

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Squares, Circles and Triangulations. Roman Jakobson, the *Prague Linguistic Circle* and the Intellectual Configurations of Interwar Prague

Patrick Flack¹

Abstract: This paper offers a contextualization of the socio-intellectual and epistemological position occupied by Roman Jakobson and the *Prague Linguistic Circle* in interwar Czechoslovakia. It does so by emphasizing the systematic role of Russian and Ukrainian émigré communities, and proposing a partial reconstruction of the intellectual network in which Jakobson and the *Prague Linguistic Circle* were involved. This contextualizing effort strives to underscore how Jakobson and the *Prague Linguistic Circle* were not only the agents, in Czechoslovakia, of a major international scientific project – the development of phonology and modern linguistics –, but also the direct product of the local interactions – across the concrete urban spaces and squares of Prague – of a whole spectrum of “minor” or “national” traditions, from Russian social philosophy and Eurasianism to Austrian (Brentanian and Neo-Herbartian) psychology or Czech positivism. In particular, the paper highlights the “triangulated” nature of intellectual exchanges in Prague, which played out not only as bilateral, explicit dialogues, but also through a pattern of indirect intersections facilitated by the overlapping participation of many actors in otherwise distinct groups or circles.

Keywords: entangled intellectual history; structuralism; history of language sciences; Russian emigration

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54681/c.2024.2.1>

Between Ideology, National Traditions and International Science

Both Roman Jakobson and the *Prague Linguistic Circle* are well-known as crucial international figures in twentieth-century linguistics and, more broadly, the human and social sciences. Jakobson is an institution all to himself: in dialogue with most of his major contemporaries in linguistics (from Antoine Meillet through Louis Hjelmslev and Leonard Bloomfield, to André Martinet, Emile Benveniste or Noam Chomsky), he was also an influent

1 University of Fribourg, e-mail: patrick.flack@unifr.ch.

interlocutor for the likes of Ernst Cassirer, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes and Jacques Lacan, and was instrumental not only in the success of structural phonology and the general rise of structuralism, but also the development of fields such as semiotics,² cybernetics³ and (American) Slavic studies.⁴ As for the *Prague Linguistic Circle*, it is recognized as a foremost scientific institution of interwar Czechoslovakia and, on par with its “sister” societies in Geneva, Paris, Moscow and Copenhagen, as a key contributor to the development of modern linguistics.⁵

For all the international outlook of Jakobson and the *Prague Linguistic Circle*, or for their impact on the development of dominant theoretical paradigms such as structural linguistics and phonology, their contributions are also unmistakably tied to a specific, historical and local context – that of interwar Czechoslovakia – and, even more importantly, to a set of particular, “national” or “minor” scientific discourses. This is most obvious in the case of the *Prague Linguistic Circle*, whose very existence depended on the historically contingent presence in (or near) Prague of a string of émigré Russian and Ukrainian philologists (Jakobson, Nikolaj Trubetzkoy, Sergej Kartsevski, Petr Bogatyrev, Dmytro Chyzhevsky, etc.), and which owed its specific, diverse structure to the famously intercultural environment of the Czechoslovak state and its capital.⁶ This local inscription is even more true of Jakobson himself: as Patrick Sériot has conclusively demonstrated, the early development of phonology by Jakobson and Trubetzkoy was fundamentally conditioned by their deep attachment to the intellectual and cultural world of their fellow émigrés and in particular by their attempts to ground and legitimize their conception of language and linguistics as a type of specifically *Russian science*.⁷

2 UMBERTO ECO, The Influence of Roman Jakobson on the Development of Semiotics, in: *Roman Jakobson*, eds. C. van Schooneveld, D. Armstrong, Lisse 1977, pp. 39–58; KALEVI KULL, At the Creative Diversity of Borders, for Understanding the Structure and the Whole. Foreword, in: PATRICK SÉRIOT, *Structure and the Whole. East, West and Non-Darwinian Biology in the Origins of Structural Linguistics*, Berlin – Boston 2014, pp. ix–xi.

3 BERNARD GEOGHEGAN, *Code. From Information Theory to French Theory*, Durham 2023.

4 HENRYK BARAN, Roman Jakobson and American Slavic Studies. The First Postwar Decade, *Roczniki Humanistyczne* 7/2021, pp. 91–116.

5 ROBERT H. ROBBINS, *A Short History of Linguistics*, London 1967; SAVINA RAYNAUD, *Il Circolo Linguistico di Praga. Radici storiche e apporti teorici*, Milano 1990; LYLE CAMPBELL, The History of Linguistics, in: *The Handbook of Linguistics*, eds. M. Aronoff, J. Resnik, Oxford 2003, pp. 81–104; JOHN GOLDSMITH, BERNARD LAKS, *Battle in the Mind Fields*, Chicago 2019.

6 Cf. S. RAYNAUD, *I Circolo Linguistico di Praga*.

7 P. SÉRIOT, *Structure and the Whole*.

In historiographical terms, the obvious tension between the strongly localized, particularist and ideological origins of Jakobson and the *Prague Linguistic Circle's* theories and the later status of their central achievement, structural phonology, as an internationally recognized paradigm of “normal” science has been explained in three main ways. Prague structuralism and phonology have been portrayed respectively: as a synthetic, sublimating distillation of the intercultural spirit and of the various national traditions of interwar Czechoslovakia; as a transitory, rapidly superseded phase in the development of structural linguistics or, indeed, of modern linguistics beyond structuralism; or finally, as a serendipitous, almost chance moment in what was an almost century-long process of discovery of the functional nature of language.

