



Victoria A. Fromkin

1923–2000

BIOGRAPHICAL

Memoirs

*A Biographical Memoir by
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VICTORIA ALEXANDRA FROMKIN

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For nearly forty years, Victoria Fromkin's research, teaching, and charismatic personality graced the Department of Linguistics and higher administration at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), as well as the linguistics profession as a whole. Always insisting on being addressed as "Vicki" by everyone, from the freshmen and sophomores in her Introduction to Language classes to the Chancellor of her university, her reliance on informality in dealing with people of all ages and statuses reflected the lively interest in fellow human beings that informed her life and her work in the field of linguistics.

As a young woman, Victoria had been active in radical politics, and she remained a political progressive and an advocate for social justice all her life, in spite of later disillusionment. With the passage of years, her linguistic research, too, increasingly reflected her humanism. Initially an experimental phonetician and phonologist, as the years went by she focused more and more on psycholinguistics, the study of the relationship between language and the mind. Ultimately, she became best known for her work on speech errors, an area of study peculiarly well suited to someone such as Vicki, who loved the human comedy.

A successful and productive researcher, she was also a highly successful teacher and administrator, putting to use in each of these spheres the interest in, and talent for, human interaction that were her most notable traits.



By Paul Schachter
and Larry M. Hyman

Curriculum Vitae

Victoria (henceforth, Vicki) was born Victoria Alexandra Landish on May 16, 1923, in Passaic, New Jersey, a suburb of New York City. She was the youngest of three children born to Henry and Rose Landish. Her father was a gifted artist born and raised in Vitebsk, Russia (now a part of Belarus). He once took first prize in an art contest over fellow Belarusian artist Marc Chagall. Because he was a Bolshevik in pre-revolutionary Russia, Henry fled his native country as a political refugee, becoming a successful set designer in New York theaters. Vicki's mother was a member of the Russian-Jewish intelligentsia

and had come to the United States from the Ukraine as a young girl. She was an accomplished hostess, and the Landish home became a magnet for the couple's friends in the arts and politics, a place filled, as Vicki remembered it, with music and political argumentation.

The family's fortunes changed for the worse in the mid-1930s, when Vicki's father had a heart attack and had to stop working. They moved to Los Angeles, where her father had another heart attack, and he was ultimately able to make a modest living as a drape maker. Vicki went to Belmont High School and became president of a chapter of the left-wing American Student Union. She joined the Young Communist League at around the age of fifteen and took part as a high school student in such political actions as picketing segregated public baths and supporting strikers in Hollywood.

Vicki's political activism continued at the University of California, Berkeley, to which she was admitted in 1940. There she became one of the relatively few non-secret members of the Communist Party. There, too, she met another young radical, Ted Kalman, who became her first husband in 1941, but soon thereafter left Berkeley to enter military service.

Vicki earned a B.A. in economics in 1944 and had started graduate study in this field when, in 1945, she was asked by the Communist Party to return to Los Angeles to work with high school and college students in the united-front group American Youth for Democracy. Later, she became secretary of another united-front organization, the Southern California Peace Crusade, the goals of which included improved American relations with the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China.

In 1948, Vicki's first marriage ended in divorce and she married Jack Fromkin, whom she had known since her childhood in Passaic, and with whom she had renewed acquaintances on a visit there after the war. He moved to Los Angeles and earned a degree in physics at UCLA under the GI Bill. Their son, Mark, was born in 1950.

Vicki remained in the Communist Party until the mid 1950s, and she and her husband remained under FBI scrutiny (with disastrous consequences for his employability—he was dismissed from seven different jobs in a single year). Ultimately, she resigned from the party in the wake of Khrushchev's 1956 revelations of the crimes of the Stalin era. But as she said in the course of interviews in 1998, "I was still a socialist. I still am. I have not given up the reasons I joined the movement or remained in it...I've never changed in what I believe: that there should be equality among people, that we should

not have war. All of the important things, I really believe. So I have no regrets about any of this. None of it.”²¹

Vicki’s entry into the field of linguistics was almost accidental, the result of a chance encounter with a linguist who recommended the field to her at a time when she had become interested in returning to graduate school. She entered the new Interdepartmental Program in Linguistics at UCLA in 1961 and, after completing a dissertation in the area of instrumental phonetics under the supervision of Peter Ladefoged, she received one of the program’s first doctoral degrees in 1965. In 1966 she began her teaching career at UCLA with an appointment in the Department of Speech.



Victoria Fromkin circa 1965.
(Photograph courtesy John Ohala.)

However, 1966 proved to be a tragic year for her personally. Vicki suffered the death of her son, who was killed in an automobile accident at the age of sixteen. In

the aftermath of this tragedy, the Fromkins’ many close friends rallied round them, and some of them later initiated a scholarship fund in Mark Fromkin’s honor at UCLA. The Mark Fromkin Memorial Scholarship Fund offers support to needy, typically minority students—a cause which would have met with the approval of Mark himself, who, though young, had already shown that he shared his parents’ egalitarian ideals.

