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INTERVIEWS WITH BERND MÖBIUS AND ZDENA PALKOVÁ ON LIFE IN PHONETICS

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ABSTRACT
This article features two in-depth interviews with long-time phoneticians, Bernd Möbius and Zdena Palková, who reflect on their careers and the changes they have witnessed in the field. Although their professional paths differ widely – from speech technology to speech on the stage, among others – both scholars share a strong connection to the core methods and questions of phonetics. The interviews touch on the development of the phonetic sciences over several decades, discussing shifts in research focus, academic culture, and international collaboration. By taking an open-ended, conversational approach, the interviews reveal not only the interviewees' scientific insights but also personal experiences, motivations, and views on the future of the discipline. The article highlights the value of interviews as a complementary format for documenting the history and diversity of phonetic research.

Keywords: interviews; history of phonetics; oral history

1. Introduction

Although interviews with phoneticians and other linguists occasionally appear in the literature (such as the conversations with William Labov, Peter Ladefoged, or Michael Ashby, see Gordon, 2006; Kaye, 2006; Ashby & McElvenny, 2022), they remain a surprisingly rare form of scientific publication in phonetics. However, we believe that interviews can be a powerful means of scientific communication.

First of all, they give space for experienced researchers to look back over several decades of work, often providing a retrospective understanding of how the field has evolved. At the same time, these conversations often turn towards the future: what still needs to be done, and what directions seem promising. For readers, interviews also create a chance to compare their own experience and viewpoints with those of the interviewee, especially when it comes to how we structure research or make decisions about what is important in our work. Furthermore, unlike standard research papers, interviews can provide space for broader conceptual discussions, differing views on methodology or theoretical frameworks, and personal perspectives on the field's development. Finally, they bring in the personal side of academic life: how careers unfolded, what certain moments felt like, and how relationships with mentors, colleagues, or institutions shaped someone's path.

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The authors previously developed the written interview project *Phonetic Sciences in Retrospect* (Trouvain & Šturm, 2025), which explores the evolution of the field through first-hand accounts from experienced scholars. The aim was to build a broader historical and conceptual understanding of phonetic sciences by gathering responses to a structured questionnaire organized around ten thematic areas. Using the same structure for each interviewee ensured consistency and allowed for direct comparison across responses.

In contrast, the current paper takes the form of oral interviews, which allow for a more interactive and dynamic exchange. This format makes it possible to explore specific points in greater depth and follow up on unexpected or particularly interesting insights during the conversation. While the written interviews focused more on overarching issues in the field, the oral interviews presented here offer richer glimpses into the interviewees' professional paths, working environments, and personal experiences – privileging small, individual insights over broad generalizations. We hope they provide both inspiration and new perspective on what it means to spend a life in phonetics.

In this paper, we present interviews with two prominent phoneticians, Bernd Möbius (BM) and Zdena Palková (ZP), each looking back on a long and varied career in the field. BM and ZP come from different backgrounds – in terms of age, gender, country, and research interests. Still, there are also many parallels. Their stories highlight the rich diversity within the phonetic sciences, while also revealing shared concerns and points of connection across the field.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Bernd Möbius (BM) is a German phonetician born in 1959 in Andernach, West Germany. From 1979 to 1985, he studied Communication Research and Phonetics (major), with minors in Linguistics and Sociology, at the University of Bonn, where he also completed his PhD in 1992. Further academic stations include Bell Laboratories (New Jersey, USA) and University of Stuttgart (Germany), before being appointed full professor of Phonetics at Saarland University in Saarbrücken (Germany) in 2011. Since 2025, he has been holding the position of senior professor in Saarbrücken.

Zdena Palková (ZP) is a Czech phonetician born in 1938 in Olomouc, Czechoslovakia. From 1956 to 1961, she studied Czech and German at Charles University in Prague. Her entire academic career has been closely tied to the Institute of Phonetics in Prague, where she held various academic roles and served as the director of the institute from 1999 to 2007. In 2015, she was granted the title of Professor Emerita of Phonetics.

