

Interview with
Libuše Dušková

SJ

You are one of the most influential linguists in Czech and Slovak English linguistics whose academic work has received most-deserved attention and recognition also outside the borders of the former Czechoslovakia. What was the beginning of such a huge domestic as well as international success? What influenced your decision to enrol for English linguistics in 1949?

LB

The choice of English as the subject of my university studies was due to circumstances and the influence of my elder sister, rather than to my own considered judgment. I started grammar school attendance at the beginning of the war, which continued for the first four years of my secondary school attendance. Although I liked learning languages, they were not my only preference. I also played the piano and was even thinking of going to the conservatoire when I finished grammar school. The languages taught at that time primarily included German - even some other subjects, e.g. mathematics and geography, were taught in German. In addition to German, we learned French and Latin. I was very fond of both French and Latin, and as a result of so much exposition to German, quite proficient in it. My elder sister, moreover, conceived the idea that we could take private lessons of English, and so we started learning English. I remember being puzzled by the lack of cases - it seemed inconceivable to me that a language could operate without declension. This may have been the beginning of my contrastive approach and interest in how language works, also traceable in connection with Latin. Once, when our Latin professor was talking about Lex Canuleia, which allowed marriages between patricians and plebeians, he pointed out that English school girls have no problem with remembering the legislator's name, since when it is pronounced it means ...: at that point he asked me to pronounce and translate it. I began laboriously to assign English sounds to the letters and by some lucky chance, together with what the professor had told us about the meaning of the law, the sounds clicked into the right words "[you] can, you liar".

After finishing grammar school I was still thinking about taking up music and meanwhile, at my sister's advice, I attended an intensive course in English at a language school, concluded by the so-called state examination. Studying English in a day class with three lessons a day and coming into contact with native speakers of English finally shifted my preferences to the study of English and I enrolled at the Prague Faculty of Arts. At that time, good marks at the school-leaving examination still played a role in the admission of students. The combination with Czech, which has proved to be most felicitous for my future work, was the result of the entrance interview.

SJ

How was it to be a student of English linguistics in the former Czechoslovakia in the early fifties (1949–1953)? What about the availability of resources, possibilities of travelling abroad for research purposes, etc.? What linguistic schools were included in the curriculum and how did it influence your future linguistic feeling and perception of the language system? What linguistic figures influenced you most?

LD

As regards the first point, foreign literature was available only in libraries. We could study from grammars by George Curme, Otto Jespersen, Erik Poutsma and other books on English, but only in the reading rooms since there was only one copy, hence these books were not lent

out. However, we were able to study from university textbooks by our teachers, which were issued as mimeographed university texts. Mathesius' *Functional analysis of present day English on a general linguistic basis* had not appeared yet; Professor Vachek's Czech edition was published in 1961.

Travelling abroad for purposes of research or study was non-existent - out of the question. Nevertheless, we had the best erudition it was possible to have. Our teachers were foremost specialists in their fields, theoretically based in the Prague School of Linguistics whose tenets they were further developing. They were all pupils of Vilém Mathesius and members of the Prague Linguistic Circle.

Bohumil Trnka lectured on English syntax, but in the seminars he also assigned papers on other points, in particular phonology. Josef Vachek held lectures and seminars on the historical development of English and Ivan Poldauf on English phonetics and morphology. Bohumil Trnka later became the supervisor of my postgraduate studies; under his guidance I broadened and deepened my linguistic erudition the basis of which had been laid during my graduate studies.

I equally benefited from Josef Vachek. According to the apt wording of a student of his, what he taught us is engraved in rock. I came into closer contact with him in the seventies when I was translating Mathesius' *Obsahový rozbor současné angličtiny* (A Functional Analysis of Present-day English), mentioned above. I felt and still feel it as a great honour that he entrusted the translation to me. The contact continued in connection with *Praguiana* and lasted until the end of his life. I did the editorial work on his last article, commemorating Mathesius on the occasion of fifty years from his death, in *Linguistica Pragensia* 1995/2.

Ivan Poldauf, who taught us in the first year, introduced me into the ways of study at university level. His mimeographed text on English pronunciation was the first university material I met with and I learned a great deal from it in this respect, in addition to the content. I also gained much from him when he was editor-in-chief of the linguistic section of *Linguistica Pragensia* and its predecessor *Philologica Pragensia*, for which I was doing the editorial work.

