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Prague Linguistic Circle in English: Semantic Shifts in Selected Texts and their Consequences¹

Translation is a mode. To comprehend it as mode one must go back to the original, for that contains the law governing the translation: its translatability. (BENJAMIN in VENUTI 2000: 16)²

Benjamin, however, says in the original: “Übersetzung ist eine Form. Sie als solche zu erfassen, gilt es zurückzugehen auf das Original. Denn in ihm liegt deren Gesetz als in dessen Übersetzbarkeit beschlossen.” (BENJAMIN 1977: 50) Ironically, as this little example shows, the perils of semantic shifts did not spare even one of the most essential texts on the theory of translation. The lexical change from “form” to “mode”, and the syntactic variations marked by a different punctuation alter the style of the author and suggest smooth transitions instead of the choppiness of the original. Benjamin’s quote shows that even a theoretical approach and its terminology change according to the new context and its scholarly and critical tradition.

Thus, René Wellek sums up the difference between Russian Formalists and their colleagues of the Prague Linguistic Circle (PLC):

Czechs had studied Hegel, Husserl’s phenomenology, Gestalt psychology, and the philosophy of symbolic forms as formulated by Ernst Cassirer. They thus thought of the relationship between language and literature as a dialectical interchange. (WELLEK 1955: 584)

1 This is a revised and expanded version of a talk given at the ASEES convention in New Orleans, Nov. 2012.

2 Orig. source: Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator” (introduction to a Baudelaire translation, 1923; this text translated by Harry Zohn, 1968).

In contrast, Keir Elam's description of the early semiotics of drama and theatre points mostly to the German example:

The semiotics of drama was born in Europe and in some ways born out of European theatrical practice. Early Structuralist approaches to performance analysis were close, for example, to the self-analytical epic theatre of Brecht, just as the latter's concept of *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect) grew, as we have seen (pp. 15–16) out of the Russian Formalist notion of *ostronenie* [sic, VA] or defamiliarization. Such a dialectic between practice and analysis is possible only within a tradition, such as the German theatrical tradition, in which theoretical and analytic approaches are not considered detrimental to directorial creativity (not by chance the figure of the dramaturg, an integral part of German theatre, has no real equivalent in English and American theatre). (ELAM 2002: 197)

Elam's conclusion shows the shortcomings of someone who has to rely on second hand knowledge and accept either a distorted spelling (*ostronenie* instead of *ostranenie*), or a translation of "*Verfremdung*" that replaces Bertolt Brecht with Karl Marx, i.e. *Entfremdung* ("alienation" instead of "estrangement"). His conclusion also points to the need to explore the Prague School's notion of the history and theory of drama and theatre within its historical context, and disclose its contribution to the contemporary study of drama, performance and cinema.

Since the terminology developed by the group has been hardly re-viewed, the translations follow frequently individual and often unrelated readings of the theoretical works which mostly ignore each other and their respective historical and theoretical context. Moreover, there is no history of PLC with respect to drama and theatre which would shed light on the synchronic and diachronic connections of PLC's scholars and their concepts.³ The texts discussed here are scattered in numerous publications.

Using Benjamin as a point of departure, I will compare a selection of scholarly studies in the original and in their respective translations, and discuss some ways in which they form or deform the understanding of the PLC for the English speaking reader. Congruent with many contemporary theorists of translation I do not consider fidelity as a criterion with which to appraise translated texts but wish to show how the semantic shifts alter some theoretical concepts of the Prague School theorists. In that I follow Lawrence Venuti's suggestion about "the reconstitution of the foreign text in accordance with values, beliefs and representations that pre-exist it in the target language, always configured in hierarchies of dominance and marginality, always determining the production, circulation, and reception of texts." (VENUTI 2000: 209) As it will be presented later, Venuti's goal is akin to the concept of concretization, suggested first by the Polish phenomenologist Roman Ingarden and later developed by the Czech theorist of literary history Felix Vodička.

³ Michael Quinn's *The Semiotic Stage* (1989) discusses mostly theoretical concepts, and devotes only one part to a survey of the Prague School's discussions about drama and theatre.

