

Praguiana

Some Basic and Less Known Aspects of the Prague Linguistic School

An Anthology of Prague School Papers
Selected by Josef Vachek

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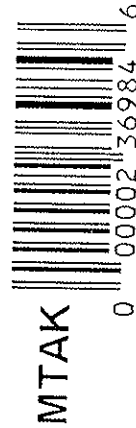
NEW CURRENTS AND TENDENCIES IN LINGUISTIC RESEARCH*

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I

Since the beginning of the 19th century two different schools of investigation have been developing in linguistic research: the first of them compares facts taken from languages genetically related trying, on the basis of facts already known, to ascertain new facts, from which the known facts may be historically derived. Its chief aim is historical reconstruction, and the method it uses may be called genetical-comparative. The other school compares facts from different languages without any regard to their genetical relations, trying in this way to arrive at a clearer insight into the real meaning and the real nature of linguistic phenomena. It chiefly aims at a more precise analysis of facts, and its method may be called analytical-comparative.

The genetical-comparative school has from the very beginning concentrated its efforts on problems of historical phonology and of historical morphology, regarded as applied phonology. From the pioneer work of Franz Bopp up to the codification by Karl Brugmann, its work has developed in an uninterrupted line. This steady and straightforward development has resulted in the working out of precise and detailed methods of investigation. Besides this very evident advantage, however, the long development on the same line has had its drawbacks. The outlook has narrowed, the conception has become mechanical.



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The outward phonetic aspect of linguistic facts has been emphasized out of all proportion, and the apparent trustworthiness of precise methods, confirmed by the discovery of so-called phonetic laws, has led to the conviction that the results arrived at should be regarded as definitive. To prove this, the statement of one of the most prominent comparative philologists of to-day may be cited, to the effect that in comparative semantics only are new and important discoveries yet in store for comparative Indo-European philology. Limiting its field of investigation to languages genetically related and to facts which can be traced in their historical development, the genetical comparative method has in the last place diverted the attention of philologists from languages belonging to other linguistic families and so eliminated from their investigation that part of linguistic materials which might have led them to a broader conception of their problems.

The analytical-comparative school of linguistic research which, from Wilhelm von Humboldt up to N. Fick, is represented by a series of isolated attempts rather than by systematical work, has been trying in vain to establish a continuous line of investigation. Its broad outlook has not narrowed, its interest in all kinds of linguistic problems has not cooled, but it has entirely failed to work out a precise and trustworthy method of research.

To-day the overwhelming preponderance of the genetical-comparative school is beginning to wane. On the one hand, facts which have up till now been regarded as unshakable, show, under the concentrated light of new and finer methods of investigation, signs of instability. On the other hand, the growing interest in syntactical and semantics-

cal problems together with the influence of some intellectual tendencies of recent years have led many philologists of the genetical-comparative school into ways, very closely resembling those of the other school. No one who realizes the necessity of regenerating the traditional methods of linguistic research can fail to observe that this regeneration will not be achieved without the victory of the new tendencies. A complete elimination of the old methods is, however, not to be regarded as desirable but rather a synthesis of the two rival currents, which should combine their advantages without sharing their weaknesses.

II

The official school of linguistic research has held as one of its articles of faith that the only scientific method of investigation is the historical method. Grammatical investigation, aiming at an analysis of language at a certain point of time, has been regarded as not reaching the scientific standard, because it has been thought that in neglecting the historical point of view it neglects to bring out the causes of the analyzed facts. This opinion, though still prevalent, is now far from being unopposed. More and more adherents have appeared in the ranks of to-day's scholars of the opposite conviction, emphasized by the late Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Cours de linguistique générale*, posthumously published in 1916, and frankly advocated in my paper, published in 1911, on the potentiality of linguistic phenomena (*O potenciálnosti jevů jazykových, Praha*), that the same position as to the dynamic, or in de Saussure's terminology diachronic, method which analyzes the linguistic facts in their chronological succession, is to be accorded

to the static, or as *de Saussure* calls it, synchronic method, limiting the investigation to the stage of a language as it appears at a given period of time, but making, at the same time, the analysis more penetrating. The changed situation is shown not only by the publication of important linguistic works, entirely based on the static method (Ferdinand Brunot. *La pensée et la langue*), but also by the appearance of papers theoretically defending the scientific character of the new method (O. F u n k e, "Über Prinzipienfragen der Sprachwissenschaft", *Engl. Studien* LVII/1923, pp. 161). It is astonishing that the linguists relatively so late have come to draw the conclusion from the fact that it was on an exclusively static basis that modern phonetics has developed to its present high standard, and that notwithstanding nobody has ever dared to call into question the scientific value of its results.

