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Pavel Drábek

Functional Reformulations: Prague School and Intralingual Translation

Theoretical writings often try to be terminologically normative in order to consolidate, define or in any other way fix its object, be it a thing or a process. Such theories tend towards a nomenclature, a terminological matrix that defines the object's form, significance and its pragmatics. Conceptually, these efforts result in a hermetic, nominalist world – of which a typical representative would be semiotics (or semiology) with its elaborate structures of relations and all but cabalistic universe of names (cf. ELAM 2002, diagrams and lists on pp. 24, 46, 79 or 114–28). This article discusses the writings of Prague Structuralists who engaged in a different notion of theory. It started with a fascination with the instability of, and the void beyond, conceptual knowledge. With a view to the long history of philosophy, this other approach could be called 'realist' (as opposed to 'nominalist'), focusing on the real-life phenomena themselves *a priori* of their naming (cf. Gerald L. Bruns' discussion of *hermetic* and *Orphic* language in his study of poetry; BRUNS 1974). As opposed to theatre semiotics, which is fundamentally *nominalist*, the early Prague School writings were closer to the *realist* approach.

The theoretical endeavours to be outlined and articulated in this article have to do with the possibility of contemplating the non-existence of the theatre sign – its unstable, transitory or even unspeakable nature. During the twentieth century the theatre sign has established itself as a key concept – perhaps even too much so. As is in the nature of nominalism, the life of words and concepts prime our engagements with reality. In modern theatre theory, the theatre sign is a prism that is taken for granted and applied almost mechanically, often forgetting that it is a theoretical construct with no substance, and it is in itself an arbitrary formulation of the signifying process. Before the theatre sign was accepted as a useful and almost omnipotent theoretical tool for understanding the theatre, the signi-

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fiying processes in the theatre were approached in ways that are more ‘arcane’ – if that is a term to refer to the opposite of a *mechanical* approach.

Within the Prague School writings there is, surprisingly, enough justification for such a metaphysical approach to the theatre – as this article demonstrates in reference to two notorious texts by two key theorists of the school – though both from a different country, a different era, and even from a different discipline. The first is Jindřich Honzl’s essay “Pohyb divadelního znaku” (1940; translated by Irwin Titunik into English as “The Dynamics of the Sign in Theater”) and Roman Jakobson’s 1959 essay “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation”. The two essays have seemingly little in common – Honzl’s text is on the theatre and on the practical aspects of onstage action, while Jakobson’s article is a reflection on translation from an essentially linguistic point of view, with a little bit of Husserl’s phenomenology thrown in. However, they share a common ontological approach in their core, somewhat surprisingly connected to the Christian mystical tradition. It is this common ontology that is addressed in this paper, suggesting possible connections and possible inspirations. In its first part, this article reflects briefly on the history and the reception of the Prague School, pointing out how the individual phases and generations fundamentally affected the understanding of, and approach to, the Prague School.¹

TNT (Taxonomy–Nomenclature–Tradition): a Critically Explosive Cocktail

The institutional grounding of the original generation of the Prague School was the *Pražský lingvistický kroužek* (the Prague Linguistic Circle), established unofficially in October 1926. This community of intellectuals and artists grew to a formal institution, registered in 1930. The Statutes were signed at Charles University in Prague, in Vilém Mathesius’ office on 23 October 1930 (PROCHÁZKOVÁ 2005).

Although the Circle gave name to what is known now as the Prague School, to identify the Circle with the theoretical heritage (the School) would be a gross misrepresentation. These later reductive names for the School – ‘Prague Structuralists’ or Michael Quinn’s ‘Prague Semiotic Stage’ – fail to do justice to the generation. What this community of theorists shared was not only a method but also a certain *Zeitgeist* (or a social matrix of knowledge and values, to use N. Katherine Hayles’ concept). They also shared a hidden

