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Czech Structuralists on Rhythm
in Epic Literature¹
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Abstract – Czech structuralism is intrinsically associated to the Prague Linguistic Circle (or Prague School), yet it also evolved independently of this institution during the 20th century. The theoretical and methodological legacy of Czech structuralism can be examined through the ways in which certain Czech scholars addressed the issue of rhythm in epic literature. This study aims to provide a concise introduction and overview of the most significant contributions of Czech structuralists to this topic. The study focuses on the ideas of Vilém Mathesius, Jan Mukařovský, Felix Vodička, Miroslav Červenka and Milan Jankovič. At the core of the study lies an analysis of Jan Mukařovský's conception, particularly his efforts to develop a systematic framework for narrative research in his university lectures. The paper concludes with a summary of the main approaches of Czech structuralists to rhythm in epic literature and a reflection on the influence of innovative terms and concepts introduced by Miroslav Červenka and Milan Jankovič – such as rhythmic focus, rhythmic vocabulary, and stream – on subsequent developments in this field.

Keywords – Czech Structuralism; Jan Mukařovský; Structural Analysis; Rhythm, Epic Literature.

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Czech Structuralists on Rhythm in Epic Literature

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1. Introduction

The history of Czech structuralism is inextricably linked with the Prague Linguistic Circle, which served as a base for formulating fundamental methodological premises, notional categories and theses concerning structural approaches to language, literature, and art in general.

The classical period of Czech structuralism is generally considered to have begun with the foundation of the Circle in 1926 and ends with the beginning of World War II in 1939. Some scholars mention a different year – 1948, the year the communists took power in Czechoslovakia. After 1948, structuralism came under criticism and replaced by a new Marxist-oriented science. In the early 1950s, the structural method was in Czechoslovakia labelled as unscientific and non-Marxist. This view resulted in an extensive anti-structuralist campaign.

A new interest in structuralism emerged during the 1960s when the political situation in Czechoslovakia seemed to be changing. However, political reforms were stopped following the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Although the conditions in the 1970s and 1980s in Czechoslovakia were difficult, some scholars managed to apply a structural approach in their research. However, the free development of structuralism and a rethinking of its theoretical concepts could only arise after the fall of communism in 1989.

From a broader perspective, the history of Czech structuralism in the 20th century exhibits a rhythmical character: it regularly passes through periods of rise and fall. It is worth reflecting on the rhythm of the historical development of Czech structuralism, given the regular recurrence of certain events throughout the 20th century.

2. The Problem of Rhythm from the Point of View of Czech Structuralism

The phenomenon of rhythm is a subject of significant interest in metatheoretical considerations regarding the history and development of Czech structuralism. However, rhythm as an object of linguistic and literary analyses conducted by Czech structuralists themselves holds even greater importance.

The early interest of Czech structuralists in the phenomenon of rhythm is evident from the famous *Theses of the Prague Linguistic Circle* (1929), in which they outlined their primary research methods and objectives. In the section devoted to the research of poetic language, rhythm is explicitly identified as a key element within the broader framework of research on poetic phonology.

The language of verse is characterized by a peculiar hierarchy of values: *the rhythm* is the organizing principle and closely connected with it are other phonological elements of verse: the melodic structure, the repetition of phonemes and phonemic groups. The synthesis of various phonological elements and rhythm also gives rise to the canonical instruments of verse (rhyme, alliteration, etc.). (Theses, 95)

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It is evident that Czech structuralists' approach to rhythm was in its early stages, primarily versological. They conceptualised rhythm in terms of the organization of sound elements within verse.

The structuralist conception of verse is rooted in the idea that verse represents the basic rhythmic-syntactic unit within the syllabotonic system, characterized by specific intonation. According to structuralists, verse constitutes a hierarchical structure of strong and weak positions, which interact with other components of the work (e.g., lexis, syntax, or theme) as well as with other verses in the text. The concepts of *metre* and *rhythm* are used to characterise verse and are often explained in analogy with de Saussure's dichotomy of *langue* and *parole*, namely that metre represents an abstract system (invariant), while rhythm is its concrete realisation (variant).

