

Michał Németh

In memoriam Professor Ralf-Peter Ritter (1938-2011)

Finno-Ugric and Indo-European linguists were saddened to learn of the death of Professor Ralf-Peter Ritter. He died in his home city, Berlin, surrounded by his family, on 20 November 2011.

Ralf-Peter Ritter was born on 10 December 1938. His first contact with higher education in linguistics was at the Free University of Berlin, where he studied Slavistics and Balkan linguistics. Even though the south Slavonic languages (above all Slovenian) and ancient Greek remained – as he often admitted in conversations in his later years – his “favourite” ones, he decided to augment his scope of interests and moved to Bavaria, where he studied Finno-Ugric linguistics at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich. After an additional year in Helsinki, thanks to a scholarship (where, among others, he had close contacts with Prof. Martti Räsänen (1893–1976)), in 1972 he defended his Ph.D. thesis, entitled *Untersuchungen zum Partitiv im Vepsischen*. He received his degree from the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich in Finno-Ugric and Balkan Philology, and in the Philology of the Christian Orient. The thesis was published several years later as the 26th volume of *Veröffentlichungen der Societas Uralo-Altaica* (Wiesbaden 1989).

Between 1972 and 1978, Dr. Ralf-Peter Ritter worked as a research assistant for the Chair of Indo-European Linguistics of the Institute of General and Indo-European Linguistics at the University of Regensburg, where he met, among others, Prof. Helmut Rix (1926–2004). His early publications already showed his wide scope of interests. In 1975 and 1976 he published his first four articles: one each on Slavonic, Hungarian, and Uralic etymology, and one on Iranian studies. He continued publishing in these fields for the rest of his life.

In 1978, Ralf-Peter Ritter moved to Austria, where he was initially employed as a contractual assistant at the Institute of Finno-Ugric Studies at the University of Vienna. Later he joined the Commission for Iranian Studies led by Prof. Manfred Mayrhofer (1926–2011) as a scientific worker. In 1983, he returned to Berlin, where he joined a research group dealing with Avestan lexicography led by Prof. Bernfried Schlerath (1924–2003), for five years. The close contact with Prof. Mayrhofer and Prof. Schlerath resulted later in a number of works connected with Indo-European studies, among them some on Armenian.

In 1985 he received the Candidate of Linguistics degree from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Four years later, in 1989, he defended his habilitation at the Free University of Berlin in Comparative and Finno-Ugric Linguistics with a thesis entitled *Studien zu den ältesten germanischen Entlehnungen im Ostseefinnischen* (= *Opuscula Fenno-Ugrica Gottingensia* 5), published in 1993. Between 1992 and 1994 Professor Ralf-Peter Ritter represented the Chair of Comparative and Indo-European Linguistics at the Free University of Berlin. From 1994 on, he gave classes in various subjects connected with Indo-European studies and in Armenian at the Chair of Comparative Linguistics at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main. In 2000 he was appointed a professor there.

In 2001, thanks to the efforts of Prof. Marek Stachowski, the idea of Prof. Wojciech Smoczyński to invite Professor Ralf-Peter Ritter to Cracow came true. Initially, he intended to stay there for a short period within the framework of the academic exchange programme of the Polish-German Academic Society. Later, however, Professor Ritter decided to stay, persuaded by Prof. Stachowski, who arranged the administrative part of his employment: he worked at the Chair of Hungarian Philology of the Jagiellonian University until his retirement in 2009. He gave classes in a number of subjects in the areas of historical grammar of Hungarian and Hungarian philology.

His list of publications comprises 3 books, 72 articles, and 28 reviews (two additional articles remained unpublished), in which he concentrated, above all, on language contacts between language families in a historical perspective, and etymology. If we were to answer the question of what his main field of specialisation was, we would definitely point to Finno-Ugric linguistics, and this was also what he himself said. His major work in the field, the *Untersuchungen zum Partitiv im Vepsischen* remains a fundamental work on the Balto-Finnic case system.

