

Roman Jakobson's Forgotten Czech Articles on Phonology: A Case of Avoiding Anachronism in Linguistic Historiography¹

Changliang Qu*

Abstract: Although Roman Jakobson's theory of distinctive features is best depicted in his English works after his immigration to the United States, a full picture of the development of this theory remains blurred unless all his early works on this topic, written in Czech, Russian, French and German, are well examined. Even though some of these works have been translated into English, there may exist misleading differences between the original non-English texts and the translated English texts. Based on a comparison between Jakobson's phonological works published in Czech in the early 1930s ("*Z fonologie spisovné slovenštiny*" and the *Ottův* entries) and their English versions in his *Selected Writings*, the present article attempts to clarify a few details on the divisibility of phoneme, the paradigmatic nature of distinctive feature, and the nomenclature and classification of the distinctive features. It also aims to provide a specific example on how to avoid anachronism in the research on history of linguistics.

Resumo: Embora a teoria dos traços distintivos de Roman Jakobson esteja bem representada em seus trabalhos em inglês após sua imigração para os Estados Unidos, um quadro completo do desenvolvimento dessa teoria ainda está por ser feito, ainda que todos os seus trabalhos iniciais sobre o tópico, escritos em tcheco, francês e alemão já tenham sido bem examinados. Apesar de alguns desses trabalhos já terem sido vertidos para o inglês, pode haver diferenças enganosas entre os originais (escritos em outros idiomas) e essas traduções. Baseado na comparação entre as obras fonológicas de Jakobson publicadas no início dos anos de 1930 ("*Z fonologie spisovné slovenštiny*" e algumas entradas da enciclopédia *Ottův*) e suas versões presentes em seus *Selected Writings*, o presente artigo procura esclarecer alguns detalhes sobre a divisibilidade do fonema, a natureza paradigmática do traço distintivo e a nomenclatura e a classificação dos traços distintivos. Este estudo também procura

Key Words: Distinctive feature; Textual differences; Anachronism; Term translation

Palavras-chave: Traço distintivo; Diferenças textuais; Anacronismo; Tradução de termos

* Professor of Linguistics at Dalian University of Foreign Languages, China; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3766-9253>; quchangliang@dlufl.edu.cn

In research on the history of linguistics, an investigation into different versions of what is assumed to be the “same” text often clarifies certain details. Differences may exist between the original text and a translated one, leading to highly different interpretations of it. As the long awaited ninth volume of Roman Jakobson’s *Selected Writings* (Edited by Toman, Part I, 2013; Part II, 2014) was finally released, many materials previously neglected have now found their place in this legendary selection whose first eight volumes were published in installment from 1962 to 1987. While editors of the previous eight volumes chose to translate instead of directly reprinting the articles that Jakobson wrote in languages other than the “four academic lingua franca” (English, French, German and Russian), the ninth volume now follows a very different editorial principle that all the writings are reprinted in their original language. Thus Czech becomes the language of the majority of the anthologized materials in this new volume subtitled “Uncollected Works, 1916–1943”. Since translated (and/or rewritten) texts may sometimes lead to misunderstanding in the sense of linguistic historiography, reprinting these Czech texts offers a very good opportunity to avoid these errors.

However, this new volume has included the Czech texts of neither “Z fonologie spisovné slovenštiny” [On the Phonology of Standard Slovak] (1931) nor the two entries “Fonéma” [Phoneme] and “Fonologie” [Phonology] that Jakobson contributed to the Czech encyclopaedia *Ottův slovník naučný nové doby* [Otto’s Academic Dictionary of the New Era] (1932). Their absence is probably because *Phonological Studies* (1962), the first volume of the same selection, has already contained their

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English translations, as all of the eight previous volumes stick to the principle that items written in Czech or Polish should be translated into English before they were anthologized.