It is important to note that the metrical pattern and the rhythmic realisation of verse do not necessarily correspond, nor is it desirable for them to do so – it would create the impression of a mechanical rhythm. The distinction between metre and rhythm was adopted by structuralists from the Russian formalists and their predecessors, particularly Andrey Belyy (cf. Plecháč–Kolář). In this context, it should be noted that for French structuralism, the distinction between metre and rhythm was not so simple. Tzvetan Todorov, for example, did not accept this distinction.

This paper does not address the question of rhythm in lyric in detail. Instead, the focus is on rhythm in epic literature from the perspective of Czech structuralists. Among the Czech structuralists who engaged with the problem of rhythm in epic literature, notable figures include Vilém Mathesius, Jan Mukařovský, Felix Vodička, Miroslav Červenka and Milan Jankovič.

3. Rhythm in Epic Literature

Rhythm is often defined as the periodic repetition of the same or similar phenomena in their *temporal* or *spatial* sequence. It can be observed in nature, in the regular change of seasons and life processes, but it is of course also present in culture – in music, in dance, in poetry – and in literature in general. While rhythm in nature is often the result of *non-intentional forces*, such as the laws of nature, in culture – in art – it is usually *intentional*.

When focusing on language and literary texts, it is obvious that the rhythmic organization of speech must be the focus of our attention. The rhythmic organization of speech depends on the division of speech into sections in which a certain configuration of speech sounds is periodically repeated (Červenka, *Významová výstavba literárního díla*). The essential point is that we do not focus solely on individual sounds and words but instead perceive the sounds and words in relation to one another, within the context they create. Rhythm in epic literature is expressed at the level of its *syntactic construction*: through the repetition of words or the specific structure of the text. Rhythm in epic is also frequently a result of the application of periodicity in the intonation of sentences or sentence segments.

One of the first Czech structuralists to address the problem of rhythm (not only in epic) was Vilém Mathesius (1882–1945), an important Czech linguist and literary historian. He was the founder of the Prague Linguistic Circle and its chairman for many years; he also lectured at Charles University in Prague.

Mathesius did not write a study solely focused on rhythm, but he addressed rhythm – especially the rhythm of sentences – in the broader context of his linguistic and stylistic research on speech. His major study in this research field is the extensive “Řec a sloh” (Speech and Style, 1942). He connected the rhythm of speech – and thus of epic – to the order of words in a sentence (word order) and to the functional division of the sentence. He observed that

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rhythm in the Czech language is based on the accent of individual words, their duration, their syllabic organization, and other phonological factors. However, what primarily determines the rhythm in a sentence is *the word order* (Mathesius, *A Functional Analysis*; “Functional Linguistics”). This analysis led Mathesius to another important research topic – exploring the individual style of the author.

4. Jan Mukařovský: Rhythm and the Structure of a Literary Work

Jan Mukařovský (1891–1975) is the primary scholar on whom this discussion focuses. He was an eminent Czech literary scholar and aesthetician, *de facto* the founder of Czech structural poetics and aesthetics (Sládek, *Jan Mukařovský*; “Mukařovský’s Structuralism and Semiotics.”). Mukařovský began his career as a versologist, and he highly familiar with the latest German, French and Russian versological works.

Mukařovský published several studies on the problem of rhythm. His works from the early 1930s “Intonace jako činitel básnického rytmu” (Intonation as the Basic Factor of Poetic Rhythm) and “O rytmu v moderním českém básnictví a o českém volném verši” (On Rhythm in Modern Czech Poetry and Czech Free Verse), are well known (Mukařovský, *The Word and Verbal Art; Studie z poetiky*). He often reflected on the function of rhythm in lyric poetry, examining the relationship among rhythm, the meaning of a literary work, word order, and the phonic line.

