Oldřich Švárný (1920–2011)

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Professor Oldřich Švárný, representing the oldest living generation of Czech and Slovak Sinologists, passed away on April 19, 2011, shortly before his 91st birthday. He dedicated his lifelong efforts to the research of Standard Chinese (Mandarin). He focused on its prosodic, i.e. suprasegmental features, connecting them to grammar. Švárný strived to reveal the relationship between the four Mandarin canonical tones on one hand, and stress, junctures and intonation patterns found in connected speech on the other, taking into account the changes in speech tempo. His goal was both the accurate phonetic description of these phenomena and their phonological interpretation. He aimed at applying the results of his research to practical language teaching as well. It is worth saying that such specialization is rather unique in the field of Chinese linguistics and pedagogy worldwide.

Oldřich Švárný was born on May 1st, 1920, in the little town Velké Němčice in Moravia. His childhood and young years were difficult: he was orphaned at the age of 7. After graduating from the Public Classical Gymnasium in Brno in 1939, he enrolled at Masaryk University to study Latin and Greek. Shortly afterwards, Czech universities were closed down by the Germans, and Švárný was summoned to forced labour in Germany. Working on road construction sites, he fully devoted his spare time to the study of languages—Italian, French, Spanish, Greek, English and Russian. The aspect in foreign languages that attracted him most was phonetics. He was especially fascinated by the rhythmical patterns of Old Greek. His interests soon drew his attention to the tone language par excellence, to Chinese. After World War II, Švárný returned to Masaryk University, this time choosing English and Russian as his fields. After graduation in 1947, he taught these two languages for three years at several secondary schools in Brno. In 1950, he plunged into postgraduate studies of Sinology and Phonetics at Charles University in Prague. Soon he attracted the attention of Professor Jaroslav Průšek (1908–1980) who entrusted him with

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1 For an appreciation in Czech, see David Uher, »Prof. PhDr. Oldřich Švárný, CSc. — pedagog« [Professor Švárný as a Teacher], SOS 4 (2005), 275–280.
designing a new, phonologically consistent version of the Czech transcription of Standard Chinese. Švarný completed it in 1951; the system is in use in parallel with Hanyu pinyin to this day.

In 1951 Švarný came to the Oriental Institute (which was later incorporated into the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences founded in 1952). Shortly afterwards, he defended his doctoral (PhDr.) thesis devoted to the study of prosodic features of the Chinese syllable and their modifications within connected speech (1952). His conclusions were based on the results of the instrumental analysis of speech data conducted in the Phonetic Institute of the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University (note that he cooperated with the renowned phonetician Professor Bohuslav Hála, 1894–1970). Švarný’s experimental research in the field of articulatory phonetics was summed up in the study «Études experimentales des articulations chinoises» (1955, in cooperation with Karel Ohnesorg). The study offers a detailed description of the articulations of Mandarin vowels and consonants based on the original radiographies and palatograms. It is worth mentioning that a similar study by Chinese authors appeared only eight years later.²

In the year 1955 Švarný spent four months in the PRC as member of a delegation of the Ministry of Education. It turned out to be his sole visit to China during his whole lifetime. He made contacts with the Chinese linguists Lü Shuxiang (1904–1998) and Xu Shirong (1912–1997). In 1963, Švarný defended his CSc. thesis (roughly equal to a Ph.D.). For a change, it was focused on a topic related to grammar and lexicology, dealing with the problem of Chinese morphemes and words. Švarný introduced here the concept of a monosyllabic semantic unit without any functional specifications, different from the Western notion of the morpheme and closely matching the concept of yǔsù proposed by Chinese linguists years later. This research formed the theoretical foundations for Švarný’s future four-volume lexicographic work Učební slovník jazyka čínšeho published several decades later (A Learner’s Dictionary of Modern Chinese, 1998–2000, see below). In 1966 and 1967 he published two articles discussing the variable degree of neutralization of atonic syllables (in cooperation with Ms Guan Mingzhe 關明哲 Janoušová). From the mid-1950s onwards, Švarný had been working on the large-scale project of a comprehensive

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textbook of Mandarin, resulting in Úvod do hovorové čínštiny (Introduction to Spoken Chinese, 1967) in cooperation with Jarmila Kalousková, Čang Ťing-jü 張 璿瑜 Rotterová and Josef Bartůšek. The book was published in two volumes, unfortunately disappearing from the market shortly after the Soviet invasion in 1968.

