Arthur S. Abramson

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Arthur S. Abramson, editor of *Language and Speech* from 1975 to 1987, died on 15 December 2017, at the age of 92. He was a central figure in the study of the phonetic realizations of linguistic distinctions of tone, voicing, voice quality, and duration. His seminal work with Leigh Lisker on the metric, voice onset time (VOT) (Lisker & Abramson, 1964), has become perhaps the most extensively used measure in phonetics. He contributed to his profession in many ways beyond his research, serving as the first chair of the Linguistics Department of the University of Connecticut, president (and other roles) of the Linguistic Society of America, and a researcher and Board member of Haskins Laboratories.

In the early 1950s, while still a graduate student in linguistics at Columbia University, New York, Arthur mentioned to colleagues and people at the Department of State that he was very interested in Southeast Asian languages and culture. He was recommended to apply for a Fulbright teaching grant, which he received. Arthur spent 1953–1955 teaching English in Thailand, beginning in the south (Songkhla), and later moving to Bangkok. This experience started a decades-long relationship with the language and people of Thailand. He defended his PhD dissertation on Thai vowels and tones in 1960, which was published two years later (Abramson, 1962).

Arthur met Leigh Lisker at Haskins Laboratories and was attracted to his way of thinking. They were the only Army veterans at Haskins Laboratories, and as they talked and shared meals they began to establish a long-standing collaboration investigating the acoustic characteristics of consonant voicing. In an early paper, Liberman, Harris, Kinney, and Lane (1961) showed that the first formant (F1) cutback, or relative onset of F1 relative to the second formant, provided a cue for differentiating /d/ from /t/, but Arthur and Leigh believed that the issue deserved further study. Beginning with oral presentations in the early 1960s and culminating in a widely-cited paper, Lisker and Abramson (1964) established that VOT (the relative phasing of stop consonant release and the onset of vocal fold vibration) effectively differentiated stops in voicing and in aspiration. With other Haskins Laboratories colleagues, Lisker and Abramson also developed innovative physiological measures of laryngeal function, including direct observation of the larynx (Sawashima, Abramson, Cooper, & Lisker, 1970), filming the larynx at high speeds (for the time) (Cooper, Sawashima, Abramson, & Lisker, 1971), and using a light source in the pharynx and a

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photodetector below the glottis, a technique dubbed "transillumination" (Lisker, Abramson, Cooper, & Schvey, 1969).

Arthur also continued to study aspects of Thai, including tones (Abramson, 1997), vowel length (Abramson & Ren, 1990), and the characterization of final stops (Abramson, 1972). In addition, he studied lesser known languages of Thailand, which often exhibited unusual phonological contrasts. While many languages distinguish geminate from singleton stops, very few do so for voiceless stops in the utterance initial position; Arthur found that Pattani Malay does, distinguishing singletons from geminates in amplitude and fundamental frequency rather than in duration (Abramson, 1986, 1991, 1999). He also studied Suai, finding that voice quality distinctions are in the process of becoming length distinctions (Abramson, Luangthongkum, & Nye, 2004), while those in Mon were more stable (Abramson, Tiede, & Luangthongkum, 2015). He reported an extremely rare aspiration distinction among fricatives in Sgaw Karen (Abramson, 1995). In his research program on Southeast Asian languages, Arthur combined studies of acoustics, physiology, and perception; this combination led to substantial and solid results.

Arthur was a presence for nearly five decades at Haskins Laboratories, as recounted in his oral history (Abramson, 2013). He was an active and thoughtful participant in discussions following talks at Haskins Laboratories, no matter what the topic; the range of his knowledge was always impressive. He will be remembered for his kindness, good humor, and willingness to share his expertise. He is very much missed by his colleagues and friends at Haskins Laboratories.

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