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"ReadyToTeach.it":
Bridging the Gap between Academia and School

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It seems just yesterday we were playing Tetris on our monochrome screens and "Computer-assisted learning" was hot and new. To date, we have been living in what has been called the "Online Era" (Warschauer 1998: 4) for almost a couple of decades, and during this time the Internet has evolved at an incredibly rapid pace. If some may find the idea that most instructors are now dependant on online resources disturbing, starting from this technology can be an excellent way to get academics and school teachers from different areas to communicate and discuss teaching strategies. When placed within a "Web 2.0" collaborative environment, this dialogue can move one step further, and create a learning space from which all can benefit.

In the (recent) beginning was the web

One has to remember that online teaching tools are relatively recent. Between the mid-1990s and 2006, the percentage of US public schools connected to the Internet rose from 35% to 100%, and the ratio of students per Internet-connected instructional computer decreased from 12:1 to 3.8:1. (see Wells and Lewis 2006). Today, many US states, among which California, Florida, New York, and Texas, offer free on-line school courses to resident students, California alone currently offering as many as four chartered institutions of this kind (Brown and Kiriakidis 2007: 47). Nor is this an exclusive American trend: very similar figures concerning school connectivity, the number of available computers per student (though not necessarily of on-line school courses) have been registered in Britain and a number of Northern European countries (see e.g. Picciano 2001; Blurton 1999: 46-47; Peña-Lópe 2010; see also Gui 2011).

Computer literacy is nowadays the norm rather than the exception for school-children and teenagers who are considered to be "digital natives" when compared to their "digital immigrant" parents and teachers (Prensky 2001; but see also Hague and Payton 2011). Little wonder that the interest of scholars and teachers towards what Dale Dougherty has termed "the Web 2.0" in 2004 (see Wright and Hill 2011) has exploded in

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recent years and that this decade has witnessed an ever-increasing desire for technological competences from learners, teachers, and administrators alike (Greenhow, Robelia and Hughes 2009: 246-247).

The "online era" has brought a revolution to Computer Assisted Language Learning, long known as CALL. One may like it or not, but what has been termed "Google assisted language learning" (GALL) is, in fact, gaining increasing acceptance (the term was first coined by Chinnery in 2008; see also Hafner and Candlin 2007; Conroy 2010). For teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), in fact, the Internet has for a relatively long time provided "a vast and valuable repertoire of authentic material and potential interlocutors for language analysis, practice and learning" (Warschauer 2006: xiv). This is clearly changing. The participatory culture characterising many areas of the Web 2.0 – the social networks *in primis* – allows non-native students not only to be exposed to a wider range of English than they usually encounter in their daily lives, but also to use English as a means of communication with people around the world (see e.g. Wright and Hill 2011). At the same time, learners and teachers can find on the Internet language resources of every kind, from quizzes and tests to audio, video and interactive tools – and even upload their own. The Internet is evidently also precious as a source of information and reference for areas such as English culture and literature: as the authors of the well-known *Literature and the Internet* put it "an enormous, in some ways unique, academic resource" and "a new kind of library [...] available to anyone, academic scholar or not" (Browner, Sears and Pulsford 2000: 2-3). Clearly, however, it is also a virtual place where negotiations of texts and meanings take place, and where the meaning of "learning" is changing at a very fast pace.

One should remember, in fact, that databases and archives, news websites, online texts and bio-bibliographical pages are presently both tools and objects of research. While digital scholarship was – not long ago – looked at with a mixture of suspect and distrust, and in the best of cases accepted as the work of lesser scholars (Kiernan 2000), research is now booming. Academia has witnessed the birth of a number of web-related research institutions, among which the *Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities* at the University of Virginia – home of the *Nines* project – and the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities, which includes projects such as *Romantic Circles, The Shakespeare Quartos Archive, The Visual Accent & Dialect Archive* and *The Shelley-Godwin Archive*. New online consortia have been created (including *The Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations*) and even the America National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) has recently set up a "Digital Humanities Start-Up Grants Program" (see Burgess and Hamming 2011). The medium may not be the one and only message, but certainly what we are witnessing today is a new interest in what the Internet 2.0 is and can do as a tool, even quite independently from its contents.

For all the enthusiasm (and some distrust) in Academia, together with new possibilities and potentialities, cutting-edge information technology may prove harder to use than one expects, especially when it comes to teaching. First of all, the "technology gap" between some academics and teachers alike and their students has always engendered and often still determines in teachers some uneasiness in the use of online resources (Lee 2000; Prensky 2001; Hague and Payton 2011). In schools, in particular, the

outcome of this situation is twofold: either teachers are defeated by their lack of web literacy and refuse to use the new technology *tout court* (see Lee 2000), or they try to make "the most of this technology since its presence cannot be ignored" (Macià, Cervera and Ramos 2006: 3) and thus recur to undiscriminating "cut and paste" of teaching material with little or no alteration to its sources.

This leads to a second problem: though the quantity of educational tools and references available online is enormous, its quality is often doubtful. Consequently, the search for reliable sites and effective teaching material can be extremely frustrating and time consuming. Thirdly, whereas EFL teachers can find a vast array of resources online, teachers of English literature might not feel as lucky. In spite of the surprising quantity of online texts and information sources (see, e.g., Correa and Owens 2010), there is a noteworthy penury of teaching material targeted on foreign secondary school students.

...and then there was a (small) community

During a course (conveniently called "Multimedia tools for teachers of English") held at Università della Valle d'Aosta between 2004 and 2006 along with some related seminars which took place at the same University in the following years, the students and their instructors tried to address these issues. The first step was to define the needs and expectations of all of the participants. An important element which emerged during these classes was the need, experienced by both teachers and researchers, to find help to make a reasoned choice when looking for online material, and online texts in particular (see Bajetta and Bourland 2011). It was perceived, for example, that very little guidance was, and still is, available when having to choose between the many texts and/or editions of texts available on a number of websites, including some identifiable as "scholarly" resources (see Antonielli 2009). Another important factor was that, in order to avoid what was defined as the "cut and paste syndrome" – frequently less a consequence of simple laziness than of the frustration of long hours spent not finding what one really needs – it would be convenient to have some form of ready-made classes which could be customized to one's own classroom. This would allow literature teachers in particular to adapt reliable contents to their needs, focusing more on the cultural background and language level of a specific set of students. Finally, the group's digital literacy, which was at the beginning of the course taken almost for granted, was discovered to be in need of some serious "brushing up" (as most students euphemistically stated) and update, especially with reference to audio/video editing, html files, and (quite surprisingly) visual presentation programmes. It was felt, however, that very little material focused on the humanities (rather than "general IT skills") was readily available.

It became evident that what was needed was a website related to English teaching which could provide a selection of quality websites and instructions on their use and, at the same time, offer original material (focusing in especially on literature) to be used in class. Such a resource, though, should not be simply "static" but a real collaborative environment in line with the participatory, and "upload" culture of the Web 2.0 (see Goldberg 2011): an online repository which could enable users to make use of the full "teaching potential" of the internet.