The first of these explanations is best exemplified by Jindřich Toman's intimation, in *The Magic of a Common Language* (1995), that the Czech, German, Russian and Ukrainian linguists of the *Prague Linguistic Circle* managed to find a *common language*, which overcame their cultural and national differences in the service of a universal, explicitly scientific approach to their object of study.⁸ In this view, the local embeddedness and the national ideologies of the Prague linguists, and in particular Jakobson or Trubetzkoy's claims to a specifically Russian science, were overcome almost “magically” by their discovery, through open-minded dialogue, of shared, cross-cultural elements (Jakobson would have spoken of “invariant features”), which then constituted the basis for a new framework that was not only common to the Prague School, but was indeed objective and general in its scope. Such an understanding of Prague as a crossroads capable of producing universal insights through the creative hybridization and transfiguration of heterogeneous, even antagonistic cultural elements echoes both the prism that is often applied to Franz Kafka and the *Prager Kreis*,⁹ as well as the rather clichéd view of Prague as a magical city (*Praga Magica*) of alchemists.¹⁰

In contrast to this highly (one might say mystically) optimistic faith in the transformative powers of the atmosphere of interwar Prague to synthesize national traditions and ideologies into scientific discourse, the most common interpretation of the historical role of Prague structuralism and phonology sees it instead merely as an intermediary, developmental stage in the crystallization

8 JINDŘICH TOMAN, *The Magic of a Common Language. Jakobson, Mathesius, Trubetzkoy, and the Prague Linguistic Circle*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1995.

9 PAUL EISNER, *Franz Kafka and Prague*, New York 1950.

10 ANGELO MARIA RIPELLINO, *Praga magica*, Paris 1993.

of both modern linguistics and general structuralism.¹¹ In this perspective, the originality of Jakobson and the *Prague Linguistic Circle* is almost completely subsumed to that of Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Foucault or Chomsky and their contributions are evaluated in terms of their impact on the master discourses of structural anthropology or literary theory, discourse analysis, and generative linguistics. In other words, the local specificity and ideological origins of the Prague contribution to linguistics and structuralism are mostly reduced to a genetic issue and thus neutralized as a strictly historiographical problem.

The third perspective on the local genesis and national inscription of Prague structuralism, defended in particular by Sériot,¹² is the one that is most explicitly attentive to the question of the tension between ideology, national traditions and science within the *Prague Linguistic Circle*, highlighting in particular the importance of *Eurasianism*. But it is also the most ambivalent as to their respective roles. On the one hand, Sériot emphasizes the constitutive importance of the ideological orientation of Jakobson's and Trubetzkoy's approaches, which are moreover not limited to their expression in Eurasianist theories, but are rooted deep in nineteenth-century German thought, from Romanticism, to Idealism and Organicism.¹³ The Pragueans' concepts of structure, function and phoneme are presented by Sériot as a slow, uncertain conquest over the ideas of totality and organism, as found in the works of Herder, Goethe, Humboldt, Schelling, as well as the philologists of the nineteenth century (Schlegel, Schleicher). In this sense, Sériot seems to intimate that the very essence of Prague structuralism and phonology *as an objective science* remained deeply conditioned by and indebted to its ideological and national origins.

On the other hand, Sériot also repeatedly suggests that Prague structuralism relied on a radical departure from preceding traditions, and that the discovery of the structure of the phoneme constituted not so much the intentional result of a wrangling with the legacy of German thought, as a chance encounter while in search of another scientific object (namely, the ontological features of the Eurasian sphere). As Sériot remarks, "searching for India, they [Jakobson

11 Cf. JONATHAN CULLER, *Structuralist Poetics. Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*, Ithaca 1975; LUBOMÍR DOLEŽEL, *Occidental Poetics. Tradition and Progress*, Lincoln 1990; FRANÇOIS DOSSE, *Histoire du structuralisme*, Vols. 1–2, Paris 1991–92; PIETER SEUREN, *Western Linguistics. An Historical Introduction*, Oxford 1998; L. CAMPBELL, *The History of Linguistics*.

12 P. SÉRIOT, *Structure and the Whole*.

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 15–17.

and Trubetzkoy] discovered America.”¹⁴ The real theoretical performance of Jakobson and Trubetzkoy, in this perspective, was thus their capacity to harness and adapt their ideological intuitions to the requirements of the pre-existing, “normal” scientific discursive framework defined by, amongst other things, institutions such as the Hague Congress (1928) or the *International Phonetic Association*. As such, Sériot’s position remains indeterminate, hesitating between seeing German thought and Eurasianism either as a fertile “soil” that fundamentally conditioned the premises and principles of Prague phonology or as a mostly contingent historical background that only played a serendipitous, transitory role in what one should rather consider, following Popper, as phonology’s initial *context of discovery*. Additionally, because of his focus on Russian actors, Sériot never really addresses the question of the multicultural dimension of the *Prague Linguistic Circle* and its obvious role as a catalyst in the transition from national ideologies to scientific theories such as structural phonology.

In short, while one finds plenty of indications that Prague structuralism and phonology owes its very make up as an internationally successful scientific theory to the particular circumstances of its emergence and formulation by Russian (and Ukrainian) émigrés in interwar Czechoslovakia, and thus to the intercultural dynamics, specific ideologies and national traditions that underlay its discovery and articulation by the Prague School, most of the existent historiography tends to emphasize the transitory, intermediary nature of this initial, localized inscription. The consensus view, indeed, favors a clear *discontinuity* between the ideological and national roots of Prague phonology and its formulation as a fundamentally objective and deterritorialized scientific theory of language. This of course fits in with a general view of the history of the language sciences that sees the emergence of modern linguistics as resulting from the replacement, as explanatory factors, of notions typical of the nineteenth century and in particular of German idealism (totality, organism, nation, the People, inner form, symbol, comparison) by an array of concepts (structure, system, sign, information, code, combinatorial transformation) that decisively shifted the emphasis of linguistics (and indeed of the entire spectrum of the human and social sciences) from a study of the origins and developments of “organic,” “national” verbal cultures, to the universal, structural or “grammatical” features of generalizable semiotic systems.¹⁵

14 P. SÉRIOT, *Structure and the Whole*, p. 258.

15 Cf. R. ROBBINS, *A Short History of Linguistics*; P. SEUREN, *Western Linguistics*; JOHN JOSEPH, *From Whitney to Chomsky. Essays in the History of American Linguistics*, Amsterdam 2002.

