

# Obituary: Ernst von Glasersfeld 1917-2010

When Ernst von Glasersfeld, in the seventh core concept of *Radical Constructivism*, stated that “radical constructivism cannot claim to be anything but one approach to the age-old problem of knowing” he might have been writing of himself. In his life, he often preferred to resolve differences not by the conflict of competitive argument, but by their accommodation. It is not that he allowed that **anything goes**, but rather that his **sentiment** was anti-authoritarian and that he moved to remove those elements that create conflict.

Ernst von Glasersfeld was born on March 8, 1917, when his father was cultural attaché at the Austrian embassy in Munich. His family home was in Prague, so at the end of **World War I**, when Czechoslovakia was created, the family became Czech citizens. Later, his parents lived mainly in Switzerland—where he was educated, eventually commencing studies of mathematics in Zürich—and Italy; his life was peripatetic. However, on the confiscation of his family’s properties in Czechoslovakia by the Nazis at the outbreak of the World War II, he moved first to Paris and then to neutral Ireland. He died retaining his Irish passport, **later** supplemented by the acquisition of US nationality. **[sounds as if his US citizenship was granted posthumously]**

Glasersfeld used to claim he did not have one mother tongue. There were several languages he grew up with and in, switching fluently between each. To the end of his life he would write with equal fluency in German, Italian and French as well as English, often translating his own work. He believed that his multi-lingualism meant he could not see the world as given, but as formed within the shaping process of each language.

Another great skill was skiing, and he became the national downhill champion of Australia in 1937. (While in **Australia** he met and fell in love with his first wife, Isabel.) Skiing was so important that he built a downhill slope in his back garden in Massachusetts and continued using it up to the end.

He used his multi-lingualism after the second world war as a means of earning a living, eventually becoming a translator for Silvio Ceccato, **whom Glasersfeld considered one of the founders of cybernetics**.<sup>1</sup> Glasersfeld found himself not only translating, but developing projects for and with Ceccato, in what might be described as a sort of intellectual apprenticeship, leading to the publication of his first paper in 1961. Ceccato was certainly one of those who influenced Glasersfeld’s development towards what he came to call radical constructivism, through his insistence that cognition does not reproduce the real world; and the adoption of the central notion of viability in Glasersfeld’s thinking. Ceccato also outlined an attitude to observing that becomes central in cybernetics: that the observer, the observed and the observation are

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1. Ceccato, the founder of the Italian Operative School and, in 1957, the Centro di Cibernetica is less known, even in his native Italy, than Glasersfeld felt he should be. As Glasersfeld talks of him, he was one of the founders of cybernetics.

born together. This sort of thinking was, in fact, common amongst many of the early cyberneticians. However, this point was lost, only reappearing when made the basis of second order cybernetics. Glasersfeld was strongly associated with this second-order cybernetics, as he makes clear in his paper, “Why I consider myself a Cybernetician,” published in this journal.

In 1967 Glasersfeld was invited to the United States by Rowena Swanson and Harold Wooster of the USAF Office of Scientific Research. The sudden liquidation of this office led to Glasersfeld working from 1971 to 1977 on the LANA (Language Analogue Project) at Emory University. In this project the possibility of communication between chimpanzee (also named Lana) and human using computer mediation was explored, and through this, some would claim, the origins of language. The chimpanzee learned to communicate (including making unprecedented remarks) through a synthetic language devised by Glasersfeld: Yerkish. Apparently she did this by learning Yerkish syntax, which Glasersfeld had derived from Ceccato’s correlational structure of thought.

