morris often says that the best way to find new theoretical ideas is to describe some complex domain of linguistic phenomena more completely and systematically than anyone has ever done before. At the same time, he insists that theoretically based analysis is the best descriptive discovery procedure. And he is as impatient with purely negative arguments as he is with isolated observations.

Alec Marantz (Professor, New York University):

For me the most important thing is Morris's insistence that a linguistic account cover (in generative terms, generate) all the relevant data. Morris is a true bridge between structuralist linguistics and contemporary generative linguistics, where the structuralists believed that you possessed all the relevant

data when you began your analysis, and your goal was to reduce it by discovering the generalizations that covered your texts, paradigms, or whatever, whereas the generative grammarians believed that your theory should predict new data that went beyond the paradigms, texts, etc., at hand. Morris believed you always learned something by showing how to derive all of the data under consideration. Morris always insisted on a thoroughness well beyond what was necessary to make the theoretical point, because it is only this discipline of completeness that offers new insights into what is going on.

Will Leben:

Part of the MIT Linguistics experience was the competition to be the first to come up with this or that bright idea. Morris, no enemy to strokes of genius, nonetheless emphasized scholarly habits through his example. His advice to someone who had had an idea stolen by someone else was to come up with lots more ideas. Morris pitied the (hypothetical) person with just one idea: “If someone steals his idea, he’s left with nothing.”

François Dell:

I was a new graduate student (I had not been around for more than 6 weeks). Morris had suggested that I read a book that had just appeared: a monograph on the phonology of my native language. After reading the book I went to see him in his office and told him that the analysis in the book was completely wrong, that only someone who did not speak the language natively could dream up something so outlandish, etc., etc. Once I was through, he gave me his characteristic laugh and said: “You haven’t given me a single argument about the book. All you’ve given me is autobiographical comments. Here we don’t deal in autobiographical comments. Next time, you come back with real arguments, not autobiographical comments.” A month later I came back with real arguments.

Samuel J. Keyser (Professor Emeritus, MIT):

Just before I left Yale for MIT, Bernard Bloch, the legendary editor of *Language*—at the time the field’s most prestigious journal—called me into his office. He wanted to know if I would like to do a book review for his journal (Keyser 1963). The book was *The Pronunciation of English in the Atlantic States* (Kurath & McDavid 1983), a linguistic atlas that recorded the speech of several hundred speakers over an area reaching from Pennsylvania to South Carolina. Of course I would do the review. That was how one made one’s way in academia. One published. Here I was, still a graduate student, and Bloch was offering me an opportunity to publish in the number one journal in the field. How could I not do it? I accepted with trepidation. I had never written a professional piece before, not even a book review. This would be my coming-out article. It didn’t help that one of the atlas’s authors, Hans Kurath, had been Bloch’s mentor.

Bloch handed me a copy of the book, all 182 pages of it plus 180 full-page maps that recorded how people pronounced a large set of key words throughout the Atlantic states. It was a hefty volume, and the weight of it brought home what it was I had agreed to do. I had no idea how I would do it. This was my trial by fire.

I knocked out a first draft of the review. I sat on it for a few days. I rewrote it, polishing it as best I could. Then I gave it to Morris.

He kept it for a day. Then he called me into his office.

“Keyser,” he said. “This is a lousy piece of work.”

“What’s wrong with it?” I stammered.

“You’re just trashing the book,” he said.

“So?”

“That’s too easy. If you don’t like what the authors are doing, then show how to do it better yourself.”

Morris was right. There was nothing creative about my review. I had written the academic version of a negative political ad. Reflecting on that moment some 50 years later, I realize that it was a watershed in my career as a linguist, in fact, the watershed.

I studied the book in a completely different light. How could I demonstrate that there was a better way of doing this? I managed to find one. I took the data and showed that, looking at it from a different perspective, one could say some interesting things about how dialects differ along the Atlantic states and, in fact, in general. I rewrote my review and went back to Morris.

He kept it a day.

“Now you’re talking,” he said. “But you need to make the argument clearer.”

I went back to Morris at least 15 times. Each draft was better than the last. Finally, with the fifteenth draft, he said, “Now it’s ready to show to Chomsky.”

I credit that exchange with Morris being responsible for my learning what it meant to be a professional. Some 53 years later we are still the best of friends, and I’m still learning from him.

6. TOUGH LOVE

As we have seen, Morris can be a bit gruff. Sometimes this is ironic.

