

Östen Dahl

I want to talk about Ferenc Kiefer and my home country, Sweden, and then also about Ferenc and myself, mentioning the most memorable encounters we had.

Sweden was clearly an important country for Ferenc. In 1969, Ferenc became Acting Professor of General Linguistics at Stockholm University, taking over from Karl-Hampus Dahlstedt, who had left for Umeå. I think Ferenc would have liked to stay in Stockholm, but the Swedish academic establishment took a somewhat protectionist attitude, preferring a native candidate when the position was filled permanently. However, he was able to find a way of keeping his connection to Sweden and spending long periods here, collaborating with Hans Karlgren, who was a pioneer in computational linguistics in Sweden and led an independent research group with premises in the very heart of downtown Stockholm. During his stay in Sweden Ferenc met his wife Julia. Another family connection is his sister Médi, who married in Sweden and still lives in Knivsta, between Uppsala and Stockholm. Ferenc quickly learnt to speak excellent Swedish with a soft Hungarian accent.

I met Ferenc early on, when I had just started teaching linguistics in Gothenburg. It was not yet properly established as a subject at the university - Stockholm had got a bit further. At one point, I was in Stockholm (I have actually forgotten what I was doing there) and went for a visit to the linguistics department and had a nice chat with Ferenc (I do not remember much of what was said). But I was to meet him again quite soon, as he was invited to be "opponent" at my thesis defense in 1970. Since there is just one opponent in the Swedish system, much depends on what he or she has to say. But Ferenc, as I remember it, was friendly and constructive in his critique.

In the autumn of 1970, I met Ferenc again, under quite different circumstances. It was at my first international conference - in Mariánské Lázně (better known perhaps under its German name "Marienbad") in what was then Czechoslovakia - only about two years after the invasion of the country by the Warsaw Pact countries. The conference was on theme-rheme (topic-comment) structure which I had written about in my dissertation and which was a really big topic in Czechoslovak linguistics and all the famous linguists I had referred to were there. I have many memories from this trip but this is not the place to develop them further.

In 1976, we invited Ferenc for the second time to a doctoral defense in Gothenburg. This time I chaired the defense, and the "respondent" was Jens Allwood, who also spoke at the "Fest Kiefer". I also invited Ferenc to stay at my house during his visit.

In 1980, I got the chair in linguistics at Stockholm University (meaning I was Ferenc' successor in a way) and bought a house in Huddinge south of Stockholm. As it turned out, I was not the only linguistics professor in Huddinge, as Ferenc at this time lived there with Julia. I joked that Huddinge probably had the highest density of linguistics professors at least in Sweden.

Later on, Ferenc spent less time in Sweden, but during the eighties he visited the Stockholm linguistics department regularly to give what came to be referred to as "the yearly Kiefer seminars". In 1992, we proposed to the Faculty of Humanities to award him an honorary doctor's degree, and as I was at this time the dean of the faculty, I was the one who put the laurel wreath on his head at the ceremony in the Stockholm City Hall (also the location where the Nobel banquets take place).

In September 1994, Ferenc invited me to Budapest for a week and I visited both the Institute and his home. This was a time when the Internet was not yet very well developed in Eastern Europe and I remember that the email was very slow. But Ferenc was not too bothered since he let his secretary print out his email correspondence every morning and put it on his desk. I found that an interesting combination of old and new habits. It happened to be a rather dramatic week back in Scandinavia with the Estonia passenger ferry sinking in the Baltic Sea between Finland and Estonia, so back in the hotel I spent much time following the events on CNN.

Although there have been long periods when our contacts have been restricted, Ferenc has remained an important person for me, having being there from the very beginning of my academic life. The "Fest Kiefer" has made me aware that he has been equally important to a great number of people. I feel it as a privilege to be among them and to be able to call Ferenc my friend.