

TRANSLATION AND THE PAST: ROLAND BARTHES AND THE “RECOVERY” OF CZECHOSLOVAK STRUCTURALISM IN THE 1960s

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Abstract: After years of emphasizing translation primarily as a way of bringing “newness into the world” (Bhabha), scholars have recently renewed their interest in translation’s relationship to the past, referring to it as a recovery of lost time or as the (Benjaminian) “afterlife” of past texts. Those who are specifically concerned with the translation of philosophical and theoretical texts now also focus on “untranslatables” that continually produce new translations. So far, this has mostly been seen as a means to emancipate the history of theory from the tyranny of linear time, but it also caters to a discourse that rethinks translation as a way of doing both theory and its history. What unites all these approaches is that they exclusively understand the past that translation relates to as the past of the source text. As the paper claims, however, translation can also function as a means to recover and, potentially, (re)write the history of the *receiving* context. This is discussed by drawing on the example of the translation of French structuralism and, especially, of Roland Barthes in Czechoslovakia in the second half of the 1960s which significantly contributes to the “recovery” of the local structuralist tradition of the interwar period that had been muted first by the war and, subsequently, by Stalinist cultural politics. Besides the first-ever book-length translation of Barthes’ into Czech (*Nulový stupeň rukopisu – Základy sémiologie*, 1967), it also examines hitherto unstudied material from the archive of Československý spisovatel, the publisher responsible for the translation’s release.

Keywords: French structuralism, Czechoslovak structuralism, translation of theory, translation history, Roland Barthes.

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Translation as Recovery

After years of emphasizing translation primarily as a way of bringing “newness into the world,”¹ scholars have recently renewed their interest in translation’s relationship to the past. While some of them refer to translation as a recovery of lost time or, in a more Benjaminian manner, as the “afterlife” of past texts, others focus on the specific temporality of translation and emphasize that, by building on pre-existing texts, it produces new presences for elements belonging to the past². And many of those specifically concerned with the translation of philosophical and theoretical texts now focus on the so-called “untranslatables,” i.e., on “symptoms of difference”³ that continually produce new translations. So far, this has mostly been seen as a means to emancipate the history of theory from the tyranny of linear time, but it also caters to a discourse that rethinks translation as a way of doing both theory and its history⁴. What unites all these approaches, however, is the fact that they mostly understand the past that translation relates to as the past of the source text and its context of origin. The most canonical example for this is, without doubt, Tzvetan Todorov’s *Theory of Literature* [*Théorie de la littérature*, 1965] and the ways it used the translation of Russian formalist writings to retrospectively bestow French structuralism with a dignifying past⁵.

As I argue, however, translation can also function as a means to recover and, potentially, to (re)write the history of the receiving context. A case in point for this is the translation of French structuralism in Czechoslovakia in

¹ Homi Bhabha, “How Newness Enters the World. Postmodern Space, Postcolonial Times and the Trials of Cultural Translation,” in *The Location of Culture*, London, New York, Routledge, 2004, p. 303–37.

² Cf. Theo Hermans, *Translation and History. A Textbook*, London, New York, Routledge, 2022; Alexandra Lianeri, “A Regime of Untranslatables. Temporalities of Translation and Conceptual History,” *History and Theory*, vol. 53, no. 4, 2014, p. 473–97; Saša Hrnjez, “Too Late to Translate? On Belatedness and Translation,” *Perspectives*, 2022, p. 1–13.

³ Barbara Cassin (ed.), “Introduction,” in *Dictionary of Untranslatables. A Philosophical Lexicon*, Princeton, Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2017, p. XVII.

⁴ Cf. Emily Apter, *Against World Literature*, London, New York, Verso, 2013, p. 247–49.

⁵ *Théorie de la littérature. Textes des formalistes russes réunis, présentés et traduits par Tzvetan Todorov. Préface de Roman Jakobson*, Paris, Édition du Seuil, 1965. See also Frédérique Matonti, “Entre Moscou et Prague. Les premières réceptions des formalistes russes par les intellectuels communistes français (1967–1971),” *Langage*, no. 182, 2011, p. 69–81; as well as Frédérique Matonti, “Premières réceptions françaises du formalisme. Retour sur Théorie de la littérature”, *Communications*, no. 103, 2018, p. 41–53.

the second half of the 1960s, for it coincided with the “recovery” [oživení]⁶ of the local structuralist tradition that had been discontinued first by the war and, subsequently, by Stalinist cultural politics. To date, Czech scholarship has largely viewed these as two separate events that happened to take place at the same time and certainly knew of each other but had otherwise very little overlap. Květoslav Chvatík for example writes that

[t]he development of the Prague School in the 1960s [...] coincided with the rise of the structuralist debate in France. It should be noted that, despite being parallel in time, these two currents originated from different sources and a different philosophical atmosphere. While the French structuralists reacted above all to the subjectivism of Sartre’s existentialism, the Czech authors endeavored to liberate Marxism from its dogmatic and voluntaristic interpretation. [...] [They] took up the tradition of the Prague Linguistic Circle under new premises; what was new was a more profound knowledge of Anglo-Saxon semiotics [...] and the attempts at a Marxist reinterpretation of semantics [...]. While the French authors had very little information about the Prague School [...], the Prague center was much better informed about the Parisian discussions in the second half of the 1960s. Nevertheless, the direct impact of the French authors [remained] limited to a minimum⁷.

⁶ Milan Jankovič, “Oživená Tradice Pražského Strukturalismu,” in *Zlatá Šedesátá. Materiály z Konference Pořádané Ústavem pro Českou Literaturu AV ČR. 16–18. Června 1999*, ed. by Radka Denemarková, Praha, Ústav pro českou literaturu AV ČR, 2000, p. 72–81; see also Ondřej Sládek, “O ‚návratech‘ a strukturalismu Milana Jankoviče,” *Česká literatura*, vol. 67, no. 3, 2019, p. 380–89.

⁷ “Die Entwicklung der Prager Schule der 60er Jahre [...], fällt mit dem Aufschwung der Strukturalismus-Diskussion in Frankreich zusammen. Es ist festzustellen, daß diese beiden Strömungen trotz der zeitlichen Parallele von verschiedenen Quellen und von einer unterschiedlichen philosophischen Atmosphäre ausgingen. Während die französischen Strukturalisten vor allem auf den Subjektivismus des Sartreschen Existentialismus reagierten, bemühten sich die tschechischen Autoren um eine Befreiung des Marxismus von seiner dogmatischen und voluntaristischen Interpretation. [Sie] knüpften auf einer neuen Grundlage an die Tradition des Prager Linguistenkreises an; neu war die tiefere Kenntnis der angelsächsischen Semiotik [...] und das Bemühen um eine marxistische Interpretation der Semantik [...]. Während die französischen Autoren von der Prager Schule sehr dürftige Informationen besaßen [...] waren im Prager Zentrum die Informationen über die Pariser Diskussion in der zweiten Hälfte der 60er Jahre bedeutend besser. dennoch blieb die direkte Wirkung der französischen Autoren auf ein Minimum beschränkt”. Květoslav Chvatík, *Tschechoslowakischer Strukturalismus. Theorie und Geschichte*, translated by Vlado Müller, München, Wilhelm Fink, 1981, p. 71, translated by me. For a somewhat more nuanced view cf. Ondřej Sládek, “Doslov. Český strukturalismus pohledem zahraničních diskusí,” in *Český strukturalismus v diskusí*, Brno, Host, 2014, p. 335–363.

In my opinion, this statement perfectly illustrates the widespread tendency to reduce the role of translation processes for the history of theory to questions of *conceptual* impact and of how it might manifest in *future* writings. This is problematic already insofar as that in the years following the violent crackdown of the Prague Spring many of the scholars involved in this “recovery”—including Chvatík himself—emigrated to Western Europe and North America, where they rebuilt their academic careers by “selling” Czechoslovak structuralism as a historical rather than a contemporary phenomenon⁸. Whereas at home, structuralism was once again pushed out of public discourse and into the realm of the private and the clandestine which, too, contributed to a certain “conservation” [*zakonzervování*]⁹, if not “musealization” of its interwar state¹⁰. It is, thus, crucial to reconsider translation’s role in different terms and, specifically, with regard to how it contributed to the recovery of the local tradition in the first place.

In what follows I will discuss this drawing on the example of the first book-length translation of Roland Barthes’ writings into Czech, *Nulový stupeň rukopisu – Základy sémiologie* [*Writing Degree Zero – Elements of Semiology*, 1967]¹¹. As I argue, this publication demonstrates not only that there was, in fact, a significant overlap between the recovery of local interwar structuralism and the translation of French structuralist writings but also that translation was deliberately used to recover local structuralist concepts and terminology. In some way, this led to the imagining of an alternate history of Czechoslovak structuralism and of how it could have further developed under more favorable

⁸ This also applies to the book quoted above. Being the first-ever attempt at writing a comprehensive introduction to Czechoslovak structuralism, it was published only after the author’s emigration to West Germany in 1979 where he taught first at the University of Constance and later in Munich. Similar cases were represented, among others, by Ladislav Matejka, Peter Steiner, and Jindřich Toman in the US, as well as by Mojmir Grygar in the Netherlands.

⁹ Vladimír Macura, “Lotmanova ‘jiná’ Dekonstrukce,” *Tvar*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1995, p. 10; cf. also Anna Förster, “Semiosphäre, Übertragungscharakter, Dekonstruktion. Vladimír Macura und das Spätwerk Jurij Lotmans,” *Brücken*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2021, p. 45–65.

¹⁰ Here, I am paraphrasing the Slovak scholar Anton Popovič who, in 1970, criticized his Czech colleagues for aiming only at what he calls “some musealized form of structuralism” [akási muzeálna podoba štrukturalizmu]. Anton Popovič, *Štrukturalizmus v slovenskej vede. 193–1949*, Martin, Matica slovenská, 1970, p. 51; a similar point is made by Popovič’s colleague at the Slovak Academy of Science, Nora Krausová. Cf. Nora Krausová, “Pražská fonologická škola a francúzsky štrukturalizmus,” *Romboid* 2, no. 4 (1966), p. 48–52.

