

Interview with  
**Eva Hajičová**

*LK*

*Let me start with our traditional question. Why linguistics? What motivated you to study language and to deal with it professionally?*

*EH*

This is a very difficult question to start with because my way to linguistics as my primary concern was rather long. Actually, from very early childhood I have been dreaming to become a teacher, whatever subject to teach. My parents, though neither of them was educated in the field of humanities (my father was an engineer who graduated at the Czech Technical University), were fully aware that knowledge of foreign languages is essential whatever my profession would be in the future, and therefore (in addition to German which I had to start to learn at the primary school during the war) they encouraged me to learn Russian (even at the end of the war) and English (soon after the war, sending me to an English high school). However, it was mathematics rather than languages that I planned to study after the high school years, and only due to the fact that as a teacher I would have to study physics along with mathematics (and physics did not belong to my favourites) I decided to follow the other direction, namely to try and pass entrance exams at the faculty of philosophy. And even then it was mainly literary studies that attracted my attention. However, thanks to the professors I met at the English department (first of all Professor Bohumil Trnka and Professor Josef Vachek, and also Professor Vilem Fried) I found out that it is the study of language that I want to follow in my professional life.

*LK*

*What do you think, what is the position of linguistics in present-day society? Has it changed if you compare it to the period of your studies?*

*EH*

I think that the difference is closely connected with the rapid development of technology. In the years of my studies – you just have to realize that I studied in the years 1953 through 1958 – the study of linguistics was mainly regarded as a prerequisite to become a teacher of languages at high schools, or a translator of literary works or perhaps an editor in some publishing house. To study linguistics as a scientific discipline was supposed to be a domain of a very small group of researchers affiliated to universities or academic institutes. In spite of this I would like to emphasize that the achievements in linguistic research were enormous, and as for our country, the Prague School of Linguistics was highly appreciated world-wide. However, a considerable social impact started to be recognized with the rapid development of computerized applications concerning natural language processing (NLP) and the availability of large electronic corpora of texts and speech. One can even observe a tendency, on the side of the NLP people, to underestimate linguistic findings as something that is an obstacle to quick text and speech processing (under the slogan “better theory is more data”) but fortunately enough the leading figures in NLP are aware that there is a limit of success that can be overcome only by taking into account deeper solid language analysis.

LK

*In recent years many of our colleagues (both from Slovakia and abroad) keep complaining about the average quality of students' knowledge as well as about their approach to studies. Have you observed any changes in this respect?*

EH

Well, I also belong to those who complain about the average quality of students' approach in general but I have to add that this does not concern the intellectual quality of the students but it is due to the fact that the graduates of the language departments focus mostly on their future employments, which is oriented towards their language capability (assistants to managers, translators, interpreters, etc.) rather than on linguistic theory. I have been teaching general and theoretical linguistics to students of several language departments that were attended also by students from the school of computer science, and I could immediately identify, without questioning, who comes from which department, according to the active participation during the lectures.

LK

*If you were to choose a degree to study at university again, would you choose computational linguistics?*

EH

Yes, and with the present study programmes, I would probably try to enrol both at the faculty of philosophy (taking the linguistics programme, be it English studies or Czech) and computer science at the faculty of mathematics and physics, with the specialization of computational linguistics.

LK

*Would you see it as a positive move that Linguistics programmes should become more and more specialised in training linguists for professional jobs other than language teaching?*

EH

I think there must be a balance in the first year(s), or better to say courses giving the students a more general basis and overview, and some possibilities of choice in the later phase of studies.

LK

*At the beginning of this interview you mentioned significant achievements of the Prague School of Linguistics. This year it celebrates its 90th anniversary. Could you summarize its most important contribution to the development of linguistic thinking in the 20th century?*

EH

The Prague School of Linguistics has a prominent and unique position within the trends of structuralist thinking in the first half of the 20th century. Its uniqueness lies in the emphasis on the function of language. It may be argued that the notion of function has been interpreted by the founding members of the School and their followers in different ways. However, I am convinced that it is exactly this 'unity in diversity' (to quote the words of the late Professor

Oldřich Leška, the initiator of the formal revival of the Prague Linguistic Circle in late eighties and one of the Circle Presidents) that has made it possible for the second generation and their followers to develop the Prague School tenets up to now.