The present state of linguistics suffices to bring home the conviction that the time has come for a fuller share of the static method in linguistic research. The expressive and communicative function of language has been in the last years becoming more and more the center of attention in modern linguistics, and problems connected with that aspect of linguistic material cannot be solved by the historical method alone. A full analysis of the basic grammatical functions — e.g. the function of the subject and of predication, the problem of the function and existence of the word, the real nature of sentence formation — can be achieved only with the help of the static method by which linguistic phenomena are not unduly separated from the action of speaking. In the same way the analysis of emotional elements in language, which are studied by Professor Ch. B a l l y with such care, as well as all subtle analyses of the meanings can be

based on the static method only. The same may be said of the study of the interdependence of two or more coexistent linguistic facts, e.g. of that of rhythm and word-order to which much attention has been lately paid in Modern English, or of rhythm and the use of the pronominal subject which I have proved for colloquial Czech. The role of linguistic tendencies, the existence of which is shown by the fact that the possibility of choosing between two ways of expression leads, in most cases, to the preference of one of them, cannot be fully appreciated but by the static analysis of the language. Linguistic characterology which, as I hope to show elsewhere, will play a first-rate role in the linguistics of to-morrow, is impossible unless on a static basis. The advocates of the dynamic method should not be afraid of the competition of the other method, for by a static analysis new linguistic problems will come to light which will require further study on the lines of the historical method. In one point, of course, the static method may prove a dangerous rival to historical research. The exaggerated faith in historical methods is based on the conviction that the origin of the linguistic fact A_2 is sufficiently explained by stating that the said fact has replaced the linguistic fact A_1 . A closer analysis of the problem leads to the result that what matters is not so much to ascertain the mere succession of facts but to show why the fact A_1 has been replaced by the fact A_2 . There is nothing easier for instance than to show which types of declension have been replaced by the Modern English simplified system and by the generalization of which forms that system has been built up, but the origin of this system is not fully explained by stating those relatively evident facts. In order to understand it completely, we must find out why the inherited variety of the types of declen-

sion came to be felt as superfluous, and why the simplification began to be carried out in favour of the types *stānes* and *wordes* for the Genitive Singular, and *stānas* for the Plural. To such questions answers may be found rather by the analysis of the general character of the language at the time when the first symptoms of the studied change appeared, than by the comparison of isolated facts belonging to different stages of development. This opinion is not merely a theoretical one. When G. H. Üben er ("Das Problem des Flexionsschwundes im Angelsächsischen" *Paul-Braunes Beiträge* 45/1921, 85 ss.) sees the chief cause of the simplified English declension system in the change of English word-order, and when E. C. L. asen ("s and n Plurals in Middle English". *Modern Language Review* 14/1919, 94 ss), as well as W. Keller ("Skandinavischer Einfluß in der englischen Flexion". *Probleme der englischen Sprache u. Kultur, Festschrift Johannes Hoops*. Heidelberg 1925, 80-87), look to the Scandinavian influence for the explanation of the disappearance of n-plurals in English, they in reality adopt the static conception of coexistent and interdependent linguistic facts for the basis of their investigations.