Yet in the case of the above-mentioned three items which deal with phonological issues, protruding differences exist between the Czech originals and the English translations, causing risks of anachronism in the understanding of the early stage of Jakobson's phonological ideas. Therefore, these forgotten Czech articles on phonology deserve serious study because of their unique historical values. Comparing these Czech texts with their English "translations" in the 1962 volume, the present essay will clear up several of the potential misunderstandings, e.g. the divisibility of phoneme, the paradigmatic nature of distinctive features, and the nomenclature and classification of the distinctive features. It intends to show an example of how to avoid this type of anachronism in a reflection on the history of linguistic terms.

The early demonstration of Jakobson's distinctive feature and the problems it presents

Although the term distinctive feature often reminds of *Preliminaries to Speech Analysis* (1952), Jakobson's post-WWII collaboration in the United States with Gunnar Fant and Morris Halle, his pilot ideas on this topic had emerged by the 1930s. In "Observations sur le classement phonologique des consonnes" [Observations on the phonological classification of consonants], his contribution to the 3rd International Congress of Phonetic Sciences in July 1938 at the University of Ghent, Belgium, he argued that:

[n]ous identifions les phonèmes d'une langue donnée en les décomposant en leurs caractères phonologiques constitutifs, c'est-à-dire que nous établissons pour chaque phonème quelles *qualités* l'opposent aux autres phonèmes du système en question.²

² Jakobson, "Observations sur le classement phonologique des consonnes" (1939), p. 34:

Written in French, this better-known declaration has constantly been regarded as symbolizing a new stage of Jakobsonian phonology that no longer focuses solely on the phonemic level³. However, it was by no means the first place where Jakobson designated the distinctive features as sub-phonemic entities. Josef Vachek pointed out that “the fact that the phoneme is divisible into simultaneous elements (whether one calls them phonological units or relevant phonic qualities or distinctive features) was accepted unanimously in the Prague group of the *mid-thirty*”,⁴ which is not inconsistent with the fact that when Nikolai Trubetzkoy defined the phoneme as “die Gesamtheit der phonologisch relevanten Eigenschaften eines Lautgebildes”,⁵ he also added in a footnote that Jakobson had given a similar definition in the 1932 volume of *Ottův encyclopaedia*.

The phonological works Jakobson published in the early 1930s therefore become keys to his emerging ideas of distinctive features in this early stage. The 1962 volume, however, cannot properly reflect this chronology because the article entitled “Phonemic notes on standard Slovak” it contains is not a faithful translation from the 1931 “Z fonologie spisovné slovenštiny”. The textual differences between the original and the anthologized were immediately noted by the reviewers as soon as the volume was freshly released: Pavle Ivić warned that “small corrections and additions have been made here and there, certainly increasing the value of the works themselves, but reducing the worth of the volume as a historical documentation”.⁶ Therefore, in tracing the development of Jakobson's ideas on distinctive features, one has to clarify the following questions:

“[w]e identify the phonemes of a given language by decomposing them into their constituent phonological characters, i.e. we establish for each phoneme what *features* it opposes to the other phonemes of the system in question.” My own translation, original emphasis.

3 See: Anderson (1985); Rudy (1987).

4 Vachek (1966), p. 46, my emphasis.

5 Trubetzkoy (1939), p. 35: “the set of the phonologically related features of a sound”. My own translation.

6 Ivić (1965), p. 36.

(1A) By the early 1930s, had Jakobson realized that a phoneme was divisible?

(1B) Had he realized by that time that sub-phonemic entities were paradigmatic in nature?

(2A) In his writings in the early 1930s, did Jakobson actually use the term “distinctive features”?

(2B) In those writings, had he fulfilled the task of naming and classifying these “distinctive features”?

While the changes in the 1962 volume resulted from translating and/or rewriting make those English texts incapable of serving as historically reliable sources, the only way to answer the questions above is to check some vital details in a comparison between the English texts and their Czech originals.