Selection and Publication

In his article “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation” (1959), Roman Jakobson poses two important questions:

If we were to translate into English the traditional formula *Traduttore, traditore* as “the translator is a betrayer”, we would deprive the Italian rhyming epigram of all its paronomastic value. Hence a cognitive attitude would compel us to change this aphorism into a more explicit statement and to answer the questions: translator of what messages? Betrayer of what values? (JAKOBSON 1959: 233)

Jakobson’s questions initiate two lines of inquiry with respect to the translations of the Prague School into English, namely, which texts were translated and how were they disseminated? Vodička’s approach to literary history and his notion of concretization might be useful when attempting to answer these. The semantic shifts discussed here are indicative of both individual concretizations in the sense introduced by Ingarden, and in its broader meaning formulated by Vodička, mentioned below. The selected texts are mostly present in collections chosen by scholars, who represent different values and shape the translated texts according to their interests.

The texts of the PLC on drama and theatre available in English offer a very limited scope of aspects examined by the Prague School theorists. They were circulated in English in three different ways:

1. The theorists Jiří Veltruský alongside Roman Jakobson, who belong to the first category, introduce their own ideas and those of their colleagues to an audience that was heretofore unfamiliar with the historical, cultural and political context of the PLC. With regard to theatre, Jakobson in his aforementioned article includes the category of intersemiotic translation as “an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems” (JAKOBSON 1959: 233), thus paving the way to conceptualize inter- and multi-mediality.

2. The second category includes scholars such as František Deák, Michael Quinn, and Herta Schmid, all well acquainted with the theoretical material in the original language and the scholarly tradition of the school and the context of their audience. Although Schmid’s contributions are mostly available in German, she co-edited an important collection of articles on semiotics of drama and theatre (SCHMID and KESTEREN 1984), and published several of her texts in English. With respect to the application of the Prague School theory to drama one of her most important studies is her analysis of Samuel Beckett’s *Quad* (SCHMID 1988). Schmid also pays tribute to the real proponent of the concept of *ostension* Ivo Osolsobě⁴ which is quoted frequently by many theatre scholars but erroneously

4 Wikipedia is just one of the examples of this reading. “The Semiotician Umberto Eco was the first to use the term to describe the way in which people communicate messages through miming actions, as by holding up a pack of cigarettes to say, ‘Would you like one?’” (*Ostensive definition*: unpg.)

attributed to Umberto Eco (ELAM 2002: 26f; cf. SCHMID 2008). Concurrently, she expands the local and temporal delineation of the Prague School:

The semiotics of theatre originated as an academic discipline in the Prague School. Jiri Veltrusky, a prominent member of the School, differentiates between the theory of the sign in general and the specific theory of the theatrical sign. The former is connected with Plato and Aristotle, the latter with St. Augustine. If Aristotle discovered the tripartite conception of the sign, then St. Augustine was the first to identify the sign character of language and treat the actor as a sign. (SCHMID 2008: 168)

Like Quinn, Schmid also contests Deák's claim that: "The potential of Structuralism in theatre was never fully tested by Czech Structuralists or by contemporary French and Italian structuralists and semioticians." (SCHMID 1974: 94)

In fact, Quinn, Schmid (although not French or Italian by origin but publishing extensively on the topic in German, Czech and English), and Jiří and Jarmila Veltruský,⁵ showed the applicability of some theoretical concepts to text and performance analysis and the potential of their further development⁶ (e.g. Quinn's *The Semiotic Stage*, 1995: stage figure and celebrity; Jarmila Veltrusky's *Mastičkář. A Sacred Farce From Medieval Bohemia* and Jiří Veltruský's "Theatre in the Corridor", 1979).