Nicholas Ostler, quoting Morris:

“We aren’t teaching you to be a scholar here. You Oxford guys are trained as scholars. You know the difference between a scholar and a scientist? A scholar, he makes a mistake, he’s a bad scholar: a scholar is supposed to know. A scientist, he makes a mistake, okay, so he learnt sump’n.”

Comment after a talk by Tom Bever arguing that his MIT Linguistics education had lacked adequate training in experimental design (quoted by Mark Liberman):

“Tough luck, Bever—no refunds!”

But sometimes the content is serious and consequential.

John R. Ross (Professor, University of North Texas):

I got a scholarship to study in Germany from the fall of 1960 to the spring of 1962. I had a fine time, taking various courses in music, English, a few even in linguistics. In vacations, I traveled to various big cities and looked up famous linguists, none of whose work I knew the slightest thing about. I had heard of Noam Chomsky in a course, but I never read anything that he wrote. Still, the buzz that I was getting was that MIT was the place to go. So in the spring of 1962, I applied. Shortly thereafter, I got a mimeographed letter of rejection.

My assessment of my own worth was so unshakable (after all, I had visited with [André] Martinet, [Louis] Hjelmslev, taken courses with Leo Weisgerber; I had visited five or six countries; my German was pretty fluent; my French [was] workable, . . .)—there was only one possible explanation for my rejection: Some clerk at MIT had sent me the wrong letter.

After I got back to the United States in the spring, I wrote to the department, requesting a meeting with the chair, Morris Halle, who I had never heard of. I drove to Boston, found MIT, and met Professor Halle in an office in Building 14.

Piercing eyes looked at me with no trace of sympathy. I explained the mix-up, and probably generously indicated (my memory is unclear on this issue) that I would accept his apologies, and would be willing to enter the program in the fall.

Morris answered: “No, Mr. Ross, I remember your case well. Weren’t you the one who was galivanting around Europe? As far as we could see, you had never done a lick of work in your life. We

have a small group of people here who are interested in the study of language. We have no time for spoon-feeding anyone. Why don't you go away and study somewhere? We would be willing to look at a reapplication from you."

End of interview. He had seen through me with microscopic and merciless clarity. No one had ever called my bluff like that. In about a minute my life turned around—there was nothing to do but what he had indicated. By the greatest of luck, I had been accepted at Penn; in the fall, I went there, and for the first time in my life, I started to study.

Those few words etched in my memory were the most intensely educational, and most necessary, of my 24 years. I will never forget them, or the man who spoke them, from whom I was to learn so many other vital things in the future.

7. ALL IN THE FAMILY

Many of Morris's former students recall his concern for students who seemed unhappy, or were absent for a period of time. On hearing that someone had health or emotional problems, he would say, "Well, we're not running a sanitarium here," while subverting this sentiment by working hard in loco parentis to learn about their situation and to find ways to help them cope. In many ways, his students and colleagues have formed an extended family.

Mark Aronoff (Professor, Stony Brook University):

Morris closed the letter that he wrote recommending me for the only regular job that I have ever had in my life with the following sentence: "If you don't believe me, you can ask his mother." I got the job and he proudly told me about the line.

John Goldsmith (Professor, University of Chicago):

When I think about Morris, the first thing that comes to mind is how supportive he has been of his students. I remember as if it were yesterday what he said when I was not chosen for some job or other: "That's part of their biography, not yours."

David Nash (Visiting Fellow, Australian National University):

I recently got to meet Steve Anderson for the first time, and when he was giving the wrap-up for his talk, I suddenly had a flash of Morris, as Steve noted (with a modest raising of palms) that some proposal could be wrong but should be explored.

Barbara Partee (Professor Emerita, University of Massachusetts):

While Chomsky was the star who drew lots of us to MIT (I knew almost nothing in 1961, but had been told a bit about him and about the new program he was starting up at MIT), Halle was really our mentor, whether we were doing syntax or phonology.

Noam Chomsky (Professor Emeritus, MIT):

Morris and I have been in the same or adjacent offices for 60 years, and have been working together since 1951, when we met—in the halls of Building 20. We at once launched into an argument about phonology. I felt I had more convincing arguments, but thinking about it a few hours later I realized that Morris was right.

An experience often repeated in the years that followed. Morris's rare talent is a special kind of linguistic intuition, an immediate understanding, when a problem arises, of how language works and what the right answer should be, even if we don't know (yet) how to establish it. That unique form

of perception has been revealed over the years in striking ways in the many areas in which Morris has worked creatively—and [has been] particularly important for me personally, in our many happy hours of working together and discussing the issues that concern us.

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The author is not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this article.

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