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Quarterly (March, June, September, December)

160pp. per issue

6 3/4 x 10

Founded: 1974

2018 Impact Factor: 1.319

2018 Google Scholar h5-index: 32

ISSN: 0891-2017

E-ISSN: 1530-9312

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Posted Online November 21, 2006

<https://doi.org/10.1162/coli.2006.32.4.457>

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Computational Linguistics
Volume 32 | Issue 4 | December 2006
p.457-469

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ACL Lifetime Achievement Award

Old Linguists Never Die, They Only Get Obligatorily Deleted*


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1. Introduction

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Martin Kay, in his speech delivered in 2005 on receipt of his ACL Lifetime Achievement Award, specified computational linguistics as follows: “Computational linguistics is trying to do what linguists do in a computational manner” (Kay 2005, 2006). I believe it is a legitimate question for a computational linguist to ask what the Prague School has contributed to computational linguistics. Coming from Prague, it is then quite a natural question for me to look back and recollect what the “old” linguists (who never die but get obligatorily deconstructed on the visible surface) with the background of the world-famous Prague Linguistic School (PLS) contributed to linguistic studies and perhaps to suggest what aspects of this heritage are even today fruitful for computational linguistics.

First, to place the PLS in the course of the development of linguistic theory, it should be recalled that the Prague Linguistic Circle belongs to the first body to take part in the transition of the older diachronic paradigm of linguistics to a synchronic theory of language. Soon after its first session (taking place in 1926 in Prague, with Roman Jakobson as the chairman of the Circle till his death in 1945), the Circle entered the international linguistic scene first of all with its systematically elaborated phonological theory. Since the Hague Linguistic Congress (see *Actes* 1928), Praguian phonology became a central discipline of structural linguistics. This approach was far from unified, but the spirit of the Circle was in its spirit of dialogue, which kept the Circle receptive to new ideas rather than in any set of postulates commonly professed. In my talk I will focus on three fundamental Prague School tenets, which I believe to have their relevance in the modern context of linguistic theory and computational linguistics. We should keep in mind here is the Circle’s structural and functional orientation, as well as the attention it has paid to the opposition of the center and the periphery of language structure, and its focus on the concept of markedness.

2. The Structural Point of View of PLS

The PLS is generally (and truly) characterized by two attributes: structuralism and functionalism. Let us first turn to the **structural** point of view, namely, the School’s tendency to view language as a system of systems rather than to study individual phenomena or ad hoc, non-systematic issues. The Circle shared de Saussure’s understanding of language as a system of (bilateral) signs, in which only oppositions rather than

* Logo on the Indiana University Linguistic Club tee-shirt, 1984.

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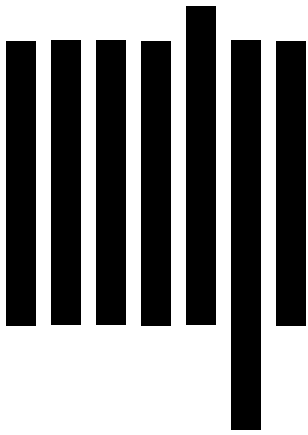
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