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# THE PRAGUE LINGUISTIC CIRCLE, ITS FOUNDER VILÉM MATHESIUS AND ITS COMMITMENT TO DEVELOPING LINGUISTIC CULTURE FROM LINGUISTIC THEORY

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## 1. SOME PREMISES

Among the four thematic areas proposed by the scientific committee of the colloquium “Linguistiques d’intervention”, it is the first one, regarding “the language theorist as a social actor”, which most clearly characterises the Prague Linguistic Circle as such and some of its most prominent members individually, in terms of several collective and individual initiatives taken by them. The time concerned is the so-called classical period, which began in 1926 with the foundation of the Circle itself and which was dramatically interrupted by the outbreak of the Second World War. We are still able to see some far-reaching results of those days however, even in the current Czech context.

Complementarily, the purpose of “manifestations of the different dimensions (theoretical, practical, social) of ‘knowledge constitutive interests’ in the language sciences” (final thematic area among those proposed), is made explicit via the well-known textual format of theses: those of 1929 as well as those of 1932 (though less famous).

After that lively season, ideological control and censorship followed and lasted for more than forty years, until the 1990s.

Beyond Prague, there will also be a brief look at Rotterdam, moving therefore to the Dutch context, while remaining in the same inter-war years. Together with and beyond the public commitments already mentioned, some other collective contexts will be explored, according to a contingent, though noteworthy, parallel chronology: in 1929 the First Conference of Czech High School Teachers was held in Prague, and in 1932 a selection of contributions on the Linguistics of Economy, the well-known Rotterdam volume *Zur Wirtschafts-Linguistik*, was published.

Why there and then? If we may suggest some reasons, we would mention that not only the years considered (both peaceful and hectic at the same time in some European countries) but also the places observed acted as a favourable context for new projects and commitments. I refer both to the newly-formed Czechoslovak Republic (1918) created after the long experience of its citizens as members of the Habsburg Empire, and to the Netherlands,<sup>1</sup> neutral during the first World War, a country where an old and rich commercial tradition was well established.

So, before considering in greater detail some technical aspects of Praguian proposals about linguistic culture, I would like to attempt to identify and sum up at least some of the reasons which promoted such a commitment:

- recent and positively evaluated historical changes, from 1918 onwards; highly recommended is that attention be paid to the even earlier socio-political Czech context, with the cultural effort developed after 1882 (the division of Prague University into separate Czech and German ones) and after 1918 (political independence), so that the language itself (Czech) had to be shaped in order to be used for teaching all subjects at the University<sup>2</sup> and, for example, for publishing and translating handbooks;
- reduced size of the socio-political subject involved: it is less difficult to govern a small republic than an empire;
- great, multicultural traditions in the background: Prague Dreivölkerstadt and its special links with Vienna and Moscow (although the developments of the debates about linguistic politics in Moscow<sup>3</sup> and in Prague followed quite different paths);
- personal outstanding witnesses of scholars or politically-engaged, cultivated personalities: from Palacký to Masaryk initially, from Patočka to Havel later.

I believe that the feeling of independence, proudly experienced in Bohemia, Moravia, Slovakia and Silesia, strongly supported the sense of responsibility of Czechoslovak citizens towards their homeland. Aware of being a small country,<sup>4</sup> they nevertheless knew that they could eventually act politically in the first-person, as it were. To pass from a subordinate condition to that of self-determining agents meant, in scholarly life, first of all to adhere to international calls and, secondly, to launch national and international projects.

<sup>1</sup> Incidentally, the Dutch too had experienced Habsburg rule, but much earlier, until they won their own war of independence in 1648 against the Spanish, not the Austrian branch of the Habsburg family.

<sup>2</sup> In order to compare and evaluate the different setting of solutions, envisaged nowadays in Italy towards an analogous problem concerning academic communication and multilingualism, see Banfi 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Archaimbault (in press).

<sup>4</sup> In 1905, Masaryk published *Problém malého národa* (“Problems of a small nation”).