The project – phase one

The first outcome of this initial phase was the setting up, in 2009, of a research project based at Università della Valle d'Aosta, "Risorse Internet per la lingua, la cultura e la letteratura inglese / Online resources for English language, culture, literature". The first purpose of the project was the identification of some criteria of selection of existing online resources in order to assure their quality and specify their use.

In fact, only few of the several existing web portals provide detailed explanatory notes and/or assessment of the quality and effectiveness of their links to external sites. Our first aim was, instead, to offer a restricted selection of very useful online resources together with ideas and suggestions on how to make the best out of, say, the available texts and exercises.

The project aimed also at providing different typologies of materials that might prove useful to teachers. Consequently, our website had to include sections dedicated to news related to the world of the Italian school system and of English culture, literature and language, together with references and academic lectures meant as updates and refreshers for teachers. We felt, however, that these features were not sufficient to mark the difference between our website and the many others. More was needed.

In the course of a series of meetings, ideas were brainstormed. We decided that it was necessary to involve other academics in the preparation of teaching material. This would ensure the quality and update of the lessons. Another distinguishing feature was perceived to be the offer of complete lessons, composed of a presentation (prepared in PowerPoint) and a transcript, and therefore ready to be used in class. A third distinctive factor had to be the complete gratuitousness of the offer. As a matter of fact, not only should our lessons be downloadable cost-free, but they should also be customisable without restrictions. Furthermore, considering that the teaching material focusing on English literature is the rarest online, our lessons would dedicate great attention to this area.

Finally, our project intended to encourage the collaboration of school teachers. Being specifically targeted on teachers from Italian schools, we aimed not only at tailoring the material on their specific needs but also at availing ourselves of their feedback and contributions in order to improve and enrich our offer. Once the basic elements that would characterise our project were set, it then became necessary to think about the "physical" (a peculiar word to use for a virtual world such as the Internet) construction of the website.

Giving shape to ideas: phase two – designing the website

Being an Internet user necessarily implies formulating some kind of assessment of the websites one visits. Consciously or not, we all have our personal ideas on how a good website should be structured in order to appear both easy to use and nice to look at. When it comes to sketching the structure for a new website, however, these ideas appear to be much more blurred and varied than it could seem at the beginning. Everybody's

chief object was, naturally, the user-friendliness of the website but working out how to achieve it was not that easy and required thorough consideration.

Seoyoung Hong and Jinwoo Kim, in "Architectural Criteria for Website Evaluation – Conceptual Framework and Empirical Validation", identify six elements that characterise a well-made website: "internal reliability and external security for structural robustness, useful content and usable navigation for functional utility, and system interface and communication interface for aesthetic appeal" (Hong and Kim 2004: 337).[2] We took into account these aspects and elaborated our own priority list.

Our primary aim, and the core of our project, was functional utility. The usefulness of our contents was and is our constant preoccupation and we aim at progressively and continuously enlarging our database of lessons, lectures, contributions and e-tools. From the beginning we also regarded usable navigation as a complementary but necessary element on account of the consideration that a website where the most precious materials are hidden in the folds of a tortuous maze is frustrating and useless. Thus we planned to create different search facilities and to add breadcrumbs in order to help users to easily keep trace of their navigation path.

Concerning structural robustness, once we agreed on the open source and open content nature of our website, security became a secondary issue. No subscription was envisaged, so we did not need any access control system. On the other hand, internal reliability was much more our concern: a website which had to be structured – and searched – as a database needed to be a perfectly working machine. Contents had to be indexed and had to be retrievable through several search facilities.

Finally, we considered the aesthetic appeal of our website as accessory but not unimportant. We decided to focus principally on meaningful visual elements (the circular homepage layout described below) and to choose colours which could immediately be identified as "typically English".

Typologies of material
Once the main outline and objectives of our project had been specified, determining what kind of materials our website should provide was not difficult. The first typology was that of the commented links. We decided to label this category "E-tools and Links" because we wanted to convey the idea that the web pages we selected should be seen as teaching resources and not merely as links to browse.

The second typology was that of the "Lessons": every single item should be composed of a PowerPoint presentation, a full transcript of the lesson and a lesson plan. The lesson plan gives teachers all information about how and when to use it: language level, school and class, duration, tools needed, pre-requisites, objectives and texts to read.

We also decided to organize our material into two further categories: academic "Lectures" specifically intended for teachers refreshers and updates and "Contributions", a subcategory that would gather miscellaneous materials.

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[2]   For another description, more targeted to language websites though less comprehensive, see Kartal and Uzul (2010: 93-94).

The contents

The second aspect to establish was the scope and the main areas that would represent the focus of our website. As stated above, our preliminary problems and needs analysis had shown that priority had to be given to English literature. However, we also knew that, in Italy, the area almost every teacher, no matter the school or the class, has to deal with is English as a foreign language. Consequently, from the very start, we decided to include both of them. Finally, after long considerations, we also agreed to introduce a third area which would focus on the culture and the civilization of English-speaking countries.

After choosing the main subject areas, we had to determine how to arrange the contents into subcategories. As for the Language section, we explored different possibilities of arrangement. We thought about skills and competences and we finally opted for a subdivision that featured the classic categories of Grammar and Vocabulary, together with other skills of such as Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking. Even though it would have been fascinating to explore other options, our experience as teachers of English language as well as literature convinced us that this traditional arrangement would still have been the most practical. We decided to add two further subcategories: Linguistics and Phonetics, to allow for more theoretical approaches; and Tools, to provide links to dictionaries, corpora and other useful resources.

The Literature area proved to be more complicated to arrange. On the one hand, our literary background taught us that ideas of canon, "traditional" categories and "genres" are often a matter of controversy. On the other hand, our observation of existing websites and an analysis of school programs led us to think that, in order to have a user-friendly content organization, we should choose a rather conservative structure. Sadly to say, the observation in *Literature and the Internet* could not be more accurate: "The Internet seems to begin with the outdated! […] At a time when postmodernism minimizes categories and hierarchies, the web reinstates and emphasizes them." (Browner, Sears and Pulsford 2000: 6).

As a matter of fact, organizing contents into categories and subcategories belongs to the nature of the medium itself; consequently, the classification of literary topics into areas and sections was unavoidable. In order to allow users to follow different paths to reach the information they need we opted for several search directories. The main would be a genre organization: Prose, Poetry and Drama. Two further sections were added to this directory: Context (focusing on historical and social aspects related to different literary periods), and General (where book databases and inclusive websites would be indicated). A final section, collecting all those peculiar cultural productions related to the literary world but not belonging to it, was added and denominated Film and Trivia.

We also wanted our contents to be searchable according to a chronological criterion. Hence, we decided to have a timeline that would group the items into nine historical periods: From the Origins to the Middle Ages, The Renaissance, The Restoration, The Augustan Age, Romanticism, The Victorian Age, Modernism and Contemporary Literature and Culture. Finally, we also needed an alphabetic search facility to search works by their authors' names.

The third subject area was labelled "Civilization and Culture of English-Speaking Countries". This choice was made in order to avoid any confusing resonance with Cultural Studies, which we have included in the literary section.

This area should host varied topics such as festivities and celebrations, social issues and political organization, up-to-date news and traditional folklore and food. No need to say, the most important countries to be considered should be the UK, the USA and Ireland, but the intention is to enlarge the scope in order to take in also Australia, Canada, South Africa, India and other countries.