1 By way of acknowledgement, this article is the outcome of a number of moments. It started from discussions had with David Drozd, Martina Musilová and Tomáš Kačer, and it also took inspiration from the ideas, writings and practical theatre work of my colleagues at Hull. I am also grateful to Martin Procházka for the discussions we had over ideas represented here. I am also developing my previous presentations and writings realised as part of our Theatre Structuralist project at events organised in the Department of Theatre Studies, Masaryk University: (1) a paper given at the Prague Semiotic Stage Revisited Symposium of 2011 (which was published last autumn in the special issue of *Theatralia* under the exemplary care of Šárka Havlíčková Kysová and Barbora Příhodová); (2) a postgraduate seminar on historiography of April 2012, convened with Martina Musilová; (3) a presentation at the “Strukturalistický poločas” (The Structuralist Half-Life) in September 2012; and finally, (4) the Prague Semiotic Stage Revisited II Symposium, which is represented in this volume.

ideological agenda, as has been observed on another occasion (see my article “Launching a Structuralist Assembly”; DRÁBEK 2012).

The members of the Prague Linguistic Circle were not the only practitioners of what is known as ‘the Prague School’; some of its members were not from Prague, or even Czechoslovak nationals. Miloš Zelenka has succinctly observed how many of the Circle’s members were from other cities, mostly from Brno. Being connected with the international metropolis Prague was part of the self-promotion and self-fashioning. Anecdotally, its members would travel together by train to Prague to convene in the Café Louvre for the official meetings of the Circle (ZELENKA 2012). Very importantly, the theoretical heritage of the School does not only include linguistic theories but also, writings on the performing art, including the new genre of film, in which the group came with some of the earliest critical analyses (ANDĚL and SZCZEPANIK 2008).

On account of the term ‘structuralism’ in the customary name for the theorists, there is a historical qualification to be made. The statutes of the Prague Linguistic Circle prescribed strict rules to its members; one of them was a certain ideological loyalty or adherence to “develop linguistics on the functional-structuralist basis” (*pěstovat lingvistiku na základě funkčně strukturálním*; for a formulation of the Circle’s aims, see the Introduction to the first issue of *Slovo a slovesnost* (1935): 1: 1). The compound is crucial and out of the two components it is the ‘functional’ that is rightly prioritised. It was not a structure (or a nominal system) that these theorists were intent on building; nor were their aims to analyse the existing structures of meaning – as was the case of the postwar Structuralists. It is the *function* of a phenomenon (be it a word, a statement, a gesture or another semantic initiative) that creates structures of meaning and imposes a hierarchy of related components. In other words, the abbreviation of the theories’ name into ‘structuralism’ does little justice to the epistemologies that the group not only proposed but also enforced for its members and adherents.

The shift in the understanding of the theories was caused by a number of factors, not least by the theorists themselves and the development of their own understanding and positions in the academia and its structures. Still, that does not justify any identifications between the original generation on the one hand, and that which could be called the Second and Third Generations of Structuralists. For the Second Generation, the period of Roman Jakobson’s stay in the United States could be taken, together with Jakobson’s direct personal influence on Claude Lévi-Strauss, who further developed the key ontological gesture of the generation and spread it among his colleagues and teachers. This ontological gesture of the Second Generation is *an understanding of phenomena as a text* – an artifact, a social phenomenon, a custom, behaviour or interaction and other types of human activity are interpreted as if they were metaphorical texts that can be analysed structurally. It has to be acknowledged that this approach has its roots in the First Generation (whether it is the Prague School, or the Russian Formalists); however, this method was not present in an explicit form. Besides, the First Generation remained relatively strictly focused on

linguistic and artistic phenomena. What may be called the Third Generation is represented by the theorists of the last half of the century associated with the continuations of the Prague Linguistic Circle – such as Josef Vachek, Vladimír Skalička, Jan Firbas, František Daneš, Libuše Dušková, Petr Sgall, Zdeněk Mathauser and others (PROCHÁZKA and PILNÝ 2012; HOSKOVEC 2006). It is beyond the objectives of this article to discuss this generation's work; at the same time, it would be a rather explosive simplification to say that this Third Generation has very little in common with the First – with the exception of the terminological foundations and personal ties (mostly from tutors to students); other than that this Third Generation is, in its attempts at systematising and terminological rigour (HOSKOVEC 2006: 13), closer to the open theoretical and ideological rivals of the original Prague Linguistic Circle, the theorists around Josef Zubatý and the journal *Naše řeč* (DRÁBEK 2012: 17).²