III

How the position of the chief representative of the traditional school of linguistics, historical phonology, may be disputed by the new methods of investigation, is clearly shown by the results arrived at in recent studies devoted to the history of English pronunciation. The fact itself is really instructive that in the history of English pronunciation since the XIVth century, well supplied as we are for that period with external evidence in the form of individual spellings, practical grammars, orthoepic

treatises, attempts at spelling reform, rhymes and puns, we hardly succeed in arriving at a commonly acknowledged theory of the succession and real nature of the respective phonetic changes, whereas in the case of prehistoric periods e.g. Primitive Germanic, or Primitive Indo-European, where all such evidence is entirely lacking, comparative philology has managed to build up very precise systems of reconstructions, which sometimes is not very far from turning into a kind of phonetic algebra. It is true that in going back into primitive periods we are likely to meet with simpler and plainer linguistic situations than in modern times. But the difference cannot be such as to account for the apparent preciseness of results on the one hand, and the prevailing uncertainty on the other. The chief cause of this discrepancy I see in the copiousness of evidence for modern periods which detract nothing from the natural complexity of linguistic facts whereas the total absence or great scarcity of evidence in the early periods leads to an artificial, and therefore fallacious simplification of the linguistic situation. In addition to this general warning against reconstructive methods, unduly simplifying the rich variety of linguistic phenomena, the history of Modern English pronunciation raises other doubts concerning the traditional ways of historical phonology. This branch of historical linguistics is based upon the supposition that the sound a' generally turns into the sound a² by a purely phonetic change and that phonetic development goes, on the whole, in a straightforward way. The last great work on the history of English pronunciation, however, Professor H. C. Wyld's *History of Colloquial English*, published originally in 1920, goes very far to subvert that supposition. For it shows in a very detailed way that changes evident in the history of Modern

English pronunciation have not always been the results of purely phonetic processes, by which the sound a¹ should have been directly turned into the sound a² but very often consequences of social shifts through which the pronunciation represented by the sound a² has been substituted for the pronunciation represented by the sound a¹. The results arrived at by Professor H. C. Wyld have far-reaching theoretical consequences. If they prove true, then it is not safe to believe as stubbornly as the traditional school of historical phonology does, in the mechanical and straightforward character of the changes of pronunciation and credulously to project the apparent direct lines of phonetic development back into prehistoric periods. Those who like H. Schuchardt have not let themselves to be enticed by the phantom of phonetic laws, are supplied with new reasons for their incredulity, and there is a great hope that the ascetic conception of historical grammar, which tries to keep apart from any contact with the so-called external history of the language, will have to surrender before the new proofs of the thesis that internal and external forces are so intimately mixed in the development of the language, that nobody can separate them without deforming the reality.

Besides the new conception of phonetic development represented by Professor Wyld's work there are other symptoms in modern linguistic research testifying to a growing dissatisfaction with the traditional predilection for the outward, purely mechanical aspects of linguistic facts. Modern phonology presents another instance of the new tendency in the fact that the functional conception of sound changes has been coming to the front in the last few years. It is based on the idea that phonetic qualities of speech have communicative and expressive values which

cannot be disregarded in looking for the causes of sound changes. In his book entitled *Sprachkörper und Sprachfunktion* (Berlin 1921), Professor Wilhelm Horn, with the one-sided zeal of a pioneer, it is true, but notwithstanding with some good arguments, tries to call the attention to the fact that the phonetic form of a word is very often determined by its meaning. In etymological investigation the interest in the concrete meaning of the studied words has been steadily strengthening in the last two decades (*Wörter und Sachen Forschung*) and although it would be perhaps overhasty to believe with M. Gilliéron that phonetic etymology has proved a complete failure (*La faillite de l'étymologie phonétique*, Paris 1919), we cannot overlook the facts which he adduced in order to prove the important role played in the history of words by internal associations. The present state of opinion in that field of linguistic research is well summarized in a recent paper by Professor L. Spitzer where he says that by purely phonetic analysis of a word we arrive at nothing more than an etymological schema to which life is given or denied by semasiological investigation only (*Jahrbuch für Philologie I*, 1925 pp. 143). That a purely phonetic solution of morphological problems is no more regarded by the linguists as satisfactory was, in the case of the revolutionary change of the English declension systems, clearly shown by Professor O. Jespersen as early as 1894 (*Progress in Language*). The building up of a new morphology, however, which instead of being an applied phonology only, should be a real study of formal systems of means of expression and should try to find the causes of their changes in the shifting needs of linguistic expression, has hardly yet begun. In the field of syntax the general shift of interest from the external aspect of language to its

inner life is exemplified by the emphasizing of the stylistic principle and by the substitution of the functional conception for the traditional formal point of view.

