

## In Memoriam Erwin Koller

I am deeply saddened by the passing of Erwin Koller, one of my teachers and mentors, in Lisbon this weekend. It's a special gift when teacher and student become friends and form a lasting relationship and I will be forever grateful to Professor Koller for his teaching and his friendship.

During the three years I studied for my MA at the University of Würzburg, I must have taken at least one class with Professor Koller each term. I loved those classes and looked forward to them each week. They were supposed to be classes in German linguistics but they were much more: they were dialogues about language, culture, communication and literature, and Professor Koller never seemed particularly bothered about the official boundaries of the discipline. One of the highlights of my MA studies was a semester-long unit about *Unsagbares and Ungesagtes* "what we can't say and what we don't say" – a class partly inspired, as he told us, by his experience of learning Japanese. Like most disciplines, linguistics is far too focused on what is "there" in the data – rather than what is absent, as has only recently been started to be recognized more widely, including in growing research on silence.

Professor Koller was a great humanist, whose teaching and research doesn't easily fit the labels of disciplinary research specializations and a *Festschrift* devoted to him on the occasion of his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday – the all-too-recent publication date of 2007 is a poignant reminder that he died far too early – was appropriately entitled *Wildern in luso-austro-deutschen Sprach- und Textrevieren*. The metaphor is almost impossible to translate into English. *Wildern* literally translates as "poaching," which in English of course has nothing positive about it and as a motif for an academic career reeks of plagiarism if anything. However, in the Alpine folklore of southern Germany and Professor Koller's native Tyrol, *wildern* is associated with romantic Robin Hood-type heroes who refuse to be hemmed in by arbitrary and historically unjust laws. When I needed to translate the title for my publications list (it was, of course, a special honor for me to contribute to the *Festschrift* and my modest offering is [available from our resources section](#)), I translated the title as *Roughing it in the linguistic and textual wilds of Portuguese, Austrian and German*. While the Alpine outlaw romanticism is gone, a new cultural universe has been introduced: the vernacular experience of the New World – the experience of people "of no account," as Mark Twain called them in his 1891 travelogue; people who find themselves far from home, indeed homeless, and trying to make the best of it; in short, a metaphor for the on-the-move experience!

The editors of the *Festschrift*, Cristina Flores and Orlando Grossegeesse, offered a beautiful tribute and account of Professor Koller's career in their preface and I'm linking to both the [German](#) and [Portuguese](#) version here.

Professor Koller and myself left Würzburg around the same time in the early 1990s and we only ever met up face-to-face once in all the years since – when I visited the German Department at the Universidade do Minho in Braga, Portugal, where he was the head of the department, as a side-trip from a conference in Galicia in 1997. However, in all these years, we've been in contact by e-mail and Professor Koller followed my own budding career as a sociolinguist as a wonderful mentor and reader of my work. When Cristina Flores told me about his death yesterday, it was obviously impossible for me to attend the funeral and so I grieved by going through those e-mails, and I found that many of them made me smile, such as the one where he said that he'd just read one of my articles during a faculty board meeting; and offered the general advice that the only way to

survive boring faculty board meetings was to bring some interesting reading. I suppose in many ways Professor Koller's practice was a perfect example of *teaching to transgress* as bell hooks calls it, even if this label and the attendant feminist theorizing would have been very alien to him.

Unfortunately, Professor Koller's work is not widely known. It's not for lack of merit but because his work is mostly in the in-between spaces that no discipline lays claim to. His research includes such seemingly obscure topics as academic literacy in a non-standard language (the Franconian dialect of the area around Würzburg) (Koller 1991), love of Portuguese and the translation of poems from Portuguese into Swabian, another non-standard language of Southern Germany (Koller 1992) or the medieval concept of oral sins (Koller 2000) (a full list of his ca. 100 publications can also be found in the *Festschrift*). His work also falls between the cracks because the ever-increasing status of English as a global language means that other languages become less and less "interesting" and thus "research-worthy". On the occasion of his early retirement he sent me an e-mail in which he said – with characteristic self-irony – that it was fortuitous that his ill-health coincided with a slump in Portuguese students' interest in studying German. At the same time, he also pointed out to me that it was a smart move on my part to emigrate into English as at least there was more job-security in English linguistics compared to the humanities in any other language.

Professor Koller was a passionate multilingual, a lover of languages, an exemplary European, a great humanist and an inspiring teacher.

REQUIESCAT IN PACE!



Cristina Flores, & Orlando Grossegeese (Eds.) (2007). *Wildern in luso-austro-deutschen Sprach- und Textgefilden: Festschrift zum 60. Geburtstag von Erwin Koller* [Roughing it in the linguistic and textual wilds of Portuguese, Austrian and German: Festschrift for Erwin Koller on the occasion of his 60th birthday Braga, PT: Cehum – Centro de Estudos Humanísticos

Koller, Erwin (1991). "Fraenggisch gschriim?" – Eine Fehleranalyse unterfraenkischer Schueleraufsaezte. Tuebingen: Niemeyer  
 Erwin Koller (1992). Karl Moritz Rapp – Um lusofilo quase esquecido Runa: Revista Portuguesa de Estudos Germanisticos, 13-14, 475-484  
 Erwin Koller (2000). Mundsuenden: Ein Fastenpredigtzyklus Geilers von Kaisersberg Sprache und Dichtung in Vorderoesterreich. Ed. G.A. Plangg & E. Thurnher. Innsbruck, 136-172