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Migrating Scholars and Ideas The Prague School and Scandinavia¹

The Prague Linguistic Circle was founded more than eighty years ago and it has created a system – structuralism – that is still amongst the most influential theories in the fields of linguistics, literary theory and aesthetics. However, this very first sentence already raises several questions. Firstly, what is it that we call structuralism? Most of today's Western-European or American scholars or students would probably think of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault or maybe Roman Jakobson. It is very likely that only a few of them would think of the group of scholars – mostly linguists – that came together in one of the rooms of Charles University in Prague in order to discuss a paper by Vilém Matheisus, a professor of English linguistics. Thus, does the term structuralism refer to the work of Lévi-Strauss, Jakobson, Matheisus, or of Louis Hjelmslev, a key figure of the Copenhagen Linguistic Circle? Or, is it all structuralism? Is there a connection between these Eastern and Western schools? There is, certainly.

The second question comes from the first: does the Western school originate from the Eastern one? The answer is probably yes, again, although there is a significant time gap (approximately thirty years) between the most fruitful periods of the two: we talk about the 1920s and 30s on one hand, and about the 60s on the other. It is certainly an

interesting investigation to see how various theories and scholars have influenced each other, sometimes ignoring political borders and cultural boundaries and sometimes very much affected by them, including geopolitical and historical factors, such as, for example, World War II.

Although I mentioned above East and West, in this present paper I intend to concentrate upon the Nordic countries. As we are going to see, the role of the Scandinavian countries was not irrelevant at all in the history of structuralism and its impact upon Europe and the US.

The first part of my paper is going to focus on the interwar period and the years of World War II, while the subject of the second part will be some reflections of Czech structuralism in Scandinavia after war.

The Prague School has its roots in linguistics, its first representatives and members were primarily linguists, like the above mentioned Vilém Mathesius, the first president of the Prague Linguistic Circle, or Roman Jakobson, Nikolai Trubetzkoy, Josef Vachek and others. However, some members of the Circle were also literary theorists and aesthetes like Jan Mukařovský and René Wellek. Furthermore, Roman Jakobson also wrote a great number of essays and studies on literature, literary history as well as on linguistics.

Jakobson's contacts and cooperation with his Nordic colleagues is going to be the topic of the following lines, and – as we are going to see – his pilgrimage to Northern Europe and later to Northern America did not lack some elements that could be regarded as stunning chapters of an adventure book, as well.

Much information on Jakobson and his contacts with Danish scholars is provided by Eli Fischer-Jørgensen who met Jakobson several times not only in Denmark but also in the US, and was a member of the Copenhagen Linguistic Circle, too (Fischer-Jørgensen 1997).

It is surely a known fact that although we consider Jakobson as a “Prague scholar”, he is not of Czech origins. His arrival to Prague took place in 1920 when he was only twenty-four, working for the Russian diplomatic mission and preparing his doctoral dissertation. Before that, in Moscow, he had been a very active member of the Mos-

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cow Linguistic Circle, thus one of the key persons of the formalist movement. Simultaneously he was in touch with several avant-garde artists, especially futurists, and even he himself was writing futurist *zaum*-poems. Jakobson was not the only Russian scholar to become a funding member of the Prague Linguistic Circle; along with him for example Nikolai Trubetzkoy and Sergei Karcevskiy were contributing significantly to the achievements of the Circle.

Thus, we may follow a certain continuity of thought as these scholars move from one cultural centre to another. A lot could be, and has been, written about the impact of the Russian School on the Prague one, but this is not my objective here.

According to Astrid Bækklund-Ehler (1977) the cooperation between the Danish and Slav linguists had started even before the Prague Circle was founded in 1926. Roman Jakobson knew the works of the Danish linguists Holger Pedersen and Otto Jespersen and several times referred to their works in the early 1920s. Reciprocally, this fact probably drew the attention of Danish scholars to the Prague colleagues, as well. This reciprocity also continued after the First International Congress of Linguists in The Hague (1928) where members of the younger Danish generation of linguists, Viggo Brøndal and Louis Hjelmslev were strongly impressed by the readings of Jakobson and Trubetzkoy. They remained in contact, exchanged thoughts and were mutually referring to each other's publications. The enthusiasm was mostly due to the fact that both parties were eager to develop the new and autonomous discipline of phonology and their common intention was to set up the phonological system of languages.

According to Fischer-Jørgensen, Jakobson, Karcevskiy and Trubetzkoy met their Danish colleagues as early as 1931 during the 2nd International Congress of Linguists in Geneva. Two outstanding scholars from Copenhagen, Lous Hjelmslev and Viggo Brøndal were present and were both impressed by the achievements of the Prague linguists especially in the field of phonetics.

