

Firbas, Jan

**Professor Josef Vachek - founder of the linguistics section of the English Department of Masaryk University : a few dates from the history of Czechoslovak English studies**

*Brno studies in English*. 1989, vol. 18, iss. 1, pp. [109]-111

ISBN 80-210-0206-9

ISSN 0231-5351

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/104232>

Access Date: 28. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.



**PROFESSOR JOSEF VACHEK –  
FOUNDER OF THE LINGUISTICS SECTION  
OF THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT  
OF MASARYK UNIVERSITY**

A FEW DATES FROM THE HISTORY OF CZECHOSLOVAK ENGLISH STUDIES

*Jan Firbas*

... from the very outset all his work has been permeated by a keen sense of the hierarchy of linguistic values. But it is by placing the ethical values above all others in the general structure of life that he has come to be respected by his pupils, colleagues and friends not only as an eminent teacher and scholar of world-wide reputation, but as a man of character and heart.

These were the closing words of my introduction to the Vachek Homage Volume ((*Brno Studies in English* 8/1969), brought out in honour of Professor Josef Vachek's sixtieth birthday. They were written at the end of two uneasy de-

acades for many who hated to be manipulated and to act contrary to their conscience. Little did I realize when writing these words that we were in for another two equally demanding decades. I find it significant that in the year of Professor Vachek's eightieth birthday (1989) there is no need to change anything about the words quoted.

It was a happy start when in the post-war winter term (1945) Vachek came to Brno and began his lectures and seminars on English linguistics. Courses on Old, Middle and Early New English were offered by the pre-war Brno Department of English, but English linguistics in the true sense of the word was not pursued, the research interests of the Department being predominantly literary. In this way Vachek became the founder of the linguistics section of the Department. Through his research he soon made the Department known to the world of linguistic learning. In his lectures and seminars he developed the heritage of the Prague School, at the same time being undogmatically open to fruitful contributions of current linguistics.

The bright prospects, however, were dimmed by the February events of 1948, which dealt a severe blow to the freedom of academic teaching and research. Vachek bravely carried on acquainting young Anglicists with the progressive ideas of the Prague School. His teaching was strongly disapproved of by Academician František Trávníček, Rector of the University. Vachek colleagues' remember Trávníček's unfounded censure of Trubetzkoy's *Grundzüge der Phonologie*, linked with an open attack on Vachek's teaching. Academician Bohuslav Havránek intervened and Vachek could continue his pedagogical activities and research. In 1959 he founded the series *Brno studies in English*, on which *Études romanes de Brno* and *Brünner Beiträge zur Germanistik und Nordistik* were modelled.

An even more serious situation arose when in January 1960 the members of the teaching staff of the Brno Faculty of Arts (Faculty of Philosophy) had to undergo a 'religious test'. The test consisted of three questions: (i) Are you a believer?, (ii) If not, state since when, and (iii) What religious prejudices do the members of your family suffer from? Vachek was one of the six teachers who declared themselves to be practicing Christians (three of them were Catholics, two were Protestants and one a member of the Orthodox Church). This evidently was the main reason for the Municipal Party Committee's decision that Vachek and his assistant (the writer of these lines) should be replaced in their teaching posts by 1964.

However, Academician Havránek, Director of the Institute of Czech Language of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, once again stepped in. Highly appreciating Vachek's work, he invited him to join the Institute. Vachek accepted the invitation and left the Department (1962). At the signs of a thaw, which ultimately led to the Prague Spring of 1968, some of his Brno colleagues made an attempt to bring Vachek to Brno. Not wanting the Institute to lose Vachek, Havránek refused to support this attempt. To demonstrate how highly he valued Vachek's work, he said that under normal conditions he would choose Vachek as his successor as director of the Institute. As a member of the Institute, Vachek

founded the series *Travaux linguistiques de Prague*, meant as a continuation of *Travaux du Cercle linguistique de Prague*. (After the invasion of 1968 the series was discontinued with volume 4 in 1971.)

Vachek never returned to Brno. Other universities have benefited from his scholarship and teaching. For one year (1968–9) he taught at the venerable University of Leiden, where he had been appointed ordinary professor. (The Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences honoured him with its membership.) But Vachek did not think of moving abroad.

In Czechoslovakia he once again – not for the last time – took upon himself the role of a founder. In Bratislava, he started the English section of the Institute of Interpretation and Translation of the University of 17th November (1971) and simultaneously revived the linguistics section of the English Department of Comenius University after the two most important members of this section had emigrated. Finally (1975–80), he taught in the English Department of Šafárik University in Prešov, laying the foundations of English linguistic studies there as well.

Previous issues of *Brno studies in English* (vols 8/1969 and 13/1979) have paid tribute to Vachek's achievements in English and general linguistics. This modest note has served another purpose – to honour the work of a university teacher who has not separated the quest for knowledge from the quest for values ensuring the proper use of knowledge and preserving human dignity.

**PROFESOR JOSEF VACHEK –  
ZAKLADATEL ANGLISTICKÉ LINGVISTICKÉ SEKCE  
MASARYKOVY UNIVERZITY**

**Několik dat z dějin československé anglistiky**

Brněnská anglistika si s vděčností připomíná životní jubileum vědce, který po čtyři těžká desetiletí našich novodobých dějin zůstal v životě osobním i vědeckém věren humanitním ideálům.

