

Interview with
Klaus Schneider

LK

Let me start with a traditional question. Why are you a linguist? Where did you study?

KS

Language and languages have always fascinated me. As a child I thought that language was a wonderful toy, and to this day I am known and feared for my horrible puns. After school I wanted to study “exotic” languages, yet as the first academic in my family I decided, like many peers in that situation, to play it safe and become a foreign language teacher. This decision limited my options immensely. As my subjects I chose English and Russian, the latter being quite exotic for me, as an *ab-initio* beginner, at the time. Additionally, however, I also studied African languages, unofficially, for three semesters, until it got a little much. Perhaps I should add that in those days linguistics departments in Germany were small and predominantly still working in the spirit of 19th century Indo-Germanic studies. Modern linguistics was taught in the language departments, and first and foremost in English departments.

Before entering university I was almost totally unaware of the existence of linguistics as an academic discipline. After having a little job at the local theatre of my birthplace in my school days, and after making a few short films with some friends (which even won prizes at festivals), I was hoping to dig deep into drama analysis. But then, in my first semester, I had to take an Introduction to Linguistics, and this course changed my life. It was the days of vehement battles between positivists and mentalists, structuralists and generativists, and I have to admit blushingly that at that time my nickname was “Chomsky” (nonetheless I did become a member of an English drama group). Later, as a more advanced and matured student, I discovered, initially quite skeptically, pragmatics, which was still fairly new on the scene – well, and you know what has happened since. I fell in love with it, was offered a position, abandoned the idea of becoming a school teacher, and stayed in the ivory tower.

Where did I study? In Marburg. A charming little place! One of those prototypical old German university towns, like Heidelberg, Tübingen and Göttingen. The University of Marburg, founded in 1527, was the first protestant university in the world. This is where Luther met Zwingli. This is also where Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm spent some time, and with its medieval townscape and its well-preserved half-timbered houses Marburg would be the perfect setting for one of their fairy tales. After four semesters I spent a year in Edinburgh and later one semester in Moscow, which was rather unusual at the time for a student from West Germany.

LK

How did you choose your field of interests? Who influenced your professional life? (if anyone?)

KS

It was through Rüdiger Zimmermann, the Chair in English Linguistics at Marburg, that I came across pragmatics. He also introduced me to applied linguistics (I now hold the Chair in Applied English Linguistics at Bonn). First Rüdiger was my teacher, then my PhD supervisor and boss,

later a colleague, now he is a friend. He was the most inspiring teacher and the most supportive supervisor you can think of, and it is he who influenced my professional life more than anyone else. He was a role model not least because he definitely had a life outside research. Among other things he was a marathon runner and a peace activist, and he has always been an excellent cook and wine lover. I am not the only linguist who owes him a lot and adores him, and if you want to know the many reasons why, then you have to read the introductory chapter I wrote with Ingo Plag for the festschrift we gave Rüdiger on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday. The title of this chapter is “Who is Rüdiger Zimmermann and why do we love him? An integrative approach” (in Plag, Ingo & Schneider, Klaus P. , eds., 2000: *Language Use, Language Acquisition and Language History: (Mostly) Empirical Studies in Honour of Rüdiger Zimmermann*. Trier: WVT, 1-13). Another scholar whose influence on my professional life I would like to acknowledge here is Gerd Freidhof, Professor of Slavic Languages and Linguistics at Marburg (later Frankfurt). He offered me my first position as a student tutor. He was also the first professor who offered me a PhD position. The topic would have been an analysis of word play in the Russian translations of James Joyce’s “Ulysses”. I have never regretted that I rejected this offer; it is a topic, I firmly believe, which has the potential of driving you mad. Instead, I carried out an empirical study of British small talk, a topic in fact suggested by Galina I. Dergačeva of the Puškin Institute in Moscow. Last but not least, John Searle was an influence. When he was in Germany to buy a new Porsche, one of my professors, Karen Ebert, an expert on languages of West Africa and of Nepal, later Chair in General Linguistics at Zurich, invited Searle, who she had met in the US, to Marburg. Much of what he had to say was not entirely new to me at the time, but I was absolutely impressed by the way he delivered his talk. He paced the stage of the lecture hall and spoke completely freely. I had never experienced anything like that before, and his performance has definitely had a long-lasting effect on me.

Choosing the fields of my specific interest – small talk in my first and diminutives in my second book – was also biographically motivated. As a young man I used to be really bad at small talk, and I grew interested in diminutives when my oldest son was about two or three years old. And the first ideas about variational pragmatics I developed when I was teaching in Dublin and comparing Irish English to British and American English.