2.2 Procedure

Both interviews were held over two days in June 2025. Each conversation lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The interview with BM took place online via a video chat (MS Teams) and was conducted in English. BM participated from his home in Germany, while both interviewers, JT and PŠ, joined from the Institute of Phonetics in Prague. The

session was audio- and video-recorded, and an orthographic transcript was automatically generated using Copilot (Microsoft, 2025), visible only to the interviewers during the conversation. This initial transcript provided a useful foundation for preparing the final written version.

The following day, the interview with ZP took place in person at the Institute of Phonetics in Prague. It was conducted in Czech by a single interviewer (PŠ). The conversation was audio-recorded using MS Teams, and once again, an automatic transcription was generated via Copilot to support the preparation of the final text.

The post-processing of the interviews involved several steps:

1. Editing the raw transcript to create a readable version by removing repeated words, correcting proper names, and inserting appropriate punctuation to reflect natural syntax.
2. Verifying the transcript against the audio/video recordings, with particular attention to unclear or uncertain passages.
3. Polishing the text by removing redundant content and reducing the number of discourse markers (e.g. *so, but, I mean*) to improve readability while preserving the speaker's style.
4. Formatting the interview for publication, including clear differentiation between the interviewee's and interviewers' contributions and appropriate paragraphing.
5. Final review by the interviewee, who was given the opportunity to make last adjustments or refinements to their responses.
6. Translation of the Czech interview into English by PŠ, in consultation with ZP to ensure accuracy and clarity.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Common features

BM and ZP come from different cultural and institutional backgrounds and have followed distinct professional paths. Yet, several important commonalities emerge in their careers, reflecting shared experiences, values, and research themes (see Table 1).

Table 1 Common features in the careers of Bernd Möbius and Zdena Palková.

Aspect	Bernd Möbius (BM)	Zdena Palková (ZP)
Institutional commitment	Long-term roles at Bonn, Bell Labs, Saarland University	Lifelong career at the Institute of Phonetics, Prague
Focus on prosody	Research on intonation models, prosodic features in technology	Studied prosodic phrasing and rhythm in Czech
Applied phonetics	Applied phonetics to speech synthesis and speech technology	Applied phonetics in public speaking and theatre
International engagement	Active at ICPhS and Interspeech since 1991	Participated in nine ICPhS congresses since 1967
Technological adaptation	From diphone synthesis to neural networks	From manual analysis to digital tools in low-resource conditions

First, while BM held positions at multiple institutions, and ZP spent her entire career at the Institute of Phonetics in Prague, both demonstrated strong, long-term commitment to their academic homes. They were involved in teaching, research, and academic leadership, including serving as department heads. Closely related is their influence on the next generation of phoneticians. BM describes working with PhD students as one of the most enjoyable and rewarding aspects of his career, emphasizing mutual learning. Similarly, ZP highlights the formative role of her early teaching experiences, especially working with foreign students of Czech phonetics.

Second, both share a sustained interest in prosody, particularly rhythm and intonation, as a central element of spoken language. They approached this topic from different angles but with complementary aims. BM worked on intonation models and their integration into speech technology (e.g., adapting Fujisaki's model for German). ZP also focused on the suprasegmental level of Czech, especially in terms of prosodic phrasing and rhythm in text interpretation. Her overarching concern has been the relationship between units of spoken language (such as stress groups and prosodic phrases) and units of written text.

Equally significant is their commitment to the practical application of phonetic knowledge beyond academia. BM contributed to the development of German text-to-speech synthesis at Bell Labs and has continued to apply phonetics in speech synthesis and recognition. ZP has worked for decades with actors and broadcasters to improve spoken performance, notably serving as a phonetic consultant at the Czech National Theatre since 1990 and collaborating on over 200 productions.

Another shared feature is their strong international engagement, reflecting a commitment to staying connected to the global phonetics community. BM has regularly participated in conferences such as ICPhS and Interspeech, and served as editor-in-chief of *Speech Communication*. ZP attended nine ICPhS congresses, starting with the 1967 Prague meeting, and remained internationally active even under difficult political and economic conditions. As a side note, it's worth mentioning a subtle connection between Bonn and Prague: not directly through BM and ZP, but through an earlier visit by Milan Romportl – another phonetician from Prague – to the University of Bonn.

