

Vachek, Josef

Jan Firbas – a sexagenarian?

Brno studies in English. 1981, vol. 14, iss. 1, pp. 11-14

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/118093>

Access Date: 29. 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.



JAN FIRBAS – A SEXAGENARIAN?

Josef Vachek

In his (now classic) *Lehrbuch der Phonetik* (1904) Otto Jespersen adduces, as an example of assibilation, the Modern English colloquial question *D'you believe?* which in everyday speech sounds exactly like *jubilee*. This pun, heard very frequently around the end of the last century at the time of the celebrations marking the sixtieth anniversary of Queen Victoria's reign, intrudes itself into the mind of an old friend and former teacher of Jan Firbas – really, who would believe this young-looking and young-feeling, untiring scholar, always so kind and yet so honest, so tactful and yet so energetic, to be sixty? Indeed, his chronological age is by no means paralleled by the indefatigable strength of his mind, which continues to have the same youthful vigour as in the unforgettable autumn of 1945, the time of the post-war reopening of the Czech universities after their six-year closure by the Nazis. It was then that I saw Jan Firbas for the first time. He was then a young student of English who, with a handful of his equally enthusiastic friends, worked very hard (also physically) to put the library of the English department, crippled by six years of emergency storage in inadequate premises, in action again to serve the needs of resurrected academic life.

Actually, Jan's original intention was not to study English (or indeed any subject of the Philosophical Faculty). Being the son of a military doctor of high reputation, he enrolled in 1939, after his Matura examination, in the Faculty of Medicine, wishing to follow in the footsteps of his father. The drastic closing of the Czech universities, in November of the same year, was to destroy his original plans but, in the long run, to prove to be a blessing in disguise. In the involuntary gap of more than five years Jan acquired a very solid practical and theoretical knowledge of English, so that in a few years he could even teach it at the Brno School of Modern Languages. And after the war, when the universities were reopened, he decided to make English his permanent object of teaching

and research. One can only speculate what Jan's future life would have been had the occupation not intervened — he might have become an excellent physician, but post-war Anglicist research (and even post-war research in general linguistics) certainly would not have been what it is without his very specific contribution to English and general syntax.

This is not the place to dwell upon a detailed survey of Jan Firbas's numerous contributions, and merits or on his wide horizon and multiform interests — his bibliography is very eloquent on this point. Suffice it to say that he very aptly concentrated on one of the main fields of problems of linguistic interest throughout the world at the present day. He is mainly a syntactician, but not one of a common descriptivist, taxonomic type. Deeply conscious of the primary importance of the communicative function of language and developing in a very independent manner some basic ideas of Vilém Mathesius, the founder of the Prague linguistic school, he analyses the sentence (including its intonational qualities) to ascertain what is functionally most essential in it. He studies the way in which the sentence enriches the store of information of the receiver of the linguistic message, as well as the ways and means employed by the transmitter of that message (again including intonational qualities) for the purpose of enriching that store in the receiver's consciousness. Firbas's research into what is now known all over the world as functional sentence perspective (though in some quarters it goes under a different name) has been widely acclaimed and indeed very markedly outstepped the narrow limits of Anglicist research in Czechoslovakia. His invitations to many foreign countries on three continents to give lectures and hold specialized courses bear eloquent witness to this. He is just as well known to linguists of the German Democratic Republic, of Poland, Hungary and Romania or Bulgaria as to those in Britain, the Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland or Sweden. He has been invited to give lectures in the U.S.A. and even in India, and his work is just as well known — and quoted with high praise — in the Soviet Union, Finland and Japan. Thus it is no exaggeration to say that hardly any Czech linguist has done so much in the past quarter of a century as he has done to propagate the Czechoslovak functionalist approach to facts of language all over the linguistic world. His theses are the more convincing in that — again in the spirit of the Prague School since Mathesius's time — he systematically confronts the situation found in English not only with that found in Czech, his mother tongue, but also with the one characterizing German, Russian, Spanish, and even Japanese. The depth of his insight and the vastness of his horizon are perhaps best revealed by the survey of Czechoslovak research in functional sentence perspective he presented to the international conference discussing problems of FSP in Mariánské Lázně in 1970 (it was included, together with other most valuable contributions on these and allied problems by F. Daneš, P. Sgall, M. Uhlířová, A. Svoboda and others, in the minutes of the conference published by the Prague Academia Publishing House in 1974).