## 2. THE FACTS

In linguistics, to act in the first person – plural – meant answering the invitation of the First International Congress of Linguists (The Hague,<sup>5</sup> 1928) and undertaking the same kind of initiative at a local level: hosting the First Congress of Slavists in Prague in 1929, where the famous 1929 Theses were the opening Manifesto.

It also meant organising a cycle of lectures beginning in early 1932, “Spisovná čeština a jazyková kultura”, published in the same year in a volume with the same title<sup>6</sup>, whose translation we shall consider in a moment. Beyond the text of the lectures, the volume included new theses, with the title *Obecné zásady pro kulturu jazyka*, “General Principles for the Cultivation of Good Language”, “Allgemeine Grundsätze der Sprachkultur” in the English and German translation respectively, published in the middle of the Seventies<sup>7</sup> - that is to say, within the context of the pragmatic turn in linguistics.

*Spisovná čeština* was the first part of the title of the 1932 volume. In the foreground the Czech language [čeština], with special attention to ... what? *Spisovná*<sup>8</sup> has been translated into English as “Standard [Czech]”<sup>9</sup> and into German as “Literatursprache”. Being evidently a problem of interpretation, because the two translations are not equivalent, I judge as more valuable the proposal of Tomáš Hoskovec, present President of Prague Linguistic Circle, who renders *spisovná čeština* as *tschechische Gemeinsprache*.

*Jazyková kultura*, the second part of the same title and the coordinated topic throughout the whole volume, was intended to remain in the background as the founding and principal idea.

Four years later, in 1936, in the same year as the 4<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Linguists, the “Études dédiées au quatrième Congrès de Linguistes” (6<sup>th</sup> volume of the TCLP, 1936) were published. In the meantime, another collective enterprise started up: the foundation of the review *Slovo a Slovesnost* [“Word and Literature”] in 1935 whose subtitle is now *A journal for the theory of language and language cultivation founded in 1935 by the Prague Linguistic Circle*.<sup>10</sup> In its current presentation, we now read “oriented towards the presentation of local and Central European research as well as its significance in relation to international trends, it focuses on all areas of structural linguistics as well as issues of language variation, style and language cultivation (language planning)[evergreen topics, since the beginning], to name a few”.

## 3. THE RESULTS

### 3.1 The 1929 Theses

What we have seen so far allows me to conclude that among the four possible scenarios sketched by our scientific committee, the first is the one which suits our topic, the one in which “the language theorist[s] [behaves/-] as social actor[s]”.

Since both the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> 1929 theses, entitled respectively “The importance of functional linguistics for the cultivation and criticism of Slavic languages” and “Exploitation of new linguistic currents in secondary schools”. were already included in the idea of tasks to be fulfilled by language as such,<sup>11</sup> this target does not seem to derive from “a decision for further socio-political goals”.

I will express this constant awareness of original tasks through the words of Paul Garvin who, on receiving a doctorate *honoris causa* in Brno in 1991, said:

I owe to Mathesius my inspiration from his awareness of the need for linguistics to have a part in the linguistic and cultural development of the speech community. This awareness is particularly clear in his work *Čeština a obecný jazykozpyt* (Czech and General Linguistics) and in his contribution to the compendium *Spisovná čeština a jazyková kultura* (Standard Czech and the Cultivation of Language). [...] The structural properties that appear in my work are Mathesius's flexible stability and Havranek's intellectualization. (Garvin 1991, p. 93-94).

<sup>5</sup> In the Netherlands once more.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Havránek & Weingart (eds.) 1932.

<sup>7</sup> English translation in Rubin & Shuy 1973, p. 102-111; or by Garvin 1974, p. 417-426. German translation in Scharnhorst & Ising 1976, p. 74-85.

<sup>8</sup> The Czech adjective *spisovný* derives from the root *spis*, de-verbal noun from *psát*, “to write”; so the German translation is more literal.

