

REMEMBERING RANDOLPH QUIRK



Charles Randolph Quirk, Baron Quirk, CBE, FBA (12 July 1920 — 20 December 2017), a British linguist and life peer, was one of the most important figures in 20th century English linguistics and his influence was likewise keenly felt in the departments of English in all Czech universities. The following reminiscences recall the contacts of Randolph Quirk with English Studies at Charles University in Prague. It is to be regretted that his contacts with Jan Firbas at Masaryk University in Brno can no longer be described considering that Randolph Quirk and Jan Firbas were not only colleagues, but also friends. Quirk's acquaintance with Firbas's theory of functional sentence perspective is evident, among other things, in the use of the term communicative dynamism in *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (1985), and their friendly relationship is shown in Quirk's often quoted saying, a comment on Firbas's punctuality: "He has to be at the airport before the runway is built." How much more could have been written by Jan Firbas had his demise not preceded that of his renowned colleague by seventeen years.¹

To my knowledge,² Randolph Quirk first came to Prague in the sixties of the last century. He gave a lecture to the Circle of Modern Philologists on a subject very topical at that time, the concept of acceptability in language, in contrast to grammaticality. The lecture was based on acceptability tests administered to students of University College London. This elicited a remark from the audience by Iris Urwin Lewit, a translator of Czech fiction living in Prague, who questioned the validity of results obtained from such a uniform sample of subjects. Quirk's spontaneous response showed the inherent difficulties of this kind of research; should he have gone out into Kensington High Street and asked passers-by to take the tests? Also notable was his apologetic comment on his own language; while still nervous at the beginning of the lecture he had used *almost no* instead of *hardly any*, presumably then felt as inappropriate.³

Another opportunity to see Randolph Quirk also presented itself in the sixties, during my attendance at a lecture at the London University Summer School of English. On that occasion he was not the lecturer, but he acted as the chair. This function was in fact a predictable attribute of his being the founder of the Summer School. Even though I cannot recall the topic of the lecture, I have a clear recollection of his comment; Quirk concluded the session by saying that that was the first time he had heard a lecture presented without any written aid except a few notes on paper slips.

My personal acquaintance with Randolph Quirk had to wait until after the period of "normalization" in the seventies, during which personal contacts with western scholars, whether at home or abroad, practically ceased. In 1981 I was invited for an academic visit to England, the major part of which I spent in London. It was during

1 Randolph Quirk and Jan Firbas were close contemporaries, respectively, 1920–2017 and 1921–2000.

2 Libuše Dušková

3 Even today, *hardly any* has nearly twice as many hits as *almost no* in the British National Corpus (361 vs. 193).



my stay in London that I was able to meet Randolph Quirk for the first time in person. He received me officially for about half an hour and asked me about my work.⁴ When I mentioned verbal aspect he expounded on it, presumably because the term is also used in his grammars, albeit in a different sense from that found in Slavonic languages.⁵

The most memorable event and the climax of Randolph Quirk's contacts with Prague English Studies is, undoubtedly, his award of an honorary doctorate by Charles University in 1997. On that occasion he was invited for a week's stay in Prague, accompanied by his wife, Lady Quirk, Professor Gabriele Stein. Among his other engagements in the course of his visit was a lecture to the Prague Linguistic Circle, which had resumed its activities shortly after the downfall of the communist regime. Randolph Quirk's lecture to the Circle dealt with the reference of possessive determiners, as illustrated by the sentence *She went to visit her murderer*. "Did she go to see the person who was going to murder her?" was the question that presented itself. The broader context showed, however, that the subject pronoun referred to a counsel for the defence, who went to see her defendant, a murderer.

The award of an honorary doctorate to Randolph Quirk by Charles University had been proposed by the English Department of Charles University on the initiative of the linguistics section then represented, in addition to myself, by the co-author of these reminiscences, Aleš Klégr, who participated in the administrative proceedings and so had ample opportunity to meet Randolph Quirk in the flesh. His recollections offer yet another perspective on the occasion.

At that time I⁶ was still relatively young and had little experience with illustrious greats of linguistic academia, and so did not know what to expect. Meeting Randolph Quirk and Gabriele Stein was a real pleasure, confirming my conviction that the greater the scholar, the more gracious they are. We remained in contact ever since. Nevertheless, there were a few unnerving moments such as when Lord Quirk called me at home and the call was answered by my 18-year-old son, who dispassionately asked him to spell his name. Randolph Quirk just as calmly obliged him and all was well.

The impression I still have of Randolph Quirk twenty years later is that of an amiable, but formidable personality. You certainly wouldn't want to bother him with silly notions and incompetence. He radiated mental agility and energy and he was a doer. When we took the honourable couple out for dinner on the first evening, one of his first questions was what was expected of him during the honorary doctorate ceremony. When he was told that he should give an acceptance speech,⁷ he drily noted that he had not been informed of that and immediately asked for a piece of paper

4 His interest in and acquaintance with the work of Czech linguists is documented by references to their publications in the *CGEL*.

5 I also had a chance to visit the Survey of English Usage, the most renowned sphere of Randolph Quirk's activities, where he laid a foundation for grammars of English based on usage.

6 Aleš Klégr

7 His speech at the honorary doctorate ceremony was published in *Linguistica Pragensia* 8/1, (1998):1-3.

and a pencil and quickly made a first draft, so as not to forget the ideas that had just occurred to him.

A few days later when the speech had been finished, revised and handed over to me for final printing with the instruction that I should not leak it to anyone (a wise directive as it turned out) and the ceremony was near at hand, Randolph Quirk asked me about the details of the ceremonial procedure to ready himself for the occasion. To my dismay I found that the vice-chancellor's department in charge of the ceremony had only a very poor and meagre outline to offer, and what is more, only in Czech. As a result, detailed step-by-step instructions were hastily put together and translated into English. Randolph Quirk was happy and the vice-chancellor's department was even happier, as they have been using these instructions successfully ever since. The story may sound insignificant but I believe it pretty much sums up Randolph Quirk's creed and approach to life — things should be done, and done well! That is why he left behind such a tremendous legacy and that is why his work will stay alive for a long time to come.

Libuše Dušková

Department of English Language and ELT Methodology
Faculty of Arts, Charles University
nám. Jana Palacha 2, 116 38 Praha, Czech Republic
libuse.duskova@ff.cuni.cz

Aleš Klégr

Department of English Language and ELT Methodology
Faculty of Arts, Charles University Prague
nám. Jana Palacha 2, 116 38 Praha
ales.klegr@ff.cuni.cz