The theories and writings of the Prague School were ideologically prevented from developing and spreading after 1948. They reached international readers only in the late 1960s, and a selection of the seminal texts were published in the following two decades. This second life of the Prague School was framed by the Second Generation, the wave of French, Italian and US structuralisms, which was not only explicitly motivated politically and ideologically; in its terminologies it was pronouncedly semiotic, informed by a developed version of Ferdinand de Saussure's theories of the linguistic sign (and, in the US, by Peircean semiotics). In consequence, Prague School writings and theories were reformulated using the recent structuralist and semiotic terminology. In the discussions at the Prague Semiotic Stage Revisited in 2011, it was observed that it is anachronistic to speak of the Czech School as 'semiotic' or 'structuralist' in the late twentieth-century meaning of the words.³ The 1960s to 1980s phase of reception retrospectively imposed a methodological unity onto a disparate generation of academics, scholars, artists and practitioners, resulting in more or less gross simplifications in the understanding of their theories. The Czech writings, now revisited by international scholars, were 'over-semiotised' and 'over-structuralised' through a process of back projection: the notions of *structure* and *sign* had had decades of cultivation and deployment histories behind them by then. To equate these terms with the terms of the 1930s and 1940s is an anachronistic error. However, that was the status quo that was confirmed by publications such as Josef Vachek's editions of Czech linguistic essays, two anthologies by Ladislav Matějka and I. R. Titunik, *Sound, Sign and*

2 The periodisation of the Prague School is not the objective of this paper. Let this makeshift division into generations be taken as a provocative proposition for further discussions. In pointing out so, I am reacting to one of my anonymous peer readers, who took issue with the division. My starting assumption is that the early stages of the Prague School (or the PLC) postulated an ontological method and did not create anything near a consistent theoretical system; attempts at finding one in the theoretical writings of the early PLC is an anachronistic imposition. For an example of what I dub the Third Generation see Zdeněk Mathauser's essay on the PLC's concepts of the 'Thing' and 'Artifact-Thing' (MATHAUSER 2006).

3 The Prague Semiotic Stage Revisited international symposium, convened by David Drozd, was hosted by the Department of Theatre Studies, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Brno on 27–29 June, 2011. The proceedings of this conference were published in a special issue of the *Theatralia* 15 (2012): 2.

Meaning (1978) and *Semiotics of Art* (1976), Peter Steiner's *Structure, Sign and Function* and *The Prague School: Selected Writings 1929-1946* (1982) or the English translations of Jan Mukařovský's *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts* (1970) and *The Word and Verbal Art* (1977) or even René Wellek's monumental *A History of Modern Criticism 1750-1950* (Volume 7, 1991). The very titles of the volumes suggest how 'semiotised' and 'structuralised' this crucial phase of reception was.

The following paragraphs return to the epistemological core of the Prague School – the *functional-structural method* – peeling away the later terminological and methodological deposit layers.

The Ontological Gesture, the Ideological Agenda and the Creating of Myths and Cultures

The rigid, systematic rules and the loyalty to the critical tradition, prominent in the Third Generation, is close to the critical practice which the First Generation opposed and against which they defined themselves. In the last half of the century the concept of 'structure' has become an almost sacred allegory that is present in every text under scrutiny, and the acquired terminology has become the compendium of basic exegetic rites. In contrast to this, the First Generation is characterised by a considerable terminological vagueness and fluctuation, as well as by an Avant-Garde type of disrespect for traditions. The concept of 'functionality' or 'function' – the more important half of the codified *functional-structuralist method* – is key to the School. As has been mentioned above, the *function* (or actual operation) of a particular thing *defines and creates a certain structure or a hierarchy of relations* ('*usouvztažňenosť*'); this hierarchy/structure is not only created but keeps dynamically changing. This is what this article calls *functional reformulation* – an incessantly changing formulation of processes, based on their functionality and activities.⁴

