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Czech Structuralism between Semiotics, Linguistics, and Aesthetics

Abstract

The history of Czech structuralism will soon reach its centenary, providing an excellent opportunity to reassess the place of this distinctive methodological approach within modern theoretical thought. While Czech structuralism may not be among the most influential schools that have directly shaped current theoretical inquiry, its impact can still be observed today in several fields, including the semiotics of literature, semiotic aesthetics, stylistics, and others. This study brings together its major sources of inspiration, areas of investigation, and innovative concepts and strategies, highlighting their legacy within this remarkable intellectual tradition.

Keywords: Czech Structuralism, Prague School, Semiotics, Linguistics, Aesthetics, Jan Mukařovský, Felix Vodička

A Hundred Years of Czech Structuralism

This study responds to the approaching centenary of the Prague Linguistic Circle (founded in 1926), whose academic contribution is known under the name of the Prague School, and its primary aim is to reflect on a simple question: What, if anything, has survived from the heritage of Czech structuralist thought into the present day? However, before addressing this, a more fundamental question perhaps requires attention: Has any aspect of this intellectual tradition made a significant contribution to the global theoretical context at any stage of its development?

It must be acknowledged that the answers to both questions largely depend on the perspective from which they are approached. Inevitably, the contribution of Czech structuralist thought to the global theoretical landscape appears differently depending on the standpoint of the observer. Optimistic observers tend to value any mention or reference to this school of thought in contemporary theoretical discourse, viewing such instances as confirmation of its continued relevance. By contrast, pessimistic

observers often interpret the relative scarcity of such references as evidence that Czech structuralism is an archaic tradition – written in an unfamiliar language and of little consequence, just one among many theoretical approaches that have rightly faded into obscurity. In any way, regardless of the position one may espouse, the coming anniversary provides an opportunity to pay tribute to the intellectual achievements of many great minds.

As a long-time observer of this tradition, I would like to reflect on its most remarkable aspects. As the title of this study suggests, my starting point is the idea that the strength of Czech structuralist thought lies in its emergence at the intersection of three major disciplines and intellectual traditions: semiotics, linguistics and aesthetics. Let me therefore reframe the question "What has survived?" as "What deserves to survive?" – highlighting the key strengths of this distinctive theoretical approach, which owes much to its position at the crossroads of these three traditions. My goal is to articulate this uniqueness and, in doing so, to demonstrate the enduring value of the various concepts and intellectual contributions of Czech structuralism.

Semiotics

The Prague School's approach may be regarded as one of the early responses to Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (1916). Indeed, within two decades of its publication, several Czechoslovak scholars had already shown a strong understanding of its foundational ideas, including Saussure's central project of semiology. In this respect, one of the most significant influences on Czechoslovak structuralists was Saussure's notion of the linguistic sign, which they expanded and applied to literary artworks: as an axiom under the Prague School's conceptual framework, literary artworks are viewed as complex and specifically structured signs. This perspective opens new paths for detailed investigation. By treating literary artworks as signs, the approach links the concept of signification with structural organisation. This dual perspective enables two major lines of inquiry: the study of fictional reference – one of the key issues in literary theory – and the analysis of literary works as structured wholes composed of interrelated parts. While the former has substantial implications for literary ontology, the latter provides a solid foundation for analysing the intricate structures of literary texts.

Moreover, the classification of literary artworks as complex signs has also had a considerable impact on aesthetics. This influence is so pronounced that a particular phase of Prague School aesthetics is sometimes referred to as "semiotic aesthetics," a concept that will be examined later[1].

(Fictional) Reference

Once the Saussurean concept of the linguistic sign was expanded and applied to literary artworks, defining them as complex and structured signs, these artworks became an integral part of the Prague School's broader semiotic investigation.[2] By incorporating semiotic principles into their understanding of

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1   See, for example, František W. Galán 1985.

2   De Saussure's dyadic (signifier–signified) structure of the linguistic sign was compared to, and later replaced by, a triadic model in the semiotic system of the Prague School. This triadic model originated in a framework proposed by Karl Bühler,

literary works, Prague structuralists established a productive link between semiotics and both linguistics and aesthetics.

