

Obituary

Nicholas Evans, Nikolaus P. Himmelmann and Dejan Matić A life of polysynthesis: Hans-Jürgen Sasse (1943–2015)

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Hans-Jürgen Sasse, typologist, field linguist, pioneer of modern language documentation, master in language description and linguistic theory, expert in Cushitic, Semitic, Iroquoian, and Balkan languages, teacher, and friend, died on 14 January 2015 in Cologne after a long struggle with illness.

Born in Berlin on 30 April 1943, Hans-Jürgen was interested in language from an early age. He would tell with a twinkle in his eye how he would crib high-school exams with notes written on his arm in Devanagari script. He began

Nicholas Evans, Department of Linguistics, Australian National University, Canberra ACT 0200, Australia, E-mail: Nicholas.evans@anu.edu.au

Nikolaus P. Himmelmann, Institut für Linguistik, Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft, Universität zu Köln, 50923 Köln, E-mail: sprachwissenschaft@uni-koeln.de

Dejan Matić, Institut für Sprachwissenschaft, Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz, Merangasse 70, 8010 Graz, Austria, E-mail: dejanmatic@hotmail.com

his university education at Freie Universität Berlin in the early 1960s, reading classical philology as well as Indo-European, Semitic, and Balkan studies. Disappointed with the dated and narrow-minded views on language and grammar among classicists, he moved to Munich in 1965, where he obtained a doctoral degree in Semitic studies in 1970 (with minors in general linguistics and Indo-European and Balkan studies), with a description of an Arabic dialect (*Mhallamiye*) in south-eastern Turkey, a few miles from the Syrian border (Sasse 1971). Having been appointed assistant professor (*wissenschaftlicher Assistent*) in the Department of General and Comparative Linguistics in 1972, he finished his *Habilitation* in general linguistics in 1975, on the morphophonology of the verb in Galab, a Cushitic language spoken in south-western Ethiopia and neighbouring areas of Kenya (Sasse 1975). In 1977 he was promoted to associate professor in the same department. In 1987 he moved to Cologne to become head of the Department of General and Comparative Linguistics, succeeding Hansjakob Seiler. When he retired from this position in 2008, his friends and colleagues felt that Hans-Jürgen would regard a traditional *Festschrift* as far too stuffy; instead, an affectionately parodistic collection of tributes was presented to him, under the title *Studies on Ugabuga* (Hanske et al. (eds.) 2008).

Hans-Jürgen was a man of many talents and interests, linguistic as well as non-linguistic. He was a talented guitar player and singer, a gripping performer of various styles of folk music, especially the blues that he loved so much. He could also sketch in various styles, his caricatures and portraits easily matching those of professionals. And he was a master of mimicry, performing astonishingly accurate impersonations with regard not just to tone of voice and speaking style, but also to gesture, bodily posture, and facial expression. These mimetic gifts were of great use in his chosen profession of linguist and venturer into many cultures. He had a native-like command of about half a dozen languages and could produce examples from the many languages he worked on with a native-like pronunciation.

Hans-Jürgen's linguistic talents and interests were also of a diversity and breadth rarely found in the field. He was a descriptive and historical linguist: we owe him detailed descriptions of a number of previously unknown linguistic varieties around the globe, a reconstruction of many aspects of Proto-Cushitic phonology and morphology, and one of the first etymological dictionaries of an African language. At the same time, he was a gifted typologist and theoretical linguist, whose interests ranged across areal linguistics, discourse prominence, theticity, word classes, aspect, and the mutual adaptation of lexical and grammatical structure. A self-acknowledged morpheme addict, he had a special weakness for morphologically complex linguistic systems, and a language without complex verb morphology could never fully catch his interest.

Hans-Jürgen's contributions to linguistics are so many and so diverse that it is not possible to review them all in the confines of this obituary. We will therefore limit ourselves to highlighting some of those we are most familiar with. But given the diversity of his contributions, it bears emphasizing that all evince one core characteristic: they are without exception of the highest quality, combining philological expertise and meticulous attention to empirical detail with complex but clear theoretical argumentation and elegant, easy-to-follow exposition.