What has been said here so far attempts to characterize, if very sketchily, Jan Firbas as a scholar. But it would be most unjust to omit here his characteristics as a man, in his daily contact with other people. I shall not go into his absolutely blameless reputation as a model husband and

father of two sons, but limit myself to the reputation he has had in his department which, incidentally, he very wisely headed for a period of four difficult years (at his own request, he was then relieved of this function). If one wants to sketch his portrait as a senior member of that department, one is tempted to quote the well-known inscription on the tablet erected in St. Paul's Cathedral in London in honour of its great builder, Sir Christopher Wren: *Lector, si monumentum requiris, circumspice*. Indeed, the most convincing witness of Firbas's qualities is his English department. Its admirably cooperative spirit speaks for volumes. Firbas has always played in it the part of *primus inter pares* and has always been deeply respected and sincerely loved by all his colleagues. Owing to his absolute honesty and impartiality, his painstaking style of work as well as his unique organizing talent he has had the lion's share in making the English department of Brno a respected institution with a high pedagogical and moral reputation, in addition to its impressive scholarly qualities. The latter gave rise to the admirable series of volumes entitled Brno Studies in English (so far 14 volumes), in which both sections of the department, the linguistic and the literary (headed since 1945 by the late Professor Karel Štěpaník and at present by Associate Professor Jessie Kocmanová), regularly inform the widest Anglicist circles of the scholarly work done in the department.

Finally, one must not leave unmentioned a very specific feature of Brno Anglicist pedagogical activities, and one that gives convincing evidence of Firbas's ingenious planning and organizing abilities. We mean the intensive English courses organized for a period of one week every autumn in the village of Cikháj, set amidst rolling hills (some 80 kilometers from Brno). They are absolutely unequalled by any other Anglicist department in the country, thanks not only to the "Cikháj lecture", which is given each year by a Czechoslovak or foreign university teacher of English, but also to the activities of the dramatic circle of Brno Anglicist students, admirably led by Prof. Kocmanová and staging each year some English play, either classical or modern, in faultless English.

There is indeed little more to be said — except the sincere wish to our young sexagenarian that he may see all his plans for the future, scholarly as well as personal, fully realized.

JAN FIRBAS was born on March 25, 1921 in Brno. He studied at the Brno Realgymnasium from 1932 to 1939. After his Matura examination became enrolled in the Faculty of Medicine in Brno in 1939. After the closing of Czech universities taught at lower technical schools and at the Institute of Modern Languages in Brno.

After the reopening of the universities he studied English and Philosophy at the Philosophical Faculty in Brno; obtained the teaching qualification for Gymnasia in 1947, and his PhD degree in 1948. In the year 1948/49 studied in England (Leeds and London). Appointed Assistant at the English Department of Brno University in 1947, and Assistant Professor in 1950. Obtained his habilitation for the English Language in 1963 and since then has acted as Associate Professor of that subject. Obtained the degree of CSc in 1959; presented his dissertation for the DrSc degree in 1978.

His activities abroad: Visiting Professorships at the University of Erlangen (1969 to 1970), and at the University of Buffalo, N. Y. (1971); Resident Fellow at the Netherlands Institute of Advanced Studies (Wassenaar, The Netherlands, 1973–1974); has lectured at the universities of Wrocław, Warszawa, Poznań (Poland), Sofia

(Bulgaria), Bucharest (Romania); London, Reading (England), Vienna, Salzburg (Austria), Bochum, Hamburg, Kiel, Mainz, Stuttgart (German Federal Republic), Leiden, Amsterdam, Groningen (The Netherlands), Brussels (Belgium), Lund (Sweden), Basle, Berne, Zurich (Switzerland), Budapest, Debrecen (Hungary), Berlin, Greifswald, Halle (Saale), Leipzig, Rostock (German Democratic Republic), Hyderabad, Poona (India).