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In Memoriam



‘Nanos gigantum umeris insidentes’

Tove Skuttnabb-Kangas 6 July 1940–29 May 2023

There is no better way to summarise Tove Skuttnabb-Kangas' impact on so many of us than Bernard de Chartres' 12th Century metaphor, known in English as to 'stand on the shoulders of giants'. To say that Tove was a Finnish linguist and educator is far too reductionist: her work, influence and contributions covered so much more. She was one of the 20th and 21st Centuries great intellectuals, an advocate and activist on linguistic rights, the rights of minorities and indigenous peoples, as well as those of users of Sign Languages. Her work has allowed many to raise the intellectual and scientific bars not only in our knowledge in fields such as linguistics and education, but also linguistic and cultural diversity, human rights and conflict prevention, amongst many others. She was not only a giant – despite her diminutive size – but a true hero and champion for the vulnerable and marginalised in many parts of the world. Many would attest to how formidable and unrelenting – but also fearless and even intimidating – which she was for the causes she espoused and defended until the very end those most unable to defend themselves. Tove was also, in the words of one testimonial after her death, 'always faultlessly kind, selflessly empathetic and unpretentiously hospitable and generous in mind and spirit.'

Tove Anita Skuttnabb-Kangas was born in Helsinki, Finland in 1940. Her mother tongues, as she always insisted, were both Finnish and Swedish, and this early insistence that she had more than one mother-tongue already showed her refusal to bow to facile and often inaccurate mainstream views on language and in linguistics. After an early career in teaching and work in the United States and Finland, she started to conduct research and publish on bilingualism. The last three decades of her university academic career were mainly spent at Roskilde University in Denmark where she taught from 1995

to 2000, became a guest researcher from 1979 to 2007, and where she remained emeritus until her death.

Tove and her husband and partner in the joys and tragedies of life, research and academia, Robert Phillipson, often worked together. Linguists and sociolinguists remember her, amongst others, for her development of the concept of 'linguicism' to refer to the 'ideologies, structures and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate, regulate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and immaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of language'. In other work, Tove and Robert were often both trailblazers and at the forefront of research which was instrumental in the world's growing understanding that linguistic rights were also human rights, and that speakers or users of minority languages, indigenous languages and sign languages were entitled to justice and equality. Her deep understanding that ultimately 'language is power' also gave her a deep appreciation that in many States there is often direct or indirect language discrimination, both ideologically and structurally, which serve to oppress or even suppress the languages minorities, indigenous peoples and users of sign languages.

She and Robert's research and writing paved the way to a better understanding of how there can be no peace without justice, including in relation to linguistic justice. Discrimination because of language preferences by State authorities, including through the refusal to recognise or accommodate linguistic diversity of minority and indigenous communities inside a country, needed to be addressed to ensure peace through the reduction of social injustices.

Tove did not content herself with living in the ivory tower and the safe and comfortable walls of academia. Until the very end she was active and supportive of minority and indigenous communities, including especially in Asia and Africa, and was well known for helping young and aspiring academics, activists and advocates around the world. She and Robert often tried to ensure their work was accessible to those which Western and mainstream publishers too often tended to disregard or not respond to.

Tove Anita Skutnabb-Kangas passed away suddenly in Lund, Sweden on 29 May 2023, at the age of 82. But that is not the end.

One testimonial reminds us that 'she will forever be remembered as a fierce advocate of the wretched of the earth and a prophetic voice against injustice and suffering. This is the legacy and vision she has bequeathed us, a formidable responsibility for those who still have faith in and care about justice, beauty, and conviviality.'

Tove was a giant and a fighter. She has showed the intellectual and practical paths forward for peace and equality through linguistic human rights for all, and will continue to do so for many years to come. She will always remain

a giant who brought understanding and hope in the beauty and wisdom she shared with us about language and linguistic diversity – and how these can be embraced rather than feared.

Her ideas and insights will always inspire – and be – with us.

Fernand de Varennes

United Nations Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues