

The Linguistic School of Prague and Functionalism

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This paper is an attempt to review the historical development of structural functionalism held by the Prague school of linguistics in the 1920s and 1930s, in consideration of the influences on the following generation of linguistic studies. As is well known, structural linguistics in Europe is in general said to have begun in 1916 with the posthumous publication of the *Cours de Linguistique Général* (henceforth, *CLG*) by Ferdinand de Saussure. Much of what is now considered as Saussurean can be already seen, though less clearly, in the earlier work of Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), and the general structural principles that Saussure was to develop with respect to synchronic linguistics in the *CLG* had been applied almost 40 years before by Saussure himself in *Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles dans les langues indo-européennes* (1879). It is a matter of regret that the importance of the work was not appropriately appreciated at the time. Saussure's structuralism can be summed up in two dichotomies, which jointly cover what Humboldt referred to in terms of his straightforward distinction of inner and outer form: langue versus parole and form versus substance. By langue, Saussurean sense as language system, is meant the totality of regularities and patterns of formation that underlie the utterances of a language; by parole, which can be translated as language behavior, is meant the actual set of utterances themselves. Structuralism in the European sense at that time refers to the view that there is an abstract relational structure that underlies and is to be distinguished from actual utterances, i.e., a system underlying actual behavior and that this is the primary object of study for the linguists.

Two important points occur to me here: first, that the structural approach is not in principle restricted to synchronic linguistics; second, that the study of meaning, as well as the study of phonology and grammar, can be structural in orientation. In both cases structuralism is opposed to atomism in the European literature. It is Saussure who draws the terminological distinction between synchronic and diachronic linguistics in the *CLG*, and despite the undoubtedly structural orientation of his own early work in the historical and comparative field, he maintains that, whereas synchronic linguistics should deal with the structure of a language system at a given point in time, diachronic linguistics should be concerned with the development of isolated elements, which it could be atomistic. Whatever the reasons that lead Saussure to take this rather paradoxical view, his reasoning

on this point is not generally accepted, and scholars soon begin to apply structural concepts to the diachronic study of languages.

The other important group of linguistics in Europe a decade after the publication of the *CLG* is the Prague Linguistic Circle, which is established centering around Vilém Mathesius (1882-1945) and his followers in 1926. The group of linguists was labeled as functional structuralism or characterized by functionalism as well as structuralism. The linguistic scholars and others applying the new methods of structural analysis came around to attend at the meetings at irregular intervals. 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 beginning of the classic period of the Prague Linguistic School (1926-1939), which was characterized by the cross-fertilization of ideas between the scholars all over the world and the foundation of the main body of highly original theoretical work about the structural and functional nature of language. The emergence of the circle coincided with the time when European linguistics was in search of a new theoretical paradigm for linguistic studies. In April 1928, the First International Congress of Linguists was organized in The Hague, partly with the aim of dealing with the issue. The congress was convened in order to discuss which method was suitable for a full description of language. At the conference, Roman Jakobson (1893-1978), Nikolai Trubetzkoy (1890-1938), V. Mathesius, and Sergej I. Karcevskij (1887-1955) made a joint proposal for a new analysis based on a synchronically-oriented description. The proposal was readily adopted by all the participants at the conference. The members of the circle so actively participated in international congresses and conferences that they are, for the first time, referred to as to "L'École de Prague" in 1932 by the organizer of the First International Congress of Phonetic Sciences in Amsterdam. As has been already observed by the founding members of the school, their formulations of the guiding principles would in the aggregate differ from author to author or, to make bad things worse, from paper to paper. About the academic question, Josef Vachek remarks:

... that the Prague group has never formed anything like a dogmatically closed body; while it has been united in the basic acceptance of the structuralist and functionalist standpoint, in matters of implementation of the common principles there has always been a great variety of opinion. (1966. 8)

In the consideration of this situation, it is useful to trace the alleged notion of function back to the origin of it in the classic period of the school in the period between from 1926 marked by the first meeting of the school taken place and 1939 also marked by the publication of N. S. Trubetzkoy's *Grundzüge der Phonologie* in *TCLP* 7. Above all things, it is the first to do for a fruitful discussion of the school heredity to note that, as mentioned

above, Mathesius plays a leading role of forming and stabilizing the guidelines of the many-sided activities of the group from the beginning. Originally, he studies English literary history and general linguistics and since the early twenties concentrates more and more the study of language. As Founder and President of the school until his death, he is energetically involved in the synchronistic approach to language facts. The document, "Deset let Pražského lingvistického kroužku", which is translated by J. Vachek in 1966 as "Ten years of the Prague Linguistic Circle", is published in 1936. It is a scrupulous survey which covers the full story of the school at the period. He also delivers at the Royal Czech Society of Sciences on February 6, 1911 and publishes in the Bulletin of the society under the title "On the Potentiality of the Phenomena of Language" in the same year. The treatise is a strong piece of evidence why he is acknowledged as a pioneer of "linguistic characterology," of which he works out the method in numerous writings, applying the analytical comparison to English and Czech. This may be said to be the same immediate reaction to the *CLG* by Saussure as can be seen in Otto Jespersen's writings *Mankind, Nation and Individual from a Linguistic Point of View* (1925) and *Efficiency in Linguistic Change* (1940).

