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THE PRAGUE SCHOOL OF LINGUISTICS AND ITS INFLUENCE ON NEW TESTAMENT LANGUAGE STUDIES

Jan H. Nylund

1. INTRODUCTION

The period from 1910 to 1930 was a time when a number of theoretical systems saw the light of the day in Central Europe: psychoanalysis, neopositivism, phenomenology, the Warsaw School of logic, *Gestalt*-psychology—and the structuralism of the Prague School of Linguistics.¹ The Prague School arose in the liberal-minded Prague of the 1920s and came to have an enormous influence on multiple fields within world linguistics as well as other academic fields. The Prague School of linguistics, or the *École de Prague*, was established by Vilém Mathesius in the mid-1920s. The school had its most active time in the 1920s and 1930s, or more precisely, from 1926 to the outbreak of World War II. The instrumental role that the Prague School linguistics played for the development of structuralism and for integrating theoretical linguistics cannot be overrated.²

This article addresses the relevance of the development of structuralism and functionalism within Prague School linguistics in relation to its adoption within New Testament Greek language studies. It is the thesis of this article that a great deal of the research that has been done within the discipline of New Testament language studies in the last decades, and especially the last 20 years, draws on ideas and concepts of the Prague School of Linguistics.

The introduction contains an survey of the beginnings of structuralism; the first main section surveys the development of Prague School linguistics in nine subsections. The second main section, Prague School Linguistics within New Testament Language Studies, surveys the development of New

¹ Lubomir Doležel, “Structuralism of the Prague School,” in Raman Selden, ed., *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, Volume 8. *From Formalism to Poststructuralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001 [1995]), 33–34.

² Philip A. Luelsdorff, “Introduction,” in Philip A. Luelsdorff, ed., *The Prague School of Structural and Functional Linguistics* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1994), 1.

Testament Greek linguistics, followed by a chronological account highlighting elements of Prague School linguistics within New Testament language studies.

As defined by Giulio Lepschy, structural linguistics can be said to designate “those trends of linguistic thought in this century which deliberately and explicitly tried to gain an insight into the systematic and structural character of language.”³ The term *structuralism* was coined by Roman Jakobson in 1929 in a paper in which he states:

Were we to summarize the leading idea of present-day science in its most various manifestations, we could hardly find a more appropriate designation than *structuralism*. Any set of phenomena examined by contemporary science is treated not as a mechanical agglomeration but as a structural whole, and the basic task is to reveal the inner, whether static or developmental, laws of this system.⁴

Structuralism⁵ was originally a view that derived from the insight as to how the physical world was organized into a “network of interrelated dynamic mechanisms.” This perspective was gradually transferred to the “products of the human mind as well as to the mind itself.” This was the beginning of ‘structuralism’. The process of beginning to view the mind in the same way as physical matter—scientifically referred to as *reductionism*—was long and slow and is still going on. Seuren defines structuralism in the human sciences as the “the study of the structures that play a role in interpretation processes.”⁶ Linguistic structuralism can be said to have had its beginning in the second half of the 19th century and its end around 1960, even though structuralism in a sense can be seen as still an integral part of modern linguistics, since the problems yet to be solved concern the relationship between speech sounds and cognitive structures “in such a way that comprehension takes place.”⁷

Two central figures of early European structuralism were Jan Baudouin de Courtenay (1845–1929) and Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913). As Baudouin was working at the University of Kazan⁸ with the philosopher and psychologist M. Kruszewski (1851–1887), he made a number of insights that were

³ Giulio C. Lepschy, *A Survey of Structural Linguistics* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 36.

⁴ Roman Jakobson, quoted in Doležel, “Structuralism of the Prague School,” 37.

⁵ This subsection will follow the outline of Pieter A.M. Seuren, *Western Linguistics: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 140–177.

⁶ Seuren, *Western Linguistics*, 141.

⁷ Seuren, *Western Linguistics*, 142.

⁸ Kazan is located more than 700 km east of Moscow.