

Review

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sales, and do not feel any obligation to support sound scholarly studies which may not have a substantial initial sale. (For example, Routledge has recently announced the discontinuation of its Descriptive Grammars volumes.) M's is the eleventh volume in the Mouton Grammar Library, a most valuable series. This publisher has a longer-term and more responsible view than others and is prepared to use profits from textbook sales to subsidize more specialized works.

The price is high. As I said before, few people read grammars, and fewer still buy them. We get the vicious circle of few buyers → small print run → highish price → fewer buyers still → even smaller print run → further price rises. We need to read grammars like this and to demand of our students that they do so too. A couple of hours won't do—a couple of days is the minimum time required to appreciate the genius of Wardaman, so splendidly described here. And the gain from such study is immeasurable.

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The magic of a common language: Jakobson, Mathesius, Trubetzkoy and the Prague Linguistic Circle. By JINDŘICH TOMAN. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995. Pp. 335.

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This book is a social and cultural history of the Prague Linguistic Circle focusing primarily on the period from its inception in 1925 to 1939. The Prague Circle is important in the history of linguistics because its activities constitute one of the major responses to the crisis in which linguistics found itself at the beginning of the present century. The crisis was the result of the extraordinary successes of nineteenth century historical phonology, which had solved so many problems so rapidly and seemingly so successfully that at the beginning of the twentieth century many linguists felt that there were no longer any problems to be solved and that 'they had no choice other than that between the known and unknowable' (Benveniste 1935: 1) Much of the book chronicles one attempt to deal with this challenge.

The Prague Circle was the brain child of Vilém Mathesius (1882–1945), ‘a professor of English and a somewhat dry Protestant’ (5). The foundation of Czechoslovakia at the end of World War I was a defining event in his life. Among the problems that the new state faced was the fact that its capital, Prague, although a major city in the Hapsburg empire, was an intellectual backwater, and Mathesius felt that this must and could be changed.

Mathesius, Toman tells us, ‘believed in rationally organized work’, and he had an extremely practical, down-to-earth view of what this meant. For instance, he thought that the annual celebration of Czech Independence Day should be used ‘to educate our citizens and to reinforce their creative efforts’. To this end, he proposed to ‘convert [Independence Day] to Construction Day, a day on which a working program for the coming year would be announced and explicated in detail’ (3). The program was to avoid bombastic undertakings. Instead, small concrete projects were to be pursued leading to concrete results that could readily be seen and evaluated: improvements in the organization of public transport or of tourist facilities, for example. [In this way] ‘we shall learn not to leave things half done, simply because the new Independence Day will be back in just a year, bringing the need to check what has been accomplished, what remains to be done, and who is guilty that not everything has been done’ (4).

Being a linguist who had come into the field in the first decade of our century, Mathesius was keenly aware of the crisis in linguistics, and he thought that the conditions in Prague were favorable for an attempt at overcoming this crisis. The Russian revolution had brought to Prague a large number of Russians, and a lively intellectual community had developed there. Mathesius thought that a collaborative effort of Czechs and Russians might address the problems in linguistics. He was quite clear about what the Czech contribution would be: ‘It is true that we are not distinguished by individual courage. Our courage is of a more corporate character . . . But given the fact that we were not endowed with individual courage, or perhaps that its tradition has not evolved here, one cannot say that it is impossible to create conditions for fostering it in research, for instance, by creating a favorable atmosphere or by supplementing it with our corporate courage’ (5).

He hoped that, if successful, the venture would also help cure the intellectual backwardness of Prague. In this, as we now know, he succeeded brilliantly. By 1930 linguists associated with the Prague Circle were playing a major role at international gatherings and the publication of the Circle, *Travaux du Cercle linguistique de Prague*, had become an influential organ in the field.

The beginnings of the Circle were quite modest. In March 1925 Mathesius organized a private gathering at his home to which he invited three young scholars: his assistant, Bohumil Trnka, and two Russian linguists then living in Prague, Sergej Karcevskij and Roman Jakobson. The four discussed a number of linguistic questions and met again in the fall of 1925. In the fall of 1926 the group—augmented by a few interested colleagues—met again to listen to a lecture by a German scholar who was visiting Prague. ‘We all liked the meeting and started to organize further meetings with enthusiasm,’ Mathesius wrote

later (136). The enthusiasm was such that '[t]here were 34 lectures in the first three academic years (1926–1929). The range of interests was broad, linguistic topics clearly dominating' (137). In the following decade, i.e. until the outbreak of World War II, the Circle held 160 official meetings. The meetings were addressed by linguists of international renown such as Jespersen (1933), Benveniste (1937), and Hjelmslev (1937), and, of course, by various Circle members including Jakobson and Trubetzkoy. There were lectures also by philosophers such as Carnap and Husserl (both in 1935), by literary critics such as Tynjanov (1928), Tomaševskij (1928), Bem (1932, 1934), Wellek (1934, 1937), as well as by the musicologist Becking (1930, 1935).¹

