Obituary: Nini Hoiting (December 20, 1944 – March 22, 2016) — from Dan Slobin

With deep sadness I report that my dear life-partner and research colleague, Nini Hoiting, passed away at the age of 71 after a long and debilitating illness. Nini spent most of her life in Groningen, in the Netherlands, sharing her time with Berkeley in the past 25 years. From 1983 to her retirement in 2009 she was a clinical researcher and sign language psycholinguist at The Royal Institute for the Deaf “H. D. Guyot” (now Koninklijke Kentalis); from 1998 to 2001 she was also a Visiting Scholar at the Institute of Human Development, University of California, Berkeley.

Nini was an early advocate for the recognition of sign language and its use in child-rearing and education. In the 1980s she worked with innovative programs to teach sign language to hearing parents of deaf children. The practice in those years was to encourage parents to speak Dutch and sign at the same time (Sign-Supported Dutch, NmG). In her clinical work, Nini made regular home visits to videotape parent-child interaction; the same children were observed and videotaped in preschool activities. She created a version of the MacArthur-Bates Communicative Development Inventory (MCDI) for Sign Language of the Netherlands and tracked vocabulary growth and communicative advances in the children, in comparison to deaf children with deaf parents. By the 1990s it became clear to her and her colleagues that Sign-Supported Dutch was not a fully adequate medium of communication, and new programs were instituted using a full, natural sign language without speech support (Sign Language of the Netherlands, NGT). She was a strong advocate of bilingual programs for the deaf, and was proud of having created a “Kijkbibliotheek”—a visual library of signed stories that hearing parents could view with their deaf children. Nini had an earlier career in theater, as an actor on stage and screen and as a theater director. She drew on these talents to select and train skilled deaf storytellers for the project. Parents were given the Dutch storybooks on which the signed stories were based, aiding early development of Dutch literacy.

The clinical work produced a unique archive of videotaped data of early signing, along with vocabulary checklists. More than 30 children were followed regularly in the first three or four years of life. This is the first large-scale documentation of language development of Dutch deaf children. These materials have all been digitized by the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen, and are being prepared for a national Dutch sign language archive under the direction of Dr. Onno Crasborn, Radboud University, Nijmegen. The data formed the basis of developmental psycholinguistic research, supported by the National Science Foundation and the Max Planck Institute. The findings are presented in Hoiting’s 2009 PhD dissertation and a series of published papers, many with Slobin as co-author. (A pdf of her dissertation can be obtained from Dan Slobin: slobin@berkeley.edu.) Hoiting and Slobin also supervised a cohort of graduate students at Berkeley. This group created the Berkeley Transcription System (BTS), designed to transcribe sign languages at the level of meaning components rather than descriptive glosses and articulatory annotation. Hoiting and Slobin argued that the typology of sign languages—essentially head-marking and thereby different from the dependent-marking languages of the surrounding spoken languages—required a distinct sort of morphological and syntactic analysis. A consequence for acquisition is that children are, in Hoiting’s terms, “verb-attenders” rather than “noun-attenders.”

In her dissertation, *The myth of simplicity: Sign Language Acquisition by Dutch Deaf Toddlers* (University of Groningen, 2009), Hoiting demonstrated that hearing parents can successfully learn some version of sign language, contributing to early vocabulary growth in their deaf children. However, only the use of a natural sign language such as Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT), rather than a sign system based on simultaneous speaking (NmG), has the potential to foster acquisition of vocabulary and morphological complexity that approaches the achievements of deaf children with deaf parents. From the side of child-directed signing, parents trained in a full sign language produced more complex and more interpretable utterances, facilitating their children’s acquisition. With the rise of cochlear implants, Hoiting still argued strongly for early bilingualism.

She was beginning to investigate the tactile manual communication of the deaf-blind, with whom she could communicate, when her progressive illness intervened. She was also much concerned with what she called “the gesture-sign continuum,” and was beginning to compare gestures of deaf and hearing toddlers.

Nini had a passion for research and took delight in language—from linguistics, to poetry, to medieval languages and literatures. She was comfortably at home with deaf colleagues and friends, and could work well with developmentally delayed and autistic deaf children. She delighted in travel, where she could engage her lifelong involvement with history, art, anthropology. And she loved the challenge of going to Groningen’s ample fish market and creating a tantalizing new meal from fresh catch from the North Sea. Nini Hoiting is remembered as a beautiful independent spirit, a devoted scholar, researcher and clinician—and a splendid human being.

Contributions in her memory can be made to Doofgewoon (“Normal Deaf”), which carries on work to which Nini was dedicated. The site is being developed; please check [Doofgewoon.nl](http://www.doofgewoon.nl/), which is scheduled to open in May 2016. Contributions will support activities to inform Dutch parents of deaf children about bilingualism, deaf culture, and sign language.