

Unit one: Modern linguistics (European structuralism)

Lesson 03: PRAGUE SCHOOL (Prague Linguistic Circle)

Prince Nikolay Sergeevich
Trubetzkoy 1890-1938



Roman Jakobson
1896-1982



Vilém Mathesius

Prague school was an influential group of literary critics and linguists who were active between 1926 and the beginning of World War II. A Vilém Mathesius was its leader, Prague linguistic circle included Russian such as Roman Jakobson, Nikolai Trubetzkoy, and Sergei Karcevsky, as well as the famous Czech literary scholars René Wellek and Jan Mukařovský. Their work constituted a radical departure from the classical structural position of Ferdinand de Saussure. They suggested that their methods of studying the function of speech sounds could be applied both synchronically, to a language as it exists, and diachronically, to a language as it changes. The functionality of elements of language and the importance of its social function were key aspects of its research program. They developed methods of structuralist literary analysis during the years 1928–1939. After the war, the Circle no longer functioned as a meeting of linguists, but the Prague School continued as a major force in linguistic functionalism (distinct from the Copenhagen school or English linguists following the work of J. R. Firth and later Michael Halliday). It has had significant continuing influence on linguistics and semiotics.

Key concepts

The basic approach to the study of linguistics of the Prague Circle sees language as a synchronic and dynamic system. The functionality of elements of language and the importance of its social function have been key aspects of its research program.

In 1928, the Prague Linguistic Circle group of Jakobson, Mathesius, Trubetzkoy, and Kartsevsky announced a radical departure from the classical structural position of Ferdinand de Saussure. They suggested that their methods of studying the function of speech sounds could be applied both synchronically, to a language as it exists, and diachronically, to a language as it changes.

The Prague School stresses the function of elements within language, their contrast to one another, and the system formed by these elements. They developed distinctive feature analysis, by which each sound is regarded as composed of contrasting articulatory and acoustic features, with sounds perceived as different having at least one contrasting feature.

While they were known for their identification of the "distinctive features" of language, these theorists also explored [culture](#) and [aesthetics](#). In fact, Jakobson considered language to be a means of the expression and development of culture.

Phonological contributions (distinctive-feature analysis of sounds)

The Prague school was best known for its work on phonology. Unlike the American phonologists, Trubetskoj and his followers did not take the phoneme to be the minimal unit of analysis. Instead, they defined phonemes as sets of distinctive features. For example, in English, /b/ differs from /p/ in the same way that /d/ differs from /t/ and /g/ from /k/.

Theory of markedness

The notion of markedness was first developed in Prague school phonology but was subsequently extended to morphology and syntax. When two phonemes are distinguished by the presence or absence of a single distinctive feature, one of them is said to be **marked** and the other unmarked for the feature in question. For example, /b/ is marked and /p/ unmarked with respect to voicing. Similarly, in morphology, the regular English verb can be said to be marked for past tense (by the suffixation of *-ed*) but to be unmarked in the present (*compare* "jumped" versus "jump").

Thus, the general approach of the Prague school can be described as a combination of functionalism—every component of a language, such as phoneme, morpheme, word, sentence, exists to fulfill a particular function—and structuralism—the context not just the components is what is important. In addition, synchronic and diachronic approaches are seen as interconnected and influencing each other. They regard language as a system of subsystems, each of which has its own problems but these are never isolated since they are part of a larger whole. As such, a language is never in a state of equilibrium, but rather has many deviations. It is these deviations that allow the language to develop and function as a living system (Doubravová 1999).

Later contributions (postwar Prague school)

- **Theme and rheme:**

By the theme of a sentence is meant that part that refers to what is already known or given in the context (sometimes called, by other scholars, the topic or psychological subject); by the rheme, the part that conveys new information (the comment or psychological predicate).

- **Functional sentence perspective & communicative dynamism**

The first one is the syntactic structure of a sentence which is in part determined by the communicative function of its various constituents and the way in which they relate to the context of utterance.

References

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- Doubravová, Jarmila. 1999. [The 'Cercle Linguistique de Prague' and the 'Wiener Kreis'](#) Center for Theoretical Study (CTS), the Institute for Advanced Studies, Charles University, Prague. Retrieved October 29, 2008.