Although attendance was at first rather sparse, never exceeding fifteen in the first three years, members of the group soon became aware that they shared certain interests and attitudes and quickly developed the 'common language' that figures in the book's title. With this 'language' also came an esprit de corps which provided the motivation for the Circle's transformation aptly characterized by T as a change from 'a republic of scholars' into 'un'organizzazione combattiva', i.e. from a loose association of scholars of the familiar kind into a more focussed group espousing definite views and engaging in collective action in support of these views.

As T points out, Jakobson was a great believer in collective action, something that will be readily confirmed by any of us who were Jakobson's students. Studying with Jakobson at Columbia or at Harvard almost invariably meant being involved in a project of which the outcome was to be a major advance in linguistics, or in the understanding of medieval Slavic literature, or of the nature of poetry, etc. And on the evidence adduced by T, Jakobson had this attitude from the beginning.

Though in almost every aspect of personality, social origins, political sympathies, and scientific approach Trubetzkoy was Jakobson's polar opposite, on the importance of collective action in science Trubetzkoy saw eye to eye with Jakobson. In his letter to Mathesius congratulating the Circle on its tenth anniversary, Trubetzkoy wrote: 'at every contact with the Prague Linguistic Circle I felt a new upsurge of creative joy, which in my lonely work away from Prague inevitably declined. This elation and creative impetus are a manifestation of that spirit which characterizes our association and emanates from the collective work of a closely-knit group of scholars proceeding upon the same methodological path and inspired by common theoretical ideas' (Jakobson 1975:372, n. 6).

The first collaborative effort in which Jakobson and Trubetzkoy joined forces was the declaration sent to the First International Congress of Linguists. To one of the questions posed by the Congress's organizers, 'What are the most appropriate methods for a complete and practical account of the phonology of a given language?' Jakobson wrote a response referred to by T as Proposition 22. Jakobson had presented the basic ideas of the response at a meeting of the Circle in early 1927, and he submitted the final text to Trubetzkoy and Karcev-

¹ For a listing of the Circle meetings between 1926 and 1948 see Kochis 1976.

skij for their signature. As all three signers were associated with the Circle, Proposition 22 marked the debut of the Circle as a participant in an international scientific debate.

The Proposition stated that the required account of a language must 'above all contain a characterization of its phonological system, i.e., a characterization of the repertory . . . of the distinctive differences among its acoustico-motor images [i.e. of the features distinguishing its phonemes] . . . The apparent conflict between synchronic phonology and diachronic phonetics would disappear once phonetic change is viewed as a function of the phonologic system that undergoes it . . . Historical phonetics is then transformed into a history of the evolution of a phonologic system' (Jakobson 1962–1988, v. 1, ch. 3).

The crucial proposal here is to shift focus from the individual sounds that occupied much of the attention of nineteenth century linguists to the phonological system, the alphabet of phonemes of a given language. This alphabet has a structure of its own which is subject to change and is therefore the proper subject of study of historical phonology.²

The fact that the phonemes of a language constitute a structure had been proposed earlier, most notably by Sapir 1925, but the nature of the structure was not spelled out clearly. Jakobson's important contribution was to propose that the phonemes composing the alphabet are not further unanalyzable entities; rather they are complexes of phonetic properties or features, and it is the features that constitute the structure of the phoneme alphabet of each language.

The conception of phonemes as complexes of features is the most original and also most enduring contribution of the Praguians, and of Jakobson and Trubetzkoy, specifically. As Jakobson wrote half a century later: 'from the very beginning of my phonological researches I assigned to the phoneme the rank of a secondary conception relative to the network of oppositions [i.e. of features] which determines the constitution of every phoneme of the given system' (Jakobson 1962–1988, v. 7:126).

It is the same conception of the phoneme that is illustrated and defended by Trubetzkoy in Chapter IV of his *Grundzüge der Phonologie* (1939). This chapter, which takes up 126 of the book's 261 pages, is devoted to 'a systematic review of the phonetic properties (*Schalleigenschaften*) that are actually utilized for distinguishing meanings (*Bedeutungsunterscheidung*) in the different languages of the world'. The chapter is thus the earliest attempt at a survey of the universal set of features that underlie the phoneme systems of all languages of the world. The conception of phonemes as bundles of phonetic properties or features is also the most important difference between Prague phonology and the phonology of American structuralism.³

As detailed by T in Ch. 8, Proposition 22 was the first of a series of collective statements and other actions by the Circle. The Circle presented theses to the

² This new approach was subsequently illustrated in Jakobson 1929, which unfortunately has been almost totally ignored by Slavists.

