

NECROLOGY

In memoriam Frans van Coetsem  
1919–2002

Frans van Coetsem, Professor Emeritus of Linguistics at Cornell University, prolific scholar, and esteemed teacher and colleague, died at his home in Ithaca, New York, on February 11, 2002. Over the course of his long professional career, Van Coetsem made numerous important and lasting contributions to Germanic linguistics and general linguistics and did so both directly through his own research and indirectly through the generous and inspiring mentoring he gave to his students.\*

Frans van Coetsem was born on April 14, 1919, in Geraardsbergen, a small provincial city in the southeastern corner of the Belgian province of East Flanders, just to the southwest of Brussels and directly on the Dutch-French language border. When Van Coetsem was still a boy, both of his parents passed away, and under the care of a close relative he was sent to a francophone boarding school, an experience that was for him of considerable importance, not only because he thus acquired the first of the several foreign languages he would later use professionally, but also because it reinforced in him his identity with and love for both his native Flemish dialect and the Dutch standard language. His early interest in language in general and Dutch in particular led him to enroll in the program in Germanic philology at the Catholic University of Leuven (Louvain). His studies were, however, interrupted by the German

---

\* In writing this piece I have drawn in a number of places on a coauthored obituary to appear in the spring of 2003 in the Memorial Statements of the Faculty, 2001–2002, Cornell University; the authors of that statement are Anthony Buccini, James Gair, Wayne Harbert, and John Wolff. I have also included some facts that I learned from the obituary by Frans's close friend, Odo Leys, which appeared in *Leuvense Bijdragen* 91.1–2 (2002); the brief quote of Leys is also from that article.

invasion and occupation of Belgium in 1940. During the war, Van Coetsem volunteered for service in the Belgian Army, and after the liberation of Belgium he was seconded to the British Army, with which he served as a translator during the Allied drive into Germany. After the war, Van Coetsem resumed his studies in Leuven where in 1946 he earned his licenciate degree and in 1952 his doctorate with a dissertation on the dialect of his hometown, Geraardsbergen, under the direction of L. Grootaers. While still a graduate student in Leuven, he was offered a position to work on the *Woordenboek der Nederlandse Taal* in Leiden and eventually became an editor for that project. It was during his years in Leiden that Van Coetsem produced his first major work, namely, the monograph *Das System der starken Verba und die Periodisierung im älteren Germanischen*, which was published by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Sciences in 1956. On the basis of this work, Van Coetsem received the degree of “geaggregeerde van het hoogonderwijs” in 1956, and in 1957 he was named the successor of Prof. Grootaers in Leuven. During this period he continued as a corresponding editor for the *Woordenboek* and in addition served as editor of the journal *Leuvense Bijdragen* (1958–1962). From 1963 on, Van Coetsem also was a professor of Germanic at the Rijksuniversiteit Leiden in the Netherlands, commuting between the two posts for several years.

Although Van Coetsem enjoyed very much working in Leiden and considered the possibility of taking up a full-time post there, it was the offer of a professorship in the Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics at Cornell University that he accepted in 1968. The decision to leave the Low Countries was not easy, especially given the disruption such a move would cause for his family. He was, however, strongly attracted to the academic atmosphere at the university level in the United States and specifically he found the relatively more egalitarian relationship between professor and graduate students and the degree to which that fostered a more active intellectual dialogue an important reason to make the move. Once at Cornell, Van Coetsem took full advantage of his new surroundings and proved himself to be an extremely engaging, inspiring and supportive mentor for many students in general linguistics and especially Germanic linguistics. His success in this regard is borne out by the number of his students at Cornell who themselves have gone on to become research scholars. It should be noted too that, although he retired from Cornell in 1989, he continued actively to support his old students and, moreover, agreed to work informally

with a few new Cornell students whose research interests naturally led them to seek his help. Upon his retirement, he did, however, withdraw from public life to an ever increasing degree, a trend that intensified after the death of his beloved wife, Juliette, in 1993. This withdrawal involved by no means a lessening of his passionate commitment to research; on the contrary, he developed and refined further his views on many of the various lines of inquiry in Germanic and general linguistics that had occupied him throughout his tenures at Leuven, Leiden, and Cornell, and he produced a remarkable number of important publications in the dozen years or so after his retirement from Cornell.