The Divisibility of the Phoneme and the Paradigmatic Nature of Distinctive Features

A glance at the entry ‘Fonéma’ in the 1932 volume of *Ottův* encyclopaedia may directly reveal whether Jakobson had already come to the view that phoneme is divisible and that distinctive features are paradigmatic. According to its English translation in the 1962 volume of the *Selected Writings*, Jakobson defined in the entry “phoneme” as the following:

Phoneme is the basic concept of phonology. By this term we designate a set of those concurrent sound properties which are used in a given language to distinguish words of unlike meaning. In speech, diverse sounds can implement one and the same phoneme. This variety depends on the style of speech and/or on the phonetic environment in which that phoneme occurs. The difference between such sounds is determined by external factors and hence cannot serve to distinguish word meanings.⁷

⁷ Jakobson “Phoneme and phonology” (1962), p. 231.

It is not difficult to draw two inferences from this definition:

(1) Since phoneme is defined as “a set of those concurrent sound properties”, it cannot be a minimal unit. “Sound properties”, naturally, are smaller units beneath the phoneme.

(2) When these “sound properties” cluster and construct a phoneme, there is no sequential order among them since they are “concurrent”. This characteristic is highly different from phonemes, as phonemes have to follow a strict sequential rule to construct a syllable. Concisely, the sub-phonemic “properties” show their simultaneity instead of successivity.

Linguists today regard both of the above assertions as the theoretical breakthroughs that Jakobson contributed to structuralist phonology. With the former one, he succeeded in discovering phonological “protons” (distinctive features) underneath the “atoms” (phonemes); with the latter one, he updated a limitation of the classical Saussurean belief that “le signifiant, ... c'est une ligne” [The signifier, ... is a line.]⁸ and proved in the case of the distinctive feature that the signifier does not always have to be sequential.

However, since these two inferences are based on the 1962 English translations, how much do they accurately reflect Jakobson's ideas of these issues in the early 1930s? To make accurate judgments, one needs to check them up in the original Czech text, although an encyclopedia entry mainly serves the need of the general public rather than the professional phonologists:

Fonéma, zákl. pojem fonologie. Nazývá se tak soubor zvukových vlastností, kterými se liší jedna hláska daného jazyka od ostat. jeho hlásek, jako prostředků sloužících k rozlišování slovních významů. Jedno a totéž f. se může realizovat v řeči několika různ. hláskami podle stylu řeči n. podle hláskového okolí. Rozdíl mezi těmito hláskami je tedy zevně podmíněn a nemůže sloužit k diferencování slovních významů.⁹

⁸ Saussure (1916), p. 105.

⁹ Jakobson, “Fonéma” (1932), p. 608: “Phoneme, a basic notion of phonology. It refers to a set of sound properties that distinguish one sound of a specific language from the other sounds, so as to distinguish word meanings. One and the same phoneme can be realised in speech as several different sounds according to speech style or according to surroundings of the sound. The difference between these sounds is therefore externally conditioned and cannot serve to differentiate word meanings.” My own translation.

This comparison confirms that the 1962 English translation is more of a flexible re-writing than a word-to-word translation, although most of the information remains faithful to the Czech original. While Jakobson did define phoneme in 1932 as “soubor zvukových vlastností” [a set of sound features], which contrasted drastically with the definition in the Prague Circle’s previous “Projet de terminologie phonologique standardise” [Project of the standardized terminology of phonology], where the phoneme had been defined as “non susceptible d’être dissociée en unités phonologiques plus petites et plus simples”.¹⁰ With the irreducibility of phoneme abandoned in this encyclopedia entry, “vlastnosti” (translated into English as “features”, “properties” or “qualities”) were on their way to replace the phoneme as the minimal functional unit in phonology. The agreement between the Czech and the English versions proves that Jakobson did realize in the early 1930s that phoneme was not an ultimate phonological unit, but a cluster of some reducible sub-phonemic entities. Therefore, the first of the above inferences turns out to be correct and Question 1A should be answered affirmatively.

