

HE HAD A DREAM ...

IN HONOUR OF SIEGMUND PRILLWITZ

The academic career of Siegmund Prillwitz began in 1971 immediately after he had finished his Ph.D. in German Language and Literature. It started tentatively first, when he, together with Rolf Schulmeister and Hubert Wudtke, began to investigate why the teaching of oral language and the training of the Deaf in schools showed so little success. He had no clear vision at that time that pointed to a solution of the problem. But his vision developed when we discovered the use of sign language in the communication of the Deaf.

Siegmund Prillwitz may look back with pride and satisfaction on a long academic life. His research successes form a lasting oeuvre, and his managerial achievements as founder of the Institute of German Sign Language will be remembered for a long time.

One of Siegmund Prillwitz's remarkable characteristics is that he was never satisfied with research on a small scale but instead always initiated large-scale projects. After several research projects which steadily grew in size he developed a human and social vision. One part of his vision was an educational setting that granted deaf children access to knowledge and access to a wide range of professions through the use of sign language. The other part of his vision was the establishment of a large institution where sign language could be studied and taught. He set up the Centre for German Sign Language and Communication of the Deaf in 1986 which, in 1993, became the Institute of German Sign Language and Communication of the Deaf. The Institute has grown significantly during the last decade and has an increasing number of important research projects. For ten years now it offers two study programs, a Master's programme for sign language studies and a diploma programme for sign language interpreters.

Once Siegmund Prillwitz had discovered the sign language of the deaf as a fascinating linguistic research object, he strongly opposed the oralist tradition in deaf education, the so-called German Method. Even though he had never pursued the idea of substituting oral education but had always proposed a bilingual approach, he was criticised very aggressively by the advocates of purely oral education, and there were many heated public debates. Siegmund Prillwitz was convinced that a holistic view should be followed, not separating language acquisition from socialisation or enculturation. His essentially psycholinguistic approach regarded the deaf person as an entity living within its surroundings in a democratic society.

Oralism, on the other hand, saw integration as a way of assimilating the deaf individual to the majority of the society. In the late 1980s there were a lot of disputes about this concept. These debates were dominated by hearing people who assumed that they had the power of definition. Siegmund Prillwitz fought against this until his ideas and aims were supported by minority right movements and were visible in changes in society and in the implementation of disability acts. Today he may be proud of the fact that through his early writings about sign language and communication of the Deaf he actively contributed to such important social improvements.

Language for Siegmund Prillwitz was never just an instrument or a medium. He did not differentiate between representation and memory or thinking, and problem-solving or learning, but he always thought of language as communication which develops in “every-day relations of experiences and actions assisted by a communicative exchange” (p. 274) with family members and the society. From the beginning he sketched an ecological perspective on language development, carefully showing the relation between cognition and socialisation.

Milestones on his way to international reputation were two international congresses:

- the 3rd European Congress on Sign Language Research, Hamburg July 26–29, 1989, and
- the International Congress “Sign Language Research and Application”, Hamburg March 23–25, 1990.

His major contribution to sign language research and his most innovative idea, however, was the development of the Hamburg Notation System (HamNoSys) in the, a notation for signs which was more comprehensive and more precise than previous notation systems. It has undergone a number of major revisions since it was first published. The major advantage of HamNoSys was that it could be used on a computer and stored in databases. It is thus ideal for use in attempts of semi-automatic language translation which is the aim of the current ViSiCAST project.

Siegmund Prillwitz realised very early that scientific research alone does not grant success on a political level. He therefore founded Signum Press – a medium for informing the public, for spreading ideas, and for extending the discussion forum. Thus Siegmund Prillwitz was an entrepreneur from the beginning, practising private-public-partnership in one person with considerable financial commitment on the part of his own private capital.

Apart from his ability to organise big scientific events and his capacity to acquire new funds for research projects, however, his most valuable talent is probably to surround himself with a number of engaged and loyal friends who share his vision.

Rolf Schulmeister

Heimo Reinitzer

We wish to express our gratitude to all colleagues who contributed an essay in honour of Siegmund Prillwitz and to those who wanted to contribute but could not make it in time to be included in this volume. Special thanks go to Tobias Meyer-Janson and Constanze Schmaling for helping us producing this volume.