

HERITAGE OF THE PRAGUE SCHOOL TO CONTEMPORARY LANGUAGE TEACHING (WITH FOCUS ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING)

Daniela Brevenikova, Ass. Prof., PhD, CSc.

Department of Linguistics and Translatology, Faculty of Applied Linguistics,
University of Economics in Bratislava, Slovak Republic

Abstract

The aim of the paper is to assess the heritage of the Prague School to contemporary linguistics and language teaching. In Chapter 1 the focus is on works and ideas two founding members of the Prague Linguistic Circle, Anglicists V. Mathesius and J. Vachek and their contribution to the development of Slovak and Czech linguistics as reflected in textbooks and course materials for undergraduates at Slovak and Czech universities. The continuation and extension of the Prague School functional and structural concept is documented with references to works of their followers up to the present days. Chapter 2 contains the analysis of selected parts of the PLC Theses (1929), namely sections related to application of PLC principles in secondary school language teaching. The ideas expressed in the late twenties and thirties of the 20th century are confronted with present-day practice of foreign-language learning and teaching.

Keywords: Functional and structuralist theory, linguistic characterology, contrastive analysis, Prague School, language teaching

Introduction:

“Seen from the functionalist point of view, language is a system of purposeful means of expression. Structure and function should be the most essential concepts in both synchronic and diachronic linguistics.” (Horálek 1983, Introduction by the General Editor of the Series P. Luelsdorff).

The present paper is a modest contribution to assessing the importance of the functionalist and structuralist approach of the Prague School of Linguistics and its heritage to present-day linguistics and language teaching in the Slovak and Czech Republics. The quotation above from the Introduction written by the General Editor of the Praguiana series P. Luelsdorff are crucial for the understanding of the Prague School theories and some statements in this paper about their qualitative features as distinct from other structuralist linguistic schools. When designing curricula in linguistics and language teaching courses at higher education institutions, as language teachers we should be aware of the origin of ideas and sources of present-day knowledge in linguistics theories and try to consider the benefits of local traditions in our presentations of new ideas and theories.

1 Principles of PLC Applied and Developed in Linguistics and Language Teaching:

“A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics” by David Crystal (2009) contains numerous references to the Prague School (Crystal 2009, p. 380). The contribution of the Prague School ideas to linguistics and their contemporary relevance is described there as follows:

“The ‘Praguean’ influence has been widespread and longlasting, as the frequent reference throughout this dictionary testifies. Its main emphasis lay on the analysis of language as a system of functionally related units, which showed Saussurean influence.

...Since the 1950s Prague School ideas have been received and developed particularly with reference to SYNTAX, SEMANTICS and STYLISTICS of English and Slavonic languages and illustrated in the work of Josef Vachek (1980 – 1996) and Jan Firbas (1921– 2000) and others...” These ideas were later developed into linguistic characterology of modern English by two founding members of the Prague Linguistic Circle (PLC) Mathesius and Vachek to be further applied in language teaching and in some cases also further developed mainly by Anglicists scholars in the Czech Republic as well as in Slovakia (e.g. Trnka 1972; Daneš 1974; Hladký and Růžička 1996; Firbas 1992; Dušková 2006; Kubišová, Bázlik and Votruba 2000).

In his visionary paper “New currents and tendencies in linguistic research” V. Mathesius writes about “a first-rate role” of linguistic characterology in future development of linguistics and explains the difference between scientific grammar and linguistic characterology: while the former gives “a detailed and accurate inventory of everything that occurs in a given language at a given time”, the latter “is an attempt at a hierarchy of the listed language phenomena according to their importance.” (Praguiana 1983, xx)

Let us mention some examples from functional syntax discussed by the Anglicist members of the Prague Linguistic School Anglicists in linguistic characterology of the English language: the comparison of the function of the Czech grammatical subject, which is mainly to express the agent, i.e. the doer of an action) with the thematic function of the grammatical subject in the English or French language¹. (Vachek 1974a, Firbas 1992; Dušková 2006); the theory of functional sentence perspective as well as the description of leading contrasting factors of the Czech word-order and the English word-order, applicable also to the Slovak language.