IV

Finer methods of linguistic analysis have brought to light the importance of what I should call the double-faced character of linguistic phenomena. It consists in a continuous fluctuation between the general and the individual. The original expressional function of language is not so much overshadowed by the communicative function that the linguistic forms which we know have entirely developed upon the basis of the latter function. The communicative character of language is made possible by the expressive quality of the linguistic means of expression. However, of making oneself understood has in reality not been able entirely to suppress the need of self-expression, and so it comes about that in linguistic research we cannot limit our attention to what is conventional in language. A consequence of the conventional character of language is the fact that the individual needs of expression can never be fully satisfied with the existing linguistic means. Each individual's experience is unique, and nevertheless is to be expressed by conventional means. This incongruity is, at least partially, removed by the constant adaptation of linguistic means to freshly arising needs of expression. New forms of expression are created on the model of the existing means of expression or the meaning of the old forms is changed. Thus the possibilities of linguistic expression are continually enlarged by individual efforts, which lead either to passing deviations or, if the novelty finds a ready acceptance in the linguistic community (see G. B. A. L. Y., *Psychologische Phänomene im Bedeutungswandel*,

Bern 1924) to a permanent change. Linguistic research work can either concentrate on what has already become a common possession of all members of the linguistic community or it can study the individual efforts of linguistic creation. The traditional school of linguistics has so exclusively limited itself to the study of commonly accepted means of expression that the individual speaker has disappeared from its ken. As a reaction against this too objective conception of language, a school of an extreme linguistic subjectivism chiefly represented by Professor K. Vossler has appeared, which follows the ideal of Wilhelm von Humboldt and regards the act of linguistic expression as something so individual as artistic creation. In a modified and more acceptable form subjectivism is represented by the thesis of complete linguistic theories by F.

192. *Journal of Linguistics*, Sprachwissenschaft und Zeitgeist, Marburg.

Lang (1924) in *Language Review* XII/1917 and XIV/1919). On the whole, however, the theories brought forward by the adherents of the new school are as yet too general to make it clear what really its contributions to the solution of concrete linguistic problems will be. In a more limited field the subjective tendency of modern linguistics shows itself in the above mentioned application of stylistic methods to syntactical and semasiological problems. As early as 1908 O. Oestergren, in a book published in Stockholm and called *Stilistisk (Språkvetenskap)*, gave a survey of what had been done in that branch of linguistic studies in Sweden. Recently the stylistic point of view in linguistic research has been advocated by L. Spitzer in a paper, in which is given a survey of the German adherents to the stylistic methods. The proposition maintained by Pro-

fessor S p i t z e r "Nihil est in syntaxi quod non fuerit in stylo" very clearly shows how the greatest stress is laid by him and his friends on the individual share in linguistic expression. Linguistics as a whole can derive from stylistic syntax and stylistic semantics a double benefit. It is good that the rule, often neglected, has been emphasized again, that linguistic analysis should always be based upon words and sentences which have actually been spoken or written, and not upon construed examples only, and it is good that the attention of linguists has been called to the fact that linguistic material does not consist in everyday clichés merely. One question however must be clearly answered, if the beneficial consequences of the stylistic method are to be realized. What is the true relation between the scientific study of language and the scientific study of style? In my opinion the difference between the two branches of scientific studies lies not in different material, but in the different aims of their analyses. Words and sentences which have actually been used by individual speakers or writers, make up the basis of investigation in both cases. In the study of language, of course, individual utterances are analysed as specimens of the linguistic possibilities of a whole community, whereas in the study of style we try to ascertain how the linguistic possibilities common to the whole community have been made use of in a special case for an individual purpose. Linguistic analysis accordingly, always concentrates on what is common or may become common to the whole community; stylistic analysis on the other hand is concerned with what is individual and unique.

V

The traditional method of linguistic research may be called formal in the sense that the form as the thing

known has been constantly made the starting point of investigation, whereas the meaning or the function of the form has been regarded as that which should be found. It was the natural consequence of the fact that philology was for a long time chiefly based upon the interpretation of old texts and that it therefore made the reader's point of view its own.

