

## LAUDATIO of OSWALD WERNER

*Rik Pinxten*

It is a great honor and a real pleasure for me to be allowed to address this Laudatio to Professor Dr. Oswald Werner.

Professor Werner has been a professor in linguistics and anthropology at Northwestern University (Chicago, USA) for thirty years now. Moreover, we had the wonderful opportunity to work and discuss with him in our department, where he has been acting as Visiting Professor for four months now. Without doubt this stay at our university will be remembered by all as an intellectual feast. On top of that, the students who were guided in their linguistic field work by professor Werner will carry with them the image of a demanding scholar, but also of a very charming and highly accessible man. The amount of hours he spent talking with them about the intricacies and pitfalls of their short field work can not be counted, but the image will forever remain with us.

Professor Werner has had a remarkable career, closely linked with a remarkable personal life. I have to talk a bit about the latter to situate the former.

Oswald Werner was born in 1928 into an academic family with a Hungarian-Slovak-German background. The line of descent can be traced back today to relatives in both Hungary and Slovakia.

Multilingualism was a characteristic of his youth from the start, since Hungarian, Slovak and German were the primary languages of his family. As a young man he went to study in Stuttgart, where he enrolled in the school of engineering. Evidently, the language of the school was German. After graduation he decided to emigrate to the United States of America, where he became a citizen.

In the United States he first performed his military duties and thus picked up some of the new language. He did not speak a word of English upon arrival in his new homeland. After the service he enrolled at

Syracuse University to study photo-journalism. When he changed to anthropology language and translation must have been a major concern for him. Later, after graduation from Syracuse with an MA in anthropology he was accepted by the University of Indiana at Bloomington in the department of anthropology. Anthropology was there and then closely linked to linguistics, and his tutor in anthropology (Carl F. Voegelin) collaborated closely with his teachers in linguistics (e.g., F. Householder, J. Lyons and T. Sebeok). Carl Voegelin had been working for many years in the Southwest of the USA, namely with Hopi Indians, while his wife F.M. Voegelin did research on the Southern Paiute in that area. It was in that part of the world that Oswald Werner's field work was to take shape. After a brief stay in the Mesa Verde area as an archaeological worker, he got in contact with the Navajo Indians, and kept working on their language and culture ever since.

Oswald Werner made his PhD. dissertation on Trader Navajo, focusing on transition and translation in language contexts from the start. The predominantly white traders on the reservation use a pidgin or simplified Navajo to communicate with their customers. The particularities of this intercultural communication setting drew Werner's attention. Afterwards he concentrated for over twenty years on the intricacies of the Navajo folk knowledge and became a specialist in this field. Meanwhile he was advanced from assistant professor to full professor by the distinguished department in anthropology of Northwestern University, once the home base of Herskovits, Hsu, Bohannan, E.T. Hall and G. Dalton. He served this university for thirty years, seven of which in his capacity of Chair of the Department. On top of that he started a Summer Ethnographic Field School in the Southwest, which initiated students in field work with Indians and Spanish speaking populations in that area of the world. The Summer School celebrated its 20th anniversary in 1992.

Professor Werner is a reknown specialist in the field of language and culture, thus crossing the disciplinary borders that often separate linguistics and anthropology. His publications on lexicography and semantics in general are alternated by his work on Navajo language and culture. But first and foremost Oswald Werner has had a lifelong concern

with methodology. It is from this interest that sprung the path breaking two-volume book on 'Systematic Field Work' which was published by Sage in 1987 and earned the nomination as best-selling book of the year on that publisher's list. The book not only detailed procedures and methods of linguistic field work, but it goes a long way in establishing the ways personal computers can be used in the field. It is the only book on ethnographic method that deals with ethnographic translation. Another focus in Werner's research is on epistemology in anthropology and the social sciences. This focus is present in the book on Systematic Field work, but also forms the core of a series of articles on the limits of social sciences, on folk knowledge, and so on. Finally, professor Werner published a large amount of scholarly papers, both in professional journals and in books.

Notwithstanding his American career Professor Werner must have kept a little yearning for Europe. In 1981 he returned to Hungary for a short field trip. He has returned several times since and started a more extensive field work on Hungarian gardens in 1987. It is our pleasure to have caught hold of him on yet another trip to Europe and to present him as candidate for the Sarton Medal of our university. The topic of his lecture is most certainly intriguing to us, Belgians, and it falls entirely in the vast competence professor Werner built up both in his personal life and in his professional career. Indeed, who better than him could aim to develop a model about the intricacies and possibilities of ethnographic translation and translation in general ?