



Nils Erik Enkvist

*27.9.1925 – † 26.5.2009

Professor Nils Erik Enkvist, who for a long time was the best known Finnish linguist internationally, died suddenly on 26 May, 2009. He was born in Helsinki in 1925. After his matriculation examination in 1943 he did war service in the artillery for more than a year. He then studied English philology and phonetics at Helsinki University, and for two years, from 1946 to 1948, at the University of Michigan, financing his studies partly as an assistant at the University Phonetics Library and partly as a jazz pianist. He received his M.A. from Michigan in 1948, and after that had various teaching appointments at Helsinki University. In 1951 he was awarded his Ph.D. at Helsinki, where his doctoral dissertation dealt with caricatures of Americans on the English stage. At the age of 26 he became acting Professor of English Language and Literature at Åbo Akademi University, and he was appointed full-time professor there in 1957.

Enkvist's stay in the US was a very fruitful time for the young researcher. One of his teachers and mentors at Michigan was Charles Carpenter Fries, a foreground figure in structural linguistics. When Enkvist

returned to Finland, however, the new ideas he had encountered in America did not meet with much enthusiasm. Traditional philology with its emphasis on the study of old texts dominated the language departments, especially at Helsinki, which in the post-war period had a dominant position in university life.

Enkvist's openness to new ideas manifested itself concretely in his career at Åbo Akademi. Still, when he arrived there in 1952, he was immediately confronted with the problems of a small private university. Apart from himself, his department had only one half-time lecturer. Also, there were only a handful of students, but as the English language and English studies became more popular, the number of students at the department soon started to grow. Inflation in the post-war period had rapidly eaten up the funds of the private university, and there were great financial problems, which could be only partly solved by the state taking over the university in 1981. Up to the early sixties Enkvist had only one foreign lecturer teaching at his department. This meant that he had to cover the whole wide field of English language and literature

in his teaching. He taught at all levels: history of the English language, history of the English novel, translation and intonation for beginners, general phonetics, Old and Middle English, Chaucer, 19th century English poetry, seminars in linguistic methodology and Renaissance linguistics, to mention just a few of his courses.

University teachers have three main tasks: teaching, research and administration. There are many who have manifested excellence in one, or even two of these. But to be brilliant in all three is exceedingly rare. Enkvist had superb gifts in all these areas. He was an inspiring lecturer and a demanding but just examiner. He also had a genuine interest in his students and their continued careers. His administrative ability was also well documented in his periods as Dean of the Faculty of Arts in 1961–64, Rector of Åbo Akademi in 1966–69 and Chancellor in 1991.

Still, it was obvious that Enkvist did not like university administration very much, in spite of his being universally acclaimed as an efficient and fair administrator. He was unwilling to take part in any of the intrigues that are not uncommon in university politics. He was happier with his own department, which he succeeded in developing into an active unit where research and a good working morale ruled, and where there was always a warm and positive atmosphere. He consistently encouraged his students to take an active part in administrative affairs, something which was quite unusual for professors in the fifties and sixties.

Nils Erik Enkvist took the initiative in various administrative improvements. Special mention must be made of the Enkvist one-man committee report 'Kielten opetuspalvelu' of 1970. This led to all Finnish universities establishing special language

service centres, i.e. units taking care of proficiency teaching that was not part of the teaching proper of the language departments. He was also instrumental in founding AFinLA, the Finnish Association for Applied Linguistics in the 1970s. The title of Academician at the Academy of Finland was awarded to him in 1990. He held many international posts of high dignity: President of the Federation Internationale des Langues et Littératures Modernes and founding member and board member of Academia Europaea. Four foreign universities in the US, Poland and Sweden awarded him honorary doctorates. He was an elected member of both the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters, from 1983, and the Finnish Society of Sciences and Letters.

Research was always closest to Nils Erik Enkvist's heart, however. In the 'sixties his interest in both linguistics and literature was manifested in several studies of stylistics. Borderline areas between literature and linguistics, and between theoretical and applied linguistics, were always objects of special interest to him. When linguists at the end of the sixties and the beginning of the seventies started to emphasize the importance of analyzing linguistic units larger than the sentence, Enkvist was one of the pioneers. He also understood the importance of the social dimension of research at an early stage, and he was among the first in the humanities to establish high-quality research teams. The Text Linguistic Research Group which he led at the end of the seventies, when he was Research Professor at the Academy of Finland, attracted the most promising young Finnish linguists at the time, who were later to put their stamp on Finnish linguistics.

Enkvist's world-wide reputation in research also reflected on his colleagues and students. At international conferences he

would often interrupt his scholarly discussion with a colleague by saying 'Come and meet my young colleague from Åbo Akademi who is doing excellent work on topic x.' He would then go on to give an informed, but usually exaggeratedly flattering account of the young researcher's work. Practically all his younger colleagues have had this expe-

rience. Such generosity was characteristic of Enkvist. He rarely missed an opportunity to promote young researchers and colleagues. This kind of generosity is clearly very rare among world-famous researchers.

To have had Nils Erik Enkvist as teacher, mentor and colleague was a great privilege.

Obituary by Håkan Ringbom