For all the agreement on the general path of linguistics and the role of Prague structuralism as a catalyst of its transition from nineteenth-century ideologies to twentieth-century humanities and social sciences, however, one still finds a lot of discordance or blind spots as to the effective modalities and precise implications of that transformation process. This is broadly true of the history of structural linguistics and structuralism, but especially of Prague phonology. As witnessed by the differing takes of Toman or Sériot, it is for example unclear to what extent that transformation was conscious and intentional, and whether it should be understood as a synthesis or as a break (in Kuhnian terms, as a paradigm shift). More fundamentally, voices have been raised to contest the very idea of a clear discontinuity in the emergence of structural linguistics or structuralism.¹⁶ Bernard Geoghegan, for example, has underscored how, for all its emphasis on formal, abstract systems apparently typical of the reception of structuralism in North America, the cybernetics of Wiener or Shannon & Weaver remained profoundly indebted to “humanist” concepts,¹⁷ in no small part thanks to the continued influence of European thinkers such as Jakobson. Similarly, Jessica Merrill¹⁸ has analyzed the transition of structural linguistics (including the work of Jakobson himself) towards more formal, mathematical models as a progressive dereliction and abandonment of the richer conceptions of the verbal form found in what she calls the “philological paradigm,” i.e., nineteenth-century German philologists and philosophers of language (Schlegel, Humbolt, Goethe) and their progressive modernization through psychological formalism (Steinthal, Wundt, Potebnja, Moscow Linguistic Circle).

The Prague Linguistic Circle between Unity and Diversity

Taking my cue from the tension between ideology, national traditions and universal science in interwar Prague and from the gaps in the canonical, Kuhnian narrative that finds a solution to this tension in the idea of

16 SYLVAIN AUROUX, *La question de l'origine des langues. L'historicité des sciences*, Paris 2007; JOHN JOSEPH, *Saussure*, Oxford – New York 2012; CHRISTIAN PUECH, Est-il temps de faire l'histoire des structuralismes?, *Dossiers d'HEL* 3/2013, pp. 1–12; DIDIER SAMAIN, Portrait du linguiste en jeune grammairien, *Recherches sémiotiques/Semiotic Inquiry* 1–3/2014, pp. 137–156; LORENZO CIGANA, FRANS GREGERSEN (eds.), *Structuralism as One – Structuralism as Many. Studies in Structuralisms*, Copenhagen 2022.

17 B. GEOGHEGAN, *Code*.

18 JESSICA MERRILL, *The Origins of Russian Literary Theory. Folklore, Philology, Form*, Evanston (Ill.), 2022.

a progressive, successful transformation or break from one to the other (in a broader movement away from the intellectual legacy of the nineteenth century), I would like to take this opportunity to re-examine the precise relation between various forms of scientific or intellectual discourses in interwar Prague. In particular, I would like to cast further light on the process of emergence and articulation of structural phonology within the *Prague Linguistic Circle* which, as I will argue, involved not so much a general operation of synthesis, transformation or epistemological break from clearly ideological or national types of discourse (German Idealism, Russian Eurasianism and Austrian Neo-Herbartian psychology) to the putatively objective, scientific approach of modern linguistics, but rather a multitude of successive “patching,” “stitching,” or “welding” operations between a multitude of theories and approaches – all of which possessed their own, distinct claim to scientificity as well as, even more importantly, a certain method or a least methodological project towards achieving that goal (all distinct from positivism).

There are at least two quite different ways in which one might wish to argue for a reassessment of Jakobson and the *Prague Linguistic Circle's* contribution to the establishment of the international scientific paradigm of phonology and especially of the legacy therein of their ideological and national origins. The first is simply to show and argue that the specific contribution of the Prague School was not completely or adequately adsorbed by phonology as an international scientific discourse or field. Despite the Pragueans' foundational and undisputed contribution to the establishment of phonology, it is clear that their approach was never synonymous with the field as a whole, and that many of their ideas were never received or integrated into the mainstream (e.g., Jakobson's binarism or poetic function), or were fundamentally misunderstood and neglected (e.g., functional teleology¹⁹). As such, one could understand my purpose here simply as a call to extend the share of their ideas that should be legitimately considered as relevant and possibly be reactualized, or reopened for debate in current approaches to phonology and linguistics. For the sake of clarity, that is not at all the argument that will be developed here.

Rather, in a much more “archaeological” way, it is to the very process of how Prague School phonology crystallized out of or from its (Russian, Czech, Austrian, German) national and ideological substrates to which I would like to turn my attention here. As I indeed would like to show (following the more radically historicizing strand of Sériot's argument mentioned above), Prague

19 LUDMILA LACKOVÁ, The Prague school, teleology and language as a dynamic system, *Acta Structuralica* 3/2018, pp. 105–121.

phonology was indeed very much the result of the concretization of the heritage of nineteenth-century German thought, which, crucially, happened under specific and provisory, but also incredibly auspicious and productive historical circumstances that are *themselves* of critical interest in understanding the very nature of the successful scientific models they produced. More than a new perspective on structural phonology itself, it is thus a re-evaluation of the conditions, modalities and scope of its scientificity – which, I wish to argue, relied not on a superation of national traditions and ideologies, but on their comparative confrontation in open-minded dialogue – that I will outline here. Rather than an example of a Kuhnian paradigm change, the crystallization of Prague phonology is much more a demonstration of a Feyerabendian process of competition between alternatives, in which “each single theory, each fairy tale, each myth that is part of [a] collection forcing the others into greater articulation and all of them contributing, via this process of competition, to the development of our consciousness.”²⁰

Paradoxically perhaps, the best way to re-evaluate and highlight the extent of the link of the Prague School’s scientific originality to its origins in ideological and national discourses, is to relativize its importance both as a unique actor in the actual context of interwar Czechoslovak and as a unitary, coherent contributor to structural phonology as a unified, international science. Indeed, almost all the canonical accounts of the Prague School²¹ systematically present it both as a distinct and unique interlocutor, in the Czechoslovak context, of the international network of linguistic schools and circles in Geneva, Moscow, Paris, or Copenhagen. Thereby, the Prague School is always both immediately legitimized as a participant of international linguistics and structurally contrasted with the other, merely “local” or “national” trends of thought present in Prague – a double framing that forecloses any discussion of the relation between international science and national tradition other than through a dichotomic contrast.

