

Obituary

Hans-Georg Obenauer (1944–2019)

<https://doi.org/10.1515/tlr-2021-2056>



It was with a sense of grievous loss that we learned shortly before Christmas 2020 that Hans-Georg Obenauer had passed away on November 14th 2019. Until he retired in 2012 Hans-Georg was a “directeur de recherches” at the French CNRS and a member of the UMR 7320 “Structures formelles du langage”, CNRS, Paris – St Denis. Within that institutional framework he coordinated the research program “Architecture of the Clause – articulation and interpretation of its functional structure” for many years. It was that research program and the various workshops and colloquia that Hans-Georg organized around it that led to the fruitful international cooperation within which the research of many of us developed, to this very day for some of us.

Hans-Georg put the solid background in Romance philology he had acquired in Germany to excellent use when he first came into contact with modern linguistics at the Université d’Aix-en-Provence in the late 60s. He continued to do so when he later worked at the linguistics department of the Université de Paris VIII – Vincennes. He also took part in a famous summer school at UMass, Amherst in 1974 and was later a visiting scientist at MIT.

Both his Universität Stuttgart doctoral dissertation “Etudes de syntaxe interrogative du français” (1975) and his 1994 Université de Paris VIII Thèse de doctorat d’état “Aspects de la syntaxe A-barre: effets d’intervention et mouvements des quantifieurs” are a testimony to Hans-Georg’s fascination with the syntax of operators and his unflinching will to describe their intricate behavior in French and other Romance languages. It was his work on so-called “Quantification at a

distance” in French that led to his discovery of certain A-bar movement constraints that later on played an important role in the theory of intervention effects as conceptualized in Rizzi’s Relativized Minimality framework. His work in the interrogative domain also unearthed intriguing facts concerning French interrogative *que*, Stylistic Inversion and *Que est-que ce que* questions, and his analyses of these facts are still a starting point in the current research of many Romance syntacticians.

A related though autonomous topic of his research concerned the typology of questions, especially what he called “non-standard questions” or “special questions”. Before the 1990s, syntactic and semantic research in this domain was scarce and was at best relegated to pragmatics, language use or contextual determination. Hans-Georg’s pioneering comparative work in this domain demonstrated impressively that most previous work had grossly underestimated the syntactic foundations of the subtle interpretive variations at work in interrogatives. Non-canonical interpretations enriching questions with emotional components of surprise and disapproval were shown to rest not on some vague context conditions but to rely syntactically on the universal availability of dedicated functional projections. This required an innovative extension of the left periphery of the clause, as shown by data from certain Northern Italian dialects. His careful work on such dialects highlighted the crucial role played by the study of cross linguistic micro variation in detecting the precise syntactic correlates of the very specific interpretive properties of non-canonical questions. The by-now standard terminology *Surprise-Disapproval Questions* (SDQs) or *Can’t-find-the-Value Questions* (CfvQs) was in fact coined by Hans-Georg after his meticulous research had identified distinctive structural signatures behind them. This part of his work amounts to nothing less than the insight that Universal Grammar makes structural means available for the syntactic encoding of nonstandard questions, including echo questions, rhetorical questions, why-like *what* questions etc. In a series of highly ambitious and well-attended workshops, Hans-Georg extended his research agenda and existing cooperations to additional Romance languages and to other language families, notably Basque, Chinese, Germanic and South-Asian.

Hans-Georg was above all else entirely devoted to linguistic research. Some of us recall endless nightly phone calls from Paris in which data had to be checked and theoretical consequences had to be explored. This was probably the reason why the retirement that was forced on him by the system left him facing an abyss, although it remains unclear why he stopped doing linguistics and interacting with his colleagues abruptly. His highly successful research and his international reputation could have made it easy for him to be associated to external research structures and colleagues who would have benefitted greatly from his considerable knowledge and experience.

The fact that between his death and the time we found out about it more than one year elapsed shows that Hans-Georg had willingly severed all connections not only with his past universe but also with his closest colleagues and friends. The “raison d’être” of this remains an enigma for us as well as a source of deep sadness and regret.

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