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In Memory of Jan Firbas

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This year the Czech Anglicist community commemorates the centenary of the birth of Jan Firbas, an outstanding linguist of world renown. Firbas was the founder and the main representative of the Brno School of Functional Sentence Perspective.

Jan Firbas was born in Brno on 25th March 1921. Before the outbreak of World War II he chose to study medicine at Masaryk university, his choice being influenced by his family background, as his father was a military doctor. However, after the war the young student changed his mind and thanks to his excellent knowledge of several languages he decided to study philosophy, Germanic philology and English philology at the Faculty of Arts.

In 1948 Firbas as a fresh graduate became an assistant lecturer under Professor Josef Vachek at the Brno English Department. Josef Vachek, one of the leading pre-war Prague School scholars, was appointed to the department chair in Brno in 1945. His influence was invaluable in establishing a direct link between the Linguistic School of Prague and the re-created Department of English in Brno.

From the very start, the research activity of the talented Anglicist Jan Firbas was navigated by the functionalist theory of the Prague School. At the same time, Firbas was not only involved in Germanic linguistics but he also paid much attention to Czech and Slavic studies, including Russian and Bulgarian. Firbas' line of research was carefully demarcated by his experienced and versatile teacher and colleague Josef Vachek. At the beginning, Firbas concentrated on English phonetics and phonology which was common in the approach of structuralist and functionalist linguists at that time. Very early, however, he shifted his research area to syntactic topics, especially those elaborated by Vilém Mathesius in his concept of *aktuální členění větné* (functional sentence perspective, FSP). In his life-long research Firbas continued to develop the theory of functional sentence perspective. However, the views of Mathesius and Firbas are substantially different. Mathesius, using the method of analytical comparison of Czech and English, supported the view that the English word order is *not susceptible to the requirements of functional sentence perspective*. On the other hand, Firbas in his further research came to the conclusion that the FSP in English, due to the relatively fixed word order, is rendered by a hierarchy of factors, namely the context, semantics, linear modification (word order) and, in spoken language, also by prosodic features, mainly intonation and emphasis.

The major contribution of Jan Firbas to the theory of FSP can be seen in the accentuation of the **role of context** in the interpretation of language phenomena. His view of context as a multi-layered phenomenon represents the introduction

of a fundamental aspect into linguistic research. Firbas differentiates between the context of general experience (in present linguistic terminology it could be labelled the cognitive context), the immediately relevant situational context and the verbal context. In his approach he lays stress on the immediate communicative intention of the speaker. Firbas was well aware of the fact that language phenomena cannot be interpreted on the basis of linguistic features alone. He understood that language problems are rooted in sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and language philosophy. His theory can thus be labelled as **interdisciplinary** in its essence.

According to Firbas the sentence is a crucial means of the process of communication in which the natural sequence called *ordo naturalis* reflects the distribution of communicative dynamism. In general, the sentence usually begins with a theme (i.e. the given, known information) and continues through transition to the rheme (i.e. the new information, the information core). The sequence theme-rheme is considered by Firbas as objective whereas the sequence rheme-theme is evaluated as subjective, emotive.

Jan Firbas was a prolific author of a great number of linguistic studies and articles both at home and abroad. His merits also include the high standard and regular publication of the journal *Brno Studies in English* at the time when English studies in Czechoslovakia were not allowed to flourish. The major publication of the work of Jan Firbas under the title *Collected Works of Jan Firbas* comprises five volumes. While the volumes I-III were published earlier, the two remaining volumes IV and V have been prepared for publication this year in connection with the 100th anniversary of his birth.

The most treasured publication of Jan Firbas is his monograph *Functional Sentence Perspective in Written and Spoken Communication* (Cambridge University Press, 1992). Through this work, Jan Firbas achieved recognition as a linguist of high repute all over the world. Three prominent European universities conferred the title *doctor honoris causa* on him, namely University of Leeds, the Catholic university of Leuven and University of Turku. Unfortunately, for political reasons full recognition by his *alma mater* and in his home country only came after 1989.

At the Brno English Department Firbas' career lasted almost until his death in May 2000. For fifty years Jan was teaching English linguistics with enthusiasm, expertise and zeal and in this way he inspired many dedicated followers. His lifelong professional mission significantly contributed to the high standard of English studies in Brno and also in the English departments throughout the Czech Republic.