To be more precise, there are two distinctly relevant (and, from our perspective, limiting) aspects to this usual framing of the *Prague Linguistic Circle* in its Czechoslovak and international context. Firstly, as we saw most strikingly in the perspective defended by Toman, Prague phonology appears

20 PAUL FEYERABEND, *Against Method. Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge*, New York 1975, 30.

21 JOSEF VACHEK (ed.), *The Linguistic School of Prague. An Introduction to Its Theory and Practice*, Bloomington (Ind.) 1966; S. RAYNAUD, *Il Circolo Linguistico di Praga*; J. TOMAN, *The Magic of a Common Language*; P. SÉRIOT, *Structure and the Whole*.

as a *synthetic* theory, as the coherent distillation or systematization of the various theoretical approaches projected onto language by the participants of the *Prague Linguistic Circle*. While the diversity of these participants is fully acknowledged and even accentuated,²² it is the synthetic, common positions of the Prague School, exemplified paradigmatically by the famous *Thèses* of 1929, that are ultimately emphasized as its most significant contribution. It is thus as a singularly unified, coherent *school*, with second- and third-generation scholars, that Prague structuralism is presented. The unified, coherent dimension of Prague structuralism is moreover usually contrasted as a main point of difference with its most influent and important predecessor, the chaotic, centrifugal movement of Russian formalism.²³

On top of the thesis of the “unity in diversity” of the Prague School itself, another fundamental assumption of the perspective defended by Toman (and indeed of the canonical picture of that institution), is the uniqueness of the *Prague Linguistic Circle’s* position as an institution in the cultural and intellectual context of interwar Prague.²⁴ Whereas Prague is often defined by its divisions, for example between the Czech and German universities,²⁵ between the various literary scenes (*Prager Kreis*, Czech avant-gardes, etc.), and generally between the competing political logic of Prague’s rival “communities” or “territories,”²⁶ the *Prague Linguistic Circle* is presented as that rare institution that managed to build cultural and intellectual bridges and “ultimately succeeded in transcending the destructive character typical of a great number of East European multicultural communities.”²⁷ Crucially, in this sense, the *Prague Linguistic Circle* often appears as an exceptional institution which, despite being an almost ideal embodiment of the

22 J. TOMAN, *The Magic of a Common Language*.

23 FREDRIC JAMESON, *The Prison-House of Language. A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism*, Princeton 1972; PETER STEINER, *Russian Formalism. A Metapoetics*, Ithaca 1984; TOMÁŠ GLANC, The Russian Formalists as a Community, in: *Theoretical Schools and Circles in the Twentieth-Century Humanities*, eds. M. Grishakova, S. Salupere, London 2015, pp. 1–22.

24 CÉLINE TRAUTMANN WALLER, SERGE TCHOUGOUNNIKOV (eds.), *Petr Bogatyrev et les débuts du Cercle de Prague*, Paris 2013; GALIN TIHANOV, *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory. Regimes of Relevance in Russia and Beyond*, Oxford 2019.

25 MICHAEL GORDIN, *Einstein in Bohemia*, Princeton 2020.

26 SCOTT SPECTOR, *Prague Territories. National Conflict and Cultural Innovation in Franz Kafka’s fin de siècle*, Berkeley 2002.

27 J. TOMAN, *The Magic of a Common Language*, p. 133.

multicultural structure of interwar Prague, was not itself an integral part of that intellectual context.

As suggested, it is an almost inevitable consequence of this double characterization of the *Prague Linguistic Circle* as a particularly coherent, unified or systematic institution and as a unique, almost isolated actor that is embedded more in international networks than in its local context that its relation with national traditions and ideologies can be thought only in terms of contrast and of “external” dialogue. A given, essential difference is postulated from the outset between the “international,” scientific and coherent theories of the Prague School and its other interlocutors. Similarly, points of contacts and exchanges are always thematized in terms of bilateral dialogue. This is typically the case of both Sériot’s and Tihanov’s discussion of the ties between Eurasianism and Prague phonology, which are framed in direct contrast with each other, and in terms of the extent of the integration of Eurasianist ideas in the core of Prague phonology.

Without contesting either the ideas of a certain, even potent unity within the *Prague Linguistic Circle*, nor trying to dispute the particular, prominent position it occupied in the landscape of interwar Prague, I would suggest, however, that this characterization falls historically short on at least two counts. For one, it falls into the trap of the cliché of Prague as a fundamentally divided, almost sectarian environment, a terrain of competition between Jewish, German or Czech intellectual and artistic cultures, where examples of multicultural interactions were exceptional. Far from being unique or isolated, the *Prague Linguistic Circle* was but one of many forums of intercultural and interdisciplinary dialogue in interwar Prague. In particular, the crucial intermediary role played by Russian and Ukrainian émigrés was not limited to the *Circle* itself. As such, as I will now show in more detail that it is untenable to see the *Prague Linguistic Circle* as an isolated, unique institution in the intellectual configuration of interwar Czechoslovakia: instead, it is much better seen as a paradigmatic exemplification of a certain kind of dialogue, or even better, as an important node in a wider web of exchanges that characterized, or indeed constituted the interwar Prague intellectual milieu.

Secondly, and as a logical consequence of this much deeper embeddedness of the *Prague Linguistic Circle* in the Czechoslovak intellectual milieu, the canonical view overstates the inner coherence of the *Circle* as a school mostly closed off unto itself and structured by its own scientific goals and internal dialogues. All the members of the *Prague Linguistic Circle*, indeed, also played an active part in other formal and informal institutions. As such, the common positions achieved within the *Circle* were not only influenced and conditioned by its centripetal dynamics, but also by the cross-wind and centrifugal pull of

its members' other centers of interests. Crucially, this means that the theories of the *Circle*, rather than being shaped exclusively within the confines of that one institution and confronted there bilaterally with other views (such as Eurasianism), were open from the start to multilateral influences, to a multiplicity of discourses, which moreover were shaped by interactions and dialogues *outside of the Circle itself*.