<sup>9</sup> “Since I did most of my lecturing on these topics in the United States, I had to begin by explaining that the English notions of ‘standard language’ and ‘language standardization’ have the disadvantage of suggesting the concept of standardization in the sense of stability and uniformity. This covers only the codificational aspect of the standard language, that is, its establishment by means of such generally accepted reference works as dictionaries, spelling books and grammars. Another disadvantage of the English terms is that, unlike the Czech term ‘spisovný jazyk’, they do not suggest the notion of ‘jazyková kultura’ for which there is not even an appropriate equivalent in English. In my work, I had to render this term by the inaccurate circumlocution ‘the cultivation of good language’.” (Garvin 1991, p. 94).

<sup>10</sup> <http://sas.ujc.cas.cz/?lang=en>

<sup>11</sup> “Resulting from human activity, language partakes in its purposefulness.” (*Theses Presented to the First Congress of Slavists Held in Prague in 1929*, 1.a) in Vachek 1983, p. 77.

Let us read directly the relevant passages from the Theses presented at the First Congress of Slavists held in Prague in 1929 (in Vachek 1983, 108-119):

**9<sup>th</sup> Thesis. The importance of functional linguistics for the cultivation and criticism of Slavic languages.**

Language cultivation is the eagerness to intensify in the standard language, literary as well as colloquial, those qualities which are needed by the special function of the standard literary language.

The first of the qualities is *stability* [...]

The second of the qualities is *accuracy* [...]

The third is *the specificity of language* [...]

- *pronunciation* [...]

- *orthography* [...]

- *onomatological formations* [...]

- *syntax* [...]

- *morphology* [...]

- *educated colloquial speech*<sup>12</sup> [...]

- *concern for the purity of language* [(...) esp. about terminology, against] an undesirable local seclusion of scientific terminology]

Most of the Slavic standard literary languages are in bad need of attention for the cultivation of language in view of their relatively young tradition or, as the case may be, of interrupted or hasty development.

**10<sup>th</sup> Thesis. Exploitation of new linguistic currents in secondary schools.**

a. In teaching the mother tongue [8 items, among which we quote as fundamental the first three]

1) Linguistics using the method of historical comparison could contribute very little to the solution of the practical problem of how to teach the mother tongue in secondary schools [...] The new linguistic currents can also provide a safer basis for the solution of the said practical problem; new linguistics and the task of teaching the mother tongue in secondary school have the following main points of contact:

- *synchronistic linguistics* [...]

- *functionalist linguistics* [...]

- *the conception of language as a functionalist system* and the effort to establish exact *characterologies* [...]

2) Essential difference [...] in the goal of instruction [...] in the mother tongue [...]:

- *practical mastery* vs. acquisition of a definite amount of information

- *gradual development of the linguistic readiness* which the pupils bring to school from their practical lives

3) In teaching the mother tongue *the theoretical goal* of instruction recedes into the background against this practical, technical goal [...].

b. In teaching Slavic languages [6 items]

1) It is generally acknowledged that the acquaintance with a Slavic foreign language made at school must be of *practical character*. Such acquaintance was usually strictly opposed to scientific recognition, which was exclusively identified with analysis pursued by methods of historical comparison. However, such a separation of the historical comparative study of language, claiming scientific status, from the practical mastery of language, absolutely denied that status, must be declared a mere prejudice, if scrutinized from the perspective of contemporary linguistic theory. Also, the practical study of language must have a solid scientific base and motivation. [...]

2) It is commonly known that there are only relatively few people who can master, even in their own mother tongue, all functions of language equally well [...] This fact can lay out *the directive for practical language teaching*; the pupils of commercial schools, e.g., [...]; at the secondary schools [...]. Apart from the specialized functions, pupils should always recognize and master language facts functioning in elementary social intercourse [...].

3) In teaching Slavic languages in Slavic schools it is necessary to *exploit the relationship existing between the source and the target languages* [...] on a confrontational basis [...].

4) In teaching, one should point out *the specific features of the phonological system* [...] as well as *of the grammatical system* of the Slavic language concerned [...].

5) However, there is a danger of the establishment [...] of a *mistaken idea of greater conformity of the target language and the mother tongue* than is actually the case. [...].

6) [...] the most important requirement of didactic methodology here is to elaborate, in conformity with the above directions, *textbooks, anthologies and other equipment*. [...].

