

František Čermák : Prague School of Linguistics Today

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1. Introduction.

Paradoxically, it seems much easier to assess past events than present time, in which we live. While trying to do this in the case of the Prague School of our time, it is, then, difficult to discern, among the new contributions, all of them being, superficially, rather individual, those features and approaches which do enjoy a *broader* acceptance by more than one linguist in each case. These and a continued use and elaboration of *prewar* tenets and concepts of this school set, then, the contemporary Prague scene of, hopefully, a more general nature, which in what follows will be briefly commented on. These remarks are based on various sources, both older and newer, domestic and extraneous (including impressions of some European linguists), which are, however, no guarantee that I will be able to offer an objective overall picture. That must be left to future historians, undoubtedly. It has to be remembered, too, that of the original Prague School members none is alive any longer, although its historian and a prominent figure professor Josef Vachek, has died only last year (1996). Thus, what is called Prague School today is a body of linguists, recently grouped under the heading of the re-established *Cercle linguistique de Prague*, which represent several postwar generations of pupils of such masters of their trade as Vilém Mathesius, Vladimír Skalička, Bohuslav Havránek, Bohumil Trnka or Roman Jakobson. The body of the postwar and contemporary Prague scene, to name just a few, is made up of, next to those I have already mentioned, by such linguists as P. Trost, P. Sgall, M. Dokulil, F. Daneš, J. Firbas, K. Horálek, K. Hausenblas, M. Komárek, J. Krámský, P. Novák, E. Hajičová, O. Leška and others.

In what follows, attention will be paid to various aspects of the *LANGUAGE SYSTEM (or la langue)* first, such as *opposition, centre-periphery* distinction, *function, syntactic patterns* and *language unit* of several kinds (i.e. *phoneme, morphoneme, nomination, lexeme, idiom, utterance*) and some related concepts. In the second part, attention will be drawn to such aspects of the *TEXT (or la parole)* as *dependency, function, valency, topic-focus organization* and some other matters. It should be stressed that, unlike mentalistic and speculative approaches, often based on very few examples from a single language, Prague approaches are, as a rule, highly empirical, resulting in detailed descriptions of what is being proposed, the general framework being a recent brand of structuralism, of course. However, as it is beyond the scope of this contribution, almost no mention will be made here of many specialized branches of Prague linguistics oriented to various languages, and the scope will mostly be limited to contributions by general linguists and Slavists.

2. Language System.

In contrast to the Chomskyan notion of *competence*, seen, basically, as a set of rules of an individual and suggesting both psychological and operational character of something which is, usually, not mentioned explicitly, Prague linguists take a rather different view, here. Following de Saussure, they understand the **language system** not only as a set of rules of an individual, but also as a hierarchical depository of all the building-blocks of language, i.e. of words and lexemes and other language units, shared by a body of speakers in general, out of which each individual speaker has made a somewhat personal selection (nowadays called idiolect). Also the notion of the Chomskyan rules is felt to be inadequate in describing the situation in that it covers rules of grammar only and has, accordingly, to be complemented by a set of functions and a number of other types of rules (socio-linguistic, pragmatic, semantic, stylistic and others), all of them being based on a different kind of convention. These are sometimes called, even today and for the sake of brevity, *norms*. Although this general and traditional concept of **norm**, which is yet to be explored in more depth, especially in its relation to pragmatics, has, among other things, a definite and obvious bearing on the notion of communicative function, too, there is yet another relationship to be brought to attention. Norm may also be understood as a **model** for syntagmatic combinations of many kinds in *la parole*. Recently, this usage of model has gained some frequency especially in syntax.

However, the notion of **system**, if reduced to its substance, is based on relations of many kinds, existing between its units (forms), which are best known as **oppositions**; every language unit is made of a unique set of oppositions. While de Saussure never explicitly tried to specify them, Prague linguists did and their findings seem to have gained a general usage nowadays.

Trubeckoy's set of four types of distinctive oppositions, namely *bilateral-multilateral, proportional-isolated, privative-gradual-equipollent* and *constant-neutralized/neutralizable* is, perhaps, best known, but it is by no means exhaustive in its domain. Both he and others also considered other types, such as *homogeneous-heterogenous, disjunctive-non-disjunctive, linear-non-linear, simple-complex, constant-not-constant or localized-non-localized*,

and, beside well-documented phonology, and they related these oppositions to morphology, lexicology and semantics as well as to suprasegmental tone differentiation and typology. Here, it is especially Jakobson's treatment of the case system which might serve as a well-known example. This development went on finding more complex relations, i.e. **correlations**. To try to enumerate here the number of the correlations found and described (some 40 types), correlation being a more complex concept closely related to opposition and dependence and suggesting a systematic occurrence, is just not possible, for they are too numerous.