One of the key terms of the Czech School is, deservedly, '*aktualisace*', which has been translated variously as 'foregrounding', 'highlighting' or 'actualisation'. A knowledgeable definition and discussion of the term and its relation to the Russian Formalist '*ostrannenie*' ('estrangement', or 'making it strange') or the Brechtian notion of *Verfremdung*, have been provided by Veronika Ambros in her essay "Prague's experimental stage: Laboratory of theatre and semiotics" (in *Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, a special issue of the journal *Semiotica*; AMBROS 2008; see also MEERZON 2012). '*Aktualisace*' in its essence names the *novelty, freshness* and *non-routine usage* of a certain expressive tool. Etymologically, the term originates in the French *actuel*, that is, not only 'topical' but also 'contemporary', 'up to date', 'actual', 'real' – in other words that which is taking place only just now. That is to say, the term '*aktualisace*' gives a name to the fact of meaning as an activity or an event, which

4 There is similarity between the notion of 'functional reformulation' and Julia Kristeva's concepts of 'semanalysis' and the 'signifying process' as formulated in her essay "The System and the Speaking Subject" (KRISTEVA 1973).

thematizes, by the same token, the very act of the communication. In this sense, the critical term disregards the existing semantic structures, focusing on the signifying and semantic processes underway.

The close relationship between ‘aktualisace’ and ‘functionality’ (*funkčnost*) has been outlined by Roman Jakobson (ZELENKA 1993). It is also worth noting that the linguists Josef Vachek and Jan Firbas translate their key critical term, ‘aktuální členění větné’ (lit. ‘the actual structuring of the sentence’), as ‘functional sentence perspective’. This very translation is in itself an instance of *aktualisace* in that it explains functionally what the term ‘aktuální’ signifies here: what the ontological gesture is here, is the *perspective of immediate functionality*, not a terminological hypostasis. Similarly, the term ‘členění’ (‘structuring’, ‘ordering’ or ‘arrangement’) has been translated into English as ‘perspective’ – as if static structure (i.e. a given hierarchy) has been reduced to a mere *perspective*, a *point of view*, an *aspect* or a *visual projection*. This is, from a translation perspective, an imprecise rendering. At the same time, it is a prominent instance of a *functional-structural* approach to meaning and its verbal formulation.

It has been mentioned that this (Jakobson’s) *functional-structural ontological trick* – to disregard things nominally but rather approach them functionally – is an ideological act. By means of this dialectic tool it is possible to dismantle and get to the very foundation of any power structures and discourses – from the basic semiotic core of culture to state establishments, this tool is capable of cancelling the existing structures and of replacing the nomenclature perspective with a perspective of functionality – the role, its effectiveness and its objective. Though this may seem adventurous and even conspiratorial for the First Generation, it is – anecdotally – in agreement with the personal style of Roman Jakobson and his cunning tricks played with the police and his playful coquetry with being a secret agent and a subversive factor (as Miloš Zelenka pointed out; ZELENKA 2012). This subversiveness is present only latently in the First Generation; however, a few decades later, in the United States and in France, it becomes a declared anti-regime attitude of critical theory – represented by Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and their followers, the subversively self-declared *Deconstructivists* (or *Post-structuralists*) Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man and Julia Kristeva. This open positioning of the Second Generation develops the political and ideological potential of the functional-structural method.

