



Matti Rissanen

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MATTI RISSANEN, emeritus professor of English philology at the University of Helsinki, died at the age of 80 years in Vantaa on 24th January 2018. He was born on 23rd June 1937 into a family of teachers in Viipuri (now Vyborg in Russia), from where they moved to Tampere upon the outbreak of war, when Matti was two years old. Thus Tampere was his home during his childhood and youth, a place which he would often recall in his conversations and speeches, even to the extent of coming out with local sayings. He matriculated from Tampere Coeducational School in 1955. In the same year he began his studies at the University of Helsinki, playing an active role as a member of the academic community in various capacities from his student years until the very end of his life. He was a member of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters from 1986 onwards.

Rissanen gained his initial degree of Candidate in Philosophy (MA) at the University of Helsinki in 1961, with English as his main subject and additional studies in general literature. He followed this with a licentiate in 1965 and a doctorate in 1968, with a thesis entitled *The Uses of 'One' in Old and Middle English* supervised by Tauno F. Mustanoja and published in the Mé-

moires de la Société Néophilologique. He was then appointed as docent in English philology at the University of Helsinki in 1969 and associate professor in 1970. He assumed the chair of English philology in 1977 and occupied this until his retirement in 2001. He also served for a long time as head of the university's Department of English, and for the period 1977–1983 as director of its Language Centre having previously, in 1975–1977, been chairman of the working group that led to its foundation. Similarly, he acted from 1995 onwards as head of the Varieng research unit for English linguistics, which became a centre of excellence financed by the Academy of Finland in the year 2000.

Rissanen was a widely known and respected authority on English diachronic studies both in Finland and internationally, and his extensive published works covered the history of English from its early days up to the present time and included research on both British and American Englishes. He produced a number of monographs and collected works for notable international publishers, a large number of research papers and some publications intended for a wider readership. Above all he became known as a pioneer of histori-

cal corpus linguistics, i.e. the linguistic study of computerized corpora of historical texts. It was under his direction that the first historical general corpus, the *Helsinki Corpus of English Texts*, covering a period of a thousand years and comprising some 1.6 million words, was compiled in the 1980s and published in 1991. The *Helsinki Corpus* was an international success story that redefined the whole research paradigm on a global scale. It was through the studies of the history of the English language carried out by Matti Rissanen and his team that the age of the digital humanities was ushered in long before the expression as such had been coined. In 1993 the team published the book *Early English in the Computer Age* (Rissanen, Merja Kytö & Minna Palander-Collin, eds.), a collection of research papers based on the corpus and setting out the principles governing its compilation. The team continued with this research under Rissanen's leadership in a project financed by the Academy of Finland, leading to the publication in 1997 of two volumes of papers that proved to be of ground-breaking significance in the field of historical corpus linguistics: *English in Transition and Grammaticalization at Work* (Rissanen, Merja Kytö & Kirsi Heikkonen, eds.).

It was on this foundation that Rissanen built up Varieng, the Research Unit for Variation, Contacts and Change in English, which functioned as an Academy of Finland centre of excellence for twelve years, in 2000–2011. Although Rissanen himself retired from his professorship and the directorship of Varieng soon after the unit was founded, he remained involved in its activities right up to the end of his life, as a member of the steering committee, a researcher, a coordinator of research groups

and publication projects, a supervisor of doctoral theses, a mentor of younger scholars, and a general source of inspiration. At the same time he was a member of an international research group editing the *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt* (Rosenthal et al., eds.), a collection of all documents surviving from the Salem witch trial proceedings which took place in 1692–1693. This work was published in a volume amounting to c. 1000 pages by Cambridge University Press in 2009. A further testimony to the exceptional breadth and depth of Rissanen's scholarship is his simultaneous role as an expert advisor to the large-scale WSOY publishing project to produce new Finnish translations of William Shakespeare's dramatic works. Altogether 38 Shakespeare's plays were published over the period 2004–2013.

Matti Rissanen played a leading role in many international organizations, including the International Computer Archive of Modern and Medieval English (ICAME) and Societas Linguistica Europae, acting as chairman for a number of years in both societies. He was also a board member of the International Association of University Professors of English (IAUPE). Among the Finnish learned societies the one that was closest to his heart was the Modern Language Society, Société Néophilologique, where he served as a board member for some 30 years in various roles, as editorial secretary in 1965–1978, vice-chairman in 1987–2002 and chairman in 2002–2005. He was also active in the founding of the Finnish Society for the Study of English (FINSSE) in 1998 and played a major part in establishing the Finnish Institute in London.

Among the many honours that Rissanen received in recognition of his work was an honorary doctorate from Uppsala

University, Sweden, in 2001 and honorary membership of the International Society of Anglo-Saxonists, the Japanese Association of English Corpus Studies and the Société Néophilologique. In 2012 he was awarded a prize by the Alfred Kordelin Foundation to mark his major contributions to advancing excellence in research into the English language and in teaching of English at the university level.

Matti Rissanen was a member of the Häme Students' Association at the University of Helsinki from his student days onwards. Later on he served as curator and inspector of the association and took part enthusiastically in its activities. Another long-term interest of his was scouting, where he retained a circle of close friends. Time spent with his family was also of

great importance to him, as were the summers spent with the family at their country house in Pälkäne. Rissanen's family also became familiar to his university colleagues, and his wife Eeva in particular took part in many events connected with his work.

Matti was a warm-hearted, understanding person with a straightforward manner and a broad outlook. He was an untiring optimist and encouraging in his support for others. His cheerful disposition and powerful presence made an impression on all who encountered him. For many he was a role model of a scholar and an academic leader, who left a permanent mark on knowledge, on the methods of acquiring that knowledge, and on the minds of those who knew him.

Obituary by Päivi Pahta

*Photo:
Sebastian Hoffmann*