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Leigh Lisker (1918–2006)

Leigh Lisker, Fellow of the Acoustical Society of America, Professor Emeritus at the University of Pennsylvania, and Scientist at Haskins Laboratories, died on March 24, 2006, at age 87. Born 17 December 1918 in Philadelphia, PA, he received all of his higher education at Penn—A bachelor's in German (1941), a master's (1946) and doctorate (1949) in Linguistics. Lisker's early professional activities reflected his broad linguistic skills: He served in the US Army as an interrogator, was an instructor of Russian for the military, and, with Fulbright funding, carried out work on Telugu and Tamil.

In 1951, Lisker was appointed to the Penn faculty, with a joint appointment in Linguistics and Dravidian Languages. He continued in the Linguistics department until his retirement in 1989. In 1953, Lisker joined Haskins Laboratories, collaborating with Alvin Liberman, Franklin Cooper, Pierre Delattre, and others who were using the Pattern Playback synthesizer to investigate questions in speech perception. He also began a life-long investigation of laryngeal distinctions in consonants. A cornerstone of this work was Lisker and Abramson's "A cross-language study of voicing in initial stops: Acoustical measurements." This paper demonstrated the utility of voice onset time (VOT) for differentiating stop



categories in diverse languages. Subsequent studies by these authors found that VOT was also effective in cueing the perception of voicing. VOT has become the most widely-used measure of stop voicing, employed not only for cross-language work, but also in developmental and clinical studies. A special session at the 147th meeting of the Acoustical Society in New York City commemorated the 40th anniversary of Lisker and Abramson's first VOT paper.

Throughout his career, Lisker continued to study the acoustics, physiology, perception, and linguistic description of consonant voicing,

both individually and with coauthors including Abramson, Thomas Baer, and Douglas Whalen. A selected list of Lisker's publications, references to other papers on VOT, and tributes from his colleagues are available at www.haskins.yale.edu/staff/lisker/lisker.html. Along with his contributions to phonetics, Leigh Lisker will be remembered for his intellectual rigor, his wit, and his humility.

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