As a student, Hans-Jürgen spent a year in Greece in 1965–66, where he came into contact with Arvanitika, the language of the descendants of Albanian migrants who had settled in Greece between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. When he started working on Arvanitika, the language was already well on its way into obsolescence, a rapid decline in usage having started in the second half of the nineteenth century, after centuries of “friendly” coexistence with the Greek varieties surrounding the Arvanitic territory. He told of one of his collaborators recounting a day when their father, a terrifying patriarch, came into the kitchen one morning with a long knife and told the family that, from that day on, none was to speak Arvanitika in the home or he would personally cut off their tongue. Providing a full documentation of the remainders of these varieties became one of his major linguistic projects. In 1991 he published the first volume of *Arvanitika: Die albanischen Sprachreste in Griechenland* (Sasse 1991), a work planned to consist of four volumes altogether. Unfortunately, his early death prevented him from completing this task, to which he had returned with great zest and pleasure in his final years despite his severe fight with cancer.

The work on Arvanitika was the starting point for his life-long interest in language contact and language endangerment. His major theoretical concern here was to distinguish clearly between the linguistic changes brought about by (intensive long-term) language contact and the ones caused by language obsolescence, strongly arguing against the then still widespread idea that contact necessarily leads to decay. Arvanitika was an excellent example of this. Centuries of close contact with Greek had brought a large number of changes, with Arvanitika clearly diverging in its development from related southern Albanian varieties and converging with Greek. But it still was a fully functional and vital language in many areas at the end of the nineteenth century. The process of language obsolescence and death occurring in the twentieth century, on the other hand, was mostly characterized by changes of a very different kind, e.g., the “simple” disappearance of major parts of the morphological paradigms without replacement from the dominant contact language. The basic points and examples are skilfully summarized in two book chapters published in 1992,

“Theory of language death and language decay” and “Contact-induced change: Similarities and differences” (Sasse 1992a, Sasse 1992b).

Hans-Jürgen was also among the few linguists who very early on sensed that the accelerating decline of linguistic diversity observable in the second half of the twentieth century was not just a scientifically interesting phenomenon providing insights into the fundamentals of language dynamics. Rather, language endangerment constituted – and still constitutes – a challenge with much broader ramifications, reaching well beyond the confines of narrow specialist interests. Therefore, together with his teacher and mentor Johannes Bechert, he began to try to raise awareness about language endangerment within the discipline – which at the time seemed oblivious to the disappearance of its empirical foundations – and within society at large. He was instrumental in forming a small working group on language endangerment, which in 1998 became the German Society for Endangered Languages (*Gesellschaft für bedrohte Sprachen*, GBS). He became the founding president of this society and was a driving force behind its success in making language endangerment a general concern in scholarship and society at large.

Among the major successes of these initiatives was the initiation of the widely known DoBeS programme of the Volkswagen Foundation, the first funding programme dedicated to the documentation of endangered languages, which started with a pilot phase in 1999 and was officially concluded in 2013. Hans-Jürgen was a key figure both in developing this programme and convincing Volkswagen to provide substantial funds for it, as well as its successful implementation, an endeavour into which he invested much time and energy for nearly two decades from the early 1990s. While acting as a German partner for a couple of projects, he did not profit as a major grantee from this programme. Instead, he was a tireless worker for it behind the scenes, among many other things successfully negotiating for an extension of the originally planned running time of six years, the first Volkswagen programme ever to be granted such an extension. His achievements with regard to this programme cannot be overestimated.

In the early seventies Hans-Jürgen went on to work on the Eastern Cushitic languages. His extensive fieldwork in Ethiopia and northern Kenya resulted in the documentation, grammatical descriptions, and dictionaries of Burji, Boni, Daasanach (Galab), Oromo, and the Dullay group, as well as in important contributions to the reconstruction of Proto-Cushitic. His *Morphophonologie des Galab-Verbs* (Sasse 1975) set new standards for the description of complex verbal systems, while his *Etymological dictionary of Burji* (Sasse 1982a) is still one of the very few etymological dictionaries of an African language.

