I.

In the unfortunate times of our present, in which even the most shameless lie may be called an alternative truth, acquiring thus legitimacy for subsequent public discussions, a public speech entitled *A history of whatever* – in this case, a history of sound, sign, and meaning – proves equivocal: will it be an alternative history in respect of what really happened in the past? Fortunately enough, that will not be the case. Nonetheless, we have to recognize that the history of whatever is always an intellectual construction: it is important that the construction be done honestly in an objectifiable way; it is important that the historical construct pay constant attention to the true nature of whose history is being constructed; and it is important that the historian never forget that history is *historically* a literary genre committed to illuminate our present understanding of our present times, which, historically again, has usually been conceived as illuminating men’s own topical lives and acts through exempla carefully chosen from the past.

The historian of thought and ideas encounters the same crucial question as do his fellow-historians of states and countries, of social institutions and artistic movements, of cultures and languages, and, naturally, of particular human beings: what is the identity of their objects founded upon? In other words, what is the *same* in the constantly changing? The historian of thought and ideas searches in what people wanted to understand, and why; in how people understood their understanding, and what they held for the means to achieve it; in how they thought to recognize that they have already understood what they wanted to, and what attitudes they would adopt towards the results thus achieved. In respect of all that, the history of sound, sign, and meaning is a history of European scientific research into the nature of language communication.

It would be not only of small use, but utterly misleading to proceed by listing whatever has been meant, in the past, by the words *sound, sign, meaning*. On the contrary, any scientific history of a set of concepts (one isolated concept does not make sense, until opposed to some other concepts) requires a clear-cut a priori understanding, as well as the boldness not to take into consideration events and ideas that are traditionally studied under their headings unless they meet the aprioristic conditions consciously chosen. In this case, due to very particular philosophical circumstances, linguistics as a fully autonomous science could have never existed before the European 19th century started, and it may still totally disappear in this third decade of the 21st century, without even being noticed by current academia: there already are numerous chairs and departments of linguistics with no linguistics inside. All of that are consequences of the malaise which the institutionalized linguistics still prevailingly experiences when affronting – to say nothing about manipulating – the key-concept of the autonomous linguistics, the Saussurean linguistic sign, a unit having both sound and meaning.

The Prague Centre perspective and prospect, as the subtitle of the lecture announces, are the one of *functional structuralism* that the Prague Linguistic Circle has been developing for already one hundred years (in this consists the perspective), and the one of *encompassing philology* that largely draws on the achievements of the Paris School of interpretive semantics (in
Encompassing philology – in Czech celostní filologie, German Gan-zheitsphilologie, French philologie englobante, Italian filologia totale, Lithuanian visuminė filologija, Russian целостная филология – supplies adequate scientific instruments for grasping the evident and yet highly delicate empirical phenomenon of mutual human understanding in language communication (this constitutes its linguistic core); its instruments can then be adapted so as to make them effective for an inquiry into other than linguistic communication (this constitutes its semiological core). Since linguistic formations are being treated not only by linguistics and literary disciplines but also by numerous other humanities (in fact, virtually all, since all of them to a degree interpret certain written or oral texts as their sources), and since all humanities deal with semiological events (i.e., each of them interprets something that made a certain sense to a certain collective), encompassing philology is an auxiliary discipline for all humanities.

Encompassing philology, far from being some new-fangled invention of the contemporary Prague Linguistic Circle, is defined by a conceptual framework and a notional apparatus constructed by means of a conscious selection and purposeful composition of elements which have already come up in the history of linguistics at various points in time: the oldest ones about two hundred years ago (which, in fact, is not that long), the most recent within the last three decades (thanks to a critical reassessment of previous achievements); the original contribution of the proponent consists exclusively in their present rearrangement, which renders them newly topical.

II.

Encompassing philology draws on resources which have always been clearly present in the history of scientific study of language, notwithstanding the paradigms which may have at any single moment dominated institutionalized research. They can be listed as follows.

(i) The initial assumption needed for an emancipation of linguistics and semiology is a philosophical one: it was necessary to discard the Aristotelian-Scholastic prejudice that pre-formed thoughts come first, and only subsequently they are coded by various languages. The philosophical resolution was achieved by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and his authoritative account that a thought is the resultant vector of a process occurring entirely in the human mind; at the same time, he found an elegant retreat for the Aristotelian-Scholastic metaphysics by assigning it with a positive task: to study the inherent qualities of thought-processes.

