

Adam Kilgarriff

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A long time ago now (maybe 1988?), Gerald (Gazdar) and I supervised Adam's DPhil at the University of Sussex. Adam was my age, give or take a year, having come to academia a little late, and was my first doctoral student. Adam's topic was polysemy, and I'm not really sure that much supervision was actually required, though I recall fun exchanges trying to model the subtleties of word meaning using symbolic knowledge representation techniques—an experience that was clearly enough to convince Adam later that this was a bad idea. In fact, Adam's thesis title itself was *Polysemy*. Much as we encourage short thesis titles, pulling off the one-word title is a tall order, requiring a unique combination of focus and coverage, breadth and depth, and, most of all, authority. Adam completely nailed it, at least from the perspective of the pre-empirical Computational Linguistics of the early 1990s.

Three years later, after a spell working for dictionary publishers, Adam joined me as a research fellow, now at the University of Brighton. I had a project to explore the automatic enrichment of lexical databases to support the latest trends in language analysis, and, in particular, task-specific lexical resources. I was really pleased and excited to recruit Adam—he had lost none of his intellectual independence, a quality I particularly valued. Within a few weeks he came to me with his own plan for the research—a “detour,” as he put it, from the original workplan. I still have the e-mail, dated 6 April 1995, in which he proposed that, instead of chasing a prescriptive notion of a single lexical resource that needed to be customized to each domain, we should let the domain determine the lexicon, providing lexicographic tools to explore words, and particularly word senses, that were significant for that domain. In that e-mail, Computational Lexicography at Brighton was born.

Over the next eight years or so, Computational Lexicography became a key part of our group's success, increasingly under Adam's direct leadership. The key project, WASPS, developed the WASPbench—the direct precursor of the Sketch Engine, recruiting David (Tugwell) to the team. In addition, Adam was one of the founding organizers of SENSEVAL, an initiative to bring international teams of researchers together to work in friendly competition on a pre-determined word sense disambiguation task (and which has now transformed into SEMEVAL). Together we secured funding to support the first two rounds of SENSEVAL; each round required the preparation of standardized data sets, guided by Adam's highly tuned intuitions about lexical data preparation and management. And we engaged somewhat in the European funding merry-go-round, most fondly in the CONCEDE project, working on dictionaries for Central European languages with amazing teams from the MULTTEXT-EAST consortium, and with Georgian and German colleagues in the GREG project.

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But Adam was not entirely comfortable in academia, or at least not in a version of academia that didn't share his drive for the practical as well as the theoretical. He didn't have tenure, nor any clear route to achieve tenure, which meant that he could not apply for and hold grants in his own right (although he freely admitted he was happy not to have the associated administrative responsibilities); he set up a high quality masters program in Computational Lexicography, which ran for a couple of years, but the funding model didn't really work, and it quickly evolved into the highly successful, but independent, Lexicom workshop series, still running today; and he couldn't engage university support for developing the WASPbench as a commercial product. So in 2003, he spread his wings, left the university, and set up Lexical Computing Ltd.

For many people, Lexical Computing and the Sketch Engine are what Adam is best known for. He spent eleven years tirelessly developing the company, the software, the methodology, the resources, the discipline. It was an environment in which he seemed completely at ease, sometimes the shameless promoter of his wares, sometimes the astute academic authority, often the source of practical solutions to real problems, and the instigator of new initiatives, and always the generous facilitator, educator, and friend. For me personally, though, this was a time when our friendship was more prominent than our professional relationship. We would meet for the odd drink, usually in the Constant Service pub (Adam's favorite), and chat about life, family, sometimes work, and occasional schemes for new collaborations, though the company didn't leave him very much time for that. It was one of those relaxed, undemanding friendships that just picks up whenever and wherever we find the time to meet, but remains strong nevertheless.

Adam's illness was as unexpected to him as to anyone. Over the summer of 2014, he was making plans for new directions and projects. And then, there was a brief hiatus in communication before we heard the news in early November. And yet, even then, he seemed reconciled—not resigned, but resolved, calm, dignified. I was upset, angry, helpless—useless really, and feeling very selfish in my distress. I saw Adam three times after he became ill and they are all good, strong memories, and that is more to his credit than mine.

The first was in his kitchen, with early spring sunshine, drinking strong coffee he had made very meticulously, watching the winter birds scavenging in the garden, just chatting about nothing in particular, and gossiping about work for a couple of hours. The second was a surprise trip to the pub—the surprise being that Adam was strong enough to get there (and back) on his own, and drink a couple of pints, too. We went to the Constant Service, as always, and it was one of our occasional “NLP group” outings, so a good crowd was there. The third was back in his kitchen, this time for work a few weeks later. Ironically, the university system that struggled to engage with Adam's practical drive is now fully signed up to demonstrating the “impact” of its research. Adam's work on Computational Lexicography at Brighton and afterwards through Lexical Computing, featured as an “Impact Case Study” in recent national evaluations, has subsequently been selected for a wider national initiative showcasing UK Computer Science research, currently in development¹. Adam was happy to cooperate with this, in part to alleviate boredom, and we arranged a Skype call with a technical author for the initiative from his kitchen. Adam was in excellent form describing his work, his passion, and still full of ideas for gentle academic engagement if his “retirement” would allow it.

1 <http://cs-academic-impact.uk>.

Shortly after that meeting we heard the news of Adam's relapse and decision not to continue treatment. Like everyone else, I followed his blog, and also emailed a little privately. I arranged to go and visit again, but Adam wasn't well enough so we cancelled. Like everyone else, I waited for the inevitable blog post.

Adam's funeral was in a modest church in the village of Rottingdean just along the coast from Brighton. A beautiful setting and a sunny afternoon. The church was absolutely packed—standing room only—we estimate about 250 people; family, friends, and colleagues from far and wide. A committed atheist, the service focused on fond memories of Adam from those closest to him, with just one hymn, *Immortal Invisible*, as all his blog readers will understand. A beautiful and fitting farewell to a man who, it seems, was to everyone a friend first, and a colleague, boss, or antagonist, second.

There have been many comments on Adam's blog, on twitter, in academic forums, which say much more and so much better than I can. Some have said that Adam will be remembered for the Sketch Engine and the amazing data resources that have been built up around it. I would say that his real legacy is much more deeply intellectual than that. Adam would probably smile with satisfaction that the two things can coexist so comfortably—a rare combination of the intellectual and practitioner, a real giant of the field.

Rest now in peace, Adam.

Roger

Brighton, June 2015