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Obituary: Hansjakob Seiler (1920–2018)

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Hansjakob Seiler (1920-2018)

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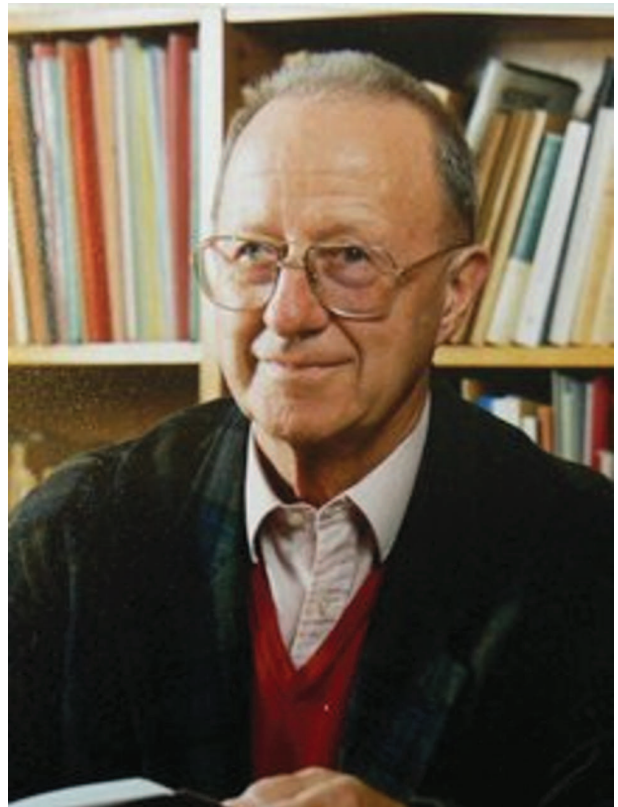In magnis voluisse sat est.
(Propertius)

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Hansjakob Seiler was born on 16 December 1920 in Munich. After an essentially healthy life, including an unusually long productive period, he died on 13 August 2018 in Lucerne. While he had no children, he is mourned by his wife and a large family and missed by numerous colleagues and former students worldwide.

One of the children of Swiss parents, a professor of zoology and a concert singer, Hansjakob Seiler started his university studies at Zürich university. There being no general linguistics at that place, he studied Indo-European linguistics with Manu Leumann and took a PhD with a dissertation on Greek morphology. His expertise in Ancient and Modern Greek appears throughout his oeuvre.

During his stay in Paris (1947-1950), he chose Émile Benveniste as his mentor, sitting in the same colloquia as his chronologically close peer Gilbert Lazard. Much later, both of them started large research projects based on typological comparison and partly focusing the same grammatical domain ("participation" and "actancy", resp.) Although these projects ran in parallel for quite a few years, cooperation between them remained limited.

With Benveniste as his supervisor, it became ever clearer to Seiler that the epistemic interest of historical-comparative linguistics targets the particular, while he was interested in the general. The fruit of the research stay at C.N.R.S. was a book on tense and aspect in Modern Greek (Seiler 1952), which served as his habilitation thesis at University of Hamburg. After having acquainted himself with the European variety of structural linguistics, Seiler went repeatedly to the U.S.A. to learn about general linguistics on the opposite shore of the Atlantic and, from 1955 on, to do salvage work on Cahuilla (Uto-Aztec). His Cahuilla grammar appeared in 1977. During a stay at Harvard University, Seiler became acquainted with Roman Jakobson. He admired him much and regarded him as his second mentor; it was impossible to criticize Jakobson in Seiler's presence.

In 1959, Seiler became full professor of general and comparative linguistics at the university of Cologne, a position which he held, despite five offers from other universities, up to his

emeritation in 1986. Over the years, the department of linguistics of Cologne university became the biggest in Germany. Seiler succeeded in having a chair of historical-comparative linguistics installed in the department, so he could fully concentrate on general linguistics; and he created many positions for lecturers, assistants, research associates and their likes.

