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Standard language and poetic language

Jan Mukařovský



Jan Mukařovský (1891–1975) was a literary scholar and aesthetician, one of the major figures of Czech structuralism and a member of the Prague Linguistic Circle. He was a professor of aesthetics (1945) and rector at Charles University (1948–1953). After World War II, he renounced his pre-war structuralism and became politically and ideologically active. In his work, he stressed the role of the aesthetic function, considering it the crucial characteristic of any work of art. The meaning of a work of art is the outcome of its dynamic structure, a sum of all component parts. Amongst others, he developed the notions of the aesthetic norm and the aesthetic function, pointing out the way works of art fulfil, as well as violate, existing norms. The violations of the norm, which arise from the foregrounding of some components of the work of art, ultimately have the potential to become new norms.

This article explores the relationship between the poetic language and the standard. Mukařovský identifies poetic language as an entity separate and distinct from the standard language. In his view, the standard provides the background against which various distortions are produced with the aim of creating aesthetic effects. The notions of automatization and foregrounding are then introduced: the former refers to production of an utterance in an automatic manner, the latter is associated with a more conscious execution of the utterance that arises when the appropriate norms are violated. In a work of art, we may find the foregrounding of various components that are mutually hierarchically organized in terms of domination and subordination.

The problem of the relationship between standard language and poetic language can be considered from two standpoints. The theorist of poetic language poses it somewhat as follows: is the poet bound by the norms of the standard? Or perhaps: how does this norm assert itself in poetry? The theorist of the standard language, on the other hand, wants to know above all to what extent a work of poetry can be used as data for ascertaining the norm of the standard. In other words, the theory of poetic language is primarily interested in the differences between the standard and poetic language, whereas the theory of the standard language is mainly interested in the similarities between them. It is clear that with a good procedure no conflict can arise between the two directions of research; there is only a difference in the point of view and in the illumination of the problem. Our study approaches the problem of the relationship between poetic language and the standard from the vantage point of poetic language. Our procedure will be to subdivide the general problem into a number of special problems.

The first problem, by way of introduction, concerns the following: what is the *relationship* between the extension of *poetic language* and that of the *standard*, between the places of each in the total system of the whole of language? Is poetic language a special brand of the standard, or is it an independent formation? Poetic language cannot be called a brand of the standard, if for no other reason that poetic language has at its disposal, from the standpoint of lexicon, syntax, etc., all the forms of the given language – often of different developmental phases thereof. There are works in which the lexical material is taken over completely from another form of language than the standard (thus, Villon's or Rictus' slang poetry in French literature). Different forms of the language may exist side by side in a work of poetry (for instance, in the dialogues of a novel dialect or slang, in the narrative passages the standard). Poetic language finally also has some of its own lexicon and phraseology as well as some grammatical forms, the so-called poetisms such as *zor* [gaze], *oř* [steed], *pláti* [be aflame], 3rd p. sg. *můž* [can; cf. English *-th*] (a rich selection of examples can be found in the ironic description of "moon language" in [Svatopluk] Čech's [1846–1908, a realist] *Výlet pana Broučka do měsíce* [Mr. Brouček's Trip to the Moon]).

Only some schools of poetry, of course, have a positive attitude towards poetisms (among them the Lumír Group including Svatopluk Čech), others reject them.

Poetic language is thus not a brand of the standard. This is not to deny the close connection between the two, which consists in the fact that, for poetry, the standard language is the background against which is reflected the esthetically intentional distortion of the linguistic components of the work, in other words, the intentional violation of the norm of the standard. Let us, for instance, visualize a work in which this distortion is carried out by the interpenetration of dialect speech with the standard; it is clear, then, that it is not the standard which is perceived as a distortion of the dialect, but the dialect as a distortion of the standard, even when the dialect is quantitatively preponderant. The violation of the norm of the standard, its systematic violation, is what makes possible the poetic utilization of language; without this possibility there would be no poetry. The more the norm of the standard is stabilized in a given language, the more varied can be its violation, and therefore the more possibilities for poetry in that language. And on the other hand, the weaker the awareness of this norm, the fewer possibilities of violation, and hence the fewer possibilities for poetry. Thus, in the beginnings of Modern Czech poetry, when the awareness of the norm of the standard was weak, poetic neologisms with the purpose of violating the norm of the standard were little different from neologisms designed to gain general acceptance and become a part of the norm of the standard, so that they could be confused with them.

