

## OBITUARY

### **John A. Holm, 1943-2015**

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In the early hours of the 28<sup>th</sup> of December 2015, creole studies and the wider field of contact linguistics lost one of its most active and relevant contributors. John A. Holm, 72, passed away, after an entire scholarly career dedicated to help laying the theoretical and logistical foundations for the establishment of contact linguistics as a mainstream linguistic discipline.

John's multiple contributions in this domain have already been well illustrated by Sarah Grey Thomason and Hildo Honório do Couto in their respective contributions to *Papia's Festschrift* volumes<sup>1</sup>, and by William Grimes in the obituary published in the New York Times<sup>2</sup> in January 2016. In these texts, the reader will also find a good summary of John's family background, early studies, travels and career in the USA.

Here, on the other hand, we wish to focus on the final years of John's career, which he chose to spend at the University of Coimbra, in Portugal. This is where the authors of this text, all three majoring in Portuguese and English language and literature at the time, had the privilege to meet John and to learn from him about the fascinating world of language contact and the political relevance of the scientific study of its outcomes. Most importantly, it was during his years in Coimbra that John worked tirelessly and successfully in the mission that had taken him there in the first place: inspiring a new generation of linguists who would help make the study of Portuguese-based pidgins and creoles and contact varieties of Portuguese a well established field of study in Portugal.

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<sup>1</sup> The *Festschrift* was published in 2014 in *Papia* 24 (1-2) and it is available at <http://revistas.fflch.usp.br/papia/issue/archive>.

<sup>2</sup> Available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/04/us/john-holm-pioneer-in-lingustics-dies-at-72.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/04/us/john-holm-pioneer-in-lingustics-dies-at-72.html?_r=0).

John first came to Coimbra in 1993-94 as a Fulbright Visiting Professor of Linguistics. Four years later, in 1998, with the unflagging support of the late Jorge Morais-Barbosa, John became a *Professor Convidado* at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Coimbra, where a Chair in English Linguistics was created for him. John moved to Casa Nova, a small village in Coimbra's mountainside, and started teaching English Linguistics to students majoring in English.

John had retired from the City University of New York and was by then an undisputed scholarly authority on pidgin and creole studies. The fact that a position as Visiting Professor was the best the University of Coimbra had to offer to such an eminent international scholar is no less surprising than the fact that such a scholar was willing to take it, even if he was later on promoted to Full Professor, after his *agregação* in 2004. But John was more than a scholar; he was a scholar with a purpose: using his knowledge and contact network to help creole studies in Portugal grow from infancy to adulthood.

Creole studies was not a new field of study in Portugal. Seminal works had been published by Adolpho Coelho, José Leite de Vasconcelos, António de Almada Negreiros and António de Paula Brito in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, by Sebastião Rodolfo Dalgado and António da Silva Rêgo in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and by Graciete Nogueira Batalha, Jorge Morais-Barbosa, Marius Valkhoff, Luís Filipe Thomaz, from the 1950s onwards. The correspondence between Adolpho Coelho and Hugo Schuchardt, the founding father of creole studies, shows that the early Portuguese creolists were in close contact with their European peers. In the 1990s, Portuguese-based creoles continued to attract the attention of the international community of creolists and the first colloquium on the topic was held at the University of Lisbon in 1991, organized by the late Ernesto d'Andrade and Alain Khim. However, by the mid-1990s, with the exception of the work of a few scholars such as Dulce Pereira, Maria Isabel Tomás, and Ernesto d'Andrade, creolistics was still a relatively marginal field of study in Portugal.

John's moving to Coimbra was a key factor in changing this situation by facilitating access to relevant literature in the field and providing contact to scholars in other countries. For some time, John did much of this ground-breaking work informally, identifying interested undergrads, inviting them home for meals and lending them books from his excellent private library to allow them to further explore their interest in the study of creoles and contact vernaculars. He also gave them impossible tasks, such as presenting papers at international conferences. It was John's 'swim or sink' strategy, but - because

he believed in us - we all swam. Truth be said, it is easier to swim when you are given the tools to do it. And John was tireless in making sure those tools were available.

In 2001, John joined efforts with colleagues in Portugal and abroad to create the *ACBLPE (Associação: Crioulos de Base Lexical Portuguesa e Espanhola)*. The first meeting of the newly-born learned society for the study of Portuguese and Spanish-based creoles took place at the University of Coimbra in 2001, in a joint meeting with the *SPCL (Society for Pidgin and Creole Languages)*. Since then, the ACBLPE has held annual meetings in different universities in Portugal, Spain, France, The Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Brazil and the Caribbean, welcoming contributions from renowned scholars and new generation of linguists alike. Many have been joint meetings with other learned societies in the field, such as *ABECS - Associação Brasileira de Estudos Crioulos e Similares* (2012 in São Paulo), the *SCL - Society for Caribbean Linguistics* (2004 in Curaçao and 2014 in Aruba) and, of course, the *Society for Pidgin and Creole Linguistics* (2004 in Curaçao, 2007 in Amsterdam, 2009 in Cologne, 2013 in Lisbon and 2014 in Aruba). In 2009, the conditions were ripe for ACBLPE to launch the first issue of this journal.

In 2002, with the support of Isabel Pereira and Clara Keating, John put together a master's program in Descriptive Linguistics (specialization in languages in contact: pidgins, creoles and semicreoles) at the University of Coimbra. The most important outcome of this program was the creation of an informal research group in creolistics that would later on be formally integrated into the university's linguistics research centre, *CELGA – Centro de Estudos de Linguística Geral e Aplicada* (currently *CELGA-ILTEC*), under John's supervision<sup>3</sup>. In addition to a number of publications in peer-reviewed journals, the group also contributed several master's thesis and PhD dissertations providing fieldwork-based comprehensive descriptions of the social history and synchronic linguistic structure of understudied varieties of Portuguese-based creoles in Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau and São Tomé, and exploring the impact of contact on varieties of Portuguese in Africa, Asia and Brazil. The work carried out by the research group was consistently rated *Excellent* by the *FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia*, Portugal's national agency for research funding, and had a very positive impact on *CELGA*'s overall rating.

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.uc.pt/creolistics>.

During his years in Coimbra, John was also very committed to keeping a regular program of workshops and seminars in contact linguistics, bringing together renowned linguists and postgraduate students to learn from each other. In addition to this, John was also responsible for getting the University and his students involved in major international research projects and publications, such as *The Atlas of Pidgin and Creole Language Structures*, a four-volume work edited by Susanne Michaelis, Philippe Maurer, Martin Haspelmath, and Magnus Huber and published by Oxford University Press in 2013.

John was in his mid-fifties when he moved to Coimbra in 1998. Academically, he had nothing else to prove. He could easily have chosen to dedicate his time exclusively to walking his beloved dogs or taking care of his much-admired garden in Casa Nova, to travelling more with his husband and to cooking for their friends. Instead, John chose to continue advancing the cause of creole linguistics. In doing so, John not only helped to put Portugal on the map of international contact linguistics research, he also prepared a new generation to keep it there. It is a big responsibility, but it is one that is worth swimming hard for.

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<sup>4</sup> We list here only major works published after 1998. A complete list of John Holm's publications is available in *Papia* 24 (1). 27-53.

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