

ALEŠ SVOBODA

JAN FIRBAS – SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS YOUNG

Jan Firbas was born on 25th March 1921 in Brno. In 1939 he enrolled at the Medical Faculty of Masaryk University, but the closure of the universities by the Nazis changed his line of studies. He attended the Institute of Modern Languages, acquired the Teacher's Certificate, and taught English and German at various secondary schools. From 1945 to 1947 he studied English and philosophy at the Faculty of Arts (Masaryk University, Brno) and became Prof. Vachek's assistant in the English seminar. After taking his Ph.D. in 1948, he spent a year in London with Prof. Gimson and J. D. O'Connor, devoting himself to phonetics. Since 1949 he has been a permanent member of the Department of English and American Studies, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Brno. It is no wonder that Prof. Vachek made Firbas enthusiastic about the ideas of the Prague Linguistic Circle and suggested to him that he continue Mathesius' syntactic studies in Functional Sentence Perspective. The internationally accepted linguistic term 'functional sentence perspective' (abbreviated FSP) is Jan Firbas' invention. In the search for a suitable counterpart of the literally untranslatable (Mathesius') term 'aktuální členění', young Firbas came to Prof. Vachek with the suggestion of 'functional sentence perspective' and Prof. Vachek gave him his approval. This fact ought to be declared publicly because in some recent (less informed) publications the term 'functional sentence perspective' is ascribed to German linguists. They actually used the term 'Perspektive' in various meanings including that of today's FSP (Mathesius himself used the German term 'Satzperspektive' in one of his papers written in German), but 'functional sentence perspective' ('Funktionelle Satzperspektive' in German) was introduced into linguistics by Jan Firbas.

In spite of excellent results in both his research work and his pedagogical activities, Jan Firbas was persecuted by the totalitarian regime mainly because he came from an old Protestant family (moreover, his father was an outstanding doctor in the army, a General in the pre-communist era) and because he lived in accordance with his religious beliefs and refused to behave otherwise. For more than thirty years these facts could not be published. After 1989 they were made

publicly known on the occasion of J. Firbas' seventieth birthday in 1991. There are many good reasons for making these facts public again and again. Firstly, one passing mention can hardly put things right if only in the sphere of moral justification. Secondly, Czechs seem to be people not quite ready to learn from their own history and without a standing repetition of what was wrong in the previous regime there appears to be a new danger of disregarding the depth of knowledge, the highest qualifications and the well-meant advice of many a present-day scholar of international repute especially by ambitious self-styled personalities who may be short of time for scholarly reading but who are definitely not short of assertivity. Jan Firbas had to wait ten years for his habilitation being approved (to become an Associate Professor), and he had to wait another twenty-four years (till 1990) to become a University Professor. There are hundreds of petty manifestations of this persecution in his life, but one of them may speak for all. Being a scholar of international reputation, he submitted his thesis for the acquisition of the degree of Doctor of Sciences (the highest degree in arts and science in former Czechoslovakia) at Charles University in Prague in 1971. He was not allowed to defend his thesis, and after two years he received it back (by fast mail!) with a short letter saying that as a consequence of his 'insufficient social activity' the defence of his thesis was postponed until 1974. Nothing happened till 1978 when the Minister of Education recommended Firbas to submit his thesis again. Firbas did so, but this time it was his own faculty in Brno that left the thesis lying in the bottom drawer without giving Firbas the opportunity to defend it until the 'post-revolutionary' year of 1990 when the defence of his thesis turned into a delayed celebration of his linguistic achievements on his home ground.

In the meantime Firbas had become well-known all over the world and invitations for his lecturing abroad poured in. In 1969-70 he was a visiting professor at the University of Erlangen; in 1971 he gave a series of lectures on Functional Sentence Perspective at the Summer Linguistic Institute in Buffalo and in 1973-74 he spent a year in the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies at Wassenaar, where he wrote two basic studies: *The functional view of 'ORDO NATURALIS'* (BSE 13; for abbreviations see the end of the present paper), and *A study in the functional perspective of the English and the Slavonic interrogative sentence* (BSE 12). In the following years he lectured at more than thirty European universities as well as in Poona and Hyderabad in India. After several years of repeated invitations by Prof. Quirk, Firbas was allowed to spend the academic year 1965-66 at University College, London. Shortly afterwards, he was awarded two honorary doctorates (Loewen and Leeds) and gave a series of lectures at thirteen (West) German universities. In 1986 (at the age of 65) he was forced to retire, but – thanks to a changed political climate – his lectures continued without interruption till 1990 when he was reinstated, appointed Professor of English, and awarded the degree of Doctor of Sciences.