¹¹ Roland Barthes, *Nulový stupeň rukopisu – Základy sémiologie*, trans. by Josef Čermák and Josef Dubský, Edice Dílna 29, Praha, Československý spisovatel, 1967.

political and societal circumstances. Besides the translation itself, the chapter also draws on hitherto unexamined material from the archive of Československý spisovatel [“The Czechoslovak Writer”], the publisher responsible for the release of *Nulový stupeň rukopisu – Základy sémiologie*¹².

Before taking a closer look at this material, however, it is important to note that this translation occurred at a crucial moment in time. Even though it was published only in late 1967, as we learn from the archival material, the project itself was first launched in the spring of 1966¹³, thus, at the beginning of a year that, in France, was later dubbed the “annum mirabile” of structuralism, marked by the simultaneous publication of Roland Barthes’ *Criticism and Truth*, Greimas’ *Structural Semantics*, Foucault’s *Order of Things*, and Lacan’s *Écrits*¹⁴. At the same time, internationally, 1966 would become canonized as the year in which structuralism already entered the phase of its decline, as exemplified by the infamous Baltimore conference and, especially by Derrida’s contribution—“Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” [« La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines »¹⁵]. In Czechoslovakia, on the other hand, 1966 marked, first and foremost, the 75th birthday of Jan Mukařovský, the co-founder of the Prague Linguistic circle and later rector of Prague’s Charles University who had officially renounced structuralism in 1951¹⁶. This being only two years prior to the Prague Spring, a number of Mukařovský’s former students succeeded in what had been unthinkable for at least one and a half decades by editing not only a tome of their teacher’s war time writings¹⁷ but also a festschrift called

¹² The publisher’s archive is preserved by the Monument of National Literature, Prague [Památník národního písemnictví, PNP]. All archival sources referred to hereafter form part of this collection. I would like to thank Jan Krejčí, Eva Jančevová, and Jana Färberová of the PNP for their help with locating and reproducing the materials in question. The collection is extremely voluminous; so far, it has been neither cataloged nor digitized.

¹³ Cf. letter by Jiří Levý to the editorial board of Československý spiovatel, April 4, 1966.

¹⁴ Cf. François Dosse, *History of Structuralism. Vol 1: The Rising Sign, 1945–1966*, trans. Deborah Glassman, Minneapolis, London, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 316.

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, “La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines,” in *L’écriture et la différence*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1967, 409–428; on the Baltimore conference see François Cusset, *French Theory. How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort, Minneapolis, London, University of Minnesota Press, 2008, p. 28–32.

¹⁶ Cf. Jan Mukařovský, “Ke kritice strukturalismu v naší literární vědě,” *Tvorba*, vol. 20, no. 40, 1951, p. 964–65.

¹⁷ Jan Mukařovský, *Studie z Estetiky*, ed. Květoslav Chvatík, Praha, Odeon, 1966; other members

Structure and Meaning of the Literary Work [Struktura a smysl literárního díla] that aimed specifically at eventually acknowledging Mukařovský's contribution to literary studies and aesthetic theory¹⁸. Additionally, this was accompanied by the (re)issuing of several publications dedicated to the avantgarde literature and art that had been closely entangled with the work of the Prague Linguistic Circle¹⁹.

As I argue, even though it would be gradually superseded by more recent and much more contemporary theorizing carried mostly by a younger generation of scholars, this initial retrospectivity of the structuralist “recovery” is highly significant and very much in tune with a more general societal desire to come to terms with the recent past and, specifically, with the history of Czechoslovak communism. Historians usually limit this to the 1960s investigation of Stalinist crimes and the rehabilitation of the victims of the show trials of the previous decade²⁰. With regard to the history of theory, however, this meant, most importantly, to reconsider the relationship between Marxism and structuralism that, since the Communist seize of power in 1948, had essentially been propagated as mutually exclusive. This is why, for some, the engagement with texts that were not only structuralist but also written by authors affiliated with or at least sympathetic towards the French Communist Party almost offered itself as a “healing” of sorts²¹.

of the Prague Linguistic Circle, too, were the subject of renewed editorial efforts, although to a much lesser degree. Cf. for example Vilém Mathesius, *Řeč a Sloh*, ed. Josef Vachek, Praha, Československý spisovatel, 1966.

¹⁸ Milan Jankovič, Zdeněk Pešat, and Felix Vodička (eds.), *Struktura a smysl literárního díla. Janu Mukařovskému k 75. narozeninám*, Praha, Československý spisovatel, 1966.

¹⁹ Květoslav Chvatík and Zdeněk Pešat (eds.), *Poetismus*, Praha, Odeon, 1967; Petr Král (ed.), *Karel Teige a Film*, Praha, Filmový ústav, 1967; Stanislav Dvorský (ed.), *Surrealistické výcho-disko 1938–1968*, Praha, Československý spisovatel, 1969; Květoslav Chvatík, *Strukturalismus a Avantgarda*, Praha, Československý spisovatel, 1970; on the nature and scope of the Prague Linguistic Circle's entanglement with avantgarde literature see e.g. Jindřich Toman, *The Magic Of a Common Language. Jakobson, Mathesius, Trubetzkoy, and the Prague Linguistic Circle*, Cambridge (Mass.), London: The MIT Press, 1995, p. 217–242.

²⁰ See, for instance, the chapter “Vergangenheit im Prager Frühling” in Martin Schulze Wessel, *Der Prager Frühling. Aufbruch in Eine Neue Welt*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 2018, p. 20–51 as well as Martin Schulze Wessel, *Zeitordnungen des Prager Frühlings. Erwartungshorizonte und Erfahrungsräume einer gescheiterten Revolution*, ed. Christian Lübke, Wien, Böhlau, 2022.

²¹ A prime example for this is a volume called *Parisian Conversations on Structuralism* [Pařížské rozhovory o strukturalismu]. Published in 1969, it was the product of a collaboration between the Prague-based scholar Mojmir Grygar and the journalist and art historian Pierre Daix who was then the editor in chief of Louis Aragon's journal *Les lettres françaises* which was financed by the

Pre-Dating French Structuralism

As indicated by its somewhat awkward composite title, *Nulový stupeň rukopisu— Základy sémiologie*, included not one but two texts by Barthes that not only differed in terms of content and style but also belonged to very different periods of the author’s career: *Writing Degree Zero* and *Elements of Semiology*. Barthes’ debut *Writing Degree Zero* dates back to 1953, thus, to a time when the author presented himself as a political rather than a structuralist writer. After years spent in sanatoriums as well as in Romania and Egypt, Barthes had just returned to a “productive life” [« vie productive »] in France²². In Bucharest, he had witnessed the fall of a conservative monarchy and the proclamation of a socialist people’s republic, and despite the overt xenophobia and homophobia of the new regime he had followed these events rather sympathetically²³. In Alexandria, he had been very much considered as a communist, especially after he had once used the word “bourgeois” in a public lecture²⁴. And, last but not least, most of the essays that later formed individual chapters of *Writing Degree Zero* had first been published in explicitly political journals such as, for instance, Camus’ *Combat*. The book itself obviously aimed at mediating between existentialist and orthodox Marxist positions, echoing, among others,

French Communist Party. In 1967 and 1968, Daix had payed several visits to the Czechoslovak capital, closely observing the country’s political and cultural changes leading up to the Prague Spring. Besides accounting for his journalistic interest, Daix’s writings at the time also reveal the extent to which the reform process launched by the Czechoslovak Communist Party served as a ‘healing’ for his own disenchantment with communism; in many ways, this is exemplary for the reception of the Prague Spring by French left-wing intellectuals. Cf. Mojmír Grygar (ed.), *Pařížské Rozhovory o Strukturalismu*, Praha: Nakladatelství Svoboda, 1969 and, especially the introductory “Prague Conversation” [“Pražský rozhovor”] between Grygar and Daix, p. 5–22. The reportages and essays written during Daix’s trips were eventually published in two books. Cf. Pierre Daix, *Journal de Prague. Décembre 1967–Septembre 1968*, Paris, Julliard, 1968 and *Prague Au Cœur*, Paris, Union générale d’éditions, 1974. The latter is particularly interesting for it also contains several texts written after 1968; together, they perfectly illustrate the extent to which the crushing of the Prague Spring sealed the turning-away of the French intellectual scene not only from the Soviet Union but also from communism at large. For this, see also Grémion, Pierre: *Paris–Prague. La gauche face au renouveau et à la régression tchécoslovaque, 1968–1978*, Paris, Julliard, 1984.

²² Roland Barthes, *Œuvres complètes, vol 4: 1972–1976*, ed. Éric Marty, Paris: Seuil, 2002, p. 582.

²³ Cf. Louis-Jean Calvet, *Roland Barthes. 1915–1980*, Paris: Flammarion, 1990, p. 110–18. Regarding Barthes’ stay in Bucharest and the subsequent reception of his works in Romania see Alexandru Matei, “Roland Barthes and the Reception of French Structuralism in Socialist Romania”, *Ekphrasis*, no. 1, 2018, p. 66–80 as well as Alexandru Matei, *Roland Barthes: Mitologii românești, urmate de fântâna barthesiană*, București, Editura Art, 2017.

²⁴ Cf. Calvet, *op. cit.*, p. 119–120.

Sartre's notion of engagement as well as his writings on Camus²⁵. To most East Central European readers, however, *Writing Degree Zero* appeared "marxizing" rather than actually Marxist²⁶.

The second text, *Elements of Semiology*, on the other hand, was the byproduct of a series of seminars Barthes had taught at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in the early sixties. Initially not written for publication at all, the text had been first released in 1964 in an Italian translation by Einaudi in Mailand²⁷ and then, a few months later, in French by the journal *Communications*²⁸. Unlike *Writing Degree Zero*, it was not a polemical and, even less so, a political—or politicizing—text but proof of Barthes' considerable approximation with French academic language in the sixties. It explicitly aimed at systematizing the field of structural linguistics, literary theory, and semiology which had become rather crowded due to the feverish activities of the previous years. The expressed goal was to lay the foundations of a new "translinguistic" [« translinguistique »]²⁹ discipline that would eventually also include non-verbal sign systems. This foundational claim was nowhere as apparent as in the text's title and its allusion to both Tesnière's 1959 *Elements of Structural Syntax* [« Éléments de syntaxe structurale »] and Martinet's seminal book *Elements of a General Linguistics* [« Éléments de linguistique générale »] published in 1961³⁰. Unlike the polemical language of *Writing Degree Zero* that often bordered with essayistic forms and treated linguistic and philosophical terminology rather freely, *Elements of Semiology* presented as highly scientific.