In the study “On Rhythm in Modern Czech Poetry and Czech Free Verse”, Mukařovský analyses the general form and characteristics of poetic rhythm, emphasizing that rhythmical organization is not limited to the component of language that serves as the direct ‘vehicle’ of meter. Rather, he argues that all elements of the linguistic system function as rhythmical agents, and that rhythmical organization influences the theme of the poem itself (*Studie z poetiky* 627). Rhythm affects, for example, the poet’s choice of short or polysyllabic words, accented or unaccented words, and whether the sentence structure and melody (intonation) align with or diverge from the verse border.

Mukařovský is convinced that

rhythm is [...] incorporated into the whole construction of linguistic expression; any change in the rhythmic principle, therefore, involves the semantics of the whole text. If, for example, a sentence is transformed by rhythm, its ‘idea’ is also influenced. (627)

He thus understands rhythm as an *integral part* of the structure of a literary work. He argues that the transformation of one part of the work influences the other parts of the work as a whole.

Although Mukařovský did not write a study focused entirely on the issue of rhythm in epic literature, he addressed this topic extensively in his *university lectures*. These lectures on the epic have been preserved, allowing us to read and study many of his notes on the subject. The lectures date from 1932–1933, and he delivered them at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University in Prague. In particular, these include the lectures: “Epika, její podstata a druhy” (The Epic, Its Essence and Types), “Román a novela” (The Novel and the Novella), “Podstata epiky. Úvaha fenomenologická” (The Essence of the Epic. Phenomenological reflection). Mukařovský did not publish any of his university lectures during his lifetime. These works have only recently appeared in a critical edition under the title *Přednášky o epice* (Lectures on Epic).

In explaining the issue of rhythm in epic he works with three main concepts: *tempo* (the *tempo*), *dějový spád* (the *narrative pacing*), and *rytmus* (the *rhythm*). Mukařovský relates the category of *tempo* to the narrator, or rather to the way (how ‘fast’) the narrator presents the story. It is

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therefore a concept intended to describe the extension or speeding up of a narrative. In oral narration, for example, the narrative is prolonged by coughing, in written narration, inserting descriptions, different details, and different ways of seeing the same events that slow down the narrative. According to Mukařovský, tempo is as important in literature as in music, where tempo determines the speed of moving in time (each of musical piece has its own tempo).

He distinguished between the *tempo of a sentence* and the *tempo of a literary work* (or a narrative) as a whole. Mukařovský is convinced that every sentence has its own tempo. He writes:

It is natural that the tempo of a sentence, although not necessarily connected with the overall tempo of the narrative, is necessarily in some proportion to it, and that it is evaluated as a factor of this overall tempo. (*Přednášky o epice* 152)

Considering this, Mukařovský analysed the function of simple sentences and complex sentences in selected texts and their effect on the narrative pace. His findings may initially seem elementary. However, his ideas originated long before the systematic narratological conceptions developed by Gérard Genette (*Narrative Discourse*; *Narrative Discourse Revisited*) or Tzvetan Todorov (*The Poetics of Prose*).

Long and complex sentences slow down *the tempo/ the pace* of the narrative. Short sentences fragment the text into short, disconnected units that we might often think of as parts of longer, more cohesive sentences. For example, the sentences from the story “Automobilová láska” (Automobile Love) by the Czech writer Vladimír Raffel are notably – and unnaturally – short: “We were driving on a clear road. Trees and telegraph lines ran briskly behind us. There were ripe cherries on the trees. It was the beginning of summer. In the fields we met a motorcycle. [...]” (Raffel 18). Mukařovský is convinced that the quoted text could be revised into a more regular form: “We were driving on a clear road, (so that/and) the trees and telegraph lines were running briskly behind us” (*Přednášky o epice* 151).

Mukařovský explains in his lectures that both extensively long and overly short sentences represent extremes. He does not deny their stylistic validity and functionality; Raffel’s short sentences, for example, create the illusion of speed – the illusion of riding a motorcycle at high speed. However, there are sentences whose rhythm and length correspond to the natural form of speech; for Mukařovský, this is spoken speech.

As an example, he analysed sentences from the prose of the Czech writer Karel Čapek. The presence of monologues and dialogues, as well as direct, semi-direct and indirect speech, has, of course a great influence on *the tempo/ the pace* of the narrative.

