

# Remembering Geoffrey Leech

In August 2014 the international linguistic public was shocked by the news of the sudden death of Geoffrey Neil Leech, FBA (16 January 1936 — 19 August 2014), Emeritus Professor at the Department of Linguistics and English Language, Lancaster University. His life and work will no doubt be recapitulated in a large number of articles, papers and obituaries in many places and various media. Nevertheless, *Linguistica Pragensia* would like to join those who wish to pay tribute to him, and for quite specific reasons. For Czech linguists, Geoffrey Leech is one of those personalities who, along with a few others, actively helped English Studies in Czechoslovakia, and later on in the Czech Republic, to overcome the severe isolation created by the Communist regime, with its grudge against the linguistics of the language of its ideological archenemy.

Ivan Poldauf could easily have given his paper *The rise and development of English Studies in the country of the Prague School* (Finkenstaedt and Scholtes, 1982), outlining the situation up to the grim 1980s, a different title — *The rise and fall of English Studies in Czechoslovakia* — had it been possible to do so. Under such circumstances the moral support given to Czech linguists by their colleagues abroad, and especially by British linguists, through recognition and personal contact was truly invaluable. The fact that the bibliography of the authoritative *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* included references to works by Daneš, Dušková, Firbas, Hajičová, Kolář, Krámský, Macháček, Mathesius, Nosek, Poldauf, Svoboda, and Vachek was of immense importance in those years, as those references amounted to a display of recognition of their work by the international linguistic community at a time when, within Czechoslovakia, most of these authors had been removed from positions of responsibility and influence and their presence in university departments and academic institutions was at best grudgingly suffered rather than positively welcome.

Relations between the Czech linguists and the authors of the CGEL, who saw to the inclusion of these references in their grammar, went back to the 1970s and were on a personal level. Geoffrey Leech visited Prague for the first time in the 1970s and then repeatedly in the 1990s for various reasons (including his collaboration with the Vilém Mathesius Center under the Institute of Formal and Applied Linguistics, Faculty of Mathematics and Physics, Charles University). Of special importance was his visit to Prague in 2012 on the occasion of the Centenary of Prague English Studies; he attended the conference organized to mark this anniversary and, on 17 May, was awarded the degree of Doctor honoris causa by Charles University, Prague, on the initiative of the Department of English Language and ELT Methodology at the Faculty of Arts. Through this symbolic act English Studies in the Czech Republic strove to repay its debt of gratitude to British linguistics, and to the authors of *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* in particular. In fact, Geoffrey Leech was the last of that team of authors to be honoured in this way. Randolph Quirk was awarded the Dr.h.c by Charles University on 21 October 1997, and Jan Svartvik by Masaryk



University, Brno, in 1998. Sadly, the fourth co-author, Sidney Greenbaum, who also visited Prague and lectured at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University, in the 1980s, died before circumstances made it possible for the English Department's plan to honour him with a doctorate to be realized. The Prague linguists' respect for Geoffrey Leech's work was reciprocated by the British linguist, who summarized his attitude towards and assessment of the Prague School and English Studies in the Czech Republic in his honorary doctorate acceptance speech and later in his remarkably perceptive introductory chapter *A Century of Prague English Linguistics* in the anniversary publication *A Centenary of English Studies at Charles University: from Mathesius to Present-Day Linguistics* (2012). He and his wife Fanny visited Prague for the last time in April 2014 at the invitation of the Department of the Czech National Corpus, and my last and lasting personal memory of their visit will be that of joining the Leeches in attending a performance of the Beethoven *Missa Solemnis* conducted by Helmuth Rilling in Prague's art nouveau Municipal House.

A complete list of Geoffrey Leech's work would be very long indeed, and so only a brief selection will have to suffice here of works with which he contributed to the development of contemporary linguistics and left his indelible mark on such fields as English grammar, stylistics, pragmatics, semantics and corpus linguistics. Although as a student he attended a series of lectures by John Rupert Firth, Daniel Jones, A.C. Gimson and J. D. O'Connor, the two personalities who had a profound influence on him were M.A.K. Halliday, who steered him towards semantics, and Randolph Quirk. It was Quirk who launched him on his academic career: he invited Leech to work at the Survey of English Usage research centre and later to participate as one of the 'gang of four' in the writing of *A Grammar of Contemporary English* (1972) and subsequently the most ambitious work, the largest synchronic grammar of English at that time, *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (1985), which quickly became the acknowledged authority in all English-speaking countries. Another major grammar book of which Leech was a co-author was the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (1999). Work on these grammars was connected with the development of corpora (The Survey of English Usage to begin with) and corpus linguistics. Indeed, Leech became a first-generation corpus linguist. During the 1970s he built the Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen (LOB) Corpus, in the mid-1990s he participated in the compilation of the British National Corpus, and in the 1999–2008 period he helped to prepare the 'FLOB' and 'Frown' Corpora, among others. All this resulted in his (co-)authorship and editorship of a number of publications on the use of computers in linguistics, e.g. *The Computational Analysis of English* (1987) and *Statistically-driven Computer Grammars of English* (1993). And, of course, he was the founder of the research centre for Corpus Linguistics at Lancaster University UCREL (University Centre for Computer Corpus Research on Language).

In addition to his other works on English grammar (*A Communicative Grammar of English*, 1975, 2002; *English Grammar for Today*, 1982, 2006; *An A-Z of English Grammar and Usage*, 1989, 2001; *Longman Student Grammar of Spoken and Written English*, 2002) and his studies in corpus linguistics, Leech is known for his works dealing with semantics (such as *Meaning and the English Verb*, 1971, and *Semantics*, 1974), stylistics (e.g. *Style in Fiction*, 1981, with Mick Short, and *Language in Literature*, 2008), and prag-

matics (*Principles of Pragmatics*, 1983) — to name but a few. His last monograph, *The Pragmatics of Politeness* (OUP, USA), which he was very much looking forward to seeing published (and which was indeed also the last book he intended to write), was released shortly before his death, on 7 August 2014. With this publication Geoffrey Leech's work had come to a symbolic end. His death is a **great loss for linguistics in general and for English linguistics in particular. But not only that** — with his departure Prague English linguistics has lost a most valued friend.

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## REFERENCES

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