Such is the case of M. Z. Polák [1788–1856, an early romantic], whose neologisms are to this day considered poor neologisms of the standard. [...]

A structural analysis of Polák's¹ poem would show that [Josef] Jungmann [a leading figure of the Czech national renaissance] was right [in evaluating Polák's poetry positively]. We are here citing the disagreement in the evaluation of Polák's neologisms merely as an illustration of the statement that, when the norm of the standard is weak as was the case in the period of national renaissance, it is difficult to differentiate the devices intended to shape this norm from those intended for its consistent and deliberate violation, and that a language with a weak norm of the standard therefore offers fewer devices to the poet.

This relationship between poetic language and the standard, one which we could call negative, also has its positive side which is, however, more important for the theory of the standard language than for poetic language and its theory. Many of the linguistic components of a work of poetry do not deviate from the norm of the standard because they constitute the background against which the distortion of the other components is reflected. The theoretician of the standard language can therefore include works of poetry in his data with the reservation that he will differentiate the distorted components from those that are not distorted. An assumption that all components have to agree with the norm of the standard would, of course, be erroneous.

The second special question which we shall attempt to answer concerns the different *function* of the two forms of language. This is the core of the foregrounding of the utterance. Foregrounding is the opposite of automatization, that is, the deautomatization of an act; the more an act is automatized, the less it is consciously executed; the more it is foregrounded, the more completely conscious does it become. Objectively speaking: automatization schematizes an event; foregrounding means the violation of the scheme. The standard language in its purest form, as the language of science with formulation as its objective, avoids foregrounding [aktualisace]: thus, a new expression, foregrounded because of its newness, is immediately automatized in a scientific treatise by an exact definition of its meaning. Foregrounding is, of course, common in the standard language, for instance, in journalistic style, even more in essays. But here it is always subordinate to communication: its purpose is to attract the reader's (listener's) attention more closely to the subject matter expressed by the foregrounded means of expression. All that has been said here about foregrounding and automatization in the standard language has been treated in detail in Havránek's paper in this [book]; we are here concerned with poetic language. In poetic language foregrounding achieves maximum intensity to the extent of pushing communication into the background as the objective of expression and of being used for its own sake; it is not used in the services of communication, but in order to place in the foreground the act of expression, the act of speech itself. The question is then one of how this maximum of foregrounding is achieved in poetic language. The idea might arise that this is a quantitative effect, a matter of the foregrounding of the largest number of components, perhaps of all of them together. This would be a mistake, although only a theoretical one, since in practice such a complete foregrounding of all the components is impossible. The foregrounding of any one of the components is necessarily accompanied by the automatization of one or more of the other components; thus, for instance, the foregrounded intonation in [Jaroslav] Vrchlický [1853–1912, a poet of the Lumír Group, see above] and [Svatopluk] Čech has necessarily pushed to the lowest level of automatization the meaning of the word as a unit, because the foregrounding of its meaning would give the word phonetic independence as well and lead to a disturbance of the uninterrupted flow of the intonational (melodic) line; an example of the degree to which the semantic independence of the word in context also manifests itself as intonational independence can be found in [Karel] Toman's [1877–1946, a modern poet] verse. The foregrounding of intonation as an uninterrupted melodic line is thus linked to the semantic "emptiness" for which the Lumír Group has been criticized by the younger generation as being "verbalistic". – In addition to the practical impossibility of the foregrounding of all components, it can also be pointed out that the simultaneous foregrounding of all the components of a work of poetry is unthinkable. This is because the foregrounding of a component implies precisely its being placed in the foreground; the unit in the foreground, however, occupies this position by comparison with another unit or units that remain in the background. A simultaneous general foregrounding would thus bring all the components into the same plane and so become a new automatization.

