

# **A portrait of a semanticist as a young man<sup>1,2</sup> – A series of fortunate events *For Manfred Krifka, featured in said events***

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## **Preface**

Over the years, I have found myself sharing anecdotes, as one does, about how I came to linguistics, and specifically semantics. Many of these involve Manfred Krifka's crucial support as I started out. In pondering a contribution to this volume, it occurred to me that I had never really shared much of this with Manfred himself. So, on the occasion of celebrating his retirement with this volume, and with gratitude and appreciation, I'd like to make up for that, and maybe bring back some fun memories for Manfred as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Lest there be any concern of hubris on my part, the title is a nod to Manfred's appreciation of James Joyce.

<sup>2</sup> It will not be lost here on the aficionado of definites that it made sense to diverge from the original title's definite *the artist*, which seems to constitute an intriguing case of a self-referential bridging definite of sorts that doesn't quite work out the same with the change in noun.

## Before Meeting Manfred

While what I share here will focus on Manfred's crucial role at the start of my career, a bit of context on where I was coming from to set the stage: Becoming a professor had always seemed appealing to me growing up, even way before I had any concrete notion of academic fields to go into. But that thought seemed like a mere fantasy, and I had no hopes or expectations of pursuing such a path. Coming of age in the 1990s in post-unification Berlin, the general outlook in my environment on getting a job, let alone pursuing an interesting career, was gloomy. While I felt relatively set on attending university, coming from a family without academic background I had no concrete plans or directions of what to study or where that might take me.

Building on nascent interests in high school, I enrolled at the Free University majoring in Philosophy with minors in Law and Political Science. The connections across fields I had hoped for didn't materialize, though, and I was doubting my choices. But I was intrigued by a philosophy of language class (my first presentation being on Frege's *Sinn und Bedeutung*) and reminded of my enjoyment of mathy things when taking Logic, and also enjoyed a Latin class. A chance encounter with a friend of a friend at a party let me piece together that interests in language and an inclination towards math would naturally be combined in studying Linguistics – a field I was blissfully unaware of. And so I switched to double-majoring in Linguistics and Philosophy, the former at the Humboldt University. Throughout my first few semesters, I vaguely saw how the field did align with my interests, but without things clicking or any clear sense of direction. I took a semester off and worked in Mexico (another story, not for here) for an extended summer. Still with no direction, I returned for the winter semester in the fall of 2000, mainly because there wasn't anything better I could think of.

## Enter Manfred

In putting together plans for that semester, the KVV (i.e., the course register) contained little that truly excited me. But on a pre-semester visit to the department at Schützenstrasse (the very space that later on became home of the ZAS), I noticed a posting on a bulletin board about an additional course offering – *Grundkurs C: Semantik* – by an instructor that had just joined the department over the summer, too late to have his courses included in the printed KVV – some Prof. Dr. Manfred Krifka. Based on my earlier encounters with philosophy of language, and not having seen how linguists approach meaning, that seemed worth giving a try. And worth a try it was!

Due to the late announcement, the class was pleasantly small, with just a handful of students, also including Doreen Bryant (now at Tübingen) and Tue Trinh (now at the ZAS, co-editor of this volume). Initially, I was still hung up on what seemed like the ultimate questions on the very nature of meaning from my philosophy of language class. But Manfred's teaching quickly had me convinced of the merits of systematically studying mechanisms for computing meanings of complex expressions without having to first settle all the big philosophical questions. He taught from his own textbook manuscript, which was extraordinarily clear, building up a compositional semantics and carefully adding in ingredients. The homework assignments did even more to pull me in deeper and deeper: gradually extending the semantic system to incorporate new expressions and phenomena, all following the same basic principles, was exhilarating and kept me enthralled for hours – I was hooked on semantics. The way Manfred taught linguistics seemed so different from what I had known, in its serious commitment to building up a very much fleshed out cohesive system as a foundation for so much more, as opposed to the bits of introductions to different approaches without a clear bigger picture that I encountered elsewhere.