In the same year, addressing an audience specifically involved with the problems of the 9<sup>th</sup> and especially the 10<sup>th</sup> thesis, Mathesius lectured about *Functional Linguistics* (in Vachek 1983, p. 121-142). The context was the First Conference of Czech High School Teachers.

The macrostructure of his contribution was the following:

- Premise, i.e. *remotio prohibentis*: diachronistic method disappeared, together with the privilege of the

<sup>12</sup> "Very important for language cultivation is *educated colloquial speech*; it constitutes a source upon which one can draw for the purpose of enlivening the bookish literary language and it creates the atmosphere in which the linguistic feeling necessary for the stabilization of the standard literary language can be most safely established. Both the colloquial standard and the standard literary language serve as instruments of cultural life which in any national community abundantly draws upon the common cultural fund of the given cultural area." (*Theses Presented [...] in 1929*, 9, in Vachek 1983, p. 110).

earlier stages of languages as compared with the more recent ones;

- Claim, i.e. *thesis reversed*: “only present-day language can provide a complete picture of the language system, devoid of any artificial simplification” (p. 122). “Recent linguistics has started to compare even unrelated languages” (*ibid.*). Just as a “common basis”: “The new linguistics conceives language as something living, underneath the words it sees the speaker or the writer from whose communicative intention they have resulted. It realises that in a large majority of cases the words are aimed at a hearer or reader. And only from this re-examination of its problems through bringing them closer to life does recent linguistics proceed to new generalisations and new attempts at establishing laws.” (p. 122-123)

- Three problems were then examined to show the fruitfulness of the functional concept:

a) the definition of the sentence;

b) the problem of Czech word order and its intrinsic factor, i.e. Functional Sentence Perspective;

c) the analysis of the phonic aspect of language.

Three layers therefore came into evidence: functional onomatology, functional syntax, phonology.

- Conclusion: “However, even the proof that the new linguistic conception is fruitful and sufficiently tenable to serve as the basis of systematic linguistic analysis is not enough for me. Every really great mental conception has its practical applications and consequences [*italics are mine*]. And the profundity of the functional conception in linguistics is, in my opinion, best shown by the fact that it really leads to practical consequences.” (p. 135)

- Further developments: the question of language correctness. “The communication needs of each period are something specific [...]. What is invariably required is the original effort of individuals endowed with linguistic creativeness.” (p. 136)

- Thesis and antithesis: “for contemporary language the criterion of *l a n g u a g e c o r r e c t n e s s* can be only contemporary usage as represented by the consensus of good writers.” (p. 136) [Vaclav Ertl, 1875-1929: Mathesius mentions Ertl 1927 and Ertl 1928]. According to Mathesius, one reservation is needed: “The consensus of good writers can make a choice only between the existing possibilities, but fails where entirely new expressions are being formed in order to meet communication needs that have not yet arisen. (p. 136-137). [...] Hence language is the more correct, the better it serves its purpose” (p. 137), of communication as well as of expression. “After all, we [...] must require language to be copious and elastic so that there is enough freedom of the satisfaction of the most varied needs. (p. 137-138) [...] However, [...] we cannot evade the requirement of language stability.” (p. 138)

- Linguistic instinct: the “criterion of language correctness has become internalised. [...] In the question of language correctness the linguist regarding language from the functional point of view goes hand in hand with the linguistically creative artist.” (p. 139)

Incidentally, the attention paid to internalised criteria of language correctness and to creativity were emerging a long time (nearly thirty years) before Chomsky began using the native speaker’s grammatical competence as the term of comparison of his generative grammar.

### 3.2 The 1932 Theses

In 1930, the Circle took part in the celebrations for the 80<sup>th</sup> birthday of President Masaryk, an interesting leader concerned with both cultural commitment and political responsibility. Two years later, in 1932, a strong debate arose within Czech linguistic environments: the response to the purists’ aggressive views published in the review “*Naše řeč*” came through many different public interventions, by Mathesius, Havránek, Jakobson, Weingart and Mukařovský, in debates and newspaper articles. The text of these 1932 theses, reformulated and republished in 1963, was translated into English in 1973 and into German in 1976.

