

Tackling the mysteries of South American languages: In memoriam Pieter Muysken (1950 – 2021)

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The news of Pieter Muysken's death came as a shock. He died on April 6th, shortly before his 71st birthday, after a short and heavy disease. His disappearance is a terrible loss for the linguistic community, both in terms of research and scientific inspiration and because of his unique and friendly personality.

Pieter Muysken has brought important advances to linguistics during the last decades, especially in the domains of language contact and of languages of South America. Here, I wish to concentrate on his contributions to the latter field. (On his impact on language contact research, see Hinskens and Smith 2021.)

There are few scholars who have had such an impact on the study of South American languages in the last 20 years. To a great degree, this is because, when Pieter Muysken received the Spinoza award (the so-called "Dutch Nobel Prize") in 2000, dotated with approximately 1,4 million Euro (3 million Dutch gulden), he spent this money mainly on doctoral and postdoctoral contracts for the description of languages of this area.

Pieter Muysken obviously felt deeply committed to the South American continent and especially to Bolivia. He was born in Oruro, where his father worked for a mining company, and during the first five years of his life he learned Dutch, Spanish, and Quechua simultaneously. However, he said that after his family moved back to the Netherlands, he forgot his Spanish and Quechua and later had to learn these languages again from scratch.

This fate – the fact that a small child can easily grow up with several languages, but that this knowledge can just as easily be lost if not constantly exercised – may have been one of the reasons that got him fascinated in language contact and multilingualism. Latin American studies and creole languages were the topics he concentrated on right from the beginning of his career in linguistics, and are the ones he is most associated with. This is reflected by his degrees and by the titles of the various academic positions he held.

In 1972, Muysken received his B.A. in Latin American Studies and Spanish from Yale University, where he also graduated in 1974 with an M.A. thesis entitled *Some syntactic aspects of creolization*. He received his doctorate in 1977 in Amsterdam with a dissertation entitled *Syntactic developments in the verb phrase of Ecuadorian Quechua*. 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, finally, he was appointed Professor of Linguistics at the department of General Linguistics of Radboud University Nijmegen, from where he retired in 2017.

It was during this last professorship – although the only one that did not bear any further specification in its name – that he intensified his endeavours on the research and documentation of Native American languages, thanks to the above-mentioned Spinoza award. My colleague Rik van Gijn and I started our doctoral contracts in this project on the same day at which Pieter took his position, and we spent almost five years next-door to his office¹. Pieter's cheerful personality set the tone for these years, his door was always open, and I was impressed by his psychological insights – quite important when dealing with people at this crucial stage of their lives.

With the Spinoza award, Pieter financed the 10-year project «Lexicon and Syntax», which included a research strand on the so-called South American paradoxon: Why is it that in South America, a few huge and wide-spread families (Arawakan, Cariban, Tupi-Guaraní, Macro-Gê)

¹ Thanks to Rik for informing me about Pieter's condition and finally, his death.

coexist with a particularly high number of tiny families and isolates ? It was typical of Pieter's approach to academia that he always had in mind the big questions, but did not pretend to be able to solve them within the scope of one such project. In practice, the focus of the Spinoza project was to lay the groundwork necessary for eventually getting closer to the answer.

Therefore, first of all, Muysken focused on the grammatical description of the isolates of the Bolivian-Brazilian border area (tentatively called the « Guaporé-Mamoré area », Crevels and van der Voort 2008). The project yielded a number of doctoral dissertations on languages especially from this area, some of them being the first comprehensive descriptions of these languages: Kanoê of the Brazilian Amazon area, which had only five remaining speakers at the time of description (Bacelar 2004); in Bolivia, the Andean-foothill languages Mosestén (of the tiny Mosestenan family; Sakel 2003) and Yurakaré (van Gijn 2006); and Movima of the Bolivian « Moxos » area (Haude 2006). These studies were complemented by descriptions of languages in Bolivia belonging to the large families of South America, such as Baure (Arawakan; Danielsen 2007) of the Moxos area and Yuki (Tupi-Guaraní; Villafañe 2004) of the Andean foothills. Pieter's « first love », the Andean area, was represented by a grammar on the extinct language Uchumataqu (Uru-Chipaya; Hannss 2008). Post-doctoral researchers were involved in the project as well. Mily Crevels went in search for speakers of Itonama (and indeed found some, with whom she worked for several years), Cayuvava and Canichana (which seem to have no more speakers) in the Moxos area. Simon van de Kerke met the last speakers of the near-extinct foothill language Leko. We do not know if and when all these languages would have been described without Pieter's initiative; many of them are critically endangered, and for some this was the last chance to be described with the collaboration of native speakers.

Another important result of the Spinoza project was the collection *Lenguas de Bolivia* (Crevels and Muysken 2009, 2012, 2014, 2015), which contains grammar sketches of the 34 native language of Bolivia and is intended for a Bolivian readership. Putting this collection together was an enormous effort for the editors. It involved not only contacting and

communicating with all the experts on the respective languages in different countries, proof-reading or translating the contributions, but also taking care of the publicity and the distribution of the volumes in Bolivia. The achievement this work represents cannot be overestimated. Most of the publications in the Spinoza project – like in Western academia in general – were written in English, and Bolivians (especially non-linguists) have only limited access to them. Offering readable grammar sketches of all the languages of Bolivia in Spanish to the larger public in the home country of these languages seems like a natural outcome of such a project, but still, it is not self-evident. Even though the a large part of the work was done by his collaborator Mily Crevels: The fact that Pieter took this enterprise so seriously reflects his unselfish attitude towards his research.

Towards the end of the Spinoza project, Pieter obtained an ERC Advanced Grant for the project *Traces of Contact*, which he used to complement the ground-laying language descriptions with a larger areal perspective. Theses were produced on noun-phrase structure (Krashnoukova 2012), on the encoding of tense, aspect, mood, and evidentiality (Mueller 2013), and on argument structure (Birchall 2014) in native languages of South America. Furthermore, Pieter co-edited a collective volume with topics on native South American languages (O'Connor and Muysken 2014).

All this is just an excerpt of the results that emerged from Pieter's initiatives. Pieter was a wonderful person and will be greatly missed. But even this short overview shows that he has achieved a lot of what he wanted to do in his life, and that he has given a lot to the world. Without Pieter, many of us would not be where we are now, and much of the knowledge on South American languages (and not only on them) would not exist today. May he rest in peace.

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