

**Laudatio für Professor Michael Tomasello, Leipzig
zur Verleihung des Oswald-Külpe-Preises am 20.11.2009**

Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Schneider

– Es gilt das gesprochene Wort –

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome the recipient of the 2009 Oswald Külpe Award, Prof. Michael Tomasello, and to introduce this outstanding scientist to you. Dear Mike, we are very glad and greatly honoured to have you here with us today, and especially for such a highly pleasing reason as the awarding of our Oswald Külpe Preis.

In the following, I will first give a short outline of Mike Tomasello's scientific career and his academic accomplishments, and then in a next step try to relate his work to the scientific approach of the founder of the Würzburg department of psychology, Oswald Külpe, a relationship which may not be immediately obvious for some of you.

Prof. Tomasello received his PhD in Experimental Psychology at the University of Georgia, USA, in 1980. He continued his academic career at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, where he spent the time between 1980 and 1998 first as Assistant Professor, then as Associate Professor, and finally as Full Professor of Psychology. During this time period, he was also appointed Adjunct Professor of Anthropology and Affiliate Scientist in Psychobiology, at the Yerkes Primate Center.

In 1998, Michael Tomasello moved to Germany, accepting an offer from the Max Planck Society which apparently was quite attractive. He has been Co-director of the Max Planck Institute for

Evolutionary Anthropology since then, and has also served as Co-director of the Wolfgang-Köhler-Primate Research Center in the zoo of Leipzig since 2001.

There is no doubt that Michael Tomasello has impressed the scientific community in various fields such as developmental psychology, social psychology, cultural psychology, anthropology, and philosophy. His special impact on philosophers may be inferred from several awards which he received recently, for instance, the Jean Nicod Prize for Philosophy of Cognitive Science, and the Hegel-Preis of the City of Stuttgart which he will receive next month if I remember it correctly. His predecessors as recipients of the Hegel Preis include Hans-Georg Gadamer, Niklas Luhmann, and Jürgen Habermas. The latter will serve as “Laudator” in Stuttgart next month.

Why is it that Michael Tomasello attracts so much attention in philosophers, anthropologists, and psychologists? One reason is that his research approach seems suited to cross borders and relate findings from different disciplines. Since the very beginning of his academic career, Michael Tomasello’s main research interests have included processes in social cognition, social learning, and communication from developmental, comparative, and cultural perspectives – especially related to language and its acquisition. His first scientific articles in the early 1980s focussed on language development in infants and toddlers, and already included aspects of social cognition such as joint attention and communication skills, and also comparisons between young children and apes in nonverbal communication settings. In the scientific papers published in the following years and decades, we can observe numerous variations of these themes, most of them published in highly prestigious outlets. The number of publications is really impressive: Although I did not count them, my guess is that the number clearly exceeds 300, including articles in *Nature*, *Science*, and the major developmental psychology journals. Although Michael Tomasello’s scientific productivity is truly outstanding, the attention his work receives seems even more impressive. When I checked the number of citations per article per year, I found considerable deviations from the usual citation pattern, which ranges from 5 to 15

citations per article per year for rather successful scientists. In Michael Tomasello's case, I found several 3-digit numbers, indicating that some of his books and articles have been cited more than 100 times per year. Especially important here is his book on the "Cultural origins of Human Cognition", published in 1999 and translated into many languages, including German. This outstanding book received the 2001 William James Book Award of the American Psychological Association. There is another recent book on the "Origins of Human Communication" published last year which obviously fascinated the jury responsible for the Hegel Preis in Stuttgart. I quote Habermas using a press release: "Michael Tomasello entwirft in seinem zweiten großen Werk eine faszinierende Naturgeschichte der menschlichen Kommunikation und stellt den ehrwürdigen Diskurs über den Ursprung der Sprache auf eine neue Basis". [Mike, I am sure you will hear more about his view next month, presumably in German]. The Hegel-Preis jury members see Michael Tomasello as a representative of evolutionary anthropology. They found it particularly impressive that he has used methodological tools of primatology and infancy research to clarify the issue which mental abilities enable human beings to create a cultural world, an accomplishment that even highly developed primates have not achieved. In their view, the approach Michael Tomasello uses in his research is in accord with Hegel's basic belief that the unique development of the human mind is strongly influenced by its ability to exceed natural capacity restrictions, mainly stimulated by fruitful social interactions with other human beings.

