

## Petr Sgall's ninetieth birthday



This year, Prof. PhDr. Petr Sgall, DrSc., h.c.mult., a prominent representative of Czech and international contemporary linguistics, celebrates his 90th birthday. It would be a very difficult if not an impossible task to summarize comprehensibly his contribution to modern linguistics during the past 70 years of his professional life in a short article; let us, then, just briefly recapitulate his life's achievements and recall some of the main topics covered by his highly varied work.

Petr Sgall (who was born on May 27, 1926, in České Budějovice, but spent his early years in his beloved East-Bohemian town of Ústí nad Orlicí) received his university education at the Faculty of Arts at Charles University in Prague. Among his professors, those who had a profound influence on him were Vladimír Skalička, Bohumil Havránek and Vladimír Šmilauer. Petr Sgall's professional life has always been connected with his Alma Mater; in 1958 he became associate professor (do-cent) of general and Indo-European linguistics, and as soon as the political situation changed he obtained full professorship in 1990; after his retirement he became Professor Emeritus of Charles University. His devotedness to his mother tongue, his home country and Charles University, however, does not mean that Sgall was isolated from the international scientific community: in 1956 he spent two terms with Professor J. Kuryłowicz at the Jagellonian University in Cracow (Poland); in the years 1968–1969 he carried out research in France at the University in Grenoble and at CNRS; he lectured at the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales in Paris (where he received his first honorary doctorate in 1995); and he was a visiting professor at Hamburg University (where he received an honorary doctorate in 1998) and at the University in Vienna in 1993. In 1992 he was also awarded the Alexander von Humboldt International Research Prize and spent 5 months as a research fellow at the Netherlands Institute of Advanced Studies in Wassenaar. Among his outstanding international honours are an honorary membership in the Linguistic Society of America (since 2002) and membership of the prestigious Academia Europaea (since 2003).

His professional pursuits started with a focus on the **typology of languages** (see his PhD thesis *Infinitive im Ṛgveda*, published in 1958; see also Sgall 1971). Under the influence of Bohuslav Havránek's work on the functional stratification of Czech, Sgall was also deeply interested in the exceptional situation of the Czech varieties; his preference was for studying actual usage rather than imposing restrictions. Sgall's permanent interest in sociolinguistic issues is also reflected in his studies on **orthographic** systems in general, and in his interest in orthographic reforms of Czech in particular (cf. e.g. Sgall 1986).

Petr Sgall's research interests are remarkably broad and most of them figure in all the periods of his professional life. He was one of the first European scholars who at the beginning of the 1960s immediately understood the importance of an **explicit description of language**. At the same time, he was aware that the generative approach as presented in the early days of transformational grammar lacks



due regard to the functions of language. 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 (Sgall 1967a) 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 theoretical and methodological approach rests on four main pillars: (i) a multilevel description of the language system (Sgall 1964; 1966), (ii) dependency syntax, (iii) information structure (topic-focus articulation) as an integral part of the underlying linguistic structure, and (iv) the distinction between linguistic meaning (captured by the underlying level of syntax, in FGD referred to as tectogrammatcs) and cognitive content. A more comprehensive account of FGD is given in Sgall et al., 1986. These basic assumptions also underlie the overall scheme of the annotation of Czech texts realized as the **Prague Dependency Treebank**, in the development of which Petr Sgall was an active participant.

One of the pivotal notions in Sgall's understanding of syntax is the concept of the **underlying (deep) level of sentence structure**, which is conceived of as a level of (linguistic) meaning of the sentence and represents the highest level of the FGD system. Its units are understood as functions of the units of lower levels (morphological, morphemic, phonemic).

From the formal point of view, the representations of sentences on the underlying (tectogrammatical) level have the form of dependency tree structures, with nodes representing the autosemantic (content) words and edges representing the dependency relation between the governor and the dependent (called functors). The meanings of function words (prepositions, subordinate conjunctions) are reflected as values of the corresponding subfunctors, which contribute to the specification of the dependency relations between the content words. Morphological meanings are captured by the grammatemes attached to the content words.

One of the most innovative contributions of Petr Sgall to theoretical and formal linguistics is his introduction of the description of the information structure of the sentence (**topic-focus articulation**, or, in his terms, TFA) into a formal description of language (Sgall 1967b; Hajičová, Partee and Sgall 1998). He built on the pioneering observations of Vilém Mathesius, one of the founders of the world-famous Prague Linguistic Circle, and was the first to point out (and to document through convincing examples, not only from Czech) that this dichotomy is semantically relevant and constitutes the basic sentence structure essential for the semantic interpretation of the sentence. Study of these issues was paid more thorough attention by a wider linguistic community only later, in the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and it is thanks to Sgall that the position of the Czech studies on the international scene has been duly recognized.

In Sgall's conception, the tectogrammatical level as the level of the (linguistic) **meaning of sentences** is distinguished from **ontological content**, which thus reflects the opposition of language as a system and the domain of cognition. Sgall argues that the distinction between the two domains known since F. de Saussure and L. Hjelmslev can be determined with the help of operational and testable criteria (Sgall

1995). On such a basis, the “deep cases” (case roles, i.e. the underlying, tectogrammatical syntactic relations) can be specified as belonging to the language patterning and differentiated from a conceptualization of the scenes more clearly than with many other approaches, including that of C. Fillmore (Sgall 1980).

Petr Sgall has also proved himself to be in possession of outstanding organizational skills. In 1959, he founded a small subdepartment of mathematical linguistics (called at that time ‘algebraic’, to distinguish it from traditional quantitative linguistics) and theory of machine translation at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University, followed by the foundation of a small group for the study of computational linguistics at the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics (in 1961) of the same University. In 1968, the two groups were integrated under his directorship into the Laboratory of Algebraic Linguistics, affiliated to the Faculty of Arts. This Laboratory, due to the political changes in the country caused by the Russian-led invasion, had, unfortunately, a very short life-span. In 1972, Sgall came up against forced dismissal from the University for political reasons, and the whole group was eventually destined 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 that Faculty, less closely watched (by the guardians of ideology) than was the domain of the Humanities. Even there, however, conditions were not at all easy for Sgall, who was deprived of the opportunity to teach, supervise students, travel to the West and attend conferences there, and only slowly and gradually was he able to resume some of his activities in the 1980s. After 1989 he became the Head of the newly established Institute of Theoretical and Computational Linguistics at the Faculty of Arts (1990–1995) and he was the initiator and the first Head of the Center of Vilém Mathesius, which organized regular two-week series of lectures given by prominent scholars from abroad and, with the financial support of the Open Society Fund, offered grants to at least 20 students coming from the countries of former Central and Eastern Europe.

Petr Sgall was also among those who helped to revive the Prague Linguistic Circle as early as 1988 and also had a substantial share in reviving the book series *Travaux du 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 Publishing Company).

Although during the past few years Petr Sgall has not participated actively in linguistic life, he will stay in our minds as a researcher with an overwhelming variety of deeply rooted topics of interest, with the ability to penetrate into the very substance of an argument and to provide a convincing counterargument; and with a consistency of opinion but, at the same time, an openmindedness and openness to discussion and a willingness to accept his opponent’s viewpoint if he finds good reason to do so. There are few researchers in his field who have been able to react so creatively to stimuli from the outside, to learn lessons from them, and to push his students to do the same, ‘Read if you want to be read’ being one of his favourite slogans.





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