Van Coetsem is thought of first and foremost as a Germanicist and, without doubt, his many contributions on a very wide range of topics in Germanic established him as one of the leading figures in the field in the second half of the twentieth century. His knowledge and original contributions ranged, however, far beyond the borders of Germanic linguistics and will perhaps ultimately prove to be his most significant scholarly achievements. Some of his most important work concerned the following topics.

Within the field of Germanic, Van Coetsem made central contributions to the study of the development of the system of strong verbs and the several fundamental phonological and morphological issues that pertain thereto. In particular, his work is cited in connection with the problem of the origins and status of Proto-Germanic  $\hat{e}^2$ , a long-standing crux in the field, and his innovative approach tied the problem to his own perspective on further basic problems of Germanic, including umlaut and related consonantal conditioning. A more recent and general study of import within the field of Germanic that has its ultimate basis in his early work on Proto-Germanic is Van Coetsem's book of 1994, *The Vocalism of the Germanic Parent Language*. This monograph goes in an important respect beyond the purely phonological and morphological issues and concludes with an attempt to relate the linguistic developments of early Germanic to what we know of the broader social context in which those developments took place.

Van Coetsem had an abiding interest in the problem of the interrelationship of suprasegmental structures and segmental developments that led him to the crosslinguistic study of accent types. A number of his articles, including some coauthored with students, explored this topic in specific relation to Germanic developments and also in broader contexts. Again, he recently built on this earlier work and

produced a monograph on the topic (*Towards a Typology of Lexical Accent*, 1996).

What may well ultimately come to be regarded as Van Coetsem's most important contribution to the field of linguistics is his work on language contact and more specifically his theory of the two transfer types and their relationship to the stability gradient of linguistic structures and linguistic behavior of the bilingual speaker. His 1988 book, *Loan Phonology and the Two Transfer Types in Language Contact*, was a truly ground-breaking work but one that has been overshadowed in this country by the similar but less innovative and less sophisticated theoretical discussion of language contact by Thomason and Kaufman that appeared that same year. Van Coetsem felt the underappreciation of his views was perhaps a result of the presentation and therefore he continued to work on the subject, restating his position and refining his theoretical framework in the process. This work yielded several articles on the topic in the course of the 1990s as well as a further book, *A General and Unified Theory of the Transmission Process in Language Contact* (2000).

As mentioned above, Frans van Coetsem's wife Juliette, née DeBodt, died in 1993 and he felt her loss very deeply. She had been his childhood sweetheart and from 1947 his wife; more simply put in the dedication of one of his books, Juliette was his *levensgezellin*. For any and all who spent time with the Van Coetsems, their mutual devotion was readily apparent. Frans and Juliette van Coetsem were also very much devoted to their children and grandchildren who survive them: their daughter is Mieke Gouwerok-Van Coetsem of Seattle and she and her husband, Ad Gouwerok, are the parents of Frans and Juliette's two grandsons, Arick and Lars Gouwerok; their son is Paul van Coetsem who, with his wife, Judy, resides in Cortland, New York.

\* \* \*

Of Frans van Coetsem, Odo Leys has said that he "was een groot taalgeleerde maar hij was ook een goed mens, van een eerlijkheid van de zuiverste keraat"—he was without doubt a great linguist and equally without doubt he was also a good man. At some level, that formulation seems to be terribly understated but simplicity and understatement were very much attributes of Frans, and Leys's words are supremely well chosen.

\* \* \*

Frans was in many ways completely at home in his position as professor but he had little or no patience for intellectual pretension and less still for the often dishonest politics of academia. He found especially distasteful the ever-increasing amount of self-promotion that has become *de rigueur* in virtually all spheres of our society. Perhaps one can say that his attitude in this regard was idealistic and old fashioned but real criticism cannot be leveled at the belief that advancement and success should be based on the merit of one's work and one's work, indeed, one's life should be conducted with uncompromising honesty.

In his research, Frans always strove to have as broad a command as possible of the relevant literature. He assiduously cited and presented fairly the ideas of other scholars and often made a special effort to acknowledge their contributions. One should also add that Frans had very strong opinions about many issues, linguistic and otherwise, but those opinions were to my knowledge always developed gradually through critical consideration of conflicting or opposing views. Not surprisingly then, he was very much open to new ideas and willing to explore their value in an unprejudiced way. For example, during his early years at Cornell, Frans was quite open to the then still relatively young generativist movement and gladly explored the utility of that approach for problems in historical linguistics. Given the strong (American) structuralist element in his department at Cornell at that time, such openness to the new theoretical approach was surely not universally applauded, but Frans was not inclined to reject a general framework or particular theory unless he had worked with it and through it and seen for himself its limitations and faults. That he was willing to go against the preferred scientific orientation of his immediate surroundings and superiors can also be seen by his earlier embracing of (European) structuralist ideas during his days as a graduate student and young scholar in Leuven.