After the foundation of the PLC a further step in the cooperation of Scandinavian and Prague scholars was a phonology conference in Pra-

gue, in December 1930. Several Scandinavian linguists received invitation to this event, but the only person taking part was Alf Sommerfelt from Oslo. The title of his paper was *Sur l'importance générale de la syllabe* but what is important is that most probably, this conference gave Sommerfelt the impetus to start thinking about the phonology of the Celtic languages – this became one of his key fields of interest – and phonology in general. Thus, upon returning to Oslo he started to lecture on this discipline at the university. The character of professor Sommerfelt gained importance not only on the scholarly level but also on the personal one, as he made significant efforts to find a position for Jakobson who had to flee from Czechoslovakia in the late 1930s.

The 2nd International Congress of Linguists took place in Geneva in 1931 and had again a very important effect on both the international cooperation of linguists and on the development of phonology in general. There were two immediate outcomes of this meeting. The first is that some of the participating scholars, including the ones from Prague and the ones from Denmark have decided on forming the Internationale Phonologische Arbeitgemeinschaft with the aim of systematically describing the phonological systems of the individual languages. The second is that shortly after the congress, the Linguistic Circle of Copenhagen was founded. The parallelism between the Prague and the Copenhagen circles is evident and becomes even more obvious if we consider that the periodical of the first was entitled „*Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague*” and of the latter: „*Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Copenhague*”. The PLC and its members without doubt strongly influenced the Danish linguists. However, one should not think that there was a complete uniformity of thought shared by these two groups.

Viggo Brøndal and Louis Hjelmslev were in the closest contact with the Prague school. Brøndal was even elected corresponding member of the PLC and it was also to his initiative that the Copenhagen Circle at its sessions discussed several times the achievements of the PLC for example were thoroughly analyzing Trubetzkoy's *Grundzüge der Phonologie*. Fischer-Jørgensen states (Fischer-Jørgen-

sen 1997, p. 16) that Brøndal's phonological system shows many differences to the one developed by Trubetzkoy and Jakobson but it is beyond dispute that his starting point goes back to them—especially in the theory of binary oppositions. Therefore it is rather difficult to explain why one can hardly find direct references to the Prague scholars in Brøndal's work. On the other hand, Jakobson discusses Brøndal's works and usually speaks of him in high terms. Mathesius was also acquainted with his Danish colleague's work and appraised it. However, it turned out, after all, that each of the groups "stuck to their own theories" (Fischer-Jørgensen 1997, p. 16).

It seems that Louis Hjelmslev was more acceptive while evaluating the ideas of the Prague School and especially Jakobson's work. At the time he was mostly interested in grammatical matters and was fascinated by Jakobson's paper on the structure of the Russian verb, published in 1932. Furthermore, he saw the Prague Linguistic Circle as an extremely useful organization particularly because of its strict rules that allowed it to show the scholarly world a solid and unified appearance in the matters of functional linguistics and structuralist aesthetics. This is partly because although the Copenhagen Circle was founded, as its members were often representing different opinions, it could never reach such a unity of opinions as its Central European counterpart.

Inside the Copenhagen Circle two workgroups were founded, a grammatical and a phonological one. The latter was created at Jakobson's request whose aim was to include the Danes into the above mentioned Internationale phonologische Arbeitsgemeinschaft and to elaborate the full description of the Danish phonological system. However, as the Danish linguists were not entirely agreeing with the Prague methods this project was not realized.

In her recapitulation of Roman Jakobson's relationship with Denmark, Eli Fischer-Jørgensen speaks about her professor, the Germanist Louis Hammerich who was also a member of the Copenhagen Linguistic Circle until 1942 and was interested in structuralist linguistics. Fischer-Jørgensen received a few copies of the „Travaux du Cer-

cle Linguistique de Prague" which fact has entirely changed her scientific career, turning her interest from Germanic linguistics to phonology and its geographic and dialectological aspects. As she puts it:

I was simply thrilled and could not stop reading; and I read with particular enthusiasm the papers by Jakobson and Trubetzkoy [...] but now that I learned that the sounds could be integrated into the linguistic system, that it was possible to find laws for the structure of phoneme systems, and that this opened up quite new perspectives for typology and for the explanation of sound change (Fischer-Jørgensen 1997, p. 18).

The 4th International Congress of Linguists in 1936 took place in Copenhagen to which, naturally, Jakobson was also invited. The secretary of the congress was Brøndal who asked Jakobson for a contribution during the plenary session. He read about *Die Arbeit der sogenannten Prager Schule*. On this congress Trubetzkoy also delivered a lecture and the closing speech. During his stay in Denmark, Jakobson delivered other lectures as well at the University of Copenhagen and at the University of Aarhus, where Hjelmslev was teaching.

