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25 March 1921 – 5 May 2000

IN MEMORY OF JAN FIRBAS

Jan Firbas, professor of the English language at the Faculty of Arts of Masaryk University, a highly esteemed follower of the linguistic tradition established by the Prague School and one of the most prominent representatives of twentieth-century linguistics, died on 5 May 2000, at the age of 79.

Jan Firbas spent most of his life in the city of Brno where he was born on 25 March 1921. After finishing secondary school in 1939, he entered Masaryk University as a student of medicine, determined to follow in his father's footsteps. He was forced to abandon his studies, however, because in the fall of 1939, all Czech universities were closed by the Nazis. Jan Firbas began attending the Institute of Modern Languages, which remained open, and later taught English and German at several secondary schools. He returned to Masaryk University after the war to study English and philosophy at the Faculty of Arts. He graduated in 1947, was awarded a Ph.D. in 1948 and became a member of that faculty's Department of English and American Studies as an assistant to Professor Josef Vachek in 1949. After being granted the degree of Candidate of Science by Charles University and defending his habilitation dissertation at Masaryk University, he was appointed associate professor in 1966. He handed in his Doctor of Science dissertation to Charles University in 1971, but as a result of increasing political and religious oppression in Czechoslovakia following the 1968 Soviet invasion, he had to wait for the fall of the communist regime to be awarded the doctoral degree and named a university professor at Masaryk University, both of which happened in 1991.

Much to the displeasure of the communist authorities, who disliked his religious beliefs and his distrust of their ideology, Jan Firbas won a world-wide reputation for his scholarly work. He received numerous invitations during his lifetime to lecture at universities across Europe, the United States, and India. Apart from various short-term visits to foreign universities, he spent several semesters in abroad: in 1948, he worked on phonetics with Professors A. C. Gimson and J. D. O'Connor in London, in 1969-70 he lectured as a visiting professor at the University of Erlangen and Nuremberg, in 1973-74 he carried out research at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies in Wassenaar and in 1984-85, on an invitation from Professor Randolph Quirk, he worked at University College London. Jan Firbas's academic merit was acknowledged by three honorary doctorates awarded to him by the Universities of Leeds (United Kingdom, 1984), Leuven (Belgium, 1984), and Turku (Finland, 2000).

Jan Firbas devoted his entire life to the study of the theme-rheme (topic-focus) structure of the sentence. He introduced the term functional sentence perspective which has been adopted by numerous functional linguists for the analysis of information flow in communication. Firbas's theory of functional sentence perspective is a structuralist and functionalist approach to language, studying the complex relations between the syntactic, semantic, contextual, and prosodic levels of language. Jan Firbas presented the results of his research and the principles of the Brno approach to functional sentence perspective, which he had founded, in over 150 publications including his definitive monograph entitled *Functional sentence perspective in written and spoken communication* (Cambridge University Press, 1992). He was a hard working scholar who devoted all his energy and free time to research. He tried to obtain a most detailed view of the properties of language communication and formulated his observations with the utmost precision. He greatly feared being misunderstood and was deeply unhappy about several instances of misinterpretation of his theory by scholars who had not paid enough attention to the complexity of the theory and who rejected his views after only a superficial reading of some of his publications. Though very busy, he did not hesitate to write a new paper in response to the objections raised, explaining with still greater precision the misunderstood aspect of his theory.

In spite of his prominent academic position, Jan Firbas was a very modest and compassionate person. He treated everyone as his peer, never boasting of his academic achievements. He showed great sympathy for other people and actively helped those in need. His home became a refuge for several gravely-ill members of his family in the final, most difficult stages of their lives, which he and his wife Helena tried to alleviate. Jan Firbas showed an equal understanding for the personal problems of his university colleagues and supported them as an experienced advisor. He was a model family man, a loving father of two sons and a man devoted to his wife, who stood by him with loving care and boundless encouragement through the end of his life.

Jan Firbas is one of the leading figures in the history of English studies at Masaryk University in Brno. Though not an acknowledged professor, he took over professorial obligations at the Department of English and American Studies of the Faculty of Arts as early as 1962 when Professor Vachek had to leave the department. He felt responsible for the academic growth of the department and encouraged its members to carry on with research and publish their writings. His younger colleagues, as well as his students, remember him as a most patient consultant who spent much of his valuable time dealing with their research problems. His exceptional conscientiousness meant that he spent the last days of his life, when he did not feel well at all, reading the dissertation of a student whose defense he would not be able to attend.

The death of Jan Firbas is not only a loss for his family but is a loss for all teachers and students of the Department of English and American Studies in Brno, as well as the entire Czech linguistic community. We shall all miss his intelligence, warmth and kindness as well as his profound knowledge and un-

derstanding of the English language, culture and linguistics. His name has been added to the pantheon of scholars who have shaped linguistic inquiry in the twentieth century.

Jana Chamonikolasová