Despite the dim political situation, Švarný managed to visit the USA for the whole academic year of 1969/70. He stayed at the universities in Princeton and Berkeley. At the University of California in Berkeley, he worked in the phonetic laboratory of Professor William S.-Y. Wang (Wang Shiyuan 王士元, b1933). Here he had the opportunity to pursue the major interest of his career—the analysis of fluent Chinese speech. He instrumentally analyzed the recordings brought from Prague, verifying the findings of his previous research related to his PhDr. thesis. An extensive article »Variability of Tone Prominence in Chinese (Pekinese)« (1974) precisely drew on the results brought from the US. It dealt with the problem of word stress in Mandarin. Using the means of arduous statistics based on a large corpus of data, Švarný explored the variability of accentuation found in disyllabic words depending on changing context. He established four degrees of tone prominence of the Chinese syllable, using them to outline seven ‘accentuation types’ of disyllabic words displaying different levels of accentual variability (or stability). He clearly showed that there is a substantial difference between the notion of word stress in common European languages and the ways the particular syllable of a polysyllabic word receives stress in the particular context of Mandarin utterances.

After his return from the US, Švarný worked for more than five years on analyzing the vast corpus of speech data (i.e. thousands of sample sentences prepared for the future dictionary Učební slovník jazyka čínského) recorded by his lifelong collaborator Ms Tang Yunling 唐雲凌 Rusková (a native speaker of Beijing Chinese). He transcribed the whole bulk of material by means of the innovative prosodic transcription he designed after an analysis of this voluminous corpus of data. The system is based on Hanyu pinyin, making use of various graphic conventions to express the degree of tonality/stress in particular syllables as well as junctures of several levels. The prosodic transcription has several subsequent versions, reflecting Švarný’s lifelong findings in the field of Mandarin prosody (cf. both Třísková 2011). The last version appears in the sample sentences of the dictionary Učební slovení jazyka čínského (1998–2000, see below).

After 1968, Švarný was forced to bear various political pressures. He was eventually dismissed from the Oriental Institute for ideological reasons in 1976, i.e. four years before his retirement. In spite of his difficult financial situation, he continued his research. He launched a statistical analysis of his speech
database (i.e. the sample sentences from the *Učební slovník jazyka čínského*) in dependence on changes of speech tempo. The outcome was a comprehensive overview of the prosodic system of Mandarin including the technical description of the prosodic transcription and of the ‘accentuation types’ of disyllabic words. This overview was published in two sequels in 1991 in *Archiv Orientální*.

Besides his scholarly research, Švarný devoted much of his time to pedagogic activities. Not being allowed to teach at Charles University for many years, he engaged himself in private training of students of Sinology, and of young Sinologists who unofficially but regularly visited his apartment (the author of the present article being one of them). He tutored them freely in Mandarin phonetics—prosody in particular, precisely the aspect of language rather neglected in university courses.

