

THE PRAGUE LINGUISTIC CIRCLE IN GENEVA AND PARIS: CIRCULATIONS & DECENTERINGS

Fribourg (Switzerland)

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Organised by

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Théories Linguistiques

Presentation

The Prague Linguistic Circle holds a clearly defined place in the historiography of the language sciences: it is recognized as an institutional and localized "hub" (Hoskovec 2011) of programmatic innovation, representing a pivotal moment in the broad transition from 19th-century philological models to the new paradigms of 20th-century linguistics. While the Circle's European and international influence—particularly the fundamental impact of its contributions to the development of structural phonology—is well known, most of its historians and commentators have focused primarily on its specific context in Prague itself (e.g., Vachek 1966, Viel 1984, Raynaud 1990, Toman 1995, Sériot 2012). In line with a certain cliché that casts the city of Prague as a “golem-like” site of magical encounters (Ripellino 1973, Flusser 1991), the Circle and its theoretical originality are often presented as the product of syncretism, or even as the precipitate of a kind of fusion between different traditions suddenly brought together in the capital of the new Czechoslovak state.

Without seeking to challenge either the specific dynamic of the Circle's local grounding in Prague's modernity or its theoretical originality—especially in contrast with other centers of linguistics (Leipzig, Paris, Geneva, Copenhagen, etc.)—this conference aims instead to focus on the international integration and reception of the Prague Circle within the scientific exchange networks and channels of intellectual circulation of its time. We wish, in particular, to interrogate a

certain methodological dichotomy that tends to oppose what could be called the integrative or symbiotic dimension of local contexts to the more diffuse or decentered nature of the international context.

This tension is not unique to the historiography of the Prague Linguistic Circle. It seems to be a structural feature of the system of “double legitimation,” both internal and external, that characterizes the functioning of “circles” or “schools” of thought in the humanities (Amsterdamska 1987, Puech 2015). This tension invites us to consider two approaches to the internationalization of the Prague Circle’s activities during the period of linguistic circles from the 1920s to the 1950s. Alongside a network-based or nodal model of exchanges between relatively autonomous hubs, circles, or poles, we might also consider a more concentric approach that accounts for the interweaving or overlapping of these various poles. The first perspective tends to reinforce the image of a system of diffuse communications forming more compact “nodes” between which circulations (contacts, exchanges, receptions of works, etc.) occur. The second model does not envision exchanges between distinct hubs, but rather overlaps or intersections among these circles, thus revealing forms of decentering in the practices or intellectual horizons of participants in these canonized circles or schools.

The conference invites reflection on the internationalization of the Prague Linguistic Circle within the Francophone world, symbolized here—without being limited to—Geneva and Paris. In particular, this conference invites us to consider the Prague Linguistic Circle *in* Geneva and Paris—not as an external reference point to the Genevan and Parisian contexts, but as a full-fledged agent shaping the theoretical horizons and practices of these intellectual contexts. We therefore welcome original contributions addressing scholarly and/or conceptual relations between Prague, Paris, and Geneva in the fields of language sciences, semiotics, literary studies, art history, or philosophy.

Contributions may explore circulations and decenterings between Geneva, Paris, and Prague in light of:

- **An interdisciplinary contextualization**, seeking traces of the Prague Linguistic Circle beyond language sciences, in the exchanges and interactions that shaped or energized the intellectual contexts of Prague, Paris, and Geneva as a whole.
- **Archival and documentary materials** relating to the activities of the Prague Circle that have been made available in recent years (Toman 1994, Troubetzkoy 2006, Havráňková 2008, Čermák et al. 2012, Jakobson 2013, 2014, Havráňková & Petkevič 2014, Toman 2017). The use of these materials can offer new insights into already explored themes, such as the distinctive Saussurianism of the Prague and Geneva schools (e.g., Koerner 1971: 295

ff.), or the difficult reception of Prague functionalism among French philologists (e.g., Chevalier 1997).

Well-known intersections between the Prague Circle and the Geneva School (Karcevskij), or with French linguistic networks (Tesnière, Benveniste, Martinet), as well as overlooked figures and phenomena in historiography. For example, one might investigate the place given in Prague Circle work to French-language linguistics (Bally, Grammont, Meillet, Sechehaye, Vendryes, etc.), but also to philosophy (Bergson, Lévy-Bruhl), psychology (Delacroix, Meyerson), or literary theory (Václav Černý, Thibaudet).

- **The role of Czechoslovak scholars or émigrés from Russia** in the activities of the Société de linguistique de Paris, the Geneva Linguistics Society (which preceded, from 1941 to 1956, the Ferdinand de Saussure Circle), or the circumstances surrounding the creation of the Bratislava Linguistic Circle in 1946, and its explicit alignment with the speech-focused themes of the Geneva School (Isačenko 1948).
- **The broader backdrop of Russian and Ukrainian emigration** (to Prague, Paris, Berlin, Geneva). The Russian and Ukrainian émigrés of the Prague Circle participated in networks of exchange and communication not structured around local institutions, but through transversal links across various émigré communities. These networks—and especially their potential importance for the history of language sciences—remain largely unstudied.
- **A reappraisal of well-known figures such as Jakobson**, not through a diachronic lens that follows his successive affiliations with the Moscow, Prague, Copenhagen, and New York Circles, but through a synchronic lens, considering him as a key actor in an almost continuous or at least systematic dialogue between these local contexts.

Please send abstracts of maximum 500 words to patrick.flack@unifr.ch and pierre-yves.testenoire@sorbonne-nouvelle.fr

Deadline: November 30th 2025

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Invited Speakers

L'udmila Lacková Bennett (Prague), Tomáš Glanc (Zürich), John Goldsmith* (Chicago)

Céline Trautmann-Waller* (Paris), Patrick Sériot (Lausanne)

* *tbc*

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