

Obituary

Jan Firbas, 1921-2000

On May 5th, 2000, Jan Firbas, professor of linguistics and humanist extraordinaire, passed away at the age of 79. He was Professor of English at Masaryk University, in Brno, in the Czech Republic, and is survived by his wife Helen and two sons. Professor Firbas was a prominent representative of the Prague School linguistic tradition in the second half of the twentieth century and helped to develop Vilem Mathesius's idea of the Theme-Rheme analysis of the sentence into a complex theory of Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP).

Jan Firbas was born in Brno on March 25th, 1921. He studied English and Linguistics at Masaryk University where he established close contacts with his teacher, Professor Josef Vachek. Following Vachek's lead, he became an active member of the Prague Linguistic Circle, which was later banned by the communist authorities. In spite of political and religious oppressions at home and numerous invitations to permanent posts at universities abroad, he remained faithful to the English Department at Masaryk University, where he served as Professor of English until his retirement in 1991. Even as Professor Emeritus he continued to be actively involved in the teaching and research at his department. His last lecture abroad was delivered at The Ohio State University in Columbus, where he participated in the LP98 (Fourth Linguistics & Phonetics) Conference, in September 1998.

A long-time member of the Prague Linguistic Circle, Jan Firbas was well-respected within his Czech homeland, serving recently, for instance, as honorary chairman of the Circle of Modern Philologists of the Czech Republic, but he was also recognized internationally. Notable awards include honorary doctorate degrees from the University of Leeds (England), the University of Turku (Finland), and the University of Leuven (Belgium).

Professor Firbas was also the long-time editor-in-chief of *Brno Studies in English* and a member of the editorial boards of other international journals, including *Functions of Language*. Of the various aims of this journal, he particularly supported that of encouraging dialogue between various forms of functionalism. One is reminded of his motto — actually a saying of Mathesius's — that “language is a formidable fortress that must be attacked from all sides” but “continues to hold out” (Firbas 1992: xii).

He published many articles and other works in his long career, but the one that is best known in the west and will perhaps be his most enduring scholarly contribution is his 1992 book, *Functional Sentence Perspective in Written and Spoken Communication*, published by Cambridge University Press. It was written at the behest of Sidney Greenbaum and contains a synthesis of the research into FSP undertaken by him and his colleagues since the mid-1950s. It is a perfect example of the Prague School approach, which, as rightly pointed out by de Beaugrande (1997: 194-206), has transcended rigid theoretical dualisms from the start and has successfully integrated diachronic with synchronic, and language-specific with comparative description. It also beautifully illustrates the dialectic between empirical data and language description, between the insightful explanation of real text and the refining and expanding of the descriptive system set up. Apart from their linguistic astuteness, Firbas's writings are a treat because of his appreciative analyses of literary classics by authors such as John Galsworthy, Katherine Mansfield, Victor Hugo (and his various translators), and, of course, of bible texts and translations.

Firbas's theory of communicative dynamism is, to refer to Fries's (1983: 117) characterization of various Theme-Rheme approaches, the most ‘combining’ in the literature: the ‘communicative orientation’ of the utterance is seen to result from the interplay not only of *word order* and *intonation*, but also of *context dependency* and *semantic function*. The systematic and internally coherent integration of the first three factors already secures Firbas a unique position in research on Theme-Rheme. The principle of ‘linear modification’ (Bolinger 1952), which intonation and the contextual factor may converge with or work counter to, assigns various degrees of ‘communicative dynamism’ (CD) to the elements of the utterance. Firbas's CD is basically a scale of Given-New information, with the Theme as most given and the Rheme as most new element — it does not attribute any ‘topical’ or ‘aboutness’ features to the Theme. It

should also be noted that Firbas's description differs from those approaches which simply equate the distribution of Given and New information in the utterance with the referring or introducing status of its NPs respectively, thus leaving the information status of VP, adverbials and other grammatical classes unaccounted for, as well as ignoring intonation, which can mark a 'referring' NP as New. In addition, he makes the highly personal claim — unique, to our knowledge, in the literature — that there is something internal to the relation between the verb and its participants, which may perspectivize the message towards the Subject, as in

- (1) A light wind (Phenomenon-Rheme) blew up (Presentation-Transition) from the southwest (Setting-Theme).

or away from the Subject, as in

- (2) Peter (Quality Bearer-Theme) works (Quality-Transition) in the British Museum (Specification-Rheme)).

Firbas (1992: 5) pinpoints this 'orientational' factor intrinsic to the semantics of the construction further when he says that in 'Quality-constructions' something, such as a quality, state, location, action, is *ascribed* to the Subject — whereas in 'Presentation-constructions' the Subject is *presented* within a Setting.

It is our conviction that research into Theme-Rheme / Given-New distribution cannot dispense with seriously considering Firbas's proposals — the most developed articulation of FSP theory within the Prague School tradition, which was the first to put this layer of organization on the map of modern linguistics. We would like to close, however, with some remarks on Jan Firbas the person.

People who had the opportunity to get to know Jan Firbas were uniformly struck by the fact that he was in all respects a true gentleman, a quiet unassuming scholar who was both formidable as an intellect and warm and friendly on the personal level. He took a real interest in one as an individual, and thus qualified, in our minds, as a humanist in the best sense of the word. We each had the good fortune of interacting with him personally and came away the better for it.

Thus, when Brian Joseph was helping to organize the Fourth Linguistics and Phonetics conference held in September 1998 at The Ohio State University, as a "new world" instantiation of a conference held previously only in the Czech Republic at Charles University in Prague, and which had focused on issues of concern to the Prague School linguists,

it was natural to think of inviting Jan Firbas. He took part in a special workshop on utterance-final phenomena in language, and drew on his wealth of knowledge on intonation and phrasing to deliver a stirring commentary on three papers read in the afternoon session. This piece was eventually published in the conference proceedings (Firbas 1999), and represents one of Professor Firbas's last publications. More important, though, than the interesting and enlightening content of his commentary was the grace with which he delivered it, the politeness of his discourse even as he was disagreeing, and the encouragement and enthusiasm he showed for the work of the other scholars gathered. For many, it was a lesson in how best to be an academic.

Jan Firbas also had relations of long standing with the Catholic University of Leuven. In 1986, Professor Emma Vorlat, then Head of the English Language department and Dean of the Humanities, managed — not without the necessary diplomatic interventions — to invite Jan Firbas to Leuven, where he was awarded an honorary doctorate in the Arts Faculty. This visit to the west was one of the first of the many celebratory occasions, guest lectures and longer study leaves abroad — including the one-year stay at University College, London, with the Survey of English team — that brightened up the later years of Jan Firbas's career.

Whenever he received news about the lives of his friends in Leuven — happy and less happy news — his sympathetic and heartening response would be immediately forthcoming, and he would convey his deep-held belief that ultimately all would be well, and all manner of things would be well. As comforting as the expression of his faith was to others, so serious and uncompromising were its demands on his own life, expressed, amongst others, in active lay service to the catholic church — also under duress. In his contribution to the *Festschrift* dedicated to Emma Vorlat (Firbas 1994) he discussed the two possible 'identificational' readings — and distinct communicative purposes — of verse 10 from Psalm 111: "Initium sapientiae timor Domini". He argued that, besides the better known 'admonishing' reading — 'the beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord' — this verse can and should also be read as conveying: 'if you hold the Lord in fearful reverence you have, in consequence, chosen the path leading to wisdom' (Firbas 1994: 205). No doubt both interpretations of the christian notion of "sapientia"/"wisdom" guided him throughout his own life.

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Kristin Davidse
University of Leuven

Brian D. Joseph
Ohio State University