²⁵ This applies, most importantly, to Sartre's essay « Explication de l'Étranger », *Situations I*, Paris: Librairie Gallimard 1947, p. 99–121. For an English translation see Jean-Paul Sartre, "An Explication of the Stranger," trans. Annette Michelson, n.d., https://waxwing.no/sysprv/sartre_explication_stranger.html.

²⁶ Cf. the Polish literary scholar Jan Błoński in the preface to his translation of Barthes' *Mythologies*. Jan Błoński, "Słowo wstępne," in *Mit i Znak*, Warszawa, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1970, p. 5–21, esp. p. 10; for the Czech context see, retrospectively, Josef Fulka, "Překlad Barthesových Mytologií: mezi marxismem a sémiologie," in *Český překlad II (1945–2004)*, Praha, Univerzita Karlova, Filozofická fakulta, 2005, p. 351–358.

²⁷ For background information on this Italian publication see Umberto Eco, "La maestria de Barthes," in *Mitologie di Roland Barthes. I testi e gli atti (Convegno di Reggio Emilia, 13–14 Aprile 1984)*, ed. by Paolo Fabbri and Isabella Pazzini, Parma, Pratiche, 1986, p. 300.

²⁸ Roland Barthes, « Éléments de Sémiologie » *Communications*, no. 4, 1964, p. 91–135.

²⁹ Cf. (with reference to Benveniste) Roland Barthes, *Œuvres complètes, vol 3: 1968–1971*, ed. Éric Marty, Paris, Seuil, 2002, p. 611–612.

³⁰ Lucien Tesnière, *Éléments de syntaxe structurale*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1959; André Martinet, *Éléments de linguistique générale*, Paris, Colin, 1961.

As we learn from the bibliographical data included in *Nulový stupeň rukopisu—Základy sémiologie*, the Czech translation was based neither on the first edition of *Writing Degree Zero* nor on the periodical version of *Elements of Semiology* but on a recent republication of Barthes’ début by the Parisian publisher Édition Gonthier that had also included *Elements of Semiology* as an addendum³¹.

There, the two texts had been accompanied by a commentary written by Barthes himself in which he explained this surprising pairing. It is worth quoting this commentary in its entirety:

Ten years separate the two texts collected here. The first (*Le Degré Zéro de l’Écriture*) dates from 1953; it is a free reflection on the historical condition of literary language [...]. The second text (*Éléments de Sémiologie*) appeared in 1964 [...]; it is a didactic text [...]: it assumes, after Saussure, the existence of a new discipline, semiology or the science of meanings, and describes the concepts of structural linguistics that can help develop it; as structuralism is now tending to penetrate the human sciences, we thought it might be useful to give a reasoned terminology. These two texts have neither the same tone nor the same subject; but perhaps they have the same object: I mean, they both deal with the same important, if little-known, fact of language, called connotation. Connotation is the development of a second meaning, on any sign system; the phenomenon is observed in the first text [...] and analyzed in the second [...]. It is this unity of concern that has led us to publish two very different texts together³².

³¹ Cf. Roland Barthes, *Nulový stupeň rukopisu*, *op. cit.*, p. 48; Roland Barthes, *Le Degré zéro de l’écriture (suivi de Éléments de sémiologie)*, Paris, Éditions Gonthier, 1965.

³² « Dix années séparent les deux textes qui sont réunis ici. Le premier (*Le Degré Zéro de l’Écriture* [sic]) date de 1953; c’est une réflexion libre sur la condition historique du langage littéraire [...]. Le second texte (*Éléments de Sémiologie* a paru en 1964 [...]; c’est un texte didactique [...]: on y suppose, après Saussure, l’existence d’une discipline noucelle, la sémiologie ou science des significations et l’on y décrit les concepts de la linguistique structurale qui peuvent aider à la développer; comme le structuralisme tend aujourd’hui à pénétrer dans les sciences humaines, on a pensé qu’il pouvait être utile d’en donner une terminologie raisonnée. Ces deux textes n’ont ni le même ton ni le même sujet; mails ils ont peut-être le même objet; je veux dire qu’ils traitent tous du d’un même fait de langage, important, semble-t-il, quoique mal connu, qu’on appelle connotations. La connotation est le développement d’un sens second, sur n’importe quel système de signe; le phénomène est constaté dans le premier texte [...] et analysé dans le second [...]. C’est cette unité de préoccupation qui a amené à publier ensemble deux textes bien différents. R.B. » Barthes, *Le Degré Zéro de l’écriture (suivi de Éléments de sémiologie)*, *op. cit.*, p. 5–6 (My translation).

Thus, what Barthes was doing here, was that he reread *Writing Degree Zero* through the lens of *Elements of Semiology*, thereby implying that his turning to structuralism had already taken place at the time of writing his debut, thus, in the early 1950s. While this was in tune with some of his friends and colleagues claiming that his structuralist “conversion” had already happened in 1949 when he had first encountered Greimas in Alexandria and had followed the latter’s recommendation to read Saussure, Jakobson, Hjelmslev and Brøndal,³³ it was very much at odds with his own writings that dated this turn to the second half of the 1950s³⁴ or even the mid-sixties³⁵. The Czech edition, however, happily followed this implication and, as will become clear below, even hypostasized it to an extent that made Barthes’ 1953 debut appear as an immediate successor to the work of the Prague Linguistic Circle which, despite many of its key figures emigrating or passing away years before and publications having become rather sparse, had officially ceased operations only in 1952.

The translation reproduced Barthes’ editorial commentary in full length and printed it onto the book’s dust cover, thus in a location that, as Genette reminds us, is particularly suited to feature “spectacular” [« spectaculaire »] and catchy information, that is, at once, programmatic and a marketing device³⁶. What we can gather from this is that, in 1967 Czechoslovakia, structuralism sold. Or, to put it differently, a book by a hitherto little-known French theorist was most likely to find its customers when marketed as being related to the contemporary revival of interwar structuralism.

Personal Continuities: Jiří Levý and the Making of the Czech Barthes

As I have mentioned above, *Nulový stupeň rukopisu – Základy sémiologie* was published in 1967 by Československý spisovatel [The Czechoslovak Writer], the publishing house of the country’s writers’ association. It formed part of a series called “The Workshop Edition” [Edice Dílna] which, according to some, exemplified the “gradual liberation of literary studies from the stigmas of the Stalinist period” [*postupného osvobození literární vědy od stigmat stalinistického*

³³ For Barthes’ meeting with Greimas in Alexandria see Calvet, *op cit.*, p. 121–124; see also Michel Arrivé, “Saussure, Barthes, Greimas,” *Modèles linguistiques* vol. 21–1, no. 41, 2000, p. 19–37.

³⁴ Cf. Roland Barthes in his preface to the reedition of *Mythologies*: Roland Barthes, *Œuvres complètes, vol. 1. 1942–1961*, ed. Éric Marty, Paris, Seuil, 2002, p. 673.

³⁵ Cf. Roland Barthes, *Œuvres complètes, vol., op. cit.* p. 718–719.

³⁶ Gérard Genette, *Seuils*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2007, p. 32.

období]³⁷. Founded in 1959, its early volumes were still very much in line with the official theoretical premises of the fifties, including, among others, Milan Kundera’s early and very much Stalinist version of *The Art of the Novel* [*Umění románu*, 1960]³⁸. Over the course of the sixties, though, it would include more and more translations, such as Garaudy’s *Realism Without Borders* [*Réalisme sans Rivage; Realismus bez břehu*, 1965] or Bakhtin’s Dostoyevsky book³⁹ as well as structuralist writings by local authors⁴⁰. Right before it was upended for political reasons in 1971, the series would even feature a translation of Lévi-Strauss’ *The Savage Mind* [*La pensée sauvage; Myšlení přírodních národů*, 1971]⁴¹.

At first glance, *Nulový stupeň rukopisu – Základy sémiologie* was the work of three people. The first one was Josef Čermák who was responsible for translating *Writing Degree Zero*. Interestingly, at that time, he was primarily known as a specialist of Prague German literature and especially of Kafka. In 1963, he had contributed to Goldstücker’s famous conference in Liblice⁴². Later, he would edit Kafka’s correspondence as well as a beautifully designed collection of facsimile documents from the writer’s personal archive⁴³. In the late 1960s,

³⁷ Michal Přibáň, “Československý spisovatel,” *Slovník české literatury po roce 1945*, 2013, <https://slovníkceskeliteratury.cz/showContent.jsp?docId=1635> [May 7, 2025].

³⁸ Milan Kundera, *Umění románu: cesta Vladislava Vančury za velkou epikou*, Edice Dílna, vol. 2, Praha, Československý spisovatel, 1960.

³⁹ Roger Garaudy, *Realismus bez břehů: Picasso-Saint-John Perse-Kafka*, trans. Eva Janovcová, Jiří Kolář, and Anna Šabatková, Edice Dílna, vol. 14, Praha, Československý spisovatel, 1965; Michail Bakhtin, *Dostojevskij Umělec. K Poetice Prózy*, trans. Jiří Honzík, Edice Dílna, vol. 37, Praha, Československý spisovatel, 1971; other translated titles include Louis Aragon, *Básník a skutečnost. Výbor z literárněkritických a teoretických statí*, trans. Antonín Liehm, Petr Kopta, and Jiří Taufer, Edice Dílna, vol. 9, Praha, 1963; René Girard, *Lež romantismu a pravda románu*, trans. Anna Šabatková, Edice Dílna, vol. 32, Praha, Československý spisovatel, 1968; Roman Ingarden, *O poznávání literárního díla*, trans. Hana Jechová, Edice Dílna, vol. 30, Praha, Československý spisovatel, 1967.

