

PBML



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EDITORIAL

50 years of The Prague Bulletin of Mathematical Linguistics

Half a century of the existence of a scientific journal is quite a long life span, especially if one takes into account the specificity of the political development and turbulences in the country of origin, namely Czech Republic (former Czechoslovakia), and the branch of science, namely computational (mathematical) linguistics. And yet, it was fifty years ago, in 1964, when the first issue of The Prague Bulletin of Mathematical Linguistics, published by Charles University in Prague, appeared, with 3 full papers and 5 review articles, in an edition of 250. The ambitions of the editor-in-chief (Petr Sgall, still participating in the present-day editorial board) and the editorial board (a logician Karel Berka, a general linguist Pavel Novák and a specialist in quantitative linguistics Marie Těšitelová; to our deep sorrow, none of the three can celebrate with us today) as declared in the first Editorial were rather modest but also rather urgent at the time: to provide a forum for Czech researchers in the newly developing field of mathematical linguistics and its applications to inform the international community about their research activities, results and standpoints. As the university department that was responsible for the publication of PBML included in its name the attribute “algebraic linguistics”, the Editorial also referred to its orientation using this attribute (borrowed from Y. Bar-Hillel) to distinguish the new trend in linguistics from the at that time already well-established field of quantitative (called also statistical, sic!) linguistics. The editors expressed their appreciation of N. Chomsky’s contribution to theoretical linguistics esp. in connection with the formal specification of language by means of generative system and the assignment of structural characteristics to sentences and emphasized the possibility offered by such an approach to compare different types of grammars by means of usual mathematical methods. However, they also warned that there are some difficulties concerning the mathematical formulation of transformational grammar and its linguistic interpretation and suggested that it is desirable to have another alternative of the generative description of language. They referred to classical Praguian understanding of the relation of form and function and the multilevel approach on the one side, and to such (at that time) contemporary researchers as H. B. Curry, H. Putnam, S. K. Shaumjan or I. I. Revzin on the other. It should be noticed that already in this very brief Editorial the possibility to use a dependency rather than a constituency based account of syntactic relations

was mentioned, as well as the importance of including semantic considerations into linguistic description (as well as into possible applications, which, at that time, mostly concerned machine translation).

It should be remembered that this Editorial was written at the beginning of 1964, before the appearance of Katz and Postal's monograph on an integrated theory of linguistic description and one year before the publication of Chomsky's *Aspects* and his idea of the difference between deep and surface structure, not to speak about the split within transformational grammar in the years 1967–1969 into the so-called interpretative and generative semantics. In a way, the contents of the Editorial somehow signaled the appearance of the alternative generative approach of formal description of language as proposed in mid-sixties by Petr Sgall and as developed further by his collaborators and pupils, i.e. the so-called Functional Generative Description (FGD). There are three distinguishing features of this theoretical approach, namely (i) a multi-level (stratificational) organization of linguistic description, with the underlying syntactic level (called tectogrammatical, using Putnam's terminological distinction between pheno- and tecto-grammatics) as its starting point, (ii) a dependency account of syntactic relations with valency as its basic notion, and (iii) the inclusion of the description of the topic-focus articulation (TFA, now commonly referred to as the information structure of the sentence) into the underlying level of the formal description of language. In the years to follow, FGD was not only used as the theoretical framework for the description of multifarious linguistic phenomena (not only of Czech, but also in comparative studies of Czech and English, or other, mostly Slavonic languages), but also as a basis for the formulation of an annotation scheme for corpora applied in the so-called Prague Dependency Treebank 30 years later.

