

István Nyirkos 1933–2013

István Nyirkos, Professor Emeritus of the Department of Hungarian Linguistics at the University of Debrecen, passed away on 2 May 2013 at the age of 80. Nyirkos began his university career in 1955 as an assistant lecturer in Hungarian linguistics at what was then the Lajos Kossuth University in Debrecen. In 1962, he was appointed Senior Lecturer at the Department of Hungarian Linguistics and in 1977 was made Assistant Professor. Following his term as a cultural diplomat, István Nyirkos worked as a Professor and as Director of the Department of Finno-Ugric Studies from 1995 to 1998, after which he became Professor of the Department of Hungarian Linguistics. He held a distinguished and active emeritus position until his death. Over the course of his career, István Nyirkos authored over two hundred publications.

Nyirkos began his linguistic career as a researcher of Hungarian dialects. His 1961 university dissertation examined the vowel system of the Abaúj dialect spoken in northeastern Hungary. István Nyirkos remained interested in dialects throughout his life. He continued to be active in organizing field trips for students to collect dialectal material up until his last years.

In the 1970s, the focus of István Nyirkos' research and publications shifted to Hungarian historical phonology. His candidate dissertation (1984, published in 1987) dealt with non-etymological consonants in Hungarian, while his academic doctoral dissertation (1993, published in 1995) focused on non-etymological vowels. Nyirkos has also studied a wide range of other linguistic phenomena, including onomastics, compounding, contamination, pleonastic phrases and lexical differentiation. He has even written about rhyming styles.

Finland came into István Nyirkos' life at an early stage, when he held a position between 1962 and 1967 as a lecturer of Hungarian language at the University of Helsinki. He returned to Finland for a longer period from 1987 to 1993, working as Director of the Hungarian Cultural Centre in Helsinki. István Hoffmann, current Director of the Department of Hungarian Linguistics at the University of Debrecen, had the following to say in his speech at Nyirkos' 70th birthday celebration in 2003: "I visited Finland for the first time when I was a student in 1973. What comes to mind from

that trip is that all of the Finns seemed to know him. When they found out I was Hungarian, they immediately asked if I knew István Nyirkos” (Magyar Nyelvjárások 41: 9). Nyirkos continues to be “the Hungarian” that many Finns know.

During his time as a lecturer, Nyirkos published his first textbook, *Unkarin lukemisto sanastoineen* [A Hungarian Reader with Vocabulary] (SKS 1965). As an appendix, the reader includes a broad, 142-page vocabulary list, which foreshadowed Nyirkos’ later lexicography work. A second publication written by Nyirkos in the Tietolipas series (number 71) of the Finnish Literature Society is *Nykyunkarin oppikirja* [A Textbook of Modern Hungarian] (1972, revised edition 1979), which held its position for a long time as an up-to-date Hungarian textbook.

While working as a lecturer, Nyirkos noticed that an adequate Hungarian–Finnish dictionary was lacking. Gyula Weöres’ dictionary from 1934 was obsolete, much too narrow in scope, and on top of all that, difficult to obtain. István Nyirkos’ Hungarian–Finnish dictionary *Unkarilais-suomalainen sanakirja. Magyar-finn szótár* was published in Helsinki in 1969 (second edition, 1977). The 380-page dictionary was based on the vocabulary lists from the above-mentioned textbooks. The dictionary was very modern and excellent in many ways, however it soon stopped being used when Nyirkos published his pocket dictionary, *Suomi–unkari–suomi taskusanakirja* (WSOY 1979, 1986, 1988, 1991). Nyirkos’ pocket dictionary can be found on the bookshelves of every learner of Hungarian and of many travellers. The popularity of the dictionary among tourists can be explained by its small size and separate, broad section of vocabulary related to food and drink. The revised edition of the dictionary first appeared in 1996 (2000, 2009) under the title *Uusi suomi–unkari–suomi taskusanakirja* [The New Finnish–Hungarian–Finnish Pocket Dictionary]. Thanks to these dictionaries, István Nyirkos’ name will continue to be known in Finland for a long time.

Regarding Nyirkos’ work in Finnish Studies, his research on the Kalevala must absolutely be mentioned. Nyirkos dealt with Lönnrot and Hungarian translations of the Kalevala in many of his writings. He was the editor of the central treatise on the subject (1985): *Utunk Pohjolába. Kalevala-kutatók Magyarországon* [Our Road to Pohjola: Kalevala Studies in Hungary]. Nyirkos also played an important role in Finnish–Hungarian contrastive research. In this subject, along with Alho Alhoniemi

and Heikki Paunonen, he co-edited a work entitled *Suomi ja unkarin rannat*. *Suomalais-unkarilaisia kontrastiivisia tutkielmia* [Finnish and Hungarian side-by-side. Contrastive research on Finnish and Hungarian]. Nyirkos was also very familiar with Finnish onomastics and made it known in Hungary. He worked as editor-in-chief of the *Onomastica Uralica*, a joint series of the Hungarian Linguistics Institute of the University of Debrecen and the Research Institute for the Languages of Finland.

István Nyirkos worked actively to make the Hungarian language and culture known in Finland, and played at least as important a role in bringing the Finnish language and culture to Hungary. He was involved in organizing twin town activities and participated actively in events and activities of the Hungarian–Finnish Society until the end of his life. He held numerous lectures and organized meetings and events in both countries.

István Nyirkos has received many acknowledgements for his academic work and his activities as a cultural diplomat. He was invited to join the Finno-Ugrian Society in 1972. The following year, the Finnish Literature Society and the Kalevala Society granted Nyirkos membership. He was elected to the Committee of the International Congress of Finno-Ugric Studies in 1985. István Nyirkos was also a member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences' working groups on the Uralic languages and the Hungarian language. He was Chairman of the Reguly Society. The Order of the White Rose of Finland granted Nyirkos a Knight's cross of honour in 1969. At the end of his career as a diplomat, the Order of the Lion of Finland granted him a Commander's class cross in 1993, as well as a medal of the Academy of Finland and a small cross of honour of the Republic of Hungary.

István Nyirkos' list of merits is impressive both from a scientific perspective and from that of cultural exchange. However, his significance extends far beyond even these achievements. Nyirkos was always friendly and prepared to help and guide his juniors. His smiling character, his story and his exemplary approach to life and science will never be forgotten.

Sándor Maticsák & Petteri Laihonen