It was not only Jakobson who visited his colleagues but also the Danish linguists went to Prague several times. In 1935–1936 Brøndal delivered two lectures in the PLC on etymology and phonetic laws and on the structure of vocalic systems. And in 1937 it was Hjelmslev who travelled to Czechoslovakia where he read on *Forme et substance linguistiques* and where he was – as the second scholar from Denmark – elected member of the Circle.

In 1937 Jakobson suggested his colleagues to launch an international journal devoted to structural linguistics edited by both Prague and Copenhagen linguists. There were several discussions on this matter but they could not agree in many questions. Because of this and the complicated political situation the periodical was never realized as a common project: *Acta Linguistica* was issued in Copenhagen, edited by Brøndal and Hjelmslev and Jakobson being only one of the members of the broad editing committee.

Despite of the numerous differences in the opinions, the cooperation between the two groups remained intense thanks to which in the first issue of *Acta Linguistica*, Brøndal and Hjelmslev formulated an

introduction that analyzed the current state of the phonological research and emphasized the importance of international work in this field. Shortly after this Brřndal's monograph *Linguistique structurale* was published and according to Baecklund-Ehler prior to publishing it the author showed the text to Jakobson and asked for his opinion.

By the end of the decade, the political situation became very serious. The German troops had occupied the majority of Czechoslovakia, universities (including the University of Brno, where Jakobson was a senior lecturer) were closed, professors were persecuted. Jakobson therefore had to flee from the capital of Moravia and spent more than a month hiding in Prague while his flat was searched (Jangfeldt 1940–1941, p. 142).

From letters partly referred to by Fischer-Jørgensen and partly presented by Jindřich Toman (1994) it becomes obvious that Jakobson had realized a few months before how difficult the upcoming times would be. Therefore he tried to organize his escape from the occupied Czechoslovakia or what was called from March 1939, the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. With the aid of his brother Sergei living at that time in London, he tried to apply for a scholarship to the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning, but by Spring 1939 it turned out that with the help of Brøndal and probably Hjelmslev he could receive a visa to Denmark. In the meanwhile Alf Sommerfelt was intensely trying to find a position for Jakobson in Oslo but his efforts turned to be successful only by the time Jakobson arrived in Copenhagen². It was Hjelmslev who waited for him and his wife at the railway station in April. It is very typical to the dynamism and diligence of Jakobson that he immediately joined scholarly life and was working hard mostly in a coffee house in the suburbs of Copenhagen, not far from Brøndal's and Hjelmslev's home. And already in May he read in the Copenhagen Linguistic Circle on *Das Nullzeichen* and had

two lectures at the university on the structure of the phonemes. As it is stated in his Activity Report compiled later in the US in 1945 (Toman 1994, p. 228), he started to study an early 17th century manuscript (a Low German Manual of spoken Russian) he had found in the Danish Royal Library. This project was planned together with Helge Poulsen but because of the war could not be continued until the late 1940s and completed with the contribution of Hammerich and others in 1986.

As it was mentioned before, the Norwegian Alf Sommerfelt was trying hard to find a position for Jakobson and by the time World War II broke out the Jakobsons ended the short but fruitful stay in Denmark that – together with the pre-war years – left a very significant impact on not only Danish linguistics but on semioticians, as well – especially in the case of the younger generation (Fischer-Jørgensen 1997, p. 13). On the other hand, the Copenhagen stopover was not meaningless at all for Jakobson, either. To underline this, Fischer-Jørgensen quotes from a letter written by Jakobson to Hjelmslev in 1950:

Our life in Denmark was just like a beautiful dream plus a most stimulating linguistic experience (Fischer-Jørgensen 1997, p. 13).

Thus in the Fall of 1939 the Jakobsons continued their pilgrimage to Norway where at the beginning they felt somewhat alone but soon enough Jakobson built close contacts and friendships with a number of local colleagues. Baecklund-Ehler points out that Jakobson foremost appreciated the work of Olaf Broch, a Slavic linguist and a scholar of phonetics and was conducting detailed researches on the relationship of voice and meaning. The scholars Jakobson regularly met and conversed with were especially Sommerfelt, Knut Bergsland, Harris Birkeland and others. Again here, Jakobson suggested extensive cooperation, for example to assemble the phonological atlas of Europe or, to provide a systematic survey of Scandinavian-Slavic relations in the Middle ages. In his above quoted report he also enumerates his activities in Oslo: in the winter semester of 1939–40 he lectured at the University of Oslo on child language and aphasia (his pioneer pa-

² According to a Hungarian linguist, Ferenc Kovács, Jakobson did not go directly to Copenhagen but remained in Budapest for approximately two weeks in the flat of another linguist, Gyula Laziczius (Kovács 1976).

per on the topic was published a few months later in Uppsala), he read on the structure of the Giljak language, and – at the Norwegian Academy of Sciences, of which he became a member – on “Tatar motives in Russian *byliny*”.

