



James W. Gair

December 27, 1927 – December 10, 2016

James Wells Gair was born on December 27, 1927. He received his BA *magna cum laude* (1949) and MA (1956) in English from the University of Buffalo, and served a year in the U.S. Army in Korea. He completed his Ph.D. in Linguistics at Cornell in 1963 and immediately joined the faculty as Assistant Professor, becoming full professor in 1974. Jim remained at Cornell until his retirement in 2000. His rich and productive years of teaching and research in Ithaca were interspersed with teaching appointments at the University of Alberta, the University of Pennsylvania, the universities of Kelaniya, Kerala, and Delhi in India, and the University of Colombo in Sri Lanka, together with stays as visiting scholar at Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Jim was a foundational figure in South Asian linguistics and South Asian studies more broadly. He was a founding member of the Association for Asian Studies, and served on the board of directors for the American Institute for Sri Lankan Studies. He helped to build and sustain Cornell's South Asia Program, directing it from 1970 to 1977 and initiating its ongoing collaboration with Syracuse University. Jim established the Sinhalese language program at Cornell, which continues today as the only program of its kind in the western hemisphere.

The Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics at Cornell, when Jim began his career there in the early 1960s, was an international center in the empirical study of the languages of South, Southeast, and East Asia, and also the largest and most prominent collection of linguists working in the still-dominant framework of American Structuralism. Already, though, the theoretical center had begun to shift, in the direction of generative grammatical theory as

developed by Noam Chomsky and his students and colleagues at MIT. Jim's 1970 book, *Colloquial Sinhalese Clause Structures* was one of the first in-depth generative analyses of an understudied language. Jim's analysis of the Sinhala focus construction, a syntactic pattern found in languages as scattered as Yukaghir and Ryukyuan Japanese, continues to provide an impetus for investigation by contemporary scholars.

Building on his theoretical breadth and credentials as one of the world's leading specialists on Sinhala and Tamil, Jim led the integration of research in generative theory with empirical language-particular studies at Cornell as associate chair of the DMLL from 1978 to 1981. In this capacity he guided the hiring of a new generation of scholars who would establish the identity of Cornell as a leading theoretical department.

Jim studied and taught numerous South Asian languages. His research focus was on Sinhala and Tamil, but he also wrote and taught about Hindi, Dhivehi (Maldivian), Malayalam and Pali, the canonical language of Theravada Buddhism. Jim's research extended to English language acquisition and Blackfoot. Other books include *A New Course in Reading Pali: Entering the Word of the Buddha* (1998) and Jim's Sinhala textbook *Colloquial Sinhalese* (co-authored with Cornell mentor Gordon Fairbanks and M. W. Sugathapala De Silva; reprinted 1984), which remains the standard in the field.

Jim's long collaboration with Sri Lankan linguist W.S. Karunatillake began with the commencement of the latter's graduate studies at Cornell in 1965 and continued throughout their lives. Jim's collaboration with Professor Karunatillake resulted in a series of major works, including *Literary Sinhala* (1974, 1976 comprehensive); *A New Course in Reading Pali: Entering the Word of the Buddha* (1998, reprinted 2001), which remains the most effective introduction to the study of Buddhist literature in Pali; *Dhamma Samgaho: An Introduction to Pali Literature* (2012); *A Reader in Colloquial Sinhala* (with Karunatillake and John Paolillo) (1987); as well as *An Introduction to Spoken Tamil* (1978) with Professors Suseendirarajah and Karunatillake, a text which provided the first structured teaching material for colloquial Jaffna Tamil of Sri Lanka. Jim and Professor Karunatillake's final collaboration was *The Sidat Sangara: Text, Translation and Glossary* (2013).

Jim was predeceased by his first wife, Sylvia Gair; by his daughter, Barbie Friedenber; by his dear collaborator Professor Karunatillake. He is survived by Barbara Lust (Human Development), his wife and scholarly collaborator for 38 years; his son, Alex Gair and his wife, Diane; his grandchildren, Brian and Amelia; and by numerous friends, students and colleagues who will remember him for his inspiration, his insight, his humor, his hospitality and his skill in a formidable kitchen stocked to overflowing with South Asian spices and condiments.

