Chovanec, Jan

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Approaching Czech linguistic functionalism

Jan Chovanec

This text outlines some of the basic theoretical concepts of Czech functionally-oriented linguistics as it developed in the first half of the twentieth century. At that time, the Prague School, as this approach came to be known, quickly assumed the position of the leading branch of structuralist thought in Europe and became immensely influential on account of its modern conception of the discipline. This text deals with its historical context, research programme, and main contributions to general linguistics. It closes with a brief discussion of the heritage of the discipline and a glossary explaining some of the major concepts.

Language is a fortress that must be assailed
from all sides and with every kind of weapon.
Vilém Mathesius

1. Setting the scene: linguistics in the olden times

At the beginning of the twentieth century, linguistic thinking in Europe was still heavily steeped in the theoretical paradigms of the previous era. The nineteenth century was a period of empirical research that was concerned mostly with sound. The study of meaning and language in communication was avoided. The positivist orientation of the mainstream discipline meant that linguists preferred to deal with tangible data – i.e. those phenomena of language that could be easily observed, measured and quantified. The strict empirical basis was connected to the linguists' efforts to develop linguistics as a true scientific discipline, on par with the objective methods of description found in the natural sciences. Phonetics and the study of sound change were the dominant disciplines.

The prevailing paradigm was historical linguistics – the diachronic study of language change over time. The main method of linguistics was 'comparative grammar', i.e. the analysis of genetically related languages carried out in order to identify similarities and differences and, thus, to establish common historical origins. The goal of many historical linguists was the reconstruction of earlier stages of their languages. The German linguist August Schleicher (1821–1868), for instance, attempted to reconstruct the proto-Indo-European language, the original ancestor language of many European languages. He also organized languages in a chart to show their gradual development, devising the family-tree model that indicates the mutual genetic relations between groups as well as between individual languages (known as '*Stammbaumtheorie*' in German). The model, representing the historical diversification of changing languages, was directly inspired by the hierarchical organization of various phenomena found in the natural sciences, such as the system of botanical taxonomy. For Schleicher, language resembled a natural organism, going through periods of growth and eventual decay, with languages competing against one another in a way similar to evolutionary Darwinianism.

Other comparative linguists (philologists) addressed topics and offered explanations for various aspects of language change that are nowadays taken as some of the stepping stones of historical linguistics. Thus, for instance, Jacob Grimm (1785–1863) formulated the so-called Grimm's law (elaborated in his 1822 book *Deutsche Grammatic* [Germanic Grammar]). Inspired by the findings of the Dane Rasmus Christian Rask, Grimm's law (also known as the Germanic Sound Shift) provided a systematic explanation of the sound shift that occurred during the transition from Proto-Indo-European to Proto-Germanic (the latter being the common ancestor language of the Germanic branch of languages).

The idea of the regularity of sound changes became a programmatic statement with the next generation of Leipzig-based historical linguists, who assumed the name 'Neo-Grammarians' (*Junggrammatiker*). Scholars such as Hermann Paul (1846–1921) and Karl Brugmann (1849–1919) postulated the independence of the level of sound from other language levels, elaborated the principle of analogy of sound change, and declared historicism – the description of the historical change of a language – as the main goal of linguistics. A famous figure in the context of English linguistics was the Danish scholar Karl Verner (1846–1896), who formulated the so-called Verner's law (1875). This served to explain the irregularities found in Grimm's law (namely situations when voiceless fricatives became voiced) as a result of the presence or absence of stress in certain syllables in the Proto-Germanic language. This finding was taken to support the Neo-Grammarians' belief that "sound laws are without exceptions".

Needless to say, there were some linguists whose approach was different from the linguistic mainstream of the nineteenth century. For instance, the German scholar Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) studied synchrony and the relationship between language and culture; and the dialectologist Georg Wenker (1852–1911) was instrumental in documenting the extent of dialectal variation in Germany, thereby weakening the Neo-Grammarians' principle of the regularity of sound change that he originally hoped to confirm.

2. Changing the scene: linguistics in the golden times

The first decade of the twentieth century was a period of change. The Swiss scholar Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) laid the ground in his lectures (published posthumously as *Cours de Linguistique Générale* in 1916) for a modern discipline based on a systematic analysis of language as structure. In addition to the ground-breaking conception of the arbitrary and conventional nature of the linguistic sign, Geneva structuralism was based, among other things, on the premise that language is to be seen as an underlying formal system of mutually related forms ('langue'), as opposed to the realization of this system in the actual act of speech ('parole'). After the publication of Saussure's work, the new conception became extremely influential and, apart from giving rise to the new discipline of semiotics, the structuralist methodology revolutionized some other scientific disciplines as well.

However, modern ideas challenging the previously dominant historicism, characterized by its atomistic approach to data, were also appearing in other places. A prominent role was played by a group of scholars who gathered around the figure of Vilém Mathesius in Prague. Together, they developed a conception of the discipline in the 1920s and 1930s that forms the basis of modern mainstream linguistics today. The structuralism of the Prague School developed alongside Saussure's Geneva structuralism, and alongside other branches of structuralism (e.g. Danish glossematics and American descriptivism).

