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Remarks on the dynamism of the system of language

Josef Vachek



Josef Vachek (1909–1996) was a Czech Anglicist, one of the major figures of the Prague Linguistic Circle. He was professor of English linguistics in Brno (1946–1962), and later at various Czechoslovak universities (Prague, Bratislava and Prešov). Vachek was active mainly in the area of historical phonology and grammar. In his work, he used the method of analytical comparison, typically contrasting English and Czech. His most famous studies dealt with peripheral phonemes in English, the functional differentiation between spoken and written language (*Written Language: General Problems and Problems of English*, 1973). He was a prolific historiographer and great popularizer of Prague School linguistics, having written and edited several volumes both in his country and abroad (*A Prague School Reader in Linguistics*, 1964; *The Linguistic School of Prague*, 1966; *U základů pražské jazykovědné školy*, 1970; *Praguiana*, 1983; *Vzpomínky českého anglisty*, 1994; *Prolegomena k dějinám pražské školy jazykovědné*, 1999). In 1959, Vachek established the journal *Brno Studies in English*. Under his editorship, it quickly became one of the leading linguistics journals dealing with English philology in Central Europe.

In this article, Josef Vachek provides an overview of the notion of “dynamism”, as it was articulated in some of the major works during the classic period of Prague school functionalism. The chapter summarizes the understanding of dynamism as the non-static nature of language and explains the therapeutic effect which the dynamism of language has in respect to the language system as such. The chapter attests to the sensitive combination of the synchronic and diachronic approaches among early scholars of the discipline. This is based on their conviction that the two levels of analysis can hardly be separated in efforts to understand the complex systematic nature of language: the current state of the language is systematically being explained as a result of past developments.

It has been commonly admitted that one of the main assets of the Prague conception of language, as formulated by the Prague Circle, mainly in its Theses of 1929, was its combination of the structuralist approach to facts of language with consistent regard for their functions. It was for this reason that, e.g., V.A. Zvegincev (1965) did not hesitate to open the chapter dealing with the activities of the Prague School with the title “Functionalist Linguistics”. Still, the earliest conception, as formulated in the Prague Theses, was not quite free from some inaccuracies. One of them appears to have been the insufficient stress laid on the dynamic, i.e. non-static character of the system of any language at any moment of its existence.

The first member of the Prague group to realize the existence of the said dynamism was undoubtedly Roman Jakobson. As early as 1929 he declared that any change in any language, if its cause and its import are to be correctly grasped, must be examined with due regard for the whole language system affected by that change. To this was to be added, in another context, Jakobson’s well-known statement that many (though of course not all) changes of the system of language have what may be called “a therapeutic function”. This means that the *raison d’être* of such changes is to restore the jeopardized balance of the language system (for illustrations of such changes on the phonological level see Jakobson’s well-known monograph *Remarques* 1929). Even if not all changes in language can claim such therapeutic status (of which Jakobson himself was well aware as early as 1929), there can be no doubt that the application of the principle of systemic therapy has been able to throw some new light on a number of points so far enigmatic in the development of concrete languages. At least one such point deserves a passing mention here, viz. B. Trnka’s application of it to the first stages of the Late Middle English complex of vocalic changes known as the Great Vowel Shift – cf. B. Trnka (1959), J. Vachek (1974).

Here, however, one must point out another conclusion that may be drawn from the idea of therapeutic changes. Its author duly emphasized that the restoration of the jeopardized balance may give rise, in its turn, to the emergence of some other “weak point” of the given system, and such a new weak point may again “call for” some therapeutic change to restore the balance, and so *ad infinitum*. In this connection, Jakobson aptly

recalled, and brought to a more logical conclusion, Saussure's well-known comparison of the situation within the language system to the situation obtaining on the chessboard in the course of a game of chess. Still, there is one point in which Saussure's comparison fails; a game of chess will terminate, after a number of moves, in checkmate, whereas the series of the therapeutic changes in the system of language does not tend to such an end – it may be virtually unlimited in time (unless all users of the language die out or accept some other language system). In other words, since all living languages are subjected to such a continuous series of changes, one can justly regard this as evidence of the fact that the dynamic, non-static character of language at any stage of its development constitutes one of the universals of language.