Finally, each experienced and adapted to major technological changes in the field, whether it was the rise of neural networks or the shift from analogue to digital tools.

3.2 Differences

There are several notable differences between the careers of BM and ZP – differences shaped by time, place, or academic context. Table 2 summarizes the key contrasts in their professional lives. However, it must be emphasized that some of these differences may also reflect the fact that BM and ZP belong to different academic generations, with nearly two decades between them.

One major difference lies in the academic environment of their respective countries. In Czechoslovakia, phonetics was an exceptionally rare field: it could be studied as a programme only in Prague, and since 1954 only as part of broader programmes such as Czech or German. In contrast, West Germany offered a dozen or so institutions where phonetics could be pursued as a dedicated subject, allowing BM to major in phonetics at the University of Bonn within a more structured academic setting. Today, thanks in

Table 2 Key differences in the careers of Bernd Möbius and Zdena Palková.

Aspect	Bernd Möbius (BM)	Zdena Palková (ZP)
Country and academic system	West Germany (later unified Germany), USA	Czechoslovakia (later Czech Republic)
Access to phonetics education	Studied phonetics in Bonn, one of ~10 institutions in West Germany	In Czechoslovakia, phonetics could only be studied in Prague
Career mobility	Held positions in multiple institutions (Bonn, Bell Labs, Stuttgart, Saarbrücken)	Spent entire career at the Institute of Phonetics in Prague
Research focus	Speech technology, intonation modelling, synthesis systems	Rhythm and intonation, applied phonetics (e.g., speech on the stage)
Use of technology	Worked with cutting-edge tools in well-funded environments	Worked with limited resources
International opportunities	Benefited from early access to international exchange	Faced travel restrictions, financial obstacles

part to ZP's post-1989 efforts, the Institute of Phonetics in Prague offers dedicated degree programmes in Phonetics at the Bachelor, Master and PhD levels.

Their career trajectories also reflect these institutional differences. BM held positions at multiple institutions in Germany and abroad, including a formative period at Bell Labs in the United States, before becoming a professor at Saarland University. ZP, by contrast, spent her entire professional life at the Institute of Phonetics in Prague, where she maintained continuity and professional standards through decades of political transformation and institutional change.

Their research interests likewise diverged. BM's focus was rooted in speech technology, including intonation modelling and speech synthesis. ZP focused on the practical description of spoken Czech, especially its prosodic aspects. She authored a book on the phonetics and phonology of Czech (Palková, 1994). Nonetheless, she also contributed to technological developments by providing phonetic feedback for early Czech speech synthesis systems, bridging academic phonetics and engineering practice.

These contrasting research paths also reflect broader disparities in technological and institutional resources. BM had access to advanced tools and well-funded labs, while ZP worked with limited equipment and often relied on her team's ingenuity – typical of the Czechoslovak academic setting at the time. A related difference lies in international engagement: BM benefited from institutional support and academic mobility, whereas ZP had to overcome political restrictions and often financed her own participation in conferences. Her attendance at nine ICPhS congresses stands as a clear testament to her determination to remain part of the global phonetics community despite the obstacles.

Finally, their intellectual influences reflect different scholarly traditions. BM was shaped by communication theory, linguistics, and speech engineering, often in interdisciplinary contexts. ZP's background includes linguistics and literary theory, which informed her phonetic perspective in distinctive ways. She views phonology – the study of meaningful sound distinctions – as an essential and natural complement to the articulatory, acoustic, and perceptual dimensions of phonetics.

In sum, the careers of BM and ZP highlight how personal interests intersect with broader cultural, institutional, and political conditions, resulting in two distinct yet equally valuable contributions to the field of phonetics.