This academically very tense atmosphere stimulates the fifteen linguists over eight countries (Australia, Bulgaria, Germany, Holland, Norway, Poland, Switzerland and Yugoslavia) to issue a more systematic programme, which they may work on some 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 presented to the First Congress of Slavists held in Prague in 1929*, is an extensive document drafted by the above mentioned scholars. At the very beginning of the *Theses*, the functional premise of the discipline is presented as follows:

Resulting from human activity, language partakes in its purposefulness. Whether one analyses language as expression or as communication, it is the intention of the speaker which can explain it in a most evident and most natural manner. For this reason, linguistic analysis should respect the functionalist standpoints. *Seen from the functionalist viewpoint, language is a system of purposeful means of expression.* No fact of language can be understood without regard to the system to which it pertains. Slavic linguistics, too, cannot avoid this topical complex of problems. (1983. 77)

This programmatic statement above reads in a surprisingly modern sense even now. From the theses, the notion of functionalism plays an important role in the theoretical paradigm of linguistic analysis. By the term function is meant a task, a piece of work to be done or undertaken among the language system.

In his *The Western Classical Tradition in Linguistics* (2007. 254), Keith Allen says

that the functionalism holds that linguistic structures can only be understood and explained with reference to the semantic and communicative functions of language, whose primary function is to be a vehicle for social interaction among human beings. Since the 1970s, inspired by the functionalism in the works of such linguists as Otto Jespersen (1860-1943), Dwight Bolinger (1907-1992), Talmy Givón (1936-), Simon Dik (1940-1995), M. A. K. Halliday (1925-), Wallace Chafe (1927-), Jan Nuyts (1988), functionalism has been attached to a variety of linguistic movements and models making major contributions to the main trends of linguistics in general and various subfields within linguistics, such as syntax, discourse, language acquisition, typology and applied linguistics. The main goal of functionalistic approaches to language is to clarify the dynamic relationship between form and function which is observed in the above theses.

While the members of the Prague school have traditionally emphasized the systemic and structural character of language, the above definition in the statement also indicates another important implication, i.e. the connection between language and the speaker's intention, which is in principle ignored in and sharply stands in contrast to the structuralism by the *CLG*. In the Saussurean sense, the speaker's intentions can be no object of linguistic studies whatsoever, because they are connected with the actual utterances produced with some goal-orientation, which definitely belong to parole. In this point, the proclamation in the theses anticipates the more local speech agenda of linguistic disciplines in the linguistic movements of the second half of the 20th century.

The first origins of the notion of the speaker orientation and functionalist standpoint in the Prague School come from Anton Marty (1847-1914), professor of philosophy at Prague and disciple of the German phenomenologist philosopher Franz Brentano (1838-1917). Marty is not a linguist, but as a philosopher he takes part in the subject-predicate debate that is going on around the turn of the century. In various writings, many of which are published posthumously, he maintains that no matter what differences can be posited between grammatical and semantic structure, it is misleading to apply the terms 'subject' and 'predicate' to both levels of analysis. In his view, logic does not come into semantics at all: everything semantic is psychological, not logical. Moreover, the grammatical form of a sentence expresses not only its abstract propositional meaning but also its less abstract linguistic meaning or 'inner form', which corresponds more closely to surface structure and intonation and is determined by the way the propositional meaning is to be integrated into running discourse. Like other psychologists at that time, such as Theodor Lipps (1851-1914) and George Frederik Stout (1860-1944), Marty considers discourse-bounded modes of presentation ('inner form') to be guided largely by question-answer structure. The terms 'subject' and 'predicate' are most

appropriately used at the 'inner form' level, since what defines a predicate is the attribution of a property to something, which is the subject, and this mental construct is achieved when new information is added to what is already there in the discourse. These arguments can also be seen in G. Graffi (2010).

Never does Marty carry out any actual linguistic analysis. All he presented is general philosophical argument, and much polemic with contemporary authors, especially Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1929), Heymann Steinthal (1823-1899), Hermann Paul (1846-1921), Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and Alexius Meinong (1853-1920). His style of writing is dense and irritating, which makes his writings not very attractive to read. It is probably for these reasons that he is less influential than expected. But the modern specialist, who reads Marty against the background of present-day analyses and theories, quickly recognizes, despite terminological differences, notions and insights that are not only highly relevant in the current debate on meaning and grammar but also show the balanced and mature judgment underlying his overall approach and ideas. Cf. A. Kobayashi (1976).