The first homepage: a circular shape

One of the first intuitions, inspired by the Romantic Circles website (www.rc.umd.edu/) and which occurred to us since the first stages of the project, was the idea of a circular and rotating main menu for the homepage. The concept was that none of the sections should prevail over the others: there should be no first nor last, on the contrary it had to convey the idea of a learning environment where all aspects would be equally important. However, even if the image of a circular layout could bring to mind the idea of a web-ring, that was never our intention. From our experience, we learnt that these structures can prove to be like mazes, environments where users know where to start but not how to get to their desired destination. As Aune points out, "bad website design, particularly that which can cause a student to get lost in a labyrinth of links is a continual concern" (Aune 2001: 128). Instead, we wanted our website to be linear to use and well centred in its main sections, so we determined to give it a branching layout which would ensure an easy selection and a clear progression among several topics.

The name: ReadyToTeach.it

If we had come across the idea for the homepage layout easily and naturally from the beginning of the project, the choice of the name for our website, instead, proved to be much more arduous and time-consuming. We were looking for a name which would stress the fact that our website would provide original material for teachers and also that such material would be ready to use in class. After some brainstorming, we finally found the name "Ready to Teach it" which seemed to convey very effectively the main idea of our project.

The ".it" domain has to be considered an integral part of the name as it serves two purposes. First of all, it identifies an Italian domain thus clearly indicating that our primary target users are Italian teachers of English. Secondly, the pronoun "it" focuses attention on the subject matter. This is an important distinction as another existing website "Ready to Teach" (www.readytoteach.org/) offers training courses for teachers,

while our name "Ready to teach it" immediately communicates the idea of a website providing "ready to use" materials.

What vehicular language?

In order to reinforce the Italian specificity of the project we also decided to use Italian as the "working language" of our site: as previously explained, there are countless websites dedicated to English teachers and learners, but very few are distinctively targeted to the Italian school. Nonetheless we are determined to provide teaching materials entirely written in English, occasionally allowing exceptions such as literary translations, grammar exercises for beginners, or conference papers originally delivered in Italian.

Further sections

Finally, the last details we had to refine where the accessory functions that complete the basic structure of a website. First of all, there should be a Site-map, a "Contact Us" page and a presentation of the project and of the team (labelled "Chi siamo" / "About us"). We also planned to have a "News" section where we could publicise useful information about events and conferences, new publications and relevant changes in school legislation. Furthermore, in order to increase the user-friendliness of our website, we decided to have a section – "Da dove iniziare" / "New to the Website" – dedicated to providing new-comers with explanations and instructions about the organization of the website and the typologies and use of the materials.

The section "Collabora" – "Work with Us" – is another crucial part of our project: we believe that teachers' contributions and feedback will be a fundamental help to improve the scope and effectiveness of our offer. Moreover, the possibility to take part in the project might also represent a moment of professional growth for teachers who could exchange experiences and become more and more confident with the web.

Finally, we have recently created another section "Working Papers". We realized that we needed an area specifically dedicated to the research which we are developing alongside the website. The section "Working Papers" allows us to keep the users informed about the most recent outcome of our research project – papers, articles, essays – no matter if they have already been published or not.

The stuff that dreams are made on: phase three – the realization

After the project was made, the contents were defined and the general structure was sketched, we moved on to the proper creation of the website. And here came the problems.

The Logo

Prof. Bajetta's initial idea for the website logo was that of a pen-nib which, incidentally, well expressed the literary penchant of the project. We needed, however, to create an original picture that would belong uniquely to us and that would immediately identify our website. So we asked a web designer for help. She elaborated the idea and created the definitive logo:

the picture of a pen nib which is mirrored by a mouse pointer. We immediately found it perfect to convey the double nature of our project: the combination of a great interest for literature and research with the use of modern technologies.

The CMS: **Joomla!**

During the initial search for a web designer we realised that by using an open source CMS (Content Management System) we would have sensibly reduced the cost of the website building. We decided to opt for *Joomla!* as it seemed the most popular system. We are still in the process of developing the website in many of its sections so we are not yet able to provide a definitive assessment of the pros and cons of this CMS; however we can relate the initial difficulties we found.

From the beginning, we realized that, by working with a pre-existing series of templates, our web designer could meet some difficulties in adjusting the sometimes rigid structures to our requests and needs. The organization of the material as a database, a fundamental characteristic of our website, created several problems and needed being re-arranged many times before a satisfactory module was found. Finally, the web designer decided that the most functional way to arrange the content was through a double organization that would have solved the impossibility of having three levels of subdivisions in the search facilities. Hence the content was distributed into sections and categories which catalogued the material according to "subjects" (for the language) and "genres" (for the literature) and which was accessible through the main menu. Tags, instead, were used to implement the chronological, alphabetical and "typological" search facilities. Unfortunately, this organization conflicted with the "breadcrumbs" application but the problem was solved by configuring the main menu as a horizontal drop-down bar that would keep trace of the navigation path.

The design of the homepage, with its circular shape, created even more difficulties since the circle would make the home page too long thus rendering it necessary for the user to scroll down the page in order to see all the contents. After many attempts we had to face the dilemma: to keep the circular shape and the general aspect of the website (almost ready to be launched online) or to privilege content visibility by opting for a radical change.

We decided that the template we were using (created by the program Artisteer) did not satisfy our needs and that, even if it could cost us some months' delay, the website should have been at its best before the launch. Our website designer proposed us a completely different template generator, Rocket Theme, which promised to be richer and more customisable, though more complicated.

Thanks to this new template we could recover the breadcrumbs (no longer conflicting with the overall search structure) and we got a more satisfying, flexible and appealing layout. We had to abandon definitively the circular homepage, but we substituted it with a slideshow that presents – every few seconds – all the main sections of the website, thus preserving the original "no first nor last" idea. This new template solved another problem which had emerged in the last phase of the website creation: the theme inconsistency between Explorer and other browsers such as Chrome or Firefox.

All considered, the experience with *Joomla!* is reasonably positive. Even if it seems, at times, too rigid, the system is of extremely easy access to non-professionals so we were able to learn how to manage (and develop) the website within a few hours.

Icons and illustrations

Choosing the icons to associate to the various types of material was another difficult task. Several websites sell icons and symbols at a very reasonable price. The offer is wide and varied and the choice proved to be time-consuming. One of the main problems was how to visually translate the idea of a "lecture" or of a "contribution".

After many attempts we decided that a "contribution" should be symbolized by two sheets of paper (differentiating it from a "lesson" which is instead identified by the image of a person and a single sheet) and that a "lecture" should be indicated by the classic iconic representation of a university so as to stress the academic provenance of such material.

Furthermore, we decided that it was better to mark the original material provided by our site (lessons, contributions, etc. specifically prepared for our project and not borrowed from other sources) with a distinctive icon, thus we agreed we should use our logo for that purpose.

Less difficult was the choice of the illustrations that would represent the main subject areas of our site: the picture of a young teacher explaining Hamlet to her class (portrayed as she holds a skull) epitomizes English literature as a whole, a blended UK-USA flag indicates the language section and a superimposition between the Liberty Statue and a red telephone box is the synthesis of the culture and civilisation area. We are well aware that these choices might not be the most original but they are certainly immediately recognizable by all users.