4. Conclusion

The development of any scientific field – here phonetics – is always reflected by the development of individual careers and propelled by individual researchers. It is their ideas, interests and fresh perspectives that drive the field forward. The personal reflections shared by BM and ZP in these interviews offer a rare opportunity to look back on several decades of scientific activity in phonetics. As contemporaneous witnesses, their accounts provide a kind of evidence not typically found in reports of empirical studies and probably also not in overview articles. The interviews not only allow us to compare the two individuals, BM and ZP, but also changes in the field over time. In our opinion, comparisons between long-time overviews can serve as a valuable source of insight and can give us important impulses for future work.

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APPENDIX

A: Interview with Bernd Möbius

Bernd, you are now a freshly retired professor. Can you say a little bit about the beginnings of your career as a scientist, when you started studying speech, and what your interests were? And a few words about your different academic stations, please.

In retrospect, I guess, it was certainly not planned this way from the beginning, but a recurring theme of my research is integration of phonetic knowledge in speech technology. That's something I have always stated on my homepage as well.

Although that sounds a bit like a unidirectional influence, I mean it in both directions. I always wanted to advance speech technology based on fundamental research in speech science, but, conversely, also to use the technology to test our hypotheses of how humans process language and speech by means of tools that implement these hypotheses. So, for me, speech synthesis used to be the prime example of this kind of approach.

And when did you start studying the big topic of phonetic knowledge for speech technology?

Somehow this was also almost right from the beginning of my studies of phonetics and a few other things a long time ago in Bonn [the capital of West Germany at the time]. I started my studies in 1979.

So it was during the Cold War, right?

Exactly. I had just finished my military service in Germany. But perhaps I should start even a little bit earlier, because how did I actually come to this somewhat obscure field of study of phonetics?

Yes, please do.

Because I guess phonetics could be studied at perhaps ten places at most in Germany.

With Germany, you mean West Germany?

Oh, that's a very good point, yes, indeed. So perhaps it was even less than ten. And there were also a few places that were called something like 'Sprechwissenschaft,' which translates into 'speech science,' right? But with a lot of focus on spoken interaction, on conversation, and less in the technical sense, I think, that we have in our focus very often today.

But you know, I was not exactly exposed to phonetics. At school I was always interested in languages and grammar, and one day, while my best friend and I were doing our homework, the older brother of my best friend – let's call him Hans – was also doing homework, but for the university, and he was working with all kinds of weird symbols he put on paper by pen. I asked him what these strange and funny symbols were. He explained to me that these were symbols that help us transcribe spoken language for all languages in the world, basically in a uniform way, and he called them phonetic symbols. Of course, I had come across some of them in, say, English and French lessons at school, but never in a systematic way.

I see. And was the interest for those strange symbols so strong that you then decided: I can study that, let's do that? Or was there interest in some other aspects which motivated you to start the studies?

Well, I did ask him, of course, about the background, why he's using those symbols, and what it is that he's actually studying at the university. He told me more about that and

he was very helpful, eventually, because after my military service I had to make a serious decision about what to study. I was always torn between astronomy on the one hand, which was another sort of hobby horse for me as an adolescent, and something with language on the other.

I then went for languages, and Hans advised me to study phonetics as a major and linguistics as a minor, not the other way around. He himself, he did his bachelor (in today's terms) in Bonn and his master in Munich. So when we talked about this, he was already in Munich, as a PhD student with Hans Tillmann. Ironically, perhaps, the Bonn Phonetics Institute was housed in the former Astronomy and Observatory building. So, in a sense – how do they say it in English? – 'I had my cake and ate it.'

Were there other surprises when you were starting your studies of phonetics in the ancient observatory in Bonn?

I guess lots of surprises because everything was essentially new to me in phonetics, apart from those symbols with which I had familiarized myself a little bit already after I first came across them.

I think my first lecturer in phonetics, Dieter Stock, started his first session on acoustic phonetics with mathematical formulae that meant to describe the acoustic structure of a spoken utterance as a variation of whatever over time. He jumped right into something that, didactically, might have been better taught a bit later, making it easier for young students to approach the field – but I survived.

It was counteracted by my professor of phonetics, Gerold Ungeheuer, who didn't actually teach phonetics courses at this time; he had, from his point of view, advanced beyond that. He advocated phonetics as part of a larger area of research that he called 'communication research.' He approached that from both a technical and a social perspective. From him I learned that phonetics and linguistics are disciplines that are also couched in a much larger context, all of which has to do with how humans communicate by language.