In 1967, Vicki transferred from UCLA’s Department of Speech into its newly formed Department of Linguistics, where she remained a member for the rest of her life. She rose rather quickly through the academic ranks, becoming an associate professor in 1969 and a full professor in 1972. Although her academic career had begun later than usual (she was already in her forties when she earned her doctorate), it was a remarkably productive and successful one. In fact, even leaving aside her research accomplishments, which are discussed separately below, she had a career that must, by any standards, be described as distinguished.

A common thread that runs through several different aspects of Vicki’s career is her gregariousness, the pleasure that she took in human interactions. Certainly this gregariousness helped to make her an exceptional teacher at both the undergraduate

and graduate levels. Fairly early in her career, in 1974, she won UCLA's Harvey L. Eby Award for the Art of Teaching, and after her career's end, in 2000, she was named one of twenty "Teachers of the Century" by the faculty and staff publication *UCLA Today*. Her most notable success as an undergraduate teacher was the lower-division Introduction to Language course that she initiated in the early 1970s. This course gave rise to a best-selling textbook written together with her then-teaching assistant, Robert Rodman. Now in its tenth edition, Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyam's *Introduction to Language* has been translated into six languages and has been read by perhaps a million readers since the first edition appeared in 1973.

As for her success as a teacher of graduate students, this is best measured by the quality of the linguists whose doctoral research she supervised. Among them are some who have gone on to become leading lights in their fields, including the phonologist Larry Hyman, the psycholinguist Susan Curtiss, the second-language theorist Stephen Krashen, and the neurolinguist Harry Whitaker.



Victoria Fromkin circa 1965.
(Photograph courtesy John Ohala.)

Another reflex of Vicki's gifts for human interaction, as well as of the organizational skills that had been so apparent in her radical youth, was her career as an administrator. She served as chair of the Department of Linguistics from 1973 to 1976, and in 1979 she was appointed dean of the UCLA Graduate Division. A year later she was given the additional title of Vice Chancellor for Graduate Programs, thereby becoming the first woman vice chancellor in the University of California system. She remained in these administrative positions until 1989, at which time she resigned from them in order to return to full-time teaching and research.

Vicki's natural sociability also played a role in her extremely active professional life, although in this case the major role was clearly played by her academic distinction. She was Secretary-Treasurer of the Linguistic Society of America from 1979 to 1983 and President of this organization in 1985. (The Society later enacted the Victoria A. Fromkin Lifetime Service Award, "for individuals who have performed extraordinary service to the Society and the discipline throughout their career.") In 1988 she was elected President of the Association of Graduate Schools, once again the first woman to have held the position. Active in numerous other scholarly and academic organizations,

she was the organizer of a good many conferences and a participant in a good many more. Additionally, she gave a very large number of invited lectures, both in the United States and abroad, and she was frequently called on to serve as a consultant both by funding agencies and by universities seeking advice on, or evaluation of, their programs. To all of these activities she brought the energy, enthusiasm and charm that made her, at the time of her death on January 19, 2000, one of the best-known and best-loved figures in her field.



Victoria Fromkin circa 1965.
(Photograph courtesy John Ohala.)

Research

Although Vicki was ultimately best known for her contributions to psycholinguistics, she began her research career working in phonetics and phonology, and she made solid contributions in these areas, as well. Phonetics, which is the study of speech sounds, was the focus of her 1965 doctoral dissertation, and phonology, which is the study of the patterning of sounds in language, was the area of her first monograph, published in 1968.

In addition, in the mid- and late 1960s and throughout the 1970s she wrote papers dealing with a wide range of issues in phonetics and phonology, including several papers on linguistic tone (the use of pitch differences to distinguish words), a subject on which she edited an anthology in 1978. While it is true that, even in the early 1970s, psycholinguistics had already begun to take center stage in her research (her seminal paper on speech errors was published in 1971), she nonetheless continued to make significant contributions in phonetics and phonology well into the 1980s, including the editing of a festschrift honoring Peter Ladefoged in 1985.

Vicki's doctoral research involved the use of electromyography to measure the activity of the orbicularis oris muscle in the production of the English consonants [b] and [p]. She was able to show, among other things, that the then widely accepted description of [b] as "lax" and [p] as "tense" was not supported by the instrumental evidence. The essence

of her results appeared in article form in 1966, and that year she also co-authored with Ladefoged an article presenting a history of electromyography and of its application to phonetic research.

