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## EDITORIAL

The Editorial Board of the Prague Bulletin of Mathematical Linguistics deeply regrets to announce that we have lost a most respectful member of the Board, Professor Petr Sgall.

**Emeritus Professor Petr Sgal**  
(May 27, 1926, České Budějovice – May 28, 2019, Prague)



Petr Sgall (born May 27th, 1926 in České Budějovice in southern Bohemia, but spending most of his childhood in the small town Ústí nad Orlicí in eastern Bohemia and living since his university studies in Prague) has been one of the most prominent Czech linguists belonging to the so-called “second generation” of the world-famous structural and functional Prague School of Linguistics. His first research interests focused on typology of languages, in which he was a pupil of Vladimír Skalička. His PhD thesis was on the development of inflection in Indo-European languages (published in Czech in 1958). He spent a year of postgraduate studies in Cracow, studying with J. Kuryłowicz. He habilitated as docent (associate professor) of general and Indoeuropean linguistics at Charles University in 1958 on the basis of his Cracow study of infinitive in Old Indian (Infinitive im Ṛgveda, published the same year).

Since his beginnings, he was always deeply interested in the exceptional situation of Czech language where alongside with the standard form of language there exists a form of Czech that is usually called ‚Common Czech‘ (as it is not restricted to some geographical area as dialects are) and that is used by most Czech speakers in everyday communication. In this view he was influenced by the work of Bohuslav Havránek on functional stratification of Czech.

At the beginning of the 1960s, Sgall was one of the first European scholars who got acquainted with the emerging new linguistic paradigm, Chomskyan generative grammar. On the one hand, he immediately understood the importance of an explicit description of language, but at the same time, he was aware that the generative approach as presented in the early days of transformational grammar, lacks a due regard to the functions of language (at this point we want to recall his perspicacious analysis of Prague School functionalism in his paper published in 1964 in the renewed series Prague Linguistic Circle Papers (pre-war TLCP), the *Travaux linguistiques de Prague* Vol. I in 1964. Based on the Praguian tenets, Sgall formulated and developed an original framework of generative description of language, the so-called Functional Generative Description (FGD). His papers in the early sixties and his book presenting FGD (*Generativní popis jazyka a česká deklinace* [Generative description of Czech and Czech declension], Prague: Academia, 1967) were the foundation stones of an original school of theoretical and computational linguistics that has been alive and flourishing in Prague since then. Sgall’s innovative approach builds on three main pillars: (i) dependency syntax, (ii) information structure as an integral part of the underlying linguistic structure, and (iii) due regard to the distinction between linguistic meaning and cognitive content.

Petr Sgall has proved also outstanding organizational skills. In 1959, he founded a small subdepartment of mathematical linguistics (called then ‚algebraic‘, to get distinguished from the traditional quantitative linguistics) and theory of machine translation at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University, followed by a foundation of a small group of computational linguistics also at the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics (in 1960) of the same University. In 1968, the two groups were integrated under his leadership into the Laboratory of Algebraic Linguistics, attached to the Faculty of Arts. This Laboratory, due to the political changes in the country caused by Russian-led invasion, had, unfortunately, a very short life-span. In 1972, Sgall faced a forced dismissal from the University for political reasons, and the whole group was eventually doomed to be dissolved. Fortunately, thanks to a group of brave colleagues and friends at the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics, he and his collaborators were transferred to this Faculty, less closely watched (by guardians of ideology) than was the domain of the Humanities. Even there, however, the conditions were not at all easy for him - for several years, the Communist Party decision for the group to disappear was in power, the number of Sgall’s collaborators was harshly reduced and many obstacles were laid in the way of research in computational linguistics as such. Sgall himself was deprived of possibilities to teach, supervise students, travel to the

West, attend conferences there, and only slowly and gradually he could resume some of his activities in the 1980s. Nevertheless, not only the core of the research group continued working in contact with Western centres and their leading personalities (as evidenced above all by the contributions to his *Festschrift* edited by Jacob Mey and published by John Benjamins in 1986), but it was also possible to help three other immediately endangered colleagues to survive at the University.

