

Ferenc Kiefer 90

Let me begin with a spotlight, that characterizes Kiefer Ferenc in a very specific way: When you drove with him along a nice view of the Hungarian landscape, it could happen that he stopped his car, took out his violin, and in the plain air he played a tune that enlightened the scene.

I have known Feri for almost 60 years as a particularly kind and helpful colleague and friend and a very competent and versatile colleague. Ferenc was one of the most European linguists one can imagine, both in his scientific capacity and his way of life.

It began with his very identity. Born on 24 May 1931 in Apatin, Yugoslavia, he came from the Swabian-German family Kiefer, who had settled in the Hungarian-Serbian border-area Vojvodina, which for a long time had belonged to Austria and was shaped by this tradition. Little Ferenc thus spent his first couple of years in an environment where Hungarian and Serbian were the everyday dialects around his family home, his parents still sticking to their German tradition. It thus was quite natural for him, that before he had fully developed his mother tongue – which was actually Hungarian – he already knew German as well as some Serbian, which helped him to acquire familiarity with other Slavic languages on later occasions. With this colorful background, characterizing not only his early linguistic environment, but his cultural experience in general, he attended primary school in Budapest, where his parents had moved because of the changes that reordered the Balkans after the First World War. Budapest became in fact Kiefer's real hometown, to which he returned from wherever he spent periods of his life in between.

After finishing graduate school in 1952, he left Budapest to become a student at the University of Szeged, where – besides taking some courses in French and German language and literature – his primary concern was to study mathematics and physics with the inspiring mathematician and logician László Kalmár, who was widely known for his contributions to mathematical logic and informatics and who had just founded a laboratory of cybernetics. Thus Feri did not begin his professional career the way one normally expects for a linguist. Instead of following the usual, still fairly conservative path of traditional philology, his interest in the nature and structure of language grew out of two strong and independent sources: first, his intuitive and informed familiarity with various languages of rather different types, and second, the advanced training in modern developments of mathematical logic and the theory of algorithms. This unimposed combination of two quite different capacities made him a highly estimated participant in the field of theoretical linguistics in his country, notably with respect to possibilities for machine translation, which attracted increasing attention during the 1950s and which were supported in Eastern European countries by the Soviet Union. Against this background, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences established a working group in mathematical linguistics with Kiefer as its leading research fellow. As a first approach, this group pursued the set-theoretically based approach proposed by O.S. Kulagina, whose basic idea was a variant of the categorial grammar conceived by Ajdukiewicz and taken up later on by Bar Hillel, who, by the way, was one of the prominent guests visiting and encouraging the Budapest research group. As the expectations for practical results in automatic translation became gradually more realistic, the official support for computer-oriented linguistics reduced noticeably – not only in Hungary. Thus, the interest in linguistics

returned to the more general and fascinating possibilities and perspectives opened by formal methods in linguistic analysis – the central field of Kiefer's expertise.

Although he was never personally affected by the political pressures dominating the Stalinist era, it came as general relief, also for Kiefer, that in the Kádár-period, which followed the violent quelling of the Hungarian uprising, the political situation lost much of the earlier tensions. During the 1960s, Kiefer could step by step expand the range of his connections and the places of his activity. After initial visits to Stockholm, he became a long-time collaborator of Hans Karlgren, with whom he founded the research group KVAL (quantitative linguistics), working with him on the "slant-grammar calculus", a new version of the system of categorial grammar. Staying in Sweden for a couple of years, he eventually held a chair in linguistics at the University of Stockholm from 1969 to 1981. From there he visited all linguistically relevant places in Europe which he had not already seen before. So, after Berlin and Vienna, he was a frequent guest in Paris, London, Rome, Pisa, and other places, but he also visited major universities in the United States. One of his lasting contributions from this period is his support for the establishment of the *Journal of Pragmatics*, which he served as the first review editor.

During the Swedish period, divorced from his first wife with whom he had a daughter in Hungary, he came to know Julia Janczyszyn, who had come from Poland under similar conditions as he had come from Hungary. It did not take long to become clear that Julia and Ferenc would stay together. They have two sons, whose life began in Sweden, much like Feri's life had begun in Yugoslavia – a really European family.

