

**XIAOXIA LIU,  
VILÉM MATHESIUS' THOUGHTS ON WORD ORDER:  
TOWARD A LINGUISTIC HISTORIOGRAPHY**

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Xiaoxia Liu's book is a sign of the growing interest in Prague School linguistics among Chinese linguists. Although the Prague School's principal tenets have been made accessible by Josef Vachek in three books, *Dictionnaire de linguistique de l'École de Prague*, *A Prague School Reader in Linguistics*, *The Linguistic School of Prague* (An introduction to its theory and practice),<sup>1</sup> the work of Vilém Mathesius is little known abroad, largely because most of it was written in Czech. The English translation in 1975 of his *Obsahový rozbor současné angličtiny, A Functional Analysis of Present Day English on a General Linguistic Basis*, laid open his conception of the language system, which appeared to be of such interest to Chinese Anglicists as to result in its re-edition in China in 2008, with a Chinese preface by Jun Qian.<sup>2</sup> Jun Qian also wrote the first of the two prefaces to the present volume. Here he notes a lack of substantial studies concerning Mathesius' early work on word order. In connection with what is known about Mathesius in Western linguistic circles — Mathesius is best known for his elaboration of functional sentence perspective — the author of the second preface, Douglas A. Kibbee, points out that by filling this gap Liu's book has done English linguistics in the world a great service.

Liu's book is indeed a most welcome addition to the few foreign research works on Mathesius. It was motivated by the need to appreciate and understand Mathesius' scholarly influence both within and outside the Prague School of Linguistics, with a special focus on word order and related aspects of language. The volume is divided into six chapters, the first of which briefly introduces Vilém Mathesius and his role in domestic English studies and the Prague Linguistic Circle. It includes a review of past publications on Mathesius and translations of his texts, with special attention to word order. In this respect, one of the few significant studies was written by Jan Firbas. On the basis of this review, Liu formulates her own research questions, intended to fill the gaps in the present writings on Mathesius; they concern his methodology of word order study, the main course of his thoughts in his early works, his conception of the hierarchy of word order principles, and the echoes of his ideas in post-war Prague linguistics.

The second chapter opens with an introductory explanation of the reasons why Mathesius is better known for his name than for his work. As the founder and lifelong president of the Prague Linguistic Circle, his repute is primarily connected with the role he played in it. The treatment of word order starts with clarification of a concept

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1 Vachek, J. (ed.) (1960) *Dictionnaire de linguistique de l'École de Prague*. Utrecht-Anvers. (In collaboration with Josef Dubský); Vachek, J. (ed.) (1964) *A Prague School Reader in Linguistics*. Bloomington, Indiana. Vachek, J. (ed.) (1966) *The Linguistic School of Prague*. An introduction to its theory and practice. Bloomington — London.

2 Vilém Mathesius (2008) *A Functional Analysis of Present Day English on a General Linguistic Basis*. Peking: World Publishing Company.

connected with it, viz. characterology. In Mathesius' approach, this term refers to synchronic ("horizontal") study of a language by comparing it to another language or a language variant; this analysis often served practical purposes, especially language teaching. Among the personalities and concepts that shaped Mathesius' views, special attention is paid to the contrast between Jan Gebauer and Josef Zubatý. Mathesius considered the Neogrammarian, formalist approach of the former unfortunate, while Zubatý's emphasis on real text and attention to reality inspired the young linguist to develop his renowned functional approach to linguistics. The formulation of Mathesius' rational, synchronic method in linguistic studies was also helped by his concern for Czech linguistic culture in connection with questions of language purism, and by the ideas of phenomenal philosophy (represented by Anton Marty and Tomáš Garigue Masaryk).

Mathesius' "formative years" in relation to his work on word order, treated in the next chapter, fall in the period between 1907–1910. This research stage is characterized by emphasis on rhythm. Mathesius' thoughts and research are most importantly summarized in his habilitation thesis "Studie k dějinám anglického slovosledu" (Studies in the history of English word order), in which he first reviews past writings on word order by previous scholars, commenting on their different views, and the material and statistical methods they used. On the basis of his objections to the views of his predecessors, Mathesius formulates his own requirements on the method and statistical analysis and on the qualities of material in the investigation of word order and rhythm. At this early period, he explored the correspondence between stress and word categories, and regular intervals between individual stresses (isochrony). When doing so, he developed his remarkable approach in which he introduced the vital concepts of tendency and potentiality (both of which are crucially important to word-order and FSP studies).

