

PAPERS AND STUDIES

VILEM MATHESIUS AS FORERUNNER OF CONTRASTIVE LINGUISTIC STUDIES

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Vilém Mathesius (1882—1945) has been fairly well known to wide circles of linguists, both in his own country and abroad, as the founder of the Prague Linguistic group and as the first president of the Prague Linguistic Circle (from its foundation in 1926 until his death). Less known has been his contribution to modern linguistic thinking, with the exception of some of his phonological papers, mainly those which examined some quantitative aspects of phonological problems. Especially his programmatic talk on the potentiality of the phenomena of language, going back to as early as 1911 when it was read in one of the sittings of the Royal Czech Society of Sciences, was to remain virtually unknown outside his country because it was published only in Czech (Mathesius 1911, its translation into world languages was to appear only half a century later: into English in 1964, into Russian in 1967).

In the said talk Mathesius emphatically stressed, four years before the publication of F. de Saussure's *Cours* (1915), the necessity of studying language synchronistically, and pointed out the importance of synchronic oscillation in any language system. As Mathesius demonstrated, it is exactly the fact of this oscillation which is able to contribute to the solution of some problems of general linguistics, e.g. the problem of the independence of the word within the sentence, the question of whether individual parts of speech can claim their specific degrees of stress, etc. Answers to such problems were formulated by Mathesius in terms of tendencies obtaining in this or that particular language: such tendencies do not operate absolutely and constantly like physical laws but nevertheless become manifested very clearly and their existence can be demonstrated by statistical methods. In this way, Mathesius was one of the first scholars to perceive that synchrony is not identical with static rigidity

but that, even if viewed synchronically, language is always "in a state of flux".

But there is another branch of modern linguistic research which can claim to have had Mathesius as its forerunner, if not initiator, and that is the branch now termed contrastive linguistics. Mathesius himself, of course, used somewhat different terminology. The method he called one of analytical comparison, and the result obtained by it he termed "linguistic characterology". (It should be added that Mathesius' Czech and Slovak followers usually denote the method itself as 'confrontational', because in their view the term 'contrastive' appears to put excessive emphasis on the differences of the compared language systems, while the term used by themselves implies an analysis taking into consideration both the differences and the correspondences of the said systems).

Although Mathesius had been always, from the very beginning of his scholarly career, deeply interested in the synchronistic analysis of the phenomena of language, his activity in the area now termed contrastive linguistics was to become his main preoccupation only in the mid nineteen-twenties, when he had completed the fourth decade of his life. If one surveys the bibliographical list of Mathesius' writings until 1922, one will find in it an imposing number of detailed and delicate analyses of Modern English grammatical phenomena, mainly syntactic, but hardly any specimen of a truly contrastive analysis, systematically confronting English with Czech or any other language. During the said period, Mathesius was also very active in the field of the history of English literature, as is eloquently demonstrated, among other things, by two volumes of his (unfinished) *History of English Literature* (Mathesius 1910—1915). As a matter of fact, one can say that Mathesius was brought to his systematically contrastive research by what was his personal misfortune but what in the end proved to be something like blessing in disguise.

What happened was that, some time in 1924, Mathesius was suddenly afflicted by virtual loss of sight: a severe disease of the retina made him unable to read for the rest of his lifetime, and he had to depend on the help of his student assistants or of the members of his family. This severe blow, which would have completely disabled most scholars, meant for Mathesius only a change of the style of his work and in the choice of his themes. Very naturally, he had to abandon his work in English literary history and to concentrate upon linguistic research. Even there, however, a basic reorientation was necessary. Unable to analyse written texts, Mathesius was becoming more and more attracted by spoken language materials, and these were, understandably, mostly drawn from Czech, which was not only his mother tongue but also the language to the impact of which his hearing had been most intensely exposed.

In this context, one can hardly regard as an accident that after the first Mathesius' paper discussing a point taken from colloquial Czech (Mathesius

1923) his bibliography¹ shows that, as Mathesius was penetrating more and more deeply into Bohemistic problems, his synchronistically orientated linguistic approach was increasingly attracted by the newly emerging possibilities of a non-historical comparison of English and other languages, mainly the linguist's mother tongue. It was only natural that, guided by this new concrete experience, Mathesius' mind logically tended to an attempt at drawing some consequences from it on a higher, more abstract level: Mathesius tried to formulate some consistent theoretical basis which might serve both as an interpreter of the results already obtained and as a guide on the way leading to further results of the kind.