Jim passed away at age 88 in Ithaca on December 10, 2016, 17 days short of his 89th birthday. He retained his love of words to the end: these included the verse of Wallace Stevens, the topic of his MA thesis; and Shakespeare, whom he quoted with perfect relevance on his deathbed. James Gair's final degree was a Doctorate of Letters in 1993 from the University of Kelaniya

in Sri Lanka, where he was awarded the title of *Sahitya Chakravartin*, “A Benevolent Emperor of Literature.”

Jim’s long collaboration with Professor Karunatilake began with the latter’s studies at Cornell as a graduate student beginning in 1965 and continued throughout their lives. This collaboration resulted in a series of major works, including *Literary Sinhala* (1974, 1976 comprehensive) and unsurpassed to this day; *A New Course in Reading Pali: Entering the Word of the Buddha* (1998, reprinted 2001), which remains the most effective introduction to the study of Buddhist literature in Pali; *Dhamma Saṅgaho: An Introduction to Pali Literature* (2012); *A Reader in Colloquial Sinhala* (with Karunatilake and Paolillo) (1987); as well as *An Introduction to Spoken Tamil* (1978) with Professors Suseendrarajah and Karunatilake, providing the first structured teaching material for colloquial Jaffna Tamil of Sri Lanka. Through these books James Gair and W. S. Karunatilake created the conditions for others to learn the languages necessary for scholarship in a wide range of fields, and, moreover, exemplified in their long-lasting collaborations, how co-operative scholarly relations were key to producing cross-cultural scholarship of the highest order. Their collaboration culminated in the publication of *The Sidat Sangara: Text, Translation and Glossary* (2013) with notes on the classic 13th century Sinhala grammar and its commentaries. Professors Gair and Karunatilake labored together on this monumental work of scholarship for almost three decades.

The wide knowledge and linguistic understanding reflected in the collaboration between Professors Gair and Karunatilake, with its linkage of theoretical linguistic analyses to deep and profound knowledge of specific languages, led them to discover profoundly similar structural properties as well as distinct differences across languages. These discoveries often revealed phenomena unknown through studies of English or European languages alone, and challenged current theoretical assumptions about the nature of language. This work has had wide consequences not only for the development of theoretical linguistics and implications for discovery of language universals, but also for language typology, and studies of language contact and change.

In addition, the depth and scope of Professor James Gair’s work led to major contributions to language pedagogy, since he and his collaborators developed one of the most extensive bodies of language teaching materials for the languages he was teaching. The pedagogical materials he and his analyses created are foundational, have trained generations of scholars, and remain in use as exemplary resources in language learning.

James Gair’s work has also contributed significantly to the basic scientific study of both first and second language acquisition, as well as language loss in dementia, and related cognitive science; he was a major contributor to research in each of these areas and to relevant cognitive science networks.

Known for his strength of mind, his incisiveness and unmatched ability to strip away from obfuscation to the underlying critical point of any proposal, Professor Gair always saw both sides of an argument, completely without prejudice. Among the rarest of brilliant intellects,

Professor Gair was marked by an unsurpassed deep humanity. His study of language learning involved not only the intricacies of grammar, but also the country, its culture, including its food, and mostly its people.

James Gair was a lover of words. These included the words of Wallace Stevens whose poetry (MA thesis) until the end remained in his mind verbatim with deep understanding, and of Shakespeare whom he quoted with perfect relevance on his deathbed. They also included the words of interaction with everyone his path crossed, regardless of their role in life, understanding them as uniquely significant individuals, insisting on knowing them by name, eager to share cultures, languages and wit with each person he met.

James Gair's intensely inquisitive mind led him to voracious reading, passionate hobbies of cooking (he became a master South Asian chef, with a Sri Lankan cookbook underway when he died), culinary herbs, travel, cars, as well as the intense enjoyment of children riding carousels.

The immense knowledge and understanding housed in James Gair's mind, which he freely shared, were unfathomable to those who knew him. The integration of intellect and humanity was unsurpassed.

Written by John Whitman