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### Hans J. Vermeer (24 September 1930 - 4 February 2010) A thinker and his work

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## Obituary

**Hans J. Vermeer (24 September 1930 – 4 February 2010)**

### A thinker and his work

Before I attempt to give an overview of Hans J. Vermeer's scientific legacy – and certainly it can only be an attempt, as his work comprises more than 300 publications in many areas of research – I would like to say that I am proud and thankful that he was my teacher and friend. To work for and with him was always a pleasure; it was a fascinating intellectual adventure.

On 17 January 2010, Hans J. Vermeer, interpreter and professor, was awarded the honorary doctorate by the University of Mainz's faculty of translation, linguistics and cultural studies for his extraordinary contribution to the faculty. To a large extent, translation studies in Germany and in other European countries owes its status as an independent discipline to this man, who developed new and important theoretical approaches such as *skopos* theory.

However, this was not his only contribution to the humanities. His fields of research included German language studies, Indology, Portuguese language studies, and linguistics – the discipline in which he wrote his doctoral thesis on colour expressions in Indo-Germanic languages and the problem of their translation, and in which he gained his professorial qualification in 1968 with a study of the constitution of Central South Asian languages. The breadth and profundity of his education and knowledge was astonishing. A disciple of Kurt Baldinger, Gerhard Eis, Anton Scherer and Ulrich Schmoll, his research ranged from German medieval technical literature, to sixteenth-century German travel literature, through to publications on the most practical of translation- and translator training-related matters. His publications in these areas show the multiplicity of his interests, the historical depth of his investigations and his phenomenological openness.

His academic career began at the University of Heidelberg in 1950, where he obtained his degree as a translator for English and Spanish in 1952 and as a translator and interpreter for Portuguese in 1953/1954. After a spell in Portugal studying to teach Portuguese, his very first work, dated 1959 (with A.C. Pinto da Rocha e Cunha), was a gramophone record for Portuguese pronunciation. From 1953 he also worked as a translator and interpreter.

His life was characterized by an insatiable desire for knowledge and its discussion, either inwardly by developing his texts or with other scholars and students at the university. For him, the university was a place where freedom of *nous* could lead to the genuine evolution of thoughts and theories. Multilingual (he spoke over twenty languages) and with multiple areas of expertise (he had studied economics, general and comparative historical linguistics, and Romance and German literatures), he worked at the Universities of Heidelberg and Mainz-Germersheim from the 1950s, holding the newly created, first chair in translation

studies at Heidelberg and publishing important works in the field of Hindi and linguistics as well as translation studies. He retired in 1992.

Hans Vermeer always opposed the greed for recognition, and remained focused on the matter itself. He was consistently aware of the perspectivity and temporal limitations of theories. The essayistic style of his writing and his desire to debate with and learn from his students, to go beyond his own perceptions and question his own and his discipline's insights, is a testament to this conviction.

Yet what was Hans Vermeer's discipline? There is no doubt that translation studies was his favourite field of research. He dedicated more than a half of his publications to it, but at the same time sought intense dialogue with and inspiration from other disciplines. Hans Vermeer can be regarded as having been ahead of his time: a pioneer of the current trend of interdisciplinary study.

Probably his most quoted work is *Grundlegung einer allgemeinen Translationstheorie* [Foundation of a General Translation Theory] of 1984, written with Katharina Reiß. In this publication Vermeer dealt with principles for the elaboration of a translation theory and created the basis for a new, functionalist theoretical approach to studying translation, which later became known as "skopos theory" – the idea that translation is a form of action, having an aim or purpose and leading to a result, a new situation and probably a "new object", as he wrote in "Skopos and Commission in Translational Action" (1989). Fully aware of the dynamic character of theory and the necessity of its amplification and evolution in time and space, he set out the debates that had arisen around his ideas in *A Skopos Theory of Translation (Some Arguments For and Against)* in 1996, and went beyond this to engage with the works of other thinkers. Early on, he discussed essential hermeneutic and philosophical questions, asking about the impact of cognition on translation, which is, among other things, dependent on cultural imprint.

Hans Vermeer was interested not only in theoretical deliberations but also in implementing new and better curricula for translation degree programmes. Keen to change the then accepted paradigm that the only crucial prerequisite of translational competence is linguistic knowledge, and to create a new view of translational competence as an independent competence and qualification, he made a vital contribution to the increasing sophistication of translator training in Europe. From 1986 he edited the journal *TextconText*, from 1989 also *th (translatorisches handeln)*. With *TextconText* he gave a voice to less famous or as yet unknown scholars, of whom no small number have since become academic teachers of translation and translation studies.

Even as professor emeritus, Hans Vermeer's creativity continued unabated. In this period he wrote his famous seven-volume history of translation, the most extensive publication in this area of research. Other studies addressed the work of Walter Benjamin (*Übersetzen als Utopie* [Translation as Utopia], 1996) and process theory (*Die Welt, in der wir übersetzen* [The World in which we Translate], 1996).

In 2006 he published a theoretical approach to translation that considered new findings in neuroscience, *Versuch einer Intertheorie der Translation* [Attempt at an Intertheory of Translation], and in cooperation with students of Istanbul's Okan University he studied Luhmann's theory of social systems in terms of its application to translation, which led to *Luhmann's "Social Systems" Theory: Preliminary Fragments for a Theory of Translation*.

He gave his last lecture as keynote speaker at the Humboldt University in Berlin during a conference entitled “History of translation – building blocks for a history of knowledge transfer”. His own text had the title “Vom Altern der Texte” [On the Ageing of Texts]. The conference motto came from Alexander von Humboldt: “Überall geht ein früheres Ahnen dem späteren Wissen voraus” – “everywhere, advances in knowledge are preceded by an anticipatory intuition”. The motto is in line with Hans Vermeer’s thinking: his texts and research will not grow old but are now both knowledge and anticipation, and we will continue to engage with them.

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