Vilém Mathesius (1882–1945), the founder of the Prague School tradition, was the first professor of English language and literature at the Faculty of Arts in Prague (1912). He was not only a linguist but also a literary scholar. In 1911, he delivered a famous lecture called "On the potentiality of the phenomena of language" to the Czech Royal Society for Sciences. In this paper, Mathesius presented a radically new understanding of language that was to contribute significantly to the change of the theoretical paradigm in the decades to come. He arrived at his conclusions at about the same time as Saussure but, unlike Saussure's theory, Mathesius's ideas elicited no response within the local linguistic milieu of the time. Although the local situation was to change in the next few years with the foundation of the Prague Linguistic Circle in 1926, the early structuralist work contained in Mathesius' 1911 text remained virtually unknown abroad for decades.[1] As Roman Jakobson stated subsequently, Mathesius's work was so radical that – had it fallen on more fertile ground – it could have caused a 'linguistic revolution'.

Potentiality, the key concept in the whole paper, was defined by Mathesius as the static (i.e. synchronic) oscillation of linguistic phenomena, i.e. their inherent changeability and instability. This refers to the variation found in spoken language. Mathesius challenged the myth of the constancy of individuals' speech, giving evidence of such oscillation (variability) from various levels of language. In particular, he noted the variability in

the phonetic realization of individual sounds in the speech of single individuals. Using the metaphor of leaves on trees, he argued that while the same kind of leaves (or sounds) "resemble one another and differ from the varieties of other" leaves (or sounds), "no two of them are exactly alike". This reveals the "potentiality, enclosed, however, within definite limits and certainly revealing… some static tendency" (1983[1911]: 13). This is a clear statement of the underlying systemic nature of the sound system that was to be later developed in the new discipline of phonology, one of the major innovations of the Prague School.

Mathesius argued against the earlier historicisim, instead promoting synchronic linguistics. However, while he wanted to separate the static and the dynamic conceptions of language, understood as the difference between synchrony and diachrony, he also believed that the two are, in fact, complementary methods in linguistic analysis, a point on which he differed from Saussure. The synchronic oscillation, after all, is very often the cause of language change. Concerning the goal of linguistics, he stated that:

> Linguistics is a science whose task is to analyse, in a static [i.e. synchronic] manner, the language materials used by a language community at a given time, and, in a dynamic [i.e. diachronic] manner, its historical changes. Consequently, linguists are obliged to ascertain the nature of these materials by means of examining the speech of individual speakers, so that the results of such examination may reveal the full extent of the potentiality of the concerned language. (Mathesius 1983[1911]: 30)

In his later work, Mathesius developed the theory of linguistic characterology – the synchronic description of a concrete language on the basis of its typical features that can be identified, among other ways, by means of the method of analytical comparison. He also postulated the basic concepts of the theory of functional sentence perspective, which was developed by Firbas in the second half of the century.

Mathesius's conception of the interrelationship between language and reality and his emphasis on the role of the specific situation and language users make it possible to see him as a precursor of some of the topics studied half a century later in pragmatics (cf. also Nekula 1999). Needless to say, these aspects of his work have remained largely unnoticed, possibly due to the prevailing functionalist framework in Czech linguistics. Still, I believe we do not need to hesitate to identify certain strands in the work of many early Prague School scholars as 'nascent pragmatics' or 'proto-pragmatics', particularly on account of the strong emphasis paid by them to the goal-oriented nature of communication and its inevitable link with both the speakers' intentions and the hearers' reception situations.

Mathesius's functional approach comprised all levels of language. He also had an active interest in stylistics, particularly in issues related to 'language culture' and the use of the standard variety of the Czech language in diverse public contexts. He was concerned about the situational appropriateness of utterances that are always recipient-oriented. These ideas emerge clearly, for instance, in his discussions of broadcast talk on the radio,

with which he himself had ample experience. All in all, Mathesius's work was so broad, modern and well-argued that it does not cease to inspire a hundred years later. Many of his ideas are truly timeless.[2]

The following sections provide a selective account of some aspects of the Czech functionalist tradition to allow the reader to get acquainted with some of its basic tenets. The exposition aims neither to repeat historical information that is available in numerous other sources nor to provide an all-encompassing encyclopaedic account of the Prague School. This information is to be sought and found elsewhere, for instance in the publications by Vachek (1983), Toman (1995) and again Vachek (1999), the latter reprinted in English in Hajičová et al. (2002).

3. Formative elements

One of the fortunate coincidences that contributed to the establishment of the Prague School was the presence in Prague of the Russian linguist Roman Jakobson (1896–1982). In the 1920s, Masaryk's Czechoslovakia was very open to emigré Russian and Ukrainian intelligentsia, who were encouraged to visit on government-sponsored grants. As reported in Toman (1995: 104), Prague was even called 'a Russian Oxford', with 94 professors and 3,500 students, a Russian academic press, the Russian National University and many other academic institutions.[3]

However, Jakobson – an extremely gifted young scholar – actually arrived on a diplomatic mission in 1920, which earned him a lot of initial suspicion (he was accused of being a spy). Because of his erudition, personality and sociability, he quickly became involved in the city's cultural and intellectual environment and assumed a leading role in many respects. Among other, he was instrumental in introducing into the Czech context the ideas of Russian formalism, a school of literary criticism that believed in the autonomy of poetic language and that was to prove very influential in the decades to come. While in Prague, Jakobson formulated some of his most famous theoretical work: the theory of markedness of distinctive features, the binary nature of oppositions of linguistic categories, the therapeutic effect of language changes, the contrast between the centre and the periphery in the language system, etc.

