

Interview with professor Ferenc Kiefer, former president of CIPL



Ferenc Kiefer (1931) has been a faithful servant to CIPL during a period of exactly ten years in the role of President. Before he was elected President though, he had been the official delegate from the Hungarian Academy of Science to our General Assembly for many years. The first CIPL Congress he attended was in Bucharest in 1967, which means that he has attended nine congresses in all. Since 1992 (the Quebec Congress) he has been a member of the Executive Committee.

S. You have been active in the field of linguistics for many decades. Why did you actually choose to study linguistics?

K. I did not study linguistics, but mathematics! At the end of the fifties, early sixties, there was a job offer for an applied mathematician at the Hungarian Academy. In those days, the field of computational linguistics started to rise and Moscow realized that it was important to focus on this, at least to keep up with the Americans. Consequently, the Russian COMECON (The Council for Mutual Economic Assistance) sent a letter to the Hungarian Academy requesting to start a study program in mathematical linguistics. However, not many young researchers could be found who had mathematics in their curriculum. That is why I came along at the right moment in time. As far as the linguistic component was concerned, one has to keep in mind that up to then, linguistics had mainly been identical to philology. I thus became the mathematical linguist at the Academy and I got the opportunity to work with the most important pioneers in computational linguistics in those days.

S. Who were the top researchers, the top computational linguists in those days?

K. Petr Sgall (Prague), Bernard Vauquois (Grenoble), David Hays (Rand Corporation, USA), Harry Josselson (Wayne State University, USA), among others.

S. Looking at your list of publications, you have been active in almost every field in linguistics, but how would you label yourself? Phonologist, morphologist, syntactician, or still something else?

K. My research is still in morphology, especially the interface between morphology and syntax, as well as lexical semantics, pragmatics, cognitive linguistics and the grammar of Hungarian, but my preference clearly is in morphological research together with Ulli Dressler, and also pragmatics and semantics. The last topic especially from the perspective of the consequences semantics has for pragmatics. My research was restricted to written language.

S. You have been the president of CIPL for 10 years, from 2003 till 2013. It were very difficult times when you started. Vicky Fromkin passed away, as did Robert Robins; Stephen Wurm who had taken over responsibility from Robins was not successful in organizing the conference in Mexico with Beatriz Garza Cuarón. Luckily, you found Eva Hajicová willing to organize the conference in 2003 in Prague when Wurm passed away unexpectedly. In Prague you succeeded Paolo Ramat who had served as the interim president after Wurm. Why did you nevertheless want to become president?

K. I did not want to become the president, but the GA of CIPL called upon me in 2003. After the failure of Quebec and the consequent stagnation of the organization, I wanted CIPL to become important for linguistics once more. That is why the Committee had to be organized in a more

efficient way, more people had to be involved and more delegates had to be given the opportunity to play a more active role. Apart from the conferences, there was not much activity and the number of members continued to decline. At the same time, the number of linguistic avenues was growing and in my opinion this growth also had to become visible in CIPL. I wanted to see more topics being represented at the conferences. Apart from this, something had to be done about the backlog of 4 years at the Linguistic Bibliography (LB) and we had to implement the topic of the endangered languages as a structural part of CIPL's policy, as had been recommended during the Berlin conference.

S. And now, looking back at those 10 years: what do you consider the highlights of your presidency?

K. We were able to save the *Linguistic Bibliography*, we were very constructive in supporting research on Endangered Languages and in connection with that, we were willing to make investments in summer schools. A further step in this direction was the creation of CIPL's Endangered Languages Award. Initiatives to create a chair on endangered languages in Leiden had not been successful. Furthermore I have tried to be an ambassador for encouraging membership of CIPL on the part of all organizations and institutions in the former Eastern Bloc countries whose main aims include the promotion of linguistic science and to further cooperation among linguists. And with great pleasure and responsibility, I was the initiator of the establishment of a Scientific Committee in which CIPL should be well represented in the organization of the International Congresses.

S. CIPL was founded in 1928 in The Hague during the first international conference of linguists with the intention to create a certain continuity in organizing linguistic conferences. Why were these conferences considered so important in those days?

K. As I have already told, linguistics was mainly philology in the thirties of last century. General Linguistics did not exist yet. The publishing, annotating and emending of old texts was of the utmost importance and historical comparative linguistics was also very popular. At the same time structural linguistics was gaining ground. There were no conference proceedings or lists of participants. The promoters of the international conference wanted to change that.

S. Everyone who has a look at our book *Eight Decades*, has to conclude that the most important linguists of their generation have presented their most groundbreaking articles and theories at these conferences. I only need to cite the names of Jespersen, Hjelmslev, Zipf, Martinet, Weinreich, Chomsky, Kurylowicz, Jakobson, Greenberg, Labov, Lyons, Dik, Comrie, Ken Hale, Bach and Dogil and these are not even all of them. Why did they use this forum? Obviously not because CIPL was the ugly duck in the linguistic world.

K. The promising linguists of those days were looking for an international platform and personal contacts with other linguists who already had achieved a prominent status. And the leaders in the discipline wanted to show that they knew their domain and therefore invited young linguists who could possibly become the leading scholars in the future.

S. CIPL is a non-profit, non-governmental organization open to all whose aim is to further the knowledge of linguistics throughout the world. Looking at people such as Meillet, Bally, Boas, Schrijnen, Jespersen, Trombetti and others, the accent seems to have been on general linguistics, definitely in the first years of activities. Everything on the applied level did not seem to exist if we look at the membership list till 2008. Is this not contradictory to the main goal of CIPL? How would you explain this very low esteem for applied linguistics?

