

PROFESSOR JERZY KURYŁOWICZ
(1895–1978)

Professor Jerzy Kuryłowicz died in Kraków on 28 January 1978.

He was one of the greatest linguists of all times and one of the most versatile scholars in the whole history of the discipline. His scholarly career coincided with the turn of an epoch in linguistics—the maturity and decline of the nineteenth century comparative Indo-European studies and the birth and development of the twentieth century structural and general linguistics. His greatness consisted precisely in a very rare, harmonious combination of these two areas; a detailed neo-grammarians knowledge of an unbelievable number of historical languages and a structuralist ability to evaluate it critically and organize systematically. He was equally interested in Indo-European and in general linguistics, and studied contemporary linguistic theories, but remained an independent representative of functional structuralism, a theory of which he had been one of the founders. His work was invariably characterized by the tendency to explain linguistic phenomena by linguistic means, treating linguistics as a separate discipline, independent of other disciplines such as psychology or logic. Beside a fantastic memory and erudition he had a gift of precise thinking, beside sound methodological foundations an infallible linguistic intuition. He was the only Indo-European scholar in Poland to handle successfully the entire discipline and one of the few linguists in the world of such vast horizons.

Jerzy Kuryłowicz was born on 26 August 1895 in Stanisławów and attended primary and secondary school in Lwów. His secondary school was a classical gymnasium where German was the language of instruction, Latin was taught for eight years and Greek for six, while English was optional. Having also been taught French at home he was well equipped not only for a diplomatic career that he originally envisaged, entering in 1913 the Hochschule für Welthandel in Vienna.

When World War I broke out he was called up to serve in the Austrian army, was wounded twice, and spent a year and a half as a prisoner of war with the Russians. After the war he resumed his studies at the Hochschule, studying at the same time at the Lehranstalt für Orientalische Sprachen and the Faculty of Law, and obtaining diplomas from the two former institutions. At the Hochschule there was an obligatory examination in four languages: German, English, French, and either Spanish or Portuguese or Italian or Russian. Kuryłowicz took all seven languages, but on obtaining the diploma in 1920 felt he was not satisfied with his studies. From the casual comparison of a number of languages there had grown an interest for pure linguistics, so at the age of twenty-five he enrolled as a first year student of the Philosophical Faculty of the University of Lwów.

That was the beginning of a swift and brilliant linguistic career that was admiration and envy of his contemporaries. He took his Ph. D. in Romance and Germanic philology in 1923, and received a French Government grant to study in France. During his two years in Paris (1923–25) he extended his interests onto Indo-European linguistics, studying under such prominent linguists as Meillet, Vendryes and Bloch. He

presented his *habilitationsschrift* on the traces of shwa in Indo-Iranian at Lwów University in 1926, and was granted his *venia legendi* in Indo-European linguistics there in 1927. In December 1928 he was appointed professor extraordinary, and in 1934 professor ordinary of this subject at the University of Lwów. Before World War II he was twice recipient of grants from the Rockefeller Foundation to study abroad. In the academic year 1931–32 he was at Yale, where he met Edward Sapir, one of the founders of structuralism in America, and also in Vienna where he worked with Karl Bühler, the psychologist and theoretician of language. In the winter term of 1935–36 he went to London to attend the lectures of the famous social anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski.

He lived through World War II in Lwów, teaching at the university in 1939–41 and 1944–46, and at the Polish school of commerce during the Nazi occupation in 1941–44. Repatriated after the war, he was a professor of comparative Indo-European linguistics at the University of Wrocław in 1946–48, and then of general linguistics at the Jagellonian University from 1948 till his retirement in 1965. He continued to lecture on Indo-European linguistics abroad as a visiting professor at Ann Arbor in 1957, Hamburg in 1960, and Cambridge, Mass., in 1962 and 1964–66.

He was a marvellous professor, and his lectures and seminars were fascinating. He had a gift of presenting the seemingly dry as dust facts of grammar of both living and dead languages in an immensely interesting way, and his own involvement in the subject was catching. His tall, very straight figure towered over the lecture room, and piercing light blue eyes looked from behind a pair of spectacles over the heads of his audience to whom he explained the complicated problems of linguistic hierarchy of forms and functions, presenting ingenious original theories, surprising with erudition, always stimulating and never boring.

What he valued most, however, in an academic career was creative scholarly work. His own accomplishment in this domain was most impressive. In his lifetime he published over 300 items, including 11 books. A bibliography of his works comprising the years 1925–1965 appeared in *Symbolae linguisticae in honorem Georgii Kurylowicz* (1965), and a sequel to it, covering the next decade (1965–1975) in the "Bulletin of the Polish Linguistic Society" (PTJ), 1975, XXXIII, which was another memorial volume dedicated to the Professor on his 80th birthday.

He made his name famous in 1927 by a discovery that immediately granted him a leading position in the linguistic world: he established a correspondence between the Indo-European shwa and the Hittite laryngeal spirant, thus substantiating the laryngeal theory.

His first book was *Études indoeuropéennes I* (1935) which dealt with the central problem of Indo-European linguistics, that of relative chronology. A second part of the book was announced but never appeared, probably because of the outbreak of war which is marked by a complete lack of publications for the period 1941–1944. But after the war, beginning with the early fifties, synthesis followed upon synthesis.