In Bonn, you did your Magister, then also your PhD. How did you come to your PhD topic, and what was it, of course?

My PhD topic was to develop an adaptation of Hiroya Fujisaki's intonation model to the German language. A lot of factors contributed to that. Of course, when you need funding for a PhD project, you have to be a little bit opportunistic and that was both on my side and on the side of my PhD advisor, Wolfgang Hess, who applied for funding from the German Research Foundation (DFG) for a project with exactly this topic, and it was perhaps a hot topic at the time. You know, Fujisaki's model was very influential but also controversial, and so it was relatively straightforward to apply for funding for such a project and get it. So it was less me defining my topic for myself, on my own or in interaction with my advisor, and more like the advisor seeing this opportunity, introducing me to this model.

And were you happy with the topic? How did it go?

Oh yeah, yeah, absolutely. It was intonation and my Magister thesis was already on German intonation, but in a much less technical sense. It was more experimental – I was trying to follow the approach that Klaus Kohler in Kiel advocated for a short time, which was to find out what the phonological atoms of intonation are. He called them 'tones,' not exactly in the sense of ToBI [Tone and Break Indices]. It was basically at the same time

when Janet Pierrehumbert developed her phonetics and phonology of American English intonation, a famous PhD thesis. So Kohler had a different approach that was, I think, inspired by Halliday's work.

My idea was to run perceptual experiments to find out whether the posited tones have any reality in human perception and processing. That was more or less successful, and it was a bit critical of the overall approach. I don't think this is why Kohler eventually dropped this kind of approach for himself. It may have contributed to it, but I never talked to him about this actually, and I don't think my experiments could have a lot of influence on Kohler's thinking.

You said that during that time modelling intonation was a hot topic. How do you feel the temperature of the topic nowadays?

Nowadays, in a sense, it has completely disappeared. There was a collection of papers a few years ago in a book entitled *Prosodic Theory and Practice* (Barnes & Shattuck-Hufnagel, 2022). The chapters basically summarised the different models that had been proposed over many years and their current state. I don't think any of them really are actively used in research these days. Except, of course, ToBI and the ToBI-kind of approach is highly influential still and used by so many people for so many languages and successfully so. But at the time when I was doing my PhD, it was a real controversy and there was a real competition between models. I don't see that anymore.

In recent years, you do see many papers exploring the tonal and intonational structure of many languages and varieties, which you can find a lot at the phonetics congresses, for instance. But if you look at the leading journals like *Speech Communication, Computer Speech and Language*, perhaps even *Journal of Phonetics*, etc., there's this strong trend in very recent years (last two or three years, I would say) to find out how intonation or intonational features are represented in neural models. This seems to be the really hot topic these days.

It's not modelling in the sense of, you know, a model that predicts and generates intonation contours for applications like speech synthesis or as a component of a speech recogniser anymore. We know, more or less, how segmental acoustic-phonetic features are represented in these neural models. A logical next step would then be to ask how intonation is represented and whether it plays a role for the neural models in the end. In the layers that are close to the acoustics, to the input, you can see these features, but they tend to disappear and, hopefully, are merged into higher level, more abstract features along the way. But there doesn't seem to be a need to model intonational features or the intonation contour separately. It's very different.

What did you do after your PhD?

After my PhD, I stayed in Bonn for another year as a postdoc. They had just started a very huge broad-scale project on speech-to-speech translation, which became known as 'Verbmobil,' in which basically all labs doing something like phonetics, many linguistics labs and all the big industrial players in Germany were involved, like 50 partners from academia and industry. I worked there for a year but then I got an offer from Bell Labs in Murray Hill, New Jersey, USA.

That was in which year, Bernd?