It is precisely out of this intellectual relation-based orientation towards breaking structures of both the system and text into a finite set of relations and classifying them that yet another and powerful distinction arose, which found its full treatment and had some interesting consequences only after the last war. This **centre-periphery** distinction is now generally understood as a continuous and gradual, scalar relation or, rather, opposition of what is on the one hand, generally *unmarked* and regular, used rather often and being primary or underived and of what is, on the other hand, *marked* and often irregular, of a lower frequency of use and secondary in its derivational nature. It goes without saying that this distinction, applied to all language strata or levels, exhibits a similar distribution of functional load: what is central in language, be it phonemes, morphemes, lexemes or sentence types, has a high functional load and vice versa. Undoubtedly, this distinction of centre-periphery has evolved from the influential idea of *potentiality* of language phenomena of V. Mathesius, an idea voiced even before de Saussure's *Cours* came out (more about it in 2.).

It is not really relevant, in this context, whether another major and highly employed notion of the Prague analysis, that of **un/markedness**, came into being before or after the centre-periphery distinction. What is relevant, however, is their mutual relation. The notion of markedness, applicable anywhere where at least a binary opposition is to be found, suggesting presence of a system feature in a form (unit) or structure and having thus a simple additional nature, seems to be so general as to be almost pre-theoretical in its nature. It is perhaps because of this that it has been so widely employed, and not only in linguistics.

A major Prague term of **function** brings the development of the original and simple notion of relation to its peak. Though de Saussure used the term rather occasionally, it has, nowadays, become an attribute of several linguistic schools, indeed. The notion of function, present in various approaches in more than one sense, has brought together traditional insular linguistic thinking and atomism with new external influences represented by semiotics, or specifically, by sign. In contradistinction to a quasi-mathematical Hjelmslevian view of the *function* as a *dependency* between functives or entities, the Prague conception of function is somewhat different, stressing that the functional relation is one between an entity or language unit and other units, or, rather, between a unit of a lower order and a higher unit or structure. This is why this view may often be explained as *task or role* played by an element in a structure (reserved originally for phonology only and called *delimitative function*) or in a paradigm (*distinctive function*) etc. Though the basis for this distinction was laid down before the 2nd world war already, a major development in the second sense of the term, that of the **communicative function**, was yet to come in the postwar years. [Let me add, that it is perhaps due to my modest contribution in having translated to Czech both *Omkring sprogteoriens grundlaeggelse* and *Cours de linguistique générale* that some sort of recent bridge between Prague, Hjelmslev and de Saussure could have been re-established leading, e.g., to a recent introduction of Hjelmslev's notion of functive into some Prague contributions.]

Having based his system of six communicative functions on earlier ideas of K. Bühler, B. Malinowski and J. Mukařovský, R. Jakobson offered a whole new basis for viewing both oral and written texts comprehensively. What is important is that this comprehensive character also had a number of semiotic aspects, with the pragmatic one being quite prominent (though under a different label), reaffirming, yet again, the semiotic orientation of the Prague linguistics. A further development of the function in the first sense, i. e. of the distinctive function, is to be seen in a current dichotomy, used nowadays, of **structural function**, being generalized and extrapolated more or less directly from phonology, and **nominative function**, being closely linked with semiotic aspects of the language denomination. Thus, a complementary set of *la langue* and *la parole* functions has been devised, incorporating their relation to sign and, in the ultimate view, to the extralinguistic reality.

Language system has always been viewed, among other things, as having several **strata or levels**, each with a typical unit of its own. There has been some development here, too. While the concept and place of phonology and morphology have, basically, remained - with some refinements taking place in both - the same as before the war, the existence of the level of *lexicon* (lexicology) as one of the major level of the language has been reaffirmed and elaborated into a comprehensive theory and description. It is only to be regretted that the idea of a parallel existence of *interlevels* connecting, in each case, two neighbouring levels, originating in and having been inspired by that of

morpho(pho)nology, has never been pursued to its logical end (known, e.g., from the lectures of professor Skalička). Next to the traditional four levels of phonology and morphology, which have been largely explored in the direction of *word formation*, lexicon and syntax, it has been found that a separate level of *collocations*, due to its specific character and numerous language units belonging here, is feasible as a level as well.