Given that we are going to honour the recipient of the Oswald- Külpe-Preis, and not the recipient of the Hegel-Preis, there is no need to further elaborate on links between Hegel and Tomasello (as I said before, Jürgen Habermas will take over this job). Instead, it seems more important to identify parallels and similarities between Oswald Külpe's and Michael Tomasello's scientific approach. To do so, it may be suitable to give you a few facts about Oswald Külpe.

Külpe began his studies at the University of Leipzig in 1881. Although he majored in history, he was strongly influenced by Wilhelm Wundt, the Founder of Scientific Psychology. Külpe spent two

semesters at Leipzig and then followed Wundt's recommendation to study with Georg Elias Müller in Göttingen, where he received a thorough training in experimental methods. He graduated in Göttingen in 1885, and then returned to Leipzig to study under Wundt. He received his Ph.D in 1887 based on a doctoral dissertation on „The theory of sensory feelings“, and was promoted to assistant professor, private docent, and subsequently “Professor Extraordinarius” (extraordinary professor) at Wilhelm Wundt's institute in 1894. In the same year, he moved on to the University of Würzburg, where he was appointed Professor of Philosophy and Aesthetics. As most of you know, Külpe – together with Karl Marbe – founded the Würzburg Department of Psychology in 1896.

In the time period between 1896 and 1909, Külpe and his students defined their own version of general experimental psychology, which has been internationally well-known as the “Würzburg School of Thought”. The work of this group on higher mental processes based on the method of introspection addressed interesting issues such as “imageless thought” and the mental act of judging based on “Bewusstseitslagen” (conscious attitudes). Külpe and his group challenged Wundt's view that internal mental processes are not accessible to direct experimentation. The Würzburg School of Thought soon received international attention and also generated discussions as well as criticism among leading psychological researchers, including Wundt, Titchener, and Müller who all disliked the Würzburger's “soft” experimental approach. Later on, the experiments done at Würzburg became more and more cognitively oriented as they addressed complex mental activities. Külpe left Würzburg in 1909 to move on to the University of Bonn where he stayed for four years before going to Munich in 1913. With Külpe's unexpectedly early death in 1915, the research program at the Würzburg School ended.

I hope this short summary of Külpe's career has shown that there are several relationships between Oswald Külpe and Mike Tomasello. Both of them worked in Leipzig for several years, both of them received a thorough training in experimental psychology, and both of them also developed a strong interest in the study of higher mental processes in humans. Furthermore,

both of them demonstrated that internal mental processes are accessible to direct experimentation. Last not least, both Oswald Külpe and Michael Tomasello have managed to enhance the body of scientific knowledge of their times in important ways. This seems true despite the fact that they investigated different research themes and age groups, and also used different experimental paradigms.

Let me just quickly give you two examples illustrating Michael Tomasello's outstanding accomplishment in his domain of expertise, that is, research on language and communication processes in young children and primates. More than 30 years ago, Premack and Woodruff asked the question "Does the chimpanzee have a theory of mind?" We have tried to answer this question for quite a while. The work carried out by Tomasello and his research group eventually seems to offer a qualified answer. According to their findings, the answer is yes when one refers to theory of mind in a broad sense, meaning that chimpanzees have a social understanding, knowing what others know. However, the answer is no when one refers to theory of mind in a more narrow sense: Apparently, they do not understand the consequences of false beliefs in their social partners, and they probably do not have a fully representational theory of mind which already can be demonstrated in 4-year old children.

The second fascinating example concerns the study of social-cognitive and social motivational skills, which have been termed "shared intentionality" by Michael Tomasello and colleagues, and which refer to collaborative interactions in which participants share psychological states with one another. The various studies investigating this phenomenon clearly showed that young children, but not chimpanzees, collaborated just for the sake of collaborating. Although chimpanzees participate in several group activities, they apparently pursue their own individual goals in these interactions, frequently competitive in nature. What follows is that humans are unique in the animal kingdom -- as Michael Tomasello put it -- in that they develop social and

motivational skills (termed “ shared intentionality”) which enable them to participate in the cultural practices around them from a very early age on.

These are only two examples taken from an extremely rich data base that Michael Tomasello and his research group developed over the last 25 years. Undoubtedly, this is a body of truly excellent research. Thus it did not take the Würzburg jury very long to conclude that Michael Tomasello is an ideal candidate for the Oswald-Külpe Preis.

Dear Mike, we are happy to announce that you were awarded the Oswald-Külpe-Preis this year, and we feel honoured by your presence in Würzburg today.

Congratulations and all the best for you!