

DOCUMENTS OF THE GENERAL FACULTY

**REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR
ROBERT T. HARMS**

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for Professor Emeritus Robert T. Harms, Department of Linguistics, has filed with the secretary of the General Faculty the following report.



Alan W. Friedman, Secretary
General Faculty and Faculty Council
The University of Texas at Austin
Arthur J. Thaman and Wilhelmina Doré Thaman Professor of English and Comparative Literature

**IN MEMORIAM
ROBERT T. HARMS**

Professor Emeritus Robert Thomas Harms, noted linguist and avocational botanist, died on October 5, 2016. Bob Harms was born on April 12, 1932, in Peoria, Illinois, where he grew up. He received his B.A. in 1952 and doctorate in 1960, both from the University of Chicago. His long career at The University of Texas began in 1958 and continued until his retirement in 2006, during which he made outstanding contributions to the field of linguistics—especially phonology, the study of sound systems in human languages—and to the University and its Department of Linguistics. He was Department Chair from 1972 to 1977 and Graduate Advisor from 1998 to 2006, in both positions helping to establish the Department’s leading international role in the burgeoning discipline.

Bob Harms was a linguist’s linguist, with an instinctive feel for complex systems, and the sagacity and skepticism to evaluate theories of how they work. Coming to Texas with a background and training in Uralic, Slavic, Germanic, and general Indo-European historical linguistics, he was one of the group of scholars, including Morris Halle and Noam Chomsky at MIT, and Bob King and Emmon Bach at UT Austin, who pioneered the then-new field of generative phonology. This research paradigm probed the regularities in sound systems, and then developed criteria for evaluating their cognitive status in the working linguistic competence of ordinary speakers. In 1968, he published a major textbook, *Introduction to Phonological Theory*, and the same year, with Emmon Bach, the widely-cited volume *Universals in Linguistic Theory*. In his later work, Bob was well known for asking how speakers innovated regularities in sound systems, undertaking studies of speech physiology and acoustics to see how the biological nature of sound and sound production led speakers in certain directions but not others.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Bob Harms began work in computational linguistics, making important contributions in the field of computational morphology, where he helped develop an approach to modeling the internal structure of the long, grammatically complex words found in some of the world’s languages but not others. Alongside his theoretical explorations, Bob maintained an interest throughout his career in the description of languages of the Uralic family. This interest led to monographs and articles on Estonian (*Estonian Grammar*, 1962); Finnish, a language he spoke proficiently (*Finnish Structural Sketch*, 1964); and several others. Meanwhile, his theoretical interests led him to explore aspects of the sound systems of languages as far-flung as the Siberian Yukaghir, the Arabic of Cairo, and the Southern Paiute language of Arizona and California.

Along with his research, Bob was also a dedicated teacher. As his long-time colleagues, we knew well his reputation among generations of students: painstaking, exacting, caring, kind, and extremely devoted to their progress, from day of freshman entry to day of Ph.D. defense. Bob applied his teaching wisdom during his many years of service as graduate advisor; and his general sagacity and knowledge of the field to his role as UT Austin’s fledgling Linguistics Department’s second Chair, for which he was deeply appreciated.

Bob managed to blend his rigor with his intense skepticism in a way that was uniquely charming. One of us—Robert D. King (RDK), former Dean of the College of Liberal Arts—recalls meeting Bob:

I met Bob Harms the first day I came to work at Texas in 1965. I had had the extraordinarily good luck to be assigned to an office with the late Emmon Bach. Emmon and Bob were great friends as it turned out, went out for coffee every morning, and they invited me along. Having been introduced to Bob I was manfully trying to hold up my side of the pleasantries: Yes, it is a damn sight hotter than Wisconsin (it was an August day in Austin); Oh, you know so-and-so at Wisconsin? Bob Harms was never much one for chit-chat, and he cut immediately to the chase (a phrase I don't recall being around in 1965).

Harms: What's your dissertation about?

RDK: Well, I used a computer program to test André Martinet's hypotheses about the role of functional load in sound change (Martinet was enjoying a great vogue in historical linguistics at the time).

Harms: And?

RDK: Well, I proved that functional load does not play any role in sound change.

Harms: You can't prove that.