As a scholar, Frans's main concern was always steadfastly to understand and explain as best he could linguistic phenomena and he had no interest in compromising his research for the sake of intellectual politics and dogmatism.

\* \* \*

Any appreciation of Frans's life and work would be very much incomplete if it failed to address the great impact he had on many of those who studied with him. At least during his years at Cornell, it is, I believe, safe to say that Frans's success as a teacher had less to do with his command of traditional pedagogical skills and methods than with his intense passion for learning and his respect and affection for his students. His courses were generally less structured and less focused on the professor's presentation of facts and received opinion than those of most other teachers. This is by no means to say that the essential facts and established opinions were ever neglected in his courses but rather to say that Frans was always eager to get past what was known or assumed and tackle the interesting problems that were yet to be solved. In his courses, then, his students were often forced to do a great deal of work on their own if they wished to be able to participate in the inevitable discussions that would come up concerning the problems related to the course subject that most intrigued Frans. For those who made any effort to do so, the reward was great, for what one could learn in those sessions were the really important lessons for a scholar: the methods of how one finds interesting problems as well as how one should go about trying to solve them. Quite a few of Frans's students also received invitations to his home for research related discussions, dissertation advice, or collaboration on joint projects. Such sessions were generally very productive, always eminently *gezellig* and the stuff of cherished memories for the participants.

All in all, Frans's less formal and more personal way of teaching was extremely effective in helping graduate students develop as scholars; indeed, for more than a few, his manner of very naturally treating them as equals gave them much confidence, and the example of his own scrupulous method of conducting research gave them an excellent model to emulate; his passion for learning was always evident and inspiring.

\* \* \*

That Frans was fluent in a number of languages can hardly be considered out of the ordinary for a professional linguist, though the fact that he published scholarly works in at least five languages (Dutch, French, Frisian, German, and English) surely can be said to be exceptional. One should also note that Frans was not merely an armchair polyglot, as it

were, but rather someone who lived as a multilingual for virtually all of his life, from his childhood with his native Flemish dialect, standard Dutch, and French, through his military service as a translator of German and Dutch for English speakers, and on to his later move to the United States and the shift of his Dutch-speaking family to the anglophone surroundings of Ithaca. In the years that I knew Frans, he moved with complete ease between English, Dutch, and French, and occasionally in the course of an animated discussion, he did so in a way that very much surprised and amused all present, including Frans. Indeed, he himself was wont to joke about his bouts of codeswitching and was also inclined to criticize unduly his command of English. In point of fact, however, Frans had an excellent command of all the languages he worked with and worked on but he was extremely self-effacing for a man of such accomplishment and talent.

Given his lifelong, direct experience with multilingualism, it was perhaps inevitable that Frans become a student of language contact, and certainly his own linguistic behavior was an initial source of insight into the mechanisms and patterns of transfer. As he intimates in the preface to his 1988 book, *Loan Phonology and the Two Transfer Types in Language Contact*, it was, however, his observations of the linguistic behavior of his wife, Juliette, and her use of English and Dutch during their years in Ithaca, that served as the real catalyst for his research on the subject and ultimately for the development of his theory of the two transfer types. More specifically it was the patterns of the regular occurrence of various Dutch features in her imperfect but increasingly fluent English as she acquired that language wholly through practical means, as well as the patterns of her borrowing of English elements into her Dutch. These observations were considered first more in terms of the specific topic of loan phonology, which had been a concern of Frans since his earliest work on his native dialect of Geraardsbergen, but ultimately they became the impetus for exhaustive study of the existing literature on language contact and related issues.

