

## In Memory of My Dear Friend and Collaborator: Jerry A Fodor (1935-2017)



I have hesitated in writing a memorial for Jerry for fear that so close to his passing it would be too emotional and personal (along the lines “what he meant to me”). Others can do better in describing his place in the pantheon of great thinkers. To me he was that combination of dear friend and colleague that is so rare in academic circles and who both shaped my intellectual development (since I came from a background of physic and engineering) and nourished my need for friendship in my adopted country. I dare to believe that the influence was mutual. There is no question that it was intense. When we worked on joint papers and our more recent book, our spouses often felt the need to leave home, so boisterous were our arguments. I found myself defending computer scientists more than they needed to be defended, while he tried to explain to me why philosophers took seriously distinctions that often seemed to me either obvious, or frivolous or even irrelevant. But through it all we grew – I am sure that my intellectual growth under his persistent and persuasive force benefited a lot more than his did.

I met Jerry a number of times at conferences in the 1960s. Sometime in the mid-1960s, after a long day made longer by my talk on the Competence-Performance distinction, as we waited for the last speaker to finish, I saw Jerry writing a note which he passed across the room through a series of audience members all the way to me. Expecting a withering critique of the talk we just heard – or of my earlier talk – I opened the piece of folded paper and read “My shirt is nicer than your shirt.” This was typical Fodor – always the unexpected. It was then that we decided to explore Old Montreal, not far from the conference, where our discussion ranged from Competence-Performance, the prerequisites for word learning in children (which I in my talk I had claimed must include the child’s intuitive apprehension of an “intention to refer”) and, of course the relative merits of our shirts. It was at that moment that we became friends whose

friendship was able to survive countless serious disagreements and individual personal crises and that ultimately resulted in his persuading me to move from Canada to Rutgers to become the founding director of the new Center for Cognitive Science. The rest is not only history but in many ways it has been not unlike those first few giddy days in Montreal; we followed similar research and personal trajectories that included sailing the Long Island Sound, the Hudson River and the New Jersey Shore (each with its stories of maritime terror), travelling in France and Italy, and a Thanksgiving dinner that met every year since 1970 bringing together our earliest academic friends and their growing families.

With so much water under the bridge and so many memories, the news of Jerry's passing represents a shocking end of an era, both personally and intellectually. Jerry leaves an enormous legacy as a leader of a tectonic shift in the field of cognitive studies. For many of us he also leaves an enormous gap in our world, and our day-to-day thoughts as we recall with love his sense of humor and his intellectual power and his humanity. He continued to be my beacon for his fine-tuned sensibilities in music, art, History and of course Philosophy. He will be missed beyond measure.

Zenon Pylyshyn, December 2017