

# Czech Structuralism in a nutshell

The core of the Prague concept is the **theory of function**, i.e. the aspect of communication as a goal-oriented intentional action/activity in a socio-historical context. Its key concepts of **norm, function and value** are best explained in Mukařovský's *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts* (1936, English translation 1979). Applied to translation by Levý they are conceptualized as follows:

The *aesthetic norm* is a strategy leading to a whole raft of instructions for the **selection of individual stylistic, compositional and thematic solutions** from the set of possible alternatives permitted by the code. In our terminology, therefore, the code is a system of definition instructions for individual paradigms and the aesthetic norm is a set of instructions for making selections within the paradigms. (Levý 1971, transl. Patrick Corness, in Králová and Jettmarová 2008: 69)

The aesthetic norm is omnipresent – there are both artistic and non-artistic aesthetic norms. The latter apply to non-literary translation, for example. Also, the dominant function of a translation may change from the original artistic-aesthetic to another one, not only during the process of translation but also in time. The latter is one of the reasons why translations age.

On the sociosemiotic aspect of norms Mukařovský says:

One may speak of a genuine norm only when there are generally accepted goals in respect of which a value is upheld independently of an individual's will and decision making; in other words when the norm exists in what is called collective awareness [...] Although a norm tends to be binding [...] it may not only be violated but, conceivably – as is quite commonplace – two or more competing norms may coexist and be applied to the same specific cases sharing the same value on the scales. (Mukařovský 1966: 27-28; Transl. Zuzana Jettmarová)

Both Mukařovský and Levý stressed individual agency on the production and reception poles:

Recipients of art evaluate a unique, specific work of art in terms of a particular norm, which they adopt at a given moment [...] The aesthetic norm of a particular individual is, of course, to a certain extent a closed system; its respective components come into play when confronted by specific works, but they are stable, at least in the limited developing phase of the individual's 'taste'. This applies especially in respect of an aesthetic norm of an entire social group or period of time etc. (Levý 1971, transl. Patrick Corness, in Králová and Jettmarová 2008: 71-72)

Czech structuralism took some inspiration from Russian formalism, but at the same time rejected its basic tenets because of the latter's exclusion of the **socio-historical context**. This is the difference between Russian formalism and Czech functionalism. Perhaps the best reading on this topic is Mukařovský's "A Note on the Czech Translation of Shklovsky's *Theory of Prose*." (In Mukarovsky, *The Word and Verbal Art*. 1977. p. 134-142).

The Czechs developed the concept of structure to interrelate form and content, and they related structure to its socio-cultural context comprising socio-political factors, sociology of agents, economic factors including the market, etc. They not only formulated theories regarding these aspects but they also tested them empirically. During the 30s and 40s the Prague School also developed **functional stylistics** covering any discourse type, built on the principles of **the unity of form and content, open structure and dynamic dialectic**; therefore literary poetics was subsumed under this discipline, thereby establishing a link between literature and linguistics. Again, the most concise reading may be Mukařovský's "A Note on the Czech Translation of Shklovsky's *Theory of Prose*." (In Mukarovsky, *The Word and Verbal Art*. 1977. p. 134-42). Mukařovský explains why Russian formalism stressed form,

ignoring everything else (content, context) – this countered the status quo in literary studies. Taking up Shklovsky's statement that the context of literary poetics (here 'the technique of weaving') is irrelevant, Mukařovský says:

**The difference between the positions of current structuralism and the quoted formalist thesis** may be put this way: the “technique of weaving” is in the focus of interest today. However, it is obvious that one must not exclude consideration of the “situation on the world cotton market”, because the development of weaving, even non-metaphorically, depends **not only on the development of the weaving technique (i.e. the intrinsic law of the evolving structure), but also on the needs of the market, on supply and demand**; mutatis mutandis, the same applies to literature. This opens new vistas in the study of the history of literature; it can consider both the continuous evolution of poetic structure based on a constant re-grouping of elements and external influences ... univocally shaping each of its stages. Every literary fact thus appears to arise through the resolution of two opposing forces – **the intrinsic dynamics of the structure and external intervention**. The flaw in traditional literary historical studies was that they only accounted for external interventions, depriving literature of its autonomous evolution; the one-sided view of formalism, on the other hand, situated literary events in a vacuum ... I suggest that the field of literary sociology is fairly accessible to structuralism ...

**Structuralism ... is neither limited to the analysis of form nor is it in contradiction with the sociological study of literature** ... however it insists that any scientific inquiry shall not consider its material as static, disconnected, chaotic phenomena, but that it shall conceive of every phenomenon as both the outcome and the source of dynamic impulses, and of the whole as representing a complex interplay of forces. (Mukařovský 1934/2007: 506-7, emphasis and transl. Zuzana Jettmarová).

