

Obituary

Frans Hinskens* and Norval Smith In Memoriam Pieter Muysken

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Pieter Muysken in 1983 (photo taken by Roland Noske).

Biographical

Pieter Muysken was born in 1950 in Oruro, Bolivia, where his father worked as a mining engineer. After growing up in Geleen and Brunssum and finishing high school in Heerlen (in the southern Dutch province of Limburg), he moved to the United States, where he received his B.A. in Latin American Studies and Spanish from Yale College, part of the university of the same name, in 1972. In 1973–1974, he was a student assistant at the Institute for General Linguistics at the University of Amsterdam. There he graduated in 1974 with an M.A. thesis entitled *Some syntactic aspects of creolization*, became a lecturer in 1976 and obtained his doctorate in 1977 in Amsterdam with a dissertation entitled *Syntactic developments in the verb phrase of Ecuadorian Quechua*.

***Corresponding author: Frans Hinskens**, Meertens Instituut, Amsterdam, Netherlands; and Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen, Nijmegen, Netherlands,

E-mail: frans.hinskens@meertens.knaw.nl

Norval Smith, Universiteit van Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands

In 1989 he was promoted to the rank of Professor of General Linguistics, more particularly Sociolinguistics and Creolistics. In 1998, he moved to Leiden University, where he became Professor of Linguistics in the specialisation of Ibero-American Linguistics. In 2001, he left Leiden University for Radboud University Nijmegen, where he was appointed Professor of Linguistics for the third time. In 2017 he retired – ‘reluctantly’, as he would later describe it (Muysken 2020).

In 2010, he was appointed as an Extraordinary Professor at Stellenbosch University. He has also been a visiting professor at the universities of Salzburg, Massachusetts and Montreal. The list of universities worldwide where he was invited as a speaker or lecturer is long and includes Harvard University. In addition, he was a member of numerous scientific bodies (including the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences [KNAW]), commissions and advisory bodies at home and abroad.

Olympic view

His linguistic expertise included the many subfields of language contact research on the one hand and formal language theory on the other. Under the umbrella of language contact, his work includes studies of pidgin and creole languages, bilingualism/multilingualism, code switching, psycholinguistic aspects of bilingualism and code switching, mixed languages, areal linguistics, second language acquisition, borrowing, ethnolects and heritage languages. He was an internationally respected expert on Andean languages and dedicated himself to the documentation of the approximately 30 different languages of Bolivia – many of which are endangered (Muysken 2020).

Some of his publications have become classics, including the 1981 paper ‘Halfway between Quechua and Spanish: the case for relexification’, one of the first linguistic studies on mixed languages.

The counter for the total number of published titles related to the above fields stood at 236 in 2019 (Smith et al. 2020). The list is headed by publications on pidgins and creole languages (75) and language contact *stricto sensu* (51). In research on pidgin and creole languages, he has been at the forefront internationally from the very beginning – among other things as founder (1977) of the series Amsterdam Creole Studies. Furthermore, he was a member of the editorial boards of a number of prominent international journals (including in the field of bilingualism) and book series.

He has also published influential works on language theory, such as *Projecting features and featuring projections*, published in 1986 together with Henk van Riemsdijk, and *Functional categories*, published in 2008. In the jury report for the

Spinoza Prize, Pieter Muysken is therefore called “...one of the most productive and influential Dutch linguists of the moment”.

This makes it clear that Pieter, more than other linguists, was able to link empiricism and theory fruitfully at different levels. Or, as it was put in the laudatio on the occasion of the conferral in 2007 by the KNAW of his *Akademiehoogler-aarschap* (Academy Professorship): Pieter Muysken possesses the “special gift of applying the insights of a theoretical linguist to concrete phenomena that are of central importance to applied linguistics”.

Project genesis: an example

In 1999 Pieter and Norval Smith were in touch with two linguists who had just finished their dissertations. Pieter with James Essegbey (dissertation on Ewe(Gbe)), and Norval with Enoch Aboh (dissertation on GunGbe). The African language that has left the deepest imprint on the Surinam creole languages (Sranan, Saramaccan, Ndyuka, etc.) is the Gbe language FonGbe. FonGbe, Ewe(Gbe) and GunGbe are closely related.

Pieter had the brilliant idea of making use of this *once in a blue moon* opportunity to apply for a larger joint NWO (Dutch Research Foundation) project. Adrienne Bruyn had finished her dissertation on Sranan in 1995, and was available. We added to this team a dissertation sub-project for Margot van den Berg, who was just finishing an M.A. thesis on Early Sranan court records with Jacques Arends (†).

So was born the project “*A Trans-Atlantic Sprachbund. The structural relationships between the Gbe languages of West Africa and the Surinamese creole languages*” (Muysken et al. 2015).

James Essegbey is now a Professor at the University of Florida, Gainesville, Enoch Aboh is a Professor at the University of Amsterdam, Adrienne Bruyn is a guest researcher at the Meertens Institute, Amsterdam, and lecturer, and Margot van den Berg is a lecturer at Utrecht University.

This is just one example of the numerous projects initiated and supervised by Pieter, giving aspiring linguists the opportunity to fulfill their ambitions.

Distinctions, prizes and premiums

Besides the many more or less regular research grants, Pieter Muysken received several prestigious prizes. First of all the Prince Bernhard Foundation Prize (now known as the Keetje-Hodshon Prize of the Royal Hollandic Society of Sciences)

which he received in 1985 together with Wim Zonneveld. In 1990, he shared the Prix des Ambassadeurs with his former PhD student Jeanine Treffers-Daller and in 1998 he received the Spinoza Prize (3 million euros). With his successful application in 2008 for an ERC Advanced Grant, he also received a research budget of 2.5 million euros.

Inspirer, promoter and organiser

Pieter Muysken was unparalleled at attracting young researchers, for whom he managed to tap external funds time and again. The exact number is difficult to establish, but he must have supervised some 50 PhD students, from all parts of the world. As an organiser of scientific events at home and abroad, he was resourceful and energetic. As a result, with his inexhaustible source of ideas, he was the inspiration par excellence for many. He was also a pleasant, cheerful and very approachable person – in short, a phenomenon.

We will miss him deeply.



Pieter Muysken 2020 (photo taken by Theo Hafmans)

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