From Mukařovský’s point of view, the *narrative pace* is influenced by the organization of narrative events. The narrative pace can be slow or fast. It slows down through reordering the chronology of events and clarifying causal connections, which creates narrative tension, and it speeds up through summarizing narrative events.

Mukařovský pays special attention to the number of syllables in words (word units), as this also influences the overall character of epic prose. A large number of polysyllabic words in sentences clearly slows down the rhythm of these sentences. The idea is straightforward and explicit: “The rhythmical character of a prose is given by the rhythmical character of the word units in it”. Mukařovský adopted and further developed this idea from Otakar Zich, a Czech aesthetician and composer, who first formulated this in his study “O rytmu české prózy” (On the Rhythm of Czech Prose). The study was published in 1920 and holds pioneering value in the Czech milieu (Mukařovský, *Přednášky o epice* 162).

Mukařovský first met Otakar Zich in 1925, so they were acquainted before the founding of the Prague Linguistic Circle. Zich accepted many structuralist views and methods, but he did not regard himself as a structuralist. He summarized the results of his lifelong study of aesthetics, drama and theatre in a seminal work entitled *Estetika dramatického umění* (Aesthetics of the Dramatic Art, 1931). Mukařovský frequently quoted this book in his lectures but also

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commented on Zich's other studies on the problem of rhythm in epic. Mukařovský did not agree with all of Zich's ideas and therefore presented his conception as follows:

the rhythm of prose is something quite different from the rhythm of verse, and therefore the theoreticians who begin their research on the rhythm of prose by looking for correspondences between the rhythm of prose and the rhythm of verse are wrong. Thus, for example, those who look for feet in prose. Years ago, I gave examples [...] that in prose we often find the overall series of feet. (Mukařovský, *Přednášky o epice*, 165–6)

According to Mukařovský, the *basic organising principle of rhythmic prose is intonation* (167). However, he is not interested in the specific acoustic realisations of sentences but rather regards intonation as one of the components of the poetic text, which is closely linked to the semantic construction of the sentence. Therefore, if intonation is a phonological element, then it is evident that its form is intrinsically linked to the internal organization of the text, as well as with the other aspects of linguistic expression.

In this context, Mukařovský referred to Karcevskij's article “Sur la phonologie de la phrase” (On the phonology of the phrase), which appeared in 1931 in the fourth issue of *Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague* (Karcevskij).

It is possible to consider other sources and inspirations that may have influenced Mukařovský's approach to epic literature and narrative. The publications of Käte Friedemann, Ernst Hirt, Viktor Zhirmunsky, Alexander Reformatsky and Valentin Voloshinov certainly merit consideration.

5. New Conceptions of Rhythm in Epic: Vodička, Červenka, Jankovič

Mukařovský mentored many students and followers. One of the most important was Felix Vodička (1909–1974), a Czech literary historian and an expert on the literary history of the 19th century. In 1948 he published a book entitled *Počátky krásné prózy novověké* (The Beginnings of Modern Czech Prose), in which he systematically applied and explained many of Mukařovský's concepts from his structural poetics. Like Mukařovský, Vodička rejected an approach to the rhythm of prose based solely on versological aspects. In his work, Vodička convincingly demonstrates that the rhythmicity of prose can be effectively analysed and studied by employing a detailed structural analysis of a specific prose text. In this context, Vodička states:

Rhythmicity is already determined by the awareness of the regular alternation of sentence segments, breaking out of the thematic and syntactic cohesion of the sentence. But it is intensified by the intonational monotony of the sections, in which the conditions are always given to perceive the distribution of accented syllables as an actualized rhythmic principle. (Vodička 223)

It is evident that Vodička adopted and further developed Mukařovský's analytical approach, which shifted attention from individual sentences to the entirety of a literary text, focusing on the analysis of its overall meaning construction, and the examination of the rhythmic-intonational effect of the whole text.