The syntactic level has long been considered to be made up of more than one layer, the best-known picture, perhaps, being offered by the three-level approach (Daneš 1964) in which grammatical structure of the sentence is distinguished from its semantic structure and its propositional (or textual) organization. Attempts have also been made to postulate a level of subjective, mainly evaluational individual expression of the speaker's attitudes (Poldauf 1964), belonging, clearly, into pragmatics. Sometimes, a level of *discourse* or hypersyntax is postulated, too, representing early and some of the first attempts at text linguistics in Prague.

As to the **language units** related to these levels, the traditional repertoire of the *phoneme*, *morpheme*, *morphoneme*, *lexeme (word)* and *sentence* has been expanded to include new units in the lexicon and syntax. Thus lexicology operates, next to word and lexeme with the notion of **(de)nomination**, introduced by V. Mathesius. This term, linked explicitly with the nominative function of the language units, mentioned above, suggests an operational approach, on the speaker's part, to facts and ideas he wants to put in words in a sentence, primarily. Since many nominations are stable and repeatable, a number of them forms a part of the speaker's lexicon, or, rather, vocabulary. Viewed statically, they include, on the one hand, words or lexemes, but also *idioms (phrasemes)* and all of the set non-idiomatic combinations, including those which have a sentence character and which it is difficult to call lexemes (Filipec-Čermák 1985). While idioms are viewed as anomalous combinations of many kinds and are to be distinguished against the full background of all paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations in the system only, the semantic aspect, which is just one of many here, comes to the fore in the treatment of the nomination in the field of the word formation (Dokulil 1962). Here, a successful and unique attempt at an onomasiological theory of the denomination has been made, resulting into a highly convincing and detailed description of the whole field; the original theory has been influential also abroad, being, among other things, translated into Polish. Similarly, the theory of idioms has been successfully applied to a description, resulting into a multi-volume dictionary of Czech idioms.

In relation to lexical-type units, at least one more remark must be made here. It is now currently admitted that words, lexemes or idioms alike have an intrinsic, system-based quality called *valency*, which - present as their combinatorial, syntagmatic potential in the lexicon - is being realised (actualised) in syntactic operations of the utterance (i.e. an occurrence of a sentence, primarily). This important notion, originally employed in syntax exclusively, has become a basis of a whole new syntactic approach, which I will come to later.

In syntax, the term of *utterance* (promluva, later also výpověď, vyskazivanije, Sprachäusserung), has been around since the prewar times, though a major elaboration (by Skalička 1937 and others) came later. It is, as is well known, such an act of la parole which is identified by the unity of the speaker, time and place and may be interpreted as an elementary semiotic reaction to an impulse of some sort; as such, it represents the first major breakthrough into the territory of la parole. Its functional character (being a reaction to an impulse) as well as a semiotic and communication-oriented one (being, among other things, indexical) is evident. It is true that this type of unit may seem to be quite broad and, accordingly, vague, as it may range, in its form, from a single word to a novel of several hundred pages if written in the *ich-form* (especially without any full stops). But it is significant that no later attempts at a more precise segmentation of text into some sort of units, primarily those of the speech acts theory, have ever scored a complete success and unambiguous acceptance, having been left equally vague and, which more is important, selective of the field that they are supposed to cover.

Another development in syntax, related to the view of the system and its norms, or models, referred to above, took place in an elaboration of the *syntactic patterns* which are seen as system-based and which may, ultimately, be traced to de Saussure himself, though this fact is hardly ever mentioned at all. These patterns are then structural patterns, limited in number, which serve as models for the formation of sentences on several levels. In a recent development, this idea has been linked with that of *valency* and further elaborated into a comprehensive theory of syntax.

Such units as morpheme, lexeme (word) or idiom, though not phoneme or sentence, are traditionally viewed as language **signs**. The prewar discussion and doubts, never really protracted in Prague, about the *arbitrary character* of these signs are now over, the original Saussurean tenet being held to be true in a modified form. The widely accepted modification, in the sense of limited intra-language motivation of some signs, has been further elaborated

primarily in idioms; it is also reflected in Mathesius's distinction of *descriptive (motivated) nomination* vs. *simple nomination*.

