

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE PRAGUE SCHOOL TO THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE

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„Universitatea 1 Decembrie 1918”, Alba Iulia

The Prague Linguistic Circle represented an important moment in the development of phonology, structuralism and linguistics in general and it prepared the grounds for research and the subsequent evolution of linguistics. The paper attempts a general view on what The Prague School meant for linguistics and it aims at giving a general survey on the activity and on the contributions brought by The Prague Linguistic Circle. It focuses on the novelty which the most important members of the Prague Linguistic Circle brought to linguistics and it points out the importance of the Prague School moment in the history of linguistics.

The Prague Linguistic Circle came into being and properly started its activity in 1926, the official year of its members' first meeting and the "so-called" classical period in the activity of the circle. However, its members' earlier preoccupations and research in the field of language and their first irregular meetings should not be left aside. These supplied material for the papers and works which were later written and published by the members of the Prague School and represented the foundations on which further research was built. The circle's roots can be dated back as far as 1911 when Vilém Mathésius, who was to become an important member of the circle, independently of and without having any connection with Ferdinand de Saussure, predicted the synchronic study of language. The preoccupations and the research of its members did not emerge out of nothing, they set out with a solid foundation behind them. The forerunners of The Prague Linguistic Circle had been Ferdinand de Saussure's "Course in General Linguistics" and the Moscow Linguistic Circle, founded in 1915. The members of the Moscow Linguistics Circle were interested in and also dealt with problems regarding language and linguistics. The sources on which its members' studies were based were Ferdinand de Saussure's and Baudouin de Courtenay's works. Due to historical background and events which occurred there (The October Revolution from Russia) the members of the Moscow Linguistic Circle were forced to leave Russia and to continue their activity elsewhere. Roman Jakobson and Nicholay Serghey Trubetzkoy fled to Czechoslovakia, where they joined The Prague Linguistic Circle. Besides the scholars of Russian origin The Prague Linguistic Circle also counted among its founding members personalities such as Vilém Mathésius, Seghey Karcévsky, Jan Mukarovsky. In 1930s younger members joined the circle: René Wellek and Felix Vodicka and many visitors among whom Emile Benveniste had the opportunity of presenting papers in the circle. The circle united scholars who wrote and published their papers in German, French, Russian and Czech. They had the same preoccupations and interests without creating in and without using the same language. Up to that point mention should be made upon an important aspect in the activity of the circle, namely its multilingualism. Moreover not only did The Prague Linguistic Circle benefit from the former activity of the Moscow Linguistic Circle but it also inherited the legacy left in the field of language by Ferdinand de Saussure. All these turned The Prague Linguistic Circle into one of the most influential, multilingual and important schools of linguistics before the war. In 1928, at the first International Congress of Linguistics organized in The Hague, the Prague participants presented the Prague Circle program drafted by Roman Jakobson and co-signed by Nicholay Serghey Trubetzkoy and Seghey Karcévsky. A year later, in 1929 at The First International

Congress of Slavists held in Prague, the Prague scholars launched “Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague” where they recorded and published the results of their efforts. The first volume of “Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague”, volume entitled “Thèses du Cercle Linguistique de Prague” sets out the principles of the new linguistics, a structural linguistics. The war broke out with the consequences it brought about. One of the consequences was the non-stimulating intellectual background, the lack of intellectual incentives the Czech universities being closed by the Nazis. The members of the circle had time to make public their ideas and their program but after the outbreak of the war the circle could not properly continue its activity and toned it down. They continued to meet in private places until 1945 when they could publicly resume their activities. By this time they had already lost some important members either due to natural death, Nicholay Serghy Trubetzkoy and Vilem Mathesius or due to exile, Roman Jakobson who had fled to the United States of America. However, even with the interruptions caused by the war, there was not any area of language to remain unexploited by the members of The Prague Linguistic Circle.