This was in 1993. Wolfgang Hess was contacted by a colleague, Juergen Schroeter from Bell Labs, who asked if Wolfgang knew a young researcher who would be interested to

work on German speech synthesis at Bell Labs. And Wolfgang in turn asked me whether I would be interested, and without knowing what I would be getting into, I said, well, yes, sure, I'm interested but I do not know so much about synthesis. We had a synthesis project in Bonn working on diphone and demi-syllable synthesis, but I was only tangentially involved – Thomas Portele and Karl-Heinz Stöber were the researchers in this project. It served as a test bed for my intonation model, though.

Maybe I should make a very quick excursion to the very early days of my studies, because the guy that I mentioned, Dieter Stock, the lecturer in phonetics, was also very technical and he had a Votrax chip. That was a chip that implemented something like, maybe I'm wrong, formant synthesis and was able to speak German with a heavy American English accent. So there was an early exposure to something, to very early speech synthesis when I was a young student, but it was not a continuous exposure over my studies. During my PhD I was then exposed to diphone synthesis a little.

I found the offer very interesting, but I didn't really know what I would be getting into. It was a big step, of course, moving house, the family to the US. It was meant to be for one year, then they said, you know, 'German synthesis, it's a lot of work to do indeed, at least two years.' Actually, after half a year, they offered me a permanent position and I took it. Although it was not planned that way, it was in the end five years and three months or so before I decided to go back to Germany (for several reasons).

And were you happy with the output of the German synthesis system you'd built there?

At the time? Yeah, I think I was enthusiastic about it. I thought it was fantastic. Whenever I listened to it, I thought, how did I do that? It sounds so great. When I played it to my wife, the enthusiasm was a bit less, but she was exposed to it occasionally, so she was also not completely neutral. When I played it to anybody else not involved in speech synthesis, they said: 'Terrible! Okay, it's quite intelligible, but the quality is awful. I would never use such a system.'

But that was not the reason to return to Germany, I guess.

No, it was not. The time at Bell Labs was fantastic. I learned so much in relatively short time, unbelievable! But for family reasons I wanted to move back to Germany. Also, I had never planned to stay in the States forever, and even at that time I couldn't actually envision it.

I got an offer from Greg Dogil, the professor of phonetics in Stuttgart, whom I met several times during conferences, and at ICSLP (International Conference on Spoken Language Processing) in 1998, he said: 'There is an opening for an assistant professor in my group starting January 1999. It may be the unique opportunity for you if you really want to go back and pursue your career in academia, not in the industry. I would be delighted if you took it.'

I had to think about it. It was a hard decision for me to leave Bell Labs because I had friends there, not only very good colleagues. But my wife and I decided to move back to Germany and of course I don't regret it.

Was it hard for you to move from Rhineland (where Bonn is located) to the Swabian area (with Stuttgart as its centre)?

Perhaps harder than to the US! No, it wasn't. It wasn't really. It was a lot of fun, really. Especially the dialect differences were a constant topic at the lunch table, not only between Rhineland and Swabia – there were people from all over Germany and outside

of Germany, of course, in the lab. The cognitive map that people have, for instance of Germany, is sometimes very distorted. So I was often addressed as a 'Fischkopf' [the head of a fish], which is what people sometimes call those who live on the North Sea coast. Now, Rhineland is basically roughly in the middle in the north-south dimension in Germany, so pretty far from 'Fischköpfe'. But everything that's north of Mannheim or Frankfurt is probably close to the sea for Stuttgart people.

But you returned to Bonn, is that correct, for a short period after your Stuttgart years?

I obtained my habilitation quite early in Stuttgart after moving there. Habilitation is like the 'second book' that used to be required if you wanted to become a professor in Germany. I was something like an associate professor, but not permanent, not tenured in Stuttgart. I applied for tenured professorships in Germany and a few other places as well, including the position in Bonn. This had a lot of appeal because I would have come back to where I started as a student, also located in Rhineland.

So I accepted the offer, and I stayed there for three years as a substitute professor because I was never formally appointed. It was all hanging in the air for various legal reasons. However, I was absolutely lucky, in a sense – it was almost a coincidence. When it became clear that, in Bonn, they would never fill the position again and would destroy the institute (not only phonetics, also computational linguistics), I was asked, exactly at that time, by people in Saarbrücken whether I would consider applying for the professorship there – which I did.