So far, these remarks have focussed on the language system in general, which is viewed synchronically. However, such a synchronic view is possible only once the crucial distinction of **synchrony-diachrony** is made and satisfactorily established. And that has been, of course, one of the major controversial points in the past, where especially Jakobson and Trnka voiced numerous objections, also after the war, against this distinction of de Saussure. Some views go so far as to weaken substantially or reject altogether the synchrony-diachrony distinction (Trnka 1988, 195): "The Linguistic circle of Prague conceives language as a system of sign oppositions (and concludes, at the same time, that it does not cease to be a structure and system even in its historical development). By applying the notion of language system to its historical perspective, the Circle has reconciled linguistic diachrony with synchrony, contrary to F. de Saussure's theory" (the part in parentheses is from the somewhat larger Czech original, p. 192).

The misunderstanding behind these words indicates clearly that Trnka never linked the synchrony-diachrony distinction with the crucial notion of the state of language which is viewed differently in different periods and is the basis for postulating existence of the system. De Saussure could have never argued that the historical periods are devoid of system; what he would have stressed, instead, is that every single state of language must have its own system. Of course, this has been an extreme position taken in the protracted discussion by one scholar only, and Trnka may not not be quite right in formulating this view also on behalf of the other Praguians.

It is clear that much of the misunderstanding behind such attitudes stems from a bad reading of de Saussure's *Cours* which was partly due to a lack of Czech translation (prepared and published by myself only recently). It is evident now that de Saussure (*Cours*, pages 234-5) viewed the language state as constantly fluctuating, hesitating and full of imperfect analyses where no absolute dividing-line between what is strictly synchronous and diachronous could be drawn. Perhaps the controversy could never have arisen if he had kept the original distinction *statique-dynamique*, abandoned later for *synchronique-diachronique* one. It is something of an irony that roughly at the same time and under the same names Vilém Mathesius used in Prague, in his study of 1911, which de Saussure had no way of knowing, of course, the term *static (fluctuation)* opposed to *dynamic (changeability)*, a term very much in use even nowadays. The general term for the static character of the synchronous language system used by Mathesius (1911) was **potentiality of language**, which he characterized, accordingly, as dynamic oscillation and fluctuation of its elements.

Of course, in a discussion of this kind, one has to distinguish individual views and suggestions, however extreme sometimes, from the mainstream of thought. The latter may be seen, for the Prague School, in the prestigious *Grammar of Czech* of B. Havránek, one of the founding members of the Prague School, and A. Jedlička (1981); the book has helped to form several postwar generations of Czech linguists. The quotations refer unequivocally to the undisputed acceptance of this Saussurean dichotomy: "Scientifically explained description and analysis of language from the point of view of its state in a given time is called *synchronic*" (p.10). "Such a scientific explanation of language from the point of view of its development is called *diachronic*, or just traditionally, *historic* (developmental)" (p.12). In what follows, both the terms *static* and *dynamic* as well as the idea of fluctuating and dynamic character of language is mentioned, too. Consequently, attempts at any major discussion or revision have stopped ever since.

But the attempts at getting to the essence of the language went on and some of them took a very general and abstract shape, indeed, covering all languages. The ideas of **language typology** from the past were taken up by V. Skalička and given a coherent frame of five major *language types* (isolating, inflectional, agglutinative, introflexional and polysynthetic), which are conceived of as ideal constructs made of a number (i.e. over 20) mutually supporting features. It is supposed, in contrast, that natural languages are a mixture of different features of more than one type. Skalička's best contributions and typological analyses of many languages came all after the war; some of them came out in 1979 in a volume published in German. One can only speculate how far his ideas, representing one of the finest and realistic theories of typology at all, have influenced, supposedly through Jakobson in America, the later development of the theory of language universals. Of course, there have been some modifications and extensions of Skalička's approach (such as that of Sgall 1986), stressing, for example, as the core of each type one predominant feature only, from which a number of other features can be deduced; for most purposes, such a major feature may be seen in the manner in which grammatical and derivative values are expressed in form (i.e. by morpheme, its alternation and order).

3. TEXT

It is not surprising that the post-war Prague linguists, having taken over basic views of the language system from the prewar period, have paid an increased attention to matters of text.

First and foremost, attention has long been paid, traditionally, to the analysis of the **sentence** where a number of *dependency* approaches have evolved. It is perhaps of some interest that no overt reference was made to L. Tesnière, a French member of the prewar Prague school, until valency theories sprung up in Europe some two decades ago, which is to say that there has been, in part, an independent parallel development in Prague. It is now clear that dependency analysis is not just a notational variant of constituent analysis and that it is controlled by quite different principles but it also seems, that dependency analysis allows for more patterns of structure derived from heads and, accordingly, for a greater amount of information conveyed by such analysis than constituency approaches do; in other words, valency frames employed offer much more information than, e.g., theta grids. Moreover, the degree of formalization that such versions of dependency description as those of functional generative description by P. Sgall et al. (1986) are able to achieve is equally high as that of other, purely generative approaches. Whereas it makes do without transformations on the one hand, this approach incorporates, on the other hand, both valency and functional sentence perspective component, representing, thus, much more than a theory of the sentence only (Sgall 1993). The former, i.e. valency, is conceived of as a vertical dimension in the dependency tree, while the latter as a horizontal dimension of the deep word order.

