

## IN MEMORIAM

### **Mirjana Vilke** **(Zagreb, 8 February 1931 – Zagreb, 26 January 2012)**

There are not many academics that have left as deep a mark as Mirjana Vilke in both the academic field they were part of and in the people whose life they touched during their professional activities. This is probably why, on several occasions during her lifetime, Mirjana was referred to as a 'living legend'.

At the academic level, Mirjana Vilke will be remembered for changing many of the approaches that were commonly accepted in applied linguistics at the time when she entered the field in the late 1960s as well as for the new ideas that she introduced. Both had an exceptional impact on developments in all the areas she was involved in during her career. One particular thing that distinguished Mirjana from many other scholars was her belief that science as such should not exist for its own sake and should not be the concern of only the selected few, but needs to be made accessible to many. And she practised what she preached! This resulted in her open, consistent and continuous efforts to de-mystify science: she would explain the most complex concepts, or interactions among research variables, in such a way that they would be comprehensible to both researchers and laymen. Also, Mirjana's research into the processes of language acquisition and language teaching did not end with the results she presented in her numerous research papers. She always took the extra step, missed in much of contemporary research in her field, to look into the relevance of her findings and the ways in which they could be applied to the benefit of language learners and users, as well as to society at large.

Among Mirjana Vilke's many contributions to the fields she actively participated in, several stand out as historic. She established glottodidactics as an applied linguistics interdisciplinary. Her 1975 doctoral dissertation presented the first experimental study on foreign language learning and teaching carried out in Croatia. In her doctoral research she applied the mixed-method methodology long before it became the widely acknowledged research approach. Based on her research findings Mirjana modelled a systematic approach to foreign language teaching that continues to be considered valid to this day. Her insistence on the need to investigate what really happens in foreign language classrooms, not what should be happening, contributed essentially to raising the awareness of researchers about the real issues they should be concerned with. One of the key innovative ideas Mirjana also introduced was that language teaching should be based on insights into the language acquisition process. This is another idea where

she was ahead of her time: it is only recently that international researchers in the second language acquisition field have come to acknowledge this connection. From today's perspective, thanks to Mirjana's efforts, glottodidactics as an independent applied linguistics interdisciplinary has come a long way in Croatia: this was greatly helped by the first postgraduate research programme at Zagreb University which she founded in 1977, and which focused on investigating foreign language teaching processes. The graduates of this programme formed a growing team of second language acquisition and foreign language teaching experts in Croatia, with quite a number of them later getting a PhD based on research into language acquisition and teaching. When the PhD programme in glottodidactics was started at Zagreb University in 2006, this was really the highlight of Mirjana's decades long efforts to change the approach to language teaching from being considered as a practical activity comprising sets of tricks which can be easily mastered once we are competent in the language, to a profession that relies on research-based insights.

The impact of Mirjana Vilke's work goes far beyond the national boundaries. She was a truly international scholar. Perhaps her most outstanding contribution recognized internationally is her research on the impact of the age factor in second language acquisition and early introduction of language teaching and learning. There is hardly an event anywhere in the world on young language learners where the Croatian research carried out or headed by Mirjana Vilke is not referred to. Her 1970s pioneering studies on early learning of English and the findings she described in several papers caught the attention of the international audience. Hence, when Pergamon Press selected an international team of top experts on early foreign language teaching to write a book that became a landmark publication on the subject, Mirjana was among them: the book (*Teaching Foreign Languages to the Very Young*), edited by R. Freudenstein and published in 1982, was translated into several languages and marked the beginning of international research into what now is one of the most lively research areas in applied linguistics. During the 1990s Mirjana Vilke coordinated a large-scale national longitudinal experimental project that again drew international attention and acclaim. Her team of researchers at Zagreb University focused on early learning of four foreign languages (English, French, German, Italian) following three consecutive generations of pupils while learning their respective foreign language during eight years of primary education. On the basis of the project's findings it was concluded that grade one was the optimal age to start foreign language learning in the Croatian context, provided three requirements were met: in the first few years the teaching should be intensive, there should be no more than 15 pupils in the group, and the language teacher should be specifically trained to teach young learners. Three edited volumes presenting the project results and several sets of video recordings showing the project children learning the foreign language in their classroom environments soon became recognised as valuable sources of information on how early foreign language teaching can be done well. The materials are still on the lists of required readings in many European MA in TEFL courses. Another of Mirjana's innovative ideas was widely accepted