The years after the political changes in our country in 1989 have brought him a due satisfaction after the previous years of suppression: a possibility of a 5-month stay as a research fellow at the Netherlands Institute of Advanced Studies in Wassenaar (a standing invitation he has had for many years but which he was not allowed to accept for political reasons), the membership in the prestigious *Academia Europaea*, the International Research Prize of Alexander von Humboldt in 1992, a visiting professorship at the University in Vienna in 1993, the Prize of the Czech Minister of Education in the same year, a honorary doctorate at the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales in Paris in 1995 and at the Hamburg University in 1998 and an honorary membership in the Linguistic Society of America in 2002, not to speak about numbers of invitations for lectures and conferences in the whole world, from the U.S.A. to Malaysia and Japan. As a Professor Emeritus of Charles University since 1995, he was still actively involved for many years in teaching and supervising PhD students, in participating at Czech and international research projects and in chairing the Scientific Board of the Vilém Mathesius Center he helped to found in 1992.

Petr Sgall was also among those who helped to revive the Prague Linguistic Circle already in 1988 and has a substantial share in reviving also the book series *Travaux de Cercle linguistique de Prague* (under a parallel title *Prague Linguistic Circle Papers*), the first volume of which appeared in 1995 (published in Amsterdam by John Benjamins Publ. Company).

As a founder of computational linguistics in Prague (and in the whole of former Czechoslovakia), Sgall has always been very sensitive to balancing the formal and empirical aspects of that interdisciplinary domain. At the same time, he has been always open to new directions; his subtle sense for the development of linguistic research is reflected by his participation in conceiving and constructing the Prague Dependency Treebank (PDT), a syntactically annotated subset of the Czech National Corpus. The firm theoretical basis of this annotation (using Sgall's functional generative description), its comprehensiveness, and consistency have made PDT one of the most frequently referred to and highly appreciated present-day corpus projects in the world.

With his research activities based on a true Praguian functional approach, he thus more than made up for his negative attitudes published in the beginning of the fifties, a revolutionary and rash approach to which he was inspired by his wartime experience (his father died in Auschwitz, as did eleven of his closest relatives, and Petr Sgall himself spent some months in a labour camp) and ill-advised by some of his tutors. Let us remind in this connection e.g. his review of three American volumes devoted to the Prague School published in 1978 in the *Prague Bulletin of Mathematical Linguistics*

tics (a University periodical founded by Sgall in 1964), at the time when the political situation in the country and his own personal position was very difficult.

Petr Sgall's linguistic interests were extremely broad and his contribution to Czech and international linguistics is overwhelming. His publications testify his ability to penetrate into the substance of arguments and to give a convincing counterargument, the consistence of opinions but, at the same time, open-mindedness and openness to discussion and willingness to accept the opponent's viewpoint if he finds good reasons for it. There are not many researchers of his position who would be able to react so creatively to stimuli from the outside, to learn a lesson from them and to push his students to do the same ('read if you want to be read' is one of his favourite slogans).

### **Bibliographical Note**

Petr Sgall's bibliography before 1986 was compiled as a gift from his colleagues at the occasion of his 60th birthday and was made available as an internal report of the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics, Charles University; the bibliographical data from later periods were published at the occasions of his birthdays in the *Prague Bulletin of Mathematical Linguistics* (PBML) 55, 1991, 95–98; PBML 65–66, 1996, 113–122 (bibliography 1986–1996, with a short introduction "Petr Sgall Septuagenerian") and PBML 75, 2001, 87–91 (bibliography 1996–2000). A complete bibliography of Petr Sgall is appended to the volume of Sgall's selected papers (Petr Sgall: *Language in its multifarious aspects*) published by Karolinum, Prague, 2006.

The text of this editorial is a slightly modified and abbreviated version of the Introduction (written by Eva Hajičová and Jarmila Panevová) to the selected papers of Petr Sgall: *Language in Its Multifarious Aspects*, Karolinum, Prague, 2006. Reprinted here with the kind permission of the Karolinum Publishing House.