

# Bertil Malmberg, first Chair of Phonetics in Sweden

## Peer Evaluations

Paul Touati

Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University

### **Abstract**

*Following a royal act, a new academic discipline, Phonetics, was officially given birth in 1947. However, it was not until November 1950 that, at Lund University, Bertil Malmberg was appointed to the first Chair of Phonetics in Sweden.*

*Four Scandinavian experts were chosen to evaluate Malmberg's scientific competence. The peers produced four evaluations, which constitute the central corpus for the present study. In order to analyse these evaluations, I will make use of a hermeneutic approach combining three ways of interpretive positioning - three stances. The first stance fits into the field of the history of science. The second stance concerns the rhetorical and textual aspects of the peer evaluations. The last stance is more epistemological in character. It mainly concerns the relationship between scientific knowledge and the definition of an academic discipline.*

### **First Chair of Phonetics and Peer Evaluations**

When in 1947, following the royal act no 272, the new academic discipline, Phonetics, was officially given birth, the two oldest and most famous universities in Sweden, Uppsala University (founded 1477) and Lund University (founded 1666) were designated to house the chairs (Gjerdman, 1959).<sup>1</sup> However, it was not until November 1950 that, at Lund University, Bertil Malmberg was appointed to the first Chair of Phonetics in Sweden (Gårding, 1994; Sigurd, 1995). The young romanist – Malmberg was born in 1913 and had defended his thesis on *Le roman du Comte de Poitiers* in 1940 – was “called” to apply; thus sole candidate to the position. Four experts were appointed to evaluate Malmberg's scientific competence. Their work consisted essentially in answering the question as to whether Malmberg was qualified enough for the task in view.

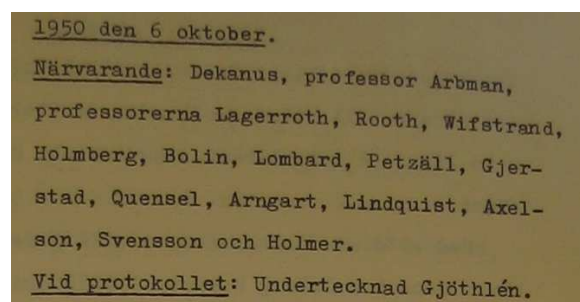
The peers produced four evaluations, which constitute the central corpus exploited for the present study<sup>2</sup>. In order to analyse these evaluations, I will make use of a hermeneutic approach combining three ways of interpretive positioning - three stances. The first stance fits into the field of the history of science. In fact, I consider the appointment of a candidate to a

new Chair as a key event in the history of a discipline, just as the textual records that enforced that event, the evaluations and comments made by the scientific and academic actors involved, are key documents to understanding the state of the art in phonetic science at the moment that its status as an academic discipline was ratified politically. The second stance concerns the rhetorical and textual aspects of the peer evaluations. The questions asked are as follows: do the peer evaluations pertain to the rhetorical domain of the epideictic? Do these evaluations express consensus or controversy? What kind of texts are produced by the four peers? The last stance is more epistemological in character. It mainly concerns the relationship between scientific knowledge and the definition of an academic discipline. In the important historical moment when specific scientific knowledge is ratified by institutionalisation, peer evaluations are absolutely crucial in defining the discipline. For instance, in our particular case, the question as to whether Phonetics should be considered as part of the Humanities or as an Experimental science was repeatedly actualised. It should be noted that these three interpretive stances are, in my opinion, quite inseparable; only when taken together, do they capture the significant movement of science in action (Latour, 2005).