Mathesius' first formulation of such a theoretical basis was presented again in a Czech paper published four years later (Mathesius 1927). The importance which its author himself attached to the issues treated in it is clearly evidenced by the fact that Mathesius did not hesitate to present its modified English version at the First International Congress of Linguists in The Hague in 1928 (cf. Mathesius 1929a). It will be recalled that one of the crucial questions addressed to the participants of the Congress by its organizers concerned the formulation of appropriate methods which could be effectively used for descriptions of language. Mathesius believed to have found such an appropriate method in his approach of analytical comparison whose application was to result in the linguistic characterology of the examined language. The presentation of Mathesius' arguments at the Congress was evidently successful, even if in the following decade the practical application of the principles exposed in this paper was not to find too many followers outside Mathesius' own country. One can only speculate whether this relative failure was due to the circumstance that, at the same Congress, the greatest success was scored by Trubetzkoy's, Jakobson's and Karcevskij's presentation of basic principles of phonology. Brilliant as they undoubtedly were, they may have had the effect of shifting Mathesius' idea of linguistic characterology to something like the second plane.

On the other hand, it should be recalled that Mathesius' theses fitted very well with those of the Russian scholars. The fact that Mathesius, Trubetzkoy, Jakobson and Karcevskij (together with two outstanding representatives of the Geneva School, Bally and Sechehaye) united their theses in a joint proposal, unanimously approved by the Congress, gives evidence to the mutual consistency, and indeed complementariness, of the said theses. The main feature that united them all was the functionalist approach of the facts of language, and it was exactly this feature that made it possible, a year later, to incorporate Mathesius' ideas into the framework of the Circle's collective theses

¹ It was published in 1947 by the English Department of Charles University, Prague, together with the Prague Linguistic Circle.

(Cercle Linguistique de Prague 1929) which were then presented to the First International Congress of Slavists held in Prague that year.

As a matter of fact, the whole section 2b of the said theses (entitled "Recherches sur le mot et le groupement des mots", and "Théorie des procédés systématique") were formulated by Mathesius on the basis of his earlier proposition presented at The Hague. It also deserves to be noted that in the introductory section of the theses (1b) it is said expressly: "La tâche la plus pressante et aussi la plus négligée de la linguistique slave est ... de formuler les caractéristiques des langues slaves actuelles", and it is added that unless one proceeds in this way any study of Slavonic languages which might claim deeper significances is absolutely impossible. If, despite the warning, the functionalist principles declared by the Prague theses were to be overwhelmingly followed only in the domain of phonological studies, while the goal set by Mathesius was to remain, at least outside Mathesius' own country, in the background, this was probably due to the above-mentioned attractiveness of phonological analysis and to the fact that phenomena of the phonic level appeared to be more easily analysable than those of the 'higher' language levels, inasmuch as facts of meaning do not interfere with the former as much as with the latter.

Even nowadays, Mathesius' arguments presented at The Hague are well worth reading. A distinctive line is drawn in them between linguistic characterology and descriptive grammar: "If it is the task of the descriptive grammar to give a complete inventory of all formal and functional elements existing in a given language at a given stage of its development, linguistic characterology deals only with the important and fundamental features of a given language at a given point of time, analyses them on the basis of general linguistics, and tries to ascertain relations between them" (1929a: 56). As a basis of such comparative analysis Mathesius recommends mainly the study of the ways in which "common grammatical functions are expressed". It should be pointed out here that this functionalist basis of contrastive research is a matter of fundamental importance because it guarantees the highest possible degree of objectivity in dealing with examined language materials. Since the communicative needs can be regarded as roughly identical in the communities using the compared languages, one can treat them as a safe background against which the characteristic differences of the compared languages will distinctly stand out. Without such a firm functionalist basis the contrastive comparison might easily lose its way in a purely subjective selection of the items to be compared, and the results might then be of doubtful value.