Back to the history of PBML. Its appearance in 1964 actually indicates that the political situation in the mid-sixties though still very tough, intolerable and difficult to live through was not so strictly adversative to some till then unimaginable movements in cultural and scientific life, especially if some parallel tendencies could be found in Soviet Russia. It was in the same year, September 18–22, 1964, when a first (rather small) international meeting on computational linguistics took place in Prague, called Colloquium on Algebraic Linguistics, in which such prominent scholars as J. J. Ross and E. S. Klima from the U.S., M. Bierwisch, J. Kunze and H. Schnelle from Germany, J. Mey from Norway, H. Karlgren and B. Brodda from Sweden, B. Vauquois from France, F. Papp, F. Kiefer and L. Kálmár from Hungary participated; altogether there were 35 participants from abroad and tens of interested mostly young scholars from Czechoslovakia. (One should be aware of the fact that this was one year before the start of the regular international meetings on computational linguistics later known as COLING (organized by the International Committee on Computational Linguistics) and the Annual ACL conferences organized by the Association for Computational Linguistics.) However, the situation dramatically changed soon (though not immediately, but with a delay of a year or two) after the Russian invasion to Czechoslovakia in 1968. This change was reflected also in the position of the research team of mathe-

matical linguistics at the Faculty of Arts at Charles University in Prague: in 1970 the team lost the status of a department, in 1972 the Head of the Laboratory Petr Sgall was threatened to have to leave the University and a similar fate was expected to be faced by all of the members. Thanks to the consistence and solidarity of the team and also to the help of our colleagues at the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics all the members of the team found an “asylum” at different departments (though not as a laboratory of its own) at this ideologically less strictly watched faculty.

At that point, it was clear to us that the very existence of the Prague Bulletin was in a great danger. And again, solidarity was a crucial factor: one of the original Editorial Board members, the well-known logician prof. Karel Berka, the only member of the Communist Party in the Board and actually not a computational linguist, took over the initiative and actively fought for the continuation of the Bulletin. Its existence was really extremely important – it helped to keep us in contact with the international scene, not only by informing our colleagues abroad about our work but also, maybe even more importantly at that time, to have something to offer “in exchange” for publications and journals published abroad which were – due to currency restrictions – not otherwise available in our country. In this way, Czech(oslovak) computational linguistics has never lost contacts with the developments in the field. One of the remarkable sources of information, for example, were the mimeographed papers, PhD theses and pre-publications produced and distributed by the Indiana University Linguistics Club at Bloomington University, Indiana, which we were receiving free of charge, not “piece for piece” (which would mean only two papers in a year, since PBML was a bi-annual journal), but tens of papers for one PBML issue. Thanks to the solidarity and friendliness of our colleagues at most different universities and research institutions abroad, a similar exchange policy was in existence for more than two decades, even between the PBML publishers and Editorial Boards or publishers of some regular scientific journals.

In the course of the fifty years of its existence, our journal has faced not only difficulties but also some favorable developments. The journal has become more international: the contents is no longer restricted to contributions of Czech scholars, as originally planned, the Editorial Board has undergone several changes the most important of which was introduced in June 2007 (PBML 87), when the Editorial Board was enlarged by prominent scholars of the field from different geographical areas as well as domains of interest, and the review process was made more strict by having at least one reviewer for each submission from abroad. At the same time, we started to make the individual issues available on the web and also the format of the journal and its graphical image has considerably improved. Starting from PBML 89, all articles have assigned DOI identifiers and they are published also via the Versita (De Gruyter) open access platform.

The thematic scope of PBML is also rather broad; the Editorial Board is open to publish papers both with a theoretical as well as with an application orientation, as testified by the fact that since 2009 (PBML 91) we publish regularly the papers accepted

for presentation at the regular Machine Translation Marathon events organized by a series of EU-funded projects: EuroMatrix, EuroMatrixPlus and now MosesCore. We are most grateful to the group of reviewers of the Marathon event who present their highly appreciated comments on the tools described in the papers. PBML has thus become one of a very few journals that provide a traditional scientific credit for rather practical outcomes: open-source software, which can be employed in further research and often also outside of academia right away.

We are convinced that in the course of the fifty years of its existence, The Prague Bulletin of Mathematical Linguistics has developed into a fully qualified member of the still growing family of journals devoted to many-sided issues of computational linguistics and as such will provide an interesting and well-received forum for all researchers irrespective of their particular specialization, be they members of the theoretically or application oriented community.

Eva Hajičová, Petr Sgall and Jan Hajič

{hajicova,sgall,hajic}@ufal.mff.cuni.cz