Obituary

Jack Windsor Lewis (7 August 1926–11 July 2021): an obituary with some personal recollections

Peter French

It is with great sadness that I report to IAFPA and IAFLL members and other colleagues the death of IAFPA Founder Member, Jack Windsor Lewis, aged 94 years.

In the early days of IAFPA – or IAFP as it then was – Jack was an active participant at annual conferences and regularly undertook forensic casework, acting as an adviser to police officers, independent legal firms and appearing in courts as an expert witness. He was noted for his warm good humour, entertaining style of teaching phonetics and great personal charm.

Jack Windsor Lewis was born in Cardiff on 7 August 1926 and attended local, state sector schools before undertaking three years of National Service in the army. He then entered the University of Wales, Cardiff and graduated in Mediaeval English in 1951. This was followed, between the years 1954 and 1957, by two periods studying phonetics at University College, London under the tutelage of the ‘greats’, J. D. (Doc) O’Connor and A. C. Gimson.

The next years saw him ‘treading the boards’ at universities and other institutions around the world. As well as giving guest lectures and providing courses to over 80 universities internationally, he held English teaching and phonetics posts at the Folk University of Sweden, the Mangold Institute in Madrid, the University of Tehran and the University of Oslo before being appointed Professor and Head of Department at the Brussels Free University.

In 1970 he returned to the UK and spent the last 19 years of his career as a Lecturer in the Department of Phonetics at Leeds University. He retired from Leeds in 1989 and from then devoted much of his time to writing and to consul-
tancy work for radio, television, publishing houses and theatre companies. His phonetics blog attracted a great many followers and remains a ‘live’ site on the internet here (www.yek.me.uk). His best-known publications were *A Guide to English Pronunciation* (1969) and *A Concise Pronouncing Dictionary of British and American English* (1972).

In the forensic context, Jack worked on many cases, but is perhaps best known for his part in the ‘Yorkshire Ripper’ investigation on which he was engaged by the police in the late 1970s to early 1980s. The facts of that case are probably so well known in the forensic speech and language communities as to make any detailed description unnecessary. Suffice to say, therefore, that the ‘Ripper’ was a serial murderer who preyed on lone women on the streets and public spaces of industrial towns in Northern England. During the progressing series of murders, a man, who subsequently turned out to be a hoaxter, sent letters and a tape recording to the investigating police officers. In the recording the man spoke with an accent from North East England, often known as ‘Geordie.’ In the communications he claimed to be the murderer, and the police were convinced that his claim was genuine. Jack was called in, along with his forensic phonetician and dialectologist colleague, the late Stanley Ellis, to profile the sender of the communications by linguistic and phonetic analysis. Stanley Ellis was able to narrow down the area from which the accent hailed to Castletown on the north bank of the River Wear in Sunderland (Ellis, 1994). Significantly, as their work progressed, both linguists came to doubt the veracity of the sender’s claim to be the ‘Ripper’ (Windsor Lewis, 1994). They informed the police of their strong misgivings, which, unfortunately, were not taken on board, as the police continued their investigations on the assumption that the man they were looking for was a Geordie. When, after three further murders and two more attacks on women, the perpetrator was eventually found, he turned out to be from the city of Bradford in West Yorkshire. He had the accent associated with that area, and had previously been interviewed by police in connection with the murders, but eliminated at least partly on the grounds that he did not have the right accent. In an attempt to justify having focused the police enquiries on the search for a Geordie, the Chief Investigating Officer made a press statement to the effect that their linguistics experts had let them down. It was Jack’s sense of outrage and indignation at this misrepresentation, in effect being unfairly used as a scapegoat, that caused him to break silence and to make a public statement setting the record straight.

Some 26 years later, the sender of the hoax tape and letters was found, and Jack came out of retirement from forensic work to carry out linguistic analysis of new material for the defence of the hoaxter (French, Harrison & Windsor Lewis, 2006).

My many encounters with Jack in other cases provided me with the opportunity to get to know him personally and to appreciate his character and fast
wit. His responses to sticky or critical situations were often sharp, quick footed and enabled him to turn the tables against would-be detractors in legal contexts. To give but one example, Jack and I appeared in the Crown Court at Blackburn, Lancashire, on opposite sides in a case against a very vocal and enthusiastic raincoat fetishist accused of leaving distressing messages on the telephone answering machines of women he had seen wearing such garments. Jack produced phonetic evidence for the prosecution in support of the defendant being the message leaver. Now, despite his great skills at phonetic observation, Jack was never a great generator of records, so when, under cross-examination, the defence barrister asked him if he could produce to the court the underlying notes of his voice comparison, I suspected he might be in difficulties. Far from it! He immediately turned the situation around with the answer ‘This was the one case where the similarities between the voice in the message recordings and that of the defendant were so blindingly obvious and distinctive that I didn’t feel the need to make even a single note’. Needless to say, that was a request the barrister wished he hadn’t made.