3. In the third category are scholars such as Keir Elam, Marvin Carlson, Elaine Aston and George Savona, who rely mostly on English sources. Elam uses a broader range of texts (he lists some studies translated into Italian and French) than, for instance, Aston and Savona, who depend solely on texts available in English. Their book does not mention Mukařovský at all; Carlson, on the other hand, includes a brief, but well-informed summary of the PLC in his *Theories of Theater* (CARLSON 1984). Missing from his purview, however, is Vodička's concept of literary history and reception theory. Jiří Levý, a scholar who made his name in the 1960s with his seminal work, *The Art of Translation*⁷, and who paid special attention to drama and theatre, is absent in all three of these books, but fortunately introduced in Matějka and Tituník's *Semiotics of Art* (1976, see below). Yet his importance as a theorist of translation is evident and manifested in the fact that his article "Translation as a Decision Process" is included in several collections of prominent works on theory of translation such as *The Translation Studies Reader*, edited by Lawrence Venuti alongside texts by Walter Benjamin, Roman Jakobson and Jorge Luis Borges (2000), and other prominent theorists of translation.

Besides Levý's and Veltruský's books, much of the translated material is available in a limited number of collections. The first scholar to set the ground was the linguist Paul

5 Not discussed here under the aspect of translation because Jarmila Veltrusky wrote her study in English and Jiří Veltruský translated his own texts.

6 See works cited.

7 An English translation has been produced only recently, cf. (LEVÝ 2011).

Garvin⁸ whose interest lies in “the work of the Prague School on esthetics and literary structure [...] as an attempt to extend Structuralist theory and method beyond the bounds of technical linguistics” (GARVIN 1964: vii). Garvin’s selection showcases a variety of topics analyzed by authors of the Prague School such as Jan Mukařovský, Jiří Veltruský, Felix Vodička. René Wellek praises Garvin’s approach and selection. In his opinion Garvin,

[...] has used new terminology with discretion and clarity; he has dropped passages which would be quite incomprehensible to the English reader, and has explained many others. He fails only when he does not understand some allusion or reference: thus he translates ‘*Les Ostrovského*’ [...] as ‘The Ostrov Forest’ though the reference is to a play, *The Forest*, by the Russian playwright Alexander Ostrovsky. (WELLEK 1955: 586)

Garvin’s book was followed by *Semiotics of Art* a collection of texts edited by Ladislav Matějka and Irvin Titunik in 1976, which represented other aspects of the PLC and included studies by Petr Bogatyrev, Karel Brušák and others. In 1978, Victor Erlich, the author of the ground-breaking history of Russian Formalism considered it “a very useful and welcome volume” (ERLICH 1978: 274). As Erlich notes, the selection pays attention to the “wide range of artistic endeavor – theater, film, poetry, folk song, and visual arts” (ERLICH 1978: 274). Consequently, it is not only an important source of information about the PLC, but also brief review of several concepts shared by the scholars. In this respect, the fact that some texts are in fact parts of larger units is somewhat misleading (e.g. Veltruský).

Peter Steiner’s collection, *The Prague School. Selected Writings 1929–1946*, published in 1982, complements the existing material by supplying additional facets of the Prague School, not only by introducing new texts, but also by providing the reader with background information about each contribution. The translated writings show the variety of interests explored by the PLC scholars which reveals the difference to the Russian Formalists, who merely expanded their field of inquiry from literature to film.

Each of these collections provides examples of semantic shifts discussed here with regard to their use of terms, titles and editorial interventions. The **first** group features the relationship between the work and its reception described using the **terms** “concretization”, “actualization”, and “echo”.

Concretization, Actualization, Echo

The literary work is in terms of structural aesthetics conceived of as an esthetic sign directed to the audience. The literary work, upon being published or spread, becomes the property of the public, who approaches it with the artistic feeling of the time. To know the artistic

8 The mimographed version appeared in 1955, the book almost a decade later, cf. (GARVIN 1964).

feeling of the time in the area of literature is the primary task of the historian, in order to understand the echo of works and their evaluation in each period. (VODIČKA in GARVIN 1964: 71)

According to Jeremy Hawthorne, Ingarden's description of concretization "exerted considerable influence" (HAWTHORNE 1992: 22). Hawthorne also mentions Vodička's "concretization in criticism" (HAWTHORNE 1992: 23), but likely has no knowledge of the interpretation of this concept as proposed by Levý in his *Art of Translation*, originally written in the 1960s but unpublished in English until 2011. A chapter of this book appeared in *Semiotics of Art* (MATĚJKA and TITUNIK 1967).⁹