⁴⁰ Zdeněk Mathauser, *Umění poezie. Vladimír Majakovskij a jeho doba*, Edice Dílna, vol. 16, Praha, Československý spisovatel, 1964; Miroslav Červenka, *Symboly, písně a mýty. Studie o proměnách českého lyrického slohu na přelomu století (Sova, Březina, Neumann, Gellner, Toman)*, Edice Dílna, vol. 22, Praha, Československý spisovatel, 1966; Zdeněk Kožmín, *Umění stylu. Úloha jazyka v současné próze*, Edice Dílna, vol. 28, Praha, Československý spisovatel, 1967.

⁴¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Myšlení přírodních národů*, trans. Jiří Pechar, Edice Dílna, vol. 34, Praha, Československý spisovatel, 1971.

⁴² Josef Čermák, “Zpráva o neznámých kafkovských dokumentech,” in *Franz Kafka. Liblická vědecká konference 1963*, Praha, Nakladatelství Československé akademie věd, 1963, p. 249–253.

⁴³ Josef Čermák, *Zápas jménem psaní. O životním údělu Franze Kafky*, Brno: B4U, 2009; for a German translation see Josef Čermák, “*Ich habe seit jeher einen gewissen Verdacht gegen mich*

Čermák taught at Prague's Charles University under Václav Černý, the founder of Czechoslovak comparative literature, who had been banned from teaching for political reasons in 1951 and temporarily returned to his chair between 1968 and 1970. After the invasion, Čermák, too, was banned from teaching and went on to work as an editor and later editor-in-chief at the "Odeon" publishing house, which some have considered a sort of "shadow university" due to its post-1968 systematic hiring of dismissed scholars from all areas of the humanities⁴⁴. On top of this, he translated German and French literature as well as philosophical and scholarly texts by authors such as Kafka, Sartre, and LeGoff. For Čermák, this was the first time translating Barthes. In contrast, the second translator, Josef Dubský, was a Romance scholar by training. In the 1950s and 60s he had primarily worked on questions of lexicography, although his focus was on Spanish rather than French. As we learn from documents preserved in the publisher's archive, he was appointed mostly due to his intimate knowledge of Romance linguistic terminology⁴⁵. Just like for Čermák, for Dubský, this was also the very first translational encounter with Barthes. The third name associated with the book, on the other hand, is Vladimír Mikeš who authored the afterword. Another student of Černý, he earned his living as a freelance translator of French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and German literature. In the 1970s and 80s, he also served as a so-called *pokrývač* [lit. "roofer"], thus as someone who lent his name to others who were banned from publishing for political reasons⁴⁶.

When it comes to the question of how the translation related to the revival of interwar structuralism, this cast is thus rather unrevealing. In fact, this link is only revealed by documents preserved in the publisher's archive, thereby illustrating the value of archival materials not only for the history of theory

gebabt" : *Franz Kafka – Dokumente zu Leben und Werk*, trans. Rolf Stimmen, Berlin, Frankfurt am Main, Parthas/Stroemfeld, 2010.

⁴⁴ Josef Forbelský in *Slovo za slovem. S překladateli o překládání*, ed. Stanislav Rubáš, Praha, Academia, 2012, p. 89; see also the conversation with Josef Čermák, *idem*, p. 28–30.

⁴⁵ Letter by Jiří Levý to the editorial board of *Československý spisovatel*, April 4, 1966.

⁴⁶ For an extended discussion of this practice within the context of theory translation see Anna Förster, "A Rather Secretive Affair". Walter Benjamin in Post-1968 Czechoslovakia," in *Walter Benjamin in the European East. Networks, Conflicts, and Reception*, ed. Caroline Adler and Sophia Buck, London and New York, Routledge, forthcoming 2025; for a detailed bibliography of allonymic translation practices in post-1968 Czechoslovakia see Zdeňka Rachůnková (ed.), *Zamlčování překladatelé. Bibliografie 1948–1989*, Praha: Ivo Železný, 1992.

but also for translation history⁴⁷. For what is revealed by these documents and, particularly the publisher’s correspondence, is that there was, in fact, a crucial overlap between the actors of the structuralist renaissance and the translation of French theory. Given that these materials have never been thoroughly studied, it is hardly surprising that, so far, this connection has not yet been commented on. The person I am referring to is Jiří Levý (1926–1967), one of the key figures of the 1960s structuralist revival and the “founder of Czechoslovak translation studies”⁴⁸. A couple of years earlier, he had published his famous book *The Art of Translation* [*Umění překladu*] which, for the first time ever, applied some of the core principles of the Prague Linguistic Circle to questions of literary translation. Remarkably, this book had been published as one of the first titles of the very *Workshop* edition which later included the Barthes volume, setting both the series’ structuralist tone and its interest in translation⁴⁹. Additionally, in 1966 and again within the same series, Levý had released an anthology called *Western Literary Studies and Aesthetics* [*Západní literární věda a estetika*] which featured essays on the state of literary theory in Great Britain, USA, France, Italy, Spain, the German-speaking countries, and Scandinavia⁵⁰. In some cases, this was combined with translations of original writings viewed as representative for their respective contexts of origin. While in the Anglo-American case, this role was attributed to the early 20th century New Humanism, the Neo-Aristotelianism of the 1930s Chicago School, and the beginnings of New Criticism, the German-speaking world was represented by the war-time writings of Leo Spitzer, Erich Auerbach, and Emil Staiger. In

⁴⁷ On the significance of archival material for the historiography of theory see Danuta Ulicka, “Zwrot archiwalny: Jak ja go widzę,” *Teksty Drugie*, no. 1–2 (121–122), 2010, p. 159–64; for a similar discussion within the context of translation history see Anthony Pym, *Method in Translation History*, London and New York, Routledge, 2015, p. 5; as well as Christopher Rundle, “Historiography,” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, London and New York, Routledge, 2020, p. 232–237.

⁴⁸ Ivana Kupková et al., *Jiří Levý. Zakladatel Československé Translatologie*, Brno, Masarykova univerzita, 2019.

⁴⁹ Jiří Levý, *Umění Překladu*, Edice Dílna, vol. 10, Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1963. Very soon after being released, the book was translated into German; an English translation, however, was published only four decades later. Cf. Jiří Levý, *Die literarische Übersetzung. Theorie einer Kunstgattung*, trans. Walter Schamschula, Frankfurt am Main, Athenäum, 1969; Jiří Levý, *The Art of Translation*, ed. Zuzana Jettmarová, trans. Patrick Corness, Amsterdam, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2011.

⁵⁰ Jiří Levý (ed.), *Západní literární věda a estetika*, Edice Dílna, vol. 22, Praha, Československý spisovatel, 1966.

the French case, on the other hand, the choice fell onto no one else but Roland Barthes and a translation of his 1963 piece “The two criticism” [« Les deux critiques »] which would later be included in his *Critical Essays*⁵¹.

This choice is significant in so far, as it demonstrates that in mid-1960s Czechoslovakia, French theory was addressed in geopolitical rather than in national or topical terms. It remains unclear whether this was Levý's own choice or a concession to the publisher's internal censorship authorities which would not be abandoned until two years later, in April 1968. In any case, Levý justified this decision by explaining that the main goal of the anthology was to grant access to theoretical contexts Czechoslovak literary theory had lost contact with “practically before World War II” [*prakticky před druhou světovou válkou*]⁵². On the other hand, though, Levý's choice of texts is remarkable for it shows that, while the Anglosaxons, Germans, and Italians were represented mostly by pre-war and, thus, *past* writings, theory's *present* and future were clearly identified with France. And, most importantly, with Roland Barthes whose intellectual trajectory was presented as possessing almost predictive qualities. As Levý wrote:

from critical interpretations of certain tendencies of French literature [...] through a rational analysis of myths [...], he [i.e. Barthes] has moved on to a structural conception of the literary work [...] and in recent years to a semiological analysis of art [...]; I believe that this is the developmental direction that all methodologically progressive literary science will take⁵³.

This positioning was further developed and specified in an essay called “Czechoslovak Structuralism and its International Context” [*Československý strukturalismus a zahraniční kontext*] in which Levý returned both to the New Humanism, the Chicago School, and early New Criticism and to French structuralism. But while the former three were conceptualized as contemporaries of the Prague Linguistic Circle, the latter was very much addressed as “another

⁵¹ Roland Barthes, “Dvě kritiky,” *op. cit.*, p. 205–210.

⁵² Jiří Levý, “Úvodem,” *op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁵³ “od kritických interpretací některých tendencí francouzské literatur [...] přes racionální analýzu mýtů [...] přešel ke strukturnímu pojetí literárního díla [...] a v posledních letech k sémiologické analýze umění [...]; domnívám se, že to je vývojový směr, kterým bude procházet celá metodologicky progresivní literární věda.“ Jiří Levý, “K metodologické situaci a pracovním výsledkům západní literární vědy”, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

developmental stage” [další vývojov[á] etap[a]] of what had begun in Prague almost four decades earlier⁵⁴. It is important to note that this paper was published nowhere else than in *Structure and Meaning of the Literary Work* [Struktura a smysl literárního díla], the 1966 festschrift for Mukařovský that marked the return of structuralism into public discourse. It is, thus, appropriate to claim that this take on French structuralism was very much representative for mid-1960s Czechoslovak structuralist literary studies as a whole. This also applies, again, to the central role that was being attributed to Roland Barthes. According to this reading, his work demonstrated in an exemplary manner how, under different and more favorable historical and political circumstances, Czechoslovak structuralism itself would have most likely further developed⁵⁵. Engaging with and translating Roland Barthes was, thus, essentially perceived as contributing to a counterfactual history of domestic theory.