The very immediate and personal experience that Frans had with bilingualism was undoubtedly an important factor in determining his approach to the subject of language contact: Frans sought to explain linguistic transfer first and foremost at the level where it actually takes place, at the level of the individual bilingual speaker. The majority of previous discussions of this subject treated the question of linguistic transfer—somewhat absurdly—in terms of the interaction of languages

or, with “stratal” theory, in terms of the interactions of large social groups, and consequently tackled the problem too far from the source to come to any clear explication of the actual mechanisms involved. Even in a sophisticated and insightful treatment of language contact such as that of Weinreich (1953), where the behavior of individual bilinguals is fully recognized as the locus of transfer and prominently analyzed as such, the use of imprecise terms such as “interference,” inherited from the discourse of the time, obscured thoroughly the simple, basic distinction that Frans brought to light in his work, that is, the distinction between *imposition* and *borrowing*, between *source-language agentivity* and *recipient-language agentivity*. The ultimate effects of language contact on broader or higher levels can and must be understood only proceeding from the starting point of the individual bilinguals who carry out linguistic transfers.

Frans’s work on language contact has been well received abroad and is regularly cited in publications by scholars outside the United States but here remains relatively and remarkably neglected in many circles. This neglect is puzzling in light of the several ways in which his model of two transfer types and their crucial relation to the stability gradient is so much clearer and more readily applicable to real data than the rather muddled notions that are most often cited in this country. Perhaps the lamentably superficial and misleading review of his 1988 book that appeared in *Language* 65.2 (1989) was a factor; it was certainly a disappointment to Frans and also to those who had read and comprehended his work. In the end, however, the light of good work shines through and I am certain in time his views on language contact will gain the wider recognition they deserve.

\* \* \*

In Ithaca there was a restaurant to which Frans and Juliette often went. On a number of occasions over the years, after Frans and I had finished long work-related discussions or editing sessions, they invited me along to that restaurant for dinner—Frans and I also went there a few times after Juliette’s death. I have no idea how long it was that they had been going there but it was a long time and they knew all the staff by name and the Van Coetsems always received very warm welcomes from them. Each time they went there, they always sat at the same table, one of a number of tables lining the south wall of the restaurant. What



distinguished this particular table from the others was its place directly beneath a large, framed print of a painting by Pieter Brueghel the Elder, namely, the work known as “The Wedding Banquet.”

The precise reasons why the Van Coetsems were so fond of this particular painting I do not know. Of course, it is a widely admired work by one of the great masters of the Northern Renaissance and surely its aesthetic value was as appreciated by Frans and Juliette as by so many others. But I cannot help but think that their attachment to this painting depended on other factors as well. It seems to me very likely that the presence of the painting above the table reinforced in them a feeling of connection to their native Flemish culture and the Low Countries. From a symbolic standpoint, it seems very fitting that the painting that so pleased Frans and Juliette depicts a scene of hospitality and conviviality among common, unpretentious people. And that the scene is of a wedding banquet reminds me of the lifelong partnership with Juliette that was for Frans always of central importance.

\* \* \*

Frans was an intensely private man and I hope I have not said more about him than, according to his tastes, I should have. He was also an undeniably great linguist from whose work real scholars will long profit. He will be remembered by those who knew him well for his great generosity, his unflagging loyalty, and his personal and professional integrity. A Dutch proverbial expression, which in

Latin form was the personal motto of an earlier scholar from the Low Countries, Hermann Boerhaave, fits well many aspects of Frans’s life and work: *Eenvoud is het kenmerk van het ware*—Simplicity is the mark of the true.

ANTHONY F. BUCCINI  
Chicago  
April 2003

REFERENCES

- Coetsem, Frans van. 1956. Das System der starken Verba und die Periodisierung im älteren Germanischen. *Mededelingen der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen, Afdeling Letterkunde, Nieuwe Reeks, Deel 19, No. 1*. Amsterdam: Noord-Hollandsche Uitgevers Maatschappij.
- Coetsem, Frans van. 1988. Loan phonology and the two transfer types in language contact. Dordrecht: Foris.
- Coetsem, Frans van. 1994. The vocalism of the Germanic parent language. Systemic evolution and sociohistorical context. Heidelberg: Carl Winter.
- Coetsem, Frans van. 1996. Towards a typology of lexical accent. "Stress accent" and "pitch accent" in a renewed perspective. Heidelberg: Carl Winter.
- Coetsem, Frans van. 2000. A general and unified theory of the transmission process in language contact. Heidelberg: Carl Winter.
- Weinreich, Uriel. 1953. *Languages in contact. Findings and problems*. The Hague, Paris, and New York: Mouton.