The devices by which poetic language achieves its maximum of foregrounding must therefore be sought elsewhere than in the quantity of foregrounded components. They consist in the consistency and systematic character of foregrounding. The consistency manifests itself in the fact that the reshaping of the foregrounded component within a given work occurs in a stable direction; thus, the deautomatization of meanings in a certain work is consistently carried out by lexical selection (the mutual interlarding of contrasting areas of the lexicon), in another equally consistently by the uncommon semantic relationship of words close together in the context. Both procedures result in a foregrounding of meaning, but differently for each. The systematic foregrounding of components in a work of poetry consists in the gradation of the interrelationships of these components, that is, in their mutual subordination and superordination. The component highest in the hierarchy becomes the dominant. All other components, foregrounded or not, as well as their interrelationships, are evaluated from the standpoint of the dominant. The dominant is that component of the work which sets in motion, and gives direction to, the relationships of all other components. The material of a work of poetry is intertwined with the interrelationships of the components even if it is in a completely unforegrounded state. Thus, there is always present, in communicative speech as well, the potential relationship between intonation and meaning, syntax, word order, or the relationship of the word as a meaningful unit to the phonetic structure of the text, to the lexical selection found in the text, to other words as units of meaning in the context of the same sentence. It can be said that each linguistic component is linked directly or indirectly, by means of these multiple interrelationships, in some way to every other component. In communicative speech these relationships are for the most part merely potential, because attention is not called to their presence and to their mutual relationship. It is, however, enough to disturb the equilibrium of this system at some point and the entire network of relationships is slanted in a certain direction and follows it in its internal organization: tension arises in one portion of this network (by consistent unidirectional foregrounding), while the remaining portions of the network are relaxed (by automatization perceived as an intentionally arranged background). This internal organization of relationships will be different in terms of the point affected, that is, in terms, of the dominant. More concretely: sometimes intonation will be governed by meaning (by various procedures), sometimes, on the other hand, the meaning structure will be determined by intonation; sometimes again, the relationship of a word to the lexicon may be foregrounded, then again its relationship to the phonetic structure of the text. Which of the possible relationships will be foregrounded, which will remain automatized, and what will be the direction of foregrounding whether from component A to component B or vice versa, all this depends on the dominant.

The dominant thus creates the unity of the work of poetry. It is, of course, a unity of its own kind, the nature of which in esthetics is usually designated as "unity in variety", a dynamic unity in which we at the same time perceive harmony and disharmony, convergence and divergence. The convergence is given by the trend towards the dominant,

the divergence by the resistance of the unmoving background of unforegrounded components against this trend. Components may appear unforegrounded from the standpoint of the standard language, or from the standpoint of the poetic canon, that is, the set of firm and stable norms into which the structure of a preceding school of poetry has dissolved by automatization, when it is no longer perceived as an indivisible and undissociable whole. In other words, it is possible in some cases for a component which is foregrounded in terms of the norms of the standard, not to be foregrounded in a certain work because it is in accord with the automatized poetic canon. Every work of poetry is perceived against the background of a certain tradition, that is, of some automatized canon with regard to which it constitutes a distortion. The outward manifestation of this automatization is the ease with which creation is possible in terms of this canon, the proliferation of epigones, the liking for obsolescent poetry in circles not close to literature. Proof of the intensity with which a new trend in poetry is perceived as a distortion of the traditional canon is the negative attitude of conservative criticism which considers deliberate deviations from the canon errors against the very essence of poetry.

The background which we perceive behind the work of poetry as consisting of the unforegrounded components resisting foregrounding is thus dual: the norm of the standard language and the traditional esthetic canon. Both backgrounds are always potentially present, though one of them will predominate in the concrete case. In periods of powerful foregrounding of linguistic elements, the background of the norm of the standard predominates, while in periods of moderate foregrounding, that of the traditional canon. If the latter has strongly distorted the norm of the standard, then its moderate distortion may, in turn, constitute a renewal of the norm of the standard, and this precisely because of its moderation. The mutual relationships of the components of the work of poetry, both foregrounded and unforegrounded, constitute its *structure*, a dynamic structure including both convergence and divergence and one that constitutes an undissociable artistic whole, since each of its components has its value precisely in terms of its relation to the totality.