Further invitations from abroad poured in. This time it was but Jan Firbas who was – in accordance with constraints on his time – to decide which of the invitations to accept and which to decline. In Britain he accepted P. Newmark's invitation to Guildford, M. Berry's to Nottingham, and G. N. Leech's to Lancaster. In the U.S., he met D. S. Worth in Los Angeles, S. Thompson at Santa Barbara and Susumo Kuno at Harvard. In Germany he visited Groningen, Leipzig and Dresden. At the Freie Universitet in Amsterdam, he participated in Prof. de Vart's special course for translators of the Bible. He also responded to Prof. Beaugrand's call and gave a course of lectures in the summer semester of 1993 at the University in Vienna. He attended a number of conferences where he was asked to act as plenary speaker or to deliver the key-note address in the workshop. The most outstanding of these are the 'Rheme Workshop' in Nottingham 1990, the Systemic Congresses in Stirling and in Gent, and the Conference in Turku 1994.

Firbas is one of very few **consistent** followers of the Prague School linguistic tradition. His intensive and extensive research into the theory and practice of Functional Sentence Perspective shows in a most convincing way that the functional structuralist approach to language is much alive even in the latter half of this century and that it has an impact on the development of modern linguistic disciplines such as text linguistics, pragmalinguistics, and syntactic typology. Firbas' theory of FSP is based on Mathesius' ideas of the functional analysis of a sentence. The starting point of a new development of the theory was Mathesius' statement about English being less susceptible to FSP than Czech. In all his work, Firbas has shown that FSP is determined, not by word order, or context, or intonation alone but by the interplay of at least the following four factors: context, semantics, linearity, and intonation (in spoken language). All these factors are present in any language, but their interplay may be different in different languages. Seen in this light, English (or any other language examined so far) is not less susceptible to FSP than Czech, but the outcome of the interplay of factors is – at least partly – signalled by other linguistic means.

In order to show the interplay of factors, Firbas had to subject them to a thorough analysis and to describe them in detail. Apart from delicate word-order studies in the broad sense of the word, i.e., studies of the linearity of linguistic elements or units, he introduced his version of semantic scales, or – in his latest terminology – the scales of dynamic semantic functions (the Presentation Scale: SETTING – PRESENTATION – PHENOMENON PRESENTED; the Quality Scale: (SETTING) – QUALITY BEARER – QUALITY – SPECIFICATION(S)), he further described the complexities of context (verbal, situational, and experiential), and he threw new light on the function of intonation in FSP. The detectable results of the interplay of factors – the degrees of communicative dynamism conveyed by the separate elements of an utterance – enabled him to make the rough division of the sentence into THEME – (TRANSITION –) RHEME more refined. His pluri-partition of a sentence has an enormous range of applicability and will – no

doubt – substantially contribute to the functional analysis of less traditionally structured languages.

Clear contours of Firbas' theory of FSP can be seen as early as mid fifties. Since then he has published over 130 papers on FSP, most of them written in English. (For his bibliography see BSE 14, 1981, and the present volume.) His work is represented by the perpetual alternation of general and specific studies, the former enriching the theory, the latter applying it to separate language phenomena. Let us mention some of them, at least: *K otázce nezákladových podmětů v současné angličtině*, ČMF 39, 1957, republished as *Non-thematic subjects in Contemporary English*, TLP 2, 1966), *Some thoughts on the function of word order in Old English and Modern English* (SPFFBU A5, 1958), *Thoughts on the communicative function of the verb in English, German and Czech* (BSE 1, 1959), *More thoughts on the communicative function of the English verb* (SPFFBU A7, 1959), *On the communicative value of the Modern English finite verb* (BSE 3, 1961), *From comparative word-order studies* (BSE 4, 1964), *On the prosodic features of the Modern English finite verb-object combination as means of FSP* (BSE 8, 1969), *On the thematic and the non-thematic section of the sentence* (Style and Text, Stockholm 1975), *On existence/appearance on the scene in FSP* (PSE 16, 1975). The two major studies dealing with 'ordo naturalis' and with 'interrogative sentences' were mentioned above. In the latter half of the eighties, Firbas focused his attention on intonation and emotiveness, which resulted in the following three studies: *Thoughts on FSP, intonation and emotiveness, part one and part two* (BSE 16, 1985, and BSE 17, 1987), and *Degrees of communicative dynamism and degrees of prosodic prominence* (BSE 18, 1990).

In the last five years Prof. Firbas seems to have doubled his research activities and his scholarly effort. He has always been a diligent researcher who proceeds step by step to his ultimate aim – to find the way the language functions and to find the best way to deliver his knowledge to other linguists, but since 1991 he has made huge strides in both respects. First of all, he published a monograph entitled *Functional sentence perspective in written and spoken communication* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), in which he offers his FSP theory in its entirety, giving a sufficient number of examples as well as supplying further food for thought. This book enables the reader to rely on one source only, and saves him much time originally spent by looking for the references in various linguistic journals, collections of papers, and irregular 'Festschriften'. Secondly, Firbas has brought his terminology, his argumentation, and his way of FSP analyses to such level of linguistic precision at which the results can be doubted only by people who – in the endeavour to be clever as quickly as possible – read every tenth line of scholarly papers with the (self-conscious) hope that they are able to fill in the highly sophisticated ideas by themselves. (This remark is made here quite deliberately, because it is not difficult to prove that most of the critics of the FSP theory do not care to make themselves sure

whether certain statements made by Firbas were (grammatically and notionally) positive or negative.)