In the next period characterized as his constructive years (Chapter Four), viz. the 1920's and 1930's, Mathesius abandoned rhythm and turned to phenomena on the higher levels of language, specifically syntax. The description of Mathesius' approach to syntax and functional sentence perspective starts with his conception of sentence and utterance which rejects the psychologically based definitions of his contemporaries and predecessors. This conception, relating to both the language system and the concrete language reality (langue and parole in de Saussure's terms), becomes a foundation to the distinction between functional syntax and Actual Sentence Division: the formal grammatical structure of a sentence is contrasted with "actual" structure, which is anchored in the real language situation. Before focusing on Actual Sentence Division (later termed Functional Sentence Perspective, FSP) in more detail, Liu duly pays attention to the problematic terminology which has been modified in the course of time together with changing approaches and developing theories. As the theory evolved, the key concepts (which are naturally multi-faceted and therefore rather difficult to grasp) were defined and labelled again and again, hence the confusing array of terms. This useful clarification is followed by a description of Mathesius' study of word order as such, including his findings about the hierarchy of the word order principles in Czech and English. This contrastive approach led Mathesius to look for the ways in which English reconciles the discrepancy between the

grammatical and FSP sentence structure. Thus in his constructive period Mathesius appears to have laid the basis for further word-order studies and most importantly, for the study of functional sentence perspective.

The fifth chapter deals with Mathesius' heritage as reflected in the work of his followers. One of the most significant scholars whose work was triggered by Mathesius' findings was Jan Firbas, of Masaryk University in Brno. Firbas developed the theory of Functional Sentence Perspective as a complex system which shapes the information structure of a sentence, and introduced the idea of communicative dynamism, thus defining the FSP factors as phenomena of a scalar nature. Besides, he discovered two major tendencies that he named dynamic semantic scales: Presentation Scale and Qualification Scale, which partly explain what Mathesius calls "the insusceptibility of English to FSP". Mathesius' most renowned Bohemist follower was František Daneš, who contributed to FSP studies by elaborating a three-level approach to syntax and the concept of thematic progressions, involving the role of FSP in the build-up of longer stretches of text. The third scholar mentioned is Petr Sgall, a representative of a more mathematical approach, whose work is influenced by generative linguistics. In accordance with this theoretical background Sgall, together with Eva Hajičová, developed a theory referred to as Topic Focus Articulation. The terms topic and focus correspond to Firbas's theme and rheme, but differ in being "directly testable" in that they stand, respectively, for contextually bound and nonbound elements. On the other hand the terms theme and rheme are claimed to be "metaphorical" and not directly testable. Although Liu's list of Mathesius' followers and scholars influenced by his work cannot be exhaustive, it very well illustrates the great range of research inspired by the issues Mathesius was concerned with during his lifetime.

In the conclusion, Liu sums up the goals and motivation of her study as well as the significance of Mathesius' work, pointing out that he has been rather overlooked outside the Czech Republic owing to the fact that some of his important papers were available only in Czech.

Given the scope of the book and the fact that it covers Mathesius' entire academic career, including his predecessors and teachers who had most significantly formed his views, the author cannot possibly go into great detail when explaining individual theories and concepts. As a result, the text is rather condensed as regards the informational content, which, however, could be expected in a historiographical work. The author clearly performed an extensive research on a number of linguists and linguistic theories. What makes the book even more remarkable is the fact that a fair portion of these concerns Czech. Apart from some typographical errors, this seems to have no ill effect on the result. In general, Liu from her position of a very knowledgeable outsider manages to provide a useful, comprehensive overview of how Mathesius' thoughts about word order originated, evolved and subsequently gave rise to theories developed by other outstanding Czech scholars such as Firbas, Daneš and Sgall.

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