In Memoriam: Ernst Moerk: 1937–2004¹

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Ernst Moerk, Professor Emeritus of Psychology at California State University, Fresno, passed way on August 2, 2004, in Los Angeles, after a courageous battle with brain cancer. Although not a behavior analyst by training, his unwavering pursuit of the truth and his search for environmental explanations in the language acquisition process led him increasingly to the behavioral community. He published in JEAB and TAVB, and attended many behavioral conferences where he participated in several DEV SIG symposia.

Ernst Lorenz Moerk was born on March 10, 1937, in Gallbrunn, Austria. He began his collegiate career majoring in chemistry, with minors in physics and mathematics at the University of Vienna, but later he switched to psychology. He obtained his Ph.D. in psychology in 1964 from University of Innsbruck. After some research and clinical experience in Europe, he traveled to the United States in 1966 to take a position to do psychotherapeutic and psychodiagnostic work with adults and children in an outpatient clinic on a post-doctoral fellowship in Los Angeles.

When he took the position in Los Angeles he was unaware that the orientation of the staff was psychoanalytic, and chafing from these Freudian constraints, he soon decided to apply for positions in academia. He had to choose between two very different institutions, the University of Minnesota, and Fresno State. He suggested to me that he chose Fresno because he had given away all his winter clothes when he moved to Los Angeles. Given his pragmatism, I assume that is at least partly correct.

He took the post of Assistant Professor of Psychology at Fresno State in 1967 and re-

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mained there until his retirement in 2001. Although Fresno's mission is primarily undergraduate teaching, which he did well, mostly in developmental psychology, Ernst managed to develop a remarkable research career. Working without any Ph.D. students or major research support, Ernst was able to challenge the hegemony of psycholinguistic research emanating from Harvard and MIT.

Much of his career was marked by a heroic tilting at the ascendant nativist view of language acquisition that marked the last decades of the 20th century. Brought to the fore by Chomsky and later Pinker, the nativist view was attacked by Ernst from his environmental-empiricist perspective based upon a rigorous analysis of the data. In a characteristic style, Ernst turned the nativists' own data against them. The clearest example was his use of Roger Brown's longitudinal transcripts of the early language interactions of three children (Adam, Eve, and Sarah) that had become the Holy Grail to nativists when they appeared in Brown's (1973) book, *A First Language*. Ernst

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was able to demonstrate that the children's mothers provided much more structured learning environments than Brown and his colleagues claimed. He rebutted the psycholinguists' innate LAD (Language Acquisition Device) with a paper that was wryly titled "The LAD Was a Lady and the Tasks Were Ill Defined" (Moerk, 1989). Unable to counter Moerk's analysis of his own data, Brown eventually refused to further share his transcripts with Ernst.

Moerk's painstaking analyses of early parent-child language interactions and the resulting detailing of the process by which parents serve as effective teachers using prompting, reinforcement, and corrections are detailed in scores of articles and presentations, and in four books. In recent years, Ernst moved closer and closer to behavior analysis, notably publishing a three-term contingency analysis of parent-child interaction (Moerk, 1990) as well as other articles in behavioral journals. He was a frequent contributor to ABA and CalABA conferences and participated in many DEV SIG symposia to which he contributed a unique perspective and helped behavior analysts expand theirs. Recently he also developed a passionate interest in environmental-behavioral causes of war and peace.

Those of us who got to know Ernst over the years will not soon forget him. He was the consummate European scholar, rigorous in his scholarship, but personally charming, refreshingly polite, and very generous with his time and his friendship. Ernst always wore a smile

and had kind words to say. It seemed as if he was always looking for ways to help. After his retirement from Fresno State a few years ago, Ernst split his time between his ancestral home in Austria and his beloved home in Fresno, which was well known in the neighborhood for its prodigious gardens, the result of one his favorite pastimes other than science. He continued to research, write, and lecture in the areas of language development and world peace.

Ernst is survived by his daughter, Kirsten, who received her Ph.D. in clinical psychology from SUNY, Stony Brook. The two of them had a very close relationship. They talked all the time and Ernst was very proud of his daughter and her accomplishments. Those of us in the behavior analysis of development were very fortunate to have Ernst L. Moerk as a colleague and a friend. The DEV SIG will be sponsoring a symposium to honor Ernst's work at the 2005 ABA conference.

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