On the other hand, however, although most information in the original Czech text well corresponds to that in the 1962 English translation, there is an important difference that deserves special attention: A modifier “concurrent” was added into the 1962 English version, which reassures that distinctive features are non-sequential within a phoneme. The absence of this key word in the Czech version clarifies that Jakobson’s idea that distinctive features are units on the paradigmatic axis was not yet born in the early 1930s. Therefore, our second inference is evidently incorrect and Question 1B should be answered negatively. While the English text turns out to be misleading, anachronism occurs unless one refers to the original Czech text.

Jakobson’s idea on the concurrent nature of the sub-phonemic entities and his amendment of Saussurean signifiers were not manifest enough until he elaborated them in “Zur

¹⁰ Cercle linguistique de Prague (1931), p. 311: “not liable to be separated into smaller and simpler phonological units”. My own translation.

"Struktur des Phonems" [On the structure of phonemes], a German article he published for the first time in the 1962 volume.

According to Saussure's classical distinction between syntagmatic and paradigmatic linguistic units, successivity is an essential nature of a signifier:

Le signifiant, étant de nature auditive, se déroule dans le temps seule et a les caractères qu'il emprunte au temps: a) il représente une étendue, et b) cette étendue est mesurable dans une seule dimension: c'est une ligne.¹¹

This principle implies that a phoneme should be dismantled along the axis of successivity, while Jakobson's innovation was exactly in the opposite direction: Distinctive features construct the phoneme along the axis of simultaneity. As he mentions in "Zur Struktur des Phonems", his rationale was partly an extension of Charles Bally's concept of "cumul des signifiés" [cumulation of the signifiers] into the phonological field. Bally successfully reduced a seemingly irreducible linguistic unit into smaller semantic or morphological elements with no trace of linear order at all:

Nous disons qu'il y a cumul des signifiés (ou, par abréviation, cumul), quand un signifiant unique et indécomposable renferme plusieurs valeurs nettement analysables par association mémorielle avec d'autres signes.¹²

Jakobson cited Bally's example of Latin verb *amo* [love] which consists of elements like "first-person", "singular" and "present-tense". While they "cumulate" into the verb's inflected form, there is nothing sequential among these smaller morphological-semantic elements. But Bally had no intention to extend this paradigmatic analysis of a linguistic unit to the phonological field, because he believed that "il est impossible de prononcer deux sons à la fois".¹³ Jakobson, on the other

11 Saussure (1916), p. 105. "The signifier, being auditory, is unfolded solely in time from which it gets the following characteristics: (a) it represents a span, and (b) the span is measurable in a single dimension; it is a line." Baskin's translation (1959), p. 70.

12 Bally (1932), p. 115: "We say that there are cumul of the signified (or concisely, cumul), when a unique and irreducible signifier contains several values that can be distinctly analyzed by the association that reminds of other signs." My own translation.

13 Bally (1932), p. 120: "it is impossible to pronounce two sounds at the same time". My own translation.

hand, declared that “freilich kann man nicht zwei *Sprachlaute* gleichzeitig erzeugen, aber zwei und mehrere lautliche *Eigenschaften* doch!”¹⁴ Thus he finally concluded that the unnecessary insistence on the linearity of signifier was “der grundsätzliche Fehler” [the fundamental mistake] of Saussure, and he exemplified his own view with a contrast of three Danish words:

lyt	luth	lidt
/lyt/	/lut/	‘/lit/
listen	lute	little

Each of these three words (or syllables, morphemes) is composed of three phonemes of linear order. In Jakobson’s view, the vowels /y/, /u/ and /i/ that determine their difference from one another should no longer be regarded as units of “minimal distinction”. As he argued,

Die Helligkeit des /y/ in „lyt“ ist durch die Gegenüberstellung zum abwesenden /u/ gegeben, der gedämpfte Klang des /y/ durch die Gegenüberstellung zum abwesenden /i/. Doch die Vereinigung der beiden distinktiven Eigenschaften – der Helligkeit und des gedämpften Klanges – im selben Phonem /y/ ist eine Beziehung zweier simultanen Glieder *in praesentia*.¹⁵

The fact that the two distinctive features, namely “brightness” and “darkness”, exist simultaneously within the vowel /y/, evidently challenged and invalidated Saussure’s definition of “associative relations” which allow only one of the paradigmatic elements *in praesentia*. Both “brightness” and “darkness” are present in the vowel /y/. And here Jakobson

14 Jakobson, “Zur Struktur des Phonems” (1962), p. 305: “certainly one cannot pronounce two speech *sounds* simultaneously, but he can pronounce two and more phonetic *features* simultaneously”. My own translation, my emphases.

