

# Remembering Gordon Pask

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*Abstract* It was a rare pleasure to have known Gordon Pask. Here is a brief tribute.

I first heard about Gordon Pask in the early 1960s when I received a contract from the US Air Force to do research in computational linguistics. Rowena Swanson, who monitored our team, operated on the wonderful principle that researchers she looked after should get to know each other in order to exchange ideas and to break down disciplinary enclosures. It took me quite some time to believe that there was no hidden agenda. It just did not seem plausible that military organisation should finance Warren McCulloch's modelling of neural networks, Heinz Von Foerster's efforts to establish a constructivist epistemology, Max Black's studies of the logic of semantics, David Rothenberg's quest for unifying principles in the perception of musical patterns, my own struggles with the structure of language, and Gordon Pask's revolutionary ideas about intellectual interaction between teachers, students, and human agents in general.

It has become clear to me, 20 years later, that what these people had in common had nothing to do with weaponry and the advancement of warfare but was simply a consuming passion for clear thinking and the staunch refusal to accept unquestioned the so-called truths of traditional Western philosophy.

From my point of view, the most important of Gordon Pask's many achievements was that he did for conversation what Freud had done for sex. Borrowing from the myths of Oedipus and Electra, Freud revealed that more than two people played a role in every heterosexual act: behind the lovers always loomed the male's mother and the female's father. Gordon took a phenomenological approach to linguistic interaction and reached the fundamental insight that every conversation involves not two but four individuals: the two speakers that an observer might distinguish and, more importantly, the construct that each speaker builds up of the other.

This insight is buried in papers of a rather technical kind, which, of their nature, have a limited readership. That is unfortunate because it is something everyone should be aware of in his or her interactions with another person. We do not interact with others as they are, but only with others as we have interpreted them on the basis of what we heard them say and saw them do. When we think we grasp the meaning of their words and the intentions of their acts, we should remember that we are dealing with chancy inferences that are at best plausible but never certain.

To me it was Gordon's sovereign, unfailing awareness of this indirect relationship that made him such a loveable partner in conversation. It gave him a kind of openness and tolerance that made others feel that in interaction with him they could be truly themselves. It was a rare pleasure to have known him.