As regards linguistics, the members of the circle laid down as the basis for further research, important concepts and theories such as the approach to the study of language as a synchronic system, the functionality of elements of language and the importance of the social function of language. In the field of linguistics they were greatly influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure and by his incipient structuralism. Structuralism is unanimously believed to have appeared in 1916 when Ferdinand de Saussure’s “Course in General Linguistics” was published and Ferdinand de Saussure is considered father of structuralism.¹ He left a legacy, which greatly influenced linguistics in general and the first to be influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure were the members of the Prague Linguistic Circle. It is The Prague School by its exceptionally prolific scholar, Roman Jakobson, which is responsible for coining the term structuralism in 1929. One can detect in the earlier works of Wilhelm von Humboldt and Baudouin de Courtenay much of Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory. Ferdinand de Saussure’s structuralism is to be found in his two dichotomies: langue/vs/parole and form/vs/substance. By langue Saussure understands the totality of regularities and patterns of formation that underlie the utterances of a language while parole represents language behaviour. This is what Wilhelm von Humboldt and Baudouin de Courtenay referred to and when they made the distinction between inner and outer form. The Prague members approached language systematically and structurally and they defined language as a system of signs. This is how the definition of language is conceived by Trubetzkoy, an important member of the circle: “un système phonologique n’est pas la somme mécanique des phonèmes isolés mais un tout organique dont les phonèmes sont les membres et dont la structure est soumise à des lois”². In studying language the Prague scholars took into account and attached a great importance to external factors (political, social and geographical factors). A strong emphasis was laid on the functions of language and this emphasis included both the function of language in the act of communication and the role of language in society. Linguists of the Prague Circle stressed the function of elements within language, the contrast of language elements to one another and the total pattern or system formed by these contrasts and they have distinguished themselves in the study of sound system. Prague structuralism is functionalistic. Functionalism represents approaching language from the perspective of the functions performed by it. The Prague School becomes famous for its interest in the application of functionalism, the study of how elements of a language accomplish cognition, expression and conation. This combination of structuralism with functionalism is yet another contribution to modern linguistics. Starting from Karl Buhler’s tripartite system (emotive, conative and referential), Roman Jakobson was to develop a model of the functions of language, model which, has marked a decisive influence on literary theory.

Another distinction made by Ferdinand de Saussure and adopted by the members of the Prague Linguistic Circle is synchrony- diachrony. Ferdinand de Saussure made the distinction between diachronic and synchronic linguistics, he maintained that whereas synchronic linguistics should deal

with the structure of a language at a given point in time, diachronic linguistics should be concerned with the historical development of isolated elements. To support this distinction, he argued that in the language system there are only differences without positive terms and every element derives its identity from its distinction to other elements in the same system. What the members of The Prague Linguistic Circle did was that they tried to reconcile Ferdinand de Saussure's opposition of synchrony and diachrony. In supporting this Vilém Mathésius pointed out the positive and negative aspects of descriptive and historical research and Roman Jakobson taking into account Saussure's theory stated that Saussure tried to suppress the tie between the system of a language and its modifications by considering the system as exclusively belonging to synchrony and assigning modifications to the sphere of diachrony alone. Moreover Jakobson showed that, as indicated in the different social sciences, the concepts of a system and its change are not only compatible but also indissolubly tied.