Even within the First Generation, there was a political and ideological agenda in the relationship of the Prague Linguistic Circle and the debates of the Czechoslovak national identity, known as the movement of Czechoslovakism in the mid- and late 1920s (DRÁBEK 2012). The intellectual discussions were about the significance and justification of the peculiar state conglomerate which was the post-Versailles Czechoslovakia. The cultural and national identity had to be defined anew – not on the basis of existing institutions and its nomenclatures but rather on the basis of their *functionality* and *effectiveness* in the new conditions. It is worth noting that the first Czechoslovak president and one of the politicians responsible for the state conglomerate Tomáš

Garrigue Masaryk was a secret patron of the Prague Linguistic Circle, financing its activities clandestinely. (It is also noteworthy that the Circle's journal *Slovo a slovesnost* never published personal news; however, Masaryk's obituary was printed there.) A certain affinity between the Prague theory as a noetic effort on the one hand, and the state-forming processes of the newly established Czechoslovakia on the other is apparent; these processes may be conceived of as *aktualisace* on a large scale. This was far from a mere act of renaming or change of code; the consequences were profound and far-reaching. In 1920, for instance, Czechoslovakia replaced the previous Austrian arrangement of regional councils (*hejtmanství*; known in historical literature as *hejtmanship*) with the French-inspired *départements*. In this process, hand in hand with the myth-creating efforts, there were suggestions to form the so-called *župa* (based on the Sokol movement), although the name 'župa' was known to have been ahistoric and clearly forged. The would-be old Slavic name *župa* was taken by the mid-19th century nationalist historian František Palacký from archival documents forged by Antonín Boček (TŘEŠTÍK 1999: 175). In 1920, however, historical truth was of secondary importance; what was more ponderous was the myth-creating gesture (as Vladimír Macura discusses in his ground-breaking book *Český sen* [The Czech Dream]; MACURA 1998). The first priority was a reconstruction of a functional political and economic infrastructure after the disasters of World War I: the imperative was to replace the well-trodden paths of the Austro-Hungarian regime and its channels of power both on a factual and on a nomenclature level. These processes were to sever the actual events from the links to the political traditions – analogically to the ontological approach of the functional-structuralist method: disrupting all dependence on the established structures – be they linguistic, institutional, political in the public sphere, or mimetic, realistic, positivist or Young Grammarist in the sphere of critical theory. Such was the central ontological gesture of the Prague School, which places it in close relation to European Modernism and Avant Garde with their opposition to traditions.

There is yet another important connection to be drawn – and that will be discussed in the remaining part of the article. By developing such a critical tool, the potential of the functional-structural theory is established outside its social and temporal environments. By the same virtue, the ontological gesture acquires a *metaphysical* validity, not unrelated to the mysticism of Anselm of Canterbury and his ontological argument of the existence of God or Kurt Gödel's ontological proof. Though, at first sight, the mystical connections may seem far-fetched, there is evidence for its relevance to the key representatives of the Prague Linguistic Circle.

Honzl's Sign and Augustinian Mysticism

Jindřich Honzl, in his short essay “The Dynamics of the Theatre Sign”, which has become a key work in Czech theatre theory, uses both of the terms, *sign* and *structure*. However, there are other prominent notions in his discussion, such as *function* (namely *actorly function* [*herecká funkce*]), *representation* or *instrumentality* (*‘představování’* or *‘zastupování’*), *effect* (*‘účín’*), somewhat surprisingly also *liberation* (*‘osvobození’*), and very importantly *mutability* or *variability* or *dynamics* (*‘proměnlivost’*, *‘dynamika’*). The last cluster of terms which Honzl uses interchangeably is most important because the synonymic concepts also represent the approach to nomenclature: the very logic of treating the act of naming.

Honzl starts his essay by referring to Otakar Zich and his definition of the stage: “jeviště přestává být jevištěm, když nic nepředstavuje” [a stage stops being a stage once it ceases to represent something] (ZICH in HONZL 1940: 227; all the translations from Honzl are author's). Honzl further elaborates on this notion, pointing out that “it is not the architectural nature which makes a stage a stage but the fact that it *represents* a dramatic [i.e. fictional] space”. And he develops the notion even further to a definition of the actor:

An actor is usually a *human* speaking and moving on the stage – and the essence of acting derives from the fact that the human *represents* someone on stage, that they *signify a dramatic* [i.e. fictional, PD] *character*. At the same time it is unimportant if the actor is human. It may even be a piece of wood. If the lath moves and someone will talk to the movements, that piece of wood may represent a dramatic character, and the wood may be an actor. (HONZL 1940: 246; italics PD)

These are radical definitions, and they also raise several questions:

- (1) What are the implications for non-mimetic theatre? Is the *representation* (i.e. standing for something else) a necessary condition?
- (2) What is the relation to Ivo Osolsobě's notion of *ostention*, that is, to the act of showing or exhibiting?
- (3) What kind of nomenclature does Honzl practice here?

