



Brno Studies in English
Volume 35, No. 1, 2009
ISSN 0524-6881

LUDMILA URBANOVÁ

IN HONOUR OF JOSEF VACHEK

Abstract

The commemorative article pays tribute to Josef Vachek, a distinguished scholar of world-wide reputation, whose legacy is an inseparable part of the highly respected Czech linguistic tradition rooted in the activities of the Prague Linguistic Circle.

Vachek's language philosophy based on the idea of change which permeates through the system, making the distinction between the centre and the periphery of that system, has contributed much to the development of current trends in linguistic research, mainly in the field of discourse analysis, sociolinguistics and contrastive linguistics. Vachek stresses both the role of language as a system and the study of language in use. At the same time, the article claims that Vachek's approach to the study of language has been a constant source of inspiration for many of his pupils and followers.

Key words

language philosophy; language change; external factors; inner change; Humboldt; spoken language; written language; distinctiveness

This year the Prague Linguistic Circle and other academic linguistic institutions in the Czech Republic commemorate the centenary of Vachek's birth. Several generations of linguists pay tribute to Professor Josef Vachek, a general linguist, Anglicist and Bohemicist of world-wide reputation expressing their gratitude and admiration.

Josef Vachek was born in Prague on 1st March 1909 and died there on 31st March 1996. Vachek's life-long professional career, however, was not only connected with Prague. In many other academic posts and universities in the former Czechoslovakia and abroad, he manifested his research skills and pedagogical mastery in the field of general, English and Czech linguistics. After World War II the Brno Department of English was revived thanks to his great efforts and care.

His role as the founding father of Brno Studies in English (established in 1959) should be mentioned in this connection.

His unique contribution can be seen in terms of a professional mission – an ardent endeavour to teach linguistics to the young generation of Anglicists and Bohemicists and navigate their path to the study of general and specific linguistic phenomena. Professor Vachek was a true teacher who enjoyed being surrounded by eager and attentive young pupils. The creed underpinning his rich life-long experience and his contribution in spreading linguistic knowledge reflected his inner conviction that language as a system of systems, i.e. a system of a higher order, is multifaceted and complex and as such deserves our great respect.

Vachek's Language Philosophy

Let me highlight Vachek's concept of language as part of his entire language philosophy. In his special seminars on linguistic topics, Vachek most distinctly voiced his disapproval of attempts by some contemporary linguists to approach language study with exact tools, considering this striving after exactness at any cost to be inadequate and incompatible with the nature of the language system. In Vachek's understanding, language is an open system availing itself of ever changing creative force which has a strong formal and meaningful potential.

In his evaluative study titled *Josef Vachek's Work in General and English Linguistics* and published as an introduction to Vachek's collection of papers under the title *Selected Writings in English and General Linguistics* (1976), Jan Firbas makes the following remarks on Vachek's view of language: "language does not constitute a perfectly balanced, fully closed, self-contained, static system. The special circumstances in which the principles do not apply indicate places in the system of language which are to be regarded as fuzzy points, indicators of the fact that, at the given time, the system has some structural problems to solve, in other words, that far from being a static structure, it is a structure in motion" (1976: 12).

Vachek conceives of language as a social system which is incessantly influenced by the changing extra-linguistic reality. Through the mutual coexistence of external and internal factors the language system keeps pace with the development of the extra-linguistic reality.

In this respect, Vachek can be considered a follower of Wilhelm von Humboldt, in whose understanding "Properly conceived of, language is something persistent and in every instant transitory" (see Heidegger 1982: 116). The harmony between Humboldt's and Vachek's understanding of language can be demonstrated in a number of common points of departure.

In the following quotation Humboldt's idea of transformation (Heidegger uses the term innate transformation) is vividly expressed. Transformation in Humboldt's view is a natural requirement reflecting the essence of language: "A people could, by inner illumination and favorable external circumstances, impart so

different a form to the language handed down to them that it would thereby turn into a wholly other, wholly new language” (Humboldt 1971: 55).

It can be stated that the understanding of language changes in Humboldt fully corresponds with the interpretation of language changes presented by Vachek (see Vachek, ‘On the Interplay of External and Internal Factors in the Development of Language’ 1976: 91–103). According to Vachek, the sources of language changes are partly internal, since they originate in the very system of language (compare Humboldt’s concept of inner illumination); at the same time, however, they are brought about by external factors (Humboldt’s collocation favourable external circumstances seems to be an apt counterpart).

Another common consideration shared by Humboldt and Vachek reflects the nature of language changes affecting linguistic form and linguistic meaning. In his treatise Humboldt tackles the substance of transformation, both meaningful and structural, and claims that “Without altering the language as regards its sounds and even less its forms and laws, time – by a growing development of ideas, increased capacity of sustained thinking, and more penetrating sensibility - will often introduce into language what it did not possess before. The old shell is filled with a new meaning, the old coinage conveys something different, the old laws of syntax are used to hint at a differently graduated sequences of ideas” (Heidegger 1970: 65). According to Humboldt, language achieves greater variation due to the development of human thinking, its growing concentration, and also due to the changing sensitivity of the language user towards the form and meaning in language. As a parallel in connection with this observation of Humboldt’s, let me mention Vachek’s considerations relating to emotional lexico-stylistic factors in the interpretation of the category of gender in English. In Vachek’s understanding, English gender is not a mere grammatical category. Therefore, in Vachek’s view “in analysing a language equal attention should be paid to the means employed both by the unmarked, non-emotional, and by the marked, emotional styles for in mutually confronting the two the basic structure of the language is due to stand out with particular clearness” (1976: 391).