*LK*

*What are the main objectives and tasks of the Prague School in the years to come?*

*EH*

The fact that the Prague Linguistic Circle celebrates its 90th anniversary this year in full strength and not just as a historical event is very exceptional and documents the vitality of its tenets. From this point of view, I think it is of crucial importance for the current leadership of the Circle to keep and support the young generation of linguists of most different directions. The faithfulness to the ideological roots is one thing, and as the history of the Prague School ideas demonstrates these roots still offer many possibilities for their further enrichment. At the same time, the development of linguistic theories and methodologies during the second half of the last century up to the present time has offered many new research issues to deal with and it would cause the Circle to become a mere historical monument if it does not offer a space for a vivid and many-sided discussion, based, on the one hand, on a well-informed knowledge of the Prague School stimulating original tenets and, on the other, on an awareness of the new scientific developments.

*LK*

*You are a member of a number of linguistic societies and have been (vice-) president of linguistic societies like the International Association for Computational Linguistics and Societas Linguistica Europaea. How do you think linguistic societies have evolved in recent years?*

*EH*

Speaking about the two international societies you mentioned, both have undergone a very positive development during the last decades. The Association for Computational Linguistics (ACL) started in the second half of the last century as an association mostly gathering American community working in the domain of computational linguistics and reflecting their needs and interests. Colleagues representing ACL soon realized that they should “go international”; this awareness got an institutional shape by the establishment of the European Chapter of ACL (this was officially announced in Prague at the international conference COLING in 1982 and I was appointed its first President) followed by the establishment of the corresponding Asian and North American Chapters in Asia. At the time being, there is a regular distribution of locations in these three geographical areas where the annual ACL conferences take place.

Societas Linguistica Europaea has also undergone a very intensive development into a strong professional association; the membership has grown in numbers, the participation at the regular annual meetings has also grown considerably, the management of the Society is very professional. And the level of the conference and the response have also become respectful.

LK

*Do you think linguistics associations have an agenda in society?*

EH

I think that the situation described in the previous answer documents that the linguistic community, be it of a general linguistic orientation or with interests in some specific domains, reacts positively to the activities of professional associations and their agenda. The development of research and the emergence of new exciting research topics is really admirable and the community needs a rapid exchange of ideas. And it is the main task of the associations to establish grounds for such an exchange – organizing conferences, workshops, opening new forums for discussions, joining researchers in small or large special groups of interests etc. etc.

LK

*The scope of your activities has been enormous. It also included editorial work for John Benjamins Publishing. Do you find this kind of work beneficial to a theoretical linguist?*

EH

I definitely think that such an involvement is a very good service for the research community, though it means to spend lot of time on the side of the person involved. To work for John Benjamins Publishing House was still more important as this Publishing House, and personally John Benjamins provided a wonderful service to Czech linguists even under the communist regime, when his House was willing to sign an agreement with the then Czechoslovak Publishing House Academia to co-publish volumes with contributions written by Czech linguists who at that time were not allowed to publish at all or to publish abroad. As Academia got some foreign currency out of this business, John Benjamins thus opened the way for us to publish. My service for them was thus also a way how we could pay-off our debts.

LK

*Which of your achievements do you value most of all?*

EH

This is a very difficult question, indeed. From the point of view of scientific achievements, my research domain has concerned from the very beginning of my career semantics in general, and topic-focus articulation (TFA) of the sentence (in more modern terms, the information structure of the sentence) in particular. In this field, I have tried to look at the interrelationships of the TFA to other aspects of the meaning of the sentence, especially negation, introducing the notion of allegation (as a specific kind of entailment). Also, I have tried to specify more explicitly the position of TFA with regard to the analysis of discourse, i.e. to look at the development of discourse with regard to the activation of individual discourse elements in the stock of knowledge assumed by the speaker to be shared by him and the hearer. And, of course, my qualification as a specialist in Czech and English studies has led me quite naturally to apply a contrastive view on these and other issues.

However, aside of these scientific achievements, or perhaps even more than them, I value the fact that I can still follow and feel proud of the achievements of my younger colleagues in our institute (and of those who have got their education in our Institute and work

now in some other institutions in our country and abroad), and especially appreciate the atmosphere that we have been building together for decades and is still there. I should say it brings me utmost happiness if at some occasions I hear, sometimes hidden from their eyes, that they feel our working and friendly environment is something unique they cannot find elsewhere. I am aware that this is a very selfish feeling but I have to admit that it is so.

Thank you very much for the interview.

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Livia Körtvélyessy

In SKASE Journal of Theoretical Linguistics [online]. 2016, vol. 13, no.3 [cit. 2016-12-19]. Available on web page [http://www.skase.sk/Volumes/JTL33/pdf\\_doc/08.pdf](http://www.skase.sk/Volumes/JTL33/pdf_doc/08.pdf). ISSN 1336-782X.