To give here but one example both of other discussion forums and of their impact on the networks and dialogues of the *Circle*: the question of the relations between Prague phonology and Eurasianism have generally been discussed as a direct dialogue, more or less within the *Circle*, between the likes of Jakobson and Trubetzkoy on the one hand, and Eurasianists such as Piotr Savitsky or Nikolaj Alekseev on the other.²⁸ The *Circle*, however, was not the only forum in which Prague's Eurasianists participated. Alekseev, in particular, was closely involved with the so-called *Philosophical Society of the Russian Law Faculty in Prague*, which also included several important Russian neo-Kantian philosophers, such as Boris Yakovenko, Sergey Gessen, and Dmytro Chyzhevsky. In turn, Yakovenko and Gessen, rather than being involved with Russian ideology such as Eurasianism, were participants in the international networks of neo-Kantian philosophy, in particular through the journal *Logos*, in which figures such as Max Weber, Georg Simmel, Herman Cohen and Heinrich Rickert were all involved. While it is unclear how much influence Alekseev's involvement with Russian neo-Kantians in Prague had on his Eurasianist ideology, the clear distinction between an international Prague School on the one hand, and ideologically motivated, exclusively "Russian" Eurasianism, is thereby very obviously complicated – especially if one further considers that neo-Kantian philosophy was also of direct importance to Prague phonology, for example through figures such as Broder Christiansen (a crucial source of Russian Formalism), Hendrik Pos (the first philosophical interpreter of structural phonology, acknowledged by Trubetzkoy), and later Ernst Cassirer.

The Entangled Intellectual Context of Interwar Prague

As indicated above, perhaps the key mistakes in the usual characterization of the *Prague Linguistic Circle* is to see it as an institution that was exceptional in the multicultural interactions it allowed in the otherwise fundamentally

28 P. SÉRIOT, *Structure and the Whole*.

divided intellectual context of interwar Prague (or more generally of the somewhat longer period known as Prague modernism). As recent scholarship has shown,²⁹ however, Prague was also a genuinely plural space, structured by a multitude of informal groups and venues (cafés, salons, circles) that favored sustained dialogues across linguistic, political, and religious divides. Much more, the intercultural communication processes, places of dialogue and shared forms of representation through which members of Prague's communities interacted have proven to be just as important to Prague modernism as the divisions of its communities and the alienation of its actors.³⁰ While modernist Prague was indeed defined, on the one hand, by the competing attempts at self-definition and differentiation of its communities and their members, i.e., by their efforts to forge or defend *particular* identities and traditions, it was no less profoundly shaped, on the other hand, by a complex set of real-life dialogues and interactions that allowed these identities and traditions to be probed for their *universal* scope and significance *through a radical confrontation with opposing views*. The defining feature of the crisis of identity expressed by Prague modernism, in this sense, is to be found not in the singular form of alienation or "deterritorialization" of its ghettoized actors and communities, but rather in the fact that each community's project to define its own identity and formulate its traditions was constantly confronted with, and constitutively depended upon, the parallel efforts of its rivals.

This image of modernist Prague as a constellation of dialogically intersecting (rather than fragmented) political or cultural spheres underpinned by a web of concrete social exchanges is particularly useful in describing Prague's intellectual milieu. Academic Prague was indeed divided along national lines: it possessed rival Czech and German universities (*Univerzita Karlova, Karl-Ferdinand Universität*), whose members barely communicated, and to which further "national" Russian and Ukrainian universities (*Russkij narodnyj universitet, Ukrains'kyj vil'nyj universytet*) were added in the 1920s. Moreover, these institutions played a role in entrenching national intellectual traditions:

29 INES KOELTZSCH, *Geteilte Kulturen. Eine Geschichte der tschechisch-jüdisch-deutschen Beziehungen in Prag (1918–1938)*, München 2012; PETER BECHER, STEFFEN HÖHNE, MAREK NEKULA (eds.), *Kafka und Prag. Literatur-, kultur-, sozial- und sprachhistorische Kontexte*, Weimar 2012; STEFFEN HÖHNE, ANNA-DOROTHEA LUDEWIG, JULIUS H. SCHOEPS (eds.), *Max Brod (1884–1968). Die Erfindung des Prager Kreises*, Köln 2016.

30 IRINA WUTSDORFF, ŠTĚPÁN ZBYTOVSKÝ (eds.), Übersetzen. Praktiken kulturellen Transfers am Beispiel Prags, *Zeitschrift für Interkulturelle Germanistik* 2/2014; MANFRED WEINBERG, IRINA WUTSDORFF, ŠTĚPÁN ZBYTOVSKÝ (eds.), *Prager Moderne(n). Interkulturelle Perspektiven auf Raum, Identität und Literatur*, Bielefeld 2018.

German-speaking scholars remained dedicated to Herbartism, the “official philosophy” of the Austro-Hungarian Empire,³¹ the Czechs turned to Masaryk’s positivism,³² while Russian émigrés brought their own religious philosophy and brand of neo-Kantianism.³³

At the same time, many Prague intellectuals engaged individually in forums and in a multiplicity of dialogues that transcended language, nationality, or discipline. The *Prague Linguistic Circle*, an institution presented, by its members and its historiographers alike,³⁴ as “symbiotic,” “intercultural” and “interdisciplinary” is of course the most obvious example. But this was not the only such dialogue: research on the tradition of formalist aesthetics³⁵ has shown not only that it relied on close collaborations between German-speaking and Czech scholars, but that the mediating role of the latter was instrumental in transposing this “Austrian” Herbartian tradition into a wider European setting.³⁶ And in fact, examples of dialogues can be multiplied to the extent that the apparently segregated intellectual (and artistic) milieu of modernist Prague appear as a single network of mutual, criss-crossed exchanges. Both Kafka himself (briefly) and Brod attended the *Brentano Circle* [*Brentano-Kreis*], a group of followers of Franz Brentano and Anton Marty, as well as the *Fanta Circle* [*Fanta-Kreis*], the “soirées” of the feminist Berta Fanta;³⁷ other guests of the *Fanta Circle* included Albert Einstein and Rudolf Steiner;³⁸ in turn, core members of the *Brentano Circle*, in particular the philosophers Emil Utitz (a classmate of Kafka) and Oskar Kraus, along with Czech participants such as Jan Patočka, later founded the *Prague Philosophical Circle* [*Cercle philosophique de Prague*], a group of phenomenologists and Brentanians

31 CAROLE MAIGNÉ, *Herbartism in Austrian Philosophy*, Berlin 2021.

32 LUBOMÍR NOVÝ, *Filosof T. G. Masaryk. Problémové skici*, Praha 1994.

33 NINA DMITRIEVA, *Russkoe neokantianstvo. „Marburg“ v Rossii. Istoriko-filosofskie ocherki*, Moskva 2007.

34 VILÉM MATHESIUS, Deset let pražského lingvistického kroužku, *Slovo a slovesnost* 2/1936, pp. 137–145; J. VACHEK, *The Linguistic School of Prague*; KVĚTOSLAV CHVATÍK, *Strukturalismus a avantgarda*, Praha 1970; JACQUELINE FONTAINE, *Le cercle linguistique de Prague*, Tours 1974; S. RAYNAUD, *Il Circolo Linguistico di Praga*.

