

# Eric P. Hamp (1920–2019). A life in words and stuff



*Eric P. Hamp, Lengries,  
Bavaria, 2009.*



*1992 50 lek stamp with Eric P. Hamp from  
the Albanian Postal Service (Posta Shqiptare), as well  
as Norbert Jokl (60 l.) and Holger Pedersen (70 l.)*

The world of linguistics and the subfields of Indo-European, Slavic, Balkan, Celtic, and Armenian linguistics, *inter alia*, lost a major scholar on 17 February 2019. Among his many academic distinctions was his interest in dialect areas of Indo-European languages, ranging from Albanian to Welsh. He spent countless weeks and months, stretched over many decades, living in the regions where the dialects are spoken and he conducted fieldwork among native speakers, collecting material from them that he used in his many studies, many of them short etymological sketches. According to his University of Chicago colleague, Victor A. Friedman, Professor Hamp's publications numbered over 3,000 (Megan 2019). An important component of his scholarly interests was Slovene and, specifically, the highly divergent variety of it spoken in the Resia Valley. In recognition of his interest in and contributions to Slovene historical linguistics, two of the leading Slavistic journals based in Slovenia, *Slovenski jezik / Slovene Linguistic Studies* and *Slavia Centralis*, accorded him status as a member of their oversight boards (e.g., Hamp 1997, 2007; 2011a, b). His work appeared in both periodicals and in this way he contributed both to the research mission and to the ongoing stewardship of scholarly communication in Slovenia and the broader Slavic linguistics community. He wrote for all other Slovene-focused journals, including *Linguistica* (Hamp 2004), *Slavistična revija* (1975), *Slovene Studies* (Hamp 1972, 1988). He could not but have been included in the important accompanying book of essays to the Slovene Academy's edition of the Freising Folia (Hamp 1996). This does not imply that his treatment of Slovene topics was limited to Slovene-focused periodicals. For example, he wrote

on the etymology of *kruh* ‘bread’ in *Romance Philology* (Hamp 1981). In view of the great number of Professor Hamp’s publications, which have not been fully and systematically cataloged, these few references serve as an indication of his more than five decades of engagement with Slovene linguistic topics, which, in turn, were but one facet of his many-faceted scholarly endeavors.

Though I met Professor Hamp rather late in his career, when I was earning my M.A. degree in Slavic at the University of Chicago during the 1983–1984 academic year, I had an opportunity to experience not just his writing, but his personality, which illuminated his way of thinking about language. For one thing, he had what I think of as a distinctly linguist’s sense of humor, which brought linguistics into the quotidian and colored the quotidian with linguistic references. It is reported that his favorite offering at his house parties was a tongue sandwich (Megan 2019). In the late 1990s and early 2000s we corresponded by mail (he sent handwritten notes in envelopes with postage stamps), in which he referred to photocopied enclosures as *xerogmata* and my current hometown, Lawrence, as *Vavřinec*. These philological witticisms were endearing, as well as indicative of his mastery of a great many ancient and living languages and dialects, including their word-formation patterns, sound changes, and interactions with other languages. We spent countless hours on the phone discussing his ideas for articles to be published. In these discussions he often referred to language data as ‘things’, ‘stuff’. Such ‘things’ and ‘stuff’ which were obviously meant metaphorically, but such metaphors revealed a cognitive peculiarity that I take, for him, meant that linguistic signs had a substance-like existence. We may observe this, as well, in his punning “gift” of data-cum-objects in his dedication of the etymology of the Resian Slovene word for ‘stone, cliff’: “On the eightieth birthday of Jože Toporišič a *kamen* for *hamarr*, in *kamen* from a *kmen* or a *hamarr*” (Hamp 2007: 307), apparently referring to the Old Norse word for ‘rocky hill’ (*hamarr*) and the unrelated but formally similar Slavic words *kamen* ‘rock’ and *kmen* ‘stem’, *inter alia* playing on their reference to ‘tools’ (‘stone’–‘hammer’), one of which is found in the etymology of the honoree’s surname ‘axe handle’, as well as to the linguistic data itself ‘word stem, root’. One can almost envision an etymologist rooting around in his tool kit and spare-parts box for just the right instruments and materials to assemble a uniquely crafted pun.