LK

You are well-known for your research which combines pragmatics and evaluative morphology. What about your life outside research – are you a good evaluator of every day pragmatics?

KS

There is no life outside research. I know this sound terrible, but I am not a workaholic (contrary to what my youngest says). What I mean is: Pragmatics is truly dangerous. Students usually like it because it is more immediately linked to their day-to-day experience and communicative practices than formal syntax, for instance. But at the beginning of each course I teach on pragmatics I have to issue a health warning. The danger is that afterwards you can never again engage innocently in any conversation. At least I often find it difficult to stop analyzing what people say, how they say it and why they say it. Yes, I am afraid some people think that I am a good evaluator of everyday pragmatics.

LK

You are a series editor of the Handbooks of Pragmatics. Pragmatically speaking, can we still speak about a HANDBOOK if it consists of 9 volumes each of them of about 600 pages? Is the last handbook really the last one? How did the series start? What do you think, why are handbooks so fashionable in these days?

KS

It was over breakfast on a cold December morning near Augsburg that Wolfram Bublitz, who had invited me to give a guest lecture, alerted me to the fact that there was a gap in the well-known and much respected handbook series Handbooks of Linguistics and Communication Science, published by Mouton de Gruyter and perhaps better known under its German abbreviation HSK. Although this series had been started in the early 1980s (a fact camouflaged on their present homepage) and had already covered many areas of linguistics, what was missing was, and still is, a handbook of pragmatics. So initially we were thinking of closing this gap. This would have meant editing a handbook in two or three volumes, which Wolfram and I wanted to do with Andreas H. Jucker from Zurich, who was happy to join us. After some negotiating, the publishers suggested to do a handbook series in nine volumes, following the example of their new series Handbooks of Applied Linguistics, which is also in nine volumes. As it was our intention to give coherence to the vast and heterogeneous field of pragmatics and provide an overview of this fast-growing interdisciplinary field, we thought it justified to do nine volumes, which, incidentally, are considerably smaller than the fat volumes in the HSK series. So, pragmatically speaking, our volumes are much more handy handbooks. And, of course, we are not talking about just one HANDBOOK, but a series of handbooks. Whether the last volume, which appeared earlier this year (2014), really is the last volume only future will tell...

You are right, handbooks are very fashionable these days. I think there are two reasons for this. One is that all disciplines are growing, that there is a continuous process of differentiation and specialization, and as a consequence journals multiply, especially online journals. Accordingly, it is increasingly difficult to keep track and gain an overview even of one particular field. That is the users' side. The second reason is that apparently you can make good money by producing handbooks, which is the publishers' side. Of course, this only works because there seems to be a genuine need for handbooks on the users' side.

LK

What do you prefer – to be an editor or to be an author? (or may you suggest a third option?)

KS

I love both, being an editor and being an author. It is amazing how much you learn as an editor. You learn a lot about areas and topics other than your own, and also how colleagues approach their topics in different ways. This can be very inspiring (but, admittedly, editing can also be a little frustrating at times). As an author, you are, of course, much more creative. Yet writing, as I guess we all know, can also be a long and painful process. Well, upon consideration, I think I like being an author a little more. On the whole, however, I believe that it is good and healthy to be both, author and editor. (Actually, I'm quite annoyed that I cannot readily suggest a third option.)

LK

What do you think what is the position of linguistics in everyday life?

KS

Linguistics could play a much more important role in everyday life, given its potential to expose dangerous ideologies and safeguard against propaganda and manipulation, as colleagues working in Critical Discourse Analysis have been emphasizing for a long time (sometimes a little too ideologically for my taste). Linguistics could play this role much more effectively if it was taught in schools on a larger scale than it is taught today, at least in Germany. Incidentally, when I say manipulation, I do not only mean manipulation in the political arena and in advertising. I also mean, and maybe even primarily, manipulation in interpersonal relations and everyday situations, for instance in work-related or private contexts. Also I would much welcome if linguists no longer left the market for language and communication trainings, including intercultural trainings, to those who hold a degree in psychology, philosophy, business studies or economics. In these times of globalization, this market is huge; international companies in particular are prepared to pay good money if their communication problems are solved. And who could solve language and communication related problems more professionally than a linguist?

LK

What do you think, what makes pragmatics different from other linguistic branches?