Levý stresses that his use of the term "concretization" diverges from both Vodička's and implicitly from Ingarden's interpretation of the concept (cf. SCHMID 1970; FIEGUTH 1971; and more recently HERMAN 1997). Unlike Vodička who applied the term to criticism, staging of a play and translation, Levý considers theatre performance as a *realization* of a dramatic text by using the means of the theatre. For him, translation is a *realization* of a text in a new language. His notion of concretization is therefore closer to Ingarden's original concept as it refers to "the perception of work of art in the mind of the recipient" (MATĚJKA and TITUNIK 1967: 223).

Susan Larson, the translator of this particular part of Levý's book for *Semiotics of Art*, blurs the connections to both Ingarden and Vodička, and creates a new, unexpected one. Although she uses the word "actualization" throughout the text, in one instance she inserts "concretization" in brackets. Consequently, her addition makes it even more confusing since it suggests an affinity of these two terms. Most likely Larson, like Hawthorne, believes that "in some usages 'actualization' is interchangeable with 'concretization'" (HAWTHORNE 1992: 3). But within the context of the PLC, each term denotes a specific theoretical concept.

The suggested equivalence between the terms "reader's actualization" and "concretization" can be regarded in Jakobson's terminology as "intralingual translation" or "rewording" (JAKOBSON 1959). This implied parallelism or contiguity refers not only to a similarity in the terminology of the target language, but it posits a correspondence in the original. In actual fact, these terms differ both with regard to their origins and their usage. Furthermore, Larson's choice reveals either her limited knowledge or a lack of respect for Levý's text where both terms designate distinctly different concepts.

Levý's concretization roughly describes individual reception, while actualization can be translated as topicalization, as it refers to the tendency to make the target text topical in a contemporary context.

Hence, Larson contributes to the terminological conundrum initiated already in Garvin's collection in which the Czech term *aktualizace* is systematically replaced by the term "fore-

9 Hawthorne does not reference this volume in his bibliography; presumably his knowledge of the PLC is limited to Garvin's collection, which he lists and quotes.

grounding". As a result, Elam, who considers foregrounding a significant contribution of the PLC, notes that it is: "[...] essentially a spatial metaphor and thus well adapted to the theatrical text" (ELAM 2002: 18). Introduced in his study on written and colloquial language, Mukařovský posits that the function of the poetic language depends on the maximal *actualization* of a linguistic utterance. For him, "[a]ctualization is the opposite of automatization" [transl. VA].¹⁰ Moreover, Mukařovský expands the 'perspectival' tendency (term introduced by Silvija Jestrovic in her book on estrangement in theatre) inherent in the Russian term *ostranenie* (estrangement), by focusing on the utterance and its relation to automatized expressions, trends and genres. To paraphrase Levý's terminological distinction, *aktualizace* is the product of the creative work of the author while concretization is "the formation of an image of it in the mind of the reader" (MATĚJKA and TITUNIK 1967: 223). Hence, they are prime examples of the first category of semantic shifts in scholarly works, that is, shifts which potentially alter the science by obfuscating its theoretical complexity.

In his innovative and stimulating study of literary history, Vodička (1969) explains how aesthetically actualized components draw the attention of the reader (VODIČKA 1969: 30). As a result, actualization refers to the perception of the reader conditioned by the structure, devices, language and other components of the work of art. Vodička, like Venuti, sees the task of literary historians as one of reinstating "the literary norm in its historical development" (GARVIN 1964: 71).

Wellek describes Vodička's contribution to literary history: "The modern scholar is assigned the task of studying the esthetic norms of every past age, the assumptions and conventions by which works of art have been received or rejected by readers and critics." (WELLEK 1955: 586) Unfortunately, only two parts of Vodička's remarkable work are available in English. Moreover, his crucial concept of *ohlas* is translated in three different ways: as "echo" (Garvin), "reception" (Steiner) and "response" (Matějka).