In the following section of his Hague talk Mathesius examines the prehistory of the effort at the establishment of linguistic characterology. He adduces here mainly two lines of development leading to this goal. One goes back to theoreticians

like Humboldt and later on, Steithal, Misteli and Finck. The other line is orientated more practically, towards stylistic instruction pointing out the characteristic features of a foreign language for the use of native learners of it. As authors whose work is particularly illustrative of this approach Mathesius mentions especially Strohmeier and Aronstein; also some aspects of the writings by Max Deutschbein and Otto Jespersen are adduced as containing some valuable materials contributing to the linguistic characterology of Modern English. For all such analogies, Mathesius' own conception of his characterology is unique for the author's effort at a consistently functionalist approach, distancing itself both from the psychologistic haziness of the former of the two above-mentioned lines of development, and of the descriptivist practiciness often inherent in the effort of the latter. What he himself had in mind is very clearly demonstrated in the third part of his Hague talk.

In it Mathesius produces evidence for an important difference that can be found between Modern English on the one hand and modern Slavonic languages (including Czech) on the other, concerning the different functions of the grammatical subject in these two types of languages. While in Modern Czech it still denotes, essentially, the doer of the action (as it clearly did in ancient Indo-European languages), in Modern English its function has been altered into one denoting the theme of an utterance (in the terminology of some scholars, the topic, as opposed to the comment). In Mathesius' opinion, this alteration accounts for the frequent use in Modern English of the passive voice as opposed to the active found in comparable sentences of Modern Czech (e.g. *I haven't even been allowed to meet any of the company* — *Ani mi nedovolili jen se setkat s někým z té společnosti*). Admittedly, in sentences of this kind the speaker who experiences the content of the utterance is the most feasible starting point in wording such experience.

This explanation of the use of passive constructions in English is borne out by the notorious Modern English instances in which the subject of a passive sentence arose by transformation of an indirect object of a corresponding active sentence (such as, e.g. in *I have been told* as opposed to *Řekli mi*), and by a number of other, equally interesting grammatical features of Modern English all of which can, in the end, be accounted for by the difference of functions of the subject in Modern English on the one hand and in Modern Czech on the other. It should only be added that more details of this difference can be found also in the enlarged German version of Mathesius' paper which he wrote for a representative German linguistic periodical after the Hague Congress (Mathesius 1929b).

In the following decade and a half Mathesius wrote a series of papers in which he subjected to contrastive analysis various points of English and Czech grammar. One of them which especially attracted his attention was the issue-

of word-order in English and Czech sentences to which he devoted, among other contributions, a paper of basic importance (Mathesius 1942) which has preserved its value until the present day.² As a very essential part in the study of word-order is played by the principle of the functional sentence perspective (which distinguishes in the sentence two main communicative component parts, the above mentioned theme, opposed to rheme-corresponding, respectively, to 'topic' and 'comment' of some scholars), also other papers by Mathesius concerning this other issue deserve to be registered here (especially Mathesius 1939a, 1941a). Another field of problems which attracted Mathesius' attention was that of comparative lexicology (see especially Mathesius 1940). Needless to say, also many other papers written by Mathesius, even if they do not deal exclusively with contrastive, but still with general linguistic issues, contain many references to details throwing some new light on the linguistic character-ology both of English and of Czech (and occasionally, also of other languages, mainly German, see, e.g., Mathesius 1936a, 1937, 1939b).

Throughout his life Mathesius had hoped to write a synthesizing monograph which would summarize and systematize all the partial contributions scattered over his numerous papers, both English and Czech. A foretaste of such a volume he gave to the Czech public in a booklet containing an enlarged version of his twelve broadcast talks by which he had accompanied a radio course of English broadcast from Radio Prague in the mid nineteen-thirties (Mathesius 1936b). The booklet contains twelve very instructive chapters, written in an easy, clear style and explaining to a Czech learner of English the most characteristic structural features by which Modern English differs from Modern Czech. It starts from the discussion of issues of phonology and graphemics, continues to deal with matters of grammar (where special attention is paid to differences between English and Czech in syntax, in the verbal system and, last but not least, in the nominal tenor of the English sentence as opposed to the verbal tenor characteristic of Czech), and concludes with an illuminating chapter pointing out the differences between English and Czech extralingual realities. Only in passing it should be remarked that Mathesius' booklet was meant as an introductory volume to a series treating also other languages in an analogous manner. And indeed, some six years later another volume of the series was compiled by a young expert in German which in many ways was to prove very helpful to learners of that language (Nosil 1942).