It is thus obvious that the possibility of distorting the norm of the standard, if we henceforth limit ourselves to this particular background of foregrounding, is indispensable to poetry. Without it, there would be no poetry. To criticize the deviations from the norm of the standard as faults, especially in a period which, like the present, tends towards a powerful foregrounding of linguistic components, means to reject poetry. It could be countered that in some works of poetry, or rather in some genres, only the "content" (subject matter) is foregrounded, so that the above remarks do not concern them. To this it must be noted that in a work of poetry of any genre there is no fixed border, nor, in a certain sense, any essential difference between the language and the subject matter. The subject matter of a work of poetry cannot be judged by its relationship to the extralinguistic reality entering into the work; it is rather a component of the semantic side of the work (we do not want to assert, of course, that its relationship to reality cannot become a factor of its structure, as for instance in realism). The proof of this statement could be

given rather extensively; let us, however, limit ourselves to the most important point: the question of truthfulness does not apply in regard to the subject matter of a work of poetry, nor does it even make sense. Even if we posed the question and answered it positively or negatively as the case may be, the question has no bearing on the artistic value of the work, it can only serve to determine the extent to which the work has documentary value. If in some work of poetry there is emphasis on the question of truthfulness (as in [Vladislav] Vančura's [1891–1942, a modern author] short story *Dobrá míra* [The Good Measure]), this emphasis only serves the purpose of giving the subject matter a certain semantic coloration. The status of subject matter is entirely different in case of communicative speech. There, a certain relationship of the subject matter to reality is an important value, a necessary prerequisite. Thus, in the case of a newspaper report the question whether a certain event has occurred or not is obviously of basic significance.

The subject matter of a work of poetry is thus its largest semantic unit. In terms of being meaning, it has certain properties which are not directly based on the linguistic sign, but are linked to it insofar as the latter is a general semiological unit (especially its independence of any specific signs, or sets of signs, so that the same subject matter may without basic changes be rendered by different linguistic devices, or even transposed into a different set of signs altogether, as in the transposition of subject matter from one art form to another), but this difference in properties does not affect the semantic character of the subject matter. It thus holds, even for works and genres of poetry in which the subject matter is the dominant, that the latter is not the “equivalent” of a reality to be expressed by the work as effectively (for instance, as truthfully) as possible, but that it is a part of the structure, is governed by its laws, and is evaluated in terms of its relationship to it. If this is the case, then it holds for the novel as well as for the lyrical poem that to deny a work of poetry the right to violate the norm of the standard is equivalent to the negation of poetry. It cannot be said of the novel that here the linguistic elements are the esthetically indifferent expression of content, not even if they appear to be completely devoid of foregrounding: the structure is the total of all the components, and its dynamics arises precisely from the tension between the foregrounded and unforegrounded components. There are, incidentally, many novels and short stories in which the linguistic components are clearly foregrounded. Changes effected in the interest of correct language would thus, even in the case of prose, often interfere with the very essence of the work; this would, for instance, happen if the author or even translator decided, as was asked in *Naše řeč*, to eliminate “superfluous” relative clauses.

There still remains the problem of *esthetic values* in language outside of the realm of poetry. A recent Czech opinion has it that “esthetic evaluation must be excluded from language, since there is no place where it can be applied. It is useful and necessary for judging style, but not language” (J. Haller, *Problém jazykové správnosti* (The Problem of Correct Language), *Výroční zpráva č. st. ref. real. gymnasia v Ústí nad Labem za r. 1930–31*, p. 23). I am leaving aside the criticism of the terminologically inaccurate opposition of style and language; but I do want to point out, in opposition to Haller's thesis, that

esthetic valuation is a very important factor in the formation of the norm of the standard; on the one hand because the conscious refinement of the language cannot do without it, on the other hand because it sometimes, in part, determines the development of the norm of the standard.

