Jan Hulstijn, 6 September 2018, speech after receiving the 2018 EuroSLA distinguished scholar award

I am extremely pleased with this award because I receive it from my peers, united in the European Second Language Association. Eurosla has helped me finding my identity as a SLA researcher. I attended the first Eurosla conference in 1991 in Salzburg and 17 others since then. In pre-Eurosla years, in the 1970s and 1980s, I was an ‘applied linguist’ and I felt inferior to, on the one hand, hard-core linguists, and, on the other hand, psychologists with their sophisticated experimental designs, methods and statistics. The term SLA was not in use in those days. Fortunately, in the meantime, the study of second-language acquisition and multilingualism has established itself as an acknowledged field of inquiry and will continue to flourish provided that we collaborate with researchers in neighboring fields, in a multidisciplinary fashion because learning and using a language is one of various kinds of information processing under various situational and ecological conditions.

People’s opinions about matters that may affect their personal lives are often grounded in folk belief, for instance about whether small children shall or shall not be vaccinated against certain diseases or whether bilingual education is good or bad. In the media, there is often insufficient room for critical assessment of what can be considered as reliable information. We, researchers, have the duty of separating beliefs from reliable observations and we have the duty of critically examining different interpretations of observations. We need complete, absolute academic freedom for developing and expressing innovative, unconventional ideas and, second, for critical discussion of each other’s ideas. Electronic mail does not suffice; we have to meet each other and talk with each other in person at a conference. It is by attending a conference that we can experience of what it is to belong to a research community, in an academic and social sense. This is why SLA researchers must attend Eurosla conferences, not just once but regularly. In this way, we can constitute a true research community.

Eurosla has provided the platform for this for already 28 years and I am grateful first to all those who were willing to sacrifice much of their time and effort to serve on the Executive Committee, and I am grateful, second, to all those who organized a Eurosla conference. In Amsterdam we organized a Eurosla conference five years ago, so I know how much work it is but I know also how rewarding this work can be for the members of the organizing team. So, again, I thank the members of Eurosla who proposed and elected me for this award. I am confident that Eurosla will continue to have successful annual conferences, provided that some of you will be willing to organize a conference at your university or serve a term in the Executive Committee.