Garvin's use of echo is, in Jakobson's categories, an interlingual translation, i.e. a simple rendition of the original that preserves the distortion this phenomenon evokes in Czech. It conjures up a skewed vision of the past that a literary historian must explore. According to Levý, "the way an author of a historical novel selects and transforms historical facts depends on the author's adherence to a contemporary world view" (LEVÝ 2011: 24). Here Levý draws on Shakespeare's plays to corroborate his opinion: "[...] the action of many of Shakespeare's plays takes place beyond the shores of England. The playwright lived in England, however, and all his plays are permeated with reflections of Elizabethan England" (LEVÝ 2011: 24).

10 The expression "aesthetically deautomatized" introduced in his definition of structure is developed here even further, cf. (MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1966a [1931] in STEINER 1982) and Havránek in Garvin:

By "foregrounding"[...] we mean the use of the devices of the language in such a way that this use itself, attracts attention and is perceived as uncommon, as deprived of automatization, as deautomatized, such as live poetic metaphor (as opposed to a lexicalized one, which is automatized). [...] every technical term [...] has an automatized meaning, but if it is transferred into a completely alien environment, it may be foregrounded immediately [...]. (HAVRÁNEK in GARVIN 1964: 19)

Response and reception both connote the American and German theoretical interest in the reader, presented in the early 1980s as reader response and reception theory. Alas, in most accounts about these theoretical concepts Vodička's ground-breaking contribution to this field is not mentioned and a discussion of the prominent role of the audience in the Prague School is also absent.

Another case is inherent in Mukařovský reference to Karl Bühler and his *Sprachtheorie. Die Darstellungsfunktion der Sprache* (The Theory of Language: The Representational Function of Language, 1990). The Czech author speaks about “*zobrazovací* function” (MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1966b) thus preserving the performative character of what Bühler calls “*die darstellende Funktion*”. Of the three functions of language Bühler introduces: an *expressive* function with regard to speaker, an *appellative* function with regard to the recipient, it is the third which presents a substantial semantic shift especially with regard to theatre as it is often translated into English as a referential or representative function, a choice, which transforms the performative aspect of the linguistic sign into a mimetic one.

Titles

The **second** group of semantic shifts involves **titles**. “Semiotics in the Folk Theater”, for instance, transposes Petr Bogatyrev's initial emphasis on signs in “Znaky divadelní” (“signs in theatre” or “theatrical signs”) to semiotics at large and implies a restriction to folk theatre. Although it does not encompass all the aspects of semiotics as the title suggests, Bogatyrev's study is essentially based on his research of folk theatre that reaches far beyond this field of study.

Another example is the shift that occurs in the translation of a subtitle as a title. In English, Mukařovský's article is titled, “An Attempt at a Structural Analysis of a Dramatic Figure” whereas in Czech it is, “Chaplin ve Světlech velkoměsta (Pokus o strukturní rozbor hereckého zjevu)” [Chaplin in *City Lights*. An Attempt at an Analysis of an Actor's Appearance] (MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1966a [1931], 1982). (It is a text, by the way, that together with Otakar Zich's *Aesthetics of Dramatic Art*, Elam considers pivotal for the semiotics of theatre and drama). The English title of Mukařovský's text implies one of the three types of translation suggested by Roman Jakobson: the intersemiotic translation, namely, “an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems” (JAKOBSON 1959: 233).

Leaving out the initial reference to Chaplin altogether, and replacing the expression “*herecký zjev*” (i.e. the actor(ly) appearance or phenomenon) with “dramatic figure”, prompts the reader to assume that she will be informed about drama. Moreover, the expression “dramatic figure” seems to allude to Zich's *Aesthetics of Dramatic Art*, where this subject is discussed at length. Yet Mukařovský's text is a film review of Chaplin's *City Lights*, an analysis of his acting style and a ground-breaking example of structural analysis that includes a concise definition of structure as “[...] a system of components that is aesthetically

deautomatized and organized into a complex hierarchy, which is unified by the prevalence of one component over the others [...]” (MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1982: 171).