The PowerPoint Templates

In order to standardize our lessons and contributions – and to make them clearly recognizable as original "ReadytoTeach.it" material – we also decided that we needed to create our own PowerPoint templates. In the first phase, we adopted a standard Microsoft Office 2007 template, we added our logo and we colour-coded the templates according to the three main subject areas: pink for literature, blue for language and green for civilisation and culture. However, we soon realized that *Issuu* – the free online slide-show support system that we use to allow a preview of the lessons – had a strong incompatibility with the extension pptx of our documents. We tried to save them in the "compatibility

mode" but we realized that the problems were then transferred to PowerPoint itself, since the graphic elements in the documents were not recognized. Finally, we created ex-novo (not without significant effort) a completely new layout which is now totally original and compatible with every system. We preserved the colour distinction, the logo and all other characteristics.

Copyright

Even though, from the beginning, we had configured our project as open-source and open-content, we still had to provide a copyright protection to our material. We needed to state that our original lessons and contributions could not be appropriated, sold or used in any lucrative activity. Creative Commons (http://creativecommons.org) provides an easy solution for this kind of problems: by selecting the most appropriate licence, it is possible to indicate with precision the conditions of use and distribution of every material on a website. We opted for the Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported (CC BY-NC-SA 3.0) licence which states that every person willing to use (adapt and remix) our material has to do it by acknowledging the original authorship, cannot do it for commercial purposes and has to share it according to these same rules.

Picking few needles in thousands of haystacks: phase four – the selection

Once the website had been created, we moved on to the second stage of our project: the choice of the e-tools and the preparation of the lessons and contributions.

The selection of valuable online resources is a complex, time-consuming and, sometimes, frustrating activity. The quantity of websites dedicated to learners or teachers of English language is enormous (a Google search for the words "English Grammar" runs to about 18,300,000 entries) and so is the number of sites devoted to English literature (about 16,600,000 entries - last update 11.8.11). Choosing the best resources means assessing both the contents and the website. The most common evaluating criteria are those of accuracy, authority, objectivity, currency and coverage, as described by Kapoun (1998: 522-523). However, these criteria are general and do not take into consideration the usefulness of the contents (a fundamental aspect in our case), as Aly does in his study specifically devoted to English language websites (Aly 2008: 7-8). Our aim is to select the very best of the available resources; consequently we are trying to limit our choices to either very comprehensive, complete and rich websites, or to specific and original ones. It is our intention to elaborate and publish our own evaluating grid in order to explain with clarity and transparency our decisions.

At the same time, we are also working on the creation of a valuable database of lessons, contributions and lectures. We are contacting professors and researchers and we are asking them to cooperate with us by preparing original teaching material. This aspect of our project is probably the most ambitious considering that we cannot repay contributors for their efforts.

A work in progress: phase five – the future

Nowadays the website is ready and the database of e-tools and other materials has reached a considerable size. No need to say, this means that this is just the beginning.

As said before, we are still looking for more involvement from the academic world and we hope that the more popular our website grows, the more numerous the contributors will become. At the moment we can rely on a very active – but small – work team but we hope to see our number increase in the future.

We are also ready to present our project to the schools from January - February 2012. As a matter of fact, this is a tool specifically targeted to the needs of Italian teachers of English so we need their feedback on our website usability together with their cooperation in the preparation of contributions and their suggestions for the selection of e-tools. We also hope that our website will become a constant teaching resource for them to prepare lessons and tests.

Finally, we also have to take care of the maintenance of the links since, as Aune explains: "Like a library, the Internet is not a stagnant environment. Just as books are borrowed, lost, or stolen, websites come and go, or their URLs change" (Aune 2001: 130). We are still working to enlarge our "library" of e-tools but periodically we also need to check the links, in order to preserve their currency.

Time has passed since we were – all alone – playing Tetris. Now both gaming and teaching have become something in which online collaboration is an essential element if one wants to get the best out of the programmes one is using. Such an interaction between teachers and academics is already working for some of us. More can be done – our hope is to meet you and collaborate with you online.

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Pathways of Social Dialectology:
An Interview with Paul Kerswill

Stefania M. Maci
University of Bergamo, Italy

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Paul Kerswill is currently Professor of Sociolinguistics at the University of York. His main interest is in social dialectology, which he defines as a **"**sociolinguistically informed approach to language variation and change", as determined by class, gender, ethnicity, age, as well as identity and mobility, and which, in turn, determine the outcomes of dialect contact. Dialect contact and, consequently, dialect levelling, form the core of Paul Kerswill's research. However, he is currently working on an ESRC-funded project on phonetic and grammatical features among teenagers and older people in London, where the opposite of levelling seems to be happening because of the highly multilingual nature of London's inner city.

I met Professor Kerswill in his office, where we had a very nice relaxed chat. Paul is a very friendly person who makes you feel at ease and at the same time lets you perceive the passion he has for his investigations. We met on a rainy Lancastrian afternoon at Bowland College, Lancaster University, where he was teaching at the time. Before starting the interview, Paul began speaking about his interest and research in sociolinguistics; he then realized that he was anticipating what I was going to ask him and was glad my recorder had been already switched on – "Oh right! So, I'm not supposed to repeat it again. Please, go ahead", he said laughing. And I began my interview.

Stefania Maci: *For those people who are new to the field of sociolinguistics and who want to understand your contribution to this field, what would you recommend among your works to be read and why?*
Paul Kerswill: Mm, difficult question. I think, probably, the article that is the best known is the one by Ann Williams and myself, published in 2000 in *Language in Society*. It is called "Creating a New Town koine". Yeah, it's a big paper, 50 pages long, that we wrote about the new town of Milton Keynes, which was founded in '67, I think it was, 1967. The population grew rapidly through immigration from one part of England, particularly the South East and London, more specifically. So there is a melting pot of English accents with a few Scottish and Irish voices to be heard. We looked for a *koiné*, a new dialect. I am not sure if we found one but we found out about the processes of new dialect formation, which is something Peter Trudgill has been looking at for many years now. I feel really very close academically to Peter Trudgill. He even examined my PhD dissertation; both he and I have connections to Norway; he is now Professor of Sociolinguistics at the University of Agder, Norway. I was brought up bilingually, with English and Norwegian. Norwegian is actually chronologically my first language, as my mother was Norwegian. So Norwegian and English were the languages at home – one parent, one

language, I suppose, is what my parents did with me, although they had never discussed that as such. …But this is another story which requires even more time than talking about sociolinguistics, I suppose…

S.M.: *I think you are right!*

P.K.: There are probably a couple of other articles, actually. One of these is actually in a *Festschrift* for Peter Trudgill. That was edited by Jenny Cheshire and Dave Britain, who are two other British linguists very close to Peter Trudgill. Actually, Peter supervised both their PhDs. This *Festschrift* came out in 2003. My article in that book is called "Dialect levelling and geographical diffusion in British English" and is about regional dialect levelling in Britain, and it is an overview of the spread of certain pronunciation features across the country. It's a speculation about what dialect levelling might mean. It takes a geographical and historical perspective on changes in British English pronunciation across the country.