Seiler was a conscientious and well-organized, but not a passionate teacher. He was committed to research. After never having published anything on typology or universals, he was surprised to get commissioned, by the Comité International Permanent des Linguistes (by an "anonymous benefactor", as he used to say), with a plenary lecture on language universals at the 1972 International Congress of Linguists. This was his springboard leading to a grant for a research project on language universals which expanded into an interdisciplinary research group on linguistic universals and typology, called UNITYP. Between 1975 and 1992, the project papers were semi-published in the series *Arbeiten des Kölner Universalienprojekts* (akup). The most important book series was *Language Universals Series* vols. 1 – 8, including *i.a.* Seiler 1983, his most quoted book. UNITYP was contemporaneous with Joseph Greenberg's universals project, and there was extensive exchange of persons and ideas over the years. The article of 1983 can be seen as a report on a project that received financial support for an unusually long period. Seiler 1991 is an autobiographic account of his way into universal linguistics.

From the beginning of his universals research, Seiler left structuralism (including his own earlier contributions to it) behind and became a functionalist. Language is a goal-directed activity in Jakobson's sense. When confronted with grammatically analyzed data of some language, the leading heuristic question in its functional analysis is "what is being done here [i.e. by these grammatical means]?" The analysis transcends the identification of constructions and their grammatical functions and looks for the operations generating and using them. These are operations of the mind, and consequently research dedicated to them must be interdisciplinary. Seiler made it a point to hire philosophers, semioticians, neurolinguists etc. in UNITYP, seeking both for theoretical foundation and empirical support for his conception.

Seiler was intrigued by the question of what is universal in human language. From the beginning, it was clear to him that, contrary to the Chomskyan and Greenbergian conception of linguistic universals, these cannot be particular features of grammatical systems which languages happen to share. What languages confront the linguist with is variation, in the first place. The linguist has to seek the principle of this variation and, thus, to posit the invariant at a higher level of abstraction than the variants. Once we have identified the invariant, we can formulate a principle of the variation which orders the variants on a continuum. This enables us, at the same time, to recognize which linguistic phenomena are covered by the invariant and what is their place on the continuum. There are continua at different levels of abstraction. Even entire grammatical strategies, called "techniques", like gender, nominal classification and numeral classification can be arranged on a cross-linguistic scale or functional "dimension". In their conceptual scope, these correspond approximately to what Californian functionalists called functional "domains" of language, like possession, determination, localization etc. The difference is that Seiler's dimensions have a structure determined by universal principles of an underlying cognitive domain. The most general principle underlying all these dimensions is a transition between the poles of indicativity and predicativity, between a mere hint at the cognitive entity in question and its explication. Language universals are, in the last analysis, pairs of problems of cognition and communication paired with a principle of their solution. The problems are common to all human beings and therefore solved in all languages.

Those who made an effort to familiarize themselves with Seiler's conception soon made the experience that it was demanding. His zeal was for an all-encompassing model of the

activity of the speaker which comprises the entire realm of what would traditionally be called the semantics of grammar. Taking this seriously, it of course means "the semantics of the grammars of all languages." The issue was not whether there are universals of language but instead at which level they are to be posited. Seiler was not afraid of abstraction, which increasingly became an outsider position at a time where the trend was back again to particularism. Particularists would doubt the possibility of a theoretical model of the semantics of the grammar of all languages. In Seiler's view, denying the existence of universals of human language amounted to denying the unity of mankind.

Hansjakob Seiler received numerous honors, including two honorary doctorates, membership in the North Rhine-Westfalian Academy of Sciences and a voluminous festschrift (Brettschneider & Lehmann (eds.) 1980). His most important articles were republished in two collective volumes (1977 and 2008). An interim account of his work and an interview with him appeared in Lehmann 1985 and François & Swiggers 2008, resp. Nevertheless, he continued to work on UniTyp and to integrate in his model theoretical notions like prototype, iconicity, pragmaticality or complementarity which are fundamental to several approaches in linguistics.

It did not escape him, though, that his work was not understood by many, nor did it leave him cold. For 30 years after his emeritation and almost up to his death, he strove for a broader foundation and a better explication of his model and created his own website (a copy of which is maintained at http://ifl.phil-fak.uni-koeln.de/seiler_unityp_weiter.html) to make it more widely accessible. Reacting to an admiring comment that he was, at an age far beyond ninety, still doing linguistics, he would reply: "Why, this is what I am best at." One day linguistics may become scientifically riper by applying a more rigorous methodology to a sufficient amount of diverse data. One may hope that Seiler's work may then be rediscovered and appreciated as an early attempt by an independent and original thinker at bridging the gap between data and theory.

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