The first of them was *L'Accentuation des langues indo-européennes* (1952), the first exhaustive treatment of the subject since Hermann Hirt's neo-grammarians book published in 1929. Kurylowicz's work, based on a number of earlier studies, resulted not only in a substantial reduction of phonetic laws, thus simplifying the comparative grammar, but also established certain functional tendencies of value for general linguistics. The book was awarded a State prize and a second edition was published in 1958.

Meanwhile there followed an even more detailed study, *L'Apophonie en indo-européen* (1956) which dealt with another problem where stagnation had reigned for over a quarter of a century. Here again Kurylowicz improved linguistic methodology by applying internal linguistic criteria. Then he took the Indo-European scholars by surprise publishing *L'Apophonie en sémitique* (1961), a book outside his proper

field, which turned out to be a great success. When later invited to prepare a second edition of it, he decided to insert some topics which seemed worth treating from the structuralist point of view and came up with a new monograph, *Studies in Semitic Grammar and Metrics* (1972), in which he tried to acquaint the Semiticists with the central morphological problems that were still being handled by them in an obsolete way.

But his main interest remained in Indo-European morphology. From a semester's stay at the Center for Advanced Study in Behavioral Sciences at Palo Alto, California, where he had everyday contact with such prominent scholars as, among others, Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, grew up a volume called *The Inflectional Categories of Indo-European* (1964). This was a renewal of grammatical analysis in terms of structural methods which, dealing with overall categories, approached the semantic universals in language. The book was published in Heidelberg by Carl Winter's Universitätsverlag where Kurylowicz undertook a yet greater project, the edition of a monumental structural grammar of Indo-European, which had been the dream of his life. The need for such a work was acute in view of both the new materials which had not been accessible to the neo-grammarians and of a new interpretation required. It was supposed to be a collective work that would not only comprise the whole comparative material at the disposal, but also respond to the exigencies of the day. Kurylowicz himself was the first to contribute a volume to it, *Indo-germanische Grammatik*, Band II: *Akzent, Ablaut* (1968), but apart from the next volume (III, 1: *Verbalflexion* by C. Watkins) the project fell through, other collaborators having abandoned it for various reasons. Kurylowicz was very much distressed. His bitter disappointment is voiced in the preface to his last book, *Problèmes de linguistique indo-européenne* (1977) in which he tried to make up for the vicissitudes of the unpublished project, summarizing once more the problems he was working upon for a long time. He supplemented the Watkins' volume with an ingenious analysis of verbal systems, and outlined the non-existent volumes III, 2 and I of the grammar, illustrating the method of comparative and historical research based on the principles of structuralism.

Theory was immanent everywhere in his studies, the theoretical foundations of functional structuralism having been elaborated over years and published in various articles. In those articles his interest was often turned onto the method and general linguistic notions rather than on the particular historical problem. The articles, originally dispersed in various journals, were subsequently republished in collections. The first of those was *Esquisses linguistiques* (1960), his most widely read book, including 30 articles, mainly published between 1945–1960, and treating of such fundamental problems as the isomorphism of linguistic planes or the nature of analogical change, his best known contributions to linguistic theory. The volume was instantly translated in the Soviet Union, and a second edition appeared in West Germany in 1973, where it was followed by *Esquisses linguistiques II* (1974), containing 50 articles published between 1962–1973, *inter alia* those on the methods of internal reconstruction and the role of the deictic elements.

What might be of special interest here is also Kurylowicz's interest in metrics. He was interested in the problem from the very beginning of his scientific career and wrote a score of articles on the subject, culminating in an entire book, *Metrik und Sprachgeschichte* (1975). His interest in metrics was due to the mutual dependence between versification and phonology which, though indirect and in principle unidirectional (phonology to versification), was important for comparative grammar, since in so many languages metrical texts constituted the oldest documents. The very scope of the material covered in the book, ranging from Homer and Plautus, the Rigveda and the Avesta, through Old Germanic and Old Irish, Russian and Lithuanian, to Italian, French and English metrics, not to mention Semitic, is breathtaking.

All through his life Kuryłowicz had a powerful influence on Polish linguistics. He was among the founders of the Polish Linguistic Society, and for a long time the editor of its "Bulletin" and the most prolific contributor to it. His works, published for the most part in the great languages of Western Europe, found an instantaneous and live echo in the linguistic world.

His outstanding merits found their due recognition in his lifetime. He was an active member of the Polish Academy of Arts (PAU) since 1931, and of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN) since its foundation in 1952, and of eight foreign academies. He was honorary doctor of the Sorbonne and the universities of Dublin, Vienna, Chicago, Michigan, Edinburgh, Liège and the Jagellonian University.

He felt rather concerned when he was obliged to retire at seventy, for he was indeed at the height of his creative ability then. His scientific contacts were ever increasing. At the age of seventy-five he would travel to six countries in two months and a half, visiting Liège, Madrid, Pisa, Florence, Innsbruck, Vienna, Paris, London, and Edinburgh. He gave lectures at McGill University in Montreal when he was eighty.

He was active till the very end of his long industrious life. The reason for his vitality and unflagging activity was his optimistic way of looking upon time. He viewed time as constructive, rejoicing in what he had achieved in the time past, and looking on forward to the future, however short it was to be, for its opportunities of further creative work. That is why his death was so untimely and so hard to accept. It marked a sudden end of a unique phenomenon in Polish and world scholarship, the passing of an individuality that was a class for itself, and will continue to exert a profound influence as an example of unattainable perfection.

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