A remarkable feature of Professor Hamp’s erudition is his shifting between lapidarian work on highly focused expository pieces—mostly etymologies—and big-picture matters. He is known for having written many extremely short articles, but also having much to say with few words. Friedman stated about his articles that “[m]ost of them [are] very short but very important, very incisive. He could find some small detail in a language or a dialect and from that detail could reconstruct something with huge implications” (Megan 2019). For example, his article on the word for ‘bread’ treats Albanian *bukë* (< Latin *bucca* ‘mouth, bite’), Romanian *cordu* ‘chunk’ (< Latin *quadra*), Croatian, Slovene *kruh* ‘bread’ (related to Bulgarian *kruxъ* ‘clump of salt’, Czech *kruch* ‘chunk of mineral’) and leads him conclude “Thus we find a continuum for virtually the whole of SE Europe showing the semantic range ‘bite (piece)’ ↔ ‘bread’. The semantics of Imperial Latin seems the only reasonable source for such a distribution” (Hamp 1981; see also Trubačev 1987: 41). The text covers just two-thirds of a journal page—a bite-sized article,

perhaps—bringing a few words to bear on a broad unifying topic of the Latin ad- and substrata in south-eastern Europe. In another short article, Professor Hamp takes a very large issue—the multitude of convergence areas (*Sprachbünde*)—in the area of (former) Yugoslavia, identifying fully eight such zones (the Carpathian arc, Eastern Balkans, the Pannonian area, Eastern Alps, the Dalmatian Adriatic, Illyria *sensu stricto*, West Middle Balkans, and the Aegean), seven more than the traditional focus of the Balkans alone, and condenses it to three-and-a-half pages (Hamp 1989a).

The foregoing discussion begs the question of whether Professor Hamp would be classified as a lumpner or a splitter. In a popular-science article in the early 1990s, this question was posed explicitly, in which Professor Hamp's work and methods were compared and contrasted to those of Joseph H. Greenberg, Sergei Starostin and Vitaly V. Sheveroshkin, among others (Wright 1991). In this company he is most unlike the lumpners who, like Sheveroshkin and Starostin, reconstruct Nostratic, or Greenberg, who reconstructs Proto-World. The problem with the reconstruction of Nostratic has always been the use of proto-languages to reconstruct a deeper proto-language, while the proto-world question not only takes this methodological problem to the extreme along with operating on the assumption that human language arose only once. For Professor Hamp, such long-range reconstruction was out of the question:

I once asked Hamp to venture a guess as to whether there had been a single mother tongue, ancestral to all modern languages. If he had to bet on it, I said, which way would he bet? 'I would consider it such ridiculous folly to answer that question, I would be embarrassed,' he said. I raised the stakes. Okay, I said, suppose an intellectually inclined terrorist put a gun to his head and demanded that he venture a guess. 'If he said that to me, of course, I would have to say, right away, "You're an ass."' So he would rather die than guess? 'Well, as a scholar, of course, you'd have to. I mean a decent scholar is never going to guess around at something that they know they have no rules to guide them by. (Wright 1991: 68)

Above, it was noted that Professor Hamp thought about linguistic data as “stuff”—signs that could be (metaphorically) examined from all angles by a researchers as well as passed down from generation to generation by the speakers themselves. He was thus naturally concerned with capturing the material before it disappeared, as he notes in his article on various stages of language loss among the rare dialect varieties where he conducted fieldwork: northern Gheg Albanian, Prespa Albanian, Mändres and Matrítsa Albanian (Greece), Arbanasi Albanian (Zadar), Arbëresh, and Arvanitika; Vannetais Breton, Scottish Gaelic; Tiefencastel Romansch; Aromanian/Koutsovlah; and Resian Slovene (Hamp 1989b: 197). Concerning the latter, he had even elaborated two parallel alphabets to render the dialect in both an idiiosyncratic “scientific” form and an Italian-compatible orthography (Hamp 1991), which was used to render the material presented in Hamp 2007. The “stuff” that he collected over many decades holds promise for new generations of researchers. Implicitly, the precious field data left in his notebooks will be made available to future researchers so that these rare, and perhaps vanished, dialects may continue to be studied and give us a view to the past to which they attest.

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**Marc L. Greenberg**

University of Kansas,  
mlg@ku.edu