One of the greatest achievements of the Prague School directly connected to the semiotic essence of the literary artwork-sign can be seen in literary-ontological investigation in general, and in investigations of fictional reference in particular. The prevailing Czech structuralist position on fictional reference is a "mixed" or "dual" referential model. In this view, literary artworks as signs refer both to external reality and to the fictional reality that they construct. The aesthetic effect emerges from the reader's perception and processing of the distinction between these two realities, as Jan Mukařovský states:

> An artwork as a sign is [...] founded on a dialectical tension between a dual relationship to reality: a relationship to the concrete reality that the artwork signifies and a relationship to reality as such. (Mukařovský [1947] 1948: 35–36)

Let us clarify that by "reality as such" Mukařovský understands the overall context of social phenomena within a given environment. The purpose of this particular type of reference is to influence the recipient's perception of reality. As Mukařovský argues in his seminal study *Aesthetic Function, Norm, and Value as Social Facts* (1936), "the most fundamental task of art is the regulation and renewal of the ties between man and reality as an element of human behavior" (Mukařovský [1936] 1970: 94).

This innovative concept of fictional reference is crucial to the development of the model of semantic aesthetics, as reflected in Felix Vodička's later description in his application of the structuralist method to literary history in *The Beginnings of Modern Czech Prose* (1948):

> Thematics expresses the most explicit bond between a literary artwork and the reality of the extra-literary world. Even though the artwork is dominated by the aesthetic function, the polarity between the reality known to or expected by the reader and literary reality can become a source of aesthetic effect. (Vodička 1948: 167)[3]

This aesthetics of difference not only contributes to the aesthetic achievements of the Prague School but also raises the very question of fictional reference. Beyond its self-referentiality, which directs the reader's attention to the structure of the artwork itself, and beyond its reference to the actual world, a literary artwork also refers to a reality that it creates.[4] Ultimately, this idea anticipates the concept of reference in modern fictional world theory: fictional texts refer to the worlds that they construct.

Moreover, regarding fictional reference, Prague School scholars introduce yet another concept that proves crucial for their subsequent theoretical reasoning. According to the axioms that they adopt, literary artworks function as self-referential signs. As self-referential signs, literary artworks direct the receiver's attention toward their own structure:

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with Roman Jakobson's adaptation gaining particular prominence. For a detailed analysis of the implementation of Saussure's model and its use and innovation by members of the Prague School, see especially Grzybek (1989).

3   "A key factor in the aesthetisation of thematic structure is its generic determination by verbal (textual) expression. Thematic units and structures are necessarily conveyed through linguistic means and textual strategies; they are inseparable from individual texts (textures) and are therefore always presented as aesthetically formed content. Consequently, the determination by verbal (textual) expression introduces a continuous dynamic into thematic structure, constantly renewing its aesthetic effectiveness" (Doležel 1996: 342).

4   Long before Roland Barthes' constructivist approach ("reality effect") and the emergence of fictional-worlds theory, scholars of the Prague School not only acknowledged that a literary artwork could refer to something (unlike de Saussure or Russell, for example), but also recognized the reality created by the work as one of its referential horizons.

The aesthetic function, which is dominant in poetic language (whereas in other functional languages it merely accompanies other functions), draws the receiver's attention to the linguistic sign itself. (Mukařovský [1940] 2001: 18)[5]

This effect arises from the fact that as literary artworks are dominated by the aesthetic function, they partly relinquish their other functions. Aesthetically, this redirection of attention leads perceivers to appreciate the "setting" of the work. Analytically, it guides scholars toward understanding the structure of the artwork – a structure that can be identified, analysed and described. In this respect, Czech structuralists achieved one of their most significant scholarly contributions: the stratified model of (literary) artworks, which posits that the structure of an artwork can be divided into hierarchically ordered strata.

Strata of Structure

In terms of the structure of literary artworks, Mukařovský originally proposed a model of literary structure comprising three structural planes: "sound, meaning, and theme." This stratification was later simplified by Vodička, "by merging the planes of sound and meaning." Lubomír Doležel emphasises that "Vodička's originality lies in his hierarchical structuring of thematic categories and their integration: motifs – plot, characters, and outer world – which, in turn, construct narrative (fictional) worlds" (Doležel 1996: 342).

