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Obituary | Roland Bielmeier (1943–2013)



Roland Bielmeier.

(Ise Schwartz, 2012)

The Faculty of Humanities of the University of Bern mourns the death of Roland Bielmeier, a highly esteemed scholar who earned great merits in his discipline, historical linguistics, and in the university administration.

Born in Munich, Roland grew up in Augsburg and studied general linguistics, historical linguistics, and Oriental studies from 1965 to 1968 at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München and from 1969 on at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum. In 1969–1970, while in Tbilisi for a year, he deepened his knowledge of Ossetian and both old and modern Georgian. He received his PhD in 1975 from Bochum, supervised by his revered teacher Karl-Horst Schmidt. He then followed Schmidt to the University of Bonn earning

his *habilitation* in 1983. His dissertation was devoted to a historical investigation of the influence of loanwords in the basic vocabulary of Ossetian. In his *habilitation*, he attended to the fairy-tale of Prince Čobzaň, analysing in particular the phonological and lexical peculiarities of the western Tibetan dialect of Baltistan in which the story was narrated.

After his *habilitation*, Roland Bielmeier served as professor for general and historical linguistics (level C2) in Bonn, and thereafter was active at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München. From 1989 to 2008, he was appointed full professor of historical linguistics at the University of Bern. By expanding the scope of language families and language

stages, he gave historical linguistics—which so far had mainly concentrated on Indo-European languages—a new orientation. One of his focuses in diachronic research was the lexicon and grammar of Tibetan, which he investigated with a growing number of students with support from the Swiss National Science Foundation over many years. Based on fieldwork conducted principally between 1992 and 2001, as well as on reliable modern sources, the results of these studies will be published as the *Comparative Dictionary of Tibetan Dialects (CDTD)* in five volumes: Introduction, Noun, Verb, Index and Syntax.

The research group led by Roland Bielmeier was engaged in ongoing scientific cooperation with prestigious institutions such as the CNRS in Paris and the Institute for Art History of the University of Vienna. In a national research network supported by the Austrian Science Fund, he participated in the deciphering of a birch-bark manuscript from Afghanistan composed in a hitherto ‘unknown’ language and written in Tibetan script. He was also connected with the collaborative research center, Linguistic Data Structures, located at the University of Tübingen, where theoretical and empirical principles of grammar research were being developed. In addition, he continued to work with native speakers from Pakistan who assisted him in the compilation of a comprehensive dictionary of the Tibetan dialect of Baltistan. In an interdisciplinary cooperation with human geographers of the University of Bonn, he investigated toponyms from Baltistan. His research on language contact between Indo-European (Tocharian) and Tibetan, and between Indo-European and Caucasian, was also interdisciplinary through its incorporation of archaeological findings.

Roland Bielmeier was a passionate researcher, innovative thinker, and inspiring teacher who was able to engage a large number of students in his discipline, including students from abroad. He shaped those who had the pleasure of working and researching with him, impressing on them his vast knowledge that far exceeded the boundaries of his discipline. He inspired his students with his enthusiasm and passion for language, and its scientific analysis from synchronic and diachronic perspectives.

It should also be noted that Roland served for several years as the financial planner for the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Bern; his performance commanded considerable respect in this office.

Roland Bielmeier will be remembered by his colleagues, employees, students, and friends as an approachable, warm-hearted and humorous personality. With his passing, the University of Bern has lost not only a

highly regarded researcher but also a valuable and generous colleague who supported all who had the privilege to work with him at the professional and human levels.

He is survived by his wife, Ise Schwartz, a well-known artist.

Roland Bielmeier was one of the most influential people in my life. I will remember him as a source of good advice in matters both scientific and personal, and as a considerate person of great integrity.

This obituary is largely a synopsis of the funeral oration delivered by the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Bern, Professor Michael Stolz, whom I wish to thank for sharing it with me. The obituary has also benefitted from materials provided by Professor Iwar Werlen.

By Felix Haller