SJ

The most important contribution of the Prague school to the world's linguistics was definitely the functionalism employed in all perspectives of language analysis which influenced major linguistic schools in the past. Is the Prague school still active? And if so, what form does it have and what is new if compared with the previous periods? Are the findings and conclusions of the Prague linguistic circle able to address the current linguistic students and academics? What may be perceived as its legacy to modern linguistics?

LD

To answer your question, I had best cite what is said about the Prague School of Linguistics by Geoffrey Leech in the centenary volume of Prague English studies, *A Centenary of English Studies at Charles University: from Mathesius to Present-day Linguistics*. The volume was published in 2012, the year of the centenary, to commemorate the occasion, and Geoffrey Leech wrote the opening article "A century of Prague English linguistics." Referring to Mathesius' teaching assignments - Mathesius gave most of the lectures and in his seminars he also covered both language and literature - Geoffrey Leech says: "... this necessity of breadth of coverage led to the foundation of a broadly-based and humanistic approach to the subject that has been one of the hallmarks of English studies in Prague since then. Apart from its breadth of coverage, what is striking is the continuity of the Prague approach to linguistics. ... The tenets set forth by Mathesius and his successor Bohumil Trnka are documented and taken further in the work of leading figures such as Josef Vachek, his Brno disciple Jan

Firbas, and Ivan Poldauf.” He further points out “the sustained evolution, refinement and elaboration of an existing paradigm which characterizes the Prague School, whereby both utterances and textual materials, together with the psychological processing of language, and the definition of language as a systemic structure have an essential place.” He finds the “strengths” of the Prague linguistic paradigm especially in three characteristics: 1. combining structuralism with functionalism; 2. combining empiricism with theoretical thinking; 3. and defining the domains of linguistics inclusively, rather than exclusively. He sees the progress in the refinement of theory and description, but also in the embracing of new technological and methodological advances that have enormously advanced the empirical basis of language description, both for Czech and English, and for their comparison. He notes that this is reflected in the centenary volume even in the titles of several chapters which end with the words ‘and beyond’. “While finding their starting point in the Prague School ‘greats’ of the past, contributors have used their chapters as a means of detailing and updating the new developments that have arisen from the pioneering creation of a modern linguistic framework up to the present work.”

It was these viable tenets of the Prague School of linguistics that the centenary volume of the Prague English studies attempted to demonstrate. As regards the Prague School heritage to my own work, I find it inspiring especially in two spheres: contrastive studies and functional sentence perspective. But these will be discussed in the answers to the following questions.

SJ

Your professional career may be divided into two phases: 30 years in the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, and then your affiliation became, and still is, the Department of English and American studies (since 1994 renamed into the Institute of English and American Studies, after the split into two chairs in 2008 renamed to Department of English Language and ELT Methodology) of the Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Prague. What was different about working in a purely academic environment if compared with the teaching/academic environment? Did you feel more as a teacher or researcher? How do teaching interactions and discussions with students influence the linguist as researcher? Can they be inspiring?

LD

My work in the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences did not start in a purely academic environment. At first I was employed in a pedagogical language institution (Katedra jazyků) founded by the Academy to provide foreign language tuition for its postgraduate students and young research workers. Their primary need at that time was to be able to read specialist literature in foreign languages. Postgraduate students moreover had to pass two language examinations, one in Russian and the other in English, German or French. Later on, there were also optional conversation classes. I taught mathematicians, physicists, geophysicists and astronomers. Actually, this was the beginning of teaching English for academic purposes. As there were no teaching materials, we had to produce them. The Academy was intent on publishing them since they were certain to be welcomed not only by the academic but also by the broader public. In fact, the first book, a brief grammar of English (*Stručná mluvnice angličtiny*) was intended for the general public. It has had six editions and is still selling. The grammar was followed by four textbooks, English for academic workers (*Angličtina pro vědecké a odborné pracovníky*, two courses, basic and intermediate), Spoken English for academic workers (*Mluvená angličtina pro vědecké a odborné pracovníky*) and an introductory course, complementing the intermediate course of English for academic workers. The course on spoken English has also appeared in Slovak.

Moreover, I did some research work, the results of which appeared in my articles published in the sixties, and as most young workers in the Academy I was engaged in postgraduate studies. My employment in this institution ended after fourteen years, in 1968. Following two older fellow workers I transferred to the Institute of languages and literatures, which then passed through several reorganizations and accordingly changed its name. This, however, did not affect the kind of work done there. It was a research institute whose linguistic section included specialists in several languages, Russian, Ukrainian, Serbo-Croatian, English and German, who were engaged in writing scholarly grammars, based on preparatory monographic studies. There was also a dictionary department where Karel Hais and Břetislav Hodek were working on their large English-Czech dictionary at that time. I worked in the grammatical department and in addition to research work - the results appeared in my articles published in the seventies, I was assigned editorial work in two academic journals, *Časopis pro moderní filologii*, a Czech journal, and a foreign language journal *Philologica Pragensia*, the predecessor of the present *Linguistica Pragensia*.