If this is so, it is obvious that any language at any moment of its development can be qualified as system-striving rather than as consistently and perfectly systematic. To put the thing differently, the imperfect balance of the language system, too, must be admitted to figure as another item on the list of language universals – on this field of problems see interesting remarks by F. Daneš (1966). If one draws all necessary consequences from this fact, one will be able to eschew two errors which even some eminent linguistic thinkers were unable to avoid. One of them is the often asserted denial of the systematic character of language with which the presence of a number of non-systematic elements is believed to be incompatible. Those scholars who commit the other error are guilty of “emendating” the language system by altering or adapting some of its elements which appear to them to contradict its systemic character – it is interesting to find that even such a protagonist of the Prague conception as N.S. Trubetzkoy was sometimes not quite averse to such “emendations”, cf. Vachek (1933), p. 97.

The dynamic nature of the language system is, as a matter of fact, also clearly revealed by the well-known presence in that system of both archaisms and neologisms (see already Jakobson 1929). Admittedly, each of these two kinds of phenomena contradicts, in some way, the regularities otherwise obtaining in the given language system. In post-war Prague writings, such phenomena were also classified as peripheral elements of the system, as opposed to the central elements which reflect the regularities of the system without any exceptional deviations – as is well known, a whole volume of the post-war Prague *Travaux* was devoted to the discussion of the peripheral elements of the language system on all its levels (cf. Vachek, ed., 1966).

It is important to keep in mind that the dynamism of the system of language is inherent not only in its basic, phonological level (for peripheral elements of the Modern English phonological system see their detailed discussion by Vachek [1964], for phonological dynamism of Modern Czech, see Vachek [1968]), but also on the “higher” language levels. For the morphological level it may be referred here to Vachek (1980), analysing the structure of Old English declension and conjugation with a view to their further development in Middle and Early Modern English, and analogous remarks could also be formulated for the syntactic and lexical levels where, as is commonly known, deviations from the

systemic regularities are often employed for specific stylistic purposes – here also belongs the vast complex of the problems of poetic language, cf. J. Mukařovský (1964).

The just noted fact that the presence of dynamism can be ascertained on any language level has some important consequences. It is now generally admitted that language constitutes a complex system containing a number of subsystems or levels, some general problems of which were ably discussed by F. Daneš (1971). It will be easily seen that each of the subsystems has its own specific needs and wants, and it is clear that all such partial needs and wants must necessarily be coordinated if the language system taken as a whole is to smoothly perform its main task, i.e. communication in the broadest sense of the term. However, such coordination may at times present some difficulties resulting from the conflicting interests of two (or even more) levels of the given language system. The solution of such difficulties is necessarily affected for the benefit of one of the levels, while the interests of the other level(s) recede, for the given moment, into the background.

An interesting case of the prevalence of the interest of the morphological level over that of the phonological subsystem was discussed by Vachek (1963, 1968). It is concerned with the preservation in the Modern Czech phonological system of the consonantal phoneme /ř/ despite the powerful handicap resting in the very slight integration of that phoneme in the phonological system of Modern Czech (for the concept of systemic integration in phonology consult A. Martinet [1955]).

As a matter of fact, the phoneme /ř/ has been ranking, for a long time, as one of the candidates for elimination from the Modern Czech phonological system, just as it was already eliminated in the Polish and Sorbian systems of consonant phonemes. The reason for the survival of /ř/ in the Czech phonological system despite the said handicap should most probably be looked for in the specific needs and wants of the morphological system of Modern Czech, in which the opposition of /r/ : /ř/ has become firmly rooted as an important morphonological signal of some basic morphological relations, e.g. as a signal of the opposition of number in the Nom. sg. vs. Nom. pl. of animate masculine nouns as well as of adjectives; further as a signal of adverbs derived from adjectives, etc. – in all such cases, the opposition /r/ : /ř/ is propped up by other instances of morphonological oppositions of “hard” vs. “soft” consonant phonemes of Modern Czech, such as /t/ : /t̚/, /d/ : /d̚/, /n/ : /n̚/. (For the opposition of /r/ : /ř/ cf. instances like Nsg. *kocour* ‘tom-cat’: Npl. *kocouři*, *autor* ‘author’: *autoři*; adj. Nsg. *starý* ‘old’: Npl. *starí*; adj. *dobry* ‘good’: adv. *dobře* ‘well’; for further particulars see Vachek 1968, pp. 97–98). In this case, clearly, the needs and wants of clear morphological signalling prevailed over the structural needs and wants of the Czech phonological system.