It should be stressed, however, that both valency and *functional sentence perspective* theory or, rather, *topic and focus* theory, the latter having been brought into Czech linguistics in the prewar papers of V. Mathesius and developed most consistently by J. Firbas (1992) and his followers, are current concern of many other Czech linguists, too (Daneš 1974, Mluvnice češtiny 1986, 1987). The original dichotomy of topic and comment (theme and rheme), modelled, basically, after the "known-new" distinction and viewed as a pragmatic component of text, has been added a third component of transition, elaborated to a considerable detail, as well as a scalar view of the communicative dynamism by which the notion of the degree of communicative information has been introduced. Due to the need to elaborate the concept of the focus, primarily, considerable attention has been paid to the problem of negation and presupposition (Hajičová 1973), too. It has also been demonstrated (Daneš 1974) that the concept of the topic-focus dichotomy is relevant for the structure of discourse where the position of a sentence is due to the way its topic-focus organization looks like.

At the same time, since topic-focus partition of the sentence, situated in its deep structure, is an inherent part of it, it became clear that it is an indispensable part of any semantic analysis of the sentence. By the same virtue, this distinction must be viewed as a mechanism allowing the *interactive*, functional communicative modification of the basic propositional structure of the sentence, based, among other things, on the theory of communicative functions of Jakobson, too. In the ultimate view, this sort of theoretical approach to text and its parts reaffirms the teleological (teleonomic) view of language, jointly stressed already by Jakobson and others (which became familiar as "means-ends model of language", Vachek 1967), in which this *philosophy of language* may be phrased as seeing it as a set of purposive means serving a goal. Once adopted, however, this view leads to some of the basic questions one can ask about language, such as: is it here primarily where the communicative needs of this order, if not fully satisfied by the existing means, give rise, ultimately, to changes of the system and are the very source of diachrony that F. de Saussure had in mind (and that Jakobson viewed as constituting a system within diachrony) ?

Like the topic-focus theory, *valency* has become, next to its treatment by Sgall et alii, a major, in fact, a core part of valency-based theory of syntax by Daneš and others. Here, the concept of valency, limited to that of the verb so far, has become an integral part of the *sentence-patterns* theory of syntax, in which more than one level of these patterns is considered. A prominent role in this theory, which materialized into a recent grammar of Czech language (1987), is played by the attention paid to semantics which became a substantial part of it. Unfortunately, the boundary between various semantically-based actants and, more generally, between the syntax itself and the lexicon, is yet in need of more elaboration. A significant development in the theory of valency has been the distinction of obligatory versus optional participants, seen as internal, which have been contrasted with free modifications of the verb (these being also obligatory in such cases as *to behave somehow, to arrive somewhere*).

4. OTHER ISSUES

A number of links between linguistics and other disciplines have been established before the war already. This has been going on after the war, too, where structuralist approaches to *semiotics and aesthetics*, represented by J.

Mukařovský, and by theories of the *standard language and functional styles*, represented by B. Havránek, primarily, have to be mentioned, though Jakobson, too, had much to say along these lines.

Last, but not least, wide and long-term attention paid to matters of *writing*, and *graphemic systems* by J. Vachek has to be mentioned.

5. CONCLUSION

Due to a traditional and ever-growing emphasis on *relation* (dependency, valency etc.), our focus of interest is gradually being shifted from static and somewhat primitive (paradigmatic) classifications and mere abstract phrase-structure syntax approaches with no place for any substance and words left, to these syntagmatic aspects of language units. However, there is much in the paradigmatic aspects where further development is to be desired. But, it also seems nowadays, among other things, that the role of the **word** as the central unit of the language, since de Saussure's times somewhat neglected in some approaches, is, yet again, getting an increased attention, being reaffirmed as an entity made of a bundle of features, Saussurean oppositions.

Mathesius' influence is still very much alive in Prague; all of the notions referred to above, representing an organic and compact blend of both prewar and postwar thinking, seem to have become international and are being used, in varying degree, in non-Prague milieus, too. Their impact may be different in different countries, which is only natural, but all of them seem to have remained stimuli for others.

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