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# FIFTY VOLUMES OF BRNO STUDIES IN ENGLISH

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Celebrating one's fiftieth anniversary is a central point in everybody's life, both personal and professional. Such a point tends to be a watershed moment, with people reflecting on their prior achievements but still looking forward in anticipation of the active and productive years ahead. This moment comes with the realization that it is now their role to provide stability and continuity, and bring to fruition their extensive experience in the service to others.

Since *Brno Studies in English* is marking its significant milestone this year, it is only apt to reflect on the journal's past, think about its present, and see where it might head in the future. Needless to say, the journal is entering its 50<sup>th</sup> volume, but since it was originally published at irregular intervals, it is actually celebrating another highlight: the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its launch in 1959. And, incidentally, the present issue is also the 65<sup>th</sup> numbered issue of the journal, neatly coinciding with the length of its existence. That makes this an occasion for a triple celebration: 65 years, 50 volumes, 65 issues.

## Journal beginnings

In his humble preface to the very first issue of *Brno Studies in English*, its founding editor Josef Vachek – aged fifty when the journal was founded – set out the mission of the newly established journal around the common approach of the papers included in the collection, namely their regard to the actual, present-day period. For linguistics, that statement was a programmatic statement – the affirmation of the synchronic functional approach pioneered and developed by the pre-War group of Czech scholars. For literature, it reflected an interpretation of the English literary heritage from the contemporary point of view, formulated somewhat ambiguously in the preface as “from the angle of today's social and cultural context” (Vachek 1959: 3).

Establishing the journal in the late 1950s in the then socialist Czechoslovakia, with the aim of focusing specifically on Western philology at the height of the Cold War, was by no means an easy task. The prevailing atmosphere was one of suspicion and distrust, and personal positions and political views needed to be not only vetted but also publically demonstrated to the authorities, with enforced public declarations of allegiance or support – whether genuine or not – to the ruling regime. The minimal length, and the strictly factual content of Vachek's

preface should be read as a kind of a cat-and-mouse game, where the regime could (but often did not, as Vachek himself was to find out shortly) allow you to carry on your work, even in dispreferred (and highly suspicious!) areas such as Anglophone philology, but typically for as long as long as you kept your head low.

It is in this context that we should consider the rather bizarre wish concluding the preface: “May these modest studies also have some share in helping to promote mutual understanding and goodwill among workers in English philology throughout the world!” The formulation will inevitably conjure up a smile on many current readers’ faces but, at that time, it was the necessary cliché that had to be present in order to get the approval of the authorities. Without it, the new journal project would not be likely to be allowed to move forwards. Nowadays, it serves as a chilling reminder that our cherished academic freedoms are not something to be taken for granted and that our predecessors often had to engage in significant strategic manoeuvring in order to secure their scholarships and, even, assure the existence of their disciplines. Only four years later, in 1962, Vachek left the university as a result of official pressures due to his religious persuasion (Vachek 1994: 118–119). At that time, having faith was regarded as a problem, particularly for people actively involved in the sphere of education. Though he got a research position at the Czech Academy of Sciences, Vachek – who was an excellent teacher (Chloupek 1969: 164) – was able to return to teaching only at the end of the 1960s when the social atmosphere became more tolerant, eventually building the English departments in Bratislava and Prešov in Slovakia.

Over the 65 years of its existence, the journal was run by 6 editors-in-chief (sometimes referred to as “výkonní redaktoři” in Czech). The first forty years are associated with the leading figures of their era: Josef Vachek (1959–1964, Vols. 1–4), Jan Firbas (1968, Vol. 7), Jan Firbas and Josef Hladký jointly (1983–1991, Vols. 8–18), and Josef Hladký independently (1993–1999; Vols. 20–25). At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the situation in the editorial office was getting more complicated. Jan Firbas, though still academically active, was already in retirement († 2000, aged 79), as was the other long-term editor, Josef Hladký († 2008, aged 76), who brought the journal to the end of the millennium but could not, also for health reasons, continue his service. There appears to have been little interest in the department to take over the demanding editorial work, which involved chasing contributions from colleagues and supervising the entire production process, a task that also became increasingly demanding after the journal switched to annual publication in 1995. The journal was thus handed over to a newcomer in the department, the linguist Aleš Launer († 2014, aged 51), and after three years to the literary scholar Pavel Drábek (currently professor at University of Hull). Each of them supervised the publication of three volumes: Vols. 26–28 (2000–2002), in the former case and Vols. 29–31 (2003–2005) in the latter. In 2006, the editorship was taken over by the current editor-in-chief, Jan Chovanec, who has been in charge of Vols. 32–50.