35 CAROLE MAIGNÉ, CÉLINE TRAUTMANN-WALLER (eds.), *Formalismes esthétiques et héritage herbartien. Vienne, Prague, Moscou*, Hildesheim 2009; CAROLE MAIGNÉ (ed.), *Formalisme esthétique. Prague et Vienne au XIXe siècle*, Paris 2013; INGO STÖCKMANN, *Form. Theorie und Geschichte der formalistischen Ästhetik*, Stuttgart – Bad Cannstatt 2022.

36 SERGE TCHOUGOUNNIKOV, CAROLE MAIGNÉ (eds.), *Formalisme esthétique, Revue des études slaves* 1/2014, pp. 141–147, here p. 141.

37 S. SPECTOR, *Prague Territories*, p. 17.

38 M. GORDIN, *Einstein in Bohemia*.

that was itself modeled on the *Prague Linguistic Circle*,³⁹ this patchwork of institutions extends back, in particular through Roman Jakobson, to Czech literary and artistic groups such as the *Devětsil*.⁴⁰

If it remains true that the *Prague Linguistic Circle* occupied an especially important place in this generally entangled background of intercultural and interdisciplinary exchanges, it is thus not as an isolated example of such exchanges, but as perhaps their most intense point of crystallization, as an integral, central node of the overall network. That role, moreover, was made possible not only by the fact that many prominent figures of the Prague milieu (or beyond that of European science, e.g. Edmund Husserl, Rudolf Carnap, Karl Bühler) were noted guests within the *Circle*, but because they actively participated or created in the diverse forums around the *Circle*, consolidated both the imbrication of the *Circle* in the Prague context, and densified the exchanges in the network overall. This activity and its effect is particularly visible and was most intense through the Russian and Ukrainian members of the *Circle*, and their involvement in the communities and circles of the Russian and Ukrainian emigration in Prague.

It is neither possible nor necessary here to systematically reconstruct the Russian and Ukrainian intellectual émigré communities, which were very extensive (interwar Prague was dubbed the “Russian Oxford”⁴¹) and consisted both of formal institutions, such as the *Russian Law Faculty* directly supported by the Czechoslovakian state, and a multitude of informal forums. I propose here to list a mere half-dozen groups around the *Prague Linguistic Circle*, which provide both an excellent and somewhat exhaustive of the variety of intellectual projects around the *Circle* and can provide an initial basis for a better understanding of the intellectual dynamics that formed the development of the Prague School’s phonology.

1. The first group, which is the only one to have been extensively studied – whether or not through its link with the *Prague Linguistic Circle*, is of course the circles of Eurasianist thinkers. Centered around figures such as Petr Savitsky, Nikolaj Alekseev and of course Roman Jakobson and

39 HANS RAINER SEPP, Patočka und der Cercle philosophique de Prague, in: Jan Patočka, *Texte, Dokumente, Bibliographie*, eds. L. Hagedorn, H. R. Sepp, Freiburg – München – Prague 1999, pp. 176–257.

40 K. CHVATÍK, *Strukturalismus a avantgarda*; JANETTE FABIAN, *Poetismus. Ästhetische Theorie und künstlerische Praxis der tschechischen Avantgarde*, München 2013.

41 ZDENĚK SLÁDEK, Prague. Das „russische Oxford,“ in: *Der grosse Exodus. Die russische Emigration und ihre Zentren 1917 bis 1941*, ed. K. Schlögel, München 1994, pp. 218–233; IVAN SAVITSKIY, Nachalo russkoy akcii, *Novyj žurnal* 251/2008, pp. 133–178, here p. 133.

Nikolaj Trubetzkoy, the Eurasianists were a well-organized movement, with antennas in other Russian centers of emigration such as Paris and Berlin. Their theories were undoubtedly an example of the most important and specific intellectual production of interwar Russian emigration, with an impact to this day on Russian ideological discourse.

2. A conspicuous feature of the Russian émigré intellectual community in Prague – albeit one which, to date, has received no specific attention –, is the significant presence in its midst of a strong cohort of philosophers directly affiliated with or closely related to neo-Kantianism. This Russian (and Ukrainian) neo-Kantian delegation in Prague was both numerous and qualitative, including important figures such as Pavel Novgorodtsev (1866–1924), Boris Yakovenko (1884–1949), Sergey Gessen (1887–1950), Nikolai Alekseev (1879–1964), as well as, less directly Dmytro Chyzhevsky (1894–1977) and Ivan Mirchuk (1891–1961). Most neo-Kantians communicated directly in the *Philosophical Society*. They were also institutionally relevant and well-connected: Novgorodtsev, for instance, was the founder and dean of the Russian Faculty of Law in Prague – the Russian émigré community’s most prestigious higher education institution –; his student Alekseev became a leading thinker of the Eurasianist movement; and Yakovenko and Gessen, thanks in part to their previous work as co-editors (with Fedor Stepun) of the Russian version of *Logos*, enjoyed strong relations with prominent neo-Kantian philosophers in both Germany and Italy.
3. Another relevant émigré institution is the *Dostoevsky Society*, organized in particular by Alfred Bém and Dmytro Chyzhevsky. Very close to the *Prague Linguistic Circle*, it was also open to Czech and German writers and literary theorists, such as Max Brod, and constituted a platform for discussion less specifically defined by the “formalist” orientation of the Prague School. The work of Dostoevsky itself served as a common analytical base for thinkers such as Jan Patočka, Tomáš Masaryk, Václav Černý, as well as Bém, Chyzhevsky or Yakovenko to develop reflections, e.g. on the theme of Titanism.⁴²
4. The *Cercle philosophique de Prague* also needs to be mentioned here. The involvement of Russian émigrés is more limited, but was nonetheless very real thanks in particular to the intense contacts between one of the *Cercle’s* main animators, Jan Patočka, and figures such as Chyzhevsky, Gessen or

42 Cf. PETRA JAMES, The Myth of Faust, “Titanism”, and the Religious Topic of the Selling of the Soul in the Cultural Writings of Jan Patočka, *Religions* 7/2021, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12070528>.