The first two questions may seem to be straightforward: if ‘representation’ is understood as an act of *making sense* or simply any kind of *semantic activity*, then Honzl's definition may be broadened to any type of theatre or performance – accepting that not all *sense* or *semantic activity* can be articulated in words (such as dance performance, opera and other stylised forms).

On account of the last question let me observe that Honzl is a pure *realist* (as opposed to *nominalist*): a *human* or a *thing* become an *actor* only through their *agency* (or *instrumentality*); the essence of acting is in the *action* realised, not in an a priori status of the human

or the thing. Likewise a *space* becomes a *stage* through the agency of a ‘semantic activity’, that is, in a word, through *action*. This *agency* (or instrumentality, which Honzl calls ‘representation’ or ‘substitution’) is identical to what other theorists of Honzl’s generation call *function*.

In this respect, the *representing function* (‘*představující funkce*’, as Honzl terms it) becomes the central demiurgical act that substantiates existence in the theatre. It is that which brings the theatre to life. If an actor comes to existence by virtue of the function of representing (or rather taking action or *acting*) and if a stage becomes a stage through the function it is applied to, then the *actuality* (or *reality*) of the theatre is derived from it – that is, from this function. This somewhat *metaphysical* or even *mystical existence* of the theatre would not be alien to Honzl or to other theorists of his generation, including Jakobson.

This demiurgical power of the *function* is further illustrated by Honzl in his discussion of the *voice*, which constitutes what he calls an ‘acoustic actor’ (sounded from behind the stage or on the radio); and equally, the stage may also be realised by mere *sound* (HONZL 1940: 247).

Such a notion of the essence of the theatre event is rather satisfactory – in that it captures its transitory nature. To speak of such a notion of theatre as a set of signs would mean to misrepresent the conditional existence as outlined by Honzl. The essay further capitalises on this instability: “The signs that the *function* chose in order to communicate (or make sense) with the audience always tend to determine the space. However, in this determining is their only stability.” (HONZL 1940: 251; emphasis PD) It is worth noting that Honzl *does* use the word ‘*sign*’ (*znak*). However, in the same breath, he points out that the sign’s only stability is in momentarily suggesting the space. In this vision – with the actor coming to existence only through acting, the stage coming to existence only through representing, or generally theatre occurring only through the *representing function*, the world of Honzl’s theatre becomes a mere mirage.

His essay has traditionally been interpreted as contemplating the multiplicity of meanings which an onstage object, person or even other physical phenomena (sound, light, shape) may assume. Thus, the onstage tools in Tairov’s *Giroflé-Giroflá* become a bench, a boat, a ship’s deck or a step. I would like to emphasise that the feature that seems to me more central to Honzl’s approach is that of *void* and its *instability/mutability* or – as Honzl calls it – “the inability to come to the substance/essence of things” (HONZL 1940: 253). It is this ‘mutability’ that is crucial here: “Indeed,” writes Honzl, “this mutability, this dress-changing of the theatre sign is its specific quality” (HONZL 1940: 254). However, it should not be forgotten that the *theatre sign* is a momentary mirage of meaning, which comes into existence through action. “In the mutability of the theatre sign lies the main problem of a good definition of theatricality [*i.e.* the essence of the theatre, PD].” And while the theatre sign is unstable it is also intractable: what it represents is often unspeakable.

Honzl’s essay is lined with comments on the need for liberating the theatre from constraints and conventions. While he praises Zich for “liberating the stage from the archi-

ecture” (and its accompanying symptoms, namely, the establishment, to use the modern word), Honzl aims at “liberating all other realities of the theatre” – including representation.

