

IN HONOUR OF PROFESSOR ALEŠ SVOBODA

Martin Adam

*Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil: for thou art with me.
(Psalm 23:4)*



On 9 January 2010, Aleš Svoboda, an extraordinary figure of European linguistics and a faithful follower of the legacy of the Prague School, passed away at the age of 68. Coincidentally – and symbolically enough – this happened ten years after the death of his great teacher and closest colleague, Professor Jan Firbas. Aleš Svoboda was in his manifold pedagogical and scholarly activities associated with several universities and cities: he studied and repeatedly worked at the Department of English and American Studies at Masaryk University in Brno, restored the Department of English and American Studies at University of Ostrava, newly co-established the Institute of Foreign Languages at Silesian University in Opava, and last but not least, meant an immense support for the Institute of British and American Studies at Prešov University.

Aleš Svoboda was born in Zlín on 2 April 1941, but until the age of 25 lived in Kyjov. In 1962 he graduated from the Conservatoire in Brno where he studied the clarinet (what a source of joy and also inspiration during his future career!), and in 1966 he successfully finished his studies at the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University in Brno (English, German and, later, also Czech philology). As early as during his student years at Masaryk University, Svoboda was an eminent pupil

of Professor Josef Vachek, who led him into the realm of functional linguistics and the teaching of the Prague School of Linguistics, especially the Brno branch. That moment seems to be crucial in the shaping of all the years to come. In 1980 Svoboda defended his habilitation thesis dealing with the phenomenon of the so-called diatheme, the coinage as well as the concept of which was to become one of Svoboda's greatest achievements in the field of the world-famous theory of functional sentence perspective (FSP). Svoboda was appointed Professor of the English language in 1992.

As has been suggested above, Professor Svoboda was a prominent representative of the Prague School linguistic tradition, following in the footsteps of Jan Firbas who – drawing mainly on Mathesius and Vachek's ideas on the theme-rheme analysis of the sentence – congenially elaborated a complex theory of functional sentence perspective. Not only did Svoboda join the ongoing research conducted by Jan Firbas, but he himself was also very creative and active in the field. His innovative and, as it were, courageous endeavours into various chambers of linguistics (above all functional syntax and pragmalinguistics) as if determined all of his research. Svoboda's comparative studies in FSP of English, German, Italian, Czech, Slovak and other languages have truly provided numerous signposts on the paths of modern linguistics. What I find most inspiring about Svoboda's research is the fact that he always succeeded in going somewhat deeper, further and beyond the average, no matter how strange or unusual the step might have appeared – outside the casual scope of the field. Svoboda-the pioneer enjoyed searching new areas of linguistics, naming new phenomena and making new steps. In a word, he was not afraid of transcending the expected and the customary.

In the first instance, two of Svoboda's contributions have enriched the research into the Firbasian theory of FSP and deserve thus special attention. Firstly, it is his minute analysis of thematic elements, which ultimately led to his identification of a new type of communicative unit labelled "diatheme". Secondly, let us recall his revealing application of FSP principles on the levels hierarchically lower and higher than the clause (e.g. within the nominal phrase or even the syllable as FSP microstructures or sentence groups as FSP macrostructures). In his latest research, Svoboda examined for instance Firbasian dynamic semantic scales and their implementation in poetic texts in relation to the auctorial communicative intention and the accompanying aesthetic effect. In other words, Aleš Svoboda surely was in many ways a credit to Jan Firbas and his legacy.

During his prolific career, Svoboda published literally dozens of studies, articles, reviews, and translations (both in English, Czech, German and Italian), and – most notably – university textbooks and monographs, among which *Diatheme*

(1981) and *Kapitoly z funkční syntaxe* and *Od mezostruktur k mikrostrukturám ve funkční syntaxi* (both 1989) definitely stand out as eternal memorials of FSP. In relation to the above-mentioned pioneering articles, let me point out at least the two following Svoboda's congenial works: 'Functional perspective of the noun phrase' (1987) and 'Syllable as a microfield in Functional Sentence Perspective' (1996). Logically, also Svoboda's editorial activities continued in the vein of FSP. Here, let us bring to mind the initiative and zealous effort with which he started a five-year project of preparation of the *Collected Works of Jan Firbas*. It was with true love, expertise and profound knowledge of Firbas' work that Professor Svoboda began collecting, apportioning, and outlining the contents of the five volumes that were to be published in 2009-2011. Unfortunately, Svoboda was neither able to finish this task, nor see the first fruit of his tremendous plan appearing only in March 2010.