A striking aspect of Vicki's dissertation is the amount and range of historical and intellectual background she chose to present. Not only did she offer, as one might expect, a history of relevant work in phonetics and electromyography; she also traced the views of leading phonetic and linguistic theorists—starting with Henry Sweet and Ferdinand de Saussure around the turn of the twentieth century—on the role of phonetics in an overall science of language. And her wide-ranging citations take her as far back in time as 1686, when Francis Lodwick proposed a “universal alphabet” for recording speech sounds, and as far outside the field of linguistics as the writings of Albert Einstein, Julian Huxley, and Max Plank. This kind of interest in intellectual history was, in fact, characteristic of Vicki throughout her career. She often spoke and wrote on historical subjects, particularly in connection with phonetics: e.g., her lecture, “300 years of speech communication research,” presented at the meeting of the Acoustic Society of America in 1979, and the 1980 paper on early views of distinctive feature theory co-authored by Ladefoged. And, she quite regularly cast a wide intellectual net, with references to Plato, Newton, and Einstein as common in her writings as more parochial references to historical figures in her field.

Vicki's first book-length contribution to phonology, *A Phonology of Akan* (1968), written together with Paul Schachter, was an attempt to apply to the description of an African language what was then the most widely accepted phonological theory, presented in Noam Chomsky and Morris Halle's *The Sound Pattern of English* (also published in 1968, but widely known before then in various pre-publication versions). This work presents a detailed account of the phonology of three dialects of Akan, the majority language of Ghana. The account is similar to Chomsky and Halle's account of the phonology of English both with regard to the types of representations and rules it includes, as well as with regard to the degree of abstractness it tolerates. (The “abstractness” of a phonological description is, roughly, the distance between the postulated mental representations of words vs. the actual way they are pronounced on the surface.)

The Phonology of Akan served in a number of respects as a point of departure for a good deal of Vicki's later work in phonology. First, Akan provided her with a wealth of data to bring to bear on theoretical issues of interest to her. For example, in her 1976 paper, “Some questions regarding universal phonetics and phonetic representations,” Vicki

cited facts concerning reduplication in Akan to argue for giving the acoustically based feature [grave] a role in phonological descriptions. In the relevant cases, Akan reduplication involves prefixing to a monosyllabic verb a syllable consisting of a copy of the initial consonant of the verb followed by a high vowel. When the vowel of the verb is the low vowel [a], the vowel of the reduplicating prefix is generally the high front vowel [I]. But when the initial consonant of the verb is a labial, such as [p], or a velar, such as [k], certain dialects allow either high front [I] or high back [U] in the reduplicating prefix. Vicki pointed out that labial consonants, velar consonants, and back vowels, while they do not share any defining articulatory property, do share the defining acoustic property of heightened acoustic energy at lower frequencies. Since this acoustic property is captured in the feature [grave] (originally proposed by Roman Jakobson in the 1930s, but not generally encountered in 1970s phonologies), an adequate theory should, Vicki argued, make this acoustic feature available for phonological descriptions.

In addition, Akan is a tone language, and Vicki's work on one such language led her to a more general interest in tone, resulting, as noted above, in the writing of several articles and, ultimately, in the editing of the anthology *Tone: A Linguistic Survey*, published in 1978. Among Vicki's more important articles on tone were "Tone features and tone rules" (1972) and "A note on tone and the abstractness controversy" (1976). The former article evaluates some alternative analyses of various types of tone systems proposed in the literature, and it offers persuasive empirical arguments in support of Vicki's own preferred alternatives. The latter article uses tonal data from Akan and other languages to argue in favor of a greater degree of abstractness in phonological representations than was allowed for by certain theories of the time.

Interestingly, however, Vicki also argued in this same article against the abstract analysis of Akan tone proposed in her 1968 monograph. According to this rejected analysis, phonological representations in Akan show just a two-way tonal contrast, between low and high. Phonetically, however, there is a three-way contrast after a high tone, between



Victoria Fromkin 1968.
(Photograph courtesy John Ohala.)

low, high, and lowered high (or downstep). In the abstract analysis, this lowered high is derived from a postulated underlying low-high sequence, with ultimate deletion of the low tone. (In high-low-high sequences that surface in Akan, the post-low high is lowered by a process of “downdrift.” A high-lowered-high sequence can thus be derived if downdrift is followed by deletion of the inter-high low tone.) Vicki rejected this analysis in her 1976 paper on grounds of its lack of “psychological reality.” She argued that, whatever the historical origin of lowered-high tones after high tones, the lexicon of Akan now contains many words with high-lowered-high sequences where there is no independent evidence for a deleted intervening low tone. And in the absence of such evidence, she argued, it is implausible that these never-surfacing low tones would be part of an Akan speaker’s mental grammar.



Fromkin at speech symposium,
Kyoto, Japan, 1968.
Photograph courtesy John Ohala.