Let us start with a general discussion of the field of esthetic phenomena. It is clear that this field by far exceeds the confines of the arts. Dessoir says about it: “The striving for beauty need not be limited in its manifestation to the specific forms of the arts. The esthetic needs are, on the contrary, so potent that they affect *almost all* the acts of man.”² If the area of esthetic phenomena is indeed so broad, it becomes obvious that esthetic valuation has its place beyond the confines of the arts; we can cite as examples the esthetic factors in sexual selection, fashion, the social amenities, the culinary arts, etc. There is, of course, a difference between esthetic valuation in the arts and outside of art. In the arts, esthetic valuation necessarily stands highest in the hierarchy of the values contained in the work, whereas outside of art its position vacillates and is usually subordinate. Furthermore, in the arts we evaluate each component in terms of the structure of the work in question, and the yardstick is in each individual case determined by the function of the component within the structure. Outside of art, the various components of the phenomenon to be evaluated are not integrated into an esthetic structure and the yardstick becomes the established norm that applies to the component in question, wherever the latter occurs. If, then, the area of esthetic valuation is so broad that it includes “almost all of the acts of man,” it is indeed not very probable that language would be exempt from esthetic valuation; in other words, that its use would not be subject to the laws of taste. There is direct proof that esthetic valuation is one of the basic criteria of purism, and that even the development of the norm of the standard cannot be imagined without it.

[...]

Esthetic valuation clearly has its indispensable place in the refinement of language, and those purists who deny its validity are unconsciously passing judgment on their own practice. Without an esthetic point of view, no other form of the cultivation of good language is possible, even one much more efficient than purism. This does not mean that he who intends to cultivate good language has the right to judge language in line with his personal taste, as is done precisely by the purists. Such an intervention into the development of the standard language is efficient and purposeful only in periods when the conscious esthetic valuation of phenomena has become a social fact — as was the case in France in the 17th century. In other periods, including the present, the esthetic point of view has more of a regulatory function in the cultivation of good language: he who is active in the cultivation of good language must take care not to force upon the standard language, in the name of correct language, modes of expression that violate the esthetic canon (set of norms) given in the language implicitly, but objectively; intervention without heed to the esthetic norms hampers, rather than advances, the development of the language. The esthetic canon, which differs not only from language to language, but also for different developmental periods of the same language (not counting in this context other functional

formations of which each has its own esthetic canon), must therefore be ascertained by scientific investigation and be described as accurately as possible. This is the reason for the considerable significance of the question of the manner in which esthetic valuation influences the development of the norm of the standard. Let us first consider the manner in which the lexicon of the standard language is increased and renewed. Words originating in slang, dialects, or foreign languages, are, as we know from our own experience, often taken over because of their novelty and uncommonness, that is, for purposes of foregrounding in which esthetic valuation always plays a significant part. Words of the poetic language, poetic neologisms, can also enter the standard by this route, although in these cases we can also be dealing with acceptance for reasons of communication (need for a new shade of meaning). The influence of poetic language on the standard is, however, not limited to the vocabulary: intonational and syntactic patterns (clichés) can, for instance, also be taken over — the latter only for esthetic reasons since there is hardly any communicative necessity for a change of the sentence and intonation structure current until then. Very interesting in this respect is the observation by the poet J. Cocteau in his book *Le secret professionnel* (Paris, 1922, p. 36) that “Stéphane Mallarmé even now influences the style of the daily press without the journalists’ being aware of it.” By way of explanation it must be pointed out that Mallarmé has very violently distorted French syntax and word order which is incomparably more bound in French than in Czech, being a grammatical factor. In spite of this intensive distortion, or perhaps because of it, Mallarmé influenced the development of the structure of the sentence in the standard language.

The effect of esthetic valuation on the development of the norm of the standard is undeniable; this is why the problem deserves the attention of the theorists. So far, we have, for instance, hardly even any lexical studies of the acceptance of poetic neologisms in Czech and of the reasons for this acceptance; [Antonin] Frinta’s article *Rukopisné podvrhy a naše spisovná řeč* [The Fake Manuscripts (Václav Hanka’s forgeries of purportedly Old Czech poetry, 1813, 1817) and our Standard Language] (*Naše řeč*, vol. II) has remained an isolated attempt. It is also necessary to investigate the nature and range of esthetic valuation in the standard language. Esthetic valuation is based here, as always when it is not based on an artistic structure, on certain generally valid norms. In art, including poetry, each component is evaluated in relation to the structure. The problem in evaluating is to determine how and to what extent a given component fulfils the function proper to it in the total structure; the yardstick is given by the context of a given structure and does not apply to any other context. The proof lies in the fact that a certain component may by itself be perceived as a negative value in terms of the pertinent esthetic norm, if its distortional character is very prominent, but may be evaluated positively in terms of a particular structure and as its essential component precisely because of this distortional character. There is no esthetic structure outside of poetry, none in the standard language (nor in language in general). There is, however, a certain set of esthetic norms, each of which applies independently to a certain component of language. This set, or canon, is constant only for a certain linguistic milieu; thus, the esthetic canon of the standard is different from that