As you can see, in the Academy I was first a teacher and textbook writer, and then a research worker. My pedagogical work in the Academy was very different from what I have been and still am doing at the Faculty of Arts. I taught different subject matter - English for academic purposes, and my students learned English as an aid to doing their work, a means necessary for their research and participation in international contacts. In the Department of English Language and ELT Methodology, I teach linguistic subjects, syntax and stylistics, to professional future Anglicists. Novel aspects to be further investigated frequently appear in connection with the treatment of the subjects of diploma dissertations. I probably feel more as a researcher than a teacher, or more exactly I consider linguistic points first as a researcher and then in the light of their presentation to receptive students. This is mostly the case in my supervision of doctoral dissertations and advisory discussions of habilitation monographs. But I feel equally concerned to initiate linguistic thinking in undergraduate and graduate students, imbue them with interest in language, make them see the interrelations between form, meaning and function. Their questions and speculative interpretations of language facts sometimes also reveal points to be investigated. Yes, I do find discussions with students at all stages of study inspiring and instructive, occasionally even in situations like the following, as described by a former graduate: a student at an examination, who has a complete vacuum in his or her head as regards the answer, blurts out something and gets an unexpected response "It's interesting what you say. It should be investigated."

SJ

Your most influential book of grammar Mluvnice současné angličtiny na pozadí češtiny which was first released in 1988, followed by three re-editions of which the last was in 2006 (academia), has become a BESTSELLER AMONG STUDENTS AND academics in the field of English linguistics both in the Czech Republic and Slovakia for more than 20 years. It is now being released also in an online electronic format. What, do you think, is beyond its success?

LD

A partial answer to this question has already been given in connection with my work in the Academy. As a member of the grammatical department I was expected to write a scholarly grammar based on preparatory monographic studies. This was indeed the case, at least partly and in the initial stages. The preparatory studies appeared in the seventies and most of them have been reprinted in Part I of my *Studies in the English Language*. This volume is nearly monothematic as all but two of the included articles deal with the grammatical categories of the verb. Basing the whole grammar on such preparatory material was of course out of the question. Only some, primarily points of contrastive importance, could be treated in this way.

This is apparent from Part II of the *Studies*, which presents articles on different points of syntax and hypersyntax. Most of them first appeared in the decade between the mid-seventies and mid-eighties. As for the theoretical basis of the grammar, I can only repeat what I said in my answer to your question about the legacy of the Prague School: empirical data are described with respect to both form and function - within the framework of Prague structural functionalism, in the context of the contemporary linguistic trends. However, I think that the main reason why students find the grammar useful - and it is very gratifying to hear former students say that they still resort to it - is its contrastive approach, and comprehensive and detailed treatment. The two grammars previously available to university students of English, Karel Hais's *Anglická mluvnice* and Mathesius' *Obsahový rozbor*, were much less voluminous hence cover much less ground. At present, students of course study from English grammars and linguistic literature. The series of grammars by Randolph Quirk and his co-workers includes volumes of comparable size with *Mluvnice současné angličtiny*, e.g. *A Student's Grammar of the English Language*. However, English grammars are less readily available and more expensive. What may also play a role in the preference of the Czech grammar, in addition to its contrastive approach, is the language. Czech students know Czech grammatical terminology from secondary school, whereas when studying from English grammars they also have to learn the English linguistic metalanguage. This is not merely a matter of form since the terminology reflects the theoretical framework. The acquisition of these aspects is unquestionably necessary, but it is more difficult than acquiring the content alone. There is of course a great deal of unknown terminology even in the Czech grammar, but even so it is easier and quicker to grasp and absorb the content through the medium of the mother tongue. Differences in terminology and in the treatment of grammatical points need to be pointed out just as the differences between the language phenomena. The two largest English grammars, *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* and *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, cannot of course be studied in their entirety; they provide research sources for the study of particular points.

SJ

Some of your latest theoretical contributions are dealing with the issue of what you call constancy of syntactic functions. Could you, please, briefly summarize its mechanism and do you think that this approach might become a useful tool in studying language universals?