Slovak linguists as well as English language teachers can be proud that also Slovak linguists (e.g. L. Novák and E. Paulíny) contributed to these ideas as members of the Prague School and later also established their circle named *The Bratislava Circle of Linguistics* (BLC) in Slovakia’s capital (1945 – 1950). (Breveníková 2009).

Today’s study programmes of faculties of humanities in the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic list courses in Linguistic Characterology (or Characteristics) of Modern English as well as those in the History of the English Language; obligatory or recommended reading lists contain Mathesius’s and Vachek’s works. These universities that continue in spreading and developing the Prague School tradition include: Comenius University in Bratislava, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, University of Constantine and Methodius, Prešov University, Prešov (to mention only the main ones) in the Slovak Republic; in the Czech Republic it is especially Masaryk University, Brno (Czech Republic), Caroline University, Prague, Silesian University, Opava, Ostrava University, Ostrava, South Bohemian University in České Budějovice, whose curricula of courses include publications by Prague School scholars, in particular Vachek, e.g. (Vachek 1991a, 1991b).

From the 1960s through 1990 Vachek’s works published also in the form of coursebooks were used at Czech and Slovak higher education institutions, which means that generations of Czech and Slovak Anglicists have been “brought up” on the functionalist and structuralist Prague School linguistic tradition, and it also bears witness of the vitality of the Praguian ideas (cf. Firbas, Hladký, Růžička, Hajičová) (Horálek 1983) and their practical application. It is mainly J. Vachek’s, V. Mathesius’s, F. Daneš’s, and Firbas’s papers that are listed in papers on contrastive linguistics written by authors from various countries, which means that ideas of the Prague School have become part of any serious linguistic thought and research (e.g. Sgall 1967; Bloor and Bloor 2004; Downing 2001; Hruška Jiří 1979; Mohsen, Khedri and Seyed, Foad Ebrahimi 2012; Nylund 2013; Sgall 1967).

The coursebook “Functional Onomatology” (Hladký – Růžička 1996) is one of those publications if not the chief one that proves that even in the late 1990s and in fact till the present time the heritage of the Prague School is alive at our universities. The book in

Hladký's words "follows in the spirit of Vilém Mathesius "Functional Analysis of Present-day English on a General Linguistic Basis" and on J. Vachek's "A Linguistic Characterology of Modern English" and is a further development of the concepts introduced by them into Czech linguistics." The concept of onomatology is to be understood as the theory of naming units; naming units in the English language are described on the basis of contrastive method with the Czech language, in terms of form and content, e.g. phenomena (e.g. conversion as zero derivation, semantic vagueness of English verbs are described in contrast with the Czech ones, the category of countability, the English aspect versus the Slavonic "vid") which are either absent (as e.g. zero derivation, conversion) or different in terms of their place in the system of the Czech (as well as in Slovak) language are at the forefront of the analysis. In the chapter on "Small Contrastive Analysis of English and Czech Pronouns" the authors (Hladký and Růžička 1996, p. 87) define their aim of the contrastive study: "The contrastive study should not just aim at discovering the infinite variation but it should envisage also the goal of delimiting the range of possible variation. Thus every contrastive research ultimately faces to the question of universal grammar."

Grammars of contemporary English language designed for Anglicists and published in Slovakia or in the Czech Republic have been written on a contrastive basis (Dušková et al. 2006; Votruba – Bázlik 2000) with grammar of the Czech or Slovak language, as their titles clearly indicate (e.g. *Grammar of Contemporary English against the Background of Czech; Comparative Grammar of the English Language*). All language levels of the English language are described in these publications via comparison with corresponding linguistic phenomena in mother tongue (Czech or Slovak). The bibliography in L. Dušková's grammar contains numerous sources with names of PLC members and their followers: for instance, V. Mathesius (17) J. Vachek (10), F. Daneš (14), J. Firbas (16), B. Havránek (1), V. Skalička (2), B. Trnka (15), etc., which is of course, only a quantitative indicator of the importance of the Prague School's contribution to present-day English linguistics in both of our countries (Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic). *Grammar of Contemporary English against the Background of Czech* by L. Dušková is used in teaching English linguistics both in Slovakia and in the Czech Republic courses in modern or historical linguistics. It is this "consistent application of confronting aspect" (DUŠKOVÁ 2006) that makes this publication suitable also for native English-language speakers who specialize in the Czech studies. Also a more recent *Grammar of the Czech Language – Speech and Language* (2011) designed mainly for Bohemists is based on the principles of linguistic characterology and includes descriptions of several topics dealt with by Prague School linguists, e.g. functional sentence perspective (p.278–281).