Honzl’s theatre then is a void, a non-space that may fleetingly assume form and meaning and become *something* – through the agency of *acting*, or – as he calls it – by virtue of the *representing function*. Honzl’s metaphysical and near-mystical notion of the theatre is spelled out in one of the more concrete passages of his essay, where he discusses the construction of sense in the theatrical event.

One could ask if the shift of the scene [or rather scene change, *mutazione; PD*] to the backdrop of a chateau wall with a back door is not simply a substitute for the dramatist’s message that could be expressed in the actor’s words “I came out of the chateau”. [...] Still, even if we found other interpretations, we would never get to the essence of the thing. We would have no way of telling which of them are the basic ones and we would not be able to deny the justification of the others. (HONZL 1940: 253)

This vision of the theatre as a sequence of fluid, unstable, and unreliable assumptions (or interpretations) which may not be taken for certain, culminates in Honzl’s final sentence, in the comparison he draws to the integrity and the fluid and doubtful nature of the theatre: in talking about the theatre, he says he “prove[s] it has both [its centre and its integrity], that it is multiple and unified, just like that trinitarian God of Saint Augustine” (HONZL 1940: 260).

Jakobson’s Translation Theory and the Neoplatonist *via negativa*

The second text to be discussed in relation to the *ontological gesture* is Roman Jakobson’s 1959 essay “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation”. In it, Jakobson discusses a similar moment to that quoted from Honzl above. It also deals with the meaning that may take on different shapes: in Honzl, it could be the stage set or the actor’s words; in Jakobson, it is the relation between language and what he calls metalanguage:

A faculty of speaking a given language implies a faculty of talking about this language. Such a “metalinguistic” operation permits revision and redefinition of the vocabulary used. The complementarity of both levels – object-language and metalanguage – was brought out by Niels Bohr: all well-defined experimental evidence must be expressed in ordinary language, “in which the practical use of every word stands in complementary relation to attempts of its strict definition”. (JAKOBSON 1959: 234)

It is the notion of complementarity that is important here. If Honzl's demiurgical function brought to life the theatre sign and determined its space (for that fleeting mirage of existence), it is equally true of Jakobson's notion of making a statement about our experience:

[t]he definition of our experience stands in complementary relation to metalinguistic operations – the cognitive level of language not only admits but directly requires recoding interpretation, i.e., translation. Any assumption of ineffable or untranslatable cognitive data would be a contradiction in terms. (JAKOBSON 1959: 236)

In other words, the *agency* of making an utterance brings language to life and also the metalinguistic operations – the 'space' of our existence and the 'contexts' in which we exist, such as culture. We have to *translate* the agency (or the intention) into linguistic tools available, which are complemented by the metalanguage.

Jakobson then points out how the grammatical and lexical specifics of individual languages bring into existence totally different worlds of existence:

But in jest, in dreams, in magic, briefly, in what one would call everyday verbal mythology and in poetry above all, the grammatical categories carry a high semantic import. In these conditions, the question of translation becomes much more entangled and controversial. (JAKOBSON 1959: 236)

In other words, the metaphysical existence of the meaning is substantially connected to the actual language and as such it cannot be disentangled from the language specifics.

In another passage, Jakobson discusses a phenomenon related to Honzl's notion of the *dynamics* of the sign:

In poetry, verbal equations become a constructive principle of the text. Syntactic and morphological categories, roots, and affixes, phonemes and their components (distinctive features) – in short, any constituents of the verbal code – confronted, juxtaposed, brought into contiguous relation according to the principle of similarity and contrast and carry their own autonomous signification. Phonemic similarity is sensed as semantic relationship. The pun, or to use a more erudite, and perhaps more precise term – *paronomasia*, reigns over poetic art, and whether its rule is absolute or limited, poetry by definition is untranslatable. Only creative transposition is possible: either intralingual transposition – from one poetic shape into another, or interlingual transposition – from one language into another, or finally intersemiotic transposition – from one system of signs into another, e.g., from verbal art into music, dance, cinema, or painting. (JAKOBSON 1959: 238)

This observation has important implications for the theatre: in essence, what Jakobson is describing is identical to what Honzl is discussing in the example of Tairov's onstage tools. That is also a case of *punning* or *paronomasia* – not in words, but in objects. Equally, the limitations and uniqueness given by a concrete language are essentially identical in the theatre to limitations and uniqueness of any onstage object, actor or physical phenomena – only in an endlessly more complex way.