Very soon war reached Norway, too, forcing Jakobson and his wife to flee further, this time to Sweden. It could have been an astonishing adventure how the couple wandered through the mountains, led by a Norwegian peasant and – according to Fischer-Jørgensen – one of them for some time lying in a coffin. Bengt Jangfeldt provides a detailed description of the story and even presents a translation of the police report written by the Swedish border guards after Roman and Svatava Jakobson crossed the border basically without any personal documents. The report deserves attention because it “sheds new light on Jakobson’s personal biography in the thirties, as well as on his stay in the Scandinavian countries” (Jangfeldt 1940–1941, pp. 141–142). Jakobson stayed in Uppsala where he could not really find Swedish colleagues interested in functional linguistics or structuralism. However there were two foreign scholars with whom Jakobson could cooperate: one of them was the Hungarian János Lotz and the other the German Wolfgang Steinitz; both were scholars of Finno-Ugric linguistics. It is amazing how productive Jakobson was despite his unsettled situation (we know from Jangfeldt’s article that he was constantly trying to organize his life, he planned to travel to the US and wrote a number of applications to various authorities etc.) and the short time he spent in Sweden. Together with Lotz, for example, they delivered a lecture on the versification system of Mordavian folksongs (Jakobson, Lotz 1978).

Lotz was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin to a family of Hungarian émigrés, who later on returned to Hungary. This is how he could start his studies at the university of Budapest. Thanks to his talent and diligence his professor – another well known linguist – Zoltán Gombocz managed to arrange him a scholarship in Stockholm where he was very soon – at the age of 23 – appointed director. It is certain that *Das ungarische Sprachsystem*, his major work from that period, is very

much influenced by the Prague school and without doubt by the personal contacts with Roman Jakobson in Sweden. The book describes the system of the Hungarian language from the perspective of structural linguistics and by a number of Hungarian linguists this book is regarded as unique in this aspect until today.

We may only guess, but it might not be sheer coincidence that after the war, Lotz was invited to Columbia University where Jakobson was also lecturing until 1949.

Further to this, Jakobson was finally provided the assistance and infrastructure (at the University Clinic in Uppsala and the library of the Karolinska Institutet in Stockholm) in order to complete the *Kindersprache, aphasie und allgemeine lautgesetze*, a study devoted to “the questions of comparative interpretation of linguistic and neurological syndroms, i.e., the questions on which the classification and therapeutics of aphasia are to a greater and greater extent based today”³.

The adventurous but scientifically fruitful Scandinavian period of Jakobson ended on May 23, 1941 when the couple boarded a freighter (and not a passenger ship, as Jengfeldt writes, we know this fact from Jakobson’s Activity Report written in 1945). Although Jakobson did not cease to correspond with his Scandinavian colleagues and the impact on his scholarly work is noticeable in many European and overseas researchers and thinkers in the fields of linguistics, literary theory, semiotics aesthetics etc., with his stay in America a new chapter begins in his life.

Towards the end of my paper I intend to deal with the Scandinavian reception of the Prague School after World War II. It is not my objective to provide a thorough survey – and I confess I lack the language competences for that – but I would like to point out a few issues of interest.

As a matter of fact, after the war we cannot mention such a close cooperation that we saw in the case of the Prague and the Copenhagen

³ Jakobson, 1974. Quoted by B. Jangfeldt, p. 145.

Linguistic Circles before it. However there are a number of scholars who devoted themselves to the study of Slavic structuralism. Several studies have been translated into Scandinavian languages and have been included into either general readers on literary theory and linguistics or in specialized textbooks⁴.

When considering the development of the last half decade, certainly Eli Fischer-Jørgensen and Astrid Baeklund-Ehler need to be mentioned. We have already quoted the former on the impact Czech functional-structural school made on her, whereas the latter is a Swedish scholar of Slavic studies. Baeklund-Ehler was the only person in Sweden during Jakobson stay, who obtained her doctoral degree under his mentoring.

Another Swedish scholar devoted to the poetics of Jakobson, Anita Boström Kruckenberg has written a large monograph on this subject (Boström Kruckenberg 1979).

