

Ferenc Kiefer

(1931-2020)



Ferenc Kiefer, full member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, winner of the Széchenyi Prize and the Gold Medal of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Professor Emeritus of Eötvös Loránd University, member of the Academia Europaea, London, the Austrian Academy of Sciences, the European Academy of Arts and Sciences, Paris, died on November 21, 2020, not long before his 90th birthday. He was also Honorary Member of the American Linguistic Society and of the British Philological Society, *Doctor Honoris Causa* of the Universities of Stockholm, Paris and Szeged, former Director of the Research Institute for Linguistics of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, a teacher and inspirational patron of generations of young linguists.

He was born in Apatin, Yugoslavia, but his family moved to Baja, Southern Hungary, following World War Two. He first graduated from the University of Szeged with a degree in mathematics and physics and became interested in German dialects as a practicing teacher in Baja. He turned to general linguistics at the encouragement of linguists in Budapest and, after completing his German and then French correspondence courses in Szeged, he got a job at the Eötvös József Secondary School in Budapest. From here he joined the newly formed mathematical linguistics research group at the Computer Science Center of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1962. From 1973 he was first a research fellow at the Research Institute for Linguistics of the HAS, rising later to the top rank of scientific advisor, and, between 1992 and 2001, its director. At the same time, he taught general linguistics at ELTE, and then became a founding professor and chair of the Department of Theoretical Linguistics, established jointly by RIL HAS and Eötvös University. He defended his doctoral dissertation in 1971, obtained his academic doctorate in 1977, became a corresponding member at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1987, and a full member in 1995.

From the late 1960s, he taught regularly at universities in Stockholm, Stuttgart, Aarhus, Paris, and Vienna, but always returned to Hungary, where he organized international conferences to promote personal communication between Eastern European and Western linguists in addition to a large number of collections of papers edited by him and printed by first class publishers,

through which he gave an opportunity to linguists on the far side of the Iron Curtain to publish for an international audience. He was a true *éminence grise* of the East-West scientific dialogue, the importance of which was little recognized, except perhaps by the organs of the state security.

Thanks to his background in mathematics, he easily embraced the trends in formal linguistics arising in the 1960s. He started by disseminating Chomsky's generative linguistics, in particular syntax, in Hungary, then he became more and more interested in the problems of morphology (word formation, compounding) and, on the other side of the grammatical divide, in the study of semantics and pragmatics, where he could put to use his erudition in logic. His books and articles on the theory of presuppositions, the formal and semantic properties of aspect, and the nature of compounding have elicited considerable international response, and he is considered to be among the best-known experts in these fields to date.

Although he was not a field linguist, he was not a scientist confined to his office. He had friends all over the world, and his knowledge of several languages made him capable of communicating with everyone in and outside the field. His genial personality, humor, constant smile, and remarks spiced with occasional irony were his trademark. His musical education was also outstanding, he was an avid reader of literature, a concert and theatre goer, and a true gourmet, who loved life in its entirety.

His disciples, friends, and colleagues will preserve his memory.