Obituary

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Typologist at Otago, Aotearoa: Jae Jung Song (1958–2017)

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Jae Jung Song died peacefully at home in Dunedin, New Zealand on 24 April 2017. Born on 18 January 1958 to Tae Hyun Song and Jin Sun Yoo in South Korea, Jae was one of four siblings, including his brother, Jae Tag, with whom Jae had a

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close relationship. He is survived by his son, Kee, daughter-in-law Coral, and his grandson, whose birth Jae had been eagerly anticipating, but sadly missed.

Jae and his wife and young son went to Australia in 1984. Jae enrolled in Arts at Monash University, Melbourne and majored in Linguistics, graduating with first class honours in 1989. He was awarded the Inaugural Silver Jubilee Scholarship for his undergraduate work and he then embarked on a doctoral dissertation on causatives. His doctoral work was supervised by Barry Blake who had moved from Monash to La Trobe University in 1988. He completed his doctorate in 1990, an insightful work remarkable for the fact that Jae looked at data from over 500 languages.

The National University of Singapore provided Jae with his first full-time academic position. He then was offered a three-year academic position at the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand in 1992, followed by a permanent academic position culminating in a full professorship in 2013. During his 25 years at Otago, Jae was instrumental in re-establishing and expanding Otago’s Linguistics programme to include a Graduate Diploma for Second Language Teachers, a TESOL minor, and papers in English for Academic Purposes.

Jae convened and taught a first-year paper, The Structure of Language; a second-year paper, Syntax; and a third-year paper, Morphosyntax. Jae also taught a range of fourth-year papers, including topics such as Language Processing and World Englishes. He supervised a number of postgraduate students. Among students, Jae was known for his high expectations, but also for his sense of humor. His repertoire of humorous linguistic examples and jokes were regularly updated with references to pop music, Jae’s passion. A number of first-year students remember Jae for inviting a team of cheerleaders to encourage students on their final exam.

The editorial boards on which Jae served at the time of his death were Web Journal of Formal, Computational and Cognitive Linguistics, International Review of Korean Studies, Language and Linguistics Compass, New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies, The Open Applied Linguistics Journal, and Hyengthaylon (“Morphology”). He was also Associate Editor of Linguistic Typology.

over 70 book chapter and journal publications in both English and Korean. He was also a member and author of the Max Planck Institute project on the *Word atlas of language structures* and was invited to spend three months at the Institute in 2002. Besides typology, Jae also published on South and North Korean language policy.

Many of those who knew Jae through his work were unaware that Jae was a survivor of polio, which he contracted as a child in South Korea. Although he was cured of polio, at the height of his career, he was struck by post-polio syndrome, a virtually untreatable re-emergence of the effects of polio. Over the course of 15 years, Jae progressed through the support of a cane, one crutch, two crutches, a mobility chair and crutches, and finally a motorized wheelchair. Jae was determined not to allow the syndrome to compromise his work, and maintained a usual workload until his untimely death.

Perhaps no one in the typology community knew Jae more closely than did Seppo Kittilä. What began as a collegial relationship became a personal friendship that Jae deeply valued.

A personal remembrance

I had my first contact with Jae in 2003. I was an editor of *SKY Journal of Linguistics*, and Jae submitted a paper to the journal. I had cited his work frequently in my own, and I was very excited to receive a submission from such a distinguished colleague. I became even more impressed when I discovered that Jae was a very easy-going guy with whom it was easy to discuss anything, not only topics related to linguistics, but also sports (especially the FIFA World Cup and UEFA Euro Cup), popular culture, and life in general. If you asked Jae a question on anything, he always replied right away, and always to the point.

In 2006 I started working in Helsinki, and Jae was one of the very first colleagues who congratulated me on getting a permanent job. Moving to work in Helsinki also had an unforeseen benefit: Helsinki and Otago have a bilateral agreement. Since I very much wanted to meet Jae in person (and also visit New Zealand), I applied for a scholarship, which I received for December 2007. By that time, I had exchanged at least a hundred e-mails with Jae, but only then did I find out that he had suffered from polio and that he used a walking aid. Similarly, another colleague told me that they never knew Jae had a disability even though they had exchanged dozens of messages over many years. He never complained, even though his situation certainly made his life more
challenging. Learning this about Jae was especially important for me as a father of a disabled son. Seeing Jae do so well despite his condition gave me hope that no one else had given me before, since prior to that point the only people I had met with such a condition were my son’s friends. Jae was waiting for me at the Dunedin airport, and during the ride to downtown it was clear that my first impression of him had been correct. Our senses of humor matched very well, and neither needed to be afraid of saying something wrong. Jae also knew that he was not the only reason I wanted to come to Dunedin, and he helped me a lot in finding things to do during my visit, and took me around Otago. I gave a talk in Otago on Finland’s Independence Day (December 6). Jae had provided two candles for that occasion – a tradition in Finland, as he explained to his students – which was really something I didn’t expect. I thought for a long time that the visit in 2007 would be my last, and that my only way of communication with Jae would be via e-mail. Therefore, I was extremely surprised and flattered to receive one particular e-mail from Jae in 2011 in which he invited me to visit Dunedin again, this time with funding from his university. The second visit was perhaps even better than the first, since we already knew each other better. My last visit to Otago was in 2015, when I spent three and a half weeks as Jae’s guest. He was always a great host, and our discussions on linguistics have always given me new ideas for my research. I really owe Jae a lot.

In addition to my visits to Otago, Jae was always an eager collaborator when I applied for external funding. His reputation definitely helped me to actually get funding as well. Jae also contributed to two volumes that I edited, and he always completed his papers, including all revisions, on time. It has also been a great feeling to know that Jae trusted me and my ability to produce something worth reading. The first sign of this was in 2004, when Jae invited me to contribute to the Oxford handbook of typology, which I found very flattering; it was a great feeling to get such an important invitation from a colleague I respected so much. In 2012, Jae was the chair of ALT’s Greenberg Award committee, and he invited me to be a member of the jury, which showed that he trusted my judgement. When he was hospitalized during the process, he first contacted me explaining his situation, and asked me to see that the process would be completed. I took over as a (co-)chair, and we were done on time.

Many of us know Jae’s work, but I also had the honor to know him personally, and I would like to consider him a friend, now lost forever. I hope, and I think, that the feeling was mutual. One of the nicest memories with him was during my second visit, when after a long day’s work, we went to Poppa’s Pizza and Jae got us a six-pack of Steinlager, which we enjoyed in his office. We
may have discussed linguistics, or perhaps something completely different. Another very nice event was in 2012; a NZ politician had scolded Finland in a Parliament meeting, and Jae wanted to show his support for Finland. I sent him a University of Helsinki T-shirt, which he wore to work on a couple of days. In exchange, he sent me a copy of his book on word order. His request was something I would not expect from anyone, but coming from Jae it only seemed natural.

Jae’s work on causatives and case marking has had a huge impact on me, and I have recommended his linguistic typology textbook and the Oxford handbook to very many of my students and colleagues. Jae is someone with whom I could discuss not only linguistics and languages, but anything else. I will always think very highly of him and remember him as a warm person.