

# **Preface**

## **An Interdisciplinary Vision towards New Avenues of Research**

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It is a pleasure and an honour to celebrate Elisabeth Burr's academic career with the preface to this Festschrift. In the following pages, I will try to outline the main milestones of her work as a professor, researcher, project coordinator, students' supervisor, and tireless promoter of new ideas and initiatives. And I will try as well to highlight one of the traits that distinguished her career, which emerged clearly to all those - like me - who had the privilege to cross her academic path: her being an innovator, a scholar always animated by a passionate vision of the future, and constantly aiming at new paths to explore. Her contributions to Romance linguistics, particularly in the fields of corpus linguistics, digital humanities, language varieties, and language and gender, are all permeated by this strong inclination towards the exploration and the promotion of new methods and strands of research.

Elisabeth Burr studied Romance, English and German literature and linguistics at the University of Tübingen from 1971 to 1980. From 1973 to 1974, in France, she devoted herself to French, Spanish and English languages and literature, at the Université de Picardie, Amiens. She then studied Spanish, English and Italian literature and language for a year (1975-76) at the University of Leeds, UK. In 1982 she also graduated in European modern foreign languages and literatures at the Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli, in Italy, where she spent more than 5 years as a lecturer for the German Academic Exchange Service. Upon her return to Germany, she took up a post in the Italian Department at Duisburg University, where she taught Italian linguistics.

In 1991 she received a PhD in Romance Linguistics from the Duisburg University, with a dissertation on "Verb and Variety. A contribution to the description of linguistic variation using the example of Italian newspaper language" (Verb und Varietät. Ein Beitrag zur Bestimmung der sprachlichen Variation am Beispiel der italienischen Zeitungssprache).

In 1997, after having concluded her postdoctoral qualification (Habilitation) in Romance Studies, with a monograph on "Repeated Discourse and

idiomatic competence. French, Italian and Spanish” (Wiederholte Rede und idiomatische Kompetenz. Französisch, Italienisch, Spanisch), she held several temporary professorships of Romance linguistics at the universities of Cologne, Siegen, Bremen and Marburg. In 2004 she was re-qualified in Romance Linguistics at the University of Bremen. In 2005 she was offered the Chair of French, Francophone and Italian linguistics at Leipzig University, which she held until her retirement.

During her career, Elisabeth Burr has received several awards for her academic work. In 1994 she obtained the Annual Prize 1993 of the Duisburg University Society for outstanding young academics; in 1997 she received a prize within the framework of the action programme "Quality of Teaching" for special commitment to teaching, proposed by a commission of students and lecturers. In 2001 she was appointed Distinguished Visiting Fellow of the Humanities Computing Unit at the University of Oxford.

### **Corpus linguistics**

Since her doctoral dissertation, Elisabeth Burr adopted an empirical approach to the study of linguistic variation, based on the analysis of vast amounts of data collected in electronic corpora. This approach, which was already widely used in the British context, was not yet widespread in Romance linguistics. Her research on the Italian verbal system was conducted using a corpus of Italian newspaper language, collected and annotated by herself. Similarly, her postdoctoral monograph on repeated discourse and idiomatic competence was based on a corpus of French, Italian and Spanish newspaper language that she had created herself. The novelty of this empirical approach, which is based on the assumption that vast amounts of linguistic data allow to discover and investigate recurrent patterns in the targeted languages, may be difficult to recognise today, when the collection and analysis of linguistic corpora is becoming the standard in most areas of linguistics. But the innovative character of her work can be better appreciated when one considers that her research through corpora began in the late 1980s: the Corpus of Italian Newspapers was compiled with articles published in October 1989 by four Italian newspapers. The corpus was encoded following the Text Encoding Initiative standard. Its TEI-compliant editorial declaration states: “Most articles have been provided in electronic form (floppy disk) by the publishers. Headlines and articles which had appeared in the paper version but were missing on the floppy disk have been

transcribed by typing. How many times has the text been proofread? Many times”. The corpus was stored at the Oxford Text Archive in 1993, so as to be permanently available to scholars from all over the world. The choice of these two international initiatives - the TEI and the OTA - reveals an early awareness of an issue in scientific research that is now considered essential: the need for open and re-usable data.