Unfortunately, the above-said Mathesius' booklet was not to be followed, within Mathesius' lifetime, by the bigger volume he had intended to write. An excessive amount of other duties, pedagogical as well as scholarly, had

² This value was most convincingly demonstrated by J. Firbas (1962), whose Czech paper, very significantly, was given the same title as that of Mathesius (printed in 1942).

prevented the seriously handicapped writer to realize his plans, especially since his eyesight troubles were to be joined by an agonizing disease of the tuberculosis of spine. Only in his university courses, so far as he was able to give them, he continued to develop his theoretical views and to illustrate them with well-chosen, carefully excerpted examples. He never gave up hope to prepare this course for print, the more so that one of his student assistants, Karel Hais, who regularly attended Mathesius' course in the year 1935/36, provided his teacher with a typewritten verbatim record of the lectures he had attended in it. On the basis of this text Mathesius had hoped to edit, at some future time, his own, authorized version of these chapters for publication purposes. But except for some isolated corrections in a few places of the text, he was never to find the time necessary for this.

After Mathesius' untimely death in April 1945, at a relatively early age of 63, Hais' typescript was discovered among the manuscripts the diseased scholar had left behind. Although it was only too obvious that in its preserved form it could not be submitted to print it was agreed that, if subjected to a detailed editorial work, it might obtain a shape acceptable for publication purposes. The present writer was then entrusted with this honourable but very difficult task, which also included the compilation of a detailed commentary bringing the discussed issues up to date. He completed the revision of the text as well as the compilation of the commentary in the autumn of 1949. But for various reasons of technical character the manuscript could only go to press in 1960. This, naturally, called for a new careful revision of the text as well as for the compilation of a new commentary; finally, a year later, post tot discrimina rerum, the volume appeared in print (Mathesius 1961).

The book is divided into two sections, the first of which discusses problems of naming (in Mathesius' terminology, 'Functional Onomatology') and the other one deals with the problems of combining naming units into utterances (in Mathesius' terminology, 'Functional Syntax'). Although it still bears the signs of the pedagogical motivation of many of its formulations, the book can be said to present an undistorted idea of Mathesius' conception of what he called analytical comparison of languages and of what he himself expected to find in a 'linguistic characterology' of a concrete living language.

Compared with the booklet of 1936, Mathesius' bigger monograph does not deal with facts of the phonic and graphemic level, and also remarks on the differences in the English and Czech extralingual realities have been dropped. Those sections of the manuscript which dealt with phonic and graphemic data were highly antiquated and their publication would have been only of historical interest. Contrary to this, the sections dealing with onomatological and syntactical issues have preserved their topical character and in their entirety present a contrastive sketch which very efficiently contributes to the linguistic

characterology not only of Modern English but also of Modern Czech. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that in the present-day period, characterized by intense interest in contrastive linguistics, it has been considered useful to have Mathesius' posthumously published book accessible also to foreign scholars who so far have been ignorant of it because of the language barrier. Therefore, the English version of the book was prepared by Dr Libuše Dušková in Prague and published in 1975, jointly with Mouton and Co., by the Prague publishing house Academia. It again contains an up-to-date commentary prepared by the present writer. It may be said that the English version of the book constitutes not only an interesting specimen of contrastive approach but also a valuable addition to the study of the prehistory of contrastive linguistic research at large, an addition which to many contrastively orientated scholars of today has so far been hardly known.