On Czech structuralist methodology, Levý notes:

Whereas the byword of positivism was *'savoir pour prévoir'*, the programme of the anti-positivist scientific phase, in which we find ourselves today, may be formulated as *'savoir pour construire'*. Structuralist tendencies in scientific disciplines investigating complex phenomena had one common thesis: they rejected positivist causality, replacing it with the concept of function, i.e. they do not attempt to discover the causes of phenomena, but to locate them in a higher entity. The functional approach is undoubtedly more appropriate for the analysis of systems, for the simple reason that it leads to the investigation of their internal structure, not merely their external relationships (their environment). In the initial stages of structuralist research it was a weakness of the functional approach that its findings were frequently untestable and that models were often constructed which, although they did have their own 'internal logic', that is to say the relations between their elements were correctly determined, could not be verified as valid models of the phenomena concerned. The positivists did have, after all, testable empirical data. By observing that phenomenon A was always followed by phenomenon B, they formulated the genetic hypothesis that A was the cause of B and it was verified by prediction, i.e. the expectation that in the future A would continue to be followed by B [...]

The functional approach in classical structuralism suffered from this drawback of a lack of testability in practice; it was not often possible to verify that the specification of the function of an element of the whole accurately represented the relationships existing in the observed phenomenon. [...] Thus **positivism formulated genetic hypotheses and attempted to verify them, while the purpose of structuralism is to formulate and verify generic hypotheses**. (Levý 1971, transl. Patrick Corness in Králová and Jettmarová 2008: 70-71)

In other words, Czech structuralism **sought a constructivist explanation** in the hierarchical structural interrelationships. Levý (1971, transl. Patrick Corness in Králová and Jettmarová 2008: 47-88) calls for an additional method to verify hypothetical findings of structural analyses by suggesting his **generative and recognoscative models**: the structuralist hypotheses derived from structural analysis should be complemented by findings related to the process of production as a decision-making process based on conscious and unconscious choices. In terms of explanation, structures and processes are different but interrelated phenomena; and so is the relationship between function and structure in a system. Levý

aspired to **tackle the level of explanation, rather than being satisfied with structural description alone.**

The Czechs are descriptivists in terms of not being prescriptivists in a methodological sense, aiming at explanation through empirical description. However, disciplines concerned with art (including the theory of literary translation) **cannot avoid normativity and thereby escape axiology**, as Levý says (1983: 35-36): the pivotal role on the axiological level is attributed to **the receiver** within the relationships between norm – function - value – agents, and thus it is the norm that comes to the fore:

Finally, we come to the most difficult issue, namely the question of the evaluation of a work of literature. The question is whether it is possible to perform a structural analysis of an *aesthetic norm*, breaking it down into a system of rules governing the generation of a particular type of art (the generative standpoint). If we were able to define such a system we could determine whether the work fulfilled the norm, and what that norm was (the standpoint of reception) and therefore evaluate it in terms of the norm. (Levý, *The Process of Creation of a Work of Literature and its Reception*. Transl. Patrick Corness. In *Tradition versus Modernity*, ed. Králová and Jettmarová, 2008, 71)

This view may explain why Czech structuralism managed to avoid formalist problems, such as norms and systems existing in a vacuum or cultural systems devoid of agents. In Czech structuralism not even autonomous systems like literature would have human agents in the position of mere structural epiphonemes (cf. Bourdieu's criticism of system theories), as **it is human agency that influences autonomous systems by exerting accidental influence/interference on them.** (Accident and necessity are two opposing dialectical variables.)

Czech translation theory, **conceiving the product in a processual manner (translation is a teleological act of communication, a goal-oriented action)**, operates a theoretical model that links the lower level of communication (as in Skopos theory) with the higher cultural level (as in Polysystem theory) thanks to the integration of individual and collective agencies (production and reception) as well as a number of socio-cultural functions. Because all phenomena (products and subjects included) and categories are conceived sociosemiotically and as phenomenological and dialectical, the elements/factors involved in the process and product are subject to perpetual change and mutual interaction. This also resolves issues like static categorial binarity, meaning indeterminacy or the existence of meaning in the 'text'.

Even the concept of *text* is treated in a specific way: the fluid product (fluid because it is conceived processually) has two aspects: it is both (a) a material object or artifact – the carrier of (b) a message. It is the message that is subject to changes in the course of social reception. And it is only through this reception that this message comes into existence. (This distinction should not be mistaken for the dichotomy of form and meaning, or form and content: form forms the content and is part of the meaning.)

Social value is built into the Czech theoretical-methodological design through the concept of social function; hence **axiology represents an integral component.**

Against this theoretical and methodological background, Levý carried out his extensive research into the history of translation (1957). It was only afterwards that he produced his theory of translation supported by other theoretical and empirical data and his own experiments (1963, 1971). As a meticulous and modest scholar, he insisted that his *Czech Theories of Translation* (1957) was not a history of translation, because he had not studied individual translators, and that his *Art of Translation* was only a theory of artistic translation.