One of the striking features of J. Firbas' research activities in the 1990's is his comparative study of biblical translations. This topic is by no means new to Firbas. In fact he started with word-order studies of the (Old English and other) translations of biblical texts as early as the 1950's, but in the years to come the possibilities of publishing the results of this type of research were considerably restricted. After 1989, however, nothing stood in the way of publishing the comparative biblical studies and giving lectures on contrastive biblical translology. Firbas, of course, deals with the translation of the Bible in the light of FSP, but his achievements reach far beyond the FSP boundaries. Firbas actually works with dozens of translations (e.g., in one of his papers he compares twenty-six different versions of the same text), more than a dozen languages and dozens of editions of the Bible in both the synchronic and the diachronic dimension. He works with texts that he himself has read, studied, analysed, and interpreted dozens, maybe hundreds of times throughout his life, so his conclusions are based, not on a one-time narrow linguistic analysis of a given text, but on a hundred-time philosophical, religious, sociological, psychological, lexical, and multi-contrastive syntactic analysis enriched by that of FSP. This is why the results – although presented as those of FSP – reach far beyond the sphere of strictly linguistic analysis and aim at the solution of some intricate questions posed in the translation and the interpretation of such multidimensional texts as appear in the Bible.

This broad range of the applicability of Firbas' FSP analyses has been recently demonstrated by 'secular' texts as well. Firbas has always exemplified his ideas by long stretches of texts because he has always tried to make the reader well aware of the fact that functional **sentence** perspective is first of all about **text** in the widest sense of the word, but it is definitely his recent analyses that display the full repertory of his FSP devices to analyse the text in the true Prague School way of applying both the structural and the functional aspects to the widest range of phenomena. The limited scope of the present paper does not give the possibility to go into detail. The reader may judge for himself by going through such Firbas' papers as *On the Thematic and the Rhematic Layers of a Text* (in Wårvik et al.: *Organization in Discourse, Proceedings from the Turku Conference*, 1995), *Retrievability Span in Functional Sentence Perspective* (BSE 21, 1995), or *Mobility of clause constituents and functional sentence perspective* (in Partee, B. H. and P. Sgall (eds.): *Discourse and Meaning*, John Benjamin, 1996).

The topics covered by the latest publications are theme, thematicity, retrievable/irretrievable information, retrievability, retrievability span, referent, co-referentiality, co-referential string, hypertheme, distance bridging, and a number of others related to them. The outcome of the research in the field of the above notions is a new, both theoretically and statistically founded, approach to

the explanation of the key term in FSP – the immediately relevant context. The new angle of approach to the old term enables Firbas to explain the relativity of the long-discussed phenomena of old/new and known/unknown information with much clarity and precision. Another feature of the latest publications is the complexity of the view. Being aware of the fact that he may refer the reader to his comprehensive book on FSP, Firbas can view the analysed texts both syntagmatically and paradigmatically without any simplifications which were necessary in his previous papers from practical reasons (the reader would have to be referred to many, often not easily accessible sources), moreover, he may guide the reader to the full multi-dimensionality of his own view so that the final result is what may be called the linguistic characterology in the field of – not only FSP – but functional syntax in general.

Jan Firbas is not only a highly-esteemed scholar of international reputation, he is also an outstanding university teacher, an excellent colleague and friend, a devoted husband, father, and grandfather. The Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Brno, originally employed Jan Firbas as a (student) librarian of the English Seminar in February 1945 (which is testified by Firbas' Labour Card, given to all the regular employees at that time). This means that at present Prof. Firbas is serving his 103rd semester at Masaryk University and in the Department of English and American Studies. He brought up – in every sense of the word – generations of students and generations of teachers of English including a range of university teachers and researchers. In spite of five (very) short-time retirements (sometimes regretful, sometimes ridiculous) followed by immediate reactivations, he has been permanently guiding his undergraduates, postgraduates, his collaborators and his colleagues through the meandering paths towards a deeper knowledge of language in general and the more profound insight into human understanding in particular. May he enjoy the years to come in good health and creative work amidst his loving family, loving disciples, and loving friends.

(Abbreviations: BSE = Brno studies in English (Brno), ČMF = Časopis pro moderní filologii (Prague), PSE = Prague studies in English (Prague), SPFFBU = Sborník prací filozofické fakulty brněnské univerzity (Brno), TLP = Travaux linguistiques de Prague (Prague).)