As I argue, this is the background against which Levý’s involvement in the making of *Nulový stupeň rukopisu* is to be considered. As we can gather from the archival materials, it was thanks to him that the editors of the *Workshop* series first came into contact with Barthes’ writings. He was also responsible for the decision to translate not only *Writing Degree Zero* but to combine it with the more recent and scientific *Elements of Semiology*⁵⁶. As we will see below, this retrospectively bestowed the earlier text with the very qualities that were seen as proving the historical continuity between the work of the Prague Linguistic Circle and French structuralism. In addition, Levý was the one who mediated the contacts between the publisher and the translators and—drawing upon his own personal library—provided them with the source text as well as with other writings by Barthes⁵⁷. Also, throughout the entire translation process, he functioned as a theoretical and terminological advisor⁵⁸. And, if it had not been for his unexpected death in early 1967, he would have also been responsible for the final assessment of the translation⁵⁹.

⁵⁴ Jiří Levý, “Československý strukturalismus a zahraniční kontext,” in *Struktura a smysl literárního díla*, ed. Felix Vodička, Milan Jankovič, and Zdeněk Pešat, Praha, 1966, p. 58–69.

⁵⁵ Cf. *idem*, p. 62.

⁵⁶ Cf. Letter by Bohumil Dolžal to Jiří Levý, May 2, 1966.

⁵⁷ Cf. *ibid*; see also letter by Bohumil Doležel to Josef Dubský, May 2, 1966

⁵⁸ Cf., for example, letter by Otakar Mohyla [?, signature illegible] to Jiří Levý, January 11, 1967.

⁵⁹ Levý passed away only six days after Československý spisovatel had mailed him the finished manuscript. Even though the print release would not be issued until mid-October, the publisher was unable to find another competent reviewer; the final assessment was, thus, conducted internally. Given that Mikeš was commissioned with the writing of the afterword only in March, it is

Mobilizing Historical Terminology

Unsurprisingly, all of this was not without consequence for Čermák's and Dubský's translational work and especially for their treatment of Barthes' terminology. Unlike the case of many other languages at the time, translating French structuralist writings into Central European languages and, especially into Czech, meant that translators were able to revert to an established terminological repertoire that was not only preexisting but also drew on the same authors and source texts as the French structuralist theory of the 1960s. Besides Russian Formalism, the most important ones were, of course, Saussure and his *Course in General Linguistics*. Surprisingly, a complete translation of the *Course* into Czech was not published until 1989, thus, much later than, for instance its German, English, Polish, or Italian versions⁶⁰. This was probably due to the Prague Linguistic Circle's multilingual character and the central role the group attributed to French⁶¹. This did not mean, of course, that other languages were not used at all. In fact, most of the internal, especially

likely that this task had been originally meant to fall onto Levý, too. Cf. *ibid*; see also the contract between Československý spisovatel and Vladimír Mikeš, signed March 30, 1967; the final review by Doležal, undated; as well as the formal issuing of the print release, dated October 18, 1967.

⁶⁰ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Grundfragen der allgemeinen Sprachwissenschaft*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Hermann Lommel, Berlin, W. De Gruyter & Co., 1931; Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Wade Baskin, New York, Philosophical Library, 1959; Ferdinand de Saussure, *Kurs językoznawstwa Ogólnego*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Krystyna Kasprzyk, Warszawa, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1961; Ferdinand de Saussure, *Corso di linguistica generale*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Tullio di Mauro, Bari, Editori Laterza, 1967; Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Roy Harris, London: Duckworth, 1983. Interestingly, though, the very first translation of the *Cours* was published neither in Europe nor in North America but in Japan in 1928. A Russian translation was prepared in 1922 within the context of the Moscow Linguistic Circle. Due to disagreements with Bally and Sechehaye, however, it was never finished and a retranslation was eventually published in 1933. Cf. Asuka Matsumoto, « Traductions japonaises de la terminologie linguistique dans le Cours de linguistique générale – les rapports entre langage/langue/parole, parole/parlant/parlé et phonation/articulation », p. 50–76 as well as Cathérine Genty-Depretto, « Une page inédite de l'histoire de la linguistique. La première traduction russe du Cours de linguistique générale de Ferdinand de Saussure », *Revue des études slaves*, vol. 54, no. 4, 1982, p. 757–762.

⁶¹ For the linguistic diversity of the Prague Linguistic Circle and the internal distribution of its various working languages see Klaas-Hinrich Ehlers, "Deutsch und Französisch als tschechische Wissenschaftssprachen in der Ersten Republik: Die Sprachen des Prager Linguistik-Zirkels. Kurt Kropol Zum 65. Geburtstag," *Brücken. Neue Folge*, vol. 4, 1996, p. 105–133.

in-person communication between the members happened in Czech. When it came to communicating across language barriers, though, for many of the local members as well as their immigrant colleagues of Soviet origin, German was a much more natural choice. And English, too, played a considerable role, not least because some of the founding members had an academic background in English studies⁶². French, however, served as the institutional written language of the Circle and, most importantly, was chosen for its internationally renowned journal *Travaux linguistiques du Cercle de Prague* which was founded in 1929. Accordingly, the engagement with Saussure’s terminology and the question of how to adapt it to the needs of local linguistics and literary studies did not happen all that much on the level of actual translation but within the Circles’ Czech-language publications. In the case of Barthes, another important source shared with the Prague Linguistic Circle was the work of the Copenhagen group and, especially, of Hjelmslev and Brøndal⁶³.

When it came to translating Roland Barthes in the 1960s, the consequence of this pre-existing vocabulary was twofold. On the one hand, compared to other countries and languages, translation was much easier for there was fewer need to coin new terms or to revert to commentary operations meant to compensate for gaps in the theoretical lexicon. Even if this later changed under the influence of poststructuralism and, especially, deconstruction, initially, in the 1960s, this led to a translation practice that was very different from the one that Barthes’ writings became known for, most importantly, in the Anglophone world. There, his writings from the 1950s and 60s were the first ones to undergo a process of significant translatory exoticization aimed at underlining their conceptual novelty by highlighting their Frenchness⁶⁴. A very similar situation occurred in Germany where Barthes’ writings began to be translated even earlier, in the late 1950s⁶⁵. However, as one of his translators would later recall, the exoticized language of Barthes’ writings remained strangely “unrelated” [*beziehungslos*] to local discourse at least until the late 1960s or early 70s⁶⁶. For some, these

⁶² This applied, most importantly, to Vilém Mathesius, but also to the linguist Bohumil Trnka. Levý, too, had originally graduated with a degree in both Czech and English literature and linguistics.

⁶³ Cf., for instance, Vladimír Skalička, “Kodaňský Strukturalismus a ‘Pražská Škola,’” *Slovo a slovesnost*, vol 10, no. 3, 1948, p. 135–142.

⁶⁴ Cf., among others, Cusset, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

⁶⁵ Roland Barthes, *Am Nullpunkt der Literatur. Objektive Literatur. Zwei Essays*, trans. Helmut Scheffel, Hamburg, Claassen, 1959.

⁶⁶ Horst Brühmann, “Als Diskussionsgrundlage für Großstadtbüchereien empfohlen. Zu

early translations even read as if they were not German at all but written in a hermetic “French theorese” [*Franzosen-theoretisch*] that “suggests a mysterious in-between-thinking that does not say exactly what it means, and at the same time lets us suspect that it can only say what it means as something that remains unsaid”⁶⁷.

The Czech translators, however, were able to translate Barthes’ early writings in a way that made them blend in almost seamlessly with the renewed local structuralist discourse. While this did not mean that Czech scholars agreed with everything Barthes came up with—there was significant disagreement, for instance, with his notions of structure and signification⁶⁸—it did mean that, instead of dwelling on his language and style, the debate went straight to the conceptual level of his writings. On the other hand, though, this also meant that some of the actually existing peculiarities of his early writings were largely overlooked. This applied, most importantly, to the very peculiar way he engaged with the terminological apparatus of structural linguistics. Let’s remember, for an instant, the scathing criticism his early writings had received from French academic linguistics. The most prominent—and brutal—statement in this regard came from the linguist Georges Mounin who dedicated an entire chapter of his 1970 book *Introduction to Semiology* [*Introduction à la sémiologie*] to the analysis of Barthes’ terminology⁶⁹. In the 1950s, Mounin claimed, Barthes had lacked any understanding of even the most basic concepts of structural linguistics like “language” and “sign,” let alone more specific ones such as the Saussurean differentiation between « langue » and « parole » or “signifier” and “signified” or Hjemslev’s dichotomy of “denotation” and “connotation”. Barthes’ use of these terms, Mounin said, was a “linguistic decalcomania” that essentially resembled the crafting technique by which engravings or prints are transferred from one material to the other as well as the related surrealist practice aimed at producing more or less random surfaces and structures of paint⁷⁰.

Übersetzung und Rezeption der Mythen des Alltags in Deutschland,” in *Mythen des Alltags – Mythologies. Roland Barthes’ Klassiker der Kulturwissenschaften*, ed. Mona Körte and Anne-Kathrin Reulecke, Berlin, Kadmos, 2014, p. 32.

⁶⁷ Lothar Baier, *Französische Zustände. Berichte Und Essays*, Frankfurt am Main, Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1982, p. 23.

⁶⁸ See for example Julie Štěpánková, “O strukturaci v současném strukturalismu francouzském a ve strukturalismu českém,” *Česká literatura* vol. 16, no. 5, 1968, p. 588–589.

⁶⁹ Cf. Georges Mounin, « La Sémiologie de Roland Barthes », in *Introduction à la sémiologie*, Paris, Les Éditions du Minuit, 1970, p. 189–198.

⁷⁰ *Idem*, p. 196.

With regard to the 1960s and, in particular, to *Elements of Semiology*, Mounin did at least acknowledge Barthes’ efforts to close these gaps and to catch up on basic linguistic knowledge. However, for him, the result still resembled a “terminological [...] thicket” [maquis [...] terminologique] rather than a proper use of structuralist linguistic and semiological vocabulary⁷¹. Similar albeit less polemical comments were made, among others, by Paul de Man⁷². Later, Barthes’ peculiar use of linguistic terminology would be perceived much more favorably and viewed less as a lack of knowledge or a conceptual weakness but as a deliberate attempt to de-dogmatize structuralism. Referencing his idea of the myth as a “stolen language,” it would come to be seen as a creative “theft” of sorts, a repurposing of linguistic terminology with the goal of creating a myth of scientificity⁷³.