## The section of Humanities, the peers and the candidate

### *The section of Humanites*

Of the twenty-six professors at the section of the Humanities at Lund University in 1950, twenty were involved in the appointment of Malmberg to the first Chair of Phonetics. On October 6 1950, fifteen professors participated in the meeting during which the appointment was unanimously voted and immediately sent to the Grand Consistory. The list is as follows:



In: Protokoll 1950-10-06, Lunds universitet, Filosofiska Fakultetens Arkiv 1666-1956, Volym A1A: 122

### *The peers*

They came from four different Scandinavian universities. The only national expert, Olof Gjerdman [1883-1965] came from Uppsala University. His Scandinavian fellow experts were, a Norwegian, Ernst Selmer [1890-1971] from the University of Oslo, a Dane, Louis Hjelmslev [1899-1965] from the University of Copenhagen and a Finn, Antti Sovijärvi [1912-1995] from the University of Helsinki. This pool was thus composed of experts not only coming from four different countries but also, as we will see, from four different rhetorical and academic traditions. The evaluations were written in three different languages: Swedish (Gjerdman and Sovijärvi), Norwegian (Selmer) and Danish (Hjelmslev). It should also be added that these experts belonged, by their age, to different generations of scholars. In 1950, Gjerdman, the oldest of the four, was aged 67, Selmer, 60, and Hjelmslev, 51. Sovijärvi was the youngest. With his 38 years, he was the only one that belonged to the same generation as the candidate (Malmberg was 37 at the time).

### *The candidate*

Bertil Malmberg was described in the following terms by Gjerdman, the Swedish expert:

“The sole candidate, Docent Bertil Malmberg, who was born in 1913, has a BA embracing German, English and Romance languages, Scandinavian languages and pedagogy. In 1940, he defended his thesis on *Le roman du Comte de Poitiers* [...]”; the same year he became a lecturer in Romance languages at Lund University [...]. In 1938, he obtained a diploma in phonetics at the Institute of Phonetics in Paris. Among the study trips made by Malmberg, I mention three: a journey to South America (Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay) made in 1946, a journey to Norway, Denmark, Netherlands, Belgium, France and Italy in 1947 and a journey to Finland undertaken in 1948. Funded by Lund University, the aim of the last two was to gain knowledge of how research (instrumental) and teaching in phonetics was effectuated in these countries“.<sup>3</sup>

## Peer evaluations rhetorical and textual aspects

### *Rhetorical aspects*

According to a list presented by Malmberg, the number of his publications amounts to 75, of which 59 were submitted to peer evaluation (see also “Bertil Malmberg Bibliography” by Gullberg, 1993). The experts were supposed to use the publications submitted by Malmberg to evaluate the candidate's scientific potential and, at the same time, estimate the actual scientific strength of his production in the light of advanced contemporary research in phonetics. The fundamental scientific positioning adopted by each expert was in fact “staged” in a text that was built along a dichotomised dimension constituted by the span between the poles “praise-vs-blame”, the power inherent to such arguments are well known to epideictic rhetoric. The section of Humanities at Lund fully understood the importance of the kind of arguments chosen. In assessing Malmberg's scientific contribution in the rhetorical terms of “praise or blame”, the Scandinavian peers did not only judge a candidate but also a potential discipline. Praising Malmberg's work meant considering him “the right person at the right place”, something that, in its turn, assured that consensus and social legitimacy was bestowed upon the new discipline. On the other hand, blame causes controversy and involves putting not only the candidate but also the scientific content at stake. It seems as though each of the four peers took a different stand along the

continuum “praise-blame” and consequently also that of “consensus-controversy”. Each positioning had consequences. “If praise implies consensus, [it] engages a vision of ethical preference involving the whole theory of *decision* [...]” (Dominicy and Frédéric, 2001:15). It is evident that blame also leads to decision. Modern epideictic theory (Dominicy, 2001) stresses that the use of the span “Praise-Blame” easily permits the transformation of spontaneous preference into “rational” preference, something that may be perceived in the peers' different manner of evaluating Malmberg's contribution.