## The journal and English linguistics

One of the ways of understanding science and scholarship is of course to consider it not only in the context of the specific socio-political situation of the practitioners but also in view of the changing conventions and requirements of science. By default, science is – or should be – one: it is the global, international dialogue that scholars hold across their linguistic constraints and political and ideological boundaries. Again, it is in this context that we have to read the inception of the journal, which aimed to “inform the wider public about the kind of work being done in the English Seminar of the University in Brno” (Vachek 1959).

Indeed, the journal was a platform for presenting the research produced locally to other scholars, at a time when communication with other European countries, particularly the Anglophone ones and those on the other side of the Iron Curtain, was not always easy. University journals played an important role in the international dissemination of science at that time: while they tended to include contributions by local scholars, Czech university libraries had a sophisticated system of international exchanges. That meant that while the local journals were sent to many foreign libraries, many international publications which would otherwise be unavailable were received in return. This was a win-win situation: the locally produced research did make it to the shelves of some of the most important centres of international scholarship, and the publications received from the West enabled local scholars to access the latest developments in the discipline, at a time when the free exchange of ideas was hindered and blocked due to the impossibility of travel, foreign currency limitations, and ideological bias.

Interestingly, many of those library exchanges – originally more than fifty of them in the case of *Brno Studies in English* – still continue until the present time, though that may strike some as a bit anachronistic at a time when almost any content is available instantly online at the click of a mouse. Things have their momentum, however, and old habits die hard – it is only the constraints of physical space in many of the libraries that have led to the discontinuation of some of those exchanges in the past few years, decades after their establishment. Nevertheless, it may come as something of a surprise for the reader to realize that the journal has had its physical presence in university libraries in such places as Toronto, Kraków, Berkeley, Ann Arbor, Chicago, Glasgow, or in St. Petersburg Academy of Science, the MLA collection in New York, the British Library in London and even the Library of Congress in Washington. Indeed, there are perhaps few more rewarding editorial experiences than when, upon a chance visit to a university library abroad, the editor-in-chief unexpectedly finds a shelf with an almost complete collection of the journal (thank you, University of Alicante!).

In any case, *Brno Studies in English* was, for decades, indeed the flagship publication of the Brno English department. Occasionally, external contributors were solicited, but that was an exception rather than the rule, as hinted, e.g. by Firbas (1993: 117) in his note celebrating the twentieth volume of BSE. In the early history of the journal, the most notable is of course Volume 8, with invited contributions from a number of leading linguists of the day (Dwight Bolinger, A.C. Gimson, Michael Halliday, Klaus Hansen, Simeon Potter, C.L. Wrenn and

others) to celebrate Vachek's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. Collected at a time of short-lived freedom in the late 1960s, the volume was, however, blacklisted shortly after its publication in 1969 because of its 'problematic content': it also included contributions from scholars who emigrated after August 1968 (Firbas 1993: 118). Courageous faculty librarians, however, did not comply with the order to have the issue shredded and preserved the volume for later distribution.

The dominant area of research in Brno has always been linguistics, more specifically functionally oriented linguistics. All scholars who have held the professorial position in Brno were involved in the journal, either as editors or contributors. Let us recollect some of the key studies from the early years of the journal. In the first volumes, published during his Brno years, Josef Vachek published three of his key papers, each addressing a general linguistic topic with a wealth of supporting historical and comparative data. In the first one, he laid out his conception of spoken and written language as two functional norms which are independent yet complementary (1959). In the second he extensively detailed his understanding of the analytical trend of English, focusing on such phenomena as the possessive case, the compactness of the English sentence, the dynamism of the finite verb, and phonological oppositions in Modern English vowels (1961). The third key paper addressed the complex issue of peripheral phonemes in Modern English, based on Vachek's unrivalled expertise in historical phonology. Over a hundred pages, this book-length article documents the historical struggle in the system of English phonemes, explaining – always in view of the complex structural relationships across various language levels – how some phonemes were eliminated and others functionally re-evaluated (1964).