Transferred into real life the formal method coincides with the method of a hearer, who has to find the meaning of words and sentences he hears. In opposition to the traditional interpretation of forms, modern linguistics more and more takes the meaning or function as its starting point and tries to find out by which means it is expressed. This is the point of view of the speaker or the writer who has to find linguistic forms for what he wishes to express.

This functional conception of language is the basis of the detailed investigation of present-day French by Ferdinand Brunot (*La pensée et la langue. Méthodes, principes et plan d'une théorie nouvelle du langage appliquée au français*. Paris, Masson 1922). M. Brunot has of course, in spite of the richness of accumulated material and the great number of very instructive discussions, not given a systematic functional analysis of Modern French. He builds up the classification of his material upon linguistic functions, but he does not go so far as a functional grammar. The chief cause of this failure is to be seen in the fact that no distinction is made in M. Brunot's analysis between usual and occasional forms by which the same function is expressed. M. Brunot even seems to prefer occasional forms on account of their rareness although the very bases of language consist in forms which are usual. That is why, in M. Brunot's analysis of Modern French, the lexicographic interest

prevails over the grammatical, and why the book as it stands is far more an accumulation of lexicographic material than a functional grammar. This indisputable fact should not, of course, be regarded as an argument against the possibility of functional grammar at all. I am fully persuaded that a complete system of functional grammar can be built upon the two fundamental linguistic activities, the semantic activity of giving names and the syntactic activity of putting the names into mutual relations. This does not mean, it must be added, that the functional conception should entirely replace the formal one. For it is at first sight evident that in language there exist many formal associations upon the basis of which formal systems of the means of expression are formed. The functional method on the other hand is sure to yield new results in the analysis of languages. Some years ago I tried to show that the functional conception of language will most probably bring us to a commonly acceptable definition of the sentence. A functional analysis of the Modern English passive and qualifying predications has proved to me that the functional conception of languages enables us to group linguistic material into new categories which in its turn leads to new problems. Such problems may be static or dynamic; so, for instance, the fact that the possessive phrase of the type *čebere* has had such an unusual development of meaning and enlargement of function in Rumanic, Germanic and some Slavonic languages, is brought best to light by a functional analysis of predicational forms in the respective languages. Not the least advantage of the functional principle consists in its being the only possible basis for the analytical comparative method of linguistic research, which analyses material drawn from different languages without any regard to their historical relationship.

VI

Traditional comparative philology has limited itself, bound to do so by the formal and historical character of its genetical comparative methods, to the analysis of languages related to each other. The example of H. J. A. C. O. B. I. who has used illustrations taken from Oriental languages in his attempt to explain some archaic Indo-European forms (*Compositum und Nebensatz*, Bonn 1897) has, on the whole, remained unfollowed. The interest in general linguistic problems, too, has been subsiding for a long time, as if it had been exhausted by Hermann Paul's *Prinzipien* and the controversy concerning W. Wundt's *Völkerpsychologie*. In those two respects also, clear symptoms of the changing orientation of linguistics may be seen. Languages lying outside the Indo-European group have been in recent years less reluctantly taken into account by specialists in Indo-European philology or at least facts from remote Indo-European languages more often used, not as material for historical reconstruction, but as illustrations helping to ascertain the real meaning of linguistic phenomena. In addition to H. Schuchardt, who has always kept outside the traditional path, O. Jespersen and A. Meillet may be named here as the chief representatives of the new type of linguists with a wide range of interests and experiences. No comparative philologist of the old school would have taken part in the preparation of the variegated volume entitled *Les langues du monde* of which M. A. Meillet is co-editor. A deeper understanding for general problems goes hand in hand with a new evaluation of multicoloured linguistic material. The number of books devoted to general linguistics has been steadily growing. *De Saussure's Cours*

de linguistique générale, published posthumously in 1916 through the care of Ch. Bally and A. S e c h e n a y e, H. S c h a r d t's opinions on general linguistic problems, collected into a Schuchardt-Brevier by L. S p i t z e r (1922) and N o r e n's general introductions to his detailed grammar of Modern Swedish, made generally accessible in the German translation by H. W. P o l l a k (Wissenschaftliche Betrachtung der Sprache. Halle 1923) make up, as it were, the vanguard of modern linguistics in this direction. The present orientation of linguistic thought is characterized by the relatively numerous books on general linguistic problems published since 1918. There are the two volumes in which O. J e s p e r s e n has laid down his views on the nature of language and the theory of grammar (Language. Its Nature, Development and Origin. London 1922; The Philosophy of Grammar. London 1924); there is the book on general linguistics by J. V e n d r y è s (Le language, Paris 1921), and another by E. S a p i r, Language, New York 1921.