Doležel's assessment of Vodička's system highlights the significance of his inclusion of the outer world category, which later influenced Doležel's own sophisticated version of fictional-worlds theory:

We have demarcated the outer world (setting) primarily in contrast to characters and plot. Moreover, in a literary artwork, an autonomous context of the outer world can also be felt – a spatial perspective that permeates the entire work and is thematically articulated in various aspects, serving either as a background for characters and story or as the very object of artistic figuration. (Vodička 1948: 115)

Although the outer world concept cannot yet be regarded as a fully developed stage of later fictional world theories, it nevertheless represents a crucial step in their evolution. This step becomes especially valuable when considering Vodička's structuralist view of the conglomerate of the presented world:

It is necessary not to view the contexts of plot, characters, and outer world separately and in a static manner but to consider their mutual relationships and dynamic structural interconnections. (Vodička 1948: 114–115)

Thus, the structure of the literary world emerges as a composition of interwoven semantic components, reinforcing the contribution of the Czech structuralist tradition to narratology and aesthetic theory.

In any way, the theoretically fruitful division of the indivisible components of linguistic signs, when applied to particular literary artworks, opens these works to detailed, twofold analysis using linguistic and semiotic methods in complementary ways. Indeed, a closer look at Czech structuralist analyses of literary texts reveals how they employ both approaches to provide exhaustive and formally unified interpretations of artworks.

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5   "The dominant may be defined as the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the structure" (Jakobson [1935] 1997: 6).

Mukařovský, in his foundational study *May: An Aesthetic Study* (1928), exemplifies this practice by linking the overall meaning of this famous work of Czech Romantic poetry not only to its metre but also to specific vowel constellations. According to him, these vowel patterns create semantically meaningful structures that help distribute motifs into higher semantic units, ultimately shaping the poem's theme. Once literary artworks – understood as complex structures – are made accessible to such deep analysis, they also become open to comparison. Felix Vodička adopts a diachronic perspective to reveal various developmental patterns in literary history. He demonstrates how these patterns are rooted in specific verbal forms while carrying particular motifs and motif clusters, ultimately shaping the fundamental narrative components: characters, plots and settings (outer worlds).

This unique integration of linguistic and semantic methodologies for the analysis and interpretation of literary artworks remains one of the defining axioms of the Prague School's methodological approach to this day.

Semiotic Aesthetics

Prague School structuralists do not merely claim that individual literary artworks and larger clusters of them form complex structures. Instead, they view the entirety of literary production as a structured whole: both in its synchronic and diachronic dimensions. The combined synchronic–diachronic view that they propose overcomes the originally synchronic structuralist concept of structure by enriching it with a crucial diachronic impulse derived primarily from domestic academic traditions. This perspective has a significant impact on the School's aesthetics and may be considered one of the methodological highlights of the Prague School.[6]

By building on both internal and pre-structuralist aesthetic traditions[7], onto which the Prague School applies modern structuralist principles, the School develops a unique aesthetic system. This system links the arts to their individual creators and audiences as well as to society and to the evolution of its conventions and values: the developing literary structure is intrinsically connected to the social structure.[8] As a result, aesthetic values and norms are relative to particular stages of social development,

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6   Apart from the domestic linguistic and aesthetic traditions, it is worth noting that this "diachronic impulse" can also be found in the Russian Formalist School. In their study *Problems in the Study of Language and Literature* (orig. 1928), Jurij Tynjanov and Roman Jakobson advocate for the use of a diachronic approach to language when investigating the development of literature.

7   The notion of structure is adopted by the Prague School from the tradition of Czech protostructuralist aesthetics, namely from Josef Durdík's *Poetics as Aesthetics of a Literary Artwork* (1881) where he compares (literary) artworks to a living organism in which every part carries a specific function.