#### *Textual aspects.*

The texts produced by the experts are of different length. Selmer produced the longest text (31 pages). It is followed in descending order by the text of Gjerdman (27 pages), of Hjelmselv (18 pages) and finally of Sovijärvi (9 pages). The overall textual structure is highly similar. It consists of an opening, a body where some chosen publications are discussed and finally a closure in which each expert expresses his overall evaluation and makes a decision. If the classical tripartite compositional structure is similar, the fact remains that content and style differ markedly. In the following, text openings are used as illustrations of the diverging styles adopted. As we have seen before in the quote from Gjerdman, his account started off with a *biographical* account, intended to put the life and writings of Malmberg, the scientist, into perspective. Sovijärvi, however, began with an *enumeration*. He lists Malmberg's areas of competence: “I ranked the candidate's publications which can be used to assess his competence in 5 groups: 1) phonetics, 2) experimental phonetics, 3) phonology, 4) phonetics and historical linguistics [...] and 5) phonetic and pedagogy”. It may be noted that Sovijärvi did not include Malmberg's publications in philology, with the one exception of an article entitled “A child changes language”. In contrast again to Gjerdman, Selmer chose to integrate Malmberg in a line of prominent phoneticians. He started with a *list* of names of renowned phoneticians belonging to a vast panorama of countries and working under different definitions of their discipline: “In Norway, the chair is described as chair of “general” phonetics which I think is a vague qualification that gives rise to many interpretations. In Finland [...] if we based it on representatives of the discipline [Pipping, Alma,

Sovijärvi] we can say that the orientation is rather that of a natural science. Naming people like D. Jones, Fouché, Menzerath, Calzia, N. Tomàs, Meriggi as all more or less representatives of “general” phonetics [points to] widely divergent directions [...]”. As a further argument in favour of the diversity of profiles in phonetics, Selmer expanded his list to names like E.A. Meyer, Millardet, Grammont, Duraffour and Rousselot. Finally, Hjelmslev began his evaluation by advancing a *definition* of phonetics: “As the chair (to fill) has been described as a chair of phonetics without further explanation, I permit myself to assume that the definition of phonetics applied to this Chair is to be understood in the broadest sense, meaning that we think not only about classical phonetics, that is physiological phonetics reclining on an auditory basis, but as experimental phonetics, on one side the most recent, mainly acoustic oriented development, on the other, the theory of phonemes, [...]”.<sup>4</sup> Hjelmselv continued his definition by saying that phonetics is not only the field of synchronic descriptions but also one of diachronic analysis, and added that it should be seen as an advantage if the holder of the Chair also had some knowledge also in the areas of general linguistics, psycholinguistics as well as in philological method. From the beginning, Hjelmslev was playing his cards by being very positive towards Malmberg, whom he saw as “very active” in all areas included in defining phonetics.

#### **Scientific Knowledge and Academic Discipline.**

To confer institutional legitimacy to scientific knowledge by giving it the status of an academic discipline and by creating a Chair that is appointed for the first time was an ambitious goal and not an easy task for any party involved. In our case, the goal was reached by means of presenting the competence of the sole candidate, Bertil Malmberg, who was officially Docent in Romance languages as a phonetician. In order to decide if Malmberg could meet the terms, it was first necessary to advance a definition of phonetics, then to investigate the competence of the candidate. As it might be expected, the experts' definitions vary. Hjelmselv gave a broad definition of phonetics as a discipline that covers areas as diverse as linguistics, philology and experimental phonetics. According to him, the work done by Malmberg was undoubtedly

pertinent. In his evaluation Malmberg's work is described as "a synthesis of perspectives and methods of linguistics, experimental phonetics and classical phonetics". There is therefore absolutely no doubt that Hjelmslev considered Malmberg as a "phonetician [who] meets the demands that nowadays are put on a scholar and a teacher [in the field of phonetics]"<sup>5</sup>. In his peer evaluation, Hjelmslev adopted the tone of "praise and consensus". The peer evaluation produced by Sovijärvi is different in tone. He emitted strong reservations about Malmberg as a phonetician; obviously arousing from the narrow definition that the young Finnish phonetician had adopted. He considered phonetics essentially as an experimental science and concluded that although Malmberg's merits were largely adequate for a Chair of "General Linguistics and Phonetics", it was not perfectly clear that they were sufficient for a Chair of "Phonetics".<sup>6</sup> He also pronounced some unwillingness to accept certain experimental methods used by Malmberg. The tone adopted by Sovijärvi tended to be the one of blame and controversy. The positioning of the other two peers may be situated in between these two poles, with a tendency towards a positive view on the pertinence of the work achieved by Malmberg. With all required lucidity, the evaluations of Hjelmslev and Sovijärvi already embody the opposing trends that were to divide the discipline twenty years later, working as a paragon examples of the uneasiness of the Humanities at large.

