

# Frans van Coetsem

*April 14, 1919 — February 11, 2002*

Frans van Coetsem was born on April 14, 1919 in Geraardsbergen, Belgium. Frans was the quintessential linguist, for languages and linguistics was his consuming interest and focus of his life from his earliest years until his final period as Professor Emeritus of Linguistics at Cornell University. Frans' home situation made it natural that a boy with a bent for language and a consuming interest in how language works should be drawn to a career as a linguist. His hometown is situated in the Flemish-speaking area close to the linguistic boundary with French. Also, it so happened that the home dialect of Flemish in Geraardsbergen differs strongly from standard Dutch, so that as soon as Frans entered school, he had to learn to work in a new language. Shortly thereafter, he was orphaned, losing father, mother and younger brother in quick succession. He was sent to live with an unmarried aunt who had little notion of how to handle a young boy and sent him off to a nearby French-language boarding school. The experience colored his life and may explain two opposite traits in his personality: his self-sufficiency—that is, ability to work and produce in total isolation, and the strong need to form warm and strong bonds with his wife and children. Certainly switching to a school with a new language was traumatic, but it gave Frans an excellent start toward becoming a polyglot. He went on to write books and articles in no less than five languages: German, French, Dutch, English, and there is at least one article in Frisian. It was the childhood in three languages and the multi-lingual nature of the community in which he grew up that piqued his interest in linguistics and led him to study Germanic linguistics and philology at the Catholic University of Leuven (Louvain). His studies were interrupted by the German invasion when he joined the Belgian army. In the last months of the war, Frans was assigned as translator for the British Army during the invasion of Germany. Evidently, he had managed to obtain a solid enough knowledge of English and German to translate between them, although both of them were foreign to him. After the war, he returned to his studies in Leuven, where he earned his licentiate in 1946 and his Ph.D. degree in 1952, writing a dissertation on the dialect of his hometown, Geraardsbergen. While still doing graduate studies, Frans was offered a position with the Institute of Netherlands Lexicography, Leiden, Netherlands, as a lexicographer and later as editor of the great Dutch dictionary, the *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal*. While working in the Institute, he published his first really important work, a study of the strong verbs in Germanic (1956). On the basis of this work, he received the degree of “geaggregeerde van het hoger onderwijs”, the post-Ph.D. degree that in Europe qualifies a scholar to receive a professorial appointment, and in 1957, he was called to Leuven as the successor of Professor Grootaers, his former advisor. At the same time, he continued with the

Lexicographic Institute as corresponding editor. He was also the editor-in-chief of the journal *Leuvense Bijdragen* from 1958-62. In 1963, he was called to Leiden University, where he was made Chairman of the Department of Historical Germanic Linguistics, continuing at the same time with his professorial duties in Leuven. In 1968, Frans decided to leave Europe and accept an offer from Cornell's Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics. It was a difficult decision for Frans and his family, for Frans was happy as a professor in Leiden, and it was hard to move far from family and friends to a new land. However, Frans was also attracted to the academic atmosphere in American universities and particularly at Cornell. The relatively more egalitarian relationship between professor and graduate students and the degree to which that fostered a more active intellectual dialogue was an important impetus for the decision to make the move.

At Cornell, Frans chaired the committees of seven Ph.D. students, all of whom have become outstanding scholars in their own right. But this is hardly the total story of his contribution, for he was an extremely engaging, inspiring and supportive mentor for his students in general linguistics and especially Germanic linguistics and was often chosen as a member of a student committee until well after retirement in 1989. Throughout his years, Frans gave popular and highly regarded courses.

His influential 1956 monograph on the vocalism of the Germanic verb placed Frans among the very top scholars in his field, and in 1970, he was inducted as a Member of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 1990, Frans was singled out for honor by the Meertens Institute in Amsterdam, where he gave the keynote address at a colloquium on dialect and standard language organized by the Royal Academy. Throughout his career, Frans published influential and widely quoted articles on various aspects of historical Germanic phonology and morphology, but it was in his years after retirement that he was most prolific and produced his most definitive work. 1994 saw the publication of *The Vocalism of the Germanic Parent Language*, a work which is important not only for its innovative solutions to some of the most difficult problems of Germanic historical phonology, but for the insights it provided based on Frans' wider perspective on the nature of Germanic phonology and morphology.

Although Frans is best known as a Germanist, he had an abiding interest in issues of general linguistics that enabled him to explore questions of Germanic linguistics in broader contexts. In 1996, he published a widely admired work of general linguistic importance, *Towards a Typology of Lexical Accent*. His life experiences of growing up in a multilingual community and later in life moving with his family to an English-speaking community, led him to think seriously about issues of language contact. It is in this area that Frans produced what may ultimately come to be regarded as his most important contribution to the field of linguistics—that is, his theory of the two

transfer types and their relationship to the stability gradient of linguistic structures and linguistic behavior of the bilingual. His book of 1988, *Loan Phonology and the Two Transfer Types in Language Contact*, was a leap forward in the study of bilingualism from the point of view of human cognitive abilities and was regarded in Europe as a truly groundbreaking work. In the United States, it did not receive similar appreciation and failed to affect the framework in which language contact was investigated to the extent that Frans had hoped. He thus continued to restate his position more clearly and rework his theoretical framework, producing his impressive work, *A General and Unified Theory of the Transmission Process in Language Contact* (2000). Upon his death, he left behind a completed manuscript on the same subject, *Topics in Contact Linguistics*.

After his retirement, Frans withdrew from public life to an ever-increasing degree. He did, however, continue to help his old students and worked informally with new Cornell students who sought his help. In addition to his remarkable academic publications in Germanic and general linguistics, Frans spent a considerable amount of time researching and writing about a topic outside his main fields of study, namely, that of human consciousness. None of this has become public at this point, but we can be sure it is, like other instances of Frans' life work, the product of a clear-thinking and imaginative mind.

In 1947, Frans married his childhood sweetheart, Juliette DeBodt, with whom he enjoyed a long and happy marriage until her death in 1993. The couple was inseparable, and after her passing, Frans lived in the certainty that she was still in communication with him. Frans and Juliette left two children, Paul van Coetsem of Cortland, New York, and Mieke Gouwerok-van Coetsem of Seattle. They have two grandsons, Arick and Lars Gouwerok, whom Frans and Juliette adored.

Frans was an intensely private person and preferred to socialize little outside of the circle of close friends and family. He was, however, open and hospitable to his students and often had them over. His students recall afternoon get-togethers over excellent wines and hors d'oeuvres and lively interaction with the whole family. Frans remained a European in much of his personal life and inclination, but he chose to become an American citizen in recognition that America was his new home and in loyalty to the new land, which had given him so much.

*Anthony Buccini, James Gair, Wayne Harbert, John Wolff*