8   "Mukařovský's concept of literary structure is abstract and stems from Hegel's idea of self-development as a continuous, dynamic process that is imperceptible to the senses and only revealed through external manifestations—in this case, literary artworks. In this view, literature as a collection of individual works recedes into the background, while as a manifestation of hidden tendencies and a testament to the developmental scheme, it becomes static and passive" (Grygar 2006: 268). More generally, the connection between both systems can be viewed at two levels: at the level of self-developing literary structures and at the level of dialectical tension between the parts of literary artworks as wholes. The structuralist concept of developing and mutually determined structures substantially stems from the Hegelian developmental model and also from the Russian Formalist idea of developing lines, as systematically formulated by Jurij Tynjanov in his study Literary Fact (orig. 1924).

as elaborated in Mukařovský's above-mentioned study *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts*. This structuralist approach to aesthetics also plays a crucial role in synthesising semiotics and aesthetics into a coherent epistemological and methodological system. In this system, artistic structures, embodied in artistic artefacts, exist and evolve within human consciousness and are materialised through individual artists:

> The correlation of components, their hierarchy, their agreements and variances – all of these constitute a certain reality, but a reality immaterial in essence and only therefore capable of being dynamic. A consciousness is a locus of its existence. But whose consciousness? Someone might answer: the artist's, of course. Whereas such a claim might have a semblance of justification in the case of a work which had just been created or completed, it is not valid if we take into account the living tradition. The artist has the same relation to the living tradition as his contemporaries, as the whole collectivity which perceives works of art – the vehicles of the living tradition. (Mukařovský [1945] 1977: 77–78)[9]

Artists–individuals, therefore, can be seen as the unique product of two intertwined forces. On the one hand, they are shaped by their own physical and mental qualities[10]; on the other, they are profoundly influenced by the artistic conventions, norms and values upheld by the collective mind.[11] At the same time, any artwork produced by the individual both contributes to and sustains the continuing dynamism of these artistic traditions:

> The poet either identifies with literary tradition or deviates from it when seeking new, individually differentiated production. […] Nevertheless, the poet's individuality can assert itself only to the extent allowed by the immanent developmental tendencies of the particular period of which they are a bearer. (Vodička [1969] 1998: 37)

Linguistics

As previously suggested, linguistics plays a crucial role in shaping the structuralist system of the Prague School. The systematic impulse from Saussurean linguistics could not have been adopted and developed

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9   This artist-individual is the guarantor of the uniqueness of a literary artwork and the vehicle for the developing literary structure. In *Occidental Poetics: Tradition and Progress* (1989), in a chapter devoted to the Prague School's legacy titled "Semiotic Poetics: The Prague School Design," Lubomír Doležel argues that the **subject–society relationship** plays a crucial role in the Prague School's systematic grasp of poetics, permeating various levels and strata of its poetological system. Doležel systematizes this relationship and highlights its essential qualities: (1) due to the sign sign-based nature of literary artworks, the relationship between the work and its creator is purely **semiotic**; (2) **intersubjective factors** are vital in the specific process of literary communications; (3) the **creative subject** exists in dialectical tension with intersubjective **norms and values**.

10   "The poet's life experience anchored in his family, locality, social origin and occupation sheds new light on the traditional view of poetry" (Mukařovský [1941] 2000: 266).

11   "Artistic talent is never purely individual; rather, it is shaped by the function assigned to the individual by the objective development of the structure" (Mukařovský [1940–1941] 1948: 16).

so readily without a pre-existing intellectual foundation in the domestic scholarly context[12]. This foundation enabled the smooth and rapid incorporation of structuralist ideas. Notably, local linguistic efforts at the turn of the 20th century sought to move beyond traditional 19th-century diachronic approaches by embracing modern, systematically synchronic perspectives. These efforts created the necessary groundwork for the reception of Saussurean thought.

Indeed, Saussurean linguistics became an integral part of the Prague School's system within less than two decades of its emergence – one of the fastest scholarly assimilations of these innovative ideas. Once a literary artwork was conceptualised as a complex sign composed of multiple strata, its verbal strata became accessible to linguistic analysis. This transformation occurred not only at the theoretical level, but also, more importantly, in practical application. As a result, the development of the linguistic system became inseparably linked to its use in concrete analytical practices. This synergy represents one of the greatest achievements of the Prague School, as it fostered a dynamic interplay between theoretical thought and practical analysis.

"Seen from the functionalist viewpoint, language is a system of purposeful means of expressions" (PLC [1929] 1983: 77) – as claimed in *Theses*, the canonical 1929 document of the Prague Linguistic Circle – although formulated as a general ideological axiom essential for the development of a specific methodology, applies equally, and in every respect, to the examination of literary artworks. Indeed, within this framework, various methodological tools and strategies emerged, arising from the mutual enrichment of linguistic theory and its practical application. The linguistic analysis of literary texts continuously refined the tools and techniques available; and this strengthened system, in turn, enhanced further analyses. This symbiotic relationship can be observed across different levels of scholarly inquiry, but one particularly significant outcome was the unification of synchronic and diachronic perspectives in literary education[13].