His study of Eastern Cushitic introduced him to another major theoretical topic, the relationship between discourse pragmatics and grammar. The Cushitic languages are rightfully famous for their spectacular morphosyntactic marking of discourse-related categories, so that one has to learn to grapple with the complexities of how communicative needs exert influence on the development of grammatical categories before one can describe them coherently. There was no way Hans-Jürgen's intellectual curiosity could remain untouched by this.

The first line of research he pursued in this field was the connection of discourse pragmatics and grammatical relations. Almost a decade before DuBois's paper on preferential argument structure (DuBois 1987), Hans-Jürgen had drawn attention to the close connections between discourse and different types of argument alignment (Sasse 1978). He was also one of the first researchers to notice the correlation between information structure and nominal incorporation (Sasse 1984). A topic he kept returning to was the relationship between topicality and argument encoding. In opposition to the overly crude dichotomy of topic- vs. subject-prominent languages, Hans-Jürgen has repeatedly, most notably in his 1982 paper on subject prominence (Sasse 1982b), argued for a finer-grained classification based on a rich set of criteria. His argument was that the European structural type, where both thematic roles and pragmatic considerations are combined to create a privileged actor/topic as the primary grammatical relation, is a geographically limited and typologically rare type of syntactic organisation. The notion of subject, he argued, should be reserved for this language type only and not be imposed on languages whose syntax is organised differently. This understanding of the notion of subject contains in a nutshell all the major components of Hans-Jürgen's approach to linguistics: sensitivity to crosslinguistic differences, meticulous attention to detail, and a commitment to always defining, clearly and independently, the notions one is working with.

These same virtues are evident in what turned out to be his most influential contribution to discourse pragmatics, namely his work on theticity (Sasse 1987). This half-forgotten notion from the so-called "judgment theory" (*Urteilstheorie*) by two nineteenth-century philosophers, Franz Brentano and Anton Marty (Marty 1918), had been revived by Kuroda (1972) as a ready-made means to account for some morphosyntactic phenomena in Japanese and some other languages. Hans-Jürgen redefined and broadened the notion by taking a typological and discourse-pragmatic perspective. In his primary interpretation, thetic utterances are informationally non-segmented, in that they lack relational pre-suppositions. This type of utterance is found in many languages across the globe, but expressed by different formal means. In his later work (Sasse 2005),

he conducted a text-based investigation of the phenomenon of theticity and revised the original notion so as to cast doubt on its categorial status. What the empirical data show, he claimed, is that languages tend to use specific types of structure under similar (though not identical) discourse conditions, but this does not allow us to assume the existence of a language-independent grammatical category, since interpretive similarities cannot be viewed as sufficient conditions for a category.

Not only discourse pragmatics, but pragmatics in general and its cross-linguistic variability in particular, was one of Hans-Jürgen's favourite topics, and this set his work off from the morphosyntactic bias characteristic of much of typology. Together with his wife and long-time collaborator, Leila Behrens, he investigated the ways in which interpretations can depend on cultural factors. They showed (Behrens et al. 2006) that the variation in understanding irony is in many respects a function of different superordinate cultural values and the resulting differences in conversational maxims. This work is one of the first attempts to free Gricean pragmatics from its pseudo-universalist stance and make it more flexible, so as to encompass variation that is observable among languages and cultures. One might add that it is no surprise that he was interested in cultural interpretations of irony: he himself was a man of subtle irony and a master of jocular conversation, experienced in more than one cultural setting, from his Berlin home territory all the way to the Balkans, Middle East, Ethiopia, and Canada.

