

Unit one: Modern linguistics (European structuralism)

Lesson 03: PRAGUE SCHOOL

School of linguistic thought and analysis established in Prague in the 1920s by VILÉM MATHESIUS. It included among its most prominent members the Russian linguist Nikolay Trubetsky and the Russian-born American linguist Roman Jakobson; the school was most active during the 1920s and '30s.

Prince Nikolay Sergeevich
Trubetsky 1890-1938



• Roman Jakobson
1896-1982



Basic concepts of the Prague school

1. Combination of structuralism and functionalism

Prague school approach is a combination of structuralism with functionalism. The latter term (like "structuralism") has been used in a variety of senses in linguistics. It is the diversity of functions fulfilled by language and a theoretical recognition that the structure of languages is in large part determined by their characteristic functions. Functionalism, taken in this sense, manifests itself in many of the more particular tenets of Prague school doctrine.

2. Phonological contributions (distinctive-feature analysis of sounds)

The Prague school was best known for its work on phonology. Unlike the American phonologists, Trubetsky and his followers did not take the phoneme to be the minimal unit of analysis. Instead, they defined phonemes as sets of distinctive features. For example, in English, /b/ differs from /p/ in the same way that /d/ differs from /t/ and /g/ from /k/.

3. Theory of markedness

The notion of markedness was first developed in Prague school phonology but was subsequently extended to morphology and syntax. When two phonemes are distinguished by the presence or absence of a single distinctive feature, one of them is said to be **marked** and the other unmarked for the feature in question. For example, /b/ is marked and /p/ unmarked with respect to voicing. Similarly, in morphology, the regular English verb can be said to be marked for past tense (by the suffixation of *-ed*) but to be unmarked in the present (*compare* "jumped" versus "jump").

Later contributions (postwar Prague school)

- Theme and rheme:

By the theme of a sentence is meant that part that refers to what is already known or given in the context (sometimes called, by other scholars, the topic or psychological subject); by the rheme, the part that conveys new information (the comment or psychological predicate).

- Functional sentence perspective & communicative dynamism

The first one is the syntactic structure of a sentence which is in part determined by the communicative function of its various constituents and the way in which they relate to the context of utterance.