One of the 1932 interventions was by Mathesius<sup>13</sup>, who pointed out a characteristic – the first one outlined in the theses of 1929 – of the standard language, its stability:

Every culture is a structure [Ordnung] and the principle of the structure is valid also in every cultivated language. [...] it is always a composed totality, the parts of which are mutually related, so that it is determined by an organising principle. [...] It consists of an elastic stability of a complex totality, organised as a system. For the culture of language, what follows from this general principle is the important demand for elastic stability. (in Scharnhorst & Ising 1976, p. 89).

Another important contribution was Bohuslav Havránek’s *The Functional Differentiation of the Standard Language* (in Vachek 1983, p. 143-164). His contribution was devoted to “the use (selection) of linguistic devices [...] in the concrete act of speech determined by the purpose of the utterance, [...] directed towards the function of the act of speech.” (p. 143) He produced a schematic survey of the functional differentiation of the standard language and of the functional styles of the standard language according to (a) the specific purpose of the response [= act of speech, parole] and (b) the manner of the response, contrasting the standard language with folk speech

<sup>13</sup> Title of the German translation: *Über die Notwendigkeit der Stabilität in der Literatursprache*, Scharnhorst & Ising, 1976, p. 86-102.

(or functional dialect). While enumerating the various devices characterising the standard language, Havránek put forth two major modes for their utilization: their *intellectualisation* and their *automatisation* or *foregrounding*.

Here are his definitions:

By the *intellectualisation* of the standard language, which we could also call its rationalisation, we understand its adaptation to the goal of making possible precise and rigorous and, if necessary, abstract, statements, capable of expressing the continuity and complexity of thought, that is, to reinforce the intellectual side of speech [...] in which the terms approximate concepts and the sentences approximate logical judgements. [...] By *automatization* we thus mean such a use of the devices of the language, in isolation or in combination with each other, as is usual for a certain expressive purpose, that is, such a use that the expression itself does not attract any attention [...]. By *foregrounding*, on the other hand, we mean the use of the devices of the language in such a way that this use itself attracts attention and is perceived as uncommon, as deautomatized. (In Vachek 1983, p. 147, 152-153).

At the end of the 1932 volume, the reader finds a text, *General Principles of Linguistic Culture*: fourteen pages, anonymous inasmuch as collective, although easily conducive to Mathesius and Havránek. As an *ouverture* we can read:

By **culture of standard language** we understand the conscious care of standard language. This care can be fulfilled as follows: 1. with the help of theoretical works in linguistics; 2. through language courses in the school; 3. in the process of writers' practice. (1932, p. 245).

Regarding the first point, one may say that the theoretical inquiry about the norm of the present day standard language is a fundamental task. The source to find out the norm of the standard language is the average practice of standard language in the last fifty years. Regarding the second point, one may say that, although the norms of standard language cannot be established by the "Diktat" of linguistic theory, the process of the stabilisation of the consolidation of its structure cannot proceed without prior theoretical intervention.

In the same year Ewald Messing published a book in Rotterdam entitled *Zur Wirtschafts-Linguistik. Eine Auswahl von kleineren und Grösseren Beiträgen über Wert und Bedeutung, Erforschung und Unterweisung der Sprache des wirtschaftlichen Verkehrs*, a collection of about twenty texts, in German or Dutch, originally published between 1908 and 1932.<sup>14</sup> They afford their theme and task according to a double perspective: a historical and a linguistic one, going from the history of economy (medieval to modern), to the scholastic and professional system concerning commerce (Handels-Hochschule, Beruf) as it relates to linguistics and, last but not least, to textual genders and linguistic topicalities such as letter style, lexical or morphological studies (contrastive studies between German and English: *stornieren* vs. *cancel*) or the suffix *-schaft* in *Wirtschaft*.

There is currently an on-going doctoral thesis in Hamburg in which the author, Ute Wöhrmann, recognises the anticipating role of these inquiries concerning the linguistics and Germanistics of economy (cf. Siebenschein 1936) and attributes to the Prague school a central role in supporting and motivating them, while she hypothesises the intervention of political reasons (Nazi autarchism and racial persecutions) which reduced to silence an area where many Jewish scholars were active. She plans to research in the archives of many Czech and Dutch towns, such as Prague, Brno, Pilsen, Krumlov, Amsterdam and Rotterdam.