The time has really come for general linguistic problems to be systematically studied. For it is truly astonishing that so much good work is being done in every special field of linguistic research, and that notwithstanding there is no central place where all the general consequences of the studied facts may be gathered and compared. Modern phonetics, in which the right relation between the general and the particular has been kept in sight since the very beginning of the systematic work, is a very instructive instance of what could be done. There are two categories of general linguistic problems which ought to be systematically studied. The basic functions of linguistic expression should be analysed and the means of linguistic expression catalogued. This means showing

how in all kinds of languages the subject and the predicate are expressed, which are the possible forms of the active, passive, perceptive, qualificative, possessive, etc. predication, how the attributive qualification is expressed, which aspects of activity or of status can be expressed in the predication, etc. It is self-evident that such problems cannot be solved but by the functional and static method of research.

The use of analogies from languages lying outside the studied group may have a great methodic importance, for by such analogies some elements can be eliminated from a complex of facts and the problem can be simplified, in very much the same way as is done in the case of an experiment. The simplification of the case system in English is for example usually explained by the phonetic reduction of the endings and the consequent weakening of their expressiveness. In some dialects of Modern Czech, however, we see that the functions of single case forms are becoming uncertain, although the expressiveness of the endings has remained unshaken, and this suggests the idea that phonetic reduction of the endings was not the only or the primary factor in play in the simplification of the English case system. In the same way the problem of analysis in the English declension may be made simpler by pointing out that analysis is used in many other languages as an occasional means of emphasis and that accordingly the chief question is how the occasional form became generalised.

VII

One characteristic feature of the new tendencies in linguistic research must be emphasized at the end of our survey. It cannot be denied that modern psychology has

accelerated their coming but their essential nature and their real basis are clearly linguistic. At the beginning of the century, it is true, great hopes were awakened by the two volumes in which Wilhelm Wundt tried to give a systematic psychology of language, but, in the long run, those hopes have been disappointed. Wundt's psychology of language has not become the starting point of the new linguistics, and where, as in the books by J. H. A. S. e (Neufranzösische Syntax, Halle 1909) and M. D. e u t s c h- b e i n (System der neuenglischen Syntax, Göttingen 1917) the attempt has been made to build up a linguistic system on the basis of Wundt's psychology, it was not that psychology but the right linguistic feeling of the scholars that led to new results enriching our knowledge of the respective languages. The failure of Wundt has a symptomatic significance. It was not a casual but a fundamental failure. It was due to the fact that Wundt regarded spontaneous expression as the sole basis of language and, consequently, took for granted that differences of language directly reflected differences of thought. This of course was wrong, for, as has been pointed out in a preceding chapter, language although originally the means of spontaneous expression only, has definitely developed on the basis of communicative function.

If, however, language, instead of being simply a result of reflex processes, is, as has been held, in opposition to Wundt by W. M. a r t y (on him the book by Prof. O. F. u n k e may now be consulted: Innere Sprachform, Eine Einführung in Marty's Sprachphilosophie, Reichenberg 1924), a system of conventional signs, then psychology cannot be expected to afford an easy and direct help to linguistics. Consequently there is no chance of linguistics ever becoming a mere branch of psychology. Modern linguistics with

its activist conception of language will have an intensely psychological attitude towards linguistic problems so far as it will always hear or see the speaker or the writer behind linguistic material - it is in this fundamental conception of the facts of speech that the pioneer book on general linguistics, J. v a n G i n n e k e n's Principes de linguistique psychologique (Paris 1907), is truly psychological - but it will formulate its own linguistic methods.

NOTE

* Originally published in *MNEMA* (Festschrift for Josef Zubatý), Prague: Klub moderních filologů 1927, p.p. 188 - 203.