S.M.: *The idea of levelling reminds me of Estuary English – the idea that RP might be levelled to what we know as Estuary English… can we actually speak of accent levelling in this case?*

P.K.: Well, defining Estuary English is hard work. David Rosewarne described Estuary English in the 1980s and defined it as a sort of new compromise accent between Cockney and the Queen's RP. My view is that there isn't any neutral way of speaking English – and Estuary English is something more towards Cockney than RP. I do agree with Trudgill when he says that actually Estuary English is upwardly mobile South-eastern speech and this is something which has always existed. But what is new is its prominence in the media and in education and business, as well – there are a lot of people who are not RP speakers who do very well nowadays. You don't need RP any more. And this can probably be seen as progress.

S.M.: *You mentioned Trudgill quite a lot. What would you say is the work of his that has influenced you most?*

P.K.: My own personal favourite is Peter Trudgill's *Dialects in Contact* (1986). I think this revolutionised the way we think about dialect change. He made it more sociolinguistic and he also made it to some extent cognitive in the way that he looked at the roles of individual speakers when dialects are in contact, which is what the book is about. He is the author who influenced me the most, I'm certain of that.

S.M.: *As you hinted at a few minutes ago, your family situation probably acted as a trigger for your interest in sociolinguistics. Are there any other aspects, factors, or even motivations behind your entry to sociolinguistics?*

P.K.: I don't know, actually – I mean, growing up bilingually was significant, but I have never really been interested in code switching and bilingualism, though I used to code-switch every day. What interested me most was the regional variation in dialects, in both Norwegian and English. So I studied Norwegian at university, and I graduated from Cambridge. For my final year undergraduate dissertation, I spent a summer on a farm in the Southwest of Norway, cycling around the countryside with a tape recorder,

interviewing old and young, with the intention of determining what the linguistic differences were between the generations – this was the topic of my dissertation. At that stage, I had never heard of dialectology or even linguistics or phonetics – I hadn't studied any of these at that stage. And I later discovered that what I had been doing was an investigation of geographical diffusion and dialect levelling. I didn't know those words and probably only came across them five years later, I think. So that's in fact what got me interested in sociolinguistics….

S.M.: *Could you describe the state of sociolinguistics as you saw it when you were a postgraduate student?*
P.K.: Sociolinguistics was a fairly small subject and its core, certainly in the UK, was what we *now* call 'language variation and change'. If we think of the *Sociolinguistics Symposium*, which is now a vast international conference held every two years: it's very broad, but despite that, it doesn't have very much language variation and change in it. But in the '70s sociolinguistics started out as language variation and change, with people like Suzanne Romaine, Euan Reid, Peter Trudgill and Lesley and Jim Milroy. These people were involved in sociolinguistic studies of language change in the 1970s. In America, the branch of sociolinguistics founded by William Labov was well under way, and these people were all inspired by him – as many of us still are today – he's still going strong.

S.M: *What were the main issues for sociolinguists in those days?*
P.K.: I suppose a major area of discussion, at least in the 1980s and 1990s and which is still relevant now, was about qualitative vs. quantitative methods in sociolinguistics. I remember attending a meeting, a very informal meeting, which was probably held in the early 1990s – who was there? Jack Chambers was visiting from Canada, Deborah Cameron was there, and so was Tope Omoniyi (who's now at Roehampton University in London) and I can't remember who else took part in it. Jack Chambers and I, I suppose, were on one side, the remaining people were on the other side. I'm not sure we were ready to draw any conclusions, but these issues are still with us. There was a similar discussion at a conference I attended last week [July 2010] where the delegates, including Deborah Cameron and myself, all took part in a plenary discussion. It was in the context of methodology in sociolinguistics and we were looking at things like social class and ethnicity, as well as identity and conversational organization at a micro-level. I said I believed there was no contradiction in linking these together. The feeling I got is that there is a lot more contact across the boundaries of sociolinguistics today than twenty years ago. Sociolinguistics has matured in just in the last fifteen or even ten years. People like Ben Rampton - he is at King's College London and was at the meeting last week, as well – carries out qualitative research, but he also looks at social class and how this is encoded in the way people speak, as an identity factor, as something which is constantly there. This kind of approach forms a point of contact with Labov's early work.

S.M.: *As you survey the field today, what are some of the most exciting research trends you see?*
P.K.: I think there is some integration with theoretical linguistics through the area of cognitive linguistics. This is something I don't know very much about, but there are now

conferences with the title *Cognitive Sociolinguistics*. Cognitive sociolinguistics has many different meanings, I discovered. I went to a conference with that title in Landau in Germany back in March [2010], that seemed to be language variation and language change – *again* – but looking at things like frequencies of features of particular linguistic patterns. I don't think it was particularly successful because the interpretation of frequencies was still at a fairly unsophisticated level on the part of the sociolinguists, I think – it was, however, worth going there. Things like language acquisition and sociolinguistics are areas which have been linked for a long time, but it's also possible to link these by seeing how phonology is acquired in sociolinguistic contexts. This is the part of the field known as sociophonetics. I suppose some aspects of what I'm doing is sociophonetics, although others are more technically much more adept than me. What all this shows is that both structural categories and sociolinguistic competence are acquired at the same time. One of my other articles I didn't mention earlier and which predates present-day cognitive sociolinguistics is from 1996, and is called "Children, Adolescents and Language Change", and it's about language variation and change from the point of view of acquisition.

S.M.: *Much of your work has been concerned with the study of sociolinguistic change in relation to dialectology. What drew you to this area of inquiry?*
P.K.: As I said, the first 'linguistics' I did was on language variation without knowing the meaning of the word *variation.* I was interested in language change, so I studied what we in Britain called 'philology'. I studied Gothic, Old High German, Old English, Old Norse, Germanic sound changes such as Grimm's Law, Verner's Law. Nowadays it's more common to take a sociolinguistic view. It is a matter of asking the right questions: "what is happening nowadays?" I was taught about grammatical changes by people who were not sociolinguists. I can hardly call them historical linguists, they were philologists in the rather general British sense. Some people still take a completely non-sociolinguistic view of change, and that may be harmful because it leaves out a whole area of explanation.

S.M.: *You are right and this is fascinating. I started reading your sociophonetic investigation some years ago when I met Dave Britain at a conference in Italy (2003) and he sent me his papers about a vowel change he calls Fenland raising, where he not only described the phenomenon but also interpreted it sociolinguistically. To me, that was revealing.*
P.K.: Precisely. He is a linguist to whom I also feel very close. He is probably the one whose work I feel most affinity with. He has moved to a slightly different direction, to some extent, dealing with geography.

S.M.: *Are there areas of sociolinguistic research today that you think are underexplored?*
P.K.: Do you mean in my own branch of sociolinguistics? You could say that that not enough cities have been explored, or that some countries haven't been fully covered. But that's not particularly interesting unless at the same time you are pushing back some theoretical boundary within sociolinguistics. I think the field is looking at new things such as cognitive linguistics and phonetics, which is good because it shows that the field is advancing.

