

# Obituary

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## A tribute to the life of Elisabeth Piirainen

Elisabeth Piirainen left us quite unexpectedly on December 29, 2017. We still mourn the untimely passing of this prominent member of the phraseological community. Because she was so young in spirit and open-minded, designing and conducting innovative projects and working with so many people all around the world, it is extremely hard for us to believe that Elisabeth is no longer with us. These few lines dedicated to her memory are a modest attempt to pay tribute to her personality, background, scientific achievements and humanity.



Elisabeth's personal background and scientific activities were closely connected, as the former was a determining factor in her involvement in research and choice of fields. She married Finnish linguist Ilpo Piirainen and after her PhD and a lectureship at the University of Jyväskylä the couple settled in the Münster region. That is what led Elisabeth to study a dialect from the region of Westphalia once she had received her PhD. She began by focusing her scholarly attention on toponymy, then on lexicography. Eventually, her continued interest in this dialect led her on to phraseological studies.

Her life was divided between family and research, but also between two countries and two fundamentally different languages. As her field of study broadened, she began to examine not only standard Germanic Languages (German, Dutch, and English) but also Finnish and Japanese which she had been motivated to learn for both personal and scientific reasons. Her fascination with other languages and cultures resulted in her developing a comparative perspective, especially regarding symbols and metaphors. She decided to devote the rest of her life to this subject matter, and carried out innovative studies while developing lasting international collaborations.

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We would like to thank Elena Berthemet for providing us with a photograph of Elisabeth Piirainen from her private collection.

It should be pointed out that friendship played a decisive role in the relationships that Elisabeth Piirainen developed with her collaborators throughout her life. The highly productive work she carried out with Dmitrij Dobrovol'skij, who was undoubtedly her main co-author and whose name is closely associated with hers, bears witness to their remarkable complementarity. At the time of Elisabeth's death, they were in the process of writing yet another book, which Dmitrij Dobrovol'skij will finish in the spirit of their joint project.

Elisabeth's abundant intellectual activity is discernible through her regular scientific publications since 1970. She produced some seminal papers on phraseology viewed as part of conventional **figurativeness**, as well as a monograph entitled *Figurative Language: Cross-Cultural and Cross-Linguistic Perspectives* (2005, Amsterdam: Elsevier), which she co-authored with Dmitrij Dobrovol'skij. This study focused on conventional figurative units, i.e. neither on novel metaphors, *ad hoc* metonymies, nor various types of rhetorical figures, but on units such as idioms and lexicalized metaphors. The most important linguistic aspect of these conventional figurative units is that they record and preserve relevant knowledge as part of their plane of content (as image traces) including, above all, a reflection of their respective cultures. This line of investigation is of both practical and theoretical value as it is based on a great amount of empirical data from various languages. Certain parts of it can be used to aid the lexicographical description and contrastive analysis that are necessary for foreign language learning. Theoretically, it offers a framework within which units of figurative language can be effectively explored and explained.

Later, Elisabeth became interested in the field of idioms that occur in an identical or similar form in very many languages. She labeled them **widespread idioms** and published a book on this phenomenon, *Widespread Idioms in Europe and Beyond* (2012, New York: Peter Lang). Attempts at explaining multilingual parallels usually include polygenesis, the increasing influence of English, and borrowing. Elisabeth Piirainen's data, however, show still another possible explanation for the far-reaching similarities between idioms: an independent recourse of individual languages to the very same source. This publication contains idioms with identifiable textual sources, such as those which can be traced back to Greek and Roman antiquity, the Bible, fables, fairy tales, and world literature.

This monograph was followed by a second volume entitled *Lexicon of Common Figurative Units* (2016, New York: Peter Lang), which groups idiomatic expressions according to source domains such as theatre, music, sports and games, history and war, and intellectual and technical achievements. Detailed microanalyses of various expressions lead to new findings which are often surprising and bring into question well-established theories. This ground-breaking book is an excellent work on figurative language from a linguo-cultural perspective.

Another of Elisabeth's fields of research was **endangered languages**. In 2012 she and Anna Idström (in co-operation with Tiber Falzett) edited a collection of papers under the title *Endangered Metaphors*, which was published by John Benjamins. This work is extremely important, not only for the development of linguistic theory, but also for cultural studies, anthropology and semiotics. This highly influential book, in which she looked at the figurative lexicon of endangered minor and minority languages whose metaphors and idioms had never before been the topic of research, was ground-breaking in empirical and theoretical research. The book is highly innovative and stimulating. It deals with significant issues of figurative language and its cultural foundation in languages on five continents. It also addresses questions concerning the universality and cultural specificity of conceptual metaphors, as well as topics associated with globalization in human languages and cultures.

Three years later, Benjamins published a work that followed this same line of research, entitled *Language Endangerment: Disappearing Metaphors and Shifting Conceptualizations* (edited by Elisabeth Piirainen and Ari Sherris). It appeared in the same book series as *Endangered Metaphors* ("Cognitive Linguistic Studies in Cultural Context"). This book analyzes work from online social interaction and discusses topics such as language maintenance, educational practice and revitalization, as well as future directions for endangered metaphor studies. The study is highly innovative and produces important new findings for linguistic and cultural studies. Presenting unique linguistic data in each chapter, it bears evidence to the non-universality of conceptual metaphors and calls for a revision of metaphor theories. Indeed, the more languages are examined, especially minority varieties distant from Western languages, the more questionable the notion of "universality" becomes in the field of metaphor.

Elisabeth's interest in phraseology, especially idioms and their lexical structure, led her to broaden the field of research to include regional languages across Europe and around the world. Thanks to her numerous contacts and the trust of her colleagues, she managed to conduct her investigations into the spread of certain idioms. More recently, she focused on selected constructions, though this last project was left unfinished. Beyond the linguistic analysis of such phenomena, these projects are a testament to her broader cultural and societal interests, which she cultivated since her early works in dialectology. Elisabeth's keen eye for traces of "human" heritage was undoubtedly one of her defining qualities, not only as a researcher, but also as a person and a humanitarian.

This tribute to Elisabeth Piirainen would be incomplete without stressing the importance of her personality. Not to diminish her professional qualities, but it was also her human qualities that consistently led her to make new and productive acquaintances, and that were immediately recognized by all who had the privilege to meet her in person.

Always eager to meet new people at conferences, she was the first to start a conversation and share her views on any given issue, with well-established scholars and young researchers alike. She was exceptionally friendly and immensely supportive to those who were new to the field, listening to them carefully, discussing their projects and offering her advice.

What was particularly special about Elisabeth was her eagerness to contribute and share. She cared for others and felt the need to collaborate, which is reflected in her scientific projects. No matter how long the journey was to a conference venue, she always brought numerous copies of her papers and books to distribute among interested participants, and always had a few spare offprints in case somebody would like to have them. Although she was engrossed in her work, she always took the time to talk or exchange emails to discuss various research issues.

Elisabeth was a person of many talents, having both strong hard skills and valuable soft skills. She had the rare ability to put brilliant ideas into practice and could manage extremely difficult tasks with ease. She knew how to make complicated research projects function well and be successful in terms of scientific achievement. She had exceptional organizational ability and a positive attitude towards her collaborators, as well as a strong sense of obligation and reliability.

Elisabeth divided her time between family and research, and she was always young and dynamic in spirit. She was serious in her thought and her work, straightforward and fundamentally honest. But she was also innovative and even playful, and always liked to joke. Her sense of humor, which made her so approachable and likeable, also enabled her to either ignore the vagaries of life or take them in stride. Her writings and research remain for us and for future generations of phraseologists, but her friendship, her generosity and her intelligence will be missed forever.