In other cases, on the other hand, it is the needs and wants of the phonological system which may have the upper hand in their conflict with those of morphology. A well-known piece of evidence of such prevalence of the needs of the phonological level is provided by the fate of the English consonant phoneme /h/. As was demonstrated elsewhere (see Vachek 1964), this phoneme was still very firmly integrated in the phonological system of Old English, but in the later stages of the development of English it was to be

ousted from most of the positions in which it had been common, with the result that in Present Day English its occurrence is confined to one single place in the word, viz. to a morpheme-initial prevocalic position. As a consequence of this, the Modern English sound [h] ranks as a peripheral, only very slightly integrated element of the Modern English phonological system, and as a peripheral element tends to be eliminated in it. As a matter of fact, this eliminating process has already been effected in the substandard varieties of Modern English, i.e. in most territorial dialects, including Cockney, where the sound [h] now ranks as a phonostylistic feature (in the sense of Trubetzkoy [1939], p. 28), not as a full-fledged phoneme – for particulars see Vachek (1964, 1981).

It is interesting that one of the Early Old English changes which were to reduce the functioning of /h/ rather seriously was the well-known process of contraction in intervocalic positions, such as took place in words like *seohan* > *sēon*, *eohes* > *ēos*, *scōhes* > *scōs*, and the like. Such contractions, very naturally, were contrary to the needs and wants of the morphological system of Old English. One is faced here with a question of why the /h/-phoneme in the above-mentioned instances was not to be propped up by the presence in the Old English morphological system by the presence in it of instances like *weorþan*, *dæʒes*, *stānes*, etc., just as the Czech phoneme /f/, discussed here above, has been propped up by the morphological signalling function performed by the opposition of “hard” vs. “soft” phonemes in the Czech morphological system.

The answer to the given question is prompted by the all-encompassing view of the Old English grammatical, particularly morphological situation. One can say that even if the grammatical system of the period was still of synthetic character, it was already perceptibly weakened in many of its points, so that ground was already being prepared for its later thorough reorganization on an analytical basis (see, e.g., A.C. Baugh [1957], pp. 189f.). It is well known that already in Old English case functions were being increasingly expressed by auxiliary grammatical words (especially by prepositions), with the result that the structure of the old synthetic grammatical pattern was at that time already palpably undermined. Thus it will be easily understood that the morphological level of Old English had been so sensibly weakened that it could hardly interfere with the changes taking place on the phonological level, the aim of which was to solve the specific systemic problems of its own (concretely, the elimination of the slightly functionally charged element of its subsystem).

Instances of the interdependence of the needs and wants of various language levels could easily be multiplied – for a number of them see Vachek (1961 and 1964 for English, 1968 for Czech). Still, one must face here some objections that may be heard from time to time against the application of the principle of dynamism of language systems in an effort to throw new light on some of the problems of such systems, both from the synchronistic and –from the diachronistic viewpoint. First of all, we want to point out here, as briefly as possible, wherein lies, in our opinion, the importance of the study of the dynamism in language and of the peripheral phenomena ascertainable in its system. It will be seen that such study is of paramount importance both for general linguistic theory and for the practical sphere of linguistic usage.

As far as the theory of general linguistics is concerned, the examination of the dynamism of language and of peripheral language phenomena may be qualified as a significant return of linguistic theory to linguistic reality. From time to time one can meet in the history of linguistic research radical currents which try to cram into the framework of a prefabricated theory all facts of the examined language, without any regard to the carrying capacity of such a theory. Here belong, e.g., some of the attempts of mathematically oriented linguists who construe their models without due regard for the actual situation in the system of natural language, especially for the imperfection of its balance, so clearly due to the dynamism of language. It should be recalled here that as early as 1962 N.D. Andrejev laid stress on the fact that no mathematical model can do justice to the actual situation obtaining in natural language. One should also recall here the very apt statement of W. Haas (1967) that there are only two disciplines in which one does not find any border-line cases, i.e. any peripheral phenomena, such as are commonly found in social sciences – the two exceptional disciplines being mathematics and formal logic. Therefore, research in social sciences must be based on prerequisites very different from those of the two exact disciplines. As has already been noted here above, it is exactly the identification of the peripheral features of language systems which can lead to the recognition of the given system's specific dynamism, which also constitutes the driving force of that system's development. It will be recalled that the fact of all natural languages being subject to the process of development has been adduced here as evidence for the fact that no language system is free of peripheral elements. The identification of such system-peripheral elements must therefore be pinpointed as one of the most urgent tasks of the analysis of natural languages.

It is sometimes objected that the just formulated approach to the given problems deprives linguistics of the possibility (or, chance) to become an exact science. To this it should be answered that the fundamental requirement to be asked from any methodological approach is its ability to reflect, as adequately as possible, the events taking place within the examined area of facts and to find out the regularities lying behind these events. And it is undeniable that the events examined by the social sciences, events characterized by a relatively very rapid changeability of the studied structures, call for such a theory as will take this changeability into account and will be able to incorporate it, in the shape of systemic dynamism, into the basic framework of the structuralist and functionalist conception whose foundations were laid in the Prague Theses of the late nineteen-twenties.