Although this editorial decision is not directly connected with the process of translation, it is indicative of the alterations that originals are subject to. In an excerpt from Levý's book, for instance, a semantic shift is evident in its title: “The Translation of Verbal Art” deviates from “The Process of Translation”, which was the heading of this particular chapter in the original. Another type of semantic shift is inherent in the transformation of the word *pohyb* (movement) in Jindřich Honzl's “Pohyb divadelního znaku” to “Dynamics of Theatrical Sign,” suggesting a quality of the sign rather than the potential action it performs.

The selected titles are transformed in such a way that the reader's expectations are often frustrated, or led away from the original and promised an altered focus.

Editorial Interventions

The **third** group of semantic shifts consists of undisclosed editorial interventions, generally, elisions that are neither explicitly indicated by the editors nor given any explanation as to why a particular passage was left out. A prime example can be found in Mukařovský's article “Karel Čapek's Prose as Lyrical Melody” in Paul Garvin's *Prague School Reader* (1964: 133–49), where the first paragraph of the original is omitted without any indication of its subject matter. As a result, the study appears as an unmarked scholarly analysis rather than as an obituary and a tribute to a dear friend. Because of the ground breaking importance of this collection Garvin's editorial decisions are detrimental with respect to the reliability and true information potential of the texts it contains.

Since similar distortions of the original are frequent and appear not only in Garvin's case, they pose questions how to approach the translation of texts which are using examples from Czech literature unknown to the target audience. Veltruský offers one solution by replacing the original quotes with their equivalents more familiar to his readers, while Lubomír Doležel (1991) bases his study on his translation of the classics of Czech dramatic literature. Hence, the quotes inform the reader about works, devices and authors hitherto unknown to him. Omissions disrupt the flow of the argument, make the reading cumbersome and often simplify the text in question.

Semantic Shifts and Their Consequences

Translation is the forcible replacement of the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text with a text that will be intelligible to the target-language reader. The aim of translation is to bring back a cultural other as the same, the recognizable, even the familiar; and this aim always risks a wholesale domestication of the foreign text, often in highly self-conscious projects, where translation serves an imperialist appropriation. (VENUTI 1993: 209)

Admittedly, most of the translated texts discussed here have introduced English speaking audiences to the Prague Linguistic Circle and enriched the knowledge of its thoughts for some. Considering Vodička's (1948) concept of literary history, which regards translators as readers of their time, who offer an invaluable source of information about concretisation, actualizations, and echoes of literary and theoretical works, epochs as well as tendencies the discussed works certainly have been instrumental in keeping the selected theories present in the minds of readers, in helping them to build their opinion about the School. Because of their respective theoretical approach and its terminology translations including the semantic shifts serve as a source of information about the new context and the respective scholarly and critical tradition.

I hope that my brief review of the possible pitfalls will help to avoid them. As I tried to show a work which will analyse and present the knowledge of the theoretical and historical context of the Prague School is long time overdue. It should not be yet another collection of texts of the group, but an important reader comparable to the German edition of the texts by Russian Formalists (STRIEDTER and KOŠNY 1969), a bilingual annotated edition of selected primary texts accompanied by a number of well informed and informing essays, including a glossary of key terms. Sorely missing is a translation of Zich's work, several articles by Honzl, Bogatyrev and most of all a thorough study (or studies) of the Prague School theory of theatre, and drama.

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Summary

The author examines selected scholarly studies available in English translation, and the ways in which they form or deform the understanding of the Prague Linguistic Circle for the English speaking reader. The contribution aims to show how the semantic shifts alter some theoretical concepts of the Prague School theorists. The semantic shifts mentioned here are indicative of both individual concretization in the sense introduced by Roman Ingarden, and in its broader meaning formulated by Felix Vodička. The selected texts are mostly present in collections chosen by scholars, who are not necessarily specializing in drama or theatre. They contain three sorts of semantic shifts: *terms*, *titles* and *editorial interventions*.

Keywords

semantic shifts, concretization, actualization, echo, translation theory, ostension, Prague Linguistic Circle

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