At the same time, Glasersfeld was developing his views on epistemology, upon which much of his reputation is based. If Ceccato had introduced Glasersfeld to the idea that observer, observed and observation are intertwined, it was Piaget who, in his account of how the child constructs reality, gave Glasersfeld cause to develop a response. The response was what Glasersfeld called Piaget’s *radical constructivism*: a term developed to explain how he understood what Piaget was describing, and which he characterised in 1992 in his “Core of Radical Constructivism.” [what is this?] The key tenet of Glasersfeld’s response to Piaget is that, because we are always present in our observing (“objectivity is a subject’s delusion that observing can be done without him,” he wrote) we can never know what in our observations might come from us, and what might come from some “mind independent reality.” I like to stress that this is not, in itself, a solipsist position. It is undecided and undecidable: the structure of the position in which we place ourselves means we may choose to follow either a realist or a solipsist path, or to “sit on the fence” and maintain constructivist undecidability.

As he began to explore this position, he also moved to Amherst and the University of Massachusetts, at the behest of Dr. Jack Lochhead. They remained very close until Glasersfeld’s death. Here he applied his developing theory particularly in the area of mathematics education. His version of constructivism, as well as being more radical and more internally consistent than other versions (it was taken to an extreme that many find uncomfortable, and thus raises some antagonism), can be related to his decade living in Ireland, as in the title of the 1992 paper: “Aspects of Constructivism: Vico, Berkeley, Piaget.” This can be seen to relate to the multi-lingual experience that no one way of observing and describing the world is inherently more right than another. It can be understood as a response to the awfulness of fascism and other authoritarian positions. In all of these, the inability to appeal to the authority of the “right view” of “the real,” denies and undermines notions of truth and correctness. Ever mindful of the possibility of his radical constructivism becoming a new authoritative position, Glasersfeld pointed this out in his seventh core concept, with

which I began this obituary: that the radical constructivist position is merely one approach to the age-old problem of knowing. It can be seen that there is a great consistency in his life and work.

Although often thought of as a philosopher, it may be more interesting to think of Glasersfeld as, essentially, a cybernetician. Keep in mind McCulloch's characterization of himself as an experimental epistemologist, as well as Piaget's self-description as a genetic epistemologist. Glasersfeld's form of constructivism can be seen as the sort of epistemology implied by second-order cybernetics, the cybernetics of observing systems, as his old friend Heinz von Foerster described it. Glasersfeld's adherence can be seen in his last public appearance, where he stated

“My life has turned out to be an illustration of a cybernetic principle. I started out without any idea of what I wanted to do, but there were things I was very sure I didn't want to do. I was not guided by a fixed purpose, but by a set of constraints.” (Speech to ASC Conference, Troy, New York, 2010)

This position is not so much second order cybernetics as cybernetics in general. It returns to Ceccato's understanding of the essential role of the observer, thus bringing old and new cybernetics together.

Late in his life (as also late in Foerster's) the German speaking world caught up with Glasersfeld, mainly through the efforts of Siegfried J Schmidt and the LUMIS group in Siegen; and Josef Mitterer in Klagenfurt. They promoted and celebrated him in the 1980s and 1990s as many German intellectuals began to explore his constructivism. He was recognized **with** a number of awards: He won the Gregory Bateson prize in 2005, and was awarded doctor *honoris causa* from the Universities of Klagenfurt and **Innsbruck**, along with the Austrian Cross of Honour for Achievements in the Sciences and the Arts (2008) and (2009) the honorary gold medal of the City of Vienna, for which he was promoted by the Heinz von Foerster Society. The American Society for Cybernetics awarded him its McCulloch award (1991) and its Wiener Gold Medal (2006), as well as making him an honorary fellow (2009). His last public appearance was at the ASC conference in 2010, just over 3 months before his death. Glasersfeld was on the original editorial board of *Cybernetics & Human Knowing* helping to get us on our feet and he wrote the famous little paper “Why I Consider Myself a Cybernetician” in its first issue along side von Foerster's article “Ethics and Second-order Cybernetics.” He was an important support the first vulnerable years of the journal.

Ernst von Glasersfeld was born in Munich, Germany, on 8 March 1917, and died in Leverett Massachusetts, USA, on 12 November, 2010. He is survived by his second wife, Charlotte, for whom he cared **during** many years of her illness.