

**“READ, IF YOU WANT TO BE READ BY OTHERS.”
(PETR SGALL, 1926–2019)**



Petr Sgall's frequent saying used as the title of the present obituary reveals a lot about its author: his serious and devoted attitude to research work, the depth of his knowledge achieved by his own intensive study of the work of his predecessors and contemporaries, and, last not least, his attention and care about his students and their future. His decease is felt as a great loss to the Czech linguistic community as well as to linguistics as a field of science.

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, where he died on May 28th, 2019), Professor Emeritus of Charles University 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 research interests were very broad: they covered language typology, functional stratification of Czech, Czech morphology and syntax, theoretical and computational linguistics and formal description of language.¹

Petr Sgall's childhood was not by far easy: his father died in Auschwitz, as did several of his close relatives, and he himself spent some months in a labour camp. After the end of the War, he studied at Charles University in Prague under the supervision of Professor Vladimír Skalička, a leading specialist in typology, and then spent a year of postgraduate studies in Cracow in Poland, studying with J. Kuryłowicz; this study resulted in his habilitation thesis in 1958 on the infinitive in Old Indian. As early as 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. He was attracted by the idea of an explicit description of natural language, but at the same time, as a Praguian scholar, he was aware that the original transformational framework suffered from the lack of due regard to the functions of language.

Based on the Praguian tenets, Sgall formulated and developed an original framework of a multi-level generative description of language, the so-called Functional Generative Description (FGD). He thus laid the foundation stones of the 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. The core of Sgall's multi-stratal framework lies in the specification of the so-called tectogrammatical (i.e. underlying syntactical) level of FGD; this level is understood as belonging to the language patterning, in distinction to ontological content belonging to the domain of cognition. On the tectogrammatical level, the sentences are represented as dependency trees, with nodes labelled by autosemantic lexical units and the edges representing the dependency relations between the governing and the dependent node

¹ 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.

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in terms of valency relations (such as Actor, Patient, Addressee, Origin, Effect, Local and Temporal relations, etc.). The second important aspect of tectogrammatical representations is the information structure of the sentence, its topic-focus articulation. Sgall's claim that the topic-focus articulation (TFA) of the sentence is semantically relevant and constitutes the basic sentence structure essential for the semantic interpretation of the sentence is one of the most innovative contributions of him to theoretical and formal linguistics. Sgall refers back to Aristotelian original understanding of 'subject' as 'given by the circumstances' and 'predicate' as what is 'predicated' about the 'subject', emphasizing the aboutness relation. It should be noticed that the first paper by Sgall on TFA and its inclusion into a generative description of language was published as early as in 1967. Issues related to the information structure of the sentence are paid serious attention in the Prague School history; their study was introduced there by Vilém Mathesius in the first half of the 20th century and was continued by Jan Firbas and others. These issues were given more intensive attention by a wider linguistic community only later, in the last two decades of the 20th century, and it is thanks to Sgall that the position of the Czech studies on the international scene has been duly specified and, even more importantly, that the attention has been focussed on the basic semantic relevance of these issues.

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 always been 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 mentioned above), its comprehensiveness and consistency have made PDT one of the most frequently referred to and highly appreciated present-day corpus projects in the world.

Petr Sgall has also proved outstanding organizational skills. In 1959, he founded a small subdepartment of mathematical linguistics (called then 'algebraic') 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 1961) 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 Russia-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 several 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 and 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.

The years after the political changes in former Czechoslovakia in 1989 have brought him a due satisfaction: 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), a 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 had a substantial share in reviving 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).

With his broad linguistic interests as well as with his ability to penetrate into the substance of arguments and to give a convincing counterargument, the consistence of his opinions but, at the same time, open-mindedness and openness to discussion and willingness to accept the opponent's viewpoint if he found good reasons for it, Petr Sgall has influenced not just a single generation of his followers. 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, as one of his favourite slogans used as the title of our obituary indicates.

Eva Hajičová

Institute of Formal and Applied Linguistics
Faculty of Mathematics and Physics, Charles University
Malostranské náměstí 25, 118 01 Praha 1
hajicova@ufal.mff.cuni.cz