(ii) However, an autonomous linguistics (and semiology) arises only once we realize that thinking itself is not only processual but also linguistic. This turn is performed by Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), historically the first to see and fully comprehend that a thought is essentially linguistic: it arises in language and by language; and since it is linguistic, it is, necessarily, also communicative; the birth of one person’s thought in the milieu of a language is complete only once this same language calls up a response in another person; language is a social, which is to say, a cultural-historical phenomenon. Besides that, Humboldt is the first to see that linguistic units have to be understood as what we now call the Saussurean sign, i.e., as formations possessing expression and content ex ante, not created by a subsequent joining of an independent expression with an independent content; an expression is what it is by virtue of being the expression of a content, a content is what it is by virtue of being the content of an expression.

(iii) Step two is represented by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913). Saussure confirms Humboldt’s stance both regarding the relationship between thought and language and regarding the nature of the linguistic unit, which, for the first time, he calls the sign, and as a novelty – without actually ever using the term – he offers “structuralism”. The essence of Saussurean structuralism is the mutual linkage of value and system: the value of any and all units is to be considered only as the resultant vector of the systemic relationship within which we observe
the unit; and again, each system by consequence of the relationships that it contains provides
the units involved in it with certain values. Saussurean structuralism is a necessary precondition
for any scientific study of the Saussurean sign: rather than to refer, a sign attains values. Saussurean structuralism is not limited to linguistic signs; rather, from the very beginning, it also counts with sign systems of other kinds.

(iv) Step three is represented by Karl Bühler (1879–1963), a medicinal psychiatrist and experimental psychologist. Bühler (1927) neatly resolved the contemporary crisis of psychology by providing a positive programme, one which defines psychology not as study of the contents of human awareness or of psychic processes, but rather of the meaningful living: human beings, but not only humans, actively perceive the world they live in (Umwelt), accord meaning to what they perceive, and in accordance with the meaning they direct their behaviour in their world. In the spirit of this programme, Bühler (1934) proceeds to analyze the niveaux and links of significance in language communication in the way they are meaningful for humans (cf. Bühlerian functions, Bühlerian fields). Thus, the relationship between language and thought is explicitly transposed into an empirically verifiable relationship of communication and action.

(v) In its classical period (1926–1948), the Prague Linguistic Circle formulated and developed a programme of functional structuralism which integrates the insights (ii) through (iv): the structuralism of the Circle builds upon the Saussurean linkage of system and value, its functionality consists in accounting for the communicative aspect (in the Humboldtian as well as the Bühlerian sense). On top of that, the Circle supplies two highly practical solutions: first, it develops a concept wherein the sign is the entire oral or written text, while all the systemic elements – from phones all the way to thematic patterns – serve as diacritical moments, structurally differentiating one large sign from another; second, it develops a concept whereby the extralinguistic reality is always being confronted not by an isolated word but rather by the entire text, i.e., a sign evincing extreme structural complexity and highly structured meaning; thus, the barrier of ontological reference is eliminated.

(vi) The Paris school of interpretive semantics attained an elegant solution of the inherent meaning dynamics of small sign units, especially lexical ones, in their textual occurrences. If the meaning of each sign unit is determined by a defining domain, i.e., a systemic section wherein it is being viewed, then the concretization of meaning in the entirety of a text consists in the actualization of one defining domain out of many potential ones, and this choice is being directed by the global structure of the text. The technique of interpretive semantics, as developed by François Rastier via a critical reassessment of the broader French tradition (Bernard Pottier, Algirdas-Julien Greimas), evinces deep parallels with the older techniques of functional structuralism, as they were developed primarily by Jan Mukařovský and Jiří Veltruský. For both the Paris and the Prague stance it is symptomatic that they combine the two concepts of language which have coexisted since Humboldt and Saussure, i.e., language as an abstract system, and language as a social institution; social institutions guide the actualization of defining domains, which are, in their potentiality, deposed in an abstract system.

(vii) Encompassing philology intelligently evaluates all the historical experiences listed above and transforms them into practical instruments, which allow for both describing a language and for analyzing a linguistic formation, i.e., a text. Unlike French semantic tradition (from Benveniste to Rastier) which determines, by mutual differentiations, the value of small linguistic signs only, mostly morphemes and lexemes, leaving the rest to what Émile Benveniste calls mode sémantique, encompassing philology disposes of systemic means for differentiating large signs as well, including entire texts. In principle, such means can be adopted even to non-linguistic signs, i.e., to cultural-historical events of various nature (cf. Jiří Veltruský, TCLP. n.s. 6). Encompassing philology was launched internationally by Tomáš Hoskové; its most recent international platform is presented in the Thèses de Prague 2016 (TCLP, n.s. 8), which have already been discussed, among others, in a trans-Atlantic tutorial Prague-Calgary-Bogotá-
Abidjan. It has been successfully applied to historical-cultural and historical-linguistic studies by Ilja Lemeškin (TCLP, n.s. 10).

