

Jan Firbas: IN MEMORIAM*Irena Headlandová Kalischová*

In May 2011, a special event took place at the Department of English and American Studies at the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Brno. The occasion was two-fold: first, it was to commemorate the 90th anniversary of the birth of Professor Jan Firbas, DrSc., and second, to introduce the first volume of the book *Collected Works of Jan Firbas*. Members of the department, linguists from various academic institutions and members of Firbas's family as well as his ex-students met to pay tribute to the man whose name will always bring back memories of his kindness, great knowledge, diligence and modesty.

Professor Jan Firbas (1925-2000) was a linguist of international reputation, who travelled and lectured in many countries of the world, yet his personal as well as professional life were most closely connected to the city of Brno. This is the place where he was born, where he died and where his entire career was intrinsically linked with Masaryk University, even though there was an extensive period of time when his alma mater treated him very harshly. As a matter of fact, Jan Firbas enrolled twice as an undergraduate at this university: first, in 1939, he became a student of medicine but his studies were soon interrupted as the Nazis closed all Czech universities. After the war he then decided on English and philosophy at the Faculty of Arts, later gained a Ph.D. degree and joined the Department of English and American Studies as an assistant to Professor Josef Vachek in 1949. His research and its results won him other academic degrees until eventually, in 1971, he submitted his Doctor of Science dissertation to Charles University, Prague. Unfortunately, due to the oppressive political regime at the time, his dissertation was 'shelved' for twenty years; it was not until 1991 that he received the doctoral degree and the status of a university professor at Masaryk University (Chamonikolasová 2001: 7).

In the Foreword to the first volume of the above-mentioned *Collected Works of Jan Firbas*, Professor Svartvik refers to Firbas as "the Father of FSP" (2010: 14), the abbreviation standing for *Functional Sentence Perspective*. Indeed, this designation does justice to Firbas's contribution to modern linguistics; he was "one of very few consistent followers of the Prague School linguistic tradition" (Svoboda 2010: 353) in that he expanded Mathesius's ideas on the functional analysis of a sentence and advanced the whole theory of FSP to an unprecedented level of elaboration. He continued Mathesius's initial research on word order

and its governing principles but at the same time introduced other factors that determine the FSP of an utterance, i.e. semantics, context and intonation.

To cover all Firbas's linguistic pursuits would take up space equivalent to several volumes as the list of all his publications includes almost 160 items (Golková 2003: 99-108). In the course of the five decades of his academic career, Firbas dealt with various subject matters – whether it be the theme-rheme structure, punctuation, word order, prosody or translation – but they all contributed in one way or another to the pivot of his research, the theory of FSP. He published numerous treatises on word order (the most significant of which is the article *The functional view of 'ORDO NATURALIS'*, written during his stay in the Netherlands in 1974 and published in 1979), he made inquiries into how prosody, and intonation in particular, affect the way that information is processed and perceived (the two parts of the article *Thoughts on FSP, intonation and emotiveness*, published in 1985 and 1987 respectively, summarize his findings in this field), and he introduced the term “communicative dynamism”, i.e. “the relative degree to which a linguistic element contributes towards the further development of the communication” (Firbas 1979: 31) – a term which is now commonly used in linguistics. The best-known and most quoted is then Firbas's comprehensive monograph titled *Functional Sentence Perspective in Written and Spoken Communication* (1992), which is a book that brings the synthesis of his research and “offers his theory of FSP in its entirety” (Svoboda 2010: 355). It must be noted here that even though one always refers to “the theory” of FSP, all research carried out by Jan Firbas was well supported by the analyses of thousands of sentences coming from a range of sources, such as various books of fiction, the Bible (and a great number of its translations), the *Corpus of English Conversation* (1980), authentic language used in textbooks on English phonetics, and even public notices; they were all worthy of his attention and in turn they served as irrefutable evidence of his conclusions.

In his lifetime, Firbas was in regular contact with many prominent scholars and linguists in Europe as well as outside it, and – despite the bleak and restrictive political atmosphere in Czechoslovakia under the communist regime – he was invited to numerous stays and visits at universities abroad. He also published regularly in international journals, gave lectures at various conferences and he was awarded three honorary doctorates from the following universities: Leeds (United Kingdom, 1984), Leuven (Belgium, 1984) and Turku (Finland, 2000). It was not just his expertise and linguistic brilliance, however, that made him welcome and respected in the world of linguistics; it was his personality, his kind nature, wisdom and modesty that allowed him to befriend many of the renowned professors and lecturers.

Let me conclude on a personal note. I was fortunate to have attended Firbas's class in the last year of my university studies in 1993 and to this day I keep my notes from that seminar. When gathering material for this little contribution, I browsed through the notebook and noticed also my scribbles in the margins of pages. These contained examples of the authentic language and idioms Firbas used when teaching; in some cases I could still picture the whole situation. In retrospect, they seem like minute characteristics of the personality of my great teacher. For instance, the simple phrase *Let's get this straight*. He told us the story of how he had first heard it: during one of his stays in England he rang up the National Rail Enquiries and asked for some train connections; however, the way he worded his question was quite incoherent even to his own ears so he worried about being misunderstood. Instead, the operator said in a perfectly calm and reassuring manner, "Right, let's get this straight." And in no time, step by step, she disentangled the facts from irrelevant details and provided the required information, thus leaving Firbas both grateful and impressed. He did not like to use just this phrase but more importantly the approach as such; he would calmly and methodically, but with persistence, work on any task or challenge he had to face in his research.

In his way of dealing with students, Firbas respected their right to be wrong or to lack a certain piece of knowledge. Indeed, he would often apply the old *There's no end to learning* to himself, not abjectly, though, but with optimism and hope, smiling gently, as if he were really looking forward to learning more and discovering new things, which he truly was.

In the Preface to his monograph *Functional Sentence Perspective in Written and Spoken Communication*, Jan Firbas made a reference to a famous quote by Mathesius about language being "a formidable fortress that must be attacked from all sides and with all means" (1992: xii) and he pledged himself to participate in the attack. He was true to his word; his life-long dedication to the battle on the field of linguistics has proved him a persevering and resilient warrior.

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