RDK: Well, uh, I felt like I did (stutter, stutter).

Emmon was no help at all, having found interesting new cloud formations above Guadalupe Street to lose himself in. Over coffee we stuck to the Texas heat and what courses everybody was teaching.

That was textbook early Bob Harms: Hit first, be nice later. After he got a copy of my dissertation, he told Emmon he thought it was "not bad," which I took for high praise. I subsequently learned generative phonology from him, a bit about bird-watching, a bit about photography, and finally how to e-mail. We never discussed things where we both knew that we would disagree, both of us having come from a generation that values friendship more highly than politics or policy.

My period as dean of Liberal Arts was tumultuous and frequently controversial, but never a word of criticism did I hear from him. I even got a couple of welcome compliments out of him.

He was in other words the best kind of friend, and I will miss him far more than he could have imagined. I like to think of him up there in that heaven he never believed in, challenging linguistic newcomers (if any other linguists are admitted through the pearly gates) with "What was your dissertation about?", listening for new birdcalls from the angels, and observing bemusedly the shenanigans of those of us left here below.

After retiring from the faculty, Bob continued to make scholarly contributions but in a new direction, one that, unknown to almost anyone else, he began pursuing during his last decade on the linguistic faculty: the scientific study of the flora of Texas. Much of Bob's botanical work and photography is now available on UT Austin's Plant Resources Center's website. He put together an extensive and intricate series of data-rich webpages with beautiful photography, most of which can be found by going to the Flora of Texas webpage (<http://w3.biosci.utexas.edu/prc/flora.html>) and then clicking on either of the two "Field Studies" links or on the "Crystallofolia" link (a term Bob coined).

Dr. Tom Wendt, Curator Emeritus of the Plant Resources Center writes:

Bob Harms wandered into the herbarium one day in the mid-1990s with a bedraggled plant fragment in hand, wondering why the botanical literature he had consulted didn't fit what he saw. The plant (a mimosa) was from his beloved Purola, a beautiful and rugged Hill Country tract in northern Hays County, where he was collecting and cataloging the flora. As curator of the herbarium, it fell to me to help him. He quickly showed himself to be careful as an observer and tenacious in his pursuit of understanding, and he taught me a lot about both over the next twenty or so years.

Bob continued to come in with plants and questions and slowly became a part of the herbarium coterie. When he retired in 2006, he asked if he could have a place to do botanical research in the herbarium. Knowing his love of and competence in web design and digital imaging, I said sure, but would he at the same time become our volunteer webmaster and help with some of our imaging set-ups? He seemed more than amenable and quickly became an absolutely indispensable member of the herbarium staff, albeit unpaid. For the next ten years he was in four days every week.

Besides handling all of our web needs, Bob was able to more seriously pursue research on taxonomic problems in various genera of plants, all of them arising from problems in identifying or understanding Purola plants. He ended up publishing two extensive articles in our in-house journal *Lundellia*, and several more articles or notes in other botanical journals. From the beginning, he was blunt in his assessment that professional botanists had done a damn poor job of carefully describing the morphology and variation of Texas plants. I could not disagree in many cases and could only provide pathetic excuses; his response was to do the needed work himself. He often developed his own seat-of-the-pants methodologies as needed when our more standard herbarium methodologies and resources were insufficient to answer his questions. He was always interested in discussing his and others' projects to gain botanical insight, yet there were many days that I would not see him at all ... before he disappeared into the bowels of the herbarium to painstakingly and tenaciously collect his data (often by making scans or microphotographs and then using the images for study). He found useful characteristics that others had missed, and he clarified problems that others had not known existed. His first published article, on the agarita (*Berberis*), well exemplifies both; characteristically, it was accompanied by copious images.

This account, which appeared on Bob's memorial webpage (<https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/linguistics/faculty/in-memorial/RobertTHarms.php>) was poignantly recognizable by all of us in the Department of Linguistics who knew him as a scholar and as a man. He will be greatly missed.

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Anthony C. Woodbury (Chair), Megan Crowhurst, and Robert D. King Jr.

Distributed to the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts on July 13, 2017, and posted under "Memorial Resolutions" at <https://wikis.utexas.edu/display/facultycouncil/Wiki+Home>.