We would like to remind especially young generation of language teachers in Slovakia, in particular our doctoral students and English language teachers specialising in teaching languages for specific purposes that the principles of effective language teaching did not originate in the 60-ies, and it is not enough to name one or two English-speaking countries when discussing the communicative approach in language teaching or links between linguistic theory and effective methods and techniques of teaching languages.

J. Vachek, who deserves to be called a historiographer of the Prague School, evaluated its contribution to modern linguistic research in his paper on "The Heritage of the Prague School to Modern Linguistic Research" He answered the question "Is what used to be called the Prague linguistic school still a linguistic reality?" in the affirmative and gave persuasive arguments showing that the principles of the Prague School remained upheld and even further extended by numerous linguists not only in the Czech and Slovak Republics but also abroad. J. Vachek in particular appreciated the publication of six volumes of the series *Prague Studies in Mathematical Linguistics* (1965–78) and explained the source of inspiration for authors of quantitative studies: "... the Prague group could simply build on the foundations that had been provided, decades ago, by V. Mathesius 1929" and two other Prague school scholars after him

(Horálek 1983, p. 269). On the other hand, J. Vachek admitted some modifications from the Prague School principal stances, especially as regards the relations between linguistics and other sciences and explained the change in attitudes by saying that once “the status of linguistics as a separate branch of research can be regarded as having been fought out, and also linguistic methods independent of those of other disciplines have been duly established”, ...“linguistics can now confront its own methods with those of other sciences without forfeiting its independence.” (In: Horálek 1983, p. 267).

2 Insights into Selected Aspects of PLC *THESES* (1929) and Comments on their Application in Teaching English:

The contrastive approach is referred to in the Theses of the Prague Linguistic Circle (1929) as the most suitable starting point of studying the English grammar by those who pursue studies in translatology (which is the case of the undergraduates at our interdisciplinary Faculty of Applied Languages). Even now, after almost a forty-year teaching experience, I frequently find that for learners the knowledge of grammar is no more than mastering a set of isolated rules and forms. Ideas of universal categories in human languages on the one hand, and the need for the contrastive approach, on the other hand, need to be repeatedly explained also to tertiary level students.

The PLC programmatic Theses were presented for discussion at the first Congress of Slavic Philologists in Prague, 1929. This part of the paper deals with selected parts of the Theses, namely those dealing with the application of trends in linguistics in secondary school language teaching. Although the contrastive functionalist approach is discussed in the Theses in the context of teaching Slavonic languages, it is fully applicable to comparing Slavonic and non-Slavonic languages, i.e. for example, Slovak and English).

The following quotation shows the perspective of the Prague School scholars on relations between theory (linguistics) and practice (language teaching) and the role of the teacher in this process, as well as aims and content of language teaching: “Within the functional perspective the task of the language teacher is to foster in the learner the ability to comply, in the best possible manner with the function of language indicated for the given case, e.g. in a dialogue, in various kinds of written manifestations, in composing essays...” (Praguiana 1983, p. XX; On Praguian functionalism and some extensions by Philip A. Luelsdorf; Introduction by the General Editor of the Series).