Eventually, Jakobson had to leave the country shortly before the beginning of the Second World War. He managed to escape to the USA, where he became professor of Slavic and general linguistics at Harvard and MIT. After the war, he went on to develop his conception of poetics, the highly influential six-fold typology of language functions and the structural-functional theory of phonology (with Morris Halle).[4]

4. Research as organized activity: The Prague Linguistic Circle and its programme

The history of Czech functional and structural linguistics is closely tied to the Prague Linguistic Circle ('*Pražský lingvistický kroužek*'), which stimulated a fruitful exchange of ideas among scholars – not only linguists but also others applying the new methods of structuralist analysis. The beginning of the circle is dated in very precise terms: on October 6, 1926, a group of five linguists – Bohuslav Havránek, Roman Jakobson, Vilém Mathesius, Jan Rypka, Bohumil Trnka – met to attend a lecture by a visiting linguist, Henrik Becker from Germany. After that, the group met at irregular intervals, with 34 meetings held in the first three years. In 1930, the members of the circle organized themselves into an officially registered organization and started to regulate their activities with by-laws. This was the 'classic period' of the Prague School (1926–1939), characterized by the cross-fertilization of ideas between the scholars and the emergence of the main body of highly original theoretical work about the structural and functional nature of language.

The foundation of the Prague Linguistic Circle coincided with the time when European linguistics was in search of a new explicit paradigm for linguistic analysis. In April 1928, the First International Congress of Linguists was organized in the Hague, partly with the aim of dealing with this issue. It was convened in order to debate which method was the most suitable for a full description of language. At the conference, Jakobson, Trubeckoy, Mathesius and Karcevskij made a joint proposal for new analysis based on a synchronically-oriented description. The proposal was readily adopted by the other participants.

This stimulated the members to develop a more systematic programme, which they worked on for several months before presenting the outcome of their joint efforts at the First Congress of Slavic Philologists in Prague in 1929. The programme, known as *Theses*, was an extensive document drafted by Havránek, Jakobson, Mathesius, Mukařovský and Weingart.[5]

This programmatic statement of the Prague Linguistic Circle reads in a surprisingly modern way even now, almost 90 years after it was formulated. At the very beginning, the *Theses* express the functional premise of the whole discipline: language is a means of communication that is used to meet the specific communicative needs of individuals and the community. Thus, the very first part of the *Theses* states, in the introduction subtitled "Methodological problems stemming from the conception of language as a system and the significance of this conception for Slavic languages", the following general conception of language:

> Language like any other human activity is goal-oriented. Whether we analyse language as expression or communication, the speaker's intention is the most evident and most natural explanation. In linguistic analysis, therefore, one should adopt the functional perspective. *From the functional point of view, language is a system of goal-oriented means of expression*. No linguistic phenomenon can be understood without regard to the system to which it belongs. […]
>
> (*Theses*, Part 1, section a; original emphasis)

While Prague School structuralists have traditionally stressed the systemic character of language, i.e. accounting for linguistic phenomena as parts of the whole system, the above definition also indicates another important dimension, namely the connection between language and the speaker's intentions. In this sense, the proclamation anticipates the more local speech situations centring around individual speakers and, thus, points towards the research agenda of linguistic disciplines in the latter half of the twentieth century. This is regardless of whether the speaker's intention is understood in the physical sense as the realization of concrete utterances produced with some goal-orientation ('parole') or, more generally, whether such utterances are used as the point of entry for investigating the system available for communicating one's intentions ('langue').

Another very modern idea in the *Theses* concerns the call to investigate language variation in a more systematic manner. The following extract lays the ground for the study of functional dialectology:

> An important factor in the stratification of language is *the relationship among the interlocutors*: the degree of their social cohesion, their professional, territorial, and familial connections, and also their membership in multiple collectivities, as expressed in the mixture of linguistic systems in the languages of cities. This category includes the problem of *languages for interdialectal communication* (so-called *general languages*), that of *specialized languages*, that of *languages adapted for communication with a foreign-language milieu*, and that of *urban linguistic stratification*. Even in diachronic linguistics one must devote attention to the profound reciprocal influence of these linguistic formations, i.e., not only to the regional influence but also to the influence of functional languages, modes of utterance, and languages of different groups.
>
> (*Theses*, Part 3, section a, paragraph 5; original emphasis)

The quote can be seen as a very sociolinguistically-oriented definition of the goals of linguistic research, particularly inasmuch as it emphasizes some of the group characteristics of speakers. In addition, the 'mixture of linguistic systems' and the reference to 'specialized languages' potentially anticipates the attention much later paid by such disciplines as stylistics and genre analysis to situationally-based varieties of language (cf. the conception of systematic language variation in the tradition of Halliday's register analysis developed since the 1970s).