It seems to me that the same also applies to W. Wundt's psychology, which attempts to give a systematic psychology to language as well. According to V. Mathesius, the scholar doesn't become a starting point of the new linguistic research. It is not that psychology but the appropriate linguistic feeling of the scholars that might lead to newly founding of a linguistically significant framework of language research. It is due to the fact that Wundt regards spontaneous expression as the sole basis of language and takes for granted that differences of language directly reflect differences of thought. Under the interpretation of the theses, language, which is originally the means of spontaneous expression only, has definitely developed on the basis of communicative function. According to *Dictionnaire de linguistique del'École de Prague*, (1960), it is easy to understand the reason why hot linguistic issues, in particular, the ones about the relations of language and thinking, occur to the psychologists in the contemporary time. This comes out of the deliberately much attention paid to the functional aspect of language and thinking because the linguists of the school stress not only the importance of the relations existing within language systems but also the relations of language systems and language utterances to extra-linguistic reality. At the first view, the latter may lead to the historically legitimate motive for philosophical linguistic research. Perhaps upon close investigation, however, it is not satisfactorily respected because of the so-called linguistic psychologism, which states that language is essentially a psychological phenomena and that linguistic categories should therefore be based on psychological ones.

V. Mathesius, the founder of the circle, is the first professor of English language and literature at the Faculty of Arts in Prague. In the above mentioned treatise (1911) entitled

as “On the potentiality of the phenomena of language,” he submits ‘potentiality,’ the key word in the lecture to the society that is defined by Mathesius as denoting two kinds of phenomena:

- 1) static (or synchronistic) oscillation of speech among the individuals inside the communities of language which connects itself up with linguistics and
- 2) static oscillation of speech of an individual which connects itself up with stylistics.

The two kinds of static (i.e. synchronic) oscillation or fluctuation of linguistic phenomena, which may be also referred to as inherent changeability and instability, belong to the different levels of language analysis, i.e., linguistics and stylistics. The ranges of the oscillations can both infinitely extend over human speech, whether for an individual or for a community. The keen eyes of the functional linguist are directed straight to the variation which could be found in spoken language. He straightforwardly challenges the myth of the constancy of individual’s speech, giving evidence of such oscillation or variation from some levels of language, i.e. the variability in phonetic realization of individual sounds in the speech of the same individuals. This is a clear statement of the underlying systemic nature of the sound system that is to be later developed in the phonology.

There is one more thing worthy of note about his functionalism that is firmly connected with the importance of what is often called as a double-faced character of linguistic phenomena. The double-faced character consists in a continuous fluctuation between the general and the individual concerning language use. At least, the two functions of language use are mentioned in ‘New Currents and Tendencies in Linguistic Research.’: an expressional function and a communicative function. On one occasion, the expressional function of language is conventionalized through automatization by the communicative function. On another occasion, the new expressional function of language is created through foregrounding of the communicative function. Thus, new forms of expression are derived on the model of the existing means of expression or the changing meaning of old forms. Through the constant adaptation of new linguistic means, linguistic phenomena are almost always double-faced with the individual and the general.

On the goal of linguistics, he states further as follows:

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 or 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)

Mathesius is against the earlier historicism which is greatly exercised by the neo-grammarians of the 19th century, instead promoting synchronic linguistics. However, he intends to separate the static and dynamic conceptions of language, well understanding the difference between synchronic and diachronic conceptions of language. He also mentions that the two would be complementary methods in linguistic analysis, which may lead to cause a different attitude from Saussure and that the synchronic oscillation or fluctuation may be the cause of language change.

In later works, Mathesius proposes the theory of linguistic characterology, which is the synchronic description of languages on the basis of its typical features that can be found out by means of the method of analytical comparison. In addition to that new linguistic field, he also postulates the basic framework which is to be established as functional sentence perspective by Jan Firbas in the second half of the century. Mathesius' ideas of the interrelationship between language and reality and his emphasis on the role of the specific situation and language users including speaker and hearer are integrated into being possible to regard him as a precursor of the topics studied half a century later in pragmatics. He strongly emphasizes the goal-oriented nature of communication and the inevitable strand with the speakers' intention and the hearers' receptive situations so that his structuralism would be consequently associated or identified with the original nature of the functional stratification of language.

Another important point about the oscillation or fluctuation of language in the theses comes from the demand to investigate language variation in a systematic way. The following extract provides 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 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 utterances, and languages of different groups.

This idea of functional dialectology may lead to the paradigm of N. S. Trubetzkoy's language union and families. He attempts to make a distinction between two types of language groups: unions, which display remarkable similarities in their syntactic, morphological and phonological structure and families, characterized primarily by the

same basic grammatical features and essential vocabulary.

From the historical view of functionalism in the linguistic school of Prague, we now arrive at the conclusion that Vilém Mathesius is in theory in sharp contrast to Saussure and really a forerunner of the modern functional grammar. Certainly, it would be to our benefit to read and understand 'Prospectus Somewhat Jaundiced' in T. Givón (1995) in a deep understanding of the structural functional linguistics in the school of Prague.

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