K. CIPL was first and foremost a reaction against the traditional philology. Apart from that, the general feeling was that applied linguistics was not a serious scientific activity. Lexicology, for example, was not considered a science but an art. Computational linguistics has been responsible for accepting applied linguistics as a science. Besides, the transition from General Linguistics to Applied has been a gradual one and we can say that the aim of both is to further the knowledge of linguistics throughout the world. Since the beginning of this century, applied linguistics was accepted in CIPL.

S. CIPL is a non-profit, non-governmental organization. What exactly is a non-governmental organization? Max Planck? The Dutch Language Institute, Fryske Akademy, Center for Computational Linguistics of the Charles University in the Czech Republic? All of these receive funding from their governments and are members of CIPL.

K. We consider all societies, associations and academies as non-governmental because they are an autonomous legal body with an independent board and own statutes. Universities were not admitted because they are accessory to the Ministry of Education and receive funding from this body.

S. CIPL has 3 main goals: 1. The organization of an international conference every five years; 2. The annual publication of the LB and 3. Concern and care for endangered languages. Let us first have a look at the conference. Is it still wise to believe in the function of a conference every five years, where almost every linguistic paradigm is present in a time where every linguistic avenue has its world conference almost every year?

K. It is always dangerous to make predictions. Conferences were important in those days because of less and different ways of transport and in the absence of communication channels that have turned the world upside down since then. Internet connections make discussions with experts and colleagues so much easier these days. I can notice based on facts that the number of participants in our international conferences is constantly diminishing. What is even more disturbing is the fact that CIPL seems to be a meeting point for honorable old men, while young scholars are mostly absent. I am not that sure anymore that CIPL can still be the connecting element that brings together linguists as it did in 1928. I am afraid that the time has passed for the type of world conferences that CIPL organizes.

S. You have turned the LB into an electronic version with a database. You also took care of catching up with the backlog of almost 4 years by hosting the whole enterprise at Brill publishers. In November this year, the new volume that goes till 2018, will be published. Yet, we see a relapse in the number of subscriptions and a steep increase in the price. University libraries will not sign up for electronic subscriptions because they have other priorities. In the last 4 years, only one electronic license has been sold. Seeing that the actual reality can hardly be improved, the question remains what CIPL has to do to let the LB survive.

K. That is a challenge for your successor and for the Brill editorial staff. Scientific publishers are experiencing difficult times. The production of books is more and more costly and even priceless for the individual customer. Libraries and other scientific institutions are very selective in subscribing to digital products. The frequency of consulting the LB on an annual basis can be important in this respect. And do not forget that with some skills, you can find almost everything on Google. I am aware of the importance of the LB for CIPL's activities, and I hope that the publisher has sufficient ideas to provide the LB with a stronger financial-economic base.

S. In 1987 in Berlin, CIPL drew attention to the problem of the many languages that were and are threatened with extinction. In 1992, during the conference in Quebec, CIPL accepted a resolution and

asked UNESCO to act together with them to protect the endangered languages. CIPL itself has supported small-scale projects in South-East Asia and organized workshops in Leiden, London, Colorado, Stellenbosch, Kaunas, Tbilisi and elsewhere to teach and train young people to do high-quality fieldwork. Meanwhile, my successor succeeded in installing a chair on endangered languages in Leiden, in cooperation with the Conseil International de La Philosophie et des Sciences Humaines (*International Council for Philosophy and Humanistic Studies; UN-affiliated*) CIPSH. Does CIPL have to treat this topic as their main action point? Certainly not, but its activities can be an integral part of it.

K. When Stephen Wurm was the President of CIPL he succeeded in publishing an *Atlas of Languages in Danger* together with UNESCO. In 2014, UNESCO informed the editorial staff of the atlas that no new funding was to be expected for a new edition of *UNESCO's World Atlas of Languages* – an atlas not limited to the endangered languages, but covering all languages and with contributors from all over the world. The aim was not only to expand the number of languages to 7000, but there was also the requirement to turn the atlas into an interactive, user-friendly tool. If UNESCO has no budget to finance this gigantic project, the question is where the money should be found. In this respect one should consider an alliance of EICat, FEL (Foundation of Endangered Languages), SOAS, Max Planck and the Fryske Akademy. CIPL cannot be left out of this venture. Maybe also cooperation with the clearing house in Tokyo needs to be considered.

S. At this very moment, which linguistic domain or branch has to be followed with a view on new, promising paradigms and who are the key players in that field?

K. That is a question of conscience. I see nothing new being presented in general linguistics, it is merely a repetition of the same. Neither does the Chomskyan school produce groundbreaking new ideas ~~anything new~~. I am rather pessimistic and I have to conclude that stagnation means decline. There is nothing sensible to say about key players.

S. What is your advice to promising young researchers in linguistics?

K. Don't do the same thing again and again. That is boring. Look for the gaps and try to fill these. For example, look for new ways to practise dialectology or language variation in general. Contact linguistics is a challenging field. Albania is interesting in this respect. What kind of influence does this language have on the surrounding Slavic languages? What are the interferences and consequences of this type of contact? This type of research has a social (sociological?) and a linguistic aspect that can both be of importance in gaining more insight into contact linguistics.

Budapest, 1st of November 2019

Piet van Sterkenburg