A NOTE ON THE DESTRUCTION AND THE REVIVAL OF THE PRAGUE LINGUISTIC CIRCLE

1. In her contribution to a volume of lectures on the Prague structuralism, Mišková (2003) describes the fate of the Prague Linguistic Circle (PLC) during the communist time, richly using documents from the archives. Since several points of the history of the Prague structuralism might get somewhat obliterated, if they are not mentioned in this connection, I would like to recall them in this short note.

As for the beginning of the 1950s, Mišková rightly points out that several members and adherents of PLC themselves contributed to the Circle’s destruction;¹ in the structure of scientific linguistic institutions (as viewed from outside), PLC was merged into two of the associations belonging to the then established Academy of Sciences. In the period between the middle of the 1950s and the end of the 1960s, B. Havránek as the leading personality of Czechoslovak linguistics understood how to ensure a rich and large continuation of the functional-structural methods of the PLC, although the name of the Circle was deprived of the possibility to be used in publications in the atmosphere determined by censorship. The term ‘Prague School of functional and structural linguistics’ was often used instead, and thanks to J. Vachek’s and F. Daneš’s efforts, it was possible to publish four volumes of *Travaux linguistiques de Prague*, which substituted a direct continuation of the *Travaux du Cercle linguistique de Prague*. The fundamental contributions of V. Mathesius were still understood as the source of fruitful linguistic traditions, and various trends having their sources in the PLC, such as V. Skalička’s typology of languages, J. Firbas’ Functional Sentence Perspective, B. Havránek’s theory of Standard language and stylistics, M. Dokušil’s derivatology or F. Daneš and Z. Hlavsa’s syntactic studies were systematically developed and discussed by many adherents. Also the systematization of phonology and of the different kinds of oppositions within the system of language, accomplished by R. Jakobson and N. Trubetzkoj, has always been recognized as a stable part of linguistic theory.

While Havránek worked as the leader of one of the two wings of the politically divided linguistic community of the country, namely the Soviet-oriented one, the other wing was headed by Trnka, who founded and led the Group of Functional Linguistics within the Circle of Modern Philology. Both wings presented summaries of their views in Russian and Czech linguistic journals. The latter wing at first might have been understood as the weaker one; however, it is worth noting that during the 1960s and 1970s several adherents of the former wing one after another started to participate also in B. Trnka’s Group.

Especially after the deterioration of the political situation following the Soviet-led invasion, it was not easy to find a possibility to explicitly refer to the PLC. Even so, much has been done in this direction by J. Vachek and others, including summarizing editions of the works of V. Mathesius and B. Trnka.² Methods of structural and functional linguistics were applied to many topics in most different subfields of linguistics in numerous contributions, be it in Czech and international journals, at conferences, or in monographs. Even the large *Mluvnice češtiny* (Grammar of Czech) published in Prague by Academia
in 1986–7 draws much of its content from research based on these methods, as its rich bibliographical data indicate.

2. Already in the spring of 1989, the late O. Leška started the efforts eventually leading to the revival of the PLC, with a very effective help of A. Míšková, who then found in the archives that from the legal point of view, the existence of the Circle was not interrupted. Just after the political turnover, in the academic year 1989–90, PLC’s activities started anew, with lectures and discussions, and later also publications; the late M. Dokulil was elected as the chairman of PLC.

Publications concerning PLC often have appeared abroad, as Nekula (2003) recalls in his Foreword to the cited volume. Out of the two volumes edited by P. Luelsdorff et al. in 1994, which bring papers by Czech and Slovak linguists, one is devoted to broadening the information on the developments in the Prague School between 1945 and 1990, in the other one the different periods of the Prague School are documented, including a couple of papers characterizing the trend oriented at an exploitation of the insights of the classical School in connection with more recent methodological requirements. This trend (briefly characterized in Sgall 1995) is intended as a challenge for the Chomskyan and other views on an explicit (if not fully formalized) linguistic description, based on dependency syntax (first systematically described by L. Tesnière in the context of the classical Circle) and on an understanding of the interactive character of natural language, see esp. E. Hajičová’s writings on focus and coreference. Along with other trends, especially those inspired by F. Čermák in corpus linguistics and those concerning relationships between sentence structure and discourse patterns, the formulation of this challenge documents that the classical PLC has found systematic and enthusiastic continuation in the recent developments of linguistics.

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Notes

1 Since she asks what actually was the goal of my paper in the weekly Tvorba in 1951, it may be recalled that before publishing the paper I delivered a talk at the Faculty of Philosophy, Charles University, in which, as a young enthusiast, I attempted a reaction to the discrepancy between the fact that many of my teachers and older colleagues at that time showed great esteem of the just published paper on linguistics by Stalin and the lack of their reflecting what consequences should be drawn for Czech linguistic research. With a heavily politically biased approach, I tried to draw a dividing line between the members of PLC adhering to Marxist inspiration (seen at that time e.g. in stressing the functional aspects of the viewpoints of PLC, see already Skalička 1948), i.e. esp. B. Havránek and V. Skalička, and those who did not share these views. My friends convinced me that my
contribution should be published in *Tvorba*, and its editors then, without informing me, mutilated my text by extreme anti-Jakobsonian invectives in the political jargon of the epoch (cf. Sgall 1994, fn. 1). On the initiative of B. Havránek as the editor of *Slovo a slovesnost*, the paper was then reprinted in that journal, and thus aroused a widespread negative reaction in the linguistic community. The real importance of the School’s basic tenets gradually became clear to me only much later.

2 One of the minor contributions to these efforts may be seen in Sgall’s (1978) mentioning of PLC in his remarks on the volume edited by L. Matějka on the occasion of the Circle’s 50th anniversary, not to speak of the short notice disclaiming my previous views and including a couple of words on R. Jakobson’s positive role, which I published in (1956), again on B. Havránek’s initiative.

3 This is due (among other things) to the fact that a significant drawback in the period between 1950 and the 1980s was determined by the restrictions on scientific contacts with the western world, so that it was useful to reestablish the contacts within the international linguistic community, and also to make available for it what had been published by Czech and Slovak authors.

References


SKALIČKA, V.: Kodaňský strukturalismus a "Pražská škola" (The Copenhagen structuralism and the "Prague School"). *Slovo a slovesnost* 10, 1947–8, 135–142.