## Diving Deeper

While that first semester had genuinely enchanted me, I still didn't know what might come next. Over break, I ran into Manfred in the elevator, and he wondered whether I might be interested in a job working on a grant project of his. I was thrilled, having been in need of a job on the side, and flattered that he'd consider me. He followed up with an email, to which I replied, but then I heard – nothing. I figured things had fallen through, and was ready to move on. Just as I was ready to accept a job as a barista at a coffee shop (in fact, 'THE Coffee Shop', still at Hausvogteiplatz, it seems), I finally heard back: some e-mail filter setting had buried my reply in his inbox, and Manfred himself had wondered why I had not followed up. From here on, things went smoothly: I got involved in an intriguing research project on cockpit communication as part of a larger research group on Group Interaction in High Risk Environments. Most importantly, even though I was still a student with hardly any research experience, Manfred treated me as a full member of the research team and left me a lot of freedom in exploring directions of the project. While the nature of the project was fairly removed from what I would wind up doing down the road, it offered both a great opportunity for getting a sense of what the practice of science actually looks like, and many fun experiences: one particular highlight was a visit to an actual airline flight simulator in Schönefeld, where we got to experience the scenarios we analyzed in our data, and even to take the helm of the simulator plane itself – the near crash landing we went through still gives me weak knees a couple decades later.

More importantly, though, doing research under Manfred's guidance taught me invaluable lessons. His comments on the workings of funding and large interdisciplinary research groups like the one we were part of made for a course in sociology of science of their own. And he always did what he could to ensure that I was fully integrated and taken seriously at the various meetings with the larger research group, where I was often the only student presenting. Finally, in being part of writing up what would be my

first co-authored publication, I learned an incredible amount from his revisions of initial drafts about structuring scientific writing and polishing prose. In the meantime, I took just about any class possible from him – pragmatics, genericity, tense and aspect, dynamic semantics, typology, you name it! –, always amazed by the detailed handouts and vast amounts of literature that he digested for us. I also was fortunate to pursue several additional study opportunities with his support and encouragement, most notably the joint LSA–DGfS summer school in Duesseldorf in the summer of 2002. At this point, I started to seriously aim for an academic career, something I might have dreamt of before but that I wouldn't have thought possible or known how to pursue.

First, though, there were still studies and an MA thesis to complete. Here, I wound up taking advantage of yet another great opportunity provided by Manfred, starting with a fieldwork class on Kikuyu. After a fascinating semester working with a native speaker in a wonderful small group (including Sabine Zerbian and Laura Downing), Manfred encouraged us to continue meeting with the informant at the ZAS to keep working on our various projects. Mine grew into my MA thesis on Focus Marking in Kikuyu, advised by Manfred. This both broadened and deepened my theoretical horizon and sparked a new level of enthusiasm for empirical work. In fact, the experience of testing out hypotheses with carefully constructed minimal pairs and eliciting different sentence variations through manipulations of context planted the seeds for my love of experimental work, which takes up much of my time nowadays.

### **Moving on**

As I worked on my thesis, the decision to pursue a PhD program in the US slowly ripened. It was my experience with Manfred's classes, which I took to reflect his time in the program at UT Austin, as well as the desire to keep learning more, rather than already settling on just one project for a doctoral dissertation, that drove this. At the time, I may have taken Manfred's support in

this for granted. In retrospect, I can better appreciate how deeply it was rooted in a commitment to encouraging me in pursuing what seemed best for me. I was also completely underestimating how much weight his support contributed to my applications, as I don't think I fully grasped his position in the field for another few years. Even as the project I had been part of ended and I finished up my studies, having accepted an offer from the PhD program at UMass for the fall of 2003, Manfred continued to support me with a position at the ZAS in the meantime, also giving me first opportunities to present my MA work at a workshop at SOAS.

Working on my PhD and then moving on to the faculty at Penn – occasionally, though too rarely, crossing paths with Manfred – I often was, and continue to be, struck by how lucky I was to have had all the generous support, and all the crucial opportunities at this formative time of becoming a linguist. Even as I went through some challenging phases on the job market, it was helpful to have heard stories of Manfred's about his own times of uncertainty with regards to an academic career. Becoming a member of the scientific community (let alone finding permanent employment) is genuinely hard for everyone. But at the same time, for students without a background providing a concrete perspective of what the path may actually look like, this may be more attainable than they think, if they get the right support at the same time. Even though I surely had many other privileges many don't enjoy, I'm absolutely certain I would not be where I am had it not been for Manfred's support at the outset. I can only hope to live up to the aspiration of following his lead and paying it forward wherever I can.