Obviously, language is not a single homogeneous entity but consists of the multiplicity of mutually overlapping varieties. The theory of functional styles was subsequently developed by the Prague School in great detail, particularly in Havránek's work, and it remains strong in the Czech bohemicist tradition up to today. One more thing is worthy of comment with respect to the quote above: while the mention of 'linguistic systems in the languages of cities' anticipates the discipline of urban dialectology, this specific point was most likely included in the *Theses* as a consequence of Jakobson's earlier interest in, and exposure to, the language of the Russian revolution. In a way, the broad statement can thus also be read as an encouragement of ethnographic, field-based research.

In another part, the *Theses* outline one of the subvarieties of language by discussing the distinctive role of the standard (literary) language. The standard language is construed as a specific entity since it is called upon to serve special functions – administrative, political, scientific, judicial and religious. As a result, its vocabulary becomes expanded and changed – 'intellectualized'. The intellectualization of the standard literary language is also related to its normative character and its elaboration of the social forms of language ('linguistic etiquette'; cf. Part 3, section b of the *Theses*).

Last but not least, the *Theses* also turn attention to the need for the study of poetic language. The occurrence of poetic language is seen as a linguistic instantiation in the sense of the Saussurean 'parole'. This is, in turn, related in a complex way to not one but two linguistic systems: (a) the existing poetic tradition (conceived of as the 'langue' in the structuralist framework), and (b) the contemporary communicative language (i.e., everyday language used for referential purposes). Since poetic language focuses on the expression itself, it deautomatizes various linguistic devices at all levels of language – these devices can become foregrounded. The Prague School demands that the specific nature of poetic language should have implications for literary historical studies: the discipline should start to look systematically at poetic language on all levels, rather than probe various heterogeneous historical, sociological or psychological concerns. This primary focus on the language form is evidently the heritage of Russian formalism, which was strong in the work of Jakobson and other Russian members of the circle. As pointed out in the *Theses*,

> […] *the organizing feature of art by which it differs from other semiotic structures is an orientation toward the sign rather than toward what is signified*. The orientation toward verbal expression is the organizing feature of poetry. The sign is the dominant feature of an artistic system, and if the literary historian makes what is signified rather than the sign the major object of his research, if he analyses the ideology of a literary work as an independent, autonomous entity, he violates the hierarchy of values of the structure that he studies.
>
> (*Theses*, Part 3, section c, paragraph 5; original emphasis)

At the same time as the *Theses* were being prepared, it became obvious to the members of the circle that it would be useful to have a suitable platform for the publication of their research results. In 1929, the Prague Linguistic Circle thus launched the book series *Travaux Linguistique du Cercle de Prague*. Eight volumes were published between 1929 and 1939 (e.g. Vol. 1 – *Theses*; Vol. 7 – Trubeckoy's *Grundzüge der Phonologie*, 1939). In 1935, the Prague Linguistic Circle went on to establish the journal *Slovo a slovesnost*, which has been consistent in developing and cultivating the functionalist tradition ever since. Nowadays, it is one of the leading linguistics journals in Central Europe.

After the Second World War, the activities of the circle became more limited. With the death of Trubeckoy in 1938 and Mathesius in 1945, and the emigration of Jakobson to Scandinavia in 1939 and eventually to the USA in 1941, the work was continued by individual scholars rather than in the communal spirit that characterized the pre-war period. The group essentially disintegrated and some members became increasingly politically involved. One of the leading scholars, the Anglicist Josef Vachek, continued his earlier work on historical phonology and became the main populariser of the whole approach. He prepared several anthologies for publication in the West (Vachek 1964, 1966, 1983). During his years at the university in Brno, Vachek also founded the international journal *Brno Studies in English*, which became associated, for a long time, with the functionally-oriented work of many Czech and international scholars, particularly Jan Firbas (cf. Firbas 1992, which sums up his theory).

After the disbanding of the circle at the beginning of the 1950s, the unofficial meetings continued under the guidance of Trnka, who founded the group for functional linguistics (*'Odborná skupina pro funkční jazykozpyt'*) within the organization *Kruh moderních filologů*. After Trnka's death, the group was presided over by Jiří Nosek. The members contributed to the international debate on structuralism, cf. Trnka et al. (1958).

In the 1960s, the pre-war traditions were revived, as was the book series (under the slightly modified title *Travaux Linguistique de Prague*). However, another period of politically-motivated suppression followed, stifling the organized activities of Prague School linguists for over twenty years. The circle was, once again, revived in 1990 by Oldřich Leška. The original book series appeared again, this time with the title *Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague, nouvelle série/Prague Linguistic Circle Papers* (with four volumes published under the editorial leadership of Eva Hajičová, John Benjamins, volumes 1–4, 1995, 1996, 1999, 2002).

