

In Memory of Professor Ján Horecký – A Personal Recollection

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Facing a second major event of computational linguistics in Prague in the history of Czech CL – the ACL Annual Meeting in June 2007 – we cannot leave the first such event – COLING 1982 – unmentioned. But alas – most unfortunately, we have to start with very sad news about the then President of the Congress, Professor Ján Horecký, who died on August 11th, 2006 in his hometown Stupava (near Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia). We have been cherishing the hope that Professor Horecký will join us to see the fruit of his courageous initiative at the end of the seventies, but instead we have to put our expressions of gratefulness just on paper.

Why have we written „courageous“? For those who are too young to remember those times, and for those who lived under different circumstances, we must elucidate the political context. Computational linguistics in Prague, though having achieved a considerable international recognition already in the sixties and seventies, did not have easy life after the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968; the Laboratory of Algebraic Linguistics belonging then to the Faculty of Philosophy of Charles University and headed by Petr Sgall, was dissolved as a politically unreliable institute, since none of its members agreed to take part in the political surges which were prepared. Only thanks to the efforts of some of our colleagues at the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics of Charles University, the members of the Lab were transferred (as individuals rather than as a group) to a less ideologically supervised Faculty of Mathematics and Physics. However, even there, the Communist Party decision was valid for ten years that computational linguists had no political perspectives and as such should be expelled from the University. Nevertheless, we did not give up: we could not teach, supervise doctoral students, or attend conferences abroad; but we carried out our research (sometimes “hidden” under some applied projects) and, first of all, we tried hard to keep our contacts with the CL community abroad. As members of the International Committee of Computational Linguistics, we felt extremely honored when in 1978 the President of the Committee, the late Professor Bernard Vauquois from Grenoble, expressed the wish of the Committee to hold one of the COLING conferences in Prague; in addition to the recognition of the results of the CL researchers in our country and, of course, the attractiveness of Prague, one of the reasons was the assumption that for researchers from the communist countries it would be easier to attend a conference held in a country belonging to the same political sphere. We had no idea how to persuade our authorities to give their permission to do that, but as our leading slogan had always been “do not give up unless you try all possible (and impossible) steps”, I gathered all my diplomatic skills and approached with Vauquois proposal the then Vice-Dean of the Faculty responsible for foreign contacts. As expected, she quickly turned our initiative down, but (apparently?) to keep her face as a person who does her best to meet the wishes of a respectable Professor from France, she said in passing: “But if you find some political guarantee (read: a respected Communist Party official), the Faculty might consider to act as a co-organizer.” At first sight, this was a clearly impossible task. At second thought, Petr Sgall suggested: “And what if we ask Professor Horecký from Bratislava to help us?” This seemed to be more a joke than a real suggestion: Professor Horecký was a leading Slovak linguist, with a very broad range of linguistic and cultural interests (mathematical linguistics being one of them), he was one of the few Party

members who deserved our respect both as a researcher and as a personality, he was the Head of the Linguistic Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, and often acted in our support, but he was in Bratislava, and to organize a conference in the Slovak capital Bratislava from a distance seemed to be an unrealizable task. But Professor Horecký had made an impossible thing real: he managed to persuade the Slovak Academy officials to accept that the main organizer would be his Institute, he would be the President of the Congress, but for rather inconvenient accommodation and limited space conditions in Bratislava, the Congress would be located in Prague. An official proposal was formulated, signed by the President of the Slovak Academy of Sciences and sent to our Dean, with a polite invitation to the Faculty to act as a co-organizer, with the Local Organizing Committee headed by Eva Hajičová. This invitation came from such politically respectable circles that the Faculty authorities could do nothing but agree, I was allowed to attend the 1980 COLING in Tokyo (on the expenses of the Japanese organizers, of course, and with a substantial help of Professor Vauquois, but this is a different story) to announce there that the location of the following COLING would be Prague.

The two years of preparations were hectic, we had to do everything by ourselves because there was no professional organizer available, but there was one thing that made our involvement enjoyable: the regular monthly meetings of the local organizing committee, for which Professor Horecký had always reserved his time, spent two nights on a train traveling from Bratislava to Prague and back, having breakfast in the home of one of us and spending lot of time to discuss not only organizational but also (or first of all) scientific issues. It was extremely nice to hear at the meeting celebrating an anniversary of the Linguistic Institute in Bratislava a year ago that Professor Horecký recollected those meetings as enthusiastically as we did.

COLING 1982 fulfilled the expectations we cherished: among the 350 participants (a large number for that time!) there were many colleagues from “the East” (not that all could come or that it would be easy for them to attend, but it was certainly easier than to travel “to the West”) and many most interesting and stimulative discussions took place. In addition, Don Walker (as the Secretary of the Association for Computational Linguistics) brought with him a proposal to create a European Chapter of the Association, with the exceptionally generous offer to pay for the membership of the members living in countries with currency restrictions from the newly established International fund of ACL (the membership included a subscription for the journal Computational Linguistics, a irreplaceable source of information for the whole CL community).

And the main initiator, mediator and unsubstitutable supporter of all this, Professor Horecký, was with us, very modestly – as always – witnessing the most awarding results of his irreplaceable involvement.

The personal tune of this historical recollection should not, of course, overshadow the immense scientific, pedagogical and organizational activities of Professor Ján Horecký and his role in the development of Slovak (and Czechoslovak) linguistics. The broad range of his interest is documented both by the fact that he represented an undisputable authority in many linguistic and related disciplines such as phonology, morphology, lexicology, stylistics, text analysis, standard language and language culture, mathematical and comparative linguistics, philosophy of language, general and theoretical linguistics) but also the number of languages he worked with (besides his native tongue, he worked with Czech, Hungarian, Latin, Old Greek, and most recently also Romani, in collaboration with his daughter, Anna Rácová). From the very beginning of his career, he was deeply interested in terminological issues, both

from the point of view of theoretical foundations and from the view of practical consequences for the development of Slovak terminology. When laying the foundations of Slovak phonology, he got inspired by the stimuli coming from generative grammar; his *Introduction to mathematical linguistics* (in Slovak) laid the foundations of the new domain of linguistic research in Slovakia and also important was his positive attitude to the introduction of corpus linguistics to the Slovak linguistic scene. In accordance with the so-called pragmatico-communicative turn in the development of linguistics, he developed an original theory of Standard language, reacting thus to the new climate and stimuli from scientific discourse in the last third of the 20th century and laid the foundations to the present day sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic orientation of Slovak Linguistics. In spite of his high age, Professor Horecký had always been open to new ideas; he presented his critical views but also was prepared to revise his own ideas when faced with new research results

Professor Ján Horecký will be remembered forever by his colleagues from Slovakia, Czechia and his friends from abroad both for his penetrating linguistic judgments and for his high moral and personal qualities.

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