Bertie Kaal*

Prof. Juan C. Sager (1929–2021): founding editor of *Multilingua*

<https://doi.org/10.1515/multi-2021-0064>

Received June 1, 2021; accepted June 1, 2021; published online June 21, 2021

The founding editor of *Multilingua*, Prof. Juan Carlos Sager, sadly passed away on 18th February 2021 in his home town, Manchester, UK, at the age of 91. He initiated and edited the journal in its first five years. In 1980, the idea for the journal was discussed with Mouton. It was a novel concept dedicated to addressing the issues of communication in an increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse world, as well as advancing language technology. The first issue appeared in 1982. In consultation with the French philosopher Jean-Marie Zemb and Loll Rolling of CEC-DGXIII, they formulated a bold mission statement:

This interdisciplinary journal seeks to stimulate discussion, new research, and activities aimed at overcoming the language barrier and to provide a forum for contact and cooperation among the many different groups of the professions involved in interlingual information, documentation, and communication. It will attempt to present, examine and influence policies on the use of language in a linguistically diverse community. (*Multilingua* 1.1, 1982, inside cover)

Juan C. Sager (photographer unknown)¹

In Prof Sager's view, definitions, and culture-sensitive translation were indispensable in a globalizing and technologizing world. He tended to be uncompromising in this respect and was determined to promote an academic

¹ Photographer unknown. Professor Sager gave me a copy of this portrait at his home, in 2014. I did not understand it at the time but now believe it might have been intended for his obituary.

***Corresponding author: Bertie Kaal**, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands, E-mail: bertiekaal@gmail.com. <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0888-5766>

foundation, rooted in philosophy, knowledge, and practice. In the Introduction to the first issue, he states that: “The first issues will have a retrospective orientation in order to survey the present state of the art. Later issues will then have a more even balance between new ideas and reports of existing work.” (*Multilingua* 1.1, 1982, p. 7) His views were timely in the development of the Commission of the European Communities (CEC) and its cultural ambition to facilitate a multicultural community. The President of the CEC, Gaston Thorn, notes in his ‘envoi’ to the maiden issue:

Multilingua will provide an interface between the Institutions and the members of the public who are interested in multilingualism, be they teachers, translators or interpreters, computer experts, publishers or librarians, businessmen or politicians. *Multilingua*’s contribution to increasing integration in Europe while at the same time safeguarding our continent’s cultural diversity cannot be overestimated: it deserves our congratulations and our encouragement. (p. 1)

The idea for the journal emerged simultaneously with the CEC’s Multilingual Action Plan. Loll Rolling acknowledges the importance of the journal to the CEC’s language agenda:

Enfin, la Commission compte profiter du présent journal, qu’elle a contribué à lancer, pour mieux faire connaître les différents aspects de ses réalisations dans le domaine du multilinguisme en y contribuant des articles sur la traduction et l’interprétation ainsi que sur l’enseignement et l’emploi des langues en Europe. (p. 20)

Multilingua fell into place academically and politically, connecting theory with practice. The journal could count on the collaboration with the CEC as a discussion platform and to reach academics, teachers, industry, and policy makers. At that time, the impact of technology on a diversifying community was a contested issue in academic, industrial, and political circles. The idea was to promote an *Information Society as Post-Industrial Society* (Masuda 1980). The impact of rapidly developing technologies may have positive effects, such as automated translation (EUROTRA and SYSTRAN), but they would have to be implemented with utmost care because of the sensitive complexities of cultures and languages. If the process were too fast it might defy the desired benefits of speeding up communication.

