

Twenty years of theoretical linguistics in Budapest

It was the spring of 1990. A group of linguists at the Research Institute for Linguistics of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences decided they felt like teaching linguistics in addition to doing research. They wanted to teach new things and teach them in new ways. They wanted to have disciples of their own; they were eager to see how their knowledge and skills might contribute to the intellectual development of talented young people. The Research Institute supported their ambitions (and has been supporting it ever since) by providing accommodation and infrastructure for the department. The founders had been teaching courses in linguistics at various universities in Budapest, Pécs, and Szeged, but the results of their efforts had been unable to accumulate. The foundation of a department was furthermore felt to be made necessary by the fact that, prior to the political changes of 1990 in this country, contemporary linguistics had not been taught anywhere in Hungarian universities. We envisioned a theoretical linguistics curriculum that was interested not only in describing linguistic phenomena but also in explaining them. Ever since, our curriculum centres on the fundamental disciplines of linguistics (phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics), but the courses we offer include various interfaces and interdisciplinary areas like neuro-, psycho-, and sociolinguistics or computational linguistics, too. The department offers knowledge of a variety of theoretical frameworks but has a homogeneous and coherent view of linguistics: we consider language as a system to be explored and explained, rather than a field of study to be conducted in terms of normative or merely descriptive grammar.

In the spring of 1990, the Soros Foundation started its Higher Education Support Program. We submitted a group grant proposal containing the curriculum and course list of the Theoretical Linguistics Group and were awarded a grant. One of the prerequisites was that a university had to host the project. The Faculty Council of the Faculty of Arts of Eötvös Loránd University accepted a three-year experimental program to start in the autumn of 1990. In 1993, the Faculty Council found the first three years to be a success and endorsed the foundation of the Theoretical Linguistics Programme. The Theoretical Linguistics PhD Programme was then started in 1996, also supported by the Soros Foundation. Students were recruited both from Hungary and from abroad, and the courses were initially given in English. Some of the students coming from other countries subsequently acquired their PhD degrees within this Programme.

The Department has been accommodated by the Research Institute for Linguistics since the very beginning, as per an agreement between the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and Eötvös Loránd University. Up to 1996, the Higher Education Support Program of the Soros Foundation kept sponsoring our work, but since then, the financial background is supposed to be provided by the University. In the fourteen

8 *Twenty years of theoretical linguistics in Budapest*

years that elapsed since 1996, however, the University was merely able to set up a single full professor's position and two part time positions, the latter two soon shrinking into one-fifth positions each (only one of which survives to the present day). In reality, the BA and MA programs and the PhD program that is built on them have been kept going by a community of eight to ten people for the past twenty years. This community has undergone changes only inasmuch as a number of our former students have become our colleagues as time went by. It would be difficult to tell exactly how we were able to maintain teaching for such a long time in the almost entire absence of financial support from the university, yet the fact is that the Theoretical Linguistics Programme became twenty years old by 2010. The success of our work is shown by the fact that both our staff and (former) students have an excellent record of number of publications, citation indices, as well as international reception.

In 2010 we organised a conference to celebrate our twentieth anniversary; we invited our former students and colleagues who contributed to the life of our department by teaching regularly for some time over the past twenty years. The conference was concluded by a fiesta organised by the students of the department. We are glad to present, in what follows, a selection of papers based on presentations at the conference.

Budapest, May 2012.

Ferenc Kiefer and Zoltán Bánréti