Vachek’s View of Language Norms

In Czech linguistics today Vachek’s merit is mainly felt in his clarification of the difference between the spoken and the written norms in language. In Vachek’s view, the existence of two norms is justified by their different functioning in communication, by their complementary character. In his treatise ‘Two Chapters on Written English’ (1976: 414–441), the spoken norm and the written norm are defined on the basis of their diverse basic characteristics: the spoken norm is taken to be dynamic, the written norm is evaluated as static. A marked difference between these two norms is their degree of matter-of-factness and emotiveness.

According to Vachek, the spoken utterance does not merely convey a matter-of-fact piece of information; it also reflects the emotive attitude of the speaker to-



Figure 1. Josef Vachek (1909–1996)

wards the shared content, thanks to prosodic features such as intonation, speed of utterance and intensity. Spoken language is immediate and spontaneous, whereas the written language expresses the message in a form which is preservable and surveyable; in writing the user primarily expresses the intellectual content of the message.

The existing divergence between written utterances and their spoken counterparts based on the speed of communication and its distinctiveness results in Vachek's observation: "The conclusion that inevitably follows is that, as far as quickness and distinctiveness are concerned, written utterances really rank much higher than their spoken counterparts, and that with the increasing extent of the compared contexts the superiority of the written utterances becomes even more obvious" (1976: 412).

In my opinion, however, it is necessary to define and delimit the notion of distinctiveness, since it can be manifested both in spoken and written communication. It can be argued that certain spoken genres, e.g. political debates of the type *Hard Talk*, *Larry King Live*, *Otázky Václava Moravce* etc., are distinctive in the sense that they are highly personal as to the degree to which the individuality

and uniqueness of the speaker are distinguished. With regard to their length they are extensive, the scope of the problems raised being very wide. It can be stated that at present the development of media language necessitates a re-evaluation of the rather clear-cut distinction between spoken and written communication. A frequent occurrence of intertextuality, namely hybridization lacking the distinction between spokenness and writtenness, has nowadays become a prevalent discourse strategy in many professional and fictional genres.

Vachek's concept of two language norms has parallels in the Anglo-Saxon linguistic tradition dealing with the topic. Traces of Vachek's ideas can be found in M.A.K. Halliday's *Spoken and Written Language* (1985) and Wallace Chafe's *Discourse, Consciousness and Time. The Flow and Displacement of Conscious Experience in Speaking and Writing* (1994). Both authors share the view formulated by Vachek that speaking and writing are two different types of communication.

Vachek's Legacy

Vachek's works on a great variety of synchronic and diachronic linguistic topics have a lasting value. They remain a font of ideas and a source of inspiration for future generations of researchers and teachers. I would like to support Firbas's view that Vachek was largely influenced by Mathesius; Vachek, however, was a researcher who pursued his own path.

Vachek's approach represents a global view of language. In this respect his language philosophy goes hand in hand with Humboldt's interpretation of language as a social phenomenon. At the same time, however, Vachek approaches many specific linguistic notions at individual levels of language. The scope of Vachek's research is unique, bearing witness to the deep insight, craft and extreme diligence of the researcher. Linguistics for him was a mission which he frequently referred to and which he truly fulfilled with distinction.

References

- Chafe, Wallace (1994) *Discourse, Consciousness, and Time. The Flow and Displacement of Conscious Experience in Speaking and Writing*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Firbas, Jan (1976) 'Josef Vachek's Work in General and English Linguistics'. In: Vachek, Josef. *Selected Writings in English and General Linguistics*. Prague: Academia.
- Halliday, M.A.K. (1985) *Spoken and written language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Heidegger, Martin (1982) *On the Way to Language*. Translated by Peter Hertz. San Francisco: Harper.
- Humboldt, Wilhelm von (1971) *Linguistic Variability and Intellectual Development*. Translated by G. Buck, F. Raven. Miami Linguistic Series No. 9. Coral Gables: University of Miami Press.
- Vachek, Josef (1976) *Selected Writings in English and General Linguistics*. Prague: Academia.

LUDMILA URBANOVÁ, Associate Professor in English Linguistics at the Department of English and American Studies, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk university is a Masaryk university graduate. In Brno she was a student of English and German in the years 1961-1966. Under the influence of two distinguished Brno scholars, namely Josef Vachek and Jan Firbas, she decided to pursue the career of a university teacher of English. The post which she held in Prešov, Slovakia from 1965 to 1992 gave her a unique opportunity to gain experience in teaching several branches of linguistics and enabled her to do research in contrastive linguistics and phonetics. In Prešov she again met Josef Vachek in his capacity of an external teacher (1975-1980), which gave her a strong impetus and resulted in close cooperation. In 1992, on the invitation from Jan Firbas, she returned to Masaryk university, initially teaching English linguistics at the Pedagogical Faculty, later at the Faculty of Arts where she has been active up to the present day. Her scope of linguistic interest embraces general linguistics, history of linguistics, functional syntax, semantics, pragmatics and sociolinguistics

Address: doc. PhDr. Ludmila Urbanová, CSc., Department of English and American Studies, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Arna Nováka 1, 602 00 Brno, Czech Republic. [email: lurbanov@mail.muni.cz]