

# JIRÍ ČERNÝ. [DĚJINY LINGVISTIKY] HISTORIA DE LA LINGÜÍSTICA. [EDITORIAL VOTOBIA] UNIVERSIDAD DE EXTREMADURA, [1996] 1998

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## 1. Introduction: contextualizing Jiří Černý’s contribution to linguistic history

Jiří Černý is a Czech linguist and historian of linguistics known for his contributions to the study of linguistic theory and its development, particularly within the context of Slavic and Central European intellectual traditions. His work often focuses on tracing the history of linguistic ideas, the evolution of language theory and the philosophical underpinnings that shaped linguistic studies in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Černý provides detailed analyses of key linguistic theories, from early Indo-European studies to structuralism, and their philosophical roots. He often emphasizes how socio-political contexts shaped these ideas, particularly the influences of Czech and Russian intellectual traditions on modern linguistic thought.

Much of this researcher’s work explores Czech contributions to linguistics, especially in the Prague Linguistic Circle. He examines the foundational work of Czech linguists like Vilém Mathesius and Roman Jakobson, who played pivotal roles in advancing structuralist theory.

Černý also compares Slavic linguistics with Western traditions, noting divergences and convergences in theoretical approaches. His work provides insight into how Slavic linguistics interacted with and influenced broader European linguistic trends.

This scholar often approaches the history of linguistics from an interdisciplinary perspective, linking linguistic theories to broader philosophical, psychological and cultural currents. He explores how linguistic thought has been influenced by and, in turn, has influenced other disciplines.

Černý's research sometimes delves into the philosophy of language, exploring how linguistic theories address the nature of meaning, signification and the structure of language itself. His work often emphasizes the intellectual lineage of these ideas, tracing them back to thinkers like Ferdinand de Saussure and even earlier theorists.

While Černý's work may be most accessible to scholars of Slavic languages, his historical and theoretical frameworks are valuable resources for linguists, historians and philosophers interested in the broader evolution of language study across cultures and time periods.

## **2. Jiří Černý's *Dějiny Lingvistiky***

Jiří Černý's *Dějiny Lingvistiky* (*History of Linguistics*) is a significant work that offers a comprehensive examination of the evolution of linguistic thought, theories and practices from antiquity to the 20th century. While the book is written in Czech, its impact extends beyond the Czech linguistic community due to its deep exploration of the philosophical, historical and intellectual currents that have shaped the field. Černý's approach is unique in its broad coverage, encompassing not only the Western intellectual tradition but also the important contributions of Slavic linguistics, particularly from Czech and Russian scholars.

Unlike many historical treatments of linguistics that focus exclusively on Western developments, the author emphasizes the global context of linguistic thought, incorporating perspectives from ancient Indian, Arabic and Greek traditions. His work is both a historical narrative and a critical analysis, offering insights into the interplay between language theories and the broader socio-political, philosophical and scientific changes that influenced them.

The following sections provide a detailed review of the book's structure, content, major contributions, and strengths and weaknesses.

### **2.1. The beginnings of linguistic thought in Antiquity and the Middle Ages**

Černý begins his historical account by exploring the roots of linguistic thought in ancient civilizations, particularly in Greece, India and China.

He highlights the work of Panini, an ancient Indian grammarian, whose *Ashtadhyayi* systematized Sanskrit grammar in a highly formalized manner that influenced later linguistic theories. The author connects Panini's work to other early grammatical traditions, discussing how these early systems of classification and rules were often intertwined with religious and philosophical thought.

Moving to Greece, Černý discusses the foundational influence of philosophers like Aristotle, who, though not a linguist in the modern sense, contributed significantly to early thinking about language, logic and meaning. His distinction between signifier ('word') and signified ('meaning') is cited as a precursor to later developments in semantics and semiotics. Additionally, the author briefly touches on the contributions of the Stoics and their development of logical grammar, which had a profound influence on medieval linguistics.

In the medieval period, Černý shifts his focus to the influence of scholasticism and Christian theology on language. He explores the works of grammarians like Priscian and the development of grammatical studies within monastic and educational institutions, emphasizing the role of language in understanding divine order and human nature. This section is a useful starting point for understanding the development of language theory in a context that merges religious and philosophical traditions with early linguistic analysis.

## 2.2. Renaissance and Enlightenment linguistics

As Černý moves into the Renaissance and Enlightenment, he highlights the revival of interest in classical languages, particularly Latin and Greek, as well as the development of the first modern European grammars. The Renaissance marked a turning point in linguistic study, moving away from purely theological interpretations of language toward a more systematic, descriptive approach. The historian details how Renaissance humanists, such as Dante Alighieri and Pietro Bembo, contributed to the study of vernacular languages, alongside the continued study of classical languages.

The Enlightenment, particularly in the work of Wilhelm von Humboldt, is pivotal in Černý's account. Humboldt's ideas about the relationship between language and thought —specifically his theory of *linguistic relativity*— would go on to influence later 20th-century developments in linguistics and anthropology. The author provides a nuanced discussion of Humboldt's ideas, emphasizing his view of language as a dynamic, creative

force that shapes human experience and cognition. Humboldt's influence is seen in the later development of structuralist and functionalist linguistic theories, which Černý discusses in later chapters.

### **2.3. Historical and comparative linguistics in the 19th century**

The rise of historical and comparative linguistics in the 19th century marks a major shift in linguistic theory, and Černý devotes considerable attention to this period. He discusses the work of Franz Bopp, who is often credited with founding comparative linguistics, particularly through his analysis of the Indo-European language family. Bopp's comparative method, which involved systematically comparing languages to identify common roots and evolutionary paths, laid the foundation for modern historical linguistics.