15 Jakobson, “Zur Struktur des Phonems” (1962), p. 307: “The brightness of the /y/ in “lyt” is manifested by the contrast to its absence in /u/, whereas the darkness of the /y/ is manifested by the contrast to its absence in /i/. The union of both these distinctive features – brightness and darkness – in the same phoneme /y/ is a relationship of the two simultaneous elements *in praesentia*.” My own translation.

made the true advancement of the “concurrent” nature of the sub-phonemic entities. If an assumption is made according to the wording “a set of those concurrent sound properties” in the 1962 English translation, anachronism will then be inevitable.

It is also worth mentioning that although Jakobson prepared the first draft of “Zur Struktur des Phonems” for the lectures he gave at the University of Copenhagen in April 1939, a study on the manuscript of this article at MIT Roman Jakobson Archive reveals that the 1962 article was also a largely rewritten one. Neither the Danish examples nor terms like “Helligkeit” and “gedämpfter Klang” appeared in the old manuscript. There would naturally be more serious anachronism arising if the 1962 text were trusted as his real understanding of distinctive features in the late 1930s.

The Earliest Version of Jakobsonian Distinctive Features and Their Classification

Then what was Jakobson's real understanding of the sub-phonemic entities back in the early 1930s? Unlike the *Ottův* encyclopaedia entries that only indirectly implies the sub-phonemic entities, “Z fonologie spisovné slovenštiny” (1931) directly reveals Jakobson's first two pairs of distinctive features, each having two opposite members within. This Czech article was translated and again quietly rewritten, and the English text entitled ‘Phonemic Notes on Standard Slovak’ in the 1962 volume may again mislead the readers who solely rely on this anthology as the source of Jakobsonian phonological ideas:

The Czech *o, u* are opposed to the phonemes *e, i* as flat grave vowels (i.e., in articulatory terms, rounded back vowels) to non-flat acute (i.e., unrounded front) vowels. The Czech *a* is a neutral vowel without a counterpart from the point of view of tonality. In Standard Slovak *a, o, u* are opposed to the pho-

nemes *ä, e, i* merely as grave to acute vowels (i.e., in articulatory terms, as back to front). The opposition of flat to non-flat is not a distinctive feature delimiting the two series, since both opposites *ä* and *a* are non-flat (i.e., unrounded) vowels.¹⁶

It does not seem unreasonable for readers of this paragraph to draw the following conclusions:

- (1) Beneath these vocalic phonemes, there exist two pairs of distinctive features: grave vs. acute, flat vs. non-flat;
- (2) The above four distinctive features are arranged and classified according to their tonality;
- (3) “Distinctive features”, the term for the sub-phonemic entities had already appeared by the early 1930s.

Once more one needs to understand how true these conclusions can be, although the terms about distinctive features here look very familiar as they have been used consistently in Jakobson’s post-WWII works published in English in the United States, from “On the Identification of Phonemic Entities” (1949), to *Preliminaries to Speech Analysis* (1952, in collaboration with Gunnar Fant and Morris Halle), then to *The Sound Shape of Language* (1979, in collaboration with Linda Waugh). To judge on the validity of these three conclusions, one needs again to check the original Czech text.

