

Princeton University

Honors Faculty Members
Receiving Emeritus Status



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Faculty Members Receiving Emeritus Status

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Leonard Harvey Babby



Leonard Babby's arrival in 1991, as a professor of Slavic linguistics in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, was in fact a return to Princeton. He had first been hired in 1969, before defending his dissertation at Harvard University (1970), as a member of the Slavic department and of Princeton's Interdepartmental Committee of Linguistics. When the Ph.D. Program in Slavic was suspended in 1971, he allowed himself to be tempted away to Cornell University. For twenty years, he was a professor in Cornell's huge Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics and an adjunct professor in Near Eastern studies, a tribute to his interest in Turkish as well as Slavic languages. By the time he re-arrived at Princeton, this breadth had become his professional trademark. Len served as head of our Ph.D. program in Slavic and theoretical linguistics, which has had an exemplary placement record for its graduates, as well as director of the Program in Linguistics. An advisee of Roman Jakobson's at Harvard in the 1960s and devotee of Noam Chomsky at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology throughout his career, Len went on to elaborate highly original systems of generative syntax that have come to define the field of structural linguistics in this country.

Through sixty scholarly articles and five monographs (two of which are in progress), Len advanced entirely novel analyses of major problems remarkably unbound by established orthodoxies. These include his widely discussed two-tiered theory of argument structure based, in part, on the unusual behavior of impersonal verbs in Russian, and his famous analysis of hybrid categories, which illustrate that a predicate's argument structure and syntactic projection do not follow naturally from its meaning. His work on negative existential sentences remains the point of departure for all study on the syntax and semantics of the genitive of negation and is now, after many years, a center of discussion within Moscow generative syntax circles. His elucidation

of “adversity impersonal” sentences in Russian led to the demise of the widely accepted generalization that accusative cannot occur in the absence of an external thematic relation. Len’s study of discontinuous case-assignment in quantified noun phrases and his theory of control predicates have left their mark, in each case shifting the discussion in the direction of more creative solutions to such problems, rooted in the kind of evidence that seemingly only Len has managed to marshal over the years.

Len’s students, both at Cornell and Princeton, together with his many “students in spirit,” occupy a central position in Slavic syntax today. In January 2013, at the annual conference of the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages in Boston, a series of panels in homage to Len’s multifaceted contributions, involving eighteen participants among Len’s current and former students and colleagues, celebrated the lasting impact of Len’s work. Each session room was filled beyond capacity. A Festschrift for Leonard Babby appeared in 2004 as a double issue of the *Journal of Slavic Linguistics*. As its editors remarked, “Len’s work is formal, though not willfully so. Len engages the formal apparatus of generative grammar only to the extent that a given problem requires it; he has never gratuitously attended to fashionable theoretical trends.” Len was one of the first linguists to apply generative grammar to the Slavic languages. The influence was reciprocal; he showed general linguists that their principles needed to be adapted if they were to be applied to morphologically rich languages (such as the Slavic family) in a consistent way, and at the same time he introduced Slavic linguists to generative grammar, showing them how its principles elucidate superficially enigmatic phenomena. One of Len’s lasting legacies will be his unparalleled attention to detail. His file cards, filled with examples to be quoted at a moment’s notice, are legendary.

As a teenager at Brooklyn Technical High School (1953-57), Len was preparing for a career in mechanical engineering. He remembers with horror and relief that crucial moment when he discovered that at heart he was a different sort of engineer, that is, a linguist: a scholar for whom the “working parts that matter” were words. Len is

an investigator, a problem-solver, whose methodology is perhaps best expressed in the epigraph to his 2009 Cambridge University Press monograph, *The Syntax of Argument Structure*, cited from another great investigator and problem-solver, Sherlock Holmes: “The more outré and grotesque an incident is the more carefully it deserves to be examined, and the very point which appears to complicate a case is, when duly considered and scientifically handled, the one which is most likely to elucidate it.”