Two more points should be added which may put in stronger relief the crucial part played by Mathesius in the prehistory of contrastive linguistics. One of them is the fact that a majority of his direct or indirect pupils have continued working in the contrastive spirit inaugurated by their teacher. To mention just a few, Ivan Poldauf contributed not only a theoretical study on the importance of analytical comparison (Poldauf 1954b) but also some concrete papers on particular grammatical issues (e.g., Poldauf 1954a, 1964); the present writer dealt with the expression of universal negation in English and Czech as well as with the preference in Modern English sentences of nominal expression as opposed to the verbal trend of the Czech sentences, and also compared the formal and functional features of the English Possessive Case with Czech possessive adjectives (Vachek 1947, 1961); Jan Firbas pointed out some notable differences ascertainable between the function of the finite verb in Modern English and Modern Czech in the context of his research in functional sentence perspective, and besides wrote a number of papers comparing the two languages also in other important points (Firbas 1962, 1963, 1964, 1968, 1976); finally, Jiří Krámský subjected to his analysis the quantitative aspects of phonology and grammar not only of English and Czech but also of many other languages (Krámský 1955, 1972). This brief list leaves unmentioned a number of younger Czech and Slovak Anglicists who follow in the footsteps of their seniors by upholding the well-established Czechoslovak traditions of synchronistic comparison of English and their mother-tongue (see, at least, A. Svoboda 1968, Dušková 1978).

The other point that should be stressed in this connection is that analogous trends of analytical comparison can be established in Czechoslovak linguistic research also outside the Anglicist domain. This is especially true of Czechoslovak Russian studies where already in the mid nineteen-thirties one of the founding members of the Prague Linguistic Circle, Leontij V. Kopeckij based

his textbook of Russian for Czech students on a contrastive methodological approach (Kopeckij 1934). This tradition has been continued ever since both in Prague (cf. B. Havránek et al., 1956) and in Brno (cf. Bauer—Mrázek—Žaža 1960). Among the scholars who work out the theoretical aspects of this type of research one should mention at least Vladimír Barnet, Oldřich Loška and Helena Běličová-Křížková; on the Slovak side, Ella Sekaninová. From the domain of German studies we have already adduced the name of Jaroslav Nosil; here, too, the tradition has never been interrupted (The best known scholars working in this field are E. Beneš, J. Povejšil, Z. Masařík and others). It should also be noted that specialists interested in the problems of the Functional Sentence Perspective in various languages discussed the involved issues in 1970 at Mariánské Lázně; their papers were published four years later, in a volume of the proceedings of that meeting (F. Daneš, ed., 1974).

One more feature deserves to be underlined in this context. As is commonly known, present-day contrastive linguistics lays particular stress on the part played by contrastive linguistics in language teaching.³ It is interesting to note that the Prague scholars who employed the method of analytical comparison never hesitated to deduce practical conclusions from their theoretical principles. One of the domains of practical application here has often been that of language teaching. We have already pinpointed here above Mathesius' booklet by which he accompanied a radio course of English for Czech listeners. It should be added that a large number of Mathesius' pupils applied contrastive methods to teaching purposes in their own textbooks, both of English and of other languages (thus, e.g., Trnka 1927, Vachek 1946, Hais 1958, etc.). Nor has this activity been limited to practical issues; the most obvious proof of this has been the research in Error Analysis pursued by an adherent of the Prague functionalist whose name has already been mentioned here above, Libuše Dušková (see Dušková 1969, 1972, 1978, where problems of error analysis are discussed from the functionalist viewpoint). Also in teaching Russian analogous trends of research may be found (here especially the names of M. Zátovkaňuk, A. Šourková, J. Zajíčková and others should be mentioned).

The very incomplete survey of Czechoslovak activities in contrastive linguistic research given here should show, in our opinion, very convincingly, that the seed sown by Vilém Mathesius more than fifty years ago has yielded rich crops. One can thus assert, without risk of exaggeration, that any survey of present-day contrastive research work would necessarily be incomplete if

³ Admittedly, some scholars take exception to the usefulness of contrastive linguistics in so far as its ability of predicting pupils' mistakes is concerned (see, e.g., W. R. Lee 1972). In any case, however, the importance of the background of the mother tongue in the process of language teaching can hardly be doubted.

it overlooked the Czechoslovak participation in this kind of activity. It should particularly be emphasized that also in this field, just as elsewhere, Mathesius figures as a forerunner of linguistic thinking which was to emerge abroad only in later decades. Besides, special stress must be laid on the fact that Mathesius' effort in this field does not constitute just a page of the past linguistic history of Czechoslovakia but rather a living tradition which has preserved its vital force and proved to be an inspiration for successive generations of linguists until the present day.

ABBREVIATIONS

BSE	Brno Studies in English
ČMF	Časopis pro moderní filologii
SaS	Slovo a slovesnost
TCLP	Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague
TLP	Travaux Linguistique de Prague

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