You've mentioned a few names so far. Who would you say is your main mentor or your main mentors during your career time?

I cannot single out one person. I really owe so much to several people, perhaps even many people. I already mentioned my first phonetics lecturer, Dieter Stock. He not only introduced me to acoustic phonetics, but he also offered me a desk in the lab, so I could stay in the lab all day. He offered me research assistant jobs, unpaid, but still fantastic. So, I assisted in acoustic phonetic analysis of German dialect data for *Mittelrheinischer Sprachatlas*, then for somebody else's habilitation thesis that I think never materialised, and in sonographic analysis of bird vocalisations using a Kay Sonagraph. And I got access to a PDP 15 computer that was also instrumental, an early exposure to computers as tools for phonetic analysis. When I said I got access to PDP 15, I meant it literally: it had a door that you could open and step into the computer – it was a room-sized computer, an amazing beast.

Dieter Stock also programmed his own early version of something that we later got to know as 'ESPS X-waves' from 'Entropics' or even later as 'Praat' that everybody uses now. He programmed it first in assembler, later in Fortran, and that's how I got a little bit into programming. So, he was very influential in lots of senses, I guess. I have already mentioned the Votrax chip that could synthesize German with an American accent. He was also my de facto advisor for my Magister thesis.

I also mentioned my first phonetics professor, Gerold Ungeheuer, saying that his lectures were more about communication theory rather than phonetics proper. He was also not accessible to beginner students. Although in principle he had something like office hours, you would have to make an appointment many weeks in advance and then he wasn't actually there. He passed away before I started my third year as a student. Despite this, he was still very influential because he provided me with this broader view of the field, the larger perspective of speech communication.

My PhD advisor was Wolfgang Hess and I already talked about him. Of course, he was very, very influential on me and very supportive. He encouraged me to take the offer from Bell Labs. And this is where the influence became more than individual, because I was an integral part of the speech synthesis group, comprising very well-known people like Jan van Santen (I think he was my primary mentor when I started my job there), Richard Sproat, Julia Hirschberg, Chilin Shih... I should stop mentioning names because I will then have to leave out a few others who would also deserve being mentioned. I definitely should mention one more name, that's Joe Olive who was the head of the group and who actually brought me there and was also always very supportive, even though he was disappointed, I think, when I decided to go back to Germany. But he understood perfectly.

Of course, this was an environment where you could just walk down the hall to talk to famous people and ask them for advice regarding some problem you had run into. They were always friendly and helpful. It was a fantastic environment.

You were influenced, of course, by others, but you were probably also influential yourself, for example on PhD students. Maybe it is not always pure fun to work with PhD students and reading their PhD theses. But eventually, in my experience, as supervisors we always learn something from them. Do you have an example for that?

You're absolutely right and also wrong. You were right in that I definitely learned from the work of my PhD students, and I hope they learned a bit from me too. However, you were also wrong because you suggested that it is not always fun to read these theses. I assume you mean reading chapters over and over again or something like that, not necessarily the final product. But I never thought that this is not fun, that it's just a duty that I'm doing; on the contrary, I usually enjoyed it. Still do.

For me, it is a bit difficult sometimes to find the right balance between interfering, perhaps too much, especially on earlier versions of chapters, and leaving too long a leash. And then having the problem of capturing the people again when they got lost a little in the various interests that they have and lost focus a bit.

Supervising PhD students and working with them is, maybe, the top enjoyable part of our profession overall. I think there are many other enjoyable aspects, but this is where I think I may have had the most lasting influence on other people. The interactions with all my PhD students were productive, friendly and, overall, entirely enjoyable.

Some were a bit more remote from my own interests. But then I became interested in these topics even more. Of course, you know, as PhD students proceed and make progress, they become the real specialists in their area, much more so than the advisor. So the advisor learns from the students.

You are also a rather active editor, for instance of the journal Speech Communication, and guest editor of, for example, special issues in journals. What is your view on how the scientific output should nowadays be published in the optimal way? Books, journals, or conferences? And should an article be available on arXiv or something similar or should it always be published in a peer-reviewed way?