“Z fonologie spisovné slovenštiny” was originally published in Bratislava in a festschrift entitled *Slovenská miscellanea* [Slovak Miscellanea] (1931), which was the volume edited by Czech linguists Josef Jirásek and František Tichý to commemorate the 30th anniversary of Albert Pražák’s engagement in the research of philology and literary history. In spite of its contributors who were “authorities on various aspects of Slovak life”,¹⁷ it is now obviously a forgotten book and Jakobson’s article in it has also become hardly available. For the English paragraph cited above, the original Czech version reads:

Česká *e, i* jsou timbrově kladena proti fonematům *o, u* jako samohlásky světlo-měkké (t.j. s hlediska artikulačního ne-labialisované přední) proti samohláskám temno-tvrdým (t.j.

¹⁶ Jakobson, “Phonemic notes on standard Slovak” (1962), pp. 224-225.

¹⁷ Roucek (1933), p. 233.

labialisovaným zadním). *a* je neutrální samohláskou bez timbrového protějšku. Ve spisovné slovenštině kladou se *ä*, *e*, *i* proti fonematům *a*, *o*, *u* jako samohlásky měkké proti samohláskám tvrdým (t.j. s hlediska artikulačního jako přední proti zadním). Protiklad světlosti a temnosti není diferenční vlastností, která by vymezovala obě řady, neboť *i*, *ä*, *a* jsou samohlásky světlé (resp. nelabialisované).¹⁸

Distinctive features involved in the description of these two vocalic systems can be summarized as the following:

- (1-1) Czech *e* and *i*: světlo-měkké [bright and soft];
- (1-2) Czech *o* and *u*: temno-tvrdé [dark and hard];
- (1-3) Czech *a*: neutrální samohláskou bez timbrového protějšku [neutral vowel without a counterpart of timbre].
- (2-1) Slovak *ä*, *e*, *i*: měkké [soft];
- (2-2) Slovak *a*, *o*, *u*: tvrdé [hard].

Names of the distinctive features may well be a surprise due to the dramatic differences between these two versions. The terms in the Czech original text had been based on some more or less subjective sound impressions, whereas those in the translated English text apparently on the more scientific and “fashionable” acoustic terms that had been thriving since the post-WWII introduction of spectrogram in the phonological studies.

In addition, when Jakobson employed these two earliest pairs of his distinctive features in the descriptions of Czech and Slovak vocalic systems, he did not mention whether these distinctive features may apply to the description of other languages. Nor did he attempt to conclude, naturally, on how many pairs of distinctive features are needed to describe any specific language. The terms borrowed from the future, i.e. “grave”, “acute”, “flat” and “non-flat” in the English text, lead to a wrong impression that universality of the distinctive fea-

18 Jakobson, “Z fonologie spisovné slovenštiny” (1931), p. 158: “Considering the timbre, Czech *e*, *i* are opposed to the phonemes *o*, *u* as light-soft vowels (i.e. with respect to their unlabialised front articulation) against dark-hard vowels (i.e. labialised, back). *a* is a neutral vowel without a timbre counterpart. In Standard Slovak, *ä*, *e*, *i* are placed against *a*, *o*, *u* as soft vowels against hard vowels (i.e. with respect to articulation as front against back). The opposition between brightness and darkness is not a distinctive feature that would define the two series, because both *a* and *ä* are light (or unlabialised) vowel.” My own translation.

tures had been considered by the early 1930s, whereas in fact those English terms obviously belong to the 1950s, when the Jakobsonian distinctive features became more established as a universal system that applies to all languages. Again, failure to realize these differences result in the risk of anachronism, since the post-WWII technological devices could not have been available in the early 1930s when Jakobson wrote “Z fonologie spisovné slovenštiny”.