As regards the fears that the exactness of linguistic analysis might be impaired by taking into consideration facts not fully systemic, such misgivings may be dismissed as wholly unfounded. Of course the admission of the existence of peripheral systemic elements cannot play the part of a *deus ex machina* providing the scholar with an easy way out of his analytical difficulties. It stands to reason that the identification of peripheral elements does not depend on the scholar's arbitrary choice but, on the contrary, on a most careful and delicate analysis of the relations obtaining in the examined complex of structural phenomena, relations of both the intralevel and the interlevel order. It would thus

be most unjust to qualify the linguistic analysis counting with peripheral phenomena as if it allowed for inadmissible facilitation of the linguist's task. On the contrary, such analysis, if adequately performed, turns out to be much more difficult than the one neglecting such phenomena: it can only be based on the linguist's fine sense of the tension existing at the given period in the examined system, and particularly on his ability of acutely observing the ways and means by which such tension becomes overtly manifested in concrete utterances serving as primary materials of the linguist's analysis. Besides, it should also be noted that the peripheral features of language often rank as something more essential than mere structural defects of the linguistic system: they rather serve as indicators showing the way towards a new structuration which in the future may replace the old one which no longer meets the systemic demands (for concrete instances of such indicators see Vachek [1966]; cf. also interesting remarks by G.Y. Shevelov [1967]). In our opinion, it is exactly because of this particular part played by system-peripheral elements in the process of reshaping the language system that one can evaluate the examination of such elements as an invaluable source of most rewarding information on both synchronic and diachronic forces operating in the system, and thus as a notable contribution to general linguistic theory.

What has just been said here refutes quite convincingly the objection that the concentration of the linguist's attention on system peripheral elements functioning as systemic "fuzzy points" might discredit the basic principle of modern linguistics, viz. the conception of language as a system "où tout se tient". Obviously, however, such concentration can only discredit a naive, arch-dogmatic conception of a perfectly balanced system of language, functioning as faultlessly as an electric switch (to quote V. Mathesius's ironic phrase often used in his university classes). Such a naive conception, of course, not only can but must be discredited, since it grossly misrepresents the language reality, while the conception of language taking into account its dynamism and allowing for its peripheral elements is able to do full justice to the real state of things. This, incidentally, was anticipated, even if not expressly stated, by Edward Sapir as early as 1921 in his often quoted dictum that "all grammars leak" (p. 39).

Finally, in the area of practical language usage the results of research on the dynamism of language can be found very useful in two domains: in that of language teaching and in attacking the problems of language standardization (particularly the fundamental problem of speech correctness). First, in language teaching it enables the instructor to distinguish the central elements of the system of language (the mastering of which saves both the teacher and the pupil lots of time and trouble) from the peripheral elements whose identification may enable the student to refine his knowledge by obtaining the proper stylistic perspective on the language system, mainly to realize the presence and function in it of archaisms and neologisms. In this way the student will be able to avoid the danger of viewing the studied language in a distorted way, i.e. in a perspective that would be rather flat and overschematized.

Second, in dealing with problems of language standardization (and, in general, with problems of the cultivation of language) the distinction between central and peripheral elements may again play a most vital part. Their formal as well as functional analysis will make the analyst conscious of the fact that the standardized norm of language very sorely needs both kinds of elements, central as well as peripheral, if it is to comply with the basic requirement of elastic stability, so competently and so persuasively voiced more than fifty years ago by Vilém Mathesius (1931). Here again, one should realize both the importance of the archaisms (which in the utterances of the standardized language can play a very essential stylistic role) as well as that of the neologisms which may very often foreshadow the direction of the future development of the examined system of language. As was duly stressed by B. Havránek as early as 1931, the identification of neologisms may often give useful hints to the linguistic theorist attempting to standardize the given language as to which forms or phrases should be chosen if the language to be standardized is to constitute a truly living, and not an unduly overconservative structure.

Note

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Comprehension questions

1. In what sense is Jakobson’s conception of “dynamism” linked to language diachrony?
2. Why is the non-static character of language considered to be one of the universals of language? What other language universals do you know?
3. What does the “imperfect balance of a language” mean? Can you think of some current examples?
4. Why is the English phoneme /h/ considered as peripheral? Why has it not disappeared from the phonological system, as might be expected to be the case?
5. In what sense is the methodology of the social sciences, according to Vachek’s view, different from such sciences as mathematics and formal logic?
6. Can linguistics be a true science, given the changeability (dynamism) of its subject?
7. How do you understand the phrase “all grammars leak”?