The author also covers the contributions of August Schleicher, who proposed a "family tree" model of language evolution. While Schleicher's model was later criticized and abandoned in favour of more sophisticated ideas of language change, it remains an important part of the history of linguistic thought. Černý situates Schleicher's work within the broader intellectual movements of the time, highlighting how his evolutionary view of language was influenced by contemporary Darwinian ideas.

This chapter also touches on the contributions of other 19th-century linguists such as Sir William Jones and Jacob Grimm, whose work on phonology, sound laws and historical change helped shape the field of historical linguistics. Černý is careful to note that while 19th-century linguistics brought the study of language into a more empirical and scientific realm, it was still limited by its focus on the reconstruction of proto-languages and its relatively simplistic models of language evolution.

### **2.4. Structuralism and the Prague Linguistic Circle**

The 20th century witnessed the rise of structuralism, which sought to analyse language as a system of signs. The scholar provides an in-depth exploration of structuralist theory, particularly the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, whose *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916) is often considered the foundational text of structuralist linguistics. Saussure's concept of the "linguistic sign" and his emphasis on the relational nature of language as a system of differences profoundly influenced later developments in both linguistics and semiotics.

In this section, Černý places particular emphasis on the Prague Linguistic Circle, a group of linguists that included Roman Jakobson, Nikolai Trubetzkoy and Vilém Mathesius. These scholars extended and

refined Saussure's structuralism, introducing key concepts such as the study of phonology as a central component of linguistic analysis and the emphasis on functionalism —the idea that the structure of language is shaped by its communicative function—. The author discusses how these scholars' work laid the groundwork for later developments in linguistics, particularly in the study of phonology and syntax.

Roman Jakobson's contributions to structuralist linguistics are highlighted in this chapter, especially his work on the phonological system, his theory of markedness and his exploration of the poetic function of language. Černý provides a thorough analysis of Jakobson's impact on the field, emphasizing how his work bridged the gap between linguistics and literary theory.

## **2.5. The rise of generative grammar and Noam Chomsky's influence**

In this chapter, Černý discusses the paradigm shift brought about by Noam Chomsky's theories of generative grammar. Chomsky's 1957 work, *Syntactic Structures*, revolutionized the field of linguistics by proposing that the study of language should focus primarily on syntax and that the structure of language is governed by universal principles of human cognition. The author explains Chomsky's critique of structuralism, particularly its focus on surface structures rather than the underlying cognitive mechanisms that generate them.

Chomsky's introduction of the concept of the *universal grammar* —a set of innate principles shared by all humans— marks a departure from the more historical and functional approaches of earlier linguists. Černý also discusses the development of Chomsky's theories over the decades, including the introduction of transformational grammar and the expansion of the theory to encompass semantic and pragmatic aspects of language.

While the author acknowledges the groundbreaking nature of Chomsky's work, he also addresses the criticisms it has faced, particularly from sociolinguists and those who argue that generative grammar overlooks the social and cultural dimensions of language. The chapter provides a balanced overview of Chomsky's influence on the field, situating his theories within the broader context of mid-20th-century linguistics.

## **2.6. Contemporary linguistics and the fragmentation of the discipline**

In the final chapter, Černý addresses the diversification and fragmentation of the field in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. He examines the rise of cognitive linguistics, which emphasizes the role of cognitive processes

in shaping language, and the growing influence of sociolinguistics, which focuses on the relationship between language and society.

The author also discusses the increasing specialization of linguistics, with the development of subfields such as pragmatics, discourse analysis and psycholinguistics. This chapter reflects on how contemporary linguistic theory has moved away from a unified approach to language, embracing a variety of perspectives and methodologies.

### **3. Strengths and weaknesses of *Dějiny Lingvistiky***

One of the greatest strengths of this book is its thorough, chronological exploration of linguistic thought. The work provides readers with a comprehensive understanding of the development of linguistic theory, from ancient times through to the contemporary period.

Černý's focus on the contributions of Slavic linguists, particularly those from the Prague Linguistic Circle, offers a valuable perspective that is often overlooked in mainstream histories of linguistics. This makes the book especially useful for scholars of Slavic languages and linguistics.

This work is not limited to linguistics alone but incorporates insights from philosophy, psychology and anthropology. This interdisciplinary approach enriches the historical narrative and helps contextualize linguistic theories within broader intellectual movements.

While Černý provides a strong overview of the 20th century, his treatment of post-structuralism and more recent trends in linguistics is somewhat brief. There is little discussion of more recent trends in applied linguistics or computational linguistics, which could have been valuable additions to the book.

The book is written in Czech, which limits its accessibility for non-Czech readers. The translation into other languages has made it more widely accessible and increased its impact on the global academic community.

### **4. Conclusion**

*Dějiny Lingvistiky* is an exceptional contribution to the field of linguistic historiography. The book's broad scope, careful attention to both Western and Slavic contributions and interdisciplinary approach make it an invaluable resource for students and scholars alike. Černý's work provides a rich, nuanced account of the history of linguistics, offering readers a deep understanding of how language theory has developed across cultures and intellectual traditions. By contextualizing linguistic thought within broader

social, cultural and philosophical movements, the author sheds light on the dynamic interplay between language and society, adding depth to our appreciation of linguistic inquiry's evolution. Despite its limitations in covering recent trends and emerging theories, *Dějiny Lingvistiky* remains a foundational text in the study of the history of linguistics. Its meticulous research and engaging narrative ensure that it will continue to inspire and inform future generations of linguistic historians. Readers will undoubtedly come away with a deeper appreciation for the diversity and complexity of linguistic traditions across time and geography.