

The Prague Linguistic Circle



The Prague School

- an influential group of literary critics and linguists established in 1926.

Prominent members:

- Vilem Mathesius, the instigator of the circle, and its first president until his death in 1945;
- Roman Jakobson;
- Nikolai Trubetzkoy;
- Sergei Karcevsky;
- René Wellek;
- Jan Mukařovský.



Key concepts

- *Key aspects:* the functionality of elements of language and the importance of its social function.
- Language as a synchronic and dynamic system.
- In 1928 the announcement of a radical departure from the classical structural position of Ferdinand de Saussure.
- Synchronic and diachronic approaches are 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.



Key concepts. Combination of structuralism and functionalism

- The general approach of the Prague school - *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.
- Karl Bühler, three general kinds of functions:
 1. *the cognitive function* refers to language employment for the transmission of factual information;
 2. *the expressive function* means the indication of the mood or attitude of the speaker (or writer);
 3. *the conative (or instrumental) function* is used for influencing the person or for bringing about some practical effect.
- The functional distinction of the cognitive and the expressive aspects of language was applied by Prague school linguists in their work on stylistics and literary criticism.

Key concepts. Phonological contributions

- The Prague school was best known for its work on *phonology*.
- The *phoneme* as sets of distinctive features, each one is composed of a number of articulatory features and is distinguished by the presence or absence of at least one feature from every other phoneme in the language.
- More phonologically relevant functions were also recognized:
 - 1. *The expressive function* is characteristic of stress, intonation, and other suprasegmental aspects of language that they are frequently expressive of the mood and attitude of the speaker in this sense;
 - 2. *The demarcative function* is applied to those elements or features that in particular languages serve to indicate the occurrence of the boundaries of words and phrases and, presumably, make it easier to identify such grammatical units in the stream of speech.

Key concepts. Theory of markedness

- *The notion of markedness* was first developed in Prague school phonology.
- 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*.

LATER CONTRIBUTIONS

- Later Prague school work remained characteristically functional.
- The distinction between *theme and rheme*.
- The notion of “*functional sentence perspective*” or “*communicative dynamism*”: the syntactic structure of a sentence is in part determined by the communicative function of its various constituents and the way in which they relate to the context of utterance.

The Prague school today

- Since 1989 under the leadership of *Oldřich Leška*, the Prague School's activity was renewed, resulting in the publication of the new *Travaux* in 1995.
- A successful conference on *70 Years of PLC* in 1996 which also commemorated *the 100th anniversary of Roman Jakobson's birthday*.
- Prague has become the site of many conferences on linguistics, in particular those organized by the *Institute for Applied and Formal Linguistics* (UFAL) at Charles University.

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**THANK YOU FOR YOUR
ATTENTION!**

