

# Olli Välikangas

\* 21.2.1933 † 10.9.2017



**OLLI VÄLIKANGAS**, Professor emeritus of Romance Philology at the University of Helsinki, died in Helsinki on 10th September 2017. He had been born there on 21st February 1933. His father was a notable architect, Martti Välikangas, who had designed numerous important buildings for construction in Helsinki and other cities in Finland. Olli used to complain that the multistory building that his father had designed for a prominent site on Kaisaniemenkatu in the centre of Helsinki had been demolished later and replaced with the “façadeless” Pukeva department store. That, too, was eventually demolished, and the site is now occupied by Helsinki University Library.

Olli Välikangas’ schooling was interrupted by a year of evacuation to Sweden in 1944, and this was always said to be the reason for his excellent command of Swedish. In fact, almost 70 years later he wrote his memoirs from that time in Swedish, under the title *Erövra Sverige åter. Lidningö 1944: Minnen från tiden som krigsbarn* (2011). Having graduated from Helsinki Lyceum in 1950, he studied Romance and English philology at the University of Helsinki, gaining a master’s degree in 1956 and a licentiate in 1959. The work

required for his doctorate took him to Paris, where he followed the teachings of the major French linguists of the day, Géraud Antoine and Robert-Léon Wagner, chiefly on visits that took place in 1957-58 and 1960. As he himself wrote in the preface, his doctoral thesis, presented at the University of Helsinki in 1966, was the culmination of ten years of research. This extensive work on *Les termes d’appellation et d’interpellation dans La comédie humaine d’Honoré de Balzac* was published in the Mémoires series of the Modern Language Society of Helsinki in 1965. This study of forms of address in Balzac’s monumental series of novels produced over the period 1829–1850 could be regarded as a pioneering work in a field of linguistic research that has attracted the attention of scholars only in recent decades, namely conversation analysis and interaction studies. It also represented historical sociolinguistics, a field of diachronic linguistics that has only recently come to the fore, so that the term as such was not known at that time.

Välikangas was appointed docent in French at the University of Helsinki in 1967, shortly after gaining his doctorate, and was subsequently acting associate

professor of Romance philology, a newly created post at that university, and acting professor of the same subject at the University of Turku before his appointment to the chair of Romance philology in Helsinki in 1973. He held this position continuously until his retirement in 1996, and was also docent at the University of Turku for the period 1972-1998. The principal honorary positions that he held in the course of his career were membership of the Matriculation Examinations Board (1985-1997) and the chairmanship of its modern languages committee (1990-1997). He was also active in the Modern Language Society of Helsinki, one of the oldest scientific societies in Finland, serving first as its long-standing deputy chairman (1981-1995) and then as its chairman (1995-2002). He was elected a member of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters in 1982.

In his research Välikangas moved effortlessly from one topic or field of study to another. He followed up his doctoral work on forms of address with a further extensive paper on the use of the second person singular and plural in Balzac's novels, the first part of which appeared in *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, the journal of the Modern Language Society, in 1967. Unfortunately the second part was never published, but he did return to the same theme almost 40 years later, in 2004, in connection with a conference on dialogue organized by the same society, the proceedings of which were published as volume LXVI of its *Mémoires* in 2006. In the meantime forms of address had gained a prominent position in modern linguistics, and he presented a paper on the treatment of the corresponding forms in 18th-century books on language usage in

Italian at a conference in 2005 (published in volume LXVIII of *Mémoires*). He had also returned to the question of style in the works of Balzac in his paper "Balzac face à son texte: le début de la 'La vieille fille'" (1983), again based on a paper given at a conference in 1981, and in his "Glanures balzaciennes: aspects de la langue des romans de jeunesse", published in 1999.

Another theme in Välikangas' research in addition to forms of address was contrastive linguistics, chiefly comparisons between Finnish and French, in which he was a pioneer as far as French was concerned. The cooperation that he initiated with the University of Paris III (Sorbonne Nouvelle) in the later 1970s resulted in the arranging of six contrastive conferences, held alternately in Finland and France, in the subsequent decades. He himself had published an extensive paper comparing the Finnish verb *ottaa* with the French *prendre* in *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* as early as 1970, before contrastive linguistics had become established as a major field of language study in Finland. Later, in 1987, he wrote a book of almost 300 pages entitled *Éléments de syntaxe contrastive du verbe français-finnois* together with two former students of his, Mervi Helkkula (professor of French at the University of Helsinki from 2003 onwards) and Ritva Nordström, which was published by the university's Department of Romance Languages. He also produced several shorter papers focused specifically on verb syntax for publication in *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* or in the proceedings of the Finnish-French conferences.

A third significant object of study was adverbs and the particles that had developed from them, starting out from a num-

ber of synchronic and diachronic studies of the French adverb *déjà* that appeared from the 1970s onwards, in which he traced its origins and compared it with the Italian adverbs *già* and *diggià* and the German *schon*, for instance. The emphasis was naturally on the semantics of these adverbs, including special cases such as *Comment s'appelle-t-il déjà?/Wie heisst er schon?* ('What did you say his name was?'). These considerations of several languages side by side demonstrate very well the versatility of Olli Välikangas as a linguist. Unfortunately the monograph that he had planned to write on this topic never materialized, although he had collected most of the material required for it and it would perhaps not have taken too much time to organize it.

As a proficient linguist and widely read scholar, Olli Välikangas was capable of surprising those conversing with him by entering into an analysis of Bruckner's symphonies, for instance. After his retirement he learned Hungarian and visited Hungary to lecture on his own fields of

study. The summers he would always spend in his villa at Villinki, in the Helsinki archipelago, where colleagues and foreign visitors were able to enjoy his hospitality in a memorable fashion, while his skiing trips to Lapland with his predecessor Professor Veikko Väänänen continued into the 1980s and 1990s for as long as Väänänen's health permitted. Among Välikangas' other interests was chess, and he gained quite a reputation with his paper on references to chess in French literature. He was also a gifted speaker, whose humorous and ingenious speeches at the annual celebrations of the Modern Language Society and at the closing dinners of Finnish and Nordic conferences will remain in the minds of listeners for a long time to come. He made a point of regularly attending the triennial congresses of Nordic Romance linguists, but his failing health meant that he was no longer to be seen at these, or indeed at Helsinki University events, or even at the Modern Language Society every March, in the last years of his life.

*Obituary by Juhani Härmä  
and Elina Suomela-Härmä*