Putting complexity into practice, it was crucial that articles would be solicited in all EU languages and that the abstracts would be translated into the then four official working languages of the EC: French, English, German, and Italian. The

translations were supplied by DGXIII's translation offices in Luxemburg: "to affirm the benefits of a multilingual society". For example, in the production process of *Multilingua* issues, we struggled to obtain the translations in time for publication. For the Editor it was a balancing act of (peer-)reviewing papers in various languages and disciplines and securing a 'fair' selection. For this reason, the editorial board was a diverse selection, both in languages as well as in professions. In 1986, Prof Sager and the DGXIII decided that, after 5 volumes, the purpose of this journal formula had been achieved. For Mouton, this was a reason to change the mission statement and Prof Richard Watts was invited to give it a new direction. The orientation shifted "toward interlanguage communication seen within an anthropological and sociological framework." (Issue 6.1, 1987), still including translation studies and intercultural communication.

Born in Argentina, Prof Sager started his academic career in Britain in the 1960s at the Royal College of Advanced Technology, Salford, introducing a Modern Languages degree. He was also one of the founders of the British Association of Applied Linguistics (BAAL). At UMIST, Manchester, he initiated the first BSc Hons in Applied Language Studies in 1976 (later the Centre for Computational Linguistics – CCL). New technologies, he said, require interdisciplinary approaches, including linguistics, philosophy, and computer science. In that respect, a common understanding, across cultures and disciplines, was (and is) essential. In principle, it can be achieved by agreement on the meaning of words.

Although he was not trained in computer science, Sager clearly foresaw the inevitable intersection between Computer Science and Linguistics. It could function as a means to facilitate communication in emerging international institutions, such as the European Community, if handled with care, so as not to upset cultural sensitivity. To this end, he developed a contemporary, practical, Theory of Definition. As he wrote in the inaugural issue, this new world needs "subject headings that require full definition and delimitation against each other and against related disciplines." (1982, *Multilingua* 1.1, p. 4). His work has contributed to the establishment of international terminology institutions special interest groups in terminology, translation, and language resources around the world. It also inspired the launch of the dedicated journal *Terminology: International journal of theoretical and applied issues in specialized communication*, and its companion book series. His example inspired other academics, including his PhD students, to establish academic centers for language engineering and translation in Europe, the USA, Asia, and in Latin America. Prof Sager retired from UMIST/University of Manchester in 1995.

Prof Juan C. Sager persistently pursued the art of defining concepts in context. He provided an awareness of how nomenclature affects our understanding and intentions for cooperation, and how clear definition can provide common ground

for people from all walks of life to communicate positively. His work must have inspired the EC's policy planning, for example, in the development of policy for *The Multilingual Information Society* (CEC Eur-Lex 1994). Former students have confirmed that he was a cherished and an inspiring thinker and instructor, open for discussion over lunch or dinner at his home and a traditional tour of his beautiful garden. He has given inspiration and a foundational, lasting oeuvre on terminology, translation, and language engineering.

References

- CEC, EUR-Lex. 1994. *The Multilingual Information Society* (1994). Recommendation. CEC. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:51995PC0486&rid=7> (accessed 27 05 2021).
- Masuda, Yoneji. 1980. *The information Society as Post-Industrial Society*. USA: World Future Society. <https://doi.org/10.5555/601061>.
- Nkwenti-Azeh, Blaise. 1996. Juan C. Sager – Bibliographical notes. In Harold Somers (ed.), *Terminology, LSP and translation: Studies in language engineering in honour of Juan C. Sager*, 1–11. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Sager, Juan C. list of publications. Available at: <http://worldcat.org/identities/lccn-n81080986/>.

Bionote

Bertie Kaal

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands

bertiekaal@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0888-5766>

Dr. Bertie Kaal was publishing editor at Mouton de Gruyter's Amsterdam office (1984–88) and continued her publishing career as an acquisition editor at John Benjamins Publishing Company (1988–2006). She grew up in a teacher and printer family and studied English Language & Literature (University of Amsterdam), while working as a translator before becoming an editor. After her publishing career she did research in critical discourse studies and party positioning at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. She received her PhD in 2017 (*Worldview and Social Practice*). She has published various articles on cultural, ideological and positivist worldviews in social, political, and technological discourses.