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Contribution to thhe Memorial Meeting for Professor Jan Firbas

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Professor Martin Davies, Stirling, 25th March 2001

Contribution to the Memorial Meeting for Professor Jan Firbas

Charles University, Prague, 5th April, 2001

It is a particular privilege for me to be here at all, and one that I value beyond all words, both because of my admiration and gratitude to Professor's Firbas for his inspiration as a scholar, and because of the affection he inspired in us all. And, if I had to say, in one word, what I admired in him, both as a scholar and as a man, that word would be "integrity".

As a scholar, he always seemed to me to combine width of learning with depth of penetration to a peculiar degree. But I am the last person to express appreciation of these qualities to you, because although I profited by his work, I do not know anything like all of it, and am not competent to provide an appreciation. You know his work much better than I do.

But, of course, I can remind you that his work has been known in the west for many years; which is why, for example, it is nice to be able to report that when I mentioned my visit here to Professor Peter Fries, of Michigan, who is a leading worker in the systemic-functional tradition in which I work, he e-mailed me to say how pleased he was that somebody from our tradition would be here. He wrote: "It is good to hear that some systemicists (at least one) will be at the memorial. We owe a great deal to those folks," by which he meant Czech linguists generally, as well as Professor Firbas's work in particular. And I can also say what Professor Firbas's work has meant to me, personally, because he taught me something which provided me with crucial encouragement at a time when, after twenty years, my research seemed to be running into the ground. And it didn't happen here or in Brno, but at home in Stirling.

I think Stirling was one of the first places he managed to visit in the west when the Berlin wall came down, and his arrival at Stir-

ling in 1990 was a particularly “lucky accident” for me, because Professor Daneš, without in the least wishing to do so, had been depressing me – not personally but academically! He was in the habit of observing that there is no intonation in writing. And of course he is right! But that was my problem, not the answer to my problem; and his saying so, even in his own terms, seemed to make my problem worse! But Professor Firbas cheered me up immensely by suggesting that there are “Intonation Centres” in writing, a fact which I only discovered when I edited the plenary paper he gave at Stirling, *On some basic problems of Functional Sentence Perspective* (for the publication which came out of the conference). This was particularly surprising for me, as I had come to the view that the function of writing was not to represent speech but to realise form; and that alphabetic writing was originally *derived* from phonology, but does not *realise* it; and so it cannot now represent phonology, except minimally. But Professor Firbas was identifying Intonation Centres, which are phonological elements of a text, and doing so in written texts, which I’d never been able to do (except by reading a written text aloud). (In systemic-functional linguistics we call Intonation Centres “Tonicities”.)

But it was not only as a scholar that he won all hearts at Stirling in 1990. He was already talking when he arrived at my house the evening before the conference, talking with Professor James D. Benson of Toronto, who had kindly brought him from the airport for me; and he then talked, pretty well non-stop, for the whole week, as well as for his plenary! And by the time he gave his plenary, on the fourth day of his visit, everyone knew he had arrived, and everyone had determined to attend his plenary, not only because they knew of his academic reputation, and influence upon systemic-functional linguistics, but because they had heard him talking – always talking, never intrusively, but courteously asking questions and elegantly explaining his ideas, and probing further possibilities. So that it was no surprise to start hearing – as you went down a corridor – people saying things like, “I don’t want to miss Firbas’s lecture,” or “But I mustn’t miss Firbas!” And, one afternoon, he also attended no less than five papers on Theme, in every case eager to learn, and in every case able to say something helpful, whether it was to beginners or to old-timers. It was in fact his presence which in large part

made the conference a particularly memorable one. And his command of English astonished us: exposition, analysis, narrative, conversation, especially as a *raconteur* of jokes – all the difficult genres, in fact – he used in a seemingly unending flow of stimulation, enlightenment and entertainment. And if, as some say, the language speaks the man (the dramatist, Ben Jonson wrote, “Speak, that I may see thee!”), then his language certainly “spoke” him, and we liked “what he spoke”. He enchanted us all!

And I also remember, with delight and gratitude, a memorable walk to the opera house in Brno, when he told the well-known, terrible, story of Jakobson’s escape from Brno to the west. Not a hint of resentment or malice against the outrageous people who made that dreadful journey necessary, and committed so many other horrors, surfaced in his telling. And it was also on that occasion that he mentioned how he had refused to accept his chair from your oppressors. And so, underneath the delightful flow of his conversation, there was always the tough integrity which declared that he was his own man. He was a very humble man, who had absolutely nothing to be humble about but was nevertheless very humble, all the same, treating us all as people from whom he might learn something. Yet, in all humility, he knew his own worth and would not barter it nor betray it. Those of us who have profited by his scholarship – as students and colleagues – can and will rejoice that we have also known him as a man, even as we mourn our loss.

(Příspěvek je uveřejněn ve zkrácené verzi)

PhDr. Iva Gilbertová

O setkání s Jendou Fibasem

Po pět let mého studia, v druhé polovině sedmdesátých let, byl Jenda pro mě a mé spolužáky nejprve náročným, ale vstřícným učitelem. Teprve postupně jsme začali vnímat význam a ohlas jeho odborné práce. O to víc jsme oceňovali jeho upřímný zájem o život katedry – nejen o její každodenní fungování, nám studentům jen zčásti patrné, ale i o naše vlastní zápolení. S pochopením vnímal