The nearest contribution on these topics comes from the Prague Circle in the 6<sup>th</sup> volume of the *Travaux* and has the signature of Zdenek Vančura (1903-1974), who writes about *The Study of the Language of Commerce* after having published *Hospodárská lingvistika* ("Linguistics of Economy") in 1934. Vančura recalls that Messing had read a paper at the First International Congress of Linguists in the Hague in 1928. So had Čada at the Third one in Rome, in 1935. At the same time, he states that "all the detailed work [done and referred to] has failed to produce theoretical results in the way of methodology that could be applied to the whole field of the language of commerce and to study of other technical jargons as well." (Vančura 1936, p.161).

He further notes that the usual "underlying principle of classification is the degree of formal distinction from the common language" (Vančura 1936, p. 162), but immediately after he suggests "that not only the form but also the function of terminology ought to be considered." (Vančura 1936, *ibid.*).

Finally, we cannot forget, on this special subject, the foundation of the review *Slovo a Slovesnost* ("Word and Literature"), in 1935. In the Introduction, Havránek, Jakobson, Mathesius, Mukařovský and Trnka signed the

<sup>14</sup> "Bis heute sind die Biographien der zentralen Vertreter von *Wirtschaftslinguistik* und *-germanistik* ungeklärt. Wahrscheinlich wurden sie von den Nationalsozialisten vertrieben oder in Konzentrationslager deportiert. Zur Erhellung ihrer Lebensläufe soll in Archiven und Bibliotheken der tschechischen Städte Prag, Brünn, Pilsen und Krummau sowie der holländischen Städte Amsterdam und Rotterdam recherchiert werden, ob sich aussagekräftige Dokumente zu den entsprechenden Personen finden, wobei eventuell sogar bislang unveröffentlichte Schriften von *Wirtschaftslinguistik* und *-germanistik* auftauchen. Zur weiteren Klärung der Vitae soll bei Bedarf auch in ehemaligen deutschen und tschechischen Konzentrationslagern nachgeforscht werden, ob Nachweise über Aufenthalte von Wirtschaftslinguisten vorliegen. Die Beschäftigung mit den Biographien ist von soziolinguistischem, sozialpsychologischem und wissenschaftsgeschichtlichem Interesse, da sich die jeweiligen Lebenswege zweifellos auf die wissenschaftlichen Anschauungen und die Ideenentwicklung der Wirtschaftslinguisten ausgewirkt haben." (Wöhrmann 2010, p. 89).

following program:

What can the science of language, linguistics offer to literary language?<sup>15</sup> [...] It depends on which linguistics we consider. [...] Our science cannot lie idle. Czech linguistics has to overcome once and for all its temporary gap with the cultural present, it must even serve it; it has to take the initiative in the problem solving concerning linguistic culture nowadays. Therefore the isolated effort of single linguists is not sufficient of course, but a strict cooperation of linguists with pedagogists and jurists, with philosophers and psychologists, with psychiatrists and speech therapists, with historians and theorists of literature and art, with specialists in sociology, history, geography and ethnography is necessary. But what is needed, first of all, is the cooperation with operators of linguistic culture, with writers and translators, people working in the theatre, cinema and radio, both artists and technicians, specialists in school and administrations, technicians and experts in terminologies. This is the program and the way to be practiced by the review SLOVO A SLOVENOST. (Havránek, Jakobson, Mathesius, Mukařovský, Trnka 1935, p. 1-4).

The whole of the first issue of the review with its various articles deserves careful examination. Just a few words, before concluding, to mention the article published in 1936 in the *Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague* by Zd. Vančura, *The Study of the Language of Commerce*, concerning the Rotterdam 1932 Symposium about *Wirtschaftslinguistik*.

Such detailed and consistent commitment suggests it may be worthwhile to enquire into the theoretical foundations granting both a realistic approach and a functional perspective on language. Among the favourable conditions, we may recall Grigorij Vinokur's contributions to the development of the notion of linguistic culture within the Moscow Linguistic Circle between 1910 and 1920, as well as the bridging role of Jakobson between the two Circles.