S.M.: *Your latest research is on the emergence of Multicultural London English, seen as a new variety, which as I understood it has been brought into being by adolescents in the inner city. Can you comment on the results you have been obtaining?*

P.K.: Yeah. This is a project stemming from our interest – and when I say *our* I mean, particularly, myself, Jenny Cheshire, Sue Fox and Eivind Torgersen – in levelling and innovation. Levelling and innovation are two opposite forces which are always present in any language. In 2001-2002 Jenny suggested looking at these in London. What is interesting in London is that you have a rate of immigration from other countries which, uniquely, is so great that it is having a major effect on the English language spoken in the inner city of East London. And I say *uniquely* because, I think, for the first time we have large areas of London – not the majority of London, but *substantial* areas of the inner city of London – where children from English-speaking backgrounds are growing up in environments which are not mainly English-speaking. What that means is that they learn English from their parents, certainly, but also from teenagers and older children, who in this case may not be first-language English speakers themselves. So the kinds of changes will be different from situations where incomers are fully absorbed. For instance, we found that some vowel sounds have been completely transformed in relation to traditional Cockney. The response, now, if you talk to old Londoners, is that most of them would say "we don't know what's happened to the Cockney dialect, where has it gone?' We claim it's being replaced by a new, multiethic Cockney, which we call Multicultural London English. The media seem to call it 'Jafaican'. This is a completely new phenomenon which has been around for 20 years, maybe. It did not exist in the 1970s and was just starting in the 80s. In the 1980s, you had the second generation of Caribbean speakers who spoke London English as well as a London version of Jamaican Creole. But now, it's as if the range has narrowed, with everybody sharing Multicultural London English. There's been some anxiety expressed in the media about the loss of Cockney, and people think that this is the fault immigration. Some readers' online comments are often negative and come close to racism. For instance, just last week [July 2010] I had a lot of exposure to this project. I was invited by a cultural association called King's Place located in central London – in that week they were celebrating the Cockney dialect and Multicultural London English as well. I was interviewed by them and they prepared a press release. Last week, there was a journalistic 'echo' of this in the London newspaper *The Evening Standard* and in *The Daily Mail*. Later the same day, *The Sun* phoned me, wanting to publish an article about Multicultural London. Their journalist wrote a text in which they reported what I said over the phone. They texted the result to my mobile, and I was more than happy to put my name to it!, They'd done a good job. The next day, the article was published with me as the author – 'by Paul Kerswill' – and was reprinted in the *Evening Standard* and *The Daily Mail*. I was very pleased by what *The Sun* did. The readers' comments in *The Evening Standard* and *The Sun* were ok, but in *The Daily Mail,* they were mainly negative. My arguments in the article were that this new variety can be seen as positive evidence of social integration. Readers don't perceive this, and persist with negative stereotyping. I'm sure it happens. We sociolinguists try to investigate, describe and interpret sociolinguistic phenomena, presenting the facts as we

see them. We are not always good enough at communicating them, though we are getting much better, with a number of projects around the world trying to do this.

S.M.: *Yeah, you are right. There is a lot of social and ethnic discrimination based on stereotypes concerning the idea of otherness as revealed through language. It's a pity, but this must not hinder any scientific investigation of language.*
P.K.: Yes. Precisely.

S.M.: *Prof. Kerswill, it has been a pleasure speaking with you. Thank you for your time and your answers.*
P.K.: Thank you, Stefania.

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A Report on English Historical Linguistics in Spain (1968-2011)

Isabel Moskowich and *Begoña Crespo*[3]
Universidade da Coruña, Spain

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In the following pages we will report on the development of research in English historical linguistics in Spain, looking specifically at doctoral dissertations. These can be seen as an indicator of the relationship between research and teaching in the Spanish public university system. This system, highly valued by Spanish society in general, requires that most teachers occupying permanent positions have doctoral degrees. However, someone with a doctorate in a particular field of expertise is not guaranteed to teach in that same field, which represents a poor use of human resources and impacts negatively on teaching quality. The cause for this is two fold: on the one hand, the humanities in general are gradually losing prestige, due to society's demand for institutions of higher education to provide teaching and scholarship of an immediate, practical and applicable nature. On the other hand, the reform process agreed on in Bologna for the creation of a Europe-wide higher education system has required an extraordinary effort on the part of faculties to rethink and adapt previously courses to these new trends. This process has implied an increasing load of administrative work and thus a decrease in the time devoted to research and to the preparation of lectures. There is a danger, if this critical situation is not addressed, that lectures will become ever more unappealing and dull, a situation compounded by the fact that the necessary financial resources are not available for the implementation of the whole process.

We write this report at a time when the reforms are not yet completed, and the data we have used correspond mostly to the "old good days". We have included two different time-spans, the first of which (1968-1997) embraces dissertations that were written and presented prior to the influence of Bologna. The second time-span (1998-2011) covers dissertations written by researchers who in some way or other have been in contact with this new European regulation and the pragmatism of current social

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Begoña Crespo is a Senior Lecturer in English at the University of A Coruña (Spain). Her main research interests are the history of English with special emphasis on the scientific discourse and women's role as science writers. She is currently a member of the MuStE research group.

tendencies. The first report was presented in the 23rd AEDEAN conference in León (1999) and the second report has been discussed recently in a SELIM Conference held at the University of Huelva (September 29th to October 1st 2011). Here we present a comparison of findings from both reports in order to establish a general outline of the evolution of researchers' concerns within historical linguistics in English.

All the data we have used have been obtained from TESEO, the official database of doctoral dissertations presented in Spain, maintained by the Ministry of Education (www.educacion.teseo). Since the database contains a number of fields (title, author, date of public presentation, supervisor, keywords, university, summary, examining committee) for each record, searches were made by using keywords. Because our intention was to compare the evolution and number of dissertations written in English historical linguistics, the data we used as variables for the present study, and for both time-spans, were the following: date, university and linguistic period under study.

The first time-span begins in 1968, the first dissertation on the history of English having been recorded in TESEO that year. Since then a total of 77 dissertations have been presented in Spain. Of these, 40 correspond to the first period (1968-1997) and the remaining 37 were presented between 1998 and June 2011. The distribution over time for both periods is displayed in Graphs 1 and 2 below. Both graphs show irregular progressions. However, there are deeper valleys and steeper peaks in Graph 1, corresponding to the first period, than in Graph 2, which is slightly more balanced.