Czechoslovak linguists and literary scholars, on the other hand, did not seem to notice these peculiarities at all. And as I argue, this was precisely due to the translators’ confidence in terminologically assimilating Barthes into domestic structuralist discourse. Let me illustrate this by drawing on two examples. The first one has to do with how they treated Barthes’ use of Saussurean terminology and, especially, of his famous triad « langage »/« langue »/« parole ». In *Writing Degree Zero*, all three show up and can be understood as traces of Barthes’ earliest structuralist readings. In terms of conceptual meaning, however, they do mostly not correspond to their respective Saussurean definitions. Let’s take a look at a passage from *Writing Degree Zero*, taken from its first chapter “What is Writing?”. For clarity’s sake I, will first quote the French original together with its English translation by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith:

[T]oute Forme est aussi Valeur; c’est pourquoi entra *la langue* et le style, il y a place pour une autre réalité formelle: l’écriture. Dans n’importe quelle forme littéraire, il y a le choix général d’un ton, d’un éthos, si l’on veut, et c’est ici précisément que l’écrivain s’individualise clairement parce que c’est ici qu’il s’engage. *Langue* et style sont des données antécédents à toute problématique du *langage*, *langue* et style sont le produit naturel du Temps et de la personne biologique; mais l’identité

⁷¹ *Ibidem*.

⁷² Paul De Man, “Roland Barthes and the Limits of Structuralism,” *Yale French Studies*, no. 77, 1972 1990, p. 177–90.

⁷³ Cf. Bettina Lindorfer, “Mythen des Zeichens. Zur ‘ersten Semiologie’ bei Roland Barthes,” in *Mythen Des Alltags – Mythologies*, *op. cit.*, p. 25–40.

formelle de l'écrivain ne s'établit véritablement qu'en dehors de l'installation des normes de la grammaire et des constantes du style, là où le continu écrit, rassemblé et enfermé d'abord dans une nature linguistique parfaitement innocente, va devenir enfin un signe total, le choix d'un comportement humain, l'affirmation d'un certain Bien, s'engageant ainsi l'écrivain dans l'évidence et la communication d'un bonheur ou d'un malaise, et liant la forme à la fois normale et singulière de sa *parole* à la vaste Histoire d'autrui. *Langue* et style sont des forces aveugles; l'écriture est un acte de solidarité historique. *Langue* et style sont des objets; l'écriture est une fonction: elle est le rapport entre la création et la société, elle est le langage littéraire transformé par sa destination sociale, elle est la forme saisie dans son intention humaine et liée ainsi aux grandes crises de l'Histoire⁷⁴.

[E]very Form is also a Value, which is why there is room, between a *language* and a style, for another formal reality: writing. Within any literary form, there is a general choice of tone, of ethos, if you like, and this is precisely where the writer shows himself clearly as an individual because this is where he commits himself. A *language* and a style are data prior to all the problematics of *language*, they are the natural product of Time and of the person as a biological entity; but the formal identity of the writer is truly established only outside the permanence of grammatical norms and stylistic constants, where the written continuum, first collected and enclosed within a perfectly innocent linguistic nature, at last becomes a total sign, the choice of a human attitude, the affirmation of a certain Good. It thus commits the writer to manifest and communicate a state of happiness or malaise, and links the form of his *utterance*, which is at once normal and singular, to the vast History of others. A language and a style are blind forces; a mode of writing is an act of historical solidarity⁷⁵.

The « langue » this passage addresses and brings into polar opposition with “style” has very little in common with Saussure’s differentiation between language as a system of rules (« langue ») and this system’s concrete realization (« parole »). This is even more apparent as Barthes famously complements this binary with a third term—« écriture »—located half-way between « langue » and “style”. « [P]arole », too, makes an appearance in this passage, although, again, not so much in a Saussurean sense but with a somewhat narrower meaning, implying something like an individual or singular act of speech. The same applies

⁷⁴ Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1., *op. cit.* p. 179–80; italics are mine.

⁷⁵ Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, translated by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith, New York, Hill and Wang, 1967, p. 179–80.

to « langage ». While for Saussure, it denotes the human faculty of speech, here, it is used as an overarching term for « langue », “style,” and « écriture ».

As we can tell by the above quote, Barthes’ Anglophone translators Annette Lavers and Colin Smith do not at all read his vocabulary as being of Saussurean provenance. Or at least, as Lavers herself would later put it, they take its Saussurean ring “with a pinch of salt”⁷⁶. This leads them to not even bother to differentiate between « langage » and « langue », translating them invariably as « langage », whereas contemporary translations of Saussure’s *Cours* would have suggested to render « langue » as “language” and « parole » as “speaking”⁷⁷. « Parole », on the other hand, is translated as “utterance” which, to use somewhat Hjelmsevan terms, comes relatively close to the denotative meaning of Barthes’ text but deletes all of the original term’s Saussurean connotation. One could cite many other examples for this, but the effect would always remain the same: this “de-Saussureanation” consequently prevents the Anglophone *Writing Degree Zero* from being read as an early structuralist text⁷⁸.

⁷⁶ Annette Lavers, *Roland Barthes. Structuralism and After*, London, Methuen & Co, 1982, p. 52.

⁷⁷ Cf. Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 1959, *op. cit.*, among others p. 9, 13; a second translation was published in 1983 by Roy Harris, rendering « parole » as “speech” while using explanatory solutions such as “linguistic structure” or “language” as a structured system’ for « langue ». The difference between « langue » and « langage », on the other hand, was indicated by a varying use of direct, indirect, and zero articles. Cf. Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 1983, *op. cit.* For a comparison of both translations see Carol Sanders, “Saussure Translated,” *Historiographia Linguistica* vol. 27, no. 2–3, 2000, p. 345–58.

⁷⁸ A similar tendency can be observed in the 1959 German translation by Helmut Scheffel. There, the passage I have quoted above reads as follows: “Jede Form ist [...] auch ein Wert; deshalb besteht zwischen Sprache und Stil noch Raum für eine andere formale Realität: für die ‘Schreibweise’. In jeder beliebigen literarischen Form findet sich die allgemeine Wahl eines Tones, oder wenn man so will: eines Ethos, und hier individualisiert sich ein Schriftsteller eindeutig, denn hier engagiert er sich. Sprache und Stil liegen vor aller Problematik der persönlichen Ausdrucksweise. Sprache und Stil sind das natürliche Produkt der Zeit und der biologischen Person. Die formale Identität des Schriftstellers entfaltet sich wirkliche erst außerhalb der installierten grammatischen Normen und der Konstanten des Stils, dort, wo das geschriebene Ganze, das zunächst in einer sprachlich völlig unschuldigen Form zusammengefaßt ist, endlich zu einem totalen Zeichen wird, zu einer Wahl einer menschlichen Verhaltensweise, zur Affirmation eines bestimmten Gutes, den Schriftsteller engagierend, ein Glück oder ein Unbehagen evident zu machen oder mitzuteilen und gleichzeitig die sowohl normale als auch einmalige Form seines Sprechens an die weite Geschichte der anderen bindend. Sprache und Stil sind blinde Kräfte, die Schreibweise ist ein Akt historischer Solidarität [...]” Roland Barthes, *Am Nullpunkt der Literatur*, trans. Helmut Scheffel, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1982, p. 20.

In contrast to this, the Czech translation takes the opposite approach and very much turns the peculiar vocabulary of *Writing Degree Zero* into an orthodoxly structuralist terminology. There, the passage in question reads as follows:

[K]aždá forma je též hodnotou; proto je mezi *jazykem* a stylem místo pro jinou formální realitu: pro rukopis. V kterékoli literární formě je obecný výběr tónu, étosu, chcete-li, a právě zde se spisovatel jasně individualizuje, protože právě zde se angažuje. *Jazyk* a styl jsou danosti předcházející veškerou problematiku *řeči*, jazyk a styl jsou přirozeným produktem času a biologické osoby; avšak formální identita spisovatele opravdu vzniká až mimo stanovené gramatické normy a stylové konstanty, tam, kde se souvislost, napsaná, shromážděná a uzavřená nejprve ve zcela nevinné lingvistické přirozenosti, stane nakonec úplným znakem, volbou lidského postoje, přitakáním jistému Dobru, zavazujíc tak spisovatele k evidentnosti a k sdělování štěstí nebo znepokojení a spojujíc formu jeho *promluvy*, normální a zároveň zvláštní, s rozhlelou historií druhých lidí. *Jazyk* a styl jsou slepé síly; rukopis je akt historické solidarity⁷⁹.

If we were to retranslate this back into English, we would arrive at something like this:

[E]very form is also a value; therefore, there is room for another formal relation between *language* [« langue »] and style: writing [« écriture »]. In any literary form, there is a general choice of tone, of ethos, if you like, and it is here that the writer clearly individuates himself, because it is here that he engages. *Language* [« langue »] and style are givens prior to all issues of *human language* [« langage »]; *language* [« langue »] and style are the natural product of time and the biological person; but the formal identity of the writer really comes into being only outside the established grammatical norms and stylistic statements, where the context, written, collected, and enclosed at first in a quite innocent linguistic nature, becomes finally a complete sign, a choice of human attitude, an adherence to a certain Good, thus committing the writer to obviousness and to the communication of happiness or concern, and connecting the form of his *speech* [« parole »], normal and strange at the same time, with the vast history of other people. *Language* [« langue »] and style are blind forces; writing [« écriture »] is an act of historical solidarity.

⁷⁹ Barthes, *Nulový stupeň rukopisu*, *op. cit.*, p. 15–16.

If we look at the 1930s and 40s Czech-language writings of the Prague Linguistic Circle, we are presented with a very clear terminological apparatus. « Langue » was unanimously translated as ‘jazyk’, which was also the common language equivalent of “language,” while « parole » usually oscillated between “mluva” and “promluva”⁸⁰. The former denotes both the general ability to use language and spoken discourse in general⁸¹, while “promluva” may refer more specifically to an individual act of speech⁸². The hyperonymous « langue », on the other hand, was habitually replaced by the word “řeč,” which is partially synonymous with “mluva” but has a somewhat broader semantic range, at least in every-day language⁸³.