of slang. We therefore need a description and characterization of the esthetic canon of the standard language of today and of the development of this canon in the past. It is, of course, clear to begin with that this development is not independent of the changing structures in the art of poetry. The discovery and investigation of the esthetic canon accepted for a certain standard language would not only have theoretical significance as a part of its history, but also, as has already been said, be of practical importance in its cultivation.

Let us now return to the main topic of our study and attempt to draw some conclusions from what was said above of the relationship between the standard and poetic language.

Poetic language is a different form of language with a different function from that of the standard. It is therefore equally unjustified to call all poets, without exception, creators of the standard language as it is to make them responsible for its present state. This is not to deny the possibility of utilizing poetry as data for the scientific description of the norm of the standard (cf. p. 165), nor the fact that the development of the norm of the standard does not occur uninfluenced by poetry. The distortion of the norm of the standard is, however, of the very essence of poetry, and it is therefore improper to ask poetic language to abide by this norm. This was clearly formulated as early as 1913 by Ferdinand Brunot (*L'autorité en matière de langage, Die neueren Sprachen*, vol. XX): "Modern art, individualistic in essence, cannot always and everywhere be satisfied with the standard language alone. The laws governing the usual communication of thought must not, lest it be unbearable tyranny, be categorically imposed upon the poet who, beyond the bounds of the accepted forms of language, may find personalized forms of intuitive expression. It is up to him to use them in accord with his creative intuition and without other limits than those imposed by his own inspiration. Public opinion will give the final verdict." It is interesting to compare Brunot's statement to one of Haller's of 1931 (*Problém jazykové správnosti*, op. cit. 3): "Our writers and poets in their creative effort attempt to replace the thorough knowledge of the material of the language by some sort of imaginary ability of which they themselves are not too sincerely convinced. They lay claim to a right which can but be an unjust privilege. Such an ability, instinct, inspiration, or what have you, cannot exist in and of itself; just as the famous feel for the language, it can only be the final result of previous cognition, and without consciously leaning on the finished material of the language, it is no more certain than any other arbitrary act." If we compare Brunot's statement to Haller's, the basic difference is clear without further comment. Let us also mention Jungmann's critique of Polák's *Vznešenost přírody* [The Sublimity of Nature] cited elsewhere in this study (see above); Jungmann has there quite accurately pointed out as a characteristic feature of poetic language its "uncommonness," that is, its distortedness. – In spite of all that has been said here, the condition of the norm of the standard language is not without its significance to poetry, since the norm of the standard is precisely the background against which the structure of the work of poetry is projected, and in regard to which it is perceived as a distortion; the structure of a work of poetry can change completely from its origin if it is, after a certain time, projected against the background of a norm of the standard which has since changed.

In addition to the relationship of the norm of the standard to poetry, there is also the opposite relationship, that of poetry to the norm of the standard. We have already spoken of the influence of poetic language on the development of the standard; some remarks remain to be added. First of all, it is worth mentioning that the poetic foregrounding of linguistic phenomena, since it is its own purpose, cannot have the purpose of creating new means of communication (as Vossler and his school think). If anything passes from poetic language into the standard, it becomes a loan in the same way as anything taken over by the standard from any other linguistic milieu; even the motivation of the borrowing may be the same: a loan from poetic language may likewise be taken over for extra-esthetic, that is, communicative reasons, and conversely the motivation for borrowings from other functional dialects, such as slang, may be esthetic. Borrowings from poetic language are beyond the scope of the poet's intent. Thus, poetic neologisms arise as intentionally esthetic new formations, and their basic features are unexpectedness, unusualness, and uniqueness. Neologisms created for communicative purposes, on the other hand, tend towards common derivation patterns and easy classifiability in a certain lexical category; these are the properties allowing for their general usability. If, however, poetic neologisms were formed in view of their general usability, their esthetic function would be endangered thereby; they are, therefore, formed in an unusual manner, with considerable violence to the language, as regards both form and meaning.