Among Oslo scholars it is definitely worth-while mentioning Kjell Lars Berge, professor of textology and Scandinavian languages, and Karen Gammelgaard, the Danish professor of Czech studies both working at the University of Oslo. The latter's scholarly work is connected with many ties to the Prague School, especially in the fields of literary theory and textology. Most recently she published a book in Danish that is a current and up-to-date introduction to Czech structuralism (Gammelgaard 2003). In 1996 in she published a lecture under the title *Derrida, Vachek and Spoken vs. Written Language*. In her paper she attacks Derrida and his *De la grammatologie* in which the French scholar criticizes structuralism. Gammelgaard says that "his [Derridas] criticism of structuralism, namely that of the relationship between speech and writing may be contradicted from the viewpoint of the structuralist tradition commonly known as the Prague School. Unfortunately, after Word War II., many linguistic achievements by the Czech structuralist tradition have remained unobserved and unno-

⁴ A thorough bibliography of translations and studies devoted to the Prague School's literary theories can be found in Gammelgaard 2001, pp. 107–115.

ticed by structuralist scholars in Western Europe" (Gammelgaard 1996, p. 7). She does not criticize Derrida on the philosophic level but states that his starting point, i. e. that in the twentieth century which can be characterized by the rule of structuralism, in the binary opposition of speech and writing, the latter is suppressed and overwhelmed by the first. Thus, in Derrida's theory, writing is going to be the metaphor of all the secondary members of binary oppositions. and a whole system of thought is built on this concept. However – as Gammelgaard writes – Derrida is wrong when he identifies structuralism exclusively with the French, Western European and American scholars. She analyses the works of the Prague School member, Josef Vachek and underlines that throughout in his work he was always able to contradict the opinion that for functional linguists and phonologists writing is of a secondary position. While considering the question why Derrida ignored the ideas of Vachek and the Prague School she concludes that it might have been the complicated political situation in Czechoslovakia after World War II that made it difficult if not impossible for Western scholars to access the works of Eastern and Central European colleagues. We may only partially agree with this, as Derrida's text was published in 1967 which represents a relatively free, fruitful and open period in Czech cultural history that lasted until August 1968 when the Warsaw Treaty armies intervened and invaded Czechoslovakia. Communism was surely playing a role in Derrida's neglect but I do not see it as a sole cause. As I showed it in my earlier paper, the situation in Hungary was very similar: although Hungary and Czechoslovakia belonged to the same Communist bloc and were on the same side of the iron curtain, the work of the Prague School did not have much influence on Hungarian academic milieu⁵. The causes here I mostly see in one of the key features of Central European cultural

⁵ Některé ohlasy českého strukturalismu v Maďarsku, [in:] Česko-slovenské vztahy, Evropa a svět, ed. by I. Pospíšil, and M. Zelenka, Ústav slavistiky Filozofické fakulty Masarykovy univerzity, Brno 2004, pp. 5–10 (Brněnské texty k slovakistice, 6).

history and existence, in general: as we always suffer from complexes and tend to compare ourselves to Western countries and try to keep up with them, we often disregard our neighbors.

To conclude, the key figure in the mutual relations and cooperation between the Prague School and the Nordic scholars is inarguably Roman Jakobson. He and his Prague fellows' impact is most obvious in the case of the Danish scholars and on the Copenhagen Linguistic Circle. We tend not to state that Czech structuralism and functional linguistics is dominating until today in Scandinavia, but in some cases its influence leads to noticeable scholarly results.

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Streszczenie

Praskie Kolo Lingwistyczne zostało założone ponad 80 lat temu. Jego zasługą jest zdefiniowanie systemu językowego jako struktury, a także strukturalizmu jako metody badawczej, która nadal należy do najbardziej znaczących teorii lingwistycznych, literackich i estetyki. Autor koncentruje się na historii strukturalizmu w Skandynawii oraz jego oddziaływaniu na Europę i Stany Zjednoczone w okresie międzywojennym, a także w czasie drugiej wojny światowej, jak również opisuje czeski strukturalizm w Skandynawii po II wojnie światowej. Kluczową postacią we wzajemnych relacjach między praską szkołą strukturalną a nordyckim językoznawstwem jest niezaprzeczalnie Roman Jakobson. Jego wpływ – jak również jego współpracowników – jest najbardziej widoczny w przypadku duńskich uczonych oraz Kopenhaskiego Koła Lingwistycznego. Jednak nie twierdzi on, że czeski strukturalizm oraz lingwistyka funkcjonalna dominują w językoznawstwie skandynawskim do dnia dzisiejszego, mimo że w niektórych przypadkach ich wpływ nadal daje zauważalne wyniki naukowe.