

XXL

Whatever my title may augur, fear not, I won't drag you into the timeworn controversy of whether it's a good or bad thing, ultimately, to let dwarfs sit – or, if they prefer, stand – on the shoulders of giants. True, on a clear day they will see beyond the next molehill; alas, it's dwarfish eyes and brains which do that extra inch of eying and grasping. Instead, brace yourselves for news of some magnitude which are above dispute.

The staggering piece of information I hasten to share is about none other but the man after whom the prize is named that the Association for Linguistic Hypology awards, biennially, to a deserving seasoned grammarian “to encourage and honour achievements in the field of documenting the world's linguistic diversity through the writing of reference grammars”. (Writing *reference grammars*??? Well, why not – if the old-timers find competitive yo-yoing too humdrum a pastime, trainspotting too outdoors, and pigeon racing ethically dubious.) Until yesterday, when I skimmed the tome whose front cover is pictured below, I had no idea, and the way he used to turn his phrases, not conspicuously longer and more tortuous than was the rule among Teutonic men of letters, surely gave you no hint, but now we have it on the authority of his own sister, Clementine von Münchhausen, and it's supported by a full-sized photograph against the backdrop of a two-storey mansion which I can't reproduce here for copyright reasons:

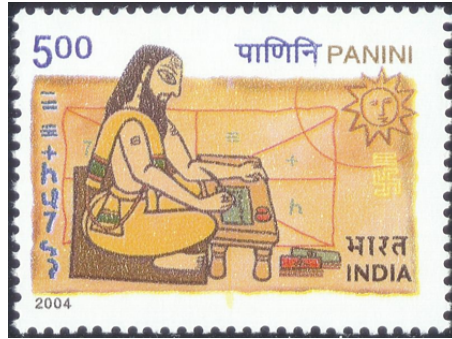
Georg von der Gabelentz was a towering 2.08 meters tall !!!
(6 ft 9.89 in, if this is how you reckon)

Even Dirk Nowitzki, the most successful German basketballer of all times and by some considered one of the greatest power forwards in NBA history, measures not more than 2.13 meters (7 ft 0 in).



I've added a miniature portrait for comparison (right), not of Nowitzki, but of Georg's father, Hans-Conon, no mean amateur linguist himself, but of what delicate build!

I've been asked by aforementioned organisation to pass on the announcement that apprentice grammarians, too green to be in contention for the Gabelentz, need not despair, because there's laurels to reap for their juvenile grammars, too: the Pāṇini award. (Mind his diacritics!) The height of that ancient titan, however, remains to be reliably ascertained. Although the 5 Rupee postage stamp that India issued in his memory, because his native Pakistan couldn't be bothered, doesn't depict him at full length, but seated tailor-style over what must be the morphophonology chapter of his Sanskrit grammar, he appears to have been no midget, either. On mere philatelic evidence, pending confirmation from siblings or next-of-kin, William Jones (4 Rupees) looks a slip of a lad by comparison.



Good enough shoulders, perhaps, if it's the thin air that you fancy breathing up there, in hot pursuit of antediluvian affinities among the tongues of men and their common sources which, perhaps, no longer exist if they ever existed. But hardly where you want to take your seat when jotting down your reference grammar.

fp to lingtyp, x/13, revised ix/20