For the sake of thoroughness, and to make a more meaningful comparison possible, we have normalized these raw figures: the first period runs over 29 years and the second only 13 years. Normalisation indicates that the 37 dissertations presented between 1998 and 2011 would in fact be equivalent to 82.53 had both periods covered the same number of years. This seems to indicate a growing interest in the field in recent years.
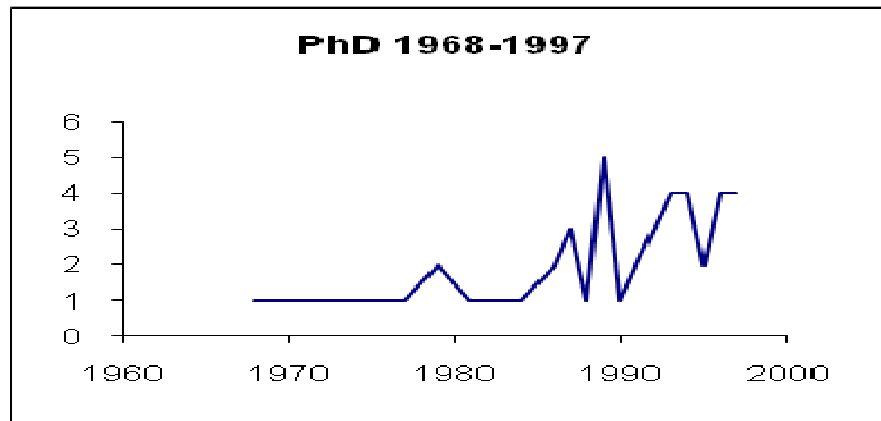
Graph 1. PhD 1968-1997
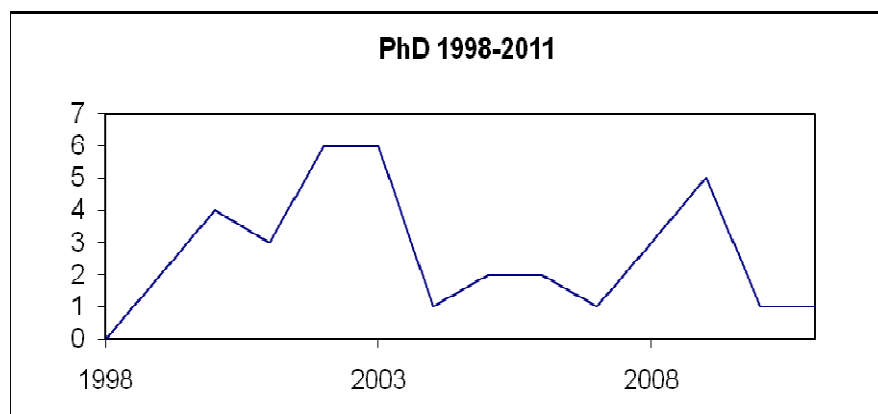
Graph 2. PhD 1998-2011

The second variable we have investigated refers to the specific universities involved in supervision and public presentations. Our data reveal that there has been an increase in the number of universities involved as well as a change in geographical distribution.

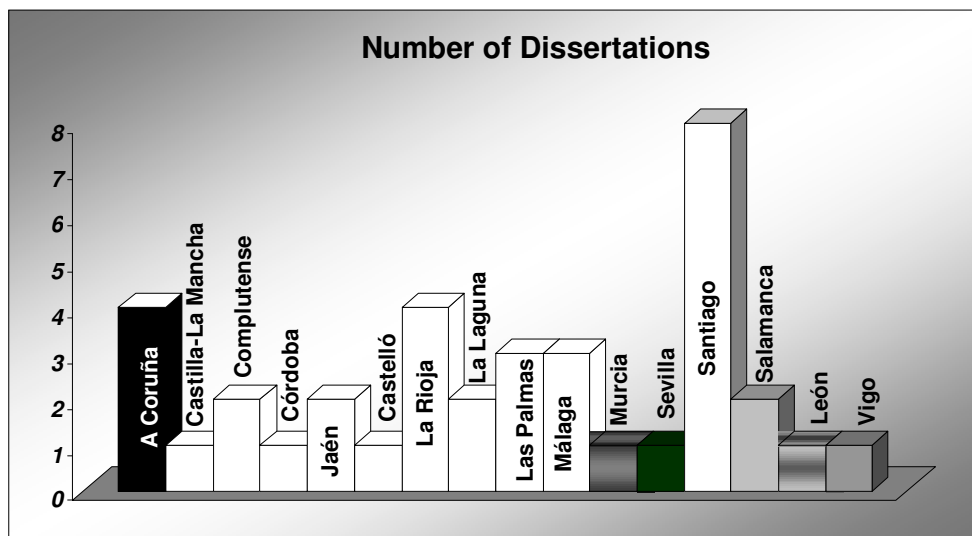| 1968-1997	1998-2011
	A Coruña
Barcelona	
	Castilla-La Mancha
Complutense	Complutense
Granada	
	Córdoba
Jaén	Jaén
	Jaume I Castelló
	La Rioja
La Laguna	La Laguna
	Las Palmas
León	León
Málaga	Málaga
Murcia	Murcia
Oviedo	
Salamanca	Salamanca
Santiago	Santiago
Sevilla	Sevilla
Valencia	
	Vigo
Zaragoza	

Table 1. Geographical distribution.

48

The initial 14 institutions have increased to 16 in the more recent period. Though this seems only slight, we must take into account that a number of traditional universities have withdrawn from the field (Barcelona, Granada, Oviedo, Valencia and Zaragoza) whereas others, some more recently founded institutions, either continue or have emerged. This is the case with A Coruña, Castilla-La Mancha, Córdoba, Jaume I Castelló, La Rioja, Las Palmas and Vigo.

As regards the intensity of academic activity, there is notable variation. In the first period, the Universidad Complutense de Madrid stood out with 8 dissertations presented, followed by Santiago de Compostela (5), Málaga and Oviedo (4) and La Laguna and Sevilla (3), as illustrated in Graph 3:
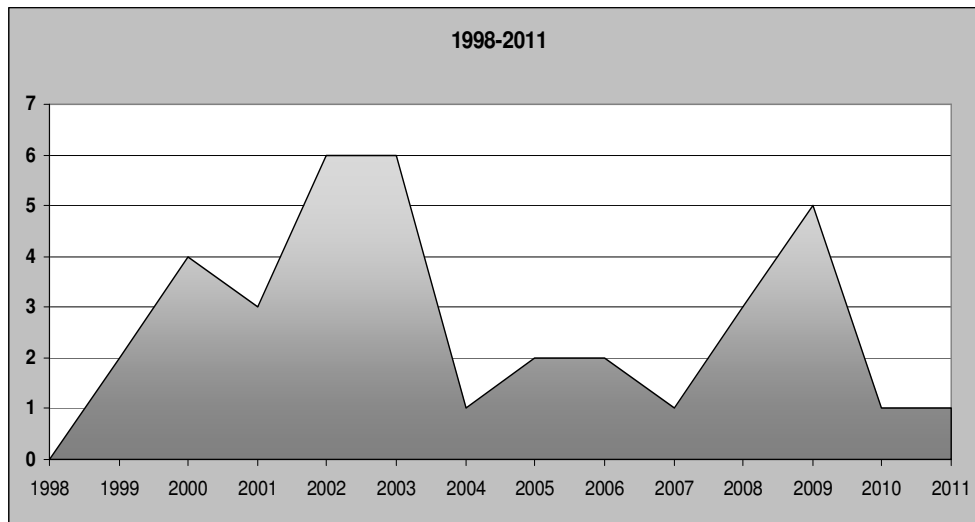
Graph 3. Universities involved in PhD presentations (1968-1997)

The data for the second period sheds new light not only on the geographical distribution of the institutions but also on the research efforts made by the newest universities. Although Santiago de Compostela, which had also appeared in the previous period, stands out with 8 theses, it is worth noting that much younger and much smaller Universities such as A Coruña and La Rioja occupy joint second position in this ranking. Las Palmas and Málaga follow with 3 thesis each (see Graph 4 below). A possible explanation may lay in the fact that some of the researchers obtaining doctoral degrees in more traditional institutions during the first period were employed as faculty in the new ones during the second period, and made efforts to nurture further research around them.

