

COMMEMORATING PROFESSOR BOHUMIL TRNKA

Jiří Nosek (Prague)

On February 14th, 1984, Professor Bohumil Trnka, Ph.D., DrSc., died at the age of 88 as the consequence of a street accident. Professor Trnka served for 50 years at the Faculty of Philosophy, Charles University, Prague, working in the fields of English language and older English literature, as the oldest pupil of Professor Vilém Mathesius. Following his university teacher, Prof. Trnka evolved linguistic theories following the tenets of the Prague Linguistic Circle. The Circle's conception was language as a system of lesser subsystems, viz. the plane of phonology, morphology, syntax and utterance, an idea that the structural units of language are composed of linguistic traits or features, whose summation is not the mechanical sum of its parts. The starting point of the functional structural theory was the phoneme, a speech sound capable of distinguishing words, and of being broken down into distinctive features. The phonemes enter into binary oppositions to constitute the plane of phonology. Language is regarded as a complex communicative sign system incorporating units standing for slices of extra-lingual reality or the real world.

B. Trnka produced the first phonological description of modern English, published in 1935 in Prague, revised and re-published in 1966 in Tokyo. The book has gained him international recognition and renown.

In the post-war years, Prof. Trnka proceeded to the analysis of the bilateral (i. e. meaning carrying) planes of language. In 1954, he published a new theory of the parts of speech as units of morphological features, e. g. a modern English noun is a unit consisting of the morphological features of number, countability and case, whereas the verb consists of the features of tense, voice, aspect and mood. The parts of speech differ from each other through the sums of their features.

After the extinction of the Prague Linguistic Circle in 1951, Prof. Trnka founded a working group for functional linguistics within the Circle of Modern Philology, a learned association affiliated with the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, Prague. The group continued to elaborate the structuralist tenets of the pre-war Circle and published an article in Russian on Prague structural linguistics in 1957 in the Soviet journal *Voprosy jazykoznanija*, vol. 6, No. 3, pp. 44-52, and an English version appeared in 1958 in the Czechoslovak journal *Philologica Pragensia*, vol. 1, pp. 33-40. The articles were very favourably received in the learned world, and reprinted in many other anthologies and introductions to general linguistics.

Prof. Trnka is the author of vast linguistic work devoted to all aspects of language structure, including historical phonology of English and Proto-Germanic, the theory of meaning (1967), and the structural units of language and their general relations.

B. Trnka's most important articles were gathered into one volume, *Selected Papers in Structural Linguistics*, published by Mouton (Berlin-New York-Amsterdam, 1982, in *Janua linguarum*, series maior vol. 88). Prof. Trnka also published many articles abroad, in the USSR, Japan, USA, Spain, Uruguay, Rumania, the German Democratic Republic, the Federal Republic of Germany, etc.

Prof. Trnka did not stagnate in his linguistic theories, and in the last period preceding his untimely death, he redefined some of his linguistic tenets. He regarded speech sounds as implementers of phonemes. In his view, the relation of speech sound to phoneme is not causal, the phonological system subordinates the sounds to its structural aims. He conceived the linguistic sign as a realizer of the higher plane: thus the word is a realizer of the sentence, the phoneme realizes the plane of words and morphemes. Such a relationship, however, holds only upwards, from the lower to the higher linguistic level, not in the reverse direction.

Professor Trnka was also an able organizer of scientific life. He was the co-founder and scientific secretary of the Prague Linguistic Circle, Chairman and later Honorary chairman of the Circle of Modern Philology.

His scholarly life will undoubtedly remain a source of inspiration for other linguists, present or future. He was one of the leading linguists of his time.