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<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to professor Olle Engstrand for sending me Olof Gjerdman's interesting autobiographical notes concerning his career as a phonetician (Gjerdman 1959).

<sup>2</sup> The present study is part of a research in progress concerning the historical, social, discursive, and rhetoric conditions that determined the emergence of phonetic science in Sweden between 1939 and 1969 (see Touati, 2009a, Touati, 2009b and Touati, Forthcoming)

<sup>3</sup> Utlåtande Gjerdman, In: Lunds universitet, Filosofiska Fakultetens Arkiv 1666-1956, Volym A1A: 122:

Den ende sökanden, docent Bertil Malmberg, som är född 1913, har avlagt fil.-kand.-och fil.mag.-examen i tyska, engelska och romanska språk, i nordiska språk och pedagogik, alltså huvudsakligen i språkliga ämnen, samt fil.lic.-examen i romanska språk. Han disputerade för filosofisk doktorsgrad 1940 på en avhandling om "Le roman du Comte de Poitiers".

Av Malmbergs resor vill jag nämna tre: en till Sydamerika (Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay) 1946, en till Norge, Danmark, Nederländerna, Belgien, Frankrike, Italien 1947 och en till Finland 1948, de två sist nämnda företagna på uppdrag av Humanistiska sektionen vid Lunds universitet och med statsbidrag för att studera den fonetiska forskningens och undervisningens organisation och uppläggning i resp. länder och de fonetiska institutens instrumentella utrustning.

<sup>4</sup>Utlåtande Hjelm selv, In: Lunds universitet, Filosofiska Fakultetens Arkiv 1666-1956, Volym A1A: 122:

Da lærestolen betegnes som et professorat i fonetik uden nogen tilføjelse, tillader jeg mig at gå ud fra, at begrebet fonetik ved lærestolens definition er at tage i videste forstand, således at det ikke blot tænkes på den klassiske fonetik, der væsentlig er en fysiologisk fonetik på auditiv basis, men tillige på den ene side på eksperimentalfonetik, herunder indbefattet de nyeste, væsentlig akustisk orienterede retninger, og på den anden side på fonenteori,

<sup>5</sup>Utlåtande Hjelm selv, In: Lunds universitet, Filosofiska Fakultetens Arkiv 1666-1956, Volym A1A: 122:

Docent Malmberg har gennem sin hele produktion vist sig som en overordentlig flittig og energisk forsker med evner til stadig udvikling i nye retninger. Han er en betydelig videnskabelig kraft, en kyndig forsker og en dygtig pædagog. Som fonetiker synes han helt på højde med de krav, som nutiden kan stille til en videnskabelig og undervisningsmæssig indsats. Jeg anser docent Malmberg for kompetent og for endog udmærket kvalificeret til at beklæde et professorat i fonetik.

<sup>6</sup>Utlåtande Sovijärvi, In: Lunds universitet, Filosofiska Fakultetens Arkiv 1666-1956, Volym A1A: 122:

den senare. Om det vore fråga om en professur i allmän språkvetenskap och fonetik, skulle jag med nöje anse sökanden kompetent, men för professuren i fonetik (nuförtiden är fonetiken en självständig vetenskap) äro sökandens vetenskapliga meriter icke så tungt vägande, att jag utan betänkande kan anse honom fullständigt kompetent.