Another Czech structuralist who expanded on Mukařovský's and Vodička's research on rhythm was Miroslav Červenka (1932–2005), an important Czech poet and literary scholar. Červenka not only built upon Mukařovský's work, but, in many respects, surpassed him. Although the broadest framework of his reflections on rhythm was centred on lyric poetry, some of his observations are so general that they can be applied to epic literature as well. Červenka authored a number of important and still inspiring studies and monographs, including *Dějiny*

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českého volného verše (The History of Czech Free Verse, 2001) and *Kapitoly o českém verši* (Chapters on Czech Verse, 2006).

If I were to highlight at least one aspect of his work relevant to the issue of rhythm and worthy of further exploration, it would be his concept of the *rhythrical impulse* (*rytmický impuls*). The Russian formalists (particularly Tomashevsky) and Jan Mukařovský had already worked with this concept. The notion can generally be characterized as the integration of individual sound patterns into a unified sound impression.

Červenka is convinced that the *rhythrical impulse* is a key category of the formalist and structuralist conception of verse. In his study “Rytický impuls: poznámky a komentáře” (The Rhythical Impulse: Notes and Comments), he writes about this concept:

It is a notion that refers to a certain position and action: to the position and action of the perceiver concerning rhythmical construction, which, in the approach indicated by this category, is no longer understood only as a set of sensual phenomena, but is at the same time incorporated into the non-material structures of general literary awareness and into the totality of a concrete poetic work of art. (120)

Contrary to the substantive conception of the rhythmic impulse, Červenka emphasizes *functional* and *relational* understanding. The point is that as perceivers we take our attitude to a work not only based on the text *sui generis*, but we also take into account other (not directly textual) signals – e.g., the graphic form of the work, the type of typesetting used, the illustrations, etc.

However, according to Červenka, the rhythmical impulse is above all the crucial component and criterion of the existence of rhythm. “It consists in the fact that after a series of units organized in some way, we expect the presence of a unit organized similarly (not in the same way, but by the same rule)” (*Dějiny českého volného verše* 245).

Červenka examined the issue of rhythm in many studies in which he analysed selected works and poetics of Czech poets from the beginning of the 19th to the end of the 20th century. He focused primarily on rhythm in lyric poetry. From a general point of view, he discussed rhythm in his monograph on the history of Czech free verse. In this work, he introduced and elaborated several concepts, which are general in application and can also be applied to analysis and interpretation of rhythm in epic literature. These concepts are: *rytmická intence* (*rhythrical intention*), *rytmické zaměření* (*rhythrical focus*) a *rytmický slovník* (*rhythrical vocabulary*). I will present them briefly.

Rhythrical intention

Červenka characterizes this concept as describing “the intention of the participants in a poetic communication to conceive and perceive the text as rhythmically ordered and rhymed” (*Dějiny českého volného verše* 245). In a particular literary work, this intention can be observed in the form of verse intonation. Additionally, in the case of epics, it is the distinct intonation of the sentence.

Rhythrical focus

According to Červenka, rhythmical focus refers to the focus of the participants of literary communication (i.e., readers, audience, interpreters) on rhythm, or rhythmic intonation in the text. The participants in this communication pay specific attention to the sound (rhythrical) construction of the text, “they are constructing in their minds the rhythmical arrangements of the work and incorporating rhythm as a single component in the overall construction of the work” (245).

Rhythrical vocabulary

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This concept primarily applies to research on verse but can also be effectively extended beyond the context of verse speech (the lyric). It refers to the repertoire of tools that the author of a literary text uses to rhythmize it.

From Červenka's point of view (and from the point of view of rhythmic verse/lyric analysis) rhythmical vocabulary consists of a repertoire of tacts (single-accented units) and words, along with their syllabic arrangement within the text. What is important here is the number of occurrences of the given tacts and words in the text. By comparing the vocabulary of verse speech with that of non-verse speech, one can identify the degree of rhythmization of the text.

