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Introduction

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Introduction

This book presents a selection of several articles that characterize the main strands of linguistic thinking of Czech functionalists, particularly with respect to the English language. The aim is to bring together some well-known and classic papers, mediate them to current students of linguistics (particularly those focusing on English studies), and, thus, allow them to become acquainted with the major ideas and figures of the Prague School of Linguistics.

While some papers lay out the general linguistic theories proposed by their authors, others deal with quite specific features of English, typically in contrast with Czech and other languages. The selection of the papers is a matter of the editor's individual choice and personal preference: it does not make a claim to presenting the most canonical or the best known texts. With the first article published in 1932 and the last in 1999, the texts in this collection span a rather long period of time. However, although the references are obviously dated, it may come as a surprise to the readers to find how at present – two or three generations later – the papers have lost little of their power and general validity. On all counts, the papers could have been written at the present time, since the approach adopted by their authors is so modern: they all set out to explore the systematic structure of language, made up of mutually interrelated subsystems, with a close regard to the functional explanation of the phenomena of language. The papers are of more than mere historical interest: they do not cease to inspire.

As regards their presentation, the individual chapters open with brief biographical information about their authors. Since one cannot aim to do justice to the work and professional career of the major Czech linguists in a few lines only, the bio-notes are limited to the summing up of some of the most important ideas of each scholar. Each article is also prefaced with the editor's introduction and summary, in which the main points are highlighted. Finally, each text is followed by a set of comprehension questions intended to guide the readers through the core ideas of the texts and aid them in reflecting on the content. Because the chapters contained in this book originally appeared in earlier collections that were often published decades ago, the present publication hopes to make these texts available to current readers.

The papers are included in their original form. While the spelling of the originals has been preserved, some minor editorial adjustments have been made (particularly in the references sections and where typographical mistakes were evident). No attempt was made to include more up-to-date references. Thus, the chapters are presented as snapshots of the time in which they were either written or translated into English for the first time but that, as suggested above, will not detract from the readers' enjoyment and appreciation of the sophistication of the argumentation.

Brno, May 2014