Approaches of the Prague School to teaching languages presented in Section III (of the Congress) and entitled “Exploitation of new linguistic trends in secondary schools” are divided into two parts; the first one deals with the instruction of the mother tongue; the second one with teaching other Slavonic languages at secondary schools. In the first part the authors identify common, overlapping points of linguistic theory and the practice of teaching (compare the entry “contrastive analysis (CA)” Crystal, 2008, p.112). The benefits of theory for the practice of teaching are described as follows: “the understanding of language as a functional system and the effort to determine precise characteristics of individual contemporary languages can provide also the school classification of language phenomena and their explanation with a safer background.” (Čermák, Poeta and Čermák 2012, p.739)

As is clear from the quotation, these benefits do not imply a mere straightforward application of theory in practice: the difference between scientific exploration in linguistics and the role in teaching the grammar of mother tongue to learners of secondary school is explicitly recognised in the Theses; the latter is referred as “cultivation”. It is important to note at this point that differentiating between studying one’s mother tongue and a foreign language has a long tradition in language teaching in our country.

We consider it relevant to refer at this point to some statements from the Theses to show how the concept of functional linguistics in the Prague School conception relates to practical teaching. According to the Theses “practical language teaching” can and should be scientifically justified”. It involves the knowledge of language in its particular function, the

language specific of social environment and a particular situation. According to authors of the Theses, “exploring language regardless specific functions of language is a complete abstraction” (translated by Breveníková from Czech). (Čermák, Poeta and Čermák 2012, p. 742).

In order to develop learners’ awareness of the system of language (p.741), teachers are recommended to summarize the knowledge taught and acquired by their learners.

As for the learners’ ability to use a foreign language in several or all its functions, the authors point to some situations when communicating in the mother tongue, stating that there are few native speakers who are able to use their mother tongue in all its functions: even educated people find it difficult to write genre-specific texts, e.g. reports or newspaper articles unless they studied the field concerned. In this connection; it was proposed in the Theses to set forth guidelines for practical language teaching and recommend that, e.g. that business colleges learners should be able to communicate in the language of business, be proficient in business correspondence, as well as using the style of research papers on economics or business. On the other hand, secondary school learners should master the general language of educated strata of society in its written and spoken forms, according to the Theses. Apart from mastering specific functions of the target language the authors of the Theses expect learners to know “facts of language with the function of elementary social contacts, e.g. greetings, introduction phrases, questions about weather...”; this is how the instruction of a foreign (Slavonic) language can start. (Čermák, Poeta and Čermák 2012, p. 742).

The statements and principles we accept and apply in foreign language teaching even nowadays were recommended by the Prague School scholars as a suitable way of language instruction, e.g. focus on contrasts between the system of learner’s mother tongue and the target language, the principle of grading requirements according to the learner’s age and type of school, as well as e.g. the danger of overrating similarities in learning or teaching genetically related languages (which Slovak learners may have experienced in learning the Russian language in the past). From our present-day perspective, it is interesting to realize that even our discussions about creativity in teaching languages was considered in the Theses: “Learners are expected to reflect on how means of language are used to express an intended content and the communicative intent and speak about learners own experiments” (the word “experiments” is italicised in the text of the Theses) (Čermák, Poeta and Čermák 2012, p.740).

The authors of the Theses also extended their requirement of contrastive approach to workbooks for language instruction, which should deal with the contrasting phenomena in the two language systems.” (Čermák, Poeta and Čermák 2012, p. 743–744).

They required that language teaching focused on current statements rather than on isolated words; they suggested that the knowledge of lexis should be enhanced in context, and from individual statements, so that the overall procedure was similar to that of “solving a riddle” by the learner and requested that the methods of practical language instruction differed from those used in teaching Latin or Greek.

The most important methodology issue according to the Theses (1929) is to elaborate textbooks on these principles; as these teaching materials “would gradually enable to master the language in its specific functions.” Those who framed the Theses were persuaded that a set of teaching materials designed on these principles would provide learners with a safe basis of language cognition (Čermák, Poeta and Čermák 2012, p.744) and the learners would be able to use the knowledge and skills in practice and further develop them in accordance with their social environment.

