

[Doctor honoris causa]

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THE UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Degree of Doctor of Letters

IT IS HEREBY
certified that
Jan Fírbas
was admitted to the
Degree of Doctor of
Letters · Honoris Causa ·
on the thirteenth of May,
Nineteen Hundred and
Eighty Six.

Edward Parker

Vice-Chancellor

Registrar

Your Royal Highness and Chancellor:

In our culture, which insists on a firm boundary line between Arts and Sciences, there is one discipline which bestrides – not to say abolishes – that boundary. Linguistics aims to give scientific answers to such questions as ‘What is language?’ and ‘How does it function?’ Dr Jan Firbas has been exploring and answering such questions for over forty years now, and to such point that his studies have made fundamental contributions not only to the linguistic characterology of English and Czech (and other languages) but also to general linguistic theory. Beginning as a disciple of the famous Prague ‘school’ of linguistics, he has originated some key concepts in modern linguistics – notably, ‘functional sentence perspective’ and ‘communicative dynamism’. These terms (his own coinages) indicate his concern with language as *communication*, as against the more abstract and impersonal strategies of certain ‘schools’ of linguists. Dr Firbas, in his many publications, as in his teaching, seems never to forget that language is something living, spoken by man to man.

Dr Firbas’s own career shows a similar dialogue between sciences and humanities. In 1939, at the age of eighteen, he enrolled as a student in the medical faculty at the University of Brno. Soon thereafter, the Nazis closed the Czech universities, and Jan Firbas was imprisoned. Released, he took up the study of English at the Brno Institute of Modern Languages. When the universities re-opened after the war, he pursued his studies of English and Philosophy at Brno, obtained his first degree in 1947, his Doctorate only a year later, and the degree of *Candidatus Scientiarum* in 1959. Since 1950 he has held posts in the Department of English at Brno University, making it into a centre of English studies which any university could be proud of. Meanwhile his scholarly distinction has been internationally recognised, and he has visited, and lectured in, the United States, India, and practically every European country, from Sweden to Switzerland, from Holland to Hungary.

Dr Firbas’s connections with this country have a long history. In 1949-50 he was a visiting postdoctoral scholar in Leeds and London; and in 1984-5 he was able to return as a distinguished Longman Fellow to the linguistic research unit established by Professor Sir Randolph Quirk at University College, London. His ties with Leeds are very special ones and include an exchange arrangement, soon to enter into its twenty-first year, between his Department and our own Department of Russian Studies.

Dr Firbas is in that tradition of distinguished foreign scholars – the grammarian Otto Jespersen was another – whose peculiar alertness to the nature of English has brought lasting illumination to the study of the English language.

In Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, Feste complains about ‘this age’ and its linguistic habits: ‘A sentence,’ he says, ‘is but a chev’ril glove to a good wit. How quickly the wrong side may be turn’d outward!’ The ‘good wit’ of Jan Firbas turns our English sentence the *right* side outward and reveals its communicative dynamism – for this age, and no doubt for ages to come. The University of Leeds wishes to pay tribute to a man who has lived through difficult times with exceptional dignity, honour, and devotion to scholarship.

Your Royal Highness and Chancellor, I present to you JAN FIRBAS for the Degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*.