

## HOW A HISTORIAN CAME TO KNOW LANGUAGE: ON THE 80<sup>th</sup> BIRTHDAY OF M. HROCH

Miroslav Hroch was born on June 14, 1932 in Prague, where he began studying history and Czech at Charles University in 1951. His teachers at the university did not include any of the well-known members of the Prague Linguistic School, which is likely why he was more interested in the study of history. Nevertheless, his philology background made him sensitive to language issues, which was also due to the fact that he had always been devoted to the practical acquisition of a number of foreign languages, enabling him to analyze the literature and historical materials from abroad. M. Hroch speaks (or at least reads) English, French, Italian, Dutch, Polish and Norwegian, he learned Swedish, and a part of his university education included, naturally, Latin, German and Russian. Upon the completion of his studies, he remained at Charles University, where he spent the greater part of his academic career teaching and conducting research in the field of history.

However, M. Hroch is not and has never been a specialist in Czech history, the history of Central Europe, or even of the Slavic world. He began his research career with the analysis of several aspects of the history of Scandinavia (it is not a coincidence that Uppsala University awarded him with an honorary doctorate in 1998), he wrote a monograph on Oliver Cromwell, specialized in European history and in methodological questions, which is why it is not surprising that he was officially named professor of Modern General History by Charles University in 1989.

M. Hroch became known in world historiography above all through his analysis of the history and structure of the European national movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> He researched these social phenomena using the comparative method so characteristic for him. He began investigating national movements as early as in the 1960s, that is, several decades before the study of national

movements, or in fact, nationalism, became not only relevant in a political sense, but to a certain degree even fashionable. M. Hroch is characterized by the fact that he rejects the historiographic mainstream, which treats the process of nation-building as merely a sort of byproduct of nationalism, and he insists that it is necessary to view this process in the context of the modernization of European societies as an aspect of their social and cultural transformation.

During his research on the European national movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, M. Hroch observed that the success of these movements was in most cases, though not everywhere, related to the question of language. The analysis of the role of language in relation to ethnic/national identity led to his interest in what contemporary sociology of language or sociolinguistics could offer a historian, and more specifically, an analyst of national movements. M. Hroch familiarized himself with the work of P. Bourdieu, J. Fishman, E. Haugen, and he drew also upon G. Williams. Most of all, he was interested in the concept of diglossia as conceived by J. Fishman, about which he often says “it’s a concept which, from the perspective of a historian of national movements, really works”.

For historians, interest in language will always be connected to interest in other factors – not only cultural factors, but also social, economic, and political ones as well. In this sense, the historian’s view is more complex than that of the linguist, or more precisely, of sociolinguists, who, given their background, are predisposed to overestimate the significance of the structure and function of language. Precisely for this reason, it is Hroch’s study “The social interpretation of linguistic demands in European national move-

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<sup>1</sup> See the collection of his papers published as Hroch, M. (2007): *Comparative Studies in Modern European History: Nation, Nationalism, Social Change*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

ments”,<sup>2</sup> which is most interesting for sociolinguists. This paper is actually a study on language planning (or language management) as it was conducted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and for contemporary sociolinguists it is an urgent reminder of the fact that systematic language planning did not begin only with the collapse of the colonial world following the Second World War.

Hroch’s model of the three phases of a national movement became a part of the historiography canon – in brief, it can be described as follows: in phase A, the phase of specialized interest, a small group of intelligentsia devotes its attention to the scientific study of the language, history and culture of the respective ethnic group, in phase B, the agitation phase, other activists appear who begin to advocate among their countrymen a plan to create a full-fledged nation, and finally in phase C, the mass movement phase, most of the population has identified with the call of the patriots, and the entire social structure of the nation is completed.

A specific national movement can then be characterized in accordance with the degree to which the linguistic, social, and political demands of a given ethnic/national group are represented in these phases (this is, above all, a question of how long the respective national movement perseveres with its linguistic demands mainly, or, viewed from another angle, how soon it formulates its political demands). Certain linguistic demands of the national movement are typically associated with these phases; for example, introducing a language in schools and realizing complete equality between languages typically take place in phase C, when the linguistic demands

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<sup>2</sup> See Hroch, M. (1998): The social interpretation of linguistic demands in European national movements. In: H.-G. Haupt, M. G. Müller & S. Woolf (eds.), *Regional and National Identities in Europe in the XIXth and XXth centuries*. The Hague, London, Boston: Kluwer Law International, 67–96. Abridged Czech versions of this paper can be found in Hroch, M. (1996): *V národním zájmu: Požadavky a cíle evropských národních hnutí devatenáctého století v komparativní perspektivě*. Praha: Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Karlovy, and Hroch, M. (2009): *Národy nejsou dílem náhody: Příčiny a předpoklady utváření moderních evropských národů*. Praha: Sociologické nakladatelství.

become, at the same time, political demands. Hroch’s model is undoubtedly inspiring not only for historians, but for sociolinguists as well.<sup>3</sup>

M. Hroch remained above all a historian, though he did comment on the new wave of nationalism, or rather, on the national movements manifested in Europe in the 1990s. Based on the analysis of the historical aspects of this situation, he rejected the idea that a new “ethno-nationalism” was specific to the post-communist world. In his opinion, it was necessary to view this new ethno-nationalism as a (minimally) European issue.<sup>4</sup> A detailed analysis of the contemporary role of language in the relationship to ethnic/national identity in the Slavic world, however, is already essentially beyond the horizon of a historian, and he is happy to leave this task to his sociolinguistics colleagues.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Neustupný, J. V. & Nekvapil, J. (2003): Language management in the Czech Republic. *Current Issues in Language Planning* 4 (3&4): 181–366 [reprinted in R. B. Baldauf & R. B. Kaplan (eds.) (2006): *Language Planning and Policy in Europe, 2: The Czech Republic, The European Union and Northern Ireland*. Clevedon, Buffalo, Toronto: Multilingual Matters, 16–201].

<sup>4</sup> See Hroch, M. (2004): *Ethnonationalismus – eine ostmitteleuropäische Erfindung?* Oskar-Halecki-Vorlesung 2002. Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag. See also studies included in the collection quoted in Note 1.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Marti, R. & Nekvapil, J. (eds.) (2007): *Small and Large Slavic Languages in Contact* (= International Journal of the Sociology of Language 183). Berlin – New York: Mouton de Gruyter.