Linguistically, Kiefer had in the meantime developed greater familiarity with the framework of generative grammar and its formal capacity, according to which categorial systems proved to be strictly equivalent to simple phrase structure grammars, providing the base-component of generative grammatical systems, which then were assumed to contain a transformational component. Fascinated by the new possibilities, Kiefer applied the framework of generative grammar to problems of different languages he was familiar with, notably Hungarian, but also Swedish, French, and German. Besides his own contributions, he was very efficient and successful as an editor and mediator, creating a remarkable number of paper collections, which made interesting developments and results accessible to a wider range of colleagues, thereby strengthening their influence

When he again took up his engagement as a research fellow at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, two different, but closely related things were of particular importance to him. First, he prepared and then initiated a systematic and theoretically based modern description of the grammar of Hungarian, an extensive – and actually quite successful – project, in which he actively participated. Second, he was very much concerned to develop the appropriate institutional basis for modern linguistic research at the Academy. To achieve this, he initiated the foundation of an Institute for Theoretical Linguistics, of which he served as the first director. Meanwhile he also held a chair as professor at the Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest. As a matter of fact, a whole generation of Hungarian linguists were his students. His own work in linguistics in these years concerned almost all aspects of language and language use, and he addressed a wide variety of special topics, ranging from Swedish morphology to information structure, focus and modality, greetings as language games, questions and attitudes, noun incorporation in Hungarian, or

thematic roles and compounds – to mention just a few. Kiefer's research as well as the prudent efficiency of his organizational steps in developing the linguistic institute of the Academy clearly influenced his role in the academic world. He was elected as regular member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, he also became an honorary member of the Linguistic Society of America, a member of the Austrian Academy and the European Academy of Sciences, and he received the degree of Doctor Honoris Causa at the Universities of Stockholm, Paris, and Szeged.

Ferenc Kiefer was elected the third President of the *International Pragmatics Association*, succeeding John Gumperz and Sandra Thompson, serving from 1995 to 1999, and organizing the 7th International Pragmatics Conference held in Budapest in 2000. With his reputation and personality, Kiefer was the ideal candidate for an international organization like the CIPL. Although he really did not apply for it, he was the elected president of the *Comité International Permanent des Linguistes* from 2003 to 2013. In this position he was responsible for the international congresses 2008 in Seoul and 2013 in Geneva. Although he was skeptic about congresses of this general type and size (the last big one he attended was the 14th International Pragmatics Conference in Antwerp in 2015), he used all his energy to stabilize the CIPL-tradition.

Kiefer was in fact successful in several respects. Still before he returned to Budapest with his family, he was able to acquire a wonderful flat at one of the most spectacular places in Budapest – right on the Gellért-hill, looking straight down onto the majestic Danube. Linguists from all over the world have been guests in this famous place, enjoying not only inspiring discussions, but also the singular view.

It would obviously be wrong to think of Kiefer only as a particularly successful linguist. He was in the first place characterized by his natural art of *savoir vivre*. He was not only a friend of the special Hungarian wines and the particular Hungarian (and French!) cuisine, he was a first-rate cook himself, as guests at his inviting place would attest with pleasure. But to Feri luxury did not just mean comfortable living. He was a real expert in all branches of art, a personal friend of active painters and sculptors, a regular attendant of opera, theater and concerts. His musical education was not confined to competent listening; he played with pleasure his own instrument.

Ferenc was an unambitious character, not a man of great words or big slogans, he convinced his partners by what he did, without noise. His success sometimes appeared as a pure surprise, but in fact it was the result of skill, cleverness – and serious work. To his colleagues and especially to his students, he was remarkably friendly and supportive, he always thought of practical possibilities, invented topics to work on, found ways to solve problems and shared them generously. His large net of connections with colleagues, institutions, and projects permitted him practical help and advice in a large range of cases. He always had a smile, and he clearly preferred a joke over a complaint.

While he had always stayed clear of political positioning in public, during the final years of his academic life, Ferenc did not hide his increasing disappointment with political developments in Hungary. In particular, he condemned the rude interference with the regular organizational structure of the Academy, too reminiscent of the autocratic tendencies of the past and, in his opinion, bordering on incompetence.

In the last few years, Feri suffered from a slowly worsening heart disease, which gradually restricted the range of his possibilities, including the visits to his summer residence in Kálocfá. I saw him for the last time 2015 in Budapest. No doubt – he would have loved to be the host at Bérc utca for his ninety birthday.

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