For Vicki, then, considerations of psychological reality ultimately came to trump considerations of apparent analytical elegance. She thus came to believe that the analysis of Akan that she and Schachter had proposed in 1968 (like the Chomsky-Halle analysis of English on which it was modeled), however elegant, was simply wrong in a number of respects. Another case in point is to be found in her 1977 paper, “The phonology of Akan revisited,” in which she rejected her earlier analysis of nasal

consonants in Akan as all derived from underlying non-nasal consonants. While the rejected analysis had reduced to a minimum the number of underlying segments that needed to be postulated, she concluded “that minimal grammars may not necessarily be correct grammars.”

The concern with correct grammars—that is, those that are psychologically real—increasingly marked Vicki’s contributions to phonetics and phonology, no doubt reflecting her growing interest in psycholinguistics.

It was particularly within this latter area that Vicki dedicated her greatest energies and creativity. From her 1971 article, “The non-anomalous nature of anomalous utterances,” which was published in *Language*, the journal of the Linguistic Society of America,

through her 1997 *Lingua* article, “Some thoughts about the brain/mind/ language interface,” Vicki was dedicated to showing what extra-linguistic evidence could tell us about the nature of language, including currently raging controversies in linguistic theory. Her interest in speech errors was legendary: Everywhere Vicki went she had her handwritten notebook ready to take down any slips of the tongue or other misspeaking in classes, lectures, or professional meetings, and her colleagues and students were only happy to oblige. (She ultimately amassed a database of ten thousand speech errors).

Vicki showed that a very common type of speech error involved the transposition of full segments (consonants and vowels), not just spoonerisms such as “you have tasted the whole worm” (for “you have wasted the whole term”), but also deletions, transpositions, and transfers of segments (consonants and vowels) from one word to another. Thus when a speaker referred to former UCLA chancellor *Chuck Young as Chunk Yug*, she argued that this was evidence that the velar “ng” sound of English, which is heard phonetically on a word such as young, is derived from an abstract underlying sequence of /n/ plus /g/. In this and many other cases,

Vicki was determined to show that mental representations can differ from what is observed on the surface.

Her working hypothesis was that despite obvious interactions, the human language faculty is autonomous from other aspects of cognition. To seek evidence, Vicki drew not only from speech errors, but also from cases of aphasia and atypical language development. She was instrumental at the beginning of the study of “Genie,” a girl who had been isolated from natural language acquisition until she was discovered at the age of thirteen. Vicki worked closely on the Genie case with Susan Curtiss, a graduate student who later became Vicki’s colleague at UCLA, and she invested considerably in working with other aphasic patients. In fact, Vicki became the first nonmedical person to chair the board of governors of the Academy of Aphasia.



Fromkin at speech symposium, Kyoto, Japan, 1968.
(Photograph Courtesy John Ohala.)

Besides being a path-breaking scholar in the above areas, Vicki was known worldwide as an important educator. She was the senior author of the best-selling textbook, *An Introduction to Language*, and she brought together twelve of her UCLA colleagues to produce the more advanced text, *Linguistics: An Introduction to Linguistic Theory*. This showed in a rather direct way Vicki's dedicated loyalty (one might say chauvinism) as it concerned her home institution.

Not content to give some of the most challenging and popular courses at several levels of the university system, Vicki rose from department chair, was visibly active in the academic senate, and rose to dean of the Graduate Division and vice-chancellor of position she held for the better part of two decades. It is no wonder that she held many equally challenging positions outside UCLA, including both president and secretary-treasurer of the Linguistic Society of America.

One can read much more about Victoria Fromkin and what her colleagues, students, friends, and acquaintances thought about her at the following website, which also provides a link to the several obituaries that appeared at the time of her death:

<http://www.linguistics.ucla.edu/people/fromkin/fromkin.htm>

As her longtime colleague and then-chair Edward Keenan put it, Vicki “was generous, compassionate, warm, feisty, dynamic, candid, and above all, concerned.” She was known for going way out of her way to help others. Jack and Vicki Fromkin also gave the best parties in the department (which on occasion could go on until six o'clock the next morning, when she would announce that it was breakfast time). One felt Vicki's presence the moment she entered the room, and all of us who had the honor to know her miss her terribly, even thirteen years later, as this document appears.

After Vicki's passing, her colleagues, students, and friends organized a memorial at the Faculty Club at UCLA, which was attended by people from around the world. The program consisted of a number of testimonials and reminiscences. The most extraordinary testimony was from a document Vicki had prepared herself, which was deep and moving, and which ended with, “I have lived at an exciting time, and I have no regrets.”

Victoria Fromkin leaves behind a legacy of accomplishments, memories, and everlasting friendships that will be long remembered.

NOTES

- 1 These quotations are from the Victoria Fromkin Oral History Transcript and are cited with permission of the Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

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