
KURT BALDINGER



FOTO-GÄRTNER

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KURT BALDINGER died in Heidelberg on 17 January 2007, at the age of eighty-seven. His was one of the most interesting and most rapid careers. At twenty, while a student at the university, he became the youngest licensed trainer of physical education in Switzerland (Lyceum in Zuoz, Upper Engadin). Having received his Ph.D. at Basel in 1948, he was hired to teach and became professor at twenty-nine and, just a year after his *Habilitation* (1952), full professor at Humboldt University in East Berlin. From 1949 to 1962 (that is, after the erection of the Berlin Wall) he was director of the Institute of Romance Languages at the Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften in East Berlin. During these years he became the teacher and mentor of the best scholars in the field of Romance linguistics within the former German Democratic Republic (DDR). In 1957, five years before the end of this activity, he joined the University of Heidelberg and a year later, at the age of thirty-nine, was elected to membership by the Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften.

At this point we may interrupt the course of honors and ask ourselves what made such a rapid career possible. An essential factor was his descent: Baldinger, born at Binningen near Basel, was a Swiss citizen, which allowed him to take the position at Humboldt University. But what helped more was the fact that he had been a pupil of Walther von Wartburg, the Swiss scholar whose research in linguistics (*Französisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*) had gained him admittance to the Hall of Fame of Romance Studies. Baldinger always kept his allegiance to his teacher's field of expertise: historical linguistics and etymology. This can already be seen from his first monograph entitled *Kollektivsuffixe und Kollektivbegriff*.¹

A special and rich talent supplemented the already mentioned conditions. From the beginning Baldinger embedded his linguistic studies in a theory of semantics.²

Before long, he transcended the Gallo-Roman realm and entered the Ibero-Roman field with a monograph on the genesis of the linguistic areas of the Iberian Peninsula. This was soon translated into Spanish and increased with each edition.³ Baldinger had furthermore the

¹Kurt Baldinger, *Kollektivsuffixe und Kollektivbegriff: ein Beitrag zur Bedeutungslehre im Französischen mit Berücksichtigung der Mundarten*. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1950 (Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Romanische Sprachwissenschaft; 1).

²Kurt Baldinger, *Die Semasiologie: Versuch eines Überblicks* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1957) (Vorträge und Schriften/Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, 61). Kurt Baldinger, *Teoría semántica: Hacia una semántica moderna* (Madrid: Ediciones Alcalá [Colección Romania: Serie Lingüística], 1970); 1980 English, 1984 French.

³Kurt Baldinger, *Die Herausbildung der Sprachräume auf der Pyrenäenhalbinsel: Querschnitt durch die neueste Forschung und Versuch einer Synthese* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag,

gift to describe complex phenomena in lucid terms, so that readers were enlightened and had to wonder why nobody else had seen them in this way. A case in point is a paper “Post- und Prädetermination im Französischen,” published in 1968.⁴ He never failed to make historical linguistics interesting and engaging, especially for the Republic of Workers and Farmers, as the former DDR styled itself. A sample is his study of the various terms for the farmer and their successive changes (*villain, paysan, roturier*), a study that of course had to be embedded in a historical context.

In these activities Baldinger was helped by the fact that he was a paradigm of knowledge, an *abîme de science*. He gives the reader the impression that he has read everything and knows everything, be it words for stupidity, pisciculture in the French region of Bresse, the judicial terminology used in the Gascogne, the “Way” in the Romance languages, the technical terms of the tobacco industry, the subtle nuances of official announcements, or slang names for the head and their significance for linguistic systems, etc. His productivity was enormous: the list of his publications in the volume of selected papers presented to him on his seventieth birthday contains 70 monographs, 261 papers, and 1,890 reviews (their number is in large part a consequence of his long years as editor of the most prestigious journal in Romance studies).⁵

Characteristically Baldinger was open to everything, reaching well beyond the limits of his own field, within which a narrow-minded person might have stayed. In this way he promoted talents, for instance Klaus Heger, a pronounced theorist, or Georg Bossong, whose doctoral dissertation was so outstanding that it was at once accepted as his *Habilitationsschrift*.⁶ Baldinger himself was not only a workaholic, but also knew how to make others work; this led to a number of dictionaries (*Dictionnaire de l'Ancien Gascon, Dictionnaire Étymologique de l'Ancien Français*).

Serious scholar though he was, Baldinger possessed a wonderful gift to make fun of himself. He was the opposite of many dull lexicographers, whom he often derided. It is no wonder that he particularly loved authors who displayed linguistic creativity and esprit, such as

1958). Kurt Baldinger, *La formación de los dominios lingüísticos en la península ibérica* (Madrid: Gredos, 1963) (Biblioteca románica hispánica/1; 10). The German version of 1958 had 194 pages, the second Spanish edition had grown to almost 500.

⁴In *Festschrift Walther von Wartburg zum 80. Geburtstag*, Band 1: 87–106 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1968).

⁵*Die Faszination der Sprachwissenschaft. Ausgewählte Aufsätze zum 70. Geburtstag mit einer Bibliographie*, ed. Georges Straka and Max Pfister.

⁶*Probleme der Übersetzung wissenschaftlicher Werke aus dem Arabischen in das Altspanische zur Zeit Alfons des Weisen* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1979).

François Rabelais in the sixteenth century or San-Antonio (Frédéric Dard) in the twentieth century.

Here the *cursus honorum* can be continued, for it is obvious that a scholar of such standing received many honors. Baldinger was a visiting professor at many universities at home and abroad and the recipient of numerous honorary degrees, especially from Iberia and Latin America. Less pleasant for him was his election as *Rektor* of the university for the year 1968–69, when student unrest was at Heidelberg, next to Berlin, the most virulent.

Multa senem circumveniunt incommoda, says Horace in the *Ars poetica*. For Kurt Baldinger the eyes were the *partes minoris resistentiae*. He had always been very short-sighted and was blind for the last decade of his life. The still active scholar suffered deeply from the fact that he could hardly work any more. He was dependent on his wife, Heidi, who, together with his four daughters, supported him admirably.

Elected 1976

WOLFGANG RAIBLE

Professor Emeritus of Romance Philology
and General Linguistics
Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg

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