Another misleading term in the 1962 English text is “tonality” that only roughly corresponds to ‘timbrově’ [according to the timbre] in the Czech text. Typical to the Prague School, Jakobson concentrated more on the sound systems than on the sounds in isolation. He presented the two vocalic systems as the following:¹⁹

Vocalic System of Standard Czech			Vocalic System of Standard Slovak	
	i		a	ä
e		o	o	e
a		u	u	i

His reinterpretation of the vocalic systems reflects an effort to transfer the sub-phonemic entities from an articulatory perspective to an acoustic one. Therefore, the distinction between front and back vowels was replaced by a “soft-hard” one, and the rounded-unrounded distinction by a “dark-bright” one. While the criterion to classify these new sub-phonemic labels was summarized as “timbrově” in the original Czech text, one must realize that the word here only stood for a relatively rough sound impression. It did not imply the precise acoustic facts displayed with the aid of the spectrograph images. Real “tonality” did not actually appear in Jakobson’s works until he (and his collaborators) published *Preliminaries to Speech Analysis* (1952), where “grave vs. acute”, “flat vs.

¹⁹ See: Jakobson, “Z fonologie spisovné slovenštiny” (1931), p. 158, and Jakobson, “Phonemic notes on standard Slovak” (1962), p. 224.

plain" and "sharp vs. plain" were placed collectively under this mega-category of distinctive features. The 1962 English version therefore shows a good effort to revise an old work and let it keep pace with the latest technological innovations, but it is by no means a precise translation of the original text and cannot be directly used as first-hand historical source. Up till now, our Question 2B should be answered negatively.

The last task for the present historical exploration centers on the term "distinctive feature" itself. The Czech equivalent of "distinctive features" appeared its genitive plural form in one of the sentences of the above citation: For the Slovak vocalic system, "protiklad světlosti a temnosti není diferenciacní vlastností, která by vymezovala obě řady" [the opposition between brightness and darkness is not a distinctive feature that would define the two series], because it is not a distinction to separate *a* from *ä* in Slovak. The four sub-phonemic entities, 'světly', 'temný', 'měkký' and 'tvrdý' were collectively referred to by Jakobson as 'diferenciacní vlastnosti' [distinctive features]. This term did exist in its Czech form in the 1931 article and was directly translated into English in the 1962 version as "distinctive features", although this English term did not appear in Jakobson's phonological writings until he published "On the identification of phonemic entities" in 1949. Thus, Question 2A should be answered affirmatively. Born in 1931, this Czech term is the forerunner of all Jakobson's French term "qualités différentielles", German term "distinktive Eigenschaften" and English term "distinctive features".

Conclusion

Slavic scholars played an especially prominent role in the emergence of modern phonology during the first half of the twentieth century. Among the founding members of the Prague School, Jakobson is most often remembered for his theory of distinctive features that extends functional pho-

nological opposition from the level of phoneme to that of sub-phonemic entities. Although this theory is best depicted in the English works he published after his immigration to the United States in 1941, a full picture of its gradual development remains blurred unless all his earlier works on this topic, written in Czech, French or German, are taken into consideration.

There are important textual differences between the easily accessible “Phonemic notes on standard Slovak” (1962) and the nearly forgotten “Z fonologie spisovné slovenštiny” (1931). Neither the English terms “acute”, “grave”, “flat”, “non-flat” and “tonality” nor their Czech equivalents appeared in the 1931 text. Instead, Jakobson was only experimenting on a set of pilot terms that neither its systematicness nor its universality was definitely known at that time. While the term “distinctive features” itself did exist in the 1931 article (in its inflected Czech form), the idea was far from being mature, leaving many theoretical issues to be solved in the following decades.

Similarly, the 1962 English article entitled “Phoneme and Phonology” was also a re-writing rather than a faithfully translated text of the Czech encyclopaedia entries. The “concurrent nature” of the sub-phonemic entities was unclear at that time and did not really exist in the original *Ottův* entries.

With the absence of these Czech texts in the newly edited ninth volume of *Selected Writings*, the English texts ‘Phonemic notes on standard Slovak’ and ‘Phoneme and Phonology’ remain the more accessible sources for the average readers and researchers, since both *Slovenská miscellanea* and the pre-WWII edition of the *Ottův* volume are now rare books. Thus it is still highly necessary to warn the linguistic historians against these misleading details in the 1962 English “translations”.

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