



## **Carol Gilson Rosen**

June 20, 1940 – August 19, 2019

Carol Gilson Rosen, professor emerita of linguistics, and a leading figure in general and Romance linguistics, died August 19, 2019 in Ithaca. She was 79.

Carol is deeply and dearly remembered by generations of students and colleagues not only in linguistics but Romance studies and in music during the more than three decades that she taught at Cornell. Carol's contributions to linguistic theory, crystalized in a number of impactful publications, are recognized by specialists across theoretical frameworks, but it is the power of her personality that those of us who knew her well will remember longest.

Carol came to Cornell from Harvard, where she received her Ph.D. in 1981. Like many linguists, she began as a mathematician; she earned her B.A. in Mathematics from Columbia in 1962, followed by an M.A. in Italian from Berkeley in 1965. She continued to study Romance philology at Berkeley, where she completed, under the distinguished Romanist Yakov Malkiel, all the requirements for the Ph.D. but the dissertation; but a growing interest in syntactic theory led her to Harvard. The shape of her early academic career represents a profile once common (if difficult to accomplish) but now increasingly rare: an internationally respected grounding in all areas of a linguistic and philological field – phonology, syntax, and historical linguistics – combined with a commitment to cutting edge theory. This combination of strengths made Carol an indispensable figure in linguistics and Romance linguistics throughout her tenure.

Carol joined the Cornell faculty in 1978 as an instructor and became assistant professor in 1981 in the Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics (DMLL). She was tenured as associate professor of modern languages in 1987 and was named full professor in 1994. In addition to the DMLL and the Department of Linguistics, she taught in the former Department of Modern Languages and was a member of the Graduate Field of Romance Studies.

In the 1970s, Cambridge, Massachusetts was a hotbed of innovation and dispute in linguistics, the International Center of the Scientific Study of Language. The central presence of Noam Chomsky at MIT stood in relief to the battles between Chomsky critics, often former MIT students, as well as supporters, in other area departments such as Harvard, Brandeis, and UMass as well. Carol became a leading proponent of the framework known as Relational Grammar, first developed by David Perlmutter and Paul Postal. The leading tenet of Relational Grammar is that grammatical relations – subject, object, indirect object – are theoretical primitives, in contrast to the Chomskyan view that these notions are derivative from syntactic structure. Romance languages, and in particular Carol’s beloved Italian, provided much of the crucial data for the early development of RG. Carol quickly became a central figure in the development of the theory.

Carol co-edited with Perlmutter the second major collection of articles in the RG framework, *Studies in Relational Grammar II* (1984, Chicago). This volume contained a hugely influential paper by Carol, “The Interface between Semantic Roles and Initial Grammatical Relations”. Many of the basic ideas of RG have gone on to influence syntacticians in all theoretical frameworks; one of these is the insight that subjects of intransitive verbs like “die” and “arrive” share properties with syntactic objects (such as the objects of “kill” and “bring”). In the basic RG analysis, such subjects originate, in the syntactic derivation that is a central concept of RG and most current frameworks, as syntactic objects. This insight led many linguists, including Perlmutter, to suggest that such “unaccusative” subjects owe their object-like properties to their meaning. Carol’s 1984 article showed that this could not be true, at least not in a general sense, because with the object-like subjects of verbs like “die” and “arrive” did tend to behave alike across languages, other verbs, particularly manner-of-motion verbs like “crawl” did not. Carol argued that the object-like behavior of unaccusative subjects must be a syntactic, not a semantic fact.

Carol’s work on unaccusativity was followed by a series of important studies, including two papers published in *Language*, one on the notion of multi-predicate clauses (1988, with William Davies), and another on the triple-agreement pattern in the Tanoan language Southern Tiwa (1990). Her 1989 paper with Kashi Wali in *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* on Marathi passives further demonstrated Carol’s extraordinary ability to uncover compelling data across languages. Throughout, she sought to build a theory of universal grammar that was free of Anglocentrism, and to discover how to best reveal and explain the regularities that run through the world’s languages. Carol’s Harvard dissertation, on the grammar of reflexives in Italian, was published by Garland in 1981.

At Cornell, Carol trained many in the next generation of scholars working in the RG framework, including Stanley Dubinsky (Ph.D. 1985), Ignazio Mirto (1997), and Josep Alba-Salas (2002). Carol’s expertise in Romance linguistics was deep and broad; she also supervised dissertations in fields such as Italian phonology (Doris Borrelli, 2000), medieval Romance languages in Hebrew script

(Devon Strolovich, 2005), and Romance historical syntax (Diego de Acosta 2006), as well as, in the graduate field of Romance Linguistics, French child language acquisition (Cristina Dye, 2005).

Carol's success as a graduate adviser was matched by her skill as a classroom teacher. She received Cornell's Russell Award for excellence in teaching in 2010 and was recognized three times by seniors in the Merrill Presidential Scholars Program for her influence on their academic careers. Taking or teaching a class with Carol was a special experience. Carol was a calligrapher, practitioner of an art of precision that matched the preciseness of her meticulous handouts and exquisitely constructed lectures. Carol was generous with her teaching experience and expertise and mentored many of the current faculty in the Department of Linguistics in the basics of teaching the foundational courses in the field.

In addition to the core undergraduate Introductions to Linguistics and one of her favorite courses, Language Typology, Carol regularly taught historical and comparative Romance linguistics, an old subdiscipline that Carol renewed with her attention to current theoretical approaches. In 2010, Carol published the widely used textbook, *Romance Languages: A Historical Introduction* (Cambridge), coauthored with Ti Alkire, senior lecturer of French and Italian language in the Department of Romance Studies. For a number of years prior to her retirement in 2010, Carol and Ti cotaught *History of the Romance Languages I and II*.

Carol is the only faculty member in the history of our university to have courses co-listed in Linguistics and Music. She taught a series of courses and seminars on Italian opera libretti, which were attended by students from Music and Romance studies as well as Linguistics. These courses, legendary among those who experienced them, gave her a forum to work with her husband, emeritus professor of music David Rosen. Carol translated the libretto of the 1606 Baroque opera *Eumelio* for a performance held in March 2016 as part of the New Century for the Humanities Celebration for the opening of Klarman Hall.

Carol's work on Romance languages went far beyond Italian to include Romanian, a subsequent passion, but her research received particular recognition in Italy. Her publications in Italian include the monograph *Ragionare di grammatica: Un avviamento amichevole* [Reasoning about grammar: A gentle introduction] (Edizioni ETS 2017), co-authored with Nunzio La Fauci, a distinguished syntactician and close colleague. Carol was elected Vice President of the *Società di Linguistica*, an unprecedented honor for an American scholar.

Carol's intellectual precision informed and was infused by her wicked sense of humor. This could pop out at any time, in a linguistic example in a beautifully crafted handout, or in a note to colleagues or pinned on her door. One of the latter was a quotation from Thoreau, "Simplify, Simplify." Beneath it, in an elegant Italian Hand, Carol wrote, "Simplify."

*Written by John Whitman*