Remembering Rahul

30 July 2020

Dr. Rahul Balusu's untimely departure was a rude shock to all of us, and a great loss to the EFL University, and the linguistics fraternity. Rahul came to us as a student of MA in 2000, did an M Phil, and briefly went away for a PhD at NYU, and finally came back to us in 2010 as an assistant professor in the Department of Computational Linguistics. His professional accomplishments are matched by his personal virtues -- warmth, strength, good humour, and devotion marked his commitments. He was widely known as someone who chased ideas furiously where they led him, but with grace, determination, and no untoward bombast or self-promotion, but with just straightforward arguments.

Dr. Rahul Balusu, as we know, worked in and contributed to a wide spectrum of areas in Linguistics, including Phonology, Computational Linguistics, Syntax, Semantics and the Syntax-semantics interface. His dissertation at NYU was in Phonology on OCP effects in Telugu. His heart though lay in Syntax and Semantics, especially in the Interface of Syntax and Semantics, with most of the data drawn from Telugu and other Dravidian languages.

Most of us are familiar with his work in Syntax and Semantics, as is evident from his publications and presentations. However, his contribution to Computational Linguistics is much less known, particularly outside the Department and University. I read from an email from Prof. Indranil Dutta about his work at the Department:

"Rahul Balusu taught several innovative courses, ranging from introductory courses on Natural Language Processing (NLP), corpus linguistics, NLP Gems and Toolkit using Scala, and highly advanced seminars on computational semantics. In addition, with exemplary ease Dr. Balusu designed courses that balanced theoretical and practical approaches to NLP and enriched the curricular lives of MA and research students. His contributions to research and teaching in computational linguistics were pioneering yet practical and offered an unprecedented and seamless unification of theoretical insight and practical wisdom. His courses were some of the most sought after for students and scholars

alike and left an impact, the fruits of which we will benefit from for decades to come.

Dr. Rahul Balusu's contribution to understanding complex predicates and challenges they pose for natural language processing applications was extremely insightful, novel, and influential (Balusu 2012). The approach provided a comprehensive representation of these structures in the computational lexicon of various South Asian languages through three sub-events. In later work too, Dr. Balusu provided a more detailed account and treatment of verbal multiword expressions (VMWE); light-verb structures, verb-particle structures, and restructuring verbs, that added a great deal of value to their processing (Balusu 2019). In future applications, this unified model will prove to be invaluable in offering efficient, yet elegant solutions."

What marked Rahul's contribution to the field of linguistics cannot be conveyed just by his published work, his talks and presentations, but in his keenness and effort in ensuring that a new generation of linguists come up, who had first and foremost personal integrity, a fire in the belly, and a willingness to dirty their hands in muddy data. His commitment to the field was deep and unwaivering, and in this pursuit, professional and personal boundaries got obliterated. I give a few examples for this.

It was Rahul's personal initiative to invite eminent speakers to the Department. Before the workshop or the talk, Rahul would circulate some of seminal publications of the speaker, have a study group going, which would meet after office hours usually in his office room to read the papers, so that students and colleagues could get the maximum benefit out of the talk. These study groups were open for all, and Rahul would stock snacks, tea/coffee to keep us all going for hours quite often late into evenings. Another aspect of Rahul which I would to point out was the way he organized workshops and conferences – from coming up with artistic, innovative and beautifully designed posters, banners, flyers, personally taking care of the speakers, ferrying them around, eating with them, ensuring that they were comfortable.

His devotion to the field was seen in what mentoring meant to Rahul. When he saw promise in an idea or a paper in a BA/MA student, he was the first to encourage them to write it up as a paper, and to sit with the student for hours,

reading with him/her, and guiding him/her throughout the process. He went looking for conferences where the paper could best be presented and then would help the student apply for funding, book tickets, look for accommodation, and would also go to the extent of personally funding the student, in case there was no funding or the funding was delayed. Once a project interested Rahul, he would see it through till the end. The professional became personal or the personal professional, something we will never know.

Apart from being a brilliant mind, Rahul was a beautiful person, He was really one of a kind. People keenly listened to him, his questions, his suggestions, his criticisms, and he made a lasting difference—in linguistics and in the lives of his students and colleagues. We will deeply miss you, Rahul.

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