Knud Lambrecht, Professor Emeritus of French Linguistics at the University of Texas at Austin, died on September 6, 2019, at the age of 80.

Lambrecht was born in Hamburg, Germany in 1939. At the age of 18, he migrated to Switzerland, where he earned a Licence ès Lettres (M.A.) in Classical Philology (Greek, Latin) and Modern Languages (German, French, Spanish) in 1966 at the University of Lausanne. During and after his studies, he taught Greek, Latin, German language and literature, translation theory, stylistics, grammar, and rhetoric at the junior high, high school, and university levels.¹

In the mid-70’s, Lambrecht turned his focus more specifically towards Linguistics and found his intellectual home at the University of California at Berkeley. Lambrecht earned his Ph.D. in Linguistics in 1986 and accepted an Assistant Professor position in the Department of French and Italian at the University of Texas at Austin, where he spent the remainder of his academic career until his retirement in 2010. By then, in addition to expertise in German, French, Spanish, Greek, and Latin, he had studied Yiddish, Hebrew, Turkish, Italian, and Lakota.

With characteristic humility and expressive economy, Lambrecht framed his central research question as: why are there so many ways to say the same thing in any given language?[¹] His answer was that the variant morphological, prosodic, lexical and syntactic forms used to encode propositional content in a language reflect language users’ conventionalized solutions to the problem of fitting sentence structures to communicative contexts. Lambrecht’s seminal book, *Information Structure and Sentence Form* (1994), changed the way that linguists look at the interaction of syntax, discourse, and prosody by examining it through the lens of construction-based syntax. Key to his approach was the simple observation that the formal features of an utterance (e.g., points of prosodic prominence, word order, morphology) encode what propositional content is to be taken as new (or focal), what propositional content is to be taken for granted, and what entities are to be treated as predictable participants of the predication. According to this model, focus marking is neither iconic nor governed by general algorithms; it is instead mediated by a set of constructions that instantiate a small universal inventory of *focus articulations*. His direct inspiration was the 19th century Austrian philosopher Anton Marty: Marty’s *Doppelurteil* (‘double judgment’) was Lambrecht’s predicate-focus (or, equivalently, topic-comment) articulation, while Marty’s *einfaches Urteil* (‘simple judgment’) was Lambrecht’s sentence-focus (or, equivalently, thetic) articulation. Following Marty, Lambrecht rejected the Aristotelian view that there is a single human judgment type, the categorical judgment. Throughout his work, Lambrecht noted that the thetic type, first brought to the attention of modern linguistics by the work of Kuroda (1972 *et passim*), had the most complex and

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multifarious instantiations in languages of the world. But, with characteristic acuity, Lambrecht noted (1994: 139-140) that several of the sentences given by Marty to illustrate the simple judgment type—in particular Gott ist ('God exists')—are in fact topic-comment, Doppelurteil sentences.

While the universal focus articulations were the cornerstones of Lambrecht’s cross-linguistic analysis of information-structure distinctions (Lambrecht 2000b), he attended to patterns unique to each language, in the constructionist tradition. For him, the manner of expression of each focus articulation in each language was as idiosyncratic as the constructional inventory of that language. The lesson here is about bricolage: speakers leverage existing structures of the language to make needed distinctions among focus articulations. It is thus unsurprising that Lambrecht draws frequently in his work upon analogies to evolutionary biology, as in the landmark 2001 Linguistics paper (Lambrecht 2001a), in which he provides a typological framework for the analysis of cleft sentences. The paper begins with an epigram from Steven Jay Gould, who himself quotes Darwin in noting the many traits of organisms that are imperfectly designed, "jury-rigged" adaptive responses.

Lambrecht’s oeuvre includes two highly influential books and over thirty articles and book chapters, many of which investigate, in broad terms, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics, and their interface. These works frequently analyze French and English but also incorporate Greek, Latin, German, Italian, and Spanish. Lambrecht’s works inspire and engage his readers through the clarity of his prose style, the conceptual coherence and rigor of his analyses, and the remarkable language facts that he retrieved from his overstocked storehouse of linguistic observations—from simple patterns that theorists have never noticed before (as in his analyses of vocatives [1996] and the French comme N construction [1995]) to intimidatingly difficult patterns that his work renders intuitively simple (as in his analyses of English 'incredulity responses' [1990] and English question accentuation [Lambrecht and Michaelis 1998]).