Another – very serious – early case (1991) where Jack and I acted for opposing sides, and in which he played an important role, was the murder of Dr David Birkett, a consultant dermatologist living in the Teesside town of Middlesbrough. An assailant bluffed his way into the doctor’s house and bludgeoned him to death with a hammer while stealing certain of his belongings, including a human skull. It was suggested that the skull may have been visible from the street through a window, and its acquisition may have been a specific motive for the crime, given that graffiti the defendant daubed on a wall within a secret hideaway in his own home included the word ‘kopfjaeger’ (‘head hunter’). For those who did not have the pleasure of meeting Jack, an insight into his highly individual manner and style of communication can be gained from the video here, where he appears, along with experts from other forensic specialisms, discussing the evidence that was produced by the Crown against the defendant, Reginald Wilson, in the Birkett murder trial.

It was, however, in cases where Jack and I worked collaboratively for the same side that I really came to know him personally and to appreciate his character. One such case was set for trial in the Supreme Court of Gibraltar in the early 1990s and involved the prosecution of members of the local fishing community for smuggling tobacco from Northern Africa via Spain. We were both called to Gibraltar at the start of the trial, and at the beginning of each day for a whole week we presented ourselves at the court expecting to give expert voice evidence, only to be sent away and told to come back the next morning because the case was going more slowly than expected. With lots of time on our hands, I accompanied Jack around various establishments on the Rock in pursuit of some of his personal interests – in particular, gourmet eating, visiting local watering holes
that served a specific type of coconut liqueur and buying electronic gadgetry. By the end of the week local opportunities for all three had been exhausted and, given that no progress was being made with the trial, we went back to the court to ask for leave to travel to Morocco for a few days’ change of scenery, on the condition that we would be back by the following Tuesday. Duly granted, we took the ferry from Algeciras to Tangiers and enjoyed visits to historic areas of the city, the souqs and the desert. As in the Crown Court at Blackburn, Jack’s nimble thinking proved invaluable on at least one occasion. Having been followed through downtown alleyways, we were eventually confronted in a dark corner by a hooded figure offering to provide local services of a type not openly on offer to visitors. Jack was identified as our representative and was asked, ‘Do you want to visit pretty girl?’ – answer ‘No, thank you.’ Then, ‘Do you want to visit young boy?’ – answer again ‘No, thank you.’ Finally, ‘Do you want to smoke marijuana?’ – answer once more ‘No, thank you.’ The irritation of the local ‘service broker’ became clearly apparent in his response to Jack’s rejections: ‘You don’t want pretty girl, you don’t want young boy, you don’t want to smoke marijuana – what the fuck the matter with you??!!’. Quick as a cat, Jack came back at him, fixed him in a steely glare, complemented him on his excellent grasp of English but asked him if he knew what the word ‘sinister’ meant. On receiving a negative reply, Jack’s riposte was swift – ‘Well, my advice is to learn the meaning of a word by hearing it used, so here we go: you’re sinister’. With that, Jack was scuttling into the daylight of the open street with me following closely behind.

We returned to the court in Gibraltar on the Tuesday as requested, only to find that still no progress had been made with the proceedings and we were being allowed to return to England, but strictly on the proviso that we should regard ourselves as being on 24 hours’ standby to return as soon as the lawyers managed to get things moving. That was around 30 years ago and the phone has still not rung. In the unlikely event of that ever happening, I shall have to tell the court that, sadly, they left it too late in Jack’s case, and the prosecution thereby missed the opportunity of presenting a compelling and often entertaining witness.

On a parting thought, I would draw attention to just one manifestation of Jack’s sometimes contradictory personality; as someone who eschewed formality in nearly all aspects of life, he was the last man in England I can remember wearing a fresh flower daily in the buttonhole of his lapel into the 1980s.

Jack is survived by his wife, Jane Peer, whom he married in 1969.

8 February 2022
References


The First International Conference on Forensic Phonetics, Grey’s Court, York, 1989. Jack Windsor Lewis - far right