



Australian
Academy of the
Humanities

TIM MCNAMARA AM FAHA

1949 – 2023

A few weeks ago (in August 2023) my partner and I flew down to Melbourne to have lunch with Tim. He'd told me he wasn't doing well in his long struggle with cancer, and when I asked whether it would help if we came down to see him, he said yes, and come as soon as possible. We'd known Tim a long time – close to 30 years – and he'd not only been a good friend but had also supported us in our work in many ways (he got me my job at the University of Melbourne). In spite of his fast-fading health, we had a very pleasant lunch, sitting in the light-dappled kitchen at the back of his house in St Kilda, eating, drinking talking. We were celebrating the recent news that his latest book was to be published (McNamara, in press). This was not an applied linguistic book but a book about his old friend Paul Kurz and his wife Paula, whom Tim had met when he was an undergraduate student at the University of Melbourne. Paul had escaped to Australia from Vienna, where his wife Paula was still trapped, during WWII. The book is based around their letters and brings together their painful yet redemptive stories, and the terrible fate of the Jews of Vienna. Tim was immensely pleased that this work was to be published and despite his physical weakness, we drank some toasts and talked some more.

I start this account here because it says a lot about Tim. Many in applied linguistics will know him as an eminent language tester, which indeed he was. He liked to tell how he had fallen rather accidentally into language testing, as a result of developing a test which would assess the ability of health professionals to cope with the communicative demands of the workplace, a project he later extended into his PhD (at the University of Melbourne). He cofounded the language testing research centre (LTRC) in

Melbourne in 1990. Celebrating its 30 years in 2020 (no mean achievement for a centre that relied largely on external funds), he suggested that the LTRC had been for him an intellectual home, a place where he could do his work on testing in collaboration with like-minded colleagues. He was recognized with a Distinguished Achievement Award by the International Language Testing Association in 2015. He was a good language tester for several reasons: He had a very sharp mind, and understood both the statistics involved and their limitations. He was proud of the development of Rasch measurement at the LTRC and its implications for more complex understandings of testing. He was also able to explain testing to a wider audience in what is generally acknowledged as one of the best introductions to the field (McNamara, 2000). At the same time, he emphasized that there were severe limits to the authenticity of all language tests, even those which claim to simulate the demands of real-world contexts. He was interested in this question of performance testing (McNamara, 1996) and also in the social implications of tests, their roles as gatekeepers and modes of exclusion (McNamara and Roever, 2006; McNamara, et al, 2019; McNamara and Shohamy, 2008).

He also had much wider interests in applied linguistics as a field, founding the Applied Linguistics program at the University of Melbourne in 1987. He co-chaired international conferences, both the International and American Associations of Applied Linguistics (AILA and AAAL) and was President of AAAL in 2017–18. He was elected as an Honorary Member of AILA in 2019 for his outstanding contributions to applied linguistics internationally. It was for his work in developing applied linguistics in Australia and his services to tertiary education more broadly, that he was, with immense pride, made a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 2021. Recognition of his work also led to his becoming a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 2010, and a Fellow of the British Academy of Social Sciences in 2017. Tim was also an excellent teacher, whether working with his many doctoral students, giving lectures internationally, or teaching graduates and undergraduates at the University of Melbourne. We taught an introduction to applied linguistics together in 1995. Tim felt that the field spent too much time introducing

linguistics when what we really needed to do was engage with applied linguistics itself. We designed a course together centred on classic texts (Hymes, Halliday, Goffman, Gumperz, and so on) combined with later applications in those fields. We had a wonderful time co-teaching and amused and bemused the students when we openly argued about points in class. This was not a unified vision of applied linguistics. As one student wrote in a course assessment: I loved the good cop/bad cop routine, though I never knew which was which.

Yet Tim's concerns were far wider than this. Remarkably, he brought his great interest in Derrida – "Never read Derrida alone" he advised (2019, p.64) – to testing, and this emerged in his thinking on the *shibboleth* (2012) and its "terrifyingly ambiguous potential" (2019, p. 207): Language testing theory tries to remove the indeterminacy and ambiguity of the test score, he argued, to yield a true reading of what a score means, but if we see test constructs as shibboleths, it becomes clear that they are in fact *undecidables* (Derrida again), "open to interpretation, inherently unstable" and potentially "socially beneficial or socially harmful" (2019, p.209). Drawing on his crucial studies of the many problems with the language analyses used to determine the origins of asylum seekers, he concluded (following Foucault), that such tests and analyses "play a fundamental role in modernity, as a mechanism for the surveillance of the subject" (p.210): they are modes of inclusion and exclusion. As the focus on asylum seekers indicates – the issue is the denial of the right to asylum by means of inappropriate and inaccurate language analysis – Tim was deeply concerned by racism (and especially anti-Semitism) and misogyny and homophobia.

His work on *subjectivity* enabled Tim to give an account of both his own personal engagement with these domains and their importance in the contemporary world. Everyday racism, he argued, is a potential "reservoir of violence" (2019, p.95) and the horrors of the Holocaust would not have been possible without the fertile ground of daily anti-Semitism across Europe. He was also engaged with language, gender and sexuality: he was very amused when he was away from Melbourne at a Lavender Linguistics (LL) conference and I told him I was planning to change the name of the

LTRC to the LTLRC. When two gay men, he asked (2019), who have known each other for a long time chat in a local pharmacy – one as pharmacist, the other as customer – what weight do broad social roles (sexuality, masculinity, service encounter) play in relation to professional and other roles (chemist, advice, familiarity)? Here he brought together his long interest in conversation analysis (CA) with Judith Butler’s idea of performativity: If we want to see how subjectivities are called into being, we have to look at the micro-politics of language use. This is all about the “recognition of Self and Other – the terms in which we are socially visible to each other – visible as particular types of subject” (2019, p.9). This is the “pain of the experience of subjectivity” (2019, p.218)

That phrase points to a central way of thinking in Tim’s life: the pain of the experience of subjectivity. The interest in Derrida was also an interest in Jewish histories, in philosophy, in poetry and art. He was fascinated and moved by Rothko, who, he (2021, p.7) explained, “wanted painting to approximate to the condition of music: that is, to act as an abstract medium, like musical notes, capable of expressing, enacting and resolving dramas of feeling.” Tim McNamara was one of applied linguistics’ deeper thinkers, one of the field’s much-needed intellectuals, one of the people for whom the *vulgar pragmatism* of the field was not enough, urging us to think politically, to engage with the local operations of language, and to *act* as applied linguists. Perhaps above all Tim loved to talk. Of primary importance if you were having lunch or dinner with him was not so much the food and drink (though these mattered too – he was a good cook and very fond of good Victorian Pinot Noir) but the acoustics. Was this place conducive to a decent discussion? And this brings me back to our last lunch, a long conversation about things beyond but somehow always connected to applied linguistics: language, art, history, music, philosophy. He was a lovely, thoughtful, learned and considerate man, who, as one mutual close friend wrote to me recently, “made us better people”.

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