In the introduction of *Slovo a Slovesnost*,<sup>16</sup> we read also:

This transformation of language from simple means into independent object of our attention, of our consideration, of our emotions, this relationship towards language can be defined linguistic culture. Linguistic culture manifests itself in various socio-historical situations. [...] All fundamental problems of linguistic culture require a methodical solution. These problems can be divided into the following groups:

1. Linguistic right in theory and practice.
2. Linguistic pedagogy [...]
3. Linguistic construction [...]

Linguistic matter has an important part in present-day socio-political questions, because with the increasing democratisation of culture in general, and of linguistic culture especially, new needs increase and new tasks are created. (Havránek, Jakobson, Mathesius, Mukařovský, Trnka 1935, p. 2-3)

Only in 1994, four years after the idea was stated, was the Czech National Corpus founded: <http://ucnk.ff.cuni.cz/english/index.php>.

#### 4. TWO CONCLUSIONS

Let us go back to the wording of the first thematic area of our colloquium:

As members of society, language documenters are affected by the social and political events of their time. How do they reconcile their dual status – as a social being on the one hand, and as an observer of social activity on the other? How have some linguists decided to use their work to further socio-political goals? Under what form can socio-political involvement affect one's work on language and/or languages?

To answer such questions. I would reply that in the Prague case the matter is not that one of reconciling a dual status: it is rather one of unifying in the same "status" a scholar and a citizen / a civil servant, the role of an observer and inquirer on the one hand and, on the other, that of a co-responsible member of the community, co-operating in public life.

Scientific endeavour – as we have seen – is well attested to in this country. Nevertheless, it was not sufficient to prevent dramatic interruptions and forced silence.

Karel Čapek wrote in the inaugural issue of *Slovo a slovesnost*: "I do not think, however, that I would be able to abstract language from people, that I could ever visualize speech as a purely linguistic phenomenon and not as a manifestation of certain people, human occupations, types, groups, cultures, and last but not least, world views."<sup>17</sup>

Finally, in order to recall further targets to "interventionist linguistics", let us consider some passages from the speech prepared by Vaclav Havel on the occasion of the "Prix de la paix", awarded to him in Frankfurt one month before the fall of the Berlin Wall:

La parole n'est-elle pas la source la plus intime de notre être, voire le fondement même de cette manière d'exister dans

<sup>15</sup> We recall the critical observations already expressed about this translational choice.

<sup>16</sup> Jakobson & Havránek, Mathesius, Mukařovský & Trnka 1935, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> Translated by Paul L. Garvin from Karel Čapek 1935, p. 7-8.

l'univers que nous appelons l'homme? [...] Il peut [...] vous sembler que je surestime l'importance de la parole parce que je vis dans un pays où des paroles peuvent encore vous envoyer en prison. Oui, je vis dans un pays où les sanctions quotidiennes confirment sans cesse le poids et la force de rayonnement de toute parole libre. [...] On gâche moins de choses en se méfiant de mots qu'en leur accordant une confiance excessive. [...] Les paroles importent partout. Un même mot peut être tantôt humble, tantôt bouffi d'orgueil. Et il est si facile de passer imperceptiblement de l'humilité à l'orgueil. Tandis que le processus inverse est très long et très difficile, comme j'ai essayé de le montrer avec l'exemple du mot « paix » dans mon pays. [...] Tirons donc des leçons de tout cela et déclarons, chacun pour soi et tous ensemble, la guerre aux paroles d'orgueil, regardons de près toute parole apparemment humble pour y déceler les œufs de coucou déposés par l'orgueil. Il ne s'agit pas là, et de loin, d'une tâche purement linguistique. C'est un appel à devenir responsables des mots et envers les mots, un devoir éthique par essence. (Havel 1989, p. 25, 27, 42, 39, 41-42)

This leads me to my second conclusion: Involvement is then a matter of responsibility, not just superimposed on our object of investigation, but intrinsically motivated by the nature of human verbal semiosis.

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