The Corpus of Italian Newspapers can be considered, along with a few others, a pioneer in the field of corpus-based studies of Italian linguistics. A few years later, as part of her research for her postdoctoral monograph, Elisabeth Burr extended her work on corpora to other Romance languages, compiling the Corpus of French, Italian & Spanish Newspaper Language “European Elections” (1994), which included articles from *Le Monde*, *La Vanguardia* and *Corriere della Sera* (cf. Burr 1999d; Burr 2000) and finally, in 2011, the French and Italian Newspaper Corpus “Women’s Football World Cup” (FrItZ). The three corpora were then merged into the Duisburg-Leipzig Corpus of Romance newspaper languages, a multilingual collection of linguistic data, annotated according to high quality international standards.

## **Digital Humanities**

Another area to which Elisabeth Burr devoted a large part of her academic activity is Digital Humanities. In this new approach, she recognised very soon the value of reshaping and strengthening the humanities and expanding their boundaries through the integration with the digital technologies.

The interest in digital humanities resulted in three complementary areas of activity. First of all, in her participation in research projects, funded by several international institutions (European Commission, Social Sciences and Humanities Canadian Research Council, German Research Foundation, to mention a few examples). Since 1998, she participated in the Thematic Network “Advanced Computing in the Humanities” (ACO\*HUM), within the SOCRATES/ERASMUS programme of the European Commission, aimed at investigating the use of new technologies in Humanities teaching and learning. She also became a member of the Network of Excellence “Computing & Humanities in Multilingual Europe” (CHiME). Some of the research themes she addressed in this framework were: “Understanding Digital Humanities Research Teams: Implications of Multi-Country, Multi-Language, and Multi-Culture Team Membership”, and

“Modelling - Networking - Visualisation. The Digital Humanities as an interdisciplinary research paradigm”.

Secondly, Elisabeth Burr played an institutional role in international associations devoted to the digital humanities. Since 2016 she has been President of the European Association for Digital Humanities (EADH), a board member of the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations (ADHO), and – since 2012 – of Digital Humanities in German-speaking countries (DHd). Having joined the Association for Literary and Linguistic Computing (ALLC) in 1989 and having served as associated member of its Executive Committee from 1998 to 2001, she was elected member of the ALLC's Executive Committee in 2001. At the moment she is also Chair of the Standing Committee on Multi-lingualism & Multi-culturalism of the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations (ADHO) and Internationalisation Editor of the Digital Humanities Quarterly (DHQ).

Thirdly, Elisabeth Burr played the role of promoter of key educational initiatives in the field of digital humanities. In 2009 she was the organizer of the first “Culture & Technology European Summer University in Digital Humanities”, as part of the “International Digital Humanities Training Network”. The school, which has been held at the University of Leipzig every year since then, brings together scholars from several countries, in order to exchange “interdisciplinary knowledge and experience on the use of information technology methods in the humanities”. The school, which was acknowledged as a reference point for the whole community of digital humanists, was originally conceived as “European” in order to emphasise the aim of developing the digital humanities within a European context, as well as to stress the multilingual and multicultural nature of scientific research.

This variety of interests and roles (project and institutional coordinator, promoter of educational activities), together with her inclination towards interdisciplinarity, is reflected in her scientific production: after her first works on the language of Italian newspapers at the end of the 1980s (cf. Burr 1987, Burr 1988, 1989, up to Burr 1998a and 1998b), Elisabeth Burr has published important contributions on the relationship between language and gender (cf. Burr 1995, 1997, 1999a, 1999b and 2003), and on linguistic policy (cf. Burr 1999c, 2012). Her more recent interest in the field of digital humanities has also produced relevant contributions (e.g.,

Burr 2013, 2019). She has also investigated topics related to historical linguistics, such as grammaticalization in Romance languages (cf. Burr 2001), and to sociolinguistics, such as multilingualism (cf. Burr 2005a).

In addition, a number of volumes she co-edited are of particular importance in the field of Romance linguistics, such as the two works on urban sociolinguistics (cf. Burr 2009a and 2011a), the volume on Language and identity in the digital space (cf. Burr 2014), and mostly the proceedings of the Sixth Conference of the Società Internazionale di Linguistica e Filologia Italiana (SILFI) on the relationship between tradition and innovation in Italian linguistics and philology. The three-volume proceedings of this conference, published in 2005, 2009 and 2011, are notably significant (cf. Burr 2005b, 2009b, 2011b), also institutionally: Elisabeth Burr was at that time the President of SILFI (1998-2000), and the theme of the conference, which focused on the relationship between tradition and innovation and on the influence of the digital technology on linguistic and philological studies, had in those days both a scientific and a cultural value.

It is this constant effort to integrate tradition and innovation, established linguistic approaches and new digital and computational methodologies, to which she has trained a generation of students and young scholars, that best characterises Elisabeth Burr's academic career, which this volume is intended to celebrate.

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