The process which Jakobson terms *translation* is paralleled in the essence of the theatre – as Honzl defines it. The performer and the spectator – the two essential components of the theatre (while the performer does not necessarily need to be human, though we do require *human agency* here) – exist in a void, a non-space: this is the *creative space of un-form* which waits for the *demiurgical gesture*. The onstage tools used for a mind *communicating* with another are of a special nature – they are fluid, unstable and doubtful – in a word, they are a play. It is through these tools that the *translation* between one mind and another occurs.

Let us assume that an actor starts acting with a more or less concrete intent in mind. That intent is brought to life in the moment of, and through the action. The action is always linked with the conventions (i.e. the *metallanguage*) and as such these are also mediated. To say that the intent is *encoded* into a system of signs would mean to fall into the Wagnerian trap of orchestrating the total and *a priori* given effect. Still the actor creates forms, utters words, engages in rhythm and operates in space. A spectator watches, listens to and senses the actor's performance and in good hope comes close to the actor's impulse. What happens here is in essence an act of translation in the sense Jakobson outlines it. It is an interplay of meaning that comes into its mirage existence from the void through that which the Prague School called 'function'.

To conclude, and most strikingly: in Jakobson's essay there is a parallel passage to Honzl's Augustinian mysticism. Jakobson refers to the founder of Western mysticism, Dionysius the Areopagite (sometimes known as Pseudo-Dionysius), a 6th-century neo-platonic and the founder of *via negativa*, which contemplated the *unspeakability and endlessness of God* through admitting the central void – the unfathomable and unknowable awareness. It is to this that Jakobson alludes when discussing the unsurpassable limitations of translation – that is, essentially, the possibility of communication: "Dionysius the Areopagite [...] called for chief attention to the cognitive values [...] and not to the words themselves." (JAKOBSON 1959: 238)

It seems that the central ontological gesture of the Prague School, as represented in these two case studies, was linked with and derived from the mystical exegetic tradition that does not rely on a pre-existing language: *realities* come into existence as they are perceived, named and experienced rather than having a nominalistic substance that has created an existing world of *names* (in the nominalist sense). The *sign*, which has become a crucial concept of the theory, represents an ontological obstacle; it does not exist and it appears merely as a transitory *function* in the signifying process. Assumptions about the sign would

be limiting to the reality of the free interplay of meaning. In the early writings of the Czech School, the theatre and the act of creating meaning through language and gesture were critically analysed while, at the same time, their metaphysical qualities were recognised. In this sense, practising the theatre and creating meaning was a demiurgical activity – one that creates a universe of meaning through the function of a single impulse. This ontological heritage of the School is revolutionary and liberating in that it is ready to disregard and subvert the notions of pre-existing structures and systems. By this token, the processes of signifying and of knowing are exempt from linguistic and other semiotic constraints: the *function* is constitutive of the semantic code itself.

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Summary

The essay analyses the central ontological gesture of the Prague School (or Prague Linguistic Circle) on the examples of Jindřich Honzl's seminal text on the theatrical sign and Roman Jakobson's later essay on translation. This ontological gesture is contextualised historically and politically with the PLC's activities in its early decades, and proposes a radical and perhaps provocative revision of the notions of the sign and the Prague School taxonomy in general with a view to the non-conceptual (or pre-conceptual) understanding of the signifying process. Honzl refers back to and elaborates on Zich and his revolutionary statement that “a stage stops being a stage once it ceases to represent something”; in doing so it precludes any nominalist assumptions that would prime the signifying process.

Keywords

Czech theatre theory, Prague School, Prague Linguistic Circle, functional-structural method, semiotics, theatrical sign, signifying process, terminology, taxonomy, Jindřich Honzl, Roman Jakobson, European mystical tradition

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