Although these papers were published decades ago, they are certainly worth remembering. They are still relevant today: though they were very influential in their time, they have aged well so they are not likely to pass into oblivion. Not only have they become classics for generations for Czech Anglicists, but they also contain a surprising wealth of excellent observations that are, in my opinion, central to any student who wishes to truly understand and appreciate the nature of the English language as a complex structural system, not just learning it instrumentally as a means of communication. Based on meticulous cross-linguistic comparison which is meant to reveal some of the typical, or 'characteristic' features of the language, this approach has been crucial to the Czech conception of philological study for almost a century, cf. its design of 'linguistic characterology' (Mathesius 1975; see also Chovanec 2014).

We cannot fail to mention the research by Jan Firbas in the area of 'functional sentence perspective', which was largely developed in a series of papers published in the *Brno Studies in English* journal. His work in the journal spans the period of full forty years – from Firbas's first paper in the journal in 1959 (on the communicative function of the verb, contrasting the situation in English, Czech and German), until his last one in 1999 (a case study on a contextually motivated resolution of potentiality in FSP in an ambiguous written text). Some of the papers have become central to the theory of information structure, developing the specific concepts, such as word order (1964) and communicative dynamism (1971).

## The journal at present

However, by the early 2000s, it was becoming increasingly evident that the limitation to local research was no longer possible or desirable. The academic climate had changed and simply publishing one's work in one's own journal was no longer meaningful and internationally competitive. It was evident that the journal needed a more radical change in order to justify its existence. Under the leadership of the current editor, the editorial board was internationalized, a stringent double blind peer review process was introduced and, most importantly, the decision was adopted to focus fully on external rather than just domestic contributions, eventually moving to the format of a regular international journal. Starting from the 2009 volume, the publication frequency was increased to two issues per year, and the change was accompanied by the adoption of a new visual style that was intended to be not only modern but also timeless. The journal also started publishing accepted papers as articles-in-pre on the department web page in order to make them available to the academic community as soon as possible, and pioneered open access at a time when most other journals published at the Faculty of Arts still relied on subscriptions. It was also among the first journals at Masaryk University that started using digital object identifier codes (DOIs) for all papers. The success of those policy decisions became evident very quickly, with the ever increasing number of submissions from all over the world and the early inclusion of the journal in international databases such as Scopus and ERIH+.

The world of academic publishing has been undergoing radical transformations in the past few years. A growing number of papers are being produced each year by scholars, accompanied by an increasing number of newly founded journals that cater to the academics' needs to get published. Publishing models are changing, with many scholars seeking open access and the major publishing houses renegotiating their policies with libraries and providers of research funds. In this context, *Brno Studies in English* is a university-based journal that is run and fully financed from public institutional funds provided by both Masaryk University and the Department of English and American Studies. Despite the ongoing digitalization of academic content, the journal will continue being published in the foreseeable future in hard copy as well as in the digital format.

Running the journal would not be possible without recalling the many other people who have been involved in the whole undertaking either directly or indirectly. Thanks have to be extended to the editorial board members, and the members of the current editorial team, namely Filip Krajník, Naděžda Kudrnáčová and Renata Kamenická, who have been very helpful in managing the large number of contributions in the past few years. Of course, the journal has also relied extensively on the goodwill of hundreds of reviewers who selflessly offered their precious time and expertise to give valuable feedback to the authors. At the same time, we cannot overlook the librarians and the technical staff at the Faculty of Arts and in the university publishing house, who have been instrumental in ensuring proper digital archiving of the content, seeing to database indexing services, and attending to the myriad other invisible things involved in producing both the digital content and the printed copies of the journal. From among the

many of the indispensable people working behind the scenes, we should not fail to mention the typesetter Dan Šlosar, who has processed over two hundred contributions for the journal, and spent dozens and dozens of hours sitting with the editor-in-chief in front of a computer screen, fixing the minute technical details in the corrected proofs from the authors.

If one's fiftieth anniversary is an occasion to reflect on the past, then we do have grounds to look back on our achievements with pride. As for the present and the future, being aware of the dedication to and belief in the meaningfulness of our work gives us a degree of confidence. Yet, we should be careful about complacency – sustaining the quality and integrity of scholarly research and its presentation is a never-ending task and a challenge for the future. Let me thus wish the journal all the best for the years to come!

## Postscript

I would like to dedicate this issue to all the previous linguistics professors at the Department of English in Brno, who have each been involved with the journal in their own ways, either as editors or contributors: professor Josef Vachek, professor Jan Firbas, professor Josef Hladký and professor Ludmila Urbanová. They represent the very best tradition of Anglicist work and research in this country, as well as the generational continuity of honest, exemplary and life-long scholarship, including selfless and dedicated pedagogical work that instilled love for the English language and linguistics in several generations of students and scholars.

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