5. Main figures

As noted by Vachek (1999), while the label 'functionally structural' is used to describe the approach of the entire Prague School of scholars, it was actually the Czech linguists Mathesius and Havránek who embodied the functional perspective, while the Russian duo Jakobson and Trubeckoy had a much more structural orientation, being interested in theorizing the broader system. Together, these scholars understood language as a functional system consisting of mutually interrelated levels, with each level being analysed with a view to the role ('function') that it plays in the overall system.

Abroad, the name of the Prague School is associated with the syntactic analysis of language on a functional basis in Mathesius's tradition and, above all, with the phonology of Trubeckoy and the markedness theory and poetics of Jakobson. The theory of functional sentence perspective has inspired, for instance, the systemic-functional theory of M.A.K. Halliday (cf. Halliday 1985).

In addition to Vilém Mathesius and Roman Jakobson, whose influence was mentioned more extensively in the previous sections, let us briefly introduce some of the other key historical figures of the Prague School of linguistics. Because of the limited scope of the present account, only a handful of the most important early scholars who developed and applied the functionally structuralist approach are mentioned here.[6] For information about other figures as well as the subsequent generations of scholars, see Vachek (1994) and (1999).

Bohuslav Havránek (1893–1978) was a Bohemicist and Slavicist. He is best known for his work concerning the standard language and functional styles. He believed that language correctness should be based on the function of the utterance and not on historical criteria (e.g. purity). He is also the author of many practical textbooks.

Roman Jakobson (1896–1982) was a general linguist and Slavicist. He introduced the idea of the binary oppositions of distinctive features of phonemes and the theory of markedness. He believed in the therapeutic effect of language change, whereby the balance of the system is reinstituted. As a literary scholar, he dealt with poetic language. He also refined our understanding of the functions of language in the act of communication.

Vilém Mathesius (1882–1945) was the key figure of the whole movement. He stressed the synchronic analysis of language and was interested in its functional aspects on all levels of language. He introduced the concept of elastic stability leading to language change and the readjustment of the system. Comparing Czech and English, he laid the grounds for the systematic syntactic analysis of word-order related issues in terms of there-rheme articulation.

Jan Mukařovský (1891–1975) was a literary scholar. He was interested in the aesthetics of verbal art. He developed a theory of poetic language, in which he argued for the primary importance of linguistic form over meaning. He also theorized the notion of normativity in verbal art, applying the concepts of habitualization and foregrounding in his analyses.

Vladimír Skalička (1909–1991) developed the conception of language typology. He classified languages into five types, depending on the kind of their prevailing morphological structure: inflectional, introflectional, isolating, agglutinative and polysynthetic. His model has been very influential in the international context.

Bohumil Trnka (1895–1984) was a historical phonologist. He worked with statistical methods and elaborated, among other things, the notion of the functional load (quantitative analysis) of phonemes. He wrote a description of the phonological system of Modern English (1935) and offered an explanation for the Great Vowel Shift in Early Modern English (1959).

Nikolai Trubeckoy (1890–1938) was the founder of phonology, based at Vienna University. He proposed the linguistic theory of phonology by formulating a system of generally valid laws that govern the structure of the phonological systems of languages. His phonological oppositions are defined as functional contrasts between phonemes. His main work (*Grundzüge der Phonologie*) was published posthumously in 1939.

Josef Vachek (1909–1996), an Anglicist, was the central figure of the Prague School in the second half of the twentieth century. As a historical phonologist, he argued that the system of any language is in a state of imperfect balance, with central and peripheral elements co-existing in a mutual tension that may motivate language change. His research on written language also led him to conclude that written language and spoken language constitute two independent functional norms.

It may come as a surprise to realize the extent to which the adherents of the Prague School approach dealt with such practical issues as the cultivation of language culture and the practice of (foreign) language teaching. This is partly because the Prague Linguistic Circle considered itself to be more than a group of linguists: it was an intellectual movement that played a wider role in the cultural life of the society, very much like some artistic movements of the early twentieth century. Members of the group got involved in social and cultural life outside of academia; Mathesius, for instance, made radio broadcasts on diverse topics related to the use of language in public, language culture, etc.

One strong aspect of the Prague School functionalists was their orientation to practical pedagogical applications of their work. In the area of foreign language teaching, this was precisely where some of the linguistic principles developed by the group could be

utilized very effectively. The method of contrastive analysis, in particular, was applied to reveal the specific characteristics of a given language (cf. Mathesius's characterology) as well as features that a target language shares with one's first language. Arguably, the language learning process becomes rationalized if the relevant findings are incorporated in the instruction because the pupils can then rely on their own mother tongue and their (pre-existing) 'linguistic consciousness'.

While the basis for teaching should be the living language, the rules taught should also reflect actual communicative practice. As pointed out by Vachek (1972), "[t]he theoretical rules to be utilized in the process of teaching have to be simple and always derived from typical specimens of living speech". The statement was directed as much against traditional grammar teaching methods of the past as against the emergent generative grammar and formalism of the post-war period. At its time, the reliance on authentic communicative language was definitely not taken for granted.