LD

My studies in syntactic constancy between English and Czech have been initiated by instances of interlingual syntactic divergence. The Czech counterparts of sentences like *The tent sleeps four persons* "V tom stanu mohou spát čtyři osoby" [in that tent can sleep four persons] have the same linear arrangement of corresponding semantic elements and the same arrangement of information structure, but differ in the syntactic functions of the initial and the final element. Both sentences have the locative thematic element at the beginning and the rhematic bearer of a state at the end. In contrast, the syntactic structure displays two deviations: the English subject is reflected in the Czech adverbial and vice versa the element corresponding to the Czech adverbial appears as the English subject. Such instances raise the question of the cause of the divergence. Among the factors that suggested themselves an obvious one was the arrangement of the information structure, functional sentence perspective (FSP) in domestic terms. Given that the principle of end focus, the final position of the rheme in FSP, is a universal principle of organization of the information structure of a sentence, the rheme should be found in the final position even in languages with fixed grammatical word order. As was shown already by Mathesius, in English this can be achieved by the passive and other constructions. According to the findings of my study on the basic distribution of

communicative dynamism vs. nonlinear indication of functional sentence perspective, the grammatical structure even of non-transformed English sentences largely displays the focal element at the end. This appears to confirm the universal character of the principle of end focus, even though the extent of its operation is restricted by the respective grammatical system. In inflectional Czech the principle of end focus is the dominant word order principle, which may conduce to syntactic divergence in the Czech-English direction involving FSP as one of the factors of the divergence. I have investigated these questions on parallel texts, English translations of Czech novels and Czech translations of English novels. The studies in syntactic constancy, together with others, are going to appear in a forthcoming volume that presents my articles written since the turn of the century. In the studies of syntactic constancy different clause elements have been found to differ in their degrees of interlingual constancy; however, whatever the degree of divergence, they all display a great prevalence of syntactic constancy over syntactic divergence, from 85% - 95%. The great prevalence of syntactic constancy is to be assigned to the fact that both English and Czech are Indo-European languages. As for the usefulness of this approach in studying language universals, the studies of syntactic constancy show the surface nature of syntax. What remains constant is the sentence semantics and information structure, irrespective of the means of expression. However, even these two aspects may occasionally display divergence if the other language lacks the means of expression or if assignment of corresponding degrees of communicative dynamism to corresponding semantic elements results in an unusual, unlikely sentence. Here the use of computerized parallel corpora might prove propitious in determining which semantic roles and general sentence meanings are universal and which are language specific. However, providing a large number of translations of the same text covering many languages from different language families appears hardly feasible.

SJ

At the 2014 ESSE conference in Košice where I had a pleasure to meet you personally again, I was sincerely impressed, beside the authority and natural respect that you enjoy in the academic community, also by your unfailing curiosity about things outside the world of theoretical linguistics. Are there any other fields of interest or hobbies that attract your attention outside linguistics?

LD

Linguistics has never been my only interest. In my answer to your first question I mentioned my inclination to take up music, and music has remained a sphere where I always find enjoyment and repose. For many years I was a regular concert-goer. Sometimes I had season-tickets for more than one concert cycle, always for the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra. I am also very fond of opera, especially operas by Czech composers. Although I now rarely go to a live performance, listening to music is one of my few leisure occupations. The other sphere of my non-linguistic interests is noted in your question. I like natural scenery and cultural and historical sights. While my husband was alive and when it became possible, we spent our holidays abroad discovering foreign countries. This actually taught us to fully appreciate the natural beauties and cultural treasures at home. The first country to visit after the war was Slovakia, which has remained a favourite place for recurrent visits. The fact that the 12th ESSE Conference took place in Košice had been an additional inducement for me to take part.

SJ

What are you currently working on? Do you have any publication plans for the coming years that we could be looking for?

LD

My current work is partly connected with the conferences that I have recently attended. I have been doing editorial work, besides revising my own contribution, on the outcomes of the Košice seminar on the information structure of discourse. They form the monothematic issue of *Linguistica Pragensia* No 1, Vol. 25/ 2015. Then there is the post-conference publication from the 10th Brno Conference of English, American and Canadian Studies, for which I am revising my contribution on deviations from the basic distribution of communicative dynamism as a style marker. A major forthcoming publication of mine has been mentioned in my answer to your question on syntactic constancy. The volume, presenting my articles concerned with the relations between syntax, FSP and text, is entitled *From syntax to text: the janus face of functional sentence perspective* and is to appear in the autumn. As regards my future plans, I have submitted, together with my co-conveners, a proposal for a seminar at the 11th ESSE Conference in Galway next year, devised to present new developments in the research of the information structure of discourse.

Thank you for the interview.

Slávka Janigová

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