internationally. It concerned the profile of the foreign language teacher that would enable early foreign language learning to be successful. Mirjana envisaged such a teacher as a homeroom teacher with an additional specialisation in the foreign language. This idea was realised through a four-year programme (later a five-year programme) carried out at a number of Faculties of Teacher Education. The idea turned highly successful and was even taken over as a model in some other European contexts.

Another area where Mirjana Vilke made an outstanding contribution is language teacher education. It was decades before the first ideas of the Bologna process appeared that she suggested that the successive model would be the best solution for effective initial teacher education: obtaining competences in the subject which the future teacher was to teach, and then acquiring professional teaching competences. The outcomes of the two-tier model that was introduced as part of the Bologna process show that she was right. One related thing that characterised Mirjana as a university professor is that students were the main centre of her attention. Many of her students described her as 'a university professor with a human face'. This implied that Mirjana not only helped her students to acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for high quality language teaching, but supported her students and was always there for them. Many would, long after graduation, remember her encouraging words offered, for example, as part of the feedback on their first teaching attempts during school practice. Memories of how she helped them build up confidence stayed on with most of her students. She had a special gift for making everyone feel important.

Mirjana's openness, flexibility, as well as friendliness and supportiveness, were felt by many of her close associates too. There are not many people who can be as happy about others' success as Mirjana was. This is probably one of the reasons why many of them turned into successful professionals themselves. It was as if Mirjana wanted to make sure that her visions lived on long after she was physically gone.

## Biography

Mirjana Vilke graduated in English Language and Literature and Yugoslav Languages and Literatures from the Faculty of Philosophy in 1954. She did her postgraduate studies in linguistics, obtaining her MSc degree in 1970: her thesis focused on English for specific purposes. Her PhD dissertation *Influence of linguistic theories on developments of English language teaching methods* (1975) marked the beginning of her major lifelong professional interest. Her study abroad periods included one full year in Nottingham (1955-1956) and shorter academic visits to such institutions as University College London (1956) and University of Oxford (1969). After a few years of teaching English at various schools and at the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering in Rijeka, she joined the Faculty of Philosophy (now Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences) in Zagreb in 1968 as a lecturer in English language teaching methodology, and was promoted to the position of senior lecturer in 1973. She spent all her professional life at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. Her academic track promotions were regular

every five years: she was elected an assistant professor in 1975, an associate professor in 1980, a full professor in 1985, and got a tenure in 1995. It was in 2005 that she became *professor emerita* at Zagreb University.

Mirjana Vilke's research interests were many, but her most well-known contributions - recognized both nationally and internationally - concern her research on early learning and teaching of foreign languages. These include a series of studies which she carried out during the 1970, and her longitudinal research project (1991-1996) which established Croatia firmly on the international research scene in the early language learning field. As a renowned scholar Mirjana was an invited plenary speaker at many national and international research conferences. She also organised some of the key international events in applied linguistics in Croatia. Mirjana was founder and first president of the Croatian Applied Linguistics Society and was editor-in-chief of the Croatian national journal *Strani jezici*. Her special accomplishments were nationally recognised on two occasions: in 1997 she got an award for her innovative research-based insights into teaching foreign languages to adults, and in 1999 she was awarded the prestigious *Ivan Filipović Award* for her contributions to improving teaching theory.

Mirjana's publications include nine books and over 70 papers. She was a highly respected reviewer for many publishers, such as Longman and Oxford University Press. Apart from supervising numerous MA and PhD theses, Mirjana was a successful Head of the English Department (1984-1986), and Head of its SLA and TEFL Section (1986-2000), member of the Faculty Council and innumerable faculty and national committees. She was an active member of the academic community until the very last.

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