Lossky. The *Cercle* is important in particular because, as was the case in the *Circle*, it brings together the more idealistic traditions of Russian thought (neo-Kantianism, Formalism, Religious philosophy) in contact with Czech positivism and in particular Brentanism (represented in the *Cercle* by Mathesius).

- 5. Finally, one can mention the fact that most of the Russian philosophers had been invited to Prague directly by Tomáš Masaryk and were deeply involved in Czechoslovak philosophical circles, including with Masaryk himself (Yakovenko, *Der russische Gedanke*), Jan Patočka (Chyzhevsky, Gessen, Lossky), and Ferdinand Pelikán and his journal *Ruch filozofický* (Yakovenko, Lapshin, etc.).

Multilateral Dialogue and the Return to Naturalism

Based on the groups and interactions enumerated above, one can attempt to visually represent the network of intellectual exchanges in which the *Prague Linguistic Circle* was inscribed as a series of overlapping circles:



Despite being highly schematic and far from exhaustive (in particular, it lacks the interactions with Herbartian formalist aesthetics and with the Brentano school), this diagram reveals a number of features that are absent from the canonical accounts of the *Circle* and its role as a synthetic catalyst of national discourses into the scientific idiom of phonology.

Most obviously, it visually confirms one of the central theses defended so far, namely that the *Prague Linguistic Circle* was only a node in a wider network of exchanges, in which it did not occupy a central, gatekeeping place. Many of the productive exchanges that characterize interwar Prague, for example the collaboration of Russian philosophers and Czech positivists (whether through their exchanges with Patočka, their involvement with the journals *Ruch filozofický* or *Der russische Gedanke* or directly with Masaryk) were not mediated in any significant way by the *Prague Linguistic Circle*. Indeed, the *Circle* does not seem to have constituted a unique, limiting pole for its own members, including the most influential: Jakobson, Trubetzkoy, Chyžhevsky and Mukařovský all appear not in the center of a circle, but at the intersection with other traditions (Eurasianism, Czech positivism, phenomenology, etc.). Interestingly, no other institution or figure (e.g. Charles University, Masaryk himself, or Patočka) seems to have played that role, resulting in a decentralized network of overlapping yet not completely concurring interests.

This general observation as to the diffuse position of Jakobson and the *Prague Linguistic Circle* in a horizontal milieu where they were but one of several significant interlocutors or actors, is confirmed by the wider, international standing of the other circles pictured above. Far from being purely local phenomena, almost all the circles enumerated here had an international dimension and impact. This is clear in the case of Eurasianism, which was an influential discourse beyond Prague, in particular in Paris, where it conditioned the whole intellectual configuration of Russia émigré life.⁴³ The international, European dimension of neo-Kantian philosophy, if somewhat on the wane since the mid-1920s has already been mentioned and is beyond doubt.⁴⁴ Patočka and the *Cercle philosophique* were crucial figures in the European development of phenomenology, publishing for example Husserl's last text, the famous *Crises of the European Sciences*, and helping to set up the future Husserl Archives in Leuven.⁴⁵

Crucially, one can note that most of the main discursive formations typical of interwar Prague and involved in the network of the *Prague Linguistic Circle* and

43 MARC RAEFF, *Russia Abroad. A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration, 1919–1939*, Oxford 1990; LEONID LIVAK, *How It Was Done in Paris. Russian Émigré Literature and French Modernism*, Madison 2003.

44 KLAUS CHRISTIAN KÖHNKE, *Entstehung und Aufstieg des Neukantianismus. Die deutsche Universitätsphilosophie zwischen Idealismus und Positivismus*, Frankfurt am Main 1986; NIKOLAJ PLOTNIKOV (ed.), *“Logos” v istorii evropejskoj filosofii. Proekt i pamjatnik*, Moskva 2005.

45 REINHARD MEHRING, *Philosophie im Exil. Emil Utitz, Arthur Liebert und die Exilzeitschrift “Philosophia.”* Würzburg 2018.

its Russian and Ukrainian émigrés – namely Eurasianism, neo-Kantianism, phenomenology, the Brentano School, and formalist aesthetics –, were not resorbed by structural phonology and structuralism, but persisted well into the post-war era as distinct intellectual paradigms. In other words, while there was undoubtedly a synthetic, cohesive dynamic at work that allowed the *Prague Linguistic Circle* to coalesce into a tradition that is indeed easily identifiable and had an undeniable impact and success as such, it is quite obvious that it did not do so by incorporating and overcoming the multitude of other discourses with which it was in dialogue. Quite to the contrary, one could even argue that all the Praguean trends tended to formulate their own version of structure and structuralism (Gestalt in the Brentano School, symbolic forms in neo-Kantianism, eidetic invariants in phenomenology, etc.).

A further point that is clearly highlighted by our little scheme and confirms another of our hypotheses is that the theories and horizon of the *Prague Linguistic Circle* was definitely not limited to *bilateral* dialogues. I have already mentioned the example of the triangulation of structural phonology, Eurasianism and neo-Kantianism. Yet the above schema also highlights the existence of further such triangular or lateral dialogues, for example between structural linguistics, phenomenology and the Brentano School (Patočka, Mukařovský), or more surprisingly, between the Brentano School, neo-Kantianism and Czech positivism (Yakovenko, Chyzhevsky). These dialogues, moreover, were often engaged not on futile polemics or trench fights, but in the often-constructive discussion of crucial notions such as those of language, system, function, sign, value, of the forms of subjectivity or inter-subjectivity, of the methods of the human sciences or the meaning and function of literature, art and aesthetic experience.