Number of Dissertations

Graph 4. Universities involved in PhD presentations (1998-2011)

In terms of the historical periods studied, there seems to be a tendency to change from OE in 1968-1997 to ME in 1998-2011. Similarly, a preference for diachronic studies in the early years has been superseded by a concentration on particular synchronic slices in more recent times. Modifications in the syllabi and the contents of new degrees, as noted above, may have had an impact on the choice of period for research. Students do not feel confident with older stages of the language, and the less they study old English in their degrees the less they choose OE as their research topic, and thus are more likely to favour more modern periods.

By way of conclusion, we might say that there is a dramatic increase in the number of dissertations that have been presented in Spanish universities. There is no way we can measure those now in progress, since although these might reflect interesting tendencies, they do not yet constitute comparable data. We have also seen that the new geographical distribution reflects, in the first place, the political decision of the 80s to decentralise old institutions and, as a consequence, the opportunities that this policy of decentralisation opened up for young lecturers to promote research in the field. Although a strict linear progression cannot be seen, in some cases this is not for academic reasons but due to circumstances beyond a researcher's control.

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Yrjö Jylhä: Two Poems[4]

Translated from the Finnish by **Henri Kauhanen**
University of Helsinki, Finland[5]

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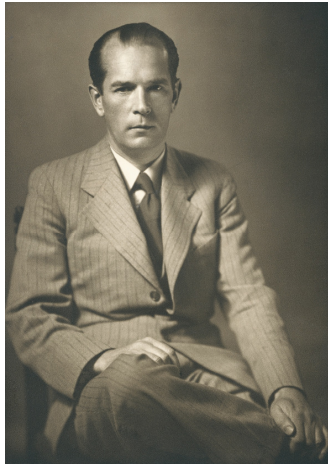
The Finnish poet Yrjö Jylhä (1903–1956) is perhaps best known as a war poet, his depictions of the Finnish–Russian War in *Kiirastuli* ("Purgatory", 1941) having become a staple of the Finnish lyrical canon. Yet much of Jylhä's early, 1930s poetry, already evinces his peculiar tendency towards the dark, towards the inexplicable, towards despair. In this respect, his voice was rather a unique one among the other *Tulenkantajat* or Fire Bearers, an early twentieth-century group of modernist, forward-looking Finnish writers of which Jylhä was a member from the beginning. A translator of Milton and of many of Shakespeare's tragedies, Jylhä certainly had the poetic means necessary for treating his often melancholy, even morbid subjects.

The two poems translated here first appeared in the collection *Risti lumessa* ("Cross in the Snow"), published in 1937 by Otava in Helsinki. Both poems are typical Jylhä in their reliance on traditional formal devices – here, as in virtually all of Jylhä's poetry, it is the form that drives (and, sometimes, almost subordinates) the content, not the other way round. Also notable is Jylhä's heavy use of parataxis and of concise, syntactically simple sentences.

In translating the two pieces I have chosen two different strategies. In "Song on Foreign Land" (*Laulu vieraalla rannalla*) I have retained the original metre and rhyme scheme as far as possible, even at the expense of a slight shift of meaning in a couple of points. In "Aspen" (*Haapa*), on the other hand, I have waived the original metre in favour of something more congenial to English. I hope that the resulting free verse poem remains truthful to its original yet is also strong enough to stand as an independent piece of poetry.

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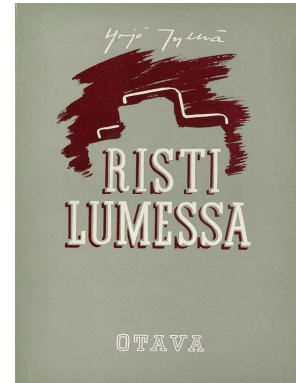
[4]   Original texts printed with permission from the copyright holders (by arrangement with the translator).

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Laulu vieraalla rannalla	**Song on Foreign Land**
He soutivat myrskyn myötä *päin ulapan usvaa ja yötä* *pois rannoilta synnyinmaan.*	They rowed at the tempest's will toward the open, and midnight still, away from their native place.
Sous venheessä neljä miestä; *he antoivat vetten piestä* *vihansynkeitä kasvojaan.*	Each one of the crew, each wight, would let the wet water smite an anger-stricken face.
He olivat närkästyneitä: *oli huonosti ruokkinut heitä* *maa häipyvä hyrskyyn veen.*	Annoyed they were, and anguished: poorly had they been nourished by the land that behind them flickered.
He olivat kuulleet maasta *ylen vauraasta, onnekkaasta,* *ja he nousivat venheeseen.*	Having heard of another coast, affluent, happy for the most, they boarded their boat, inspired.
He soutivat hammasta purren *vain henkensä menoa surren* *ja kiroten synnyinmaan.*	Gnashing their teeth, they toiled; at the thought of their deaths recoiled; and cursed their native land.
Jo sarasti valju aamu; *yön usvasta niinkuin haamu* *nous kallio häämöttäin.*	Soon dawnèd a hueless morn; in the fog like a ghost forlorn a rock there rose from a crack.
Maan äärellä alastomalla, *niin kolean taivaan alla* *he katsoivat taaksepäin.*	Thus standing on naked ground, and being by a cold sky bound, they cast their views aback.
Vesi roiskui kasvoja piesten, *mut huulilta jäyhäin miesten* *soi laulu synnyinmaan.*	Wet water those faces smote. The crew of the landed boat sang the song of their native land.

Haapa

Sun värisevät lehtesi, mut sydämes on tyyni,
ei ytimeesi kylmä käy, ei järkytä sua tuuli;
mun sydämeni värisee, mut värähdä ei huuli,
niin vapisen kuin syyllinen, mut salata voin syyni.

Juot lämpöä sä mullasta, sen voiman imet mahlaan,
jos myrsky sulta oksan lyö, ei juurias se raasta;
ei mulla ole juuria, ne reväisty on maasta,
ja vilu mull' on ikuinen, suon liejussa kun kahlaan.

Syys lehvillesi verta tuo ja kultapisaroita,
sun kevättoivees kypsymään jää kinoksiin maan marron;
mun syksyni on loistoton, vain talvea ma varron,
ei sula lumi talven sen, ei siitä kevät koita.

Aspen

Although your leaves do quiver, your heart lies calm.
Your pith won't catch a cold, a wind shall not upset you.

My heart quivers; my lip, however, is stiff. I shiver
like one that's guilty but can hide his guilt.

Sucking the soil's warmth, you turn its potence into sap.
A storm may chop a bough; your root remains intact.

I have no roots, they have been ripped off the ground.
I, wading in a marsh, in sludge, am ever cold-afflicted.

On your foliage autumn sprinkles drops of blood and gold.
Your vernal promise ripens under wasting snows.

My autumn knows no lustre, knows no glee. I await a winter
whose snowfields will not melt, will not produce a spring.