Although linguistic analyses of literary works are primarily produced for scholarly purposes, they also play a crucial role beyond purely academic contexts. To understand this, one must consider the ambitions of Czech structuralists in interwar Czechoslovakia. One of their key objectives was to establish modern linguistics as an essential component of contemporary research and education. Consequently, literary analyses were intended not only for theoretical exploration but also as methodological models for educational use. These analyses were meant to be incorporated into textbooks in order to equip students with essential tools for interpreting literary works[14].

At the same time, practical linguistic analyses of specific literary artworks make substantial contributions to general philological research. This is particularly evident in a discipline central to the Prague School structuralists – one that intertwines the study of language and literature: stylistics.

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12   See especially Vilém Mathesius's foundational study *On the Potentiality of Language Phenomena* (1911). "In other words, from the perspective of the Prague School, language is not a closed system, hermetically detached from extra-linguistic reality; rather, its primary function is to react to and refer to this reality. In fact, Vilém Mathesius' conception laid the foundation for the functional approach: by emphasizing that the same facts can be expressed in all languages and by focusing his analytical attention on the various ways different languages refer to these facts, Mathesius clearly established the approach that became the *differentia specifica* of the Prague School" (Vachek 2005: 7).

13   In this respect, the *Theses* provide a clear statement: "Diachronic research not only does not exclude the concepts of [synchronic] system and function, but on the contrary, it is incomplete if these concepts are disregarded" (PLC [1929] 1983: 78).

14   The ambitious plan was only partly realised in a few contemporary textbooks.

The Prague School's work on stylistics represents one of the earliest systematic investigations of style in modern linguistic and literary studies, significantly influencing both fields. This primarily linguistic discipline views verbal units chiefly as means of communication, applying a semiotic perspective, and provides a distinctive system for describing regular configurations of verbal patterns structured according to the intended purpose of communication. It contributed to the formulation of functional styles within linguistics and to comparative and genre-based studies of literature[15].

Furthermore, the identification and classification of stylistic features based on linguistic and semantic properties have led scholars to detect and describe different types of discourse within literary texts. However, the most productive application of Prague School stylistics lies in the analysis of literary discourse, providing essential insights into how the fundamental semantic units of literature are constructed – whether in lyrical subjects, dramatic personae, characters, spatio-temporal structures, plots, or entire fictional worlds. Thanks to the work of Prague School scholars, we now have a wide range of terms and analytical strategies that connect verbal form with literary meaning, some of which are still evident in modern theoretical investigations, such as narrative modes or the intentional function, which both substantially contribute to contemporary narrative theory[16].

Conclusions

The aim of this study was to reflect on the legacy of Czech structuralist thought and examine its impact, if any, on modern theoretical inquiry. It has been argued that the uniqueness of the Prague School lies in its integration of three main scholarly disciplines: semiotics, linguistics and aesthetics. This interdisciplinary foundation led to innovative concepts and analytical strategies, some of which remain influential today. The semiotic perspective on (literary) artworks – viewing them as composed of verbal and semantic elements that form distinct semantic strata and contribute to an overarching thematic structure – represents a significant step towards modern fictional worlds theory. Furthermore, the intersection of linguistics and semiotics supports the idea that (literary) artworks possess a sign-like nature, which is a key assumption in addressing the complex issue of artistic reference. This perspective also opens literary works to in-depth semiotic and linguistic analysis, offering new avenues for interpretation and scholarly exploration. In turn, the application of semiotics to aesthetic structures offers a unique model of semiotic aesthetics that anchors literature and its development to the dynamic evolution of human society and its axiological and deontic systems.

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15 A notable example of the Prague School's systematic approach to functional stylistics is the study of functional sentence perspective (FSP), which links stylistic analysis with syntax and semantics. FSP remains one of the Czech structuralist concepts, still valued in modern linguistic research. Another important application of stylistics can be seen in the construction of modern language dictionaries.

16 Clearly, the narrative modes defined in the work of Lubomír Doležel later became the basis for his definition of intentional functions in fictional-worlds theory.

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