The contrastive method was used by many authors in their textbooks and other manuals that served pedagogic purposes. Havránek, for instance, is a well-known author of textbooks and grammars of Standard Czech. In the area of English studies, Mathesius and Vachek wrote many such texts aimed at the general public as well as university students. The tradition of the comparative approach has become the standard for decades; cf., for instance, the grammar of English by Dušková (1988), the lexical guide to false friends in English and Czech by Hladký (1990), and the usage guide to typical 'Czenglish' mistakes by Sparling (1990). These are some of the very tangible – and extremely useful – applications of the method for the needs of both scholars and those outside academia.

Let us conclude by adding the reflection that although the contrastive method has its undeniable benefits for the pupils, its application in the textbook production process requires a substantial degree of 'localization' (if we may borrow one of the current senses of the word). Many modern textbooks, however, are rather inadequate in this respect – they are often merely generic, 'one-size-fits-all' English-only textbooks that are mass-produced for the global markets. Thus, the textbook industry inevitably disregards the linguistic specificities of the target audiences in the individual countries (or language communities), sometimes constructing the hypothetical entity of some universal 'foreign learner'. However, the particular needs of pupils with different mother tongues are necessarily different. For instance, while the topic of modals and past infinities is hardly of any particular interest to German pupils of English, this area of grammar requires much more attention in the case of Czech pupils because their mother tongue lacks a corresponding structure. The comparative approach can identify such points of difference and lead to targeted language instruction and practice in areas that groups of pupils from specific language backgrounds particularly need.

6. The historiography of the approach

The list of primary sources and works interpreting and popularizing the work of the Prague School is very extensive, given the fact that it concerns over one hundred years of a consistent research tradition in various linguistic disciplines. Readers may be directed to some of the primary texts (the original series of *Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague* and the follow-up series from the 1960s and 1990s mentioned earlier) and anthologies compiling the key texts (e.g. Vachek 1964, 1966). Lots of valuable information is provided in Mathesius (1982), Vachek (1994, 1999), Steiner (1982), Toman (1995) and others. Since it is hardly possible to do justice to the breadth of historiography on the Prague School, readers are encouraged to start with some of the classic texts referencing the movement, and then complement their readings with some of the more recent interpretations. Rest assured that this is a true voyage of discovery that promises to be highly inspiring to anyone who approaches the data with an open mind.

Out of the large number of books, let us perhaps mention a few of the most recent ones. Credit must be given to the members of the English departments at Charles University, who lately compiled several publications that document various aspects of Prague School structuralism as well as its modern heritage. These books include: *The Prague School and Theories of Structure* (Procházka, Malá and Šaldová, 2010), which discusses the relevance of traditional structuralism for contemporary linguistics; *A Centenary of English Studies at Charles University: From Mathesius to Present-day Linguistics* (Malá and Šaldová, 2012), which traces the key topics in linguistics investigated by the famous Anglicists at the English department; and *Prague English Studies and the Transformation of Philologies* (Procházka and Pilný, 2013), which probes the influence of Vilém Mathesius on a number of his colleagues and followers, as well as the subsequent development of Prague School structuralism. A good summary overview of the school and its history is to be found in Dušková (2013). Cf. also one of the recent issues of the journal *La Linguistique*, which is devoted entirely to the Prague School (e.g. Dušková 2014).

More than a hundred years after the first innovative ideas of modern linguistics were voiced by Mathesius, it is evident that the shared conceptual framework which the Prague School established in the 1920s is still viable and applicable for our understanding of how language works. At different times, different aspects of the extremely rich heritage tend to be emphasized; and only the future will show where the next generation of Czech functionalists will turn their attention to in order to keep the approach alive, operational and in contact with the world. One of the main legacies of Czech functionalism consists in the fact that it is a shared approach – an outlook on the general operation of language as a system – rather than a dogma that has to be followed in the exact footsteps of its forefathers. It is a shared perspective that we can mould in order to understand new challenges.

7. Key concepts

This section provides a selection of some of the key concepts that were either developed or used by Prague School scholars. Some of the terms below belong to the common vocabulary of modern linguistics (e.g. *phoneme; markedness*), others are more specifically tied to a particular theoretical framework (e.g. *functional sentence perspective*) or author (e.g. *elastic stability*). Still others may be used in somewhat different senses in different schools of modern linguistics (e.g. *theme*). The definitions provided here are, for the most part, not the literal definitions provided by the authors. The formulations are purposefully simplified in order to facilitate the basic comprehension of the concepts. Selectively, they also include the name of the scholar(s) who the concepts are most readily associated with. The English translations of the original definitions referencing some of these terms can be found in Vachek (2003[1960]).

