

Herbert Penzl 1910–1995

Herbert Penzl, professor emeritus of German at the University of California at Berkeley, died on September 1, 1995, just one day shy of his eighty-fifth birthday, of cancer.

Herbert Penzl was born on September 2, 1910, in Neufelden, Austria. He passed his *Matura* at the Classical Gymnasium in Vienna in 1929 and thereupon enrolled in the University of Vienna to study Germanic and English philology. He interrupted his doctoral studies to accept an honorary fellowship at Brown University from 1932 to 1934, where he worked as an editorial assistant to Hans Kurath on the *Linguistic atlas of the United States and Canada*. He completed his doctorate in 1935 with a dissertation on “The development of Middle English *a* in New England speech.” After finishing his doctoral studies, he taught secondary school in Vienna for a year, and in September 1936, immigrated to the United States. He served with the Information and Education Division of the U.S. Army Service Forces from 1943 to 1945, working in New York on a Norwegian dictionary project. He became a U.S. citizen in 1944.

Herbert Penzl’s first academic appointment was at Rockford College in 1936. He joined the faculty at the University of Illinois in 1938, and moved to the University of Michigan in 1950. He remained at Michigan until 1963, when the University of California at Berkeley beckoned. He retired from his post at Berkeley, but by no means from the profession in 1979.

Professor Penzl achieved high recognition for his work on historical phonology and the phonemic analysis of writing systems. His publications address issues not only in the Germanic area, but also in Pashto, for which he spent a year (1948–49) in Afghanistan. His approach to these issues was influenced by his early work with Hans Kurath, who trained him in what was then called the “new approach to philology,” which he applied to his studies of New England speech, Pennsylvania German, and Pashto, as well as to Old English, Old High

German, and Gothic. Indeed, all of his work bears the stamp of structuralism, applied with care, thoroughness, and incisive intelligence, from his early publications on New England American English (such as “The Vowel in *rather* in New England,” 1938), through his phonemic analyses of specific texts (for example, “Die Phoneme in Notkers alemannischem Dialekt,” 1968) and his more general theoretical contributions (such as *Methoden der germanischen Linguistik*, 1974), to his monographs on historical Germanic phonology and the older stages of German (such as *Vom Urgermanischen zum Neuhochdeutschen: Eine historische Phonologie*, 1975, and *Mittelhochdeutsch*, 1989).

During his long career he received numerous honors, including a Fulbright grant for study in Afghanistan (which led to several publications on Pashto verb and noun morphology, as well as his *Grammar of Pashto*, 1955, translated into Pashto in 1961), a Guggenheim fellowship, the Citation of Distinction from the University of California at Berkeley, and an appointment to the Austrian Academy of Sciences. Visiting professorships took him to several universities here and abroad. A measure of the esteem in which he was held by his colleagues throughout the world is the list of distinguished contributors to his festschrift, *Linguistic method: Essays in honor of Herbert Penzl*, 1979.

Herbert Penzl’s students were especially fond of him. They appreciated his patience, his broad knowledge, his ability to transmit that knowledge clearly and with conviction, his deep enthusiasm for the study of language, and his sincere commitment to methodological rigor. He was able to instill in them his own extraordinary respect for concrete evidence, as well as his (sometimes none too thinly veiled) suspicion of theoretical constructions based less on fact than on fancy. He convinced them that there are plenty of real data available to fuel one’s research, and that one need not manufacture one’s own *Schreibtischsätze* to prove a point. They learned important lessons from his commentaries on “hocus pocus” linguistics and on the dangers of trying to see things whose existence is not solidly documented. During the 1950s and 1960s, when the field of linguistics seemed to be suffering one revolution after another, and historical/comparative linguistics was becoming marginalized by highly publicized and abundantly funded debates over increasingly abstract theoretical concerns, he held the torch that lit the way for many aspiring students who went on to take their own places in the

profession and now continue to affirm their faith in the principles and values that he so carefully nurtured. [ROBERT L. KYES, *University of Michigan*]

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