When translating *Writing Degree Zero*, Čermák very much reverted to this Saussurean terminology—and as we can tell by the passage quoted above and especially by comparing it to Lavers’ and Smith’s translation, he did so even in places where the source text considerably deviated from the Saussurean definition of those terms. So, for instance, when Lavers and Smith translated Barthes « parole » as “utterance” instead of as “speech,” Čermák reverted to “promluva,” thereby explicitly mobilizing the codified Saussurean lexicon. And—to name another example—while the Anglophone translators subsumed Barthes’ peculiar use of « langue » under an indistinguishable but ubiquitous “language,” their Czech colleagues opted for “řeč,” thereby reasserting not only the Saussurean connotation but also directly linking Barthes to the terminological apparatus of historical, interwar structuralism. Because as the linguist Eva Macháčková has pointed out, after World War II, “řeč” had been increasingly used not as an equivalent to « langue » but to « parole ». The most likely explanation for this was the increasing influence of Russian within Czechoslovak academia, for, in Russian, the Saussurean « parole » had always been translated as речи [“řeč”]⁸⁴. This is particularly interesting, for it means that

⁸⁰ Cf. Eva Macháčková, “O Názorech Na Dichotomii Langue a Parole (K Vývoji Pojetí Některých Základních Lingvistických Pojmů a Termínů),” *Slovo a slovesnost*, vol. 48, no. 3, 1987, p. 232–39; Eva Macháčková, “O Názorech Na Dichotomii Langue a Parole (2. Část) (K Vývoji Pojetí Některých Základních Lingvistických Pojmů a Termínů),” *Slovo a slovesnost*, vol. 50, no. 1, 1989, p. 56–65.

⁸¹ “Mluva,” in *Slovník Spisovného Jazyka České (Ústav pro český jazyk, 2011)*, <https://ssjc.ujc.cas.cz/search.php?hledaj=Hledat&heslo=mluva&sti=EMPTY&where=hesla&hsubstr=no> (May 7, 2025).

⁸² “Promluva,” *idem*.

⁸³ “Řeč,” *idem*.

⁸⁴ Macháčková, “O Názorech Na Dichotomii Langue a Parole (K Vývoji Pojetí Některých Základních Lingvistických Pojmů a Termínů),” *op. cit.*, p. 237. For a reverse case in which the

Čermák's translation deliberately conducted a sort of terminological archeology that used Barthes to recover the historical vocabulary of domestic structuralism.

Écriture, Rukopis and the Semantic Gesture

The second example I would like to draw on to illustrate how the discursive and editorial framing of *Nulový stupeň rukopisu – Základy sémiologie* interplayed with the actual work of the translators is closely linked to this very archeological quality. Unlike the previous example, however, it plays out much more on the level of reception and the discussion engendered by the translators' strategies. In April 1968, thus, a couple of months after the translation's release and simultaneously with the abolition of censorship by the Dubček government, the Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in the Moravian city of Brno—today's Masaryk University—hosted a conference aimed at discussing the relationship between “Structuralism and Historism in 20th Century Philosophy” [“Strukturalismus a historismus ve fe filosofii 20. Století”]⁸⁵. Despite this title, the majority of the contributions as well as the “very animated” [“velmi animované”] discussions they were followed by evolved around the recent revival of domestic structuralism and its meaning for Czech philosophy⁸⁶. This was a particularly pressing topic since, other than in post-war France—and, interestingly, in Slovakia as well—the local structuralism of the interwar period had remained mostly within the disciplinary realm of linguistics, literary studies, and aesthetics, hardly spilling over into the social sciences and philosophy at large. Hence, what was at stake was the very possibility of going beyond a simple recovery of the past and actually taking local structuralist theorizing into a new, decidedly transdisciplinary direction that would also leave room for an exchange with Marxism. Most importantly, however, this new and broadly understood structuralist discussion was thought to actively communicate with

Czech “mluva” influenced the Ukrainian linguistic vocabulary cf. Lesya Kopran, “Difficultés d'interprétation des termes de F. de Saussure en ukrainien et en russe,” in *La Terminologie de Ferdinand de Saussure En Traduction*, *op. cit.*, p. 32–49.

⁸⁵ For contemporary reporting on the conference see Julie Štěpánková, “O Strukturalismu a Historismu ve Filosofii 20. Století,” *Česká literatura*, vol. 16, no. 5, 1968, p. 587–88 and Ivan Hodonský, “Konference o Strukturalismu,” *Sborník prací Filozofické fakulty brněnské univerzity*, B 54, *Studia philosophica*, 1969, p. 118–20. See also retrospectively Jan Zouhar, “Konference o strukturalismu a historismu v roce 1968,” *Sborník prací Filozofické fakulty brněnské univerzity*, B 54, *Studia philosophica*, 2007, p. 85–90.

⁸⁶ Štěpánková, “O strukturalismu a historismu ve filosofii 20. století,” *op. cit.*, p. 587.

contemporary theory debates abroad. In many ways, this conference therefore represented not only the climax of the “recovered” [“oživený”] structuralism but also the potential onset of something new, be it, as Chvatík put it, a “dialectical structurology” [“dialektische Strukturologie”]⁸⁷ or, as promised by another participant and translator of Roland Barthes, Julie Štěpánková⁸⁸, with reference to Derrida, a “criticology” [“kritikologie”] that would already de-center the notion of the structure⁸⁹. Since only four months later, the country would be invaded by the Warsaw Pact armies, this would remain mostly unrealized.

For now, though, several of the contributions explicitly discussed recent theoretical developments in France and Italy, including publications by Lévi-Strauss, Althusser, and Barthes⁹⁰. One of these contributions is of particular interest here, for it specifically confronted the latter’s term « écriture » to the so-called “semantic gesture” [“sémantické gesto”]. This had been—to quote the German slavist Wolfgang F. Schwarz—one of the “most problematic” concepts [“einer der problematischsten Begriffe”] of historical Czechoslovak structuralism⁹¹. Coined by Jan Mukařovský, the idea had first appeared in 1938 in a paper dedicated to the poem *The Absolute Gravedigger* [*Absolutní hrobář*] by avant-garde writer Vítězslav Nezval⁹² where it had been defined as a “methodical

⁸⁷ Chvatík, *Tschechoslowakischer strukturalismus. Theorie und Geschichte*, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

⁸⁸ Štěpánková’s most important work in this regard is, without doubt, her translation of Barthes’ *Critique et vérité*. Besides this, she translated a long interview with Barthes as well as several fragments from *Essais critiques*. Cf. Roland Barthes, *Kritika a Pravda*, trans. Julie Štěpánková, *Česká literatura*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1968, p. 72–103; Roland Barthes, “Z Kritických Esejů,” trans. Julie Štěpánková, *Orientace*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1967, p. 21–28; Roland Barthes, “Rozhovor s Rolandem Barthesem. Rozmlouvá Raymond Bellour,” in *Pařížské Rozhovory o Strukturalismu*, *op. cit.*, p. 74–85.

⁸⁹ Štěpánková, “O strukturalismu a historismu ve filosofii 20. století,” *op. cit.*, p. 588.

⁹⁰ Cf. *ibidem*. Due to the political situation, only a fraction of the contributions would end up being published, distributed across various periodicals.

⁹¹ Wolfgang F. Schwarz, “Die ‘semantische Geste’—Ein brauchbares analytisches Instrument? Zur Entwicklung und Kritik eines Kernbegriffs in Mukařovskýs Literaturästhetik,” in *Prager Schule. Kontinuität und Wandel. Arbeiten zur Literaturästhetik und Poetik der Narration*, ed. by Wolfgang F. Schwarz, Frankfurt am Main, Vervuert, 1997, p. 197.

⁹² Vítězslav Nezval, *Absolutní hrobář. Básně*, Praha: František Borový, 1937. For an English translation cf. Vítězslav Nezval, *The Absolute Gravedigger*, trans. Stephan Delbos and Tereza Novická, Prague, Twisted Spoon Press, 2016; see also Anna Förster “On the Afterlife of Czech Surrealism. Vítězslav Nezval’s The Absolute Gravedigger, Translated by Stephan Delbos and Tereza Novická,” *Glasgow Review of Books*, 2016, <https://glasgowreviewofbooks.com/2016/12/08/on-the-afterlife-of-czech-surrealism-vitezslav-nezvals-the-absolute-gravedigger-translated-from-the-czech-by-stephan-delbos-and-tereza-novicka/> (May 7, 2025).

principle” [“metodickým principem”] that, although being “itself without concrete content, determines the character of the artwork as a meaningful construction” [“sám je bez konkrétního obsahu, určuje ráz uměleckého díla jako významové výstavby”]⁹³. Shortly thereafter, in a study dedicated to the romantic poetry of Karel Hynek Mácha, this idea was then metaphorized as an “unspecific [...] gesture by which the poet selected and merged the elements of his work into a unity of meaning” [“nespecifikované [...] gesto, jímž básník prvky svého díla vybíral a slučoval ve významovou jednotu”]⁹⁴. And, in 1940, it had eventually been connected with semantics, or, to be more specific, with an approach that bridged the gap between formal analysis and semantic meaning, and thus, between content and form⁹⁵.

When the conference was held in 1968, like so many other concepts, too, the “semantic gesture” had recently been rediscovered and discussed by some of Mukařovský’s students. One of them was the literary scholar Milan Jankovič who had used it to prove the biographical rather than theoretical hypothesis that Mukařovský’s renouncement of structuralism in 1951 had not been all that surprising, but that he had already begun to turn away from some of structuralism’s core tenets—such as the analytical separation of content and form—by the early 1940s⁹⁶. In addition to this, Jankovič had used the idea and also the metaphorical implications of the “semantic gesture” as starting points for his own concept of a dynamic and processual “occurrence of meaning” [“dění smyslu”]⁹⁷. As I have mentioned above, at the conference itself, however, the “semantic gesture” was paired primarily with Roland Barthes’ *écriture*. The comparison was conducted on the grounds of two hypotheses. Firstly, it was claimed, both concepts were born out of the same question: How can

⁹³ Jan Mukařovský, “Sémantický rozbor básnického díla: Nezvalův Absolutní Hrobár,” in *Studie II*, ed. Miroslav Červenka and Milan Jankovič, Brno, Host, 2007, p. 376.

