

# A Tribute to my Former Teacher

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## 1 Introduction

My first interaction with Pierre was as a student in his class on NLP given at the CS department in Lund. Prior to that I had never even heard of language processing, let alone pondered over the potential challenges. The class was exciting and different, with a high pace basically touching everything NLP-related in the lectures, a variety of labs, as well as a final programming project with both written report and an oral presentation. I recall how this stood out from many other classes I had taken in Lund and it was a lot of fun. I now realize that this ambitious setup probably implied more work than the bare minimum for Pierre, but as a student I profited considerably.

## 2 Working with Pierre

After completing Pierre's NLP class I ended up doing my master's thesis with him during spring 2009. We did the CoNLL 2009 Shared Task. It was a tight timeline with a high pace. Pierre kept asking what were the latest numbers, how is the development going. The code was a nasty combination involving C, Java, Perl, and a mess of shell scripts. In parallel, Pierre also mentioned from time to time that conference, to be held in summer, and that I should go there to present our work. I had no intention of going anywhere. Eventually we submitted our runs, the shared task closed, and we did quite alright and wrote up the paper. Later that summer I also attended that conference and presented the work. This was a rather significant moment in my life, gaining a new perspective both on the breadth of the NLP/CL community as well as what an academic career implies.

After an exciting summer of 2009 Pierre asked me to do work in a robotics project, supposedly involving NLP. I was ambivalent but unemployed after completing my degree. The reasons for my reluctance was two-fold. I had an urge to get out

of Lund, I wanted a change of environment. Second, having encountered the NLP community at that conference, I had learned that at other universities there are full groups or even departments working on language processing. Doing a PhD in such an environment was attractive. In hindsight, this makes Pierre's endeavor in Lund even more impressive – maintaining the NLP education at undergraduate and graduate level as a single faculty.

I stayed with Pierre for some time, working as developer in said robotics project, considering to apply as a PhD student, eventually opting to pursue doctoral studies elsewhere. Before leaving we managed to learn a lot about industrial robotics and published a couple of papers on the topic. During that time, Pierre also pushed me into cleaning up the CoNLL code and making it open source. Said and done, published as a separate paper. To this day, these papers remain some of my most cited.

## 3 Conclusion

As I'm writing this up, my 8-year old daughter is asking me what I'm up to. I try to explain what a Festschrift is, that I'm writing a document regarding my former teacher. Trying to explain how one person can affect the winding paths of one's life to an 8-year old is tricky. To make things a bit more tangible to her, I tell her that "If it wasn't for Pierre, mommy and I would never have met." This is a true statement involving conferences and career paths, the underlying details being outside the scope of this document. In any case, I guess it is also a way of summarizing my gratitude towards my former advisor: Dear Pierre, I am deeply grateful that our paths crossed. That you believed in me and pushed me into doing some of those things I wasn't all that enthusiastic about at the time. I never did a PhD under your supervision, but my PhD and academic career would not have been possible without you. Thank you.