
Nachruf

Manfred Bierwisch (*28.07.1930 – †31.07.2024)

Wolfgang Klein

He was a legend. He was an eminent scholar. He was an honest person in difficult times. He was a strong ally to our institute, of which he has been an external scientific member since 1985. And above all, he was a wonderful friend for many in Nijmegen and elsewhere. Plain facts can never convey worthy a picture of his kindness.

Born on July 28, 1930 in Halle, Manfred studied German philology in Leipzig with Theodor Frings, Ernst Bloch, and Hans Mayer from 1951–1956. No, that is not correct: in 1952, he was arrested for political reasons and sentenced to 18 months in prison, of which he served 10. After his release due to an amnesty, he was allowed to resume his studies. In 1956, he became a research assistant at the *Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften in Berlin*. In 1961, he received his doctorate in Leipzig for his thesis *Zur Morphologie des deutschen Verbalsystems*. Published in revised and extended form two years later as *Grammatik des deutschen Verbs*, it became a classic; in the first ten years alone, it was reprinted eight times: a milestone, the first German grammar who merged solid philological expertise with principles of the still young generative linguistics. From 1962 until 1973, he was a member of the “Arbeitsstelle Strukturelle Grammatik”, a small group of young linguists who rapidly gained international reputation with him as its figurehead. In 1973, the Arbeitsstelle was dissolved, but Manfred was allowed to continue his work at the Academy. He was not allowed to travel abroad; but numerous visitors, mostly from West Germany and the US, came to see him in Berlin, usually in his one-room flat in the Bürgerheimstrasse; the flat was bugged, and many years later, he could study the transcriptions of these discussions. In 1978, the vice-president of the Academy, Werner Kalweit (the name deserves to be mentioned), began to support him; in particular, he made it possible for him to accept an invitation to the Netherlands – to the “Projektgruppe [1980: Institute] für Psycholinguistik” in Nijmegen. That changed his life.

From the files of the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, 9 June 1978:

Mein Besuch in Ost-Berlin sowie alle weiteren telefonischen und schriftlichen Kontakte haben dazu geführt, daß Prof. Bierwisch die Gelegenheit erhält, drei Monate nach Nijmegen zu kommen. [...] Offiziell wird Prof. Bierwisch nicht von der MPG eingeladen, und es soll kein direkter Briefwechsel mit ihm geführt werden. (gez. Levelt). [My visit to East Berlin and all further telephone and written contacts led to Prof. Bierwisch being given the opportunity to come to