To name but one concrete example of such a dialogue, one can take the notion of *value*, which was pervasive in modernist Prague. At the most general level, this importance of value was simply a reflection of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' crises of identity, science, language, or faith, and of the discovery of their inherently conventional nature as axiological systems. In Prague, though, value was not just a catch-all concept in a context of cultural, moral or linguistic relativism: it was often used technically, with specific aims. Many of the intellectual traditions that shaped interwar Prague involve an explicit discussion of the notion of value: it is at the heart of structural linguistics (Saussure's *Valeur*), of neo-Kantian philosophy (Rickert's and Lask's Wert and Geltung), of phenomenology (Scheler's Wertethik, Heidegger's Geltung, which is directly related to Rickert and Lask), and is present in the Brentano School (cf. Kraus's *The Theory of Value*, 1901), and Gestalt psychology (cf. Köhler's *The Place of Value in a World of Facts*, 1938). One also finds it in

works by interwar Prague intellectuals, most explicitly in Lossky's *Value and Existence* (1931) and Mukařovský's *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts* (1936), as well as in debates on the relation between positivism and transcendental philosophy (Yakovenko, Masaryk), the crisis of European science (Husserl, Patočka), Eurasianism (Jakobson, Alekseev, Trubetzkoy), the national or universal scope of Russian and German philosophy (Yakovenko, Gessen, Husserl, Chyzhevsky), philosophy of law (Novgorodtsev, Alekseev), religious philosophy (Bulgakov, Lossky, Masaryk), or the psychological or formal nature of art and aesthetic experience (Mukařovský, Utitz, O. Fischer).

In typical fashion for modernist Prague, this constellation of debates over value reflects not a unified, synthetic research program, but a network of exchanges and co-dependencies between distinct (and often unrelated) traditions. Of course, some of these bilateral exchanges are historiographically obvious and well established (the Brentano School and phenomenology, neo-Kantianism and phenomenology). Further, some less evident cases have been demonstrated more punctually (e.g. phenomenology and structuralism,⁴⁶ structuralism and Eurasianism).⁴⁷ What is suggested by the density of the exchanges just mentioned, however, is that all these bilateral dialogues were themselves co-related and that much less obvious links, such as between Eurasianism and phenomenology, or structuralism and neo-Kantianism, were also operative. A true understanding of the development logic and conceptual potential of the notion of value in each of these traditions thus requires that we take into account not just their bilateral dialogues, but the totality of their interactions in the context of modernist Prague. Conversely, the specific developments of phenomenological, Brentanian, neo-Kantian or structuralist theories of value in Prague seem to be profoundly indebted to their common, dialogical co-existence there.

Conclusion

As such, perhaps the most important, or at least the most general conclusion we can derive from our brief reconstruction of the milieu of the *Prague Linguistic Circle* is that rather than looking at it as a phase of transition – i.e., from a multitude of approaches still firmly anchored in national traditions to a “normalized” paradigm –, one should be attentive to the triangulated,

46 ELMAR HOLENSTEIN, *Roman Jakobson's Approach to Language: Phenomenological Structuralism*, Bloomington (Ind.) 1976.

47 P. SÉRIOT, *Structure and the Whole*.

polyphonic nature of the debates that structured it. The conceptual advances materialized in Prague, be it on the terrain of structural linguistics, but also in Gestalt psychology or the critical reception of Russian literature and literary theory involved not the articulation of a dominant, universal type of “scientific” discourse, but a much more pragmatic, patient and open-minded work on the correction and development of core concepts and new ideas (sign, system, form) not through the refutation of opposing positions, but a productive confrontation that sought to integrate their insights.

The fundamental, constitutive importance of this heuristic structure, I would venture, cannot merely be reduced to its dimension as a context of discovery. The ulterior, quite different developments given to structuralism, and the much more confrontative nature of its exchange with traditions with which it was a partner in Prague (phenomenology, literary hermeneutics, Gestalt psychology) are, in my view, symptomatic of the irretrievable loss of the complex context of interwar Prague, which was completely destroyed by the events of World War II. Because the Prague context was not only a series of conscious, explicit dialogues that could easily be recorded by historiography, but a diffuse network of triangulated exchanges of which its participants were not necessarily (and probably never fully) aware, the concrete loss of the intellectual circles and urban squares of Prague as pragmatic sites of exchanges can be considered as an effective factor in the ulterior transformations of its theoretical products and indeed the loss of their particularity.

Crucially, that loss, in contrast to most mainstream views, is not a function of the adaptation and “purification” of the local intellectual products of the Prague milieu in the context of a deterritorialized, international science, but a fundamental (if contingent) moment in the very process of its elaboration. As has been highlighted by a slew of recent studies,⁴⁸ the very modalities of the transfers of the intellectual heritage of Central Europe, in particular in the North American context, are not only a question of interest for historians and historiographers, but a process with grave epistemological consequences for the development of scientific discourse and paradigms in particular in the post-war era.

More radically, what the case of the Prague School and phonology seems to illustrate, is that the transition from a plurality of ideologically or nationally inclined perspectives to the neutral terrain of objective science was not itself an epistemologically grounded movement of solidification and universalization,

48 Cf. J. GOLDSMITH, B. LAKS, *Battle in the Mind Fields*; B. GEOGHEGAN, *Code*.

but rather a case of ceasing dialogue and retreating either back to the pragmatic certainties of naturalistic empiricism or to a certain eclecticism and relativism. Where the quest for the phoneme, from early nineteenth-century phonetics, through Jan Beaudouin de Courtenay, right up to its formulations by Jakobson and Trubetzkoy, is an example of a conceptual and methodological experiment in which a multitude of concepts (Gestalt, form, zone, organism) and perspectives (phenomenology, psychologism, value-theory) were confronted critically to find an answer to the crises of empirical phonetics, ulterior developments, in particular in generative linguistics, fell back upon the template of an experimental approach, where questions pertaining to the very status of the object “phoneme” were put aside, in favor of a series of operationalizable, predictable explanatory models (transformative grammar, government and binding theory, minimalist program). In this sense, the establishment of phonology as a universal, or at least dominant science (first within structural, then generative linguistics) appears not so much as a triumph, than as a pragmatic renouncement to answer the questions of the very foundations of science and the nature of its objects that had, for example, famously been raised by Husserl in his 1935 conference at the *Prague Linguistic Circle*.