⁹⁴ Jan Mukařovský, “Genetika Smyslů v Máchově Poezii,” in *idem*, p. 305.

⁹⁵ Cf. Jan Mukařovský, “O Jazyce Básnickém,” in *idem*, p. 16–70.

⁹⁶ Cf. Milan Jankovič, “K pojetí sémantického gesta,” *Česká literatura*, vol. 13, no. 4, 1965, p. 319–26.

⁹⁷ Cf. *idem*, p. 320. See also Jankovič’s eponymous book which, although it originated around the same time, was published only in the early 1990s. Cf. Milan Jankovič, *Dílo jako dění smyslu*, Praha, Pražská imaginace ve spolupráci s Ústavem pro českou a světovou literaturu Československé akademie věd, 1992; for this timeline see also Irina Wutsdorff, “Die Geste als Denkfigur. Dynamische Konzepte vom Werk im Prager Strukturalismus (Jan Mukařovský und Milan Jankovič) und in der Posthermeneutik (Dieter Mersch),” *Textpraxis. Digitales Journal für Philologie*, no. 2, 2018, p. 1–14, <http://www.textpraxis.net/irina-wutsdorff-die-geste-als-denkfigur> (May 7, 2025).

one mediate between, on the one hand, the structural study of literature and, on the other, the individuality of the concrete artwork or, also, the complete works of one author? And second, the author of the contribution, Miroslav Kačer—who was otherwise known primarily for his contributions to structural theater studies⁹⁸—claimed that just like Mukařovský’s concept, Barthes’ *écriture* was based on the idea of a gesture that was at once semantical and corporeal. Quoting from Čermák’s translation, he argued that the *écriture*

« derives from the meaning-making gesture of the writer ». [...] From this statement, in which the very use of the word gesture in its semiological validity is remarkable, [...] it follows that Barthes, like Mukařovský, is aware of the existence of a kind of authorial gesture that has a fundamental (and presumably unifying) meaning-generating validity for his work⁹⁹.

This statement is highly interesting given the fact that, at the time when it was uttered in 1968 and, even more so, when the text Kačer quoted—*Writing Degree Zero*—was written in the early fifties, Barthes’ idea of an *écriture* was still very far from the explicit, sometimes even erotic corporeality it would entail in later works such as *The Pleasure of the Text* [« Le plaisir du texte »] or his writings about Cy Twombly¹⁰⁰. And it was also years before Barthes himself would dwell on the polysemy of the word « *écriture* » and on the fact that at least one of its meanings pointed at a “manual gesture, as opposed to a vocal gesture” [« un geste manuel, opposé au geste vocal »]¹⁰¹. After all, in *Writing Degree Zero*, *écriture* was still very much a literary historical concept. So, where did this precocious focus on its corporeal qualities come from?

As I argue, it has everything to do with the way *écriture* was treated by Čermák’s translation. And from the way it semantically related Barthes’ *écriture* to Mukařovský’s “semantic gesture”. For Čermák—and Dubský, too, in his

⁹⁸ See, for instance, his contribution to the Mukařovský festschrift mentioned above: Miroslav Kačer, “K významové výstavbě dramatické grotesky,” in *Struktura a smyslliterárního díla*, *op. cit.*, p. 215–27.

⁹⁹ “se odvozuje od významotvorného gesta spisovatele’ [...] Z tohoto výroku, v němž je pozoruhodné již samotné použití slova gesto v sémiologické platnosti, [...] vyplývá, že i Barthes si stejně jako Mukařovský uvědomuje existenci jakéhosi autorova ‚gesta‘, které má pro jeho dílo zásadní (a patrně i jednotící) významotvornou platnost.” Miroslav Kačer, “Mukařovského ‘sémantické gesto’ a Barthesův ‘rukopis’ (*écriture*),” *Česká literatura* vol. 16, no. 5, 1968, p. 597.

¹⁰⁰ Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 4., *op. cit.*, p. 688–720.

¹⁰¹ *Idem.*, 293.

version of *Elements of Semiology*—translated « écriture » as “rukopis”. According to the *Dictionary of Written Czech* [“Slovník spisovného jazyka českého”], this word has four different meanings: 1. “handwriting” as in opposition to typewriting; 2. “manuscript,” either in the sense of a historical document or an unpublished text; 3. a piece of writing; and 4. “a way of writing characteristic of an individual” [“způsob psaní charakteristický pro jedince”]¹⁰². The latter is of particular interest here, for it not only functions literarily—in the sense of individual handwriting—but also metaphorically. In the afterword to the Barthes translation, Mikeš quotes several art-historical works that use the term “malířský rukopis”¹⁰³. While it is difficult to adequately render this in English, it might be best translated by the German phrase “künstlerische Handschrift” that refers an individual painter’s recognizable style. This is, most possibly, what motivated Kačer to associate both Barthes’ *écriture* and Mukařovský’s “semantic gesture” with the concept of the individual style [“individuální styl”]¹⁰⁴. While this comes relatively close to what Mukařovský was aiming at it is, again, not very compatible with the idea of a writer freely choosing an *écriture* in order to express their historical allegiance.

As we learn from the archival materials, not all of those involved in the making of the book agreed with the rendering of « écriture » as “rukopis”. In fact, Levý himself seems to have expressed unease, pointing to the fact that Čermák’s solution was too narrow and too static for what he himself perceived of as much more polysemous and dynamic¹⁰⁵. Instead, he preferred “psaní,” which derived from the verb “psát” [“to write”] and covered a semantic field similar to the English “writing”¹⁰⁶. Lubomír Doležal who took over the final review

¹⁰² “Rukopis” in *Slovník Spisovného Jazyka Českého*, *op. cit.* (May 7, 2025).

¹⁰³ Vladimír Mikeš, “Zapsat co nejpravdivěji,” in *Nulový stupeň rukopisu – Základy sémiologie*, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Kačer, “Mukařovského ‘sémantické Gesto’ a Barthesův ‘Rukopis’ (Écriture),” *op. cit.*, p. 596.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. footnote 1 in Mikeš, “Zapsat co nejpravdivěji,” *op. cit.*, p. 137. As I have mentioned above, this is the only mention of Levý in the entire publication.

¹⁰⁶ Again, this is indicated by Mikeš’s afterword. In a bibliographical footnote, he lists existing translations of Barthes’ writings into Czech, including a translation called “Nulový stupeň psaní” [*Degree zero of writing*] which seems to have been authored by Levý himself. Since the publication date listed is prior to the release of *Écriture degré zéro*, this is, most probably, a translation of the eponymous paragraph of Barthes’ article „Reflection on the style of “The Stranger” [« Réflexion sur le style de ‚L’Étranger’ »] which had been published in the journal *Existences* back in 1944. Mikeš lists the translation as having appeared in *Dialog*, an internal newsletter issued by the translators’ section of the Czechoslovak writers’ association. Due to its

of the manuscript after Levý's passing even suggested consulting translations of *Writing Degree Zero* into other languages. The 1959 German translation in particular seemed to be a point of reference, for Doležal suggested to replace “rukopis” with “způsob psaní” [“way of writing”] which was obviously modeled on Helmut Scheffel's German translation of « écriture » as “Schreibweise”¹⁰⁷. This suggestion also came up at the Brno conference, with Kačer admitting that, when it came to translating this key term, “[t]he Germans [...] do a better job” [“jsou na tom [lépe]”]¹⁰⁸. Interestingly, German translations of Barthes' works would remain a permanent reference point even when Barthes would be translated in samizdat journals and editions and in the 1970s and 80s¹⁰⁹. For the time being, however, Čermák's translational solution very much set the tone of the debate and determined the overall historicizing register Barthes' work would be discussed within. This only changed in the 1990s when, under the influence of the gradual translation of Derrida, Levý's original suggestion—“psaní”—did indeed become the go-to equivalent for « écriture »¹¹⁰.

To sum this up, on a historical level, there are at least two things we can gather from this. First of all, other than has been stated, so far, by Czech literary scholars and historians of science alike, the “recovery” interwar Czechoslovak structuralism underwent in the wake of the Prague Spring was far from being separate from the simultaneous reception of French structuralist writings. Quite the contrary: the two of them were closely intertwined both conceptually and in terms of people involved. And second, the most important proof is the involvement of Jiří Levý, who, as I argue above, should be reconsidered not only as the founder of Czechoslovak translation studies but also as a key figure of the history of French theory and its translation in Central Europe. On a more general, systematic level, however, the most important insight is,

semi-official or ‘grey’ nature, this publication has been collected neither by the Czechoslovak National Library nor by samizdat archives such as Libri prohibiti in Prague. I have, thus, not been able to verify this. Cf. *ibidem*. For Barthes' 1944 article, see Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, *op. cit.*, p. 75–79.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Bohumil Doležal: final assessment, undated, 1.

¹⁰⁸ Kačer, “Mukařovského ‘sémantické Gesto’ a Barthesův ‘Rukopis’ (Écriture),” *op. cit.*, p. 595.

¹⁰⁹ On translations of Barthes in Czech samizdat see Anna Förster, “Spielplätze der Theorie,” *Mitropa*, no. 22, 2023, p. 154–56 as well as Anna Förster, “Aus der Philologie ein Fest machen. Hrabals Barthes-Lektüren der 1980er Jahre,” in *Der Schriftsteller als Philologe. Bohumil Hrabal, Jaroslav Hašek und die Philologie*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2020, p. 215–311.

¹¹⁰ See, for instance Zdeněk Hrbata, « Écriture », in *Slovník Literárněvědného Strukturalismu*, ed. Ondřej Sládek, Brno, Host, 2018, p. 181–83.

without doubt, that, besides being used to recover the history of a theoretical source text or body of theory, translation can also serve as a means to recover the theoretical past of the receiving context. As we have seen, besides paratextual framing, the most important playing field for this is terminology or, to be more precise, a specific kind of terminological archeology by which translators access and revive historical theoretical vocabulary.

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