As a student of Professor Charles Fillmore at UC Berkeley, Lambrecht adopted an approach to form and meaning analysis based on Construction Grammar (Fillmore, Kay, and O’Connor 1988, Kay and Fillmore 1999). As Lambrecht explained, the Construction Grammar framework allows researchers to analyze constructions "as form-function pairings whose structural and semantic properties cannot, or not entirely, be accounted for in terms of other properties of the grammar of a language or of universal grammar and which therefore require independent explanation" (Lambrecht 2001a:466). Lambrecht made major contributions to Construction Grammar; these include his (1996) Language paper, co-written with Laura Michaelis, "Toward a Construction-based Model of Language Function: The Case of Nominal Extraposition," one of the first works on Construction Grammar to appear in a major journal. The paper is still widely cited as a strong early demonstration of the need for constructional type hierarchies or "inheritance networks." Lambrecht’s work has also influenced allied function-oriented theories of syntax, in particular Role and Reference Grammar, which integrated Lambrechtian focus articulations into its formal descriptive architecture (Van Valin and LaPolla 1997).

His important contribution to grammatical theory notwithstanding, Lambrecht was first and foremost a specialist of French linguistics. Many of his most noteworthy publications entailed the
insightful description of frequently overlooked grammatical constructions of spoken French. Inspired by Henri Frei’s seminal work published in 1929, La grammaire des fautes (The Grammar of Mistakes), Lambrecht analyzed colloquial, spoken French syntax in his early book, *Topic, Antitopic, and Verb Agreement in Non-Standard French* (1981). In this book, Lambrecht pioneered the use of corpus data (the 1974 François corpus) to explore how non-standard constructions formed the basis of the “preferred-clause structure” of spoken French that differed in systematic ways from the canonical sentences found in most French grammars of the day. His contributions to French morphosyntax included a wide variety of such spoken constructions, such as dislocations, null complements, presentational clefts, and vocatives, to name a few.

Lambrecht’s focus on colloquial, spoken French encountered a lot of resistance. But with his keen ear for spoken language, it was not uncommon for Lambrecht to point out non-standard usage to native speakers who would sometimes accuse him of having ‘heard it wrong’, only to discover later that he had it exactly right. One of his students once insisted that French speakers do not drop the “ne” in spoken French, saying “Je te crois pas” (“I don’t believe you,” with the “ne” absent), proving Lambrecht’s point.

Lambrecht was highly regarded by his students and colleagues as a dedicated and caring teacher with a charming sense of humor and a love of multilingual puns. During his career, he taught a wide variety of undergraduate and graduate courses, including Introduction to French Linguistics, Comparative Stylistics, French Syntax and Semantics, Linguistic Approaches to Translation, Word Order in Romance Languages, and The Grammar of Spoken French. In 1996, he received the President’s Excellence in Teaching Award for his contributions to the undergraduate French program at UT Austin. In 2004, he was awarded the Outstanding Graduate Teaching Prize in recognition of his inspired mentorship of graduate students in the field. His students lauded him for helping them to improve the rigor and clarity of their analyses, and they especially appreciated the extensive and nuanced feedback that he routinely provided on all their written work. In 2014, several of his graduate students, along with colleagues and co-authors, honored him with a Festschrift entitled *Perspectives on Linguistic Structure and Context: Studies in Honor of Knud Lambrecht.*

If it’s fair to draw a line from one’s political and social values to one’s linguistic interests, it can be noted that Lambrecht was a great believer in empathy and equity, and an opponent of arrogance and snobbery, intellectual and otherwise, throughout his life. His focus on spoken language, and on grammatical patterns devised for conversation, makes sense in light of his enduring belief in human worth and his interest in the human condition.

References