Aleš Svoboda was a scholar with broad and indeed universal compass of both human and professional interest (from music to linguistics, from linguistics to literature, from literature to translation), who also – in the Mathesius' spirit of "science for life" – devoted much of his time to organising academic life, preparing symposiums and conferences and unifying scholarly efforts. In full correspondence with all this, on 10 January 2003 Svoboda as the main and honorary guarantor co-founded *The Vilém Mathesius Society* with its seat in Opava. The Society draws on the tradition and teaching of the Prague School and its main objectives are to support science, education, creative activism, and to mediate exchange of opinions, especially in the area of linguistics.

It was Svoboda's great predecessor, Professor Vilém Mathesius, who once said to his students – and was repeatedly alluded to by both Firbas and Svoboda himself – that "language is a fortress that must be attacked with all means and from all sides" (Vachek 1972: 69). Let me say in harmony with this metaphor that for me, Aleš Svoboda was one of the most exemplary, diligent, faithful and noble knights of linguistics, always prepared to do his best to conquer the fortress. Apropos, this Mathesius' dictum on the necessity to assail the stronghold of language also became the motto of the e-journal *Philologica.net*, which was co-initiated by Aleš Svoboda in 2003. To further illustrate Svoboda's worthy efforts, it will be fitting to remind the reader of a number of doctoral students Svoboda trained and nurtured as their supervisor, providing them, apart from linguistic knowledge and a lucid teaching example, with contagious enthusiasm and love for the study of language in the broadest sense of the word.

On a more personal note, I will never forget my first face-to-face encounter with Professor Svoboda. This goes back to the autumn of 2000, when, after Jan Firbas passed away, Professor Svoboda kindly agreed to become the supervisor

of my doctoral thesis. To be honest, I was a little scared of the first consultation that was to be held in Opava in his office. During my journey on the railcar train to Opava, thoughts of qualm and fear of the unknown were filling my mind. Nonetheless, what Professor Svoboda offered to me as a teacher a few hours later, when talking with me on a comfortable sofa, was anything but fearful. He turned out to be a humble, friendly as well as wise and most helpful guide throughout that period of my career. Always ready to hint and give advice, yet very careful not to force and persuade. In terms of FSP analysis, for instance, Professor Svoboda did not believe in black-and-white solutions and confessed the right of individual freedom, which he tried to make clear as my supervisor. I think I will ever treasure our discussions and his thought-provoking ideas – whether on FSP, translation, the Bible or poetry.

Let me conclude my tribute to Aleš Svoboda by saying that, in my and definitely not only my opinion, Professor Svoboda – being an extraordinary linguist, a gifted teacher and a good man – undoubtedly ranks among the distinguished names such as Vilém Mathesius, Josef Vachek, and Jan Firbas. Lastly, if we take somewhat daring advantage of FSP terminology (which I believe Professor Svoboda would generously approve of), it will be entirely legitimate to say the following about Professor Svoboda's life. Regarding the earthly, finite life of man as a DIATHEME journey, and one's end as TRANSITION from "the valley of the shadow of death" to "the pastures green" (Psalm 23:2,4), Svoboda, as a RHEME par excellence that once appeared shining on the scene of life, has by all means been eternally THEMATISED; both in linguistics in the broadest sense and in our hearts.

References

- Svoboda, A. (1981) *DiatHEME*. Brno: Masarykova univerzita.
Svoboda, A. (1987) 'Functional perspective of the noun phrase.' *Brno Studies in English* 17, 61-86.
Svoboda, A. (1989a) *Kapitoly z funkční syntaxe*. Praha: Státní pedagogické nakladatelství.
Svoboda, A. (1989b) *Od mezostruktur k mikrostrukturám ve funkční syntaxi*. Brno: Masarykova univerzita.
Svoboda, A. (1996) 'Syllable as a microfield in Functional Sentence Perspective.' *Prague Linguistic Circle Papers* 2, 193-203.
Svoboda, A., Chamonikolasová, J. and Urbanová, L. (eds) (2009) *Collected Writings of Jan Firbas. Volume One (1951–1967)*. Brno: Masaryk University Press.
Vachek, J. (1972) 'Epilogue.' In: Vachek, J. (ed.) *Z klasického období pražské školy 1925–1945* (Vol. 2). Prague: Academia. 67-73.

Sources

Departmental web-site of Aleš Svoboda. On-line document: <http://ff.osu.cz/kaa/index.php?idc=14595> (retrieved on 27 February 2010)

King James Version of the Bible. On-line document: <http://kingjibible.com/psalms/23.htm> (retrieved on 15 January 2010)

Philologica.net. An On-line Journal of Modern Philology. On-line document: <http://philologica.net/> (retrieved on 1 March 2010)

Společnost Viléma Mathesia. On-line document: <http://mathesius.org/> (retrieved on 28 February 2010)