[...]

The relationship between poetic language and the standard, their mutual approximation or increasing distance, changes from period to period. But even within the same period, and with the same norm of the standard, this relationship need not be the same for all poets. There are, generally speaking, three possibilities: the writer, say a novelist, may either not distort the linguistic components of his work at all (but this nondistortion is, as was shown above, in itself a fact of the total structure of his work), or he may distort it, but subordinate the linguistic distortion to the subject matter by giving substandard colour to his lexicon in order to characterize personages and situations, for instance; or finally, he may distort the linguistic components in and of themselves by either subordinating the subject matter to the linguistic deformation, or emphasizing the contrast between the subject matter and its linguistic expression. An example of the first possibility might be [Jakub Arbes [1840–1914, an early naturalist], of the second, some realistic novelists such as T. Nováková [1853–1912] or Z. Winter [1846–1912], of the third, [Vladislav] Vančura. It is obvious that as one goes from the first possibility to the third the divergence between poetic language and the standard increases. This classification has of course been highly schematized for purposes of simplicity; the real situation is much more complex.

The problem of the relationship between the standard and poetic language does not, however, exhaust the significance of poetry as the art form which uses language as its material, for the standard language, or for the language of a nation in general. The very existence of poetry in a certain language has fundamental importance for this language. [...]

By the very fact of foregrounding, poetry increases and refines the ability to handle language in general; it gives the language the ability to adjust more flexibly to new requirements and it gives it a richer differentiation of its means of expression. Foregrounding brings to the surface and before the eyes of the observer even such linguistic phenomena as remain quite covert in communicative speech, although they are important factors in language. Thus, for instance, Czech symbolism, especially O. Březina's [1868–1929] poetry, has brought to the fore of linguistic consciousness the essence of sentence meaning and the dynamic nature of sentence construction. From the standpoint of communicative speech, the meaning of a sentence appears as the total of the gradually accumulated meanings of the individual words, that is, without having independent existence. The real nature of the phenomenon is covered up by the automatization of the semantic design of the sentence. Words and sentences appear to follow each other with obvious necessity, as determined only by the nature of the message. Then there appears a work of poetry in which the relationship between the meanings of the individual words and the subject matter of the sentence has been foregrounded. The words here do not succeed each other naturally and inconspicuously, but within the sentence there occur semantic jumps, breaks, which are not conditioned by the requirements of communication, but given in the language itself. The device for achieving these sudden breaks is the constant intersection of the plane of basic meaning with the plane of figurative and metaphorical meaning; some words are for a certain part of the context to be understood in their figurative meaning, in other parts in their basic meaning, and such words, carrying a dual meaning, are precisely the points at which there are semantic breaks. There is also foregrounding of the relationship between the subject matter of the sentence and the words as well as of the semantic interrelationships of the words in the sentence. The subject matter of the sentence then appears as the centre of attraction given from the beginning of the sentence, the effect of the subject matter on the words and of the words on the subject matter is revealed, and the determining force can be felt with which every word affects every other. The sentence comes alive before the eyes of the speech community: the structure is revealed as a concert of forces. (What was here formulated discursively, must of course be imagined as an unformulated intuitive cognition stored away for the future in the consciousness of the speech community.) Examples can be multiplied at will, but we shall cite no more. We wanted to give evidence for the statement that the main importance of poetry for language lies in the fact that it is an art. [...]

Notes

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- ¹ It is important to note that Polák himself in lexical notes to his poem clearly distinguishes little known words (including obvious neologisms and new loans) from those which he used “for better poetic expression”, that is, as is shown by the evidence, from poetic neologisms.
- ² M. Dessoir: *Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, Stuttgart, 1906, p. 112.

Comprehension questions

1. What is the relationship between the standard and poetic language?
2. What is the relationship between the degree of stabilization of the norm and the potential for its violation?
3. In what sense does Mukařovský use the concept of “structure”?
4. What is the differential status of subject matter in poetry and in communicative speech?