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**PROFESSOR JOSEF VACHEK —  
AN HONORARY DOCTOR OF MASARYK  
UNIVERSITY**

*Jan Fírbas*



In an article dealing with the preconditions of the Prague School and published in *Index*, a Brno monthly, Roman Jakobson (1934), points out that in his work *Versuch einer konkreten Logik* T. G. Masaryk emphasizes the necessity of scholarly research into present-day languages and the impossibility of examining the history of languages without appreciating the laws governing the languages of today (Masaryk 1887.193).

Masaryk made his observation at a time when research into present-day language was not yet regarded as worthy of a university and when only diachronistic analysis was considered to be truly scholarly in character. Masaryk's remarks on linguistics were embraced by Vilém Mathesius, the founder of the Prague School

of Linguistics (Mathesius 1911; 1964.32). In their emphasis on present-day language Masaryk and Mathesius preceded the famous founder of the Geneva School, Ferdinand de Saussure.

Mathesius' ideas were developed in a remarkable way by Josef Vachek, a leading Czechoslovak Anglicist, Bohemist and general linguist. Vachek is one of the pioneers of the functional and structural approach, which regards language as a system and examines how language, together with its components, functions in fulfilling the communicative purposes of its users. Vachek applies this approach, for instance, in his revealing writings on the phonic structure of English, the historical development of English, and the system of contemporary English in comparison with those of Czech and Slovak. As for his other areas of interest, let us recall at least his brilliant research into the written language, regarded by him as a norm complementary to that of the spoken language. In this respect, Vachek strikingly differs from de Saussure, who assigns the written language a purely subsidiary role.

Vachek has gained the reputation of an excellent university teacher. With the exception of the Olomouc Arts Faculty, he taught at all our Arts Faculties: those of Brno, Prague, Bratislava and Prešov. As ordinary professor of English, appointed by the Queen of the Netherlands, he taught for one year at the venerable University of Leiden. As a Bohemist, he enhanced the good name of the Prague Institute of Czech Language of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, which he represented for some years as one of its outstanding members. The deepest furrow, however, has been ploughed by him in Brno, where the linguistics section of the Department of English regards him as its founder. It was he who brought the series *Brno studies in English* into existence.

Vachek's writings have been highly acclaimed by linguists at home and abroad. But the Communist authorities were slow in honouring his work. Because of the events in August 1968, the procedure leading to his membership of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences was discontinued. But it was the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences that invited and admitted him to membership.

Among linguists all the world over, Vachek is not only well known as a historiographer and interpreter of the ideas of the Prague School, but also as a scholar who has played a prominent role in their development, in this way becoming one of the makers of the history of the Prague School and the history of linguistics in general. It is therefore fully justified and in harmony with the significance of the line of thought indicated by the names of Masaryk, Mathesius and Jakobson that on 4th June, 1991, Masaryk University awarded Professor Josef Vachek an honorary doctorate.

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