

Preface

This *Festschrift* is meant as a celebration of John Nerbonne's career as a researcher. Two things immediately stand out. The first is the weight of this book, which is caused by the large number of contributions by an even greater number of people. More than 65 researchers have contributed to this impressive collection of scientific papers. This exemplifies not only John's productive career in which he has published extensively, and often with colleagues from different universities, but also his open, friendly and constructive approach to others. The second thing standing out is the great variation in terms of content of the contributions, ranging from semantics to dialectology. While in the last two decades John has focused primarily on his dialectometric work – thereby founding the approach which is known in the rest of the world as the “Groningen School of Dialectometry” – he is highly knowledgeable and has published in a large number of areas within Computer Science and Computational Linguistics.

When John Nerbonne came to Groningen in 1993 as the new professor in Alfa-informatica (see Figure 1), the Alfa-informatica department consisted of two temporary lecturers in computational linguistics (Gosse Bouma and Gertjan van Noord), one historian (George Welling), and one researcher (Harry Gaylord) with a background in biblical studies and an interest in digital texts. Alfa-informatica, often referred to as “Humanities Computing” in English, can be seen as a kind of Digital Humanities *avant la lettre*. Under Nerbonne's guidance, the department maintained an interest in the various aspects of Humanities Computing, in particular in computational linguistics.

Through the years, John has been much more than just the head of the Alfa-informatica department. Being an engineer with a background in industry, he was initially seen by many in the Faculty of Arts as somewhat of an outsider. This changed quickly, however, as John was always keen on establishing contacts with others both within and outside the Faculty of Arts. He was director of the Center for Language and Cognition Groningen (CLCG) for several years, thus positioning computational linguistics as one of the key themes of linguistics research in Groningen. He was also immensely important as teacher, especially of many statistics courses, for a range of programs at both the BA and MA level.

The current state of the Alfa-informatica study programme and the computational linguistics research group makes it easy to forget that, for a long time, Alfa-informatica attracted only a modest numbers of students, thus putting staff under constant pressure to find new teaching and funding opportunities. One of the results of this is that the department has merged recently with Communication Science to become the Communication and Information Science department. At the same time, student



Figure 1: Dutch newspaper article about John Nerbonne's appointment as professor in Groningen (*Nieuwsblad van het Noorden*, Friday May 8, 1992, p. 13).

numbers began to rise, which has led to the unprecedented situation that new staff members needed to be recruited for several years in a row.

Under Nerbonne's leadership, computational linguistics flourished enormously in Groningen. The computational linguistics group now consists of an astonishing number of twelve (!) staff members, including three professors. One important aspect of his leadership which helped in establishing Groningen as a hot spot for computational linguistics was his capability to identify opportunities. The following examples illustrate this.

It must have been around 1998 when Nerbonne suggested to van Noord that he should apply for a Dutch NWO Pionier grant. In order to prepare better for such a grant proposal, a successful grant proposal of a previous year was somehow obtained. Van Noord vividly remembers the enormously impressive list of publications of previous year's applicant, and his sincere conviction that he, van Noord, had absolutely no chance whatsoever to get that funding. Nerbonne convinced him to try anyway – and less than two years later the Pionier grant (over 2 million Dutch guilders which paid for four PhD positions and two post-doc positions) landed in Nerbonne's group.

JOHN AS SUPERVISOR

The first time I came into contact with John Nerbonne was when following his course on Machine Learning in 2005. As John was a very open and knowledgeable teacher, I was very glad that he accepted to be my Master thesis supervisor and two years later to be my PhD thesis supervisor. During the period of four years as John's PhD student, I came to know him as someone whose office door is always open.¹ We did not have many formal meetings, but given his open-door-policy this was also entirely unnecessary. Only when talking to PhD students at other departments, I learned that his policy was a (very positive) exception rather than the rule. I remember John as a supervisor who was able to bring out the best in you. He had several approaches for this. Frequently, he knew just how to ask the right questions to get you (back) on track. That he knew which questions to ask is in no small part due to his extensive knowledge about our field, but also many other fields. I was always impressed by his inevitable intelligent questions when attending a guest lecture of someone in a completely different field. Another approach John employed to bring out the best in you, was for example stimulating scientific creativity and productivity by casually remarking that there might be an interesting workshop in Singapore or some other exotic place, but that the deadline for submitting an eight-page paper was already in two weeks. Or he simply suggested attending a workshop of a visiting scientist who did not exactly work in our field, but he thought would be useful for my development. That this person eventually became my second promotor is in no small part due to John. What I remember most, however, is his advice to PhD students: "Work hard, play hard!" We all know that life in academia requires a lot of effort, but it's important not to forget that there should also be room for a personal life outside of the university. It's a mantra I still try to live by today. I would not have been where I am today without John. I am grateful that I had the opportunity to work with him, and hope we will continue collaborating for many years to come.

¹Generally from about 7.30 AM to about 7.30 PM.

Several years later, the Executive Board (*College van Bestuur*) of the university initiated an "Endowed Chair" programme. The university made available extra funding for an Endowed Chair professorship – together with funding for PhD students and postdocs – for each faculty, for which an international top researcher ("a potential winner of the Dutch NWO Spinoza prize") could be convinced to come work in Groningen. Again, Nerbonne saw opportunities that most of his close colleagues did not see. As a result, a few years later Alfa-informatica alumnus Johan Bos was appointed Endowed Chair at the Faculty of Arts!

John Nerbonne was also very successful as a supervisor of PhD students. He managed to supervise more than 40 successful PhD projects – in itself already an enormous achievement. In the inset, Martijn Wieling reports on his memories of John Nerbonne in the role of PhD supervisor. Nerbonne was quite successful in super-

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vising brilliant PhD students – but perhaps in contrast to other supervisors, he was particularly good at motivating students working on projects that – for various reasons – were not finished within the four year period normally available for a PhD. In several of these cases, Nerbonne was very insistent in motivating these students – which often were distracted by a new job to pay for their living – and simply did not allow them to give up.

Internationally, his reputation as a successful and influential researcher in computational linguistics was confirmed by his election as President of the Association for Computational Linguistics in 2002. His reputation was also recognized at the national, Dutch, level. In 2005, Nerbonne was awarded membership of the Dutch Royal Academy (KNAW), and in 2014, Nerbonne received a royal decoration (*Ridder in de Orde van de Nederlandse Leeuw*).

The papers in this volume are all written by distinguished scholars, colleagues, former colleagues and former PhD students of John Nerbonne, and in many ways reflect the breadth of his interests. Although readers with a background in almost any field of linguistics will find papers worth reading, it is hard to imagine anyone reading all of the papers with equal interest – except for one person, we hope...