Another interest of Hans-Jürgen's that was quite unorthodox in the linguistic typology of the 1980s and 90s was so-called lexical typology, to which he devoted much of his energy in the last decades, mostly in collaboration with Leila Behrens. This is in fact a somewhat misleading term, since its focus is broader than just the lexicon *tout court* – rather, on the ecological adjustments between lexicon and grammar in a given linguistic system. This established a new approach to crosslinguistic research, lexicon-oriented and corpus-based, which sought to reach significant generalisations through detailed microstructural analyses of a small number of languages. It is here that his general methodological credo, which put great emphasis on the importance of fine-grained distinctions and apparently marginal details in interpreting linguistic phenomena and formulating broader generalisations, is at its most noticeable. The analysis was based on the observation of individual lexical items and on the effects that occur when they are found in different contexts, so as to capture the whole range of semantic effects which may result from the interaction of lexical meaning of words and the meanings of constructions in which they are used.

The postulate that lexicon and grammar are interdependent leads to the conclusion that differences in grammar will produce differences in the

lexicon and vice versa. This research programme was realised through work in many fields, such as the relationship between aspect and aktionsart, discussed in his influential 2002 *LT* article “Recent activity in the theory of aspect: Accomplishments, achievements, or just non-progressive state?” (Sasse 2002). But its most far-reaching and detailed statement, which establishes a fine-grained typology within the nominal domain, is laid out in the monograph *The microstructure of lexicon-grammar interaction* (Behrens & Sasse 2003), which develops a full representational model for dealing with the variation in the lexicon. This model comprises a set of parameters placed on different descriptive dimensions, including boundedness, discourse-referentiality, spatio-temporal location, a number of ontological parameters (material, artefact, human, etc.), and three qualia (constitutive, formal, and telic). The result of this work is an unprecedentedly rich typology of lexicon-grammar interaction, which shows how lexical patterns in a language are inseparable from its grammatical features.

Hans-Jürgen’s interest in lexical matters is also responsible for his fieldwork on Iroquoian languages, especially Cayuga – a natural intellectual development, given that the interactions between grammar and lexicon are perhaps more far-reaching in polysynthetic languages than anywhere else. In his work on Cayuga he developed a novel approach to the parts-of-speech problem. The core of his proposal is clearly to differentiate two levels, the lexical and the syntactic one, and four different possible mappings between these two levels, so that, for instance, English and German display a more or less full mapping of the lexical and syntactic levels, whereas Cayuga and other Iroquoian languages do not – a proposal of clear relevance to syntactic approaches such as X-bar theory which assume direct projection between lexical and syntactic categories.

As his curiosity about polysynthetic languages deepened, Hans-Jürgen (together with one of the present authors) organised a momentous workshop on the typology of polysynthesis, spanning languages from North and Central America, the Caucasus, central and eastern Siberia, and Australia, whose proceedings were published as Evans & Sasse (eds.) (2002). Of particular interest to him – and obviously relevant to his later work developing Lexical Typology – was the way that polysynthetic languages like Cayuga were not simply reworkings, within the morphology, of what happens in the syntax of other languages (in the way argued for by, e.g., Baker (1996)). Rather, as he showed, all sorts of conventionalised combinations of morphemes within the polysynthetic word could be found, with ambiguities between compositional and non-compositional readings or blockings of compositional readings. In this sense, his approach – together with work by scholars like Mithun & Corbett (1999) and Michelson (1990) – led to a much more construction-based view of

how polysynthetic languages work, with an implicit consequence that much more of what would be done in the syntax by a language like English or German would be carried by complex, preassembled lexical units.

Hans-Jürgen's typological and theoretical work was always based on detailed fine-grained descriptions, to the point that the idea of fine-grained typology was his methodological credo. He never tired of emphasising that apparently marginal details can decisively change the way we interpret a whole phenomenological field, or make an interpretation possible in the first place. It is clear that this was a rather lonely position at a time when sweeping generalisations based on ever-bigger data sets increasingly dominate the mainstream discourse in one's discipline. His work stands as a reminder of how much the field of typology still has to gain from remembering its sources in detailed, philologically-grounded comparisons of languages in which the investigator has pursued a long, disciplined, text-driven immersion.

Hans-Jürgen is survived by his wife, Leila Behrens, and his son Alexander.

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