analytical comparison (*analytické srovnávání*) – the comparative study of genetically unrelated languages, e.g. English and Czech. This method of analysis stands in contrast to the traditional method in historical linguistics of comparing closely related languages, typically from the same language group, which is applied in order to identify earlier common forms. The method of analytical comparison has significant practical implications, e.g. in applied linguistics concerned with the teaching of foreign languages. (Mathesius)

automatisation (**habitualisation**) (*automatizace jazykových prostředků*) – the use of linguistic means in a way that is expected by the communicators. This refers to uses that are conventional and expected. Since speakers/writers follow norms that are implicitly shared, hearers/readers pay attention to the content of the message rather than its linguistic form. This concept contrasts with foregrounding. (Mukařovský)

communicative dynamism (*výpovědní dynamičnost*) – a term in functional sentence perspective that denotes the relative extent to which an element contributes to the further development of communication. In other words, some elements in a sentence are comparatively less important than others, hence the contrast between thematic elements (contextually bound / given / known information) and non-thematic elements (contextually non-bound / new information). (Firbas)

distinctive features of phonemes (*distinktivní rysy fonémů*) – features that give rise to oppositions between phonemes.

elastic stability (**dynamic stability**; *pružná stabilita*) – at any given moment, a language is in a relatively stable situation, although it is simultaneously undergoing the slow process of change. The elasticity (changeability) of language is partly the result of the need of the language to deal with the changing communicative needs of the community and partly a natural internal process, with the system in an inherent need for readjustment or reorganization. When the stability of the language is affected, e.g. by means of external factors such as language contact, the system will reorganize itself in order to re-establish its balance again – a process also called the 'therapeutic effect of changes'. In another sense, elastic stability refers to the variation of language among speakers in a speech community, cf. Mathesius's famous dictum about the "oscillation of speech among individuals inside the communities of language". (Mathesius, Jakobson)

foregrounding (*aktualizace*) – the use of the means of language in a way that is novel, creative or unusual, whereby the text draws attention to its own formal features in addition to the communicated content. Such creative use of language is found in verbal art but also in the media, advertising and other public domains. (Mukařovský)

functional load (*funkční zatížení*) – the relative degree to which an element of language is used, particularly in comparison with other elements. This notion is related to the contrast between the centre and the periphery: central elements typically have a high functional load. The high frequency of some items may also contribute to the preservation of irregular forms (e.g. certain morphemes)

functional onomatology (*funkční onomatologie*) – in Mathesius's theory of language, this is the first step in linguistic analysis dealing with the nature of naming units. It comprises lexicology (semantics), morphology and word formation. (Mathesius)

functional sentence perspective (**FSP**; *aktuální členění větné, funkční perspektiva větná*) – a theory that analyses the distribution of communicative dynamism in units of language called distributional fields, which typically correspond to a sentence or a clause. Each element in a sentence contributes a different degree of information. Ranging from the least informative to the most informative elements, we distinguish thematic (Th) and non-thematic elements (non-Th), the latter consisting of transitional (Tr) and rhematic elements (Rh). The natural progression from known to new information (Th – Rh), known as 'ordo naturalis', is typically found in languages with a relatively free word order (as in Czech). The distribution of communicative dynamism in utterances is the result of several factors: linearity, semantics, context and prosody. (Mathesius, Firbas)

functional styles (*funkční styly*) – this concept emphasizes the functional differentiation of (standard) language into several subsystems, such as professional style, poetic style, colloquial style, etc. (Havránek)

functional syntax (*funkční syntax*) – in Mathesius's theory, this is the second major area of linguistic analysis that focuses on how units of language become connected in the act of communication as a linear string of elements. On a different level, the concept refers to the syntactic analysis of language, mainly in the tradition of functional sentence perspective. (Mathesius)

historical phonology (*historická fonologie*) – a discipline that explores the diachronic dimension of the phonological system of a language. It considers how the system developed over time, with individual phonemes changing as a result of immanent factors or external influence. The phonological system of English was significantly affected by the Great Vowel Shift, a chain shift of vowels that reorganized the English vocalic system between the 14th and the 17th centuries. The current English spelling essentially reflects Middle English pronunciation before the Vowel Shift. Another major change currently underway is the Northern Cities Vowel Shift in the USA. (Vachek, Trnka)

language functions (*jazykové funkce*) – since language is defined as a system of goal-oriented means of expression, we can distinguish several functions in relation to the primary or dominant orientation of the utterance. The early model proposed by the Vienna-based psychologist Karl Bühler distinguishes three functions (referential – *Darstellung*; expressive – *Ausdruck*; conative – *Appell*, cf. his 'organon' model of communication). The later model proposed by Roman Jakobson adds three more functions into the typology: phatic, poetic and metalingual. (Bühler, Jakobson)

linguistic characterology (*lingvistická charakteristika*) – a synchronic description of a language that aims to deal with the characteristic or fundamental features of the language rather than to provide an exhaustive account of all of its levels. The typical features are often suitably revealed by means of a contrastive study using the method of analytical comparison. (Mathesius)

markedness (*příznakovost*) – a theoretical concept that is used to describe the contrast between two members of a pair. Thus, the unmarked member is characterized as the default category, with the marked member standing out as a more specific or complex member, sometimes characterized by the presence of a feature that is absent from the unmarked member of the pair. In linguistics, this applies to phonological, morphological and semantic oppositions. Jakobson (1932) also applied his theory of markedness to the analysis of the grammatical system of tenses in terms of binary categories. The marked v. unmarked contrast is also used in other social sciences.

