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Obituary for John R. Rennison (1950–2025)

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Obituary for John R. Rennison (1950–2025)

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We mourn the loss of John Richard Rennison, Emeritus Professor at the Department of Linguistics at the University of Vienna, who passed away at the age of 75 on December 24, 2025.

John was a British-Austrian linguist who, after his studies in Modern Languages/German at the University of Oxford (MA Oxon) from 1969 to 1973, enrolled at the University of Salzburg. There he took an interest in the local Bavarian dialect, which was to be the subject matter of his PhD (1979) under Gaberell Drachman. In it, he analysed the (phonological) competence of two speakers as the result of a complex phonological system of ordered rules.

According to the way John himself would tell the story, it was happenstance that brought him to Vienna: In the same year that he completed his PhD, and after a conference presentation on German umlaut, he got into a lengthy debate with Wolfgang U. Dressler, then head of the Linguistics Department in Vienna. The discussion continued in a joint car ride, at the end of which Dressler suggested John join the Linguistics Department of Vienna. John would become a member of faculty in Vienna in the May of 1979, and completed his habilitation there in 1988. He stayed in Vienna until his retirement, with the exception of a number

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of guest professorships in various locations, including a two-year stay at the university of Witwatersrand (1998–2000), South Africa, where he also served as head of department and encouraged students to work on local languages.

In his long list of publications and conference presentations, John worked on various phonological topics, such as syllable structure, the internal structure of vowels, vowel harmony, computer modelling of phonological theories, etc. Much of his data came from West African languages, and he took a particular interest in Koromfe, a Gur language that he dedicated more than 40 years of his life to. His magnum opus, a descriptive grammar of the language based on his own extensive field work, appeared with Routledge in 1997. He also published an extensive and multilingual Koromfe dictionary online, the most current version of which appeared in January 2025. As of 2022, Koromfe has been a language without a language area due to terrorist attacks and the subsequent eviction of the local population, and John was also involved in humanitarian work in the association “Hilfe für Pobé-Mengao” (“Help for Pobé-Mengao”).

John must also be credited for nourishing the theory of Government Phonology at the University of Vienna. The Government Phonology Round Table (GPRT), by now a regular meeting point for linguists working in that framework, originally started out in 1997 as a bilateral forum for discussion between Government Phonologists in Vienna and Budapest, with John one of the initiators. In addition, John was also heavily involved in the organisation of the International Phonology Meeting, a conference series that used to take place in Vienna and other nearby locations in Austria. Starting in the 1980's, John also made it his responsibility to take care of the IT infrastructure at the Linguistics Department, a function not to be underestimated in those earlier days of the internet.

As a teacher, John was extremely supportive of his students and believed in their potential. He would always have an open ear and listen patiently to problems of a linguistic as well as of a more personal nature. In general, John was very sociable and enjoyed working and being with people. Also after his retirement he kept teaching occasional courses, and he would unfailingly attend social events at the Linguistics Department.

We can only hope that this short obituary succeeds in expressing some of our feelings for a renowned researcher, a generous teacher and supervisor, a respectful and gentle person, and a good colleague and friend.