Being unable to have a second edition of his early textbook *Úvod do bovorové čínštiny* published, Švarný, in cooperation with a lecturer at a Prague language school, Ms Tang Yunling Rusková, compiled the teaching material *Gramatika bovorové čínštiny v příkladech* (A Grammar of Spoken Chinese in Examples, 1991–93), re-edited in a revised version in 1998 under a slightly different title *Hovorová čínština v příkladech* (Spoken Chinese in Examples). This textbook in four volumes comprises a detailed survey of the Chinese grammar with numerous sample sentences, given both in Chinese characters and in Švarný’s prosodic transcription. The textbook also offers theoretical chapters on Chinese grammar and phonetics, as well as a dictionary part. A set of tape-recordings, consisting of 6 or 10 items, respectively, is available, too. Another piece of work aiming at improving language teaching was *Úvod do studia bovorové čínštiny* (Introduction to the Study of Spoken Chinese, 1997; 2nd edition in 2001, in cooperation with David Uher). After the ‘Velvet Revolution’ of November 1989, Švarný began to teach Mandarin phonetics at several universities: at Comenius University in Bratislava (1989–91), at Charles University in Prague (1990–97), and later on also at Palacký University in Olomouc (1994–2007).

In the years 1998–2000, Švarný’s *opus magnum*, the four-volume dictionary *Učební slovník jazyka čínského* (A Learner’s Dictionary of Modern Chinese) was finally published. Švarný had been working on it literally for several decades—and note that according to Jaroslav Průšek’s suggestion it was originally intended as the third volume of the older two-volume textbook issued in 1967. Švarný constantly and unsuccessfully fought for its publication, finally succeeding only in the late 1990s. This tremendous piece of work reflects the results of Švarný’s lifelong research in the field of Mandarin grammar and prosody. It is a dictionary of Chinese morphemes, listing nearly 2,000 of the most frequent monosyllabic morphemes (yǔsū) of Standard Chinese with a detailed analysis of their grammatical properties, usage, as well as thousands of sample sentences (given
both in characters and in Švarný’s prosodic transcription based on Hanyu pinyin; Czech translations of the sentences are added, and the recordings are available as well on a set of three CD-ROMs). The dictionary, unfortunately not written in English, is a unique item in Sinological lexicography worldwide—both in terms of its overall concept and in terms of the scope of the speech material included (note that the original recordings of the 16,000 sample sentences took more than 50 hours, each sentence being recorded in two versions).

Švarný became docent at Palacký University in Olomouc in 1998, and was appointed professor at the same university in 2000. He abandoned teaching in Olomouc as late as in 2007, still enjoying relatively good health during his late years and keeping rather active almost until his last days. His life was long and fruitful, yet far from smooth. His lifetime companion was Ms Jožka Švarná (b1922) who lovingly supported him during good times and bad times, constantly offering a helping hand with his work (note that Švarný never came to use a computer, keeping faithful to his typewriter).

Oldřich Švarný is among the most outstanding personalities of Czech and Slovak Sinology. And even more, he is a significant figure in the field of modern Chinese linguistics worldwide, although his work (a large part of which is not widely accessible because it is written in Czech) has not necessarily drawn broad attention. He merits praise for having explored a field which is still rather underresearched compared to other aspects of the Chinese language such as syntax, lexicology and so forth—let alone specializations such as Chinese literature, history, sociology or fine arts. The prosodic features and phenomena of Standard Chinese (such as the interplay between tone and stress, between tone and sentence intonation, between stress and grammar, the distribution of stress, etc.), are still far from sufficiently described. As a consequence, the methodology of teaching these features to students has not been worked out yet. No wonder that these aspects tend to be rather neglected in second language teaching. Whatever is beyond the four citation tones on isolated syllables, neutral tone morphemes, disyllabic combinations and tone sandhi, is most frequently hardly mentioned, let alone practised. Švarný’s systematical attention to the study of Mandarin prosody in close connection to teaching practice was literally ground-breaking. His extensive contribution to a deeper understanding of the sound system of Mandarin built a profound basis for future research.

Švarný’s enthusiasm, personal warmth, his white beard and blue eyes will be always remembered by the colleagues who knew him and by his students.

Czech Academy of Sciences, Oriental Institute, Prague
Select Bibliography of Oldřich Švarný

Monographs


Articles


Reviews


On Oldřich Švarný
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Ms. Jožka Švarná

In front of a portrait of the Late Professor Oldřich Švarný, Taken in 1971

(photograph by Hana Třísková, Praha, August 2011)