*

The last scholar I want to mention is the literary theoretician and historian Milan Jankovič (1929–2019). Jankovič and Červenka were close friends from their time as students at Charles University in Prague in the 1950s. Their scientific orientation was fundamentally influenced by Jan Mukařovský, whose work they interpreted and re-published in several editions. Milan Jankovič was primarily interested in the notion of semantic gesture, which Mukařovský introduced and first used in literary analyses in the 1930s. In their view, the semantic gesture is the organizing (and unifying) principle of the construction of a literary work or the work of a particular author (Jankovič, "Perspectives of semantic gesture"; *Cesty za smyslem literárního díla*).

However, let us remain with the problem of rhythm. Jankovič is the author of several studies on both rhythmicity in prose and the role of intonation in the rhythmical and semantic construction of prose ("Rytmičnost v próze"; "Role intonace v rytmické a významové výstavbě prózy. Čapkův *Hordubal*"). He characterizes the rhythm of sentences, passages and entire texts based on the *repetition* of similar phenomena. He points out that the more challenging aspect in a literary text is the effect of rhythmical thematic structure, which manifests itself, for example, in the repetition and return of certain *motifs* ("Rytmičnost v próze" 166). Such phenomena are commonly put in the context of composition. This, however, only confirms the fact that rhythm permeates all the components of a literary work, enriches the thematics of the work, and participates in the overall organisation of the text.

Regarding Jankovič's approach to the interpretation of literary texts, it is clear that reflection on the reader's point of view plays a major role in his studies. Jankovič highlights that "in a prose text, rhythmicity asserts itself more irregularly and with fluctuating intensity. It is always more at the mercy of the reader, who either is or is unable to recognize its signals. The rhythmicity of the text is usually appreciated only on repeated readings" (173).

Jankovič based his theoretical reflections on analyses of the intonation structure and meaning construction of literary works by Czech writers – Karel Čapek, Vladislav Vančura, and above all Bohumil Hrabal. On the literary work of Bohumil Hrabal, he wrote a book entitled *Kapitoly z poetiky Bohumila Hrabala* (Chapters in Bohumil Hrabal Poetics, 1996), in which he characterizes some of his texts as a *stream* – *reflective lyrical and epic stream* (*reflexívně lyrický a epický proud*) with regard to their rhythmical form. The term *stream* (*proud*) is important because it is supposed to express the special fluidity of Hrabal's syntax with its tendency to rhythmization. Through this terminology, Jankovič deliberately aligns himself with his predecessor and teacher Mukařovský.

6. Conclusion

My view on the issue of rhythm in epic in the context of Czech structuralism is to some extent selective and reductive. From what has been said so far, however, we can observe a clear development in this issue from the perspective of Czech structuralists.

To summarize: Vilém Mathesius was concerned with the rhythm of sentences in the context of word order (and thus in stylistics). Jan Mukařovský paid great attention to rhythm, he was aware of the necessity of a different approach to rhythm in lyric and epic. He tried to explain the problem of rhythm in epic literature comprehensively for the first time in his university lectures, where he introduced and worked with the concepts of tempo, narrative pacing and poetic rhythm.

Felix Vodička built upon Mukařovský's work, systematizing and elaborating many of his observations. Rhythm in epic literature is manifested across all levels of the literary work. Although Miroslav Červenka primarily focused on rhythm in lyric poetry, his conception of the rhythmical impulse is a general one. This concept remains highly relevant and offers possibilities for further exploration. His other concepts related to the issue of rhythm – rhythmical intention, rhythmical focus and rhythmical vocabulary – are equally applicable to the study of epic literature.

The issue of rhythm in epic literature has been most systematically analysed by Milan Jankovič. He authored several studies on rhythmicity and intonation in epic literature. His approach synthesizes all previous approaches. Moreover, his studies provide numerous insights for further development of this issue, including his notion of a stream – both lyrical and epic. This may involve, for example, questions surrounding the repetition of words and motifs, and the effect of this repetition on the intonation of sentences.

The aim of this study was to summarize the basic ideas and changes in Czech structuralists' views on the issue of rhythm in epic literature. It is reasonable to expect that further and innovative approaches will follow, as research on rhythm within Czech structuralism remains ongoing.

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