

Biography of Paul Kiparsky

Born in Helsinki on January 28, 1941, René Paul Victor Kiparsky is a scion of a long line of scholars, not least his parents Dagmar (née Jaatinen) and Valentin Kiparsky. His great-grandfather Valentin Ludwig Kiparsky wrote a dissertation on plastic surgery in 1864, at a time of academic renaissance at Tartu University and the emergence of Estonian nationalism. Paul's grandfather, René Valentinovich Kiparsky (1867–1938), was a distinguished gynecologist in St. Petersburg who developed several innovative surgeries and wrote a standard text with Dmitri Ott, head of the research institute that now bears his name (Ott 1914).¹ Paul's father, Valentin Julius Alexander Kiparsky (1904–1983), is best known among linguists for his book on Russian accent and his three-volume historical grammar of Russian (V. Kiparsky 1962, 1963–1975). Equally important, in a long career devoted to Russian and the Baltic linguistic area, are his many detailed studies of linguistic contact and diffusion, including a dissertation on prehistoric Germanic-Slavic contact and monographs on topics ranging from the loan vocabulary of Baltic German to the history of terms for the walrus (V. Kiparsky 1934, 1936, 1952). Valentin Kiparsky is indeed still cited for his early statement, in 1938, that a language's receptiveness to borrowing depends as much on social factors as it does on facts about linguistic structure. It is relevant to add that when he joined the University of Helsinki faculty in the same year, he introduced modern phonology (Prague School structuralism) to Finland.

Paul Kiparsky's career continues the family tradition. After studying at Alabama College and the Universities of Helsinki and Minnesota, Kiparsky received his PhD in 1965 from MIT. For two decades he taught at MIT, and since 1984 he has taught at Stanford University, where he is Bass Professor in the School of Humanities and Sciences. Among other honors he has served as Collitz Professor of the Linguistic Society of America (1973), been awarded an honorary doctorate by Göteborg University (1985) and the University of Konstanz (2008), and received the Alexander von Humboldt Prize (1993). He has directed over thirty dissertations in fields as diverse as poetics, language change, semantic and syntactic theory, and every area of phonology and morphology.

Kiparsky's work in linguistics has been wide-ranging and foundational. He has re-defined no fewer than four fields of linguistics (so far) and made major contributions to several others, notably semantics and Paninian studies. His dissertation and a series of papers mainly devoted to Greek phonology (Kiparsky 1965, 1967a, 1967c, 1967d), together with several other articles published in his second book (Kiparsky 1982a) and elsewhere, established him as the central figure in a new field of generative historical linguistics—the analysis of sound change and analogy in the grammatical terms of generative linguistics. More recent papers such as his survey of phonological change and several radical reanalyses of morphological changes in Gothic and Latin (Kiparsky 1995, 1998, 2000a, 2000b) show that he continues to be as much a leader in this field as ever.

His work throughout the 1960s on phonological and morphological change led Kiparsky to assess the relationship between phonology and morphology more broadly, and the result of his and others' research in this area was the field of lexical phonology as it arose in the 1970s and 1980s. This field remains at the center of linguistic theory, and the questions it poses are urgent for linguists of all theoretical persuasions; still among its foundational texts are a series of papers by Kiparsky (1982b, 1982c, 1982d, 1984, 1985).

At the same time, starting with a classic treatment of Indo-European modality (Kiparsky 1968), Kiparsky has set a new standard in the field of historical syntax. He continues this line of research unabated, in the last decade through a dazzling set of studies tracing the evolution of Indo-European word order structures in Germanic and English and in the history of Greek (Kiparsky 1994, 1996c, 1997c; Condoravdi and Kiparsky 2001). Finally, Kiparsky created and still defines the modern linguistically informed analysis of poetics and poetic meter. His earliest work in this vein was a study of Finnish meter, to which he has recently returned (Kiparsky 1967d; Hanson and Kiparsky 1996); other major contributions appear in classic volumes on oral poetry and on the linguistics of meter (Kiparsky 1976, 1989).

Kiparsky's students and friends will agree that in accomplishment and breadth of interest he is the truest successor to his teacher Roman Jakobson, whose paraphrase of Terence equally defines Paul Kiparsky's own career: *Linguista est; linguistici nihil a se alienum putat.*

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Note

1. See Ol'shanets'kyi 1950, 103–104. I am grateful to Boris Maslov for archival research in St. Petersburg and to Lisa Conathan, Cleo Condoravdi, and Leslie Kurke for discussion and other information.