³ For a clear statement of this difference see Z.S. Harris's 1942 critical review of Trubetzkoy's *Grundzüge der Phonologie*: For additional discussion see Halle 1988.

First Congress of Slavic Philologists that met in Prague in 1929. In 1931 it advanced proposals for a standardized phonological terminology and for principles of phonological transcriptions. In 1932 the Circle intervened in the so-called purism debate that was concerned with the issue of what constitutes proper Czech usage. The Circle took strong exception to the conservative normative stance espoused by J. Haller, the editor of a journal devoted to questions of correct usage. This intervention brought the Circle extensive publicity. Since the Circle's position was in harmony with that of many of the best Czech writers of the time, the debate also established links between the Circle and the Czech artistic avant-garde. Not only poets and novelists became interested in the Circle's activities but also some actors and a number of painters and sculptors, all of whom 'were impressed by the expertise, the scholarship, and the ASSERTIVENESS of the Prague Circle linguists' (165, emphasis supplied).

Another political issue in which the Circle took a leading role was German-Czech cultural relations. In his 1936 monograph *Germans and Czechs* Konrad Bittner, a German historian, argued that most of Czech cultural achievements were due to German influence and borrowing from German. The book provoked outrage among the Circle membership and was sharply attacked in a public meeting organized by the Circle. Particularly prominent in this meeting was Roman Jakobson, who in his years in Czechoslovakia had become a leading expert on Czech medieval literature and history.⁴

As detailed by T, the activist character of the Circle involved some restriction on the freedom of its members. The by-laws of the Circle stated that '[e]ach member has the right to propose to the committee that a member whose activity is at variance with the purpose of the society be excluded' (264). Since the purpose of the Circle was defined as 'to work on the basis of functional-structural method', this implied a limitation on the direction in which members were free to pursue their explorations. T reports one instance where a member reserved to himself the right not to follow the 'party line' On joining the Circle in 1934 René Wellek wrote: 'I would only like to remark that the admiration I have for structural methods does not exclude that I should work in literary history with other, especially ideographic methods, as follows from my entire previous research' (156).

Wellek's reaction was more than excessive fastidiousness for, as T documents, the Circle had problems dealing with dissenters. The most difficult case for the Circle was that of Miloš Weingart (1890–1939). Weingart had been an active member of the Circle. He participated in the purism debate touched on above and co-edited the book presenting the Circle's side of the issues. However, as a conservative in politics he disagreed with the Circle's rather leftist sympathies and was repelled by its positive approach to the Czech artistic avant-garde. He seems also to have been uninterested in adopting in his own research the newer linguistic methods pioneered by the Circle. These disagreements led him to break with the Circle. The exact details of this break are difficult to establish and not of much interest in any event. T's conclusion says

⁴ Jakobson came to Czechoslovakia in July 1920 with an official mission of the Russian Red Cross. (See 280, n. 4).

all that is relevant: 'On December 17, 1935, the Circle condemned Weingart's scholarship in extenso at a meeting convened solely for that purpose' (158).

Limitations of space prevent me from discussing additional aspects of the Circle's history as they emerged from T's book. I regret especially that I am not able to deal here with such fascinating topics as, on the one hand, Jakobson's relations with contemporary Russian and Czech poets—in particular, V. Xlebnikov and V. Nezval—and the influence that these had on the development of Jakobson's phonology; and, on the other hand, the role that the ideology of Eurasianism played in Trubetzkoy's rejection of the traditional view of genetic descent in linguistics and its replacement by a diffusionist picture of linguistic evolution.

The Prague Circle was a phenomenon of a special time and of a special place. In order to recreate for today's readers this special time and place, T had to unearth and bring together documents scattered in archives and libraries in many countries. T's major achievement is to have fashioned this enormous body of facts, much of which was previously unknown, into a coherent whole where each piece has its proper place and function, and in this way to have made understandable the source and background of approaches to problems and of leading ideas that continue to influence current thinking.

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The phonology of tone: The representation of tonal register. Ed. by HARRY VAN DER HULST and KEITH SNIDER. Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1993. Pp. 278.

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This book collects several studies on the phonological analysis of tonal register. This topic, though relatively new to the literature, has proven to be central