III.
Under the circumstances described above, the lecturer seeks, first, to demonstrate that present-day humanities provide room for working with the language sign (in Saussure’s sense) in a way semio logically correct, philologically exhaustive and heuristically profitable, and second, to point out that the crucial elements needed for such work have been available for quite some time; the emphasis is put on demonstrating practicability in execution. This presentation proceeds in three steps.

First of all, we must eliminate the principal barrier for a historical understanding of European structuralism (there was a U.S. structuralism as well) and its relationship to semiology. This barrier has been erected not by lack of knowledge, but rather by the preponderance of superficial, or indeed false knowledge. European structuralism has to be understood as corpora of scientific texts, produced during more than a century of varying intensely and variously interrupted activity. These corpora are not “just there”; there are always consciously compiled by a researcher responsible for his selection. The criterion of the present selection is, whether and how scientific research comes to terms with the principles of Saussurean structuralism and Saussurean sign, as described above under II. (ii)–(iii). Within the scientific production thus selected, we discern centres, i.e., large collections of texts that are aware of one another and recognize certain shared goals, even though their procedures may differ. Methodological unity of the conceptual and interpretive apparatus is the defining quality of a yet narrower collection of texts, called school; as a rule, there are several schools in each centre (and the “Prague School” label as traditionally employed actually designated the Prague Centre of functional structuralism, within which numerous schools may be discerned). The lecturer will characterize the thematic specificity of the important centres of European structuralism (Prague, Geneva, Copenhagen, Paris) and describe their programmatic development as well as the modifications of the dynamics of their research production.

In the following step, it is indispensable to exemplify a systemic description of a language as a sign system. The crucial quality is the assumption of a top-to-bottom perspective: large signs (such as, in particular, entire texts) are not composed out of smaller ones and smaller ones are not composed out of elementary ones; rather, the large and global sign is always primary, and only secondarily does it disintegrate into smaller signs, where the separation of lower-level, partial signs must always be legitimized by detecting their structural relationship to the higher-level whole. This is how variously voluminous textual passages – and ultimately single utterances qua elementary texts – separate out of a global text. Within the further structural descent, the analysis introduces the structurally-analytical unit “sentence”, defined completely independently from “utterance”, and only against the background of the structural unit “sentence” there come forward such sign units as “word” and “grammatical relationship”, as well as diacritical units such as “prosodic contour” or “phoneme” at the expression plane, “seme” at the content plane.

Finally, we must demonstrate a model of grasping the meaning of the text in an objectivized way by employing a dynamic selection of semes. The content units of a text are modelled as configurations of semes, i.e., the minimal diacritical moments effective in the content plane of a language. The occurrence of a seme is demonstrable by the actualization of the pertinent defining domain as against other, systemically compossible defining domains. The choice of defining domains is being determined both by the structural relationships within the given text, and by the cultural-historical anchoring of linguistic signs in a particular collective.
IV.
To conclude, encompassing philology offers both practical assistance and improved scientific self-confidence to the Humanities (Geisteswissenschaften, sciences humaines), denigrated as they often are in a presumed contrast to the “hard”, “exact”, truly “scientific” disciplines, a contrast currently mirrored in the standard usage of languages such as English (sciences :: humanities) and French (sciences :: lettres). The essence of scientific exactness does consist not in making exact measurement but rather in separating certain structural components, including those to be measured, out of the empirical reality, and then interpreting them in a methodical manner with respect to the behaviour of the whole. In this sense, there is only one science; and the scientific community, being simply one out of many various collectives within humanity, is characterized by the fact that within it, the specific norms of rational thought and objectivized procedures are especially dominant.

References
As underlined in the speech, any history of whatever shall be founded in exhaustive corpora of texts. For the history of sound, sign, and meaning, the corpora are of such an amount that not even a sketch of them could be made here. The Prague Linguistic Circle has been elaborating, within a large-scaled international research project called Atlas du structuralisme européen, an open-source basis of structured and annotated bibliographies: all who may feel concerned are kindly invited to join these efforts. Instead of references, a list of the last issues of the new series of Travaux du Cercle linguistique de Prague is given, in which materializes another aspect of the Atlas project; an outline of the historiographic-bibliographic basis for the classical period of the Prague structuralism can be found in [9], another one, for the classical Prague phonology, in [14]. Above that, a list of proponent’s selected papers is added, in which the programme of encompassing philology is being materialised.

Author’s own texts explaining the past and prospects of functional structuralism:


Travaux du Cercle linguistique de Prague, nouvelle série (TCLP, n.s.):