The Prague School is basically associated with its phonology, with its phonologically relevant functions: expressive and demarcative and with the theory of oppositions which its members (Trubetzkoy) provided linguistics with. In fact, the distinction between phonetics and phonology is associated with The Prague Linguistic Circle. In the field of phonology two members of the circle stand out: Roman Jakobson and Nicholay Serghy Trubetzkoy, both of Russian origin and both former members of the Moscow Linguistic Circle. The circle's preoccupations in phonetics and phonology date from the outset of its coming into being. At the International Congress of Linguistics, held in 1928, the members of the Prague Linguistic Circle presented the famous Proposition 22, which became the manifesto of the circle. This program of the Prague Linguistic Circle changed the development of the European linguistics and marked the beginning of a new science- phonology. This new science operates with concepts, which are to become important for analytical grammar: opposition, synchrony, diachrony, marked, unmarked. Phonology represented yet another contribution brought by the Prague Linguistic Circle. It introduced new concepts, which were further inherited by linguists and linguistics. This is how phonology is described by its founders: "Toute description scientifique de la phonologie d'une langue doit avant tout comprendre la caractéristique du repertoire, propre à cette langue, des differences significatives entre les images acoustico- motrices. (...) La phonologie comparee a à formuler les lois générales qui régissent les rapports des corrélations dans les cadres d'un système phonologique donné. L'antinomie de la phonologie synchronique et de la phonétique diachronique se trouverait être supprimée du moment que les changements phonétiques seraient considérés en fonction du système phonologique qui les subit. Le problème du but dans lequel ces changements ont lieu doit être posé. La phonétique historique se transforme ainsi en une histoire de l'évolution d'un système phonologique. D'autre part, le problème du finalisme des phénomènes phonétiques fait, que dans l'étude du côté extérieur de ces phénomènes, c'est l'analyse acoustique qui doit ressortir au premier plan."³. As it is conceived by the members of the circle, phonology has the following tasks: to identify the characteristics of particular phonological systems in terms of the language particular range of significant differences among "acoustico-motor images"; to specify the types of differences that can be found in general; to formulate laws governing the relations of these correlations to one another within particular phonological systems; to found phonetic studies on acoustic rather than articulatory basis.

Trubetzkoy chiefly contributed to phonology and phonological theory. He signed the birth certificate of functional phonology, he made the distinction between phonetics and phonology by taking into account the criterion of function and he also formulated the principles of phonology. It is also Trubetzkoy who provided the school's most encompassing and thorough work on phonology: "Principles of Phonology". In separating phonetics from phonology and phoneme from sound, Trubetzkoy adopted Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between langue and parole. Trubetzkoy defined the phoneme as a set of distinctive features and he linked the concept of neutralization with the distinction marked/unmarked. According to his theory when two phonemes are distinguished by

the presence/absence of a single distinctive feature one of them is marked and the other unmarked. Not only is he responsible for coining and circulating concepts of neutralization and archiphoneme, but he also laid stress on the concept of phonological opposition and founded a new theory, the theory of opposition. However, Trubetzkoy did not develop this theory without a solid ground behind him. Once again they turned to Ferdinand de Saussure's "Course in General Linguistics". It is Ferdinand de Saussure who creates and initiates this term of opposition: "De îndată ce comparăm între ele semnele-termeni pozitivi-, nu mai putem vorbi de diferență; expresia ar fi improprie, pentru că ea nu se aplică bine decât comparației dintre două imagini acustice, de exemplu tată și mamă, sau la cea dintre două idei, de exemplu ideea de „tată” și ideea de „mamă”; două semne ce comportă fiecare un semnificat și un semnificant nu sunt diferite; ele sunt numai distincte. Între ele nu există decât opoziție. Întreg mecanismul limbajului, despre care vom vorbi mai departe, se bazează pe opoziții de acest gen și pe diferențele fonice sau conceptuale pe care le implică ele"⁴. Trubetzkoy did more than Saussure, in analysing oppositions he stated that oppositions suppose a base of comparison, similarity and properties, which are different. It is he who distinguished different types of oppositions, who gave a classification of oppositions and extensive examples of the different oppositions of various languages. Along with Roman Jakobson, Trubetzkoy attached a great importance to the oppositions among phonemes rather than to phonemes themselves. For Roman Jakobson oppositions represent the constitutive features of relations among phonemes. Jakobson initiated the theory of binary oppositions by which he states that the system of linguistic units depends on the idea of difference and the idea of difference depends on binary opposites. This is how Jakobson describes the system of binary oppositions: "L'ensemble de choix par oui ou non qui est sous-jacent à chaque faisceau de ces traits discrets par le linguiste: ces choix sont réellement effectués par le destinataire du message chaque fois que les suggestions du contexte, verbal ou non verbalisé, ne rendent pas inutile la reconnaissance des traits."⁵ Jakobson's contribution to linguistics and phonetics can be represented by concepts such as: feature, binary, redundancy, universals and by his rich publishing activity. The Prague phonology, concepts and theory did not remain without echo. Its contribution and its manifesto changed the direction of the development of the European phonology. Notions and concepts, developed in Prague phonology such as markedness were subsequently extended to morphology and syntax.

