

Course : Linguistics

Level : L2

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Unit: 1 European structuralism

Lesson 3

# The Prague School

## Introduction

European structuralists were deeply influenced by Saussure's work, partly having different structuralist movements in which one of the most prominent is Prague School referred to as the Prague Circle. In general terms, European structuralists share the same core beliefs; language should be studied from a synchronic point of view, it should be studied as a system of signs for which the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations between the units constitutes the basis and meaning is to be considered as the inherent aspect of language. However, the Prague Circle linguistics are interested in language change and they stressed the function of the various elements of actual utterances.

### 1. The Prague Linguistic Circle

The Prague School was established in Prague by Vilém Mathesius in the 1920s. The Prague Linguistic Circle represented an important phase in the history of linguistics in that it provided linguistics with a new theory such as the theory of linguistic functions. It included Russians such as Roman Jakobson, Nikolai Trubetsky and Serghei Karsévsky as well as the famous Czech René Wellek and Jan Mukarovsky.

The Prague Linguistic Circle started activity in 1928, when, the Prague linguists presented their programme drafted by Roman Jakobson in cooperation with Nicholay Serdhey, Trubetsky and Serghei Karsévsky at the first International Congress of Linguistics, organized in the Hague.

The Prague Linguistic Circle was brilliantly represented by the aforementioned scholars. Their preoccupations covered various areas of the sciences of language. Trubetzky dealt with **phonetics and phonology**, Vilém Mathesius dealt with **syntax**, Roman Jakobson was interested in **poetics** and Jan Mukarovsky tackled **poetic language**.

### The Prague School major contributions

The Prague established the **synchronic approach** of studying a language as it exists at one point in time and the diachronic approach studying the history and development of language over time. They

argued that it should be replaced by **dynamic synchronism** and should not be limited to Saussure's static structural model of language because language system is bound to change.

The general approach in the study of language for the Prague School can be described as a combination of **structuralism** and **functionalism** (every component of language, such as phonemes, morphemes, words and sentences fulfill a particular function). Linguists of the Prague School stressed the function of elements within language, the contrast of language elements to one another and the total pattern or system made by these contrasts. According to them the function of language is the act of communication and its role in society and literature.

The Prague School was best known for its work on **phonology**. Unlike the American phonologists, Trubetskoy and his followers didn't 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/. For example, the /p/ and /b/ in the words pill and bill are the distinguish feature of the two sounds as they differ in voicing (one is voiceless and the other is voiced).

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.

In sum, the Prague School contributions in structuralism, functionalism, phonology, morphology and markedness revolutionized linguistic studies. Their focus on language structure, functions, sound systems, and distinctive elements reshaped our understanding of language.

## References

Comparison between the Prague Circle and the Copenhagen Circle <https://fr.slideshare.net/slideshow/comparison-between-the-prague-circle-and-copenhagen-circle-of-linguistics/249786383>

Prague Linguistic Circle : [https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Prague\\_Linguistic\\_Circle](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Prague_Linguistic_Circle)