Conclusion:

When paying the tribute to the linguistic heritage of the Prague School of Linguistics, the aim of the paper is also to remind language teachers and authors of course materials and

scholarly papers not to neglect the merits of those who built a strong linguistic tradition in this part of Europe and laid solid fundamentals for teaching foreign languages. Opinions of PLC members of content and methods of language teaching indicate that the roots of communicative approach go farther in history than is usually claimed. The contrastive method advocated by the Prague school is applied in most grammar books of modern Slovak, Czech and English languages published in the Slovak and Czech Republic.

The message is that the history of modern linguistics did not start in the sixties of the 20th century, and we had better studying primary sources when discussing, e.g. communicative approach in language teaching.

On realising how significant the Theses (1929) for contemporary language teachers are, including those who teach languages for specific purposes, we should be ready to critically assess our own performance and decide whether we have managed to apply what is recommended in the Thesis (1929) and put that “practical orientation” into our language classes and course materials. The merits of the Prague Linguistic School in this area deserve to be recognised across the global linguistic and language teaching community.

It is significant to observe that what our students expect to learn in their English language classes and how they want to be taught coincides to a great extent with what was recommended in the Theses so many years ago as a principal requirement in teaching foreign languages. As an English language teacher I especially appreciate a creative and pro-active approach in Theses: the metaphor of the learning riddle (the Czech word “luštění” used in the Thesis means “doing/solving a crossword puzzle”) Those language teachers who enjoy using prediction and involve their learners in various creative activities in teaching English grammar, may be surprised and delighted to find that their favourite techniques were recommended by well-known linguists and distinguished scholars.

A selection of sources below indicates that the “safe background” mentioned in the PLC Theses (Čermák, Poeta and Čermák 2012, p. 739) exists, and there are good prospects for its application and development both in linguistics and language teaching.

This paper is also an expression of my personal gratitude for the knowledge and inspiration I gained from the seminars for doctoral students conducted by J. Vachek in 1970s at the Institute of Translation and Interpretation in Bratislava and lectures in Linguistic Characterology in Modern English at the Faculty of Philosophy, Bratislava.

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Notes:

¹⁾ The terms *theme – rheme* correspond to *topic – comment* are used in the description of information structure of utterance; the term *theme* means the starting point (what is known); *rheme* (comment) is the *raison d'être* of communication, i.e. new information. Cf. CRYSTAL 2009, p.483). The functional sentence perspective theory was later “very ably developed” mainly by J. Firbas, F. Daneš, and others as J. Vachek comments with appreciation (Praguiana 1983, p. 269)

²⁾ The name of the Bratislava Linguistic Circle (BLC) reflects its methodological connection with the Prague Linguistic Circle. As early as two years after its foundation, the BLC had 10 regular and 8 corresponding members (L. Novák, E. Pauliny, A.V. Isačenko (founding members), J. Horecký, J. Ružička, V. Blanár, V. Kochol, J. Štolc, Š. Peciar (Slovakia); J. Mukařovský, V. Skalička, K. Horálek (Czech Lands) and L. Hjelmslev (Copenhagen, Denmark). In the year 1947 the Bratislava Linguistic Circle started publishing a journal *Slovo a tvar, revue pre jazykovedu, štylistiku a slovesnosť* (Word and Form, Review for Linguistics, Stylistics and Literature) and was published quarter-yearly. Its orientation was distinctly functionalist and structuralist. Its connection with the PLC journal *Slovo a slovesnosť*, is evident. (Its present-day subtitle in English is: *A Journal for the theory of language and language cultivation founded in 1935 by the Prague Linguistic Circle*). In 1950 the BLC published the first issue of the international *Recueil linguistique de Bratislava* edited by A. V. Isachenko. The Revue was to become a parallel to the pre-war revue *Travaux du Cercle linguistique de Prague*. Members of the BLC (e.g. V. Skalička and J. Mukařovský, L. Hjelmslev) met for lectures and discussions with PLC scholars as invited guests. Discussions were held on various linguistic topics, e.g. functions of language. The conative function (Bühler’s *appellative function*), i.e. the problems of the relationship between the speaker and the language were explored by A. V. Isachenko; the structure of language functions and the topic of standard language were explored by K. Horálek; properties of parole were presented V. Skalička’s and E. Pauliny’s lectures.