The most important and valuable contribution of the Prague Linguistic Circle after the war was brought by Vilém Mathésius in the field of syntax namely the distinction, which he made between theme and rheme. He tried to surpass phonology and to study grammar, especially syntax. Vilém Mathésius approached and analysed the sentence from a functional perspective, he stated that the sentence has two parts: the theme and the rheme. By the theme of a sentence is meant the part that refers to what is already known or given in the context while the rheme is the part that conveys new information. Although this contribution represents the school's last efforts to tackle and conquer another area of linguistics, syntax, Mathésius' work and terminology remained unknown and without echo in the world of linguistics. 1948 represents the year when Prague scholars went public for the last time. This is the year when the last lecture of the circle took place. It is also in 1948 when the school's last representative works, Vodicka's monograph "The Beginnings of Czech Artistic Prose" and the three-volume edition of Mukarovsky's selected works "Chapters from Czech Poetics" were published.

The Prague Linguistic Circle greatly contributed to the way linguistics developed, by coining new concepts and theories by providing rich material for the following generations of linguists. Their works and papers are widely consulted nowadays, Trubetzkoy's "Principles of Phonology", Roman Jakobson's "Comments on Phonological Change in Russian Compared with that in Other Slavic Languages" (1929), "Characteristics of the Eurasian Language Affinity" (1931). The Prague School's linguistics, theory and activity influenced and changed the character of the European linguistics. Trubetzkoy's contributions were inherited and further elaborated by André Martinet who founds the functionalist school and develops functionalist linguistics. The new concepts and

theories, launched by The Prague Linguistic Circle became key concepts in linguistics so happened with the concept of neutralization and the theory of markedness, which were inherited by generative grammar. It anticipated and supported the emergence of new movements in linguistics. Prague scholars provided the first systematic formulation of semiotic structuralism. Semiotics emerged from Prague Linguistic Circle structuralism. The Prague Linguistic Circle members were the first to claim that literary history has to be based on literary theory and the first to develop a comprehensive theory of literary history. Without the Prague School the image of the twentieth century structuralism and linguistics is incomplete both historically and theoretically. They brought innovations and contributions not only to the development of linguistics, but also to the development of phonetics, phonology and syntax.

Notes:

- ¹. Ionescu, Emil - Manual de lingvistică generală, Editura All, București, 1997 p.86
- ². La phonologie actuelle în Psihologie du langage, Paris, 1923, p.245 apud Maria Manoliu Manea, Structuralismul lingvistic p.87.
- ³. Actele Primului Congres Internațional al Lingviștilor de la Haga, p.33 apud. Maria Manoliu Manea, Structuralismul lingvistic p.26-27.
- ⁴. Saussure, Ferdinand de- Curs de lingvistică generală, Editura Polirom, Iași, 1998 p.133
- ⁵. Jakobson, Roman Essais p.92 apud apud Maria Manoliu Manea, Structuralismul lingvistic p.133.

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2. Coteanu, Ion- *Crestomație de lingvistică generală*, Editura Fundației România de Măine, București, 1998
3. Elgin Haden, Suzette-*What is Linguistics?* Prentice Hall-Inc., New Jersey, United States of America, 1979
- 4.Graur, Alexandru; Wald, Lucia- *Scurtă istorie a lingvisticii*, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 1977
- 5.Ionescu, Emil- *Manual de lingvistică generală*, Editura All, București, 1997
- 6.Archibald, A. Hill- *Linguistics*, United States of America, 1969.
- 7.Lyons, John- *Introducere în lingvistica teoretică*, Editura Științifică, București, 1995
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- 9.Manoliu Manea, Maria- *Structuralismul lingvistic*, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, București, 1973
10. Saussure, Ferdinand de- *Curs de lingvistică generală*, Editura Polirom, Iași, 1998
- 11.<http://www.heartfield.demonco.uk/jakobson.html>
- 12.<http://www.shlrc.mq.edu.au/trubetzkoy.html>