morphophonemic variation (*morfonologická variace*) – this refers to the relationship between different phonemes that can be realized in a single morpheme as a result of the morphological structure of a word. This phenomenon is very common in Slavic languages (cf. the morphophonemic variation of k/č in *ruka* and *ruční*). Morphonology studies the phonological structure of morphemes and words and the use of phonemes on the morphological level.

neutralization (*neutralizace*) – the loss of distinction between two phonemes in certain positions of the word. Thus, for example, the distinction between /t/ and /d/ is neutralized in Czech at the ends of words, where voiced consonants are realized in an unvoiced manner (cf. *led* ('ice') pronounced as [let]; but note the inflected genitive form *ledu* ('of ice') [ledu]). (Trubeckoy, Jakobson)

organon model – a model of the linguistic act proposed by Karl Bühler in 1934. Language is considered as an instrument whereby a speaker transfers a message (meaning, thoughts) to a hearer. The linguistic sign, which stands at the centre of the model, can be focused either on the speaker, the hearer, or the message. Hence, the following three basic functions are distinguished: expression (focus on the sender), appeal (focus on the recipient), and representation (focus on the message, i.e. the 'object' or content). This is a very dynamic view of language: it entails that linguistic analysis needs to consider the whole speech act, i.e. the interface between language and its users, and not the linguistic form only. (Bühler)

origo (**deictic centre**; *deiktický střed, origo*) – a conceptualization of the discourse space around a particular speaker. It is the speaker's here-and-now, which serves to anchor deixis in communication. The origo – as the deictic centre from which an utterance is produced – is a shifting entity that changes as a speaker switches his/her role into the recipient and vice versa (cf. the switch in personal deixis). It can also be projected along the temporal and spatial axes, allowing the speaker/writer to formulate an utterance from some other perspective. (Bühler)

phoneme (*foném*) – the basic phonological unit of the sound system. It is an abstraction of a speech sound that is perceived to have the same function and be meaningfully distinct from other phonemes. Each language has a distinct phonological system. There may be differences between individual dialects and other subvarieties of a given language (e.g. while Standard English has 24 consonantal phonemes, Scottish English also uses the voiceless velar fricative /x/). The number of vocalic phonemes is more variable, in case of English ranging from 20 in British Received Pronunciation to 14-16 in General American. (Trubeckoy, Vachek)

phonological opposition (*fonologický protiklad*) – the relationship between two sounds where the substitution of one for the other changes the meaning of the word. Depending on the nature of the mutual relationship between phonemes, phonological theory distinguishes several types of oppositions: isolated, proportional, bilateral, multilateral, privative, equipollent, and gradual. (Trubeckoy)

phonology (*fonologie*) – a discipline of linguistics that studies the sounds of language from the point of view of their function. It is interested in the sound system of the language and the mutual relations between phonemes, as long as there is some functional distinction between them. Phonic sounds without regard to their function, i.e. their acoustic or articulatory nature without regard to the systemic abstractions behind them, are studied by phonetics.

poetic function of language (*poetická funkce*) – the function of the message is directed towards the form rather than the content. This is the dominant function in verbal art where the linguistic means tend to be foregrounded. (Jakobson)

poetics (*poetika*) – the branch of linguistics that studies the poetic function. (Jakobson)

privative opposition (*privativní protiklad*) – the kind of phonological opposition in which one member of the pair is characterised by the presence and the other member of the pair by the absence of a specific feature, e.g. *voiced* v. *voiceless* or *nasalized* v. *non-nasalized*. The member with the presence of the relevant feature is referred to as *marked*, while the member with the absence is called *unmarked* with respect to the given feature. (Trubeckoy)

rheme (**rhematic element**; *réma, jádro výpovědi*) – a term in functional sentence perspective that denotes an element that carries the highpoint of the message. Since it conveys the most important information in the sentence, the sentence is 'perspectived' towards this element. (Firbas)

theme (**thematic element**; *téma, základ výpovědi*) – a term in functional sentence perspective that denotes an element that provides known or contextually bound information. It provides the starting point for some other, more important information in the sentence (i.e., the rheme). (Firbas)

Notes

[1] The work was published in English as late as in 1964 in Josef Vachek's translation (see Vachek 1964). The Czech title is "O potenciálnosti jevů jazykových" (*Věstník Královské* české *společnosti nauk* 1911).
[2] A comprehensive account of Mathesius's life and work is provided in Mathesius (1982).
[3] Toman refers to an article by Michailovskij in *Prager Presse*, September 1924, pt.1.
[4] A good overview of Jakobson's years in Prague is provided in Vachek (1999, reprinted in English in Hajičová 2002). For a thorough general-linguistic discussion of some of his theoretical work (most notably the markedness theory), see Andrews (1990).
[5] The full title of the document, presented in Czech and French, is *Theses presented to the First Congress of Slavists held in Prague in 1929*. The full text is available in *Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague* 1, 7–29, reprinted in Vachek (1970), with the English version included in Vachek (1983) and reprinted in Steiner (1982).
[6] More information about the Czech linguists Vilém Mathesius, Bohuslav Havránek, Josef Vachek and Jan Firbas is provided in the opening sections of the respective chapters in this book.

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