KS

Pragmatics can be conceptualized in different ways and defined in broad or narrow terms. In the Anglo-American view (as Huang calls it), pragmatics is a level of language description, along with phonology, morphology, syntax, etc. In this view, it is closely related to semantics, which deals with invariant meaning, while pragmatics deals with situation-dependent meaning. By contrast, in the European Continental view (also Huang's term), pragmatics is not another level of description, but something qualitatively different, namely a functional perspective on all linguistic phenomena. As the very term 'pragmatics' (from Greek *pragma* 'action') suggests, pragmatics is not concerned with meaning, but with action as a type of human behaviour. I subscribe to this broader understanding, which we have also adopted in our handbook series. In this conceptualization, then, pragmatics is the study of language use, which contrasts with the study of the language system. The latter is concerned with finding out how language works on the different levels, whereas pragmatics is concerned with what language can be used for in communication. After all, language only exists for communicative purposes. But, as the late Geoffrey Leech once wrote, you can only understand the nature of language if you study both the language system and language use, and the interaction between them. Regrettably, this last part about the interaction between system and use is often ignored in linguistics.

LK

If you compare university programs in Germany at the time of your study with the current situation, have you observed any considerable changes?

KS

The changes are very considerable; they are, in fact, dramatic. As part of the so-called Bologna Process, Germany, like most countries in Europe, has introduced the Anglo-American consecutive BA-MA system, which certainly has its strengths, but definitely also many weaknesses, at least in Germany where it combines with a totally different school system and where it is unnecessarily bureaucratic. Believe it or not, in German universities, positions for academics have been abolished, while at the same time new positions for administrative staff have been created to cope with the new BA-MA system. Shortly after this system had been implemented in our universities, Michael Clyne, the eminent Australian scholar, asked me why on earth German academics had not fought for the Humboldtian ideals had not defended the traditional German system, which he considered superior. Michael had been a postgraduate student at Bonn and knew German universities very well. I had no good answer for him.

LK

If you were in a position of power what would you change in the world of linguistic research? Do you have a linguistic (pragmatic) dream?

KS

If I were in a position of power, I would first of all create more positions for linguists, who are, as a rule, a minority in language departments, at least at German universities, where there is a strong bias towards literary and cultural studies – unlike in Scandinavia, as far as I know. Also I would introduce more linguistics into the school curricula for language subjects, which are currently heavily focused on the analysis of the literature. The world of linguistic research, on the other hand, can take care of itself.

Dreams I have many, too many to share here. Let me mention just two. I would love to have the resources for collecting Big Data for pragmatics research, especially for simultaneously collecting both naturally occurring and experimental data in all English-speaking countries around the globe, and then put the findings on maps and present them in an electronic atlas of language use which would give you access to the original data, i.e. to written material as well as sound files. This could also be done for other languages, needless to say. I am convinced that this atlas and these findings would also shed a new light on grammar and the language system (as Bernd Kortmann, compiler of the World Atlas of Varieties of English, which only exists for grammatical features, readily agrees). Another dream is to develop a system of pragmatic corpus annotation and test it on a large and systematically varied corpus of drama dialogue, as this type of dialogue can be considered as ‘tidied-up conversation’ (or a ‘competence model’, as Robin Lakoff and Deborah Tannen once suggested), which makes pragmatic annotation considerably easier.

LK

Which of your publications do you consider most valuable one?

KS

Oh dear, that's a difficult question. I am certainly not proud of all of my publications, I don't think anyone is, but I like quite a few. Of course, my book on small talk I consider important, because it was my first. Also it was, I think, the first monograph on this topic, and there have not been many competitors since. As its primary focus is on linguistic patterns, many thought that this book was only relevant to foreign language teaching, especially those who believe that small talk should only be analyzed regarding its social functions. While relevance to language teaching is not a bad thing in my opinion, I was pleased to learn that my book was also used at the MIT in projects on man-machine communication.

My book on English diminutives I don't like particularly, because it took me too long to write it. Yet there is no denying that it has received some attention in the community interested in evaluative morphology and related phenomena. Upon consideration, however, it is probably the article "Where pragmatics and dialectology meet" which has had the greatest impact. This article I wrote with Anne Barron as the programmatic introduction to the Benjamins volume we edited together in order to establish variational pragmatics as a new field of linguistic inquiry. This article has been reprinted in the Routledge Major Works series *Critical Concepts in Linguistics*. (And here I stop, suddenly remembering Leech's old Modesty maxim.)

Thank you for your questions. It has been a great pleasure answering them!

Thank you very much for the interview.

Lívia Körtvélyessy

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