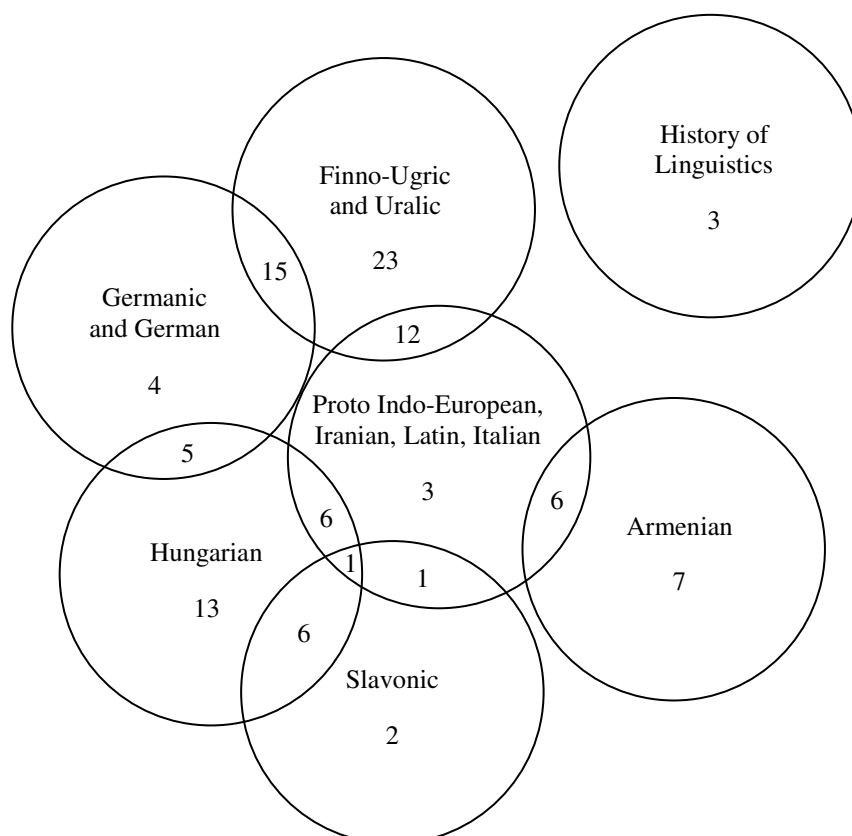
The main field of academic specialisation in his case was not equal to his main field of interests. His versatile education resulted in intense interdisciplinary research, which undeniably constitute one of the most important parts of his scientific heritage. His works on contacts between the Balto-Finnic and Germanic or Baltic languages cannot be neglected in any future studies (see *Ein mögliches finnisches Zeugnis für germanische Resonantengemination durch Laryngal*; *Studien zu den ältesten germanischen Entlehnungen im Ostseefinnischen*; *Über das Alter der baltischen Elemente des ostseefinnischen Wortschatzes*; *Zu den Reflexen der baltischen Liquiddiphthonge im Ostseefinnischen*; *Towards determining the terminus ante quem of the beginning of Proto-germanic-Fennic contacts*, *Zu einer baltischen Reaktion auf fragwürdige germanisch-ostseefinnische Lehnwortforschung*). Thanks to his broad-minded approach to the linguistic world of the whole Baltic region, historical linguistics has gained a number of interdisciplinary studies in which almost every linguistic aspect of

this area has been touched upon. The value of these works is well known to scholars.

Besides the Baltic region, the second most characteristic field of his interests was Hungarian etymology, more precisely the issue of German and Slavonic loanwords and calques in that language. We can only regret that he did not collect all his remarks on German lexical influences on Hungarian in a separate study, which would have formed an excellent supplement to the works of such Hungarian etymologists as János Melich, Károly Mollay, Mária Horváth or Károly Gerstner. In Professor Ritter's later years, this topic often occurred in his discussions. His remarks will therefore remain dispersed in a number of short articles (see *Zwei frühneuhochdeutsche Lehnwörter des Ungarischen*, *Ein frühneuhochdeutsches Lehnwort des Ungarischen: hopcihér 'Rädelsführer'*, *Frühneuhochdeutsche Ghost-Words in einer hungarologischen Veröffentlichung*, *A magyar nyelv korai újfelnémet elmei – különös tekintettel a jövevényszó kutatás módszerére*).

Last, but not least, we mention his interest in Armenian, which should not be neglected. Even though he did not publish a large number of works in this field, one must emphasize that those he did publish were all deeply grounded in Indo-European linguistics. This kind of familiarity with Indo-European linguistics is concerned made him be an exceptional Finno-Ugricist. Importantly, his concise grammar of Classical Armenian (*Introducción al armenio antiguo*) is one of the few existing grammars of Grabar Armenian.

Perhaps it would not be amiss to present Professor Ritter's extraordinary scientific heritage in a diagram, which would demonstrate how ably he combined his versatile scientific abilities:



How broad a range Professor Ritter's research opus covers in the linguistic sciences is clearly visible, too, when we look at the two Festschrift presented to him on his sixty-fifth and seventieth birthdays, respectively. In the two volumes, one entitled *Artes et Scientiae. Festschrift für Ralf-Peter Ritter zum 65. Geburtstag* (Wien 2004) and the other *Languages and Cultures in Research and Education. Jubilee Volume Presented to Professor Ralf-Peter Ritter on His Seventieth Birthday* (Kraków 2011), we find 61 authors altogether, representing various disciplines and specialisations.

Pro domo sua, we should like to emphasize that the Chair of Hungarian Philology at the Jagiellonian University owes much to Professor Ralf-Peter Ritter. For eight years he was an excellent adviser in scientific matters, and was considered a modest and generous colleague. For his academic and educational activity he was highly esteemed not only within his scientific milieu, but also outside Poland: in 2009, the President of the Republic of Hungary awarded him the Silver Cross of Merit of the Republic of Hungary (civil division), which is one of the highest state distinctions in Hungary.

It was indeed a proud privilege to benefit from his warmth, generosity, and wisdom.

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