You know, I'm getting older and almost necessarily a little bit more conservative. I tend to think that many aspects or components of scientific publishing that I've come to learn about or got to know over the many years have survived the storms of time. They have proved to be very valid and effective publication channels. But some things have changed, of course.

I think the importance of books has diminished. Of course it depends on the type of book, but even textbooks for students are less popular these days than they used to be when I was still an early-career researcher. I have a certain dislike for collections. Depending on the scope and topic, they still have their place, definitely. But I also have had a number of rather negative experiences as a contributor to such collections – some of them never materialised, and all this work, writing chapters, was almost for nothing.

The top journals in our field, I think, still play – and have to play – a very crucial role: for peer-reviewed scientific publishing, for quality, for making sure that the scientific quality is top. Peer reviewing – yeah, definitely, we need this system. Although we know it has drawbacks, especially from the view of an editor, I can't see a better system than that.

I see the tendency to upload pre-publication versions of papers on arXiv or similar platforms from a negative perspective, I must say. It seems to be taking on its own life in a sense. Other researchers rely a lot on these pre-publication versions, taking them for gospel even though they have never been peer-reviewed, never been checked, never been approved by authorities (the peers). Of course, I also see why it can be useful. For instance, if you really have a groundbreaking contribution to make, you want to stake the claim, you want to make sure that you can claim ownership of this original idea, then putting the stuff on arXiv is one way of achieving that. But I've also seen many arXiv papers that have never been published for whatever reason or that have never been updated after being published. I see more downsides than upsides in this development.

What about conferences? Can you say a few words about them? Perhaps even some repeated shortcomings that you identify in the presentations or in the organization?

I really can't say anything negative about it. I think these conferences, especially the big ones in our field like the phonetics congresses and Interspeech, still have a very important role to play and I think they achieve these goals very well. I think most of the presentations (both oral and poster) are very professional, very good, very well prepared. Naturally, there are always negative outliers, but in general the vast majority is in my experience very good.

The conferences are so big now, the ones that I mentioned, that, obviously, you have to be very selective to build your own schedule, and you will necessarily miss a lot of papers that you would also have found interesting but you could not have started an interactive discussion with the authors. You can read the papers, of course, in the proceedings afterwards.

Regarding organization, I think a recurring problem is poster sessions. These are often very tiresome, the acoustic conditions are often very bad. It's difficult to organize these poster sessions in an ideal way, but at some conferences it's better, at others it's problematic.

Over time, I've come to appreciate small venues more and more, and also the value of such small conferences and workshops – especially workshops where you can also present unfinished and not so polished work. You have a lot of interaction with the other participants, who are usually specialists in exactly this research area, and you get feedback from your colleagues while you're still working on these topics. This can be very fruitful.

So they are often presentations without published proceedings, right? Perhaps just extended abstracts.

Very often, yes. I would always encourage PhD students to attend these kinds of workshops that specialize in exactly the areas that they work on. Of course, I also see the need

for them to publish in peer-reviewed conferences and hopefully, at the later stages of their PhD, in journals as well. They have to find the right balance. They should not only look at the opportunity to publish, but also to get into stronger interactions with more advanced researchers on the one hand and their peers, other PhD students, on the other. That's also very valuable at the smaller events.

Let's return to speech synthesis. Nowadays, synthetic speech sounds quite different compared to the early 90s. Would you say that the work on formant synthesis, diphone synthesis, maybe also on unit selection was paving the way for the synthesis nowadays? And would you still see that phonetic knowledge can contribute to improvement of speech synthesis quality nowadays?

That's very complex. To be a little bit facetious, I think that the early approaches to synthesis with articulatory synthesis, concatenative synthesis, statistical parametric synthesis, etc., don't have a direct impact anymore on current synthesis techniques. The knowledge that we gained from these earlier approaches was invaluable, was immense, but I don't think it translates directly into the current synthesis approaches. Rather, it was invaluable for the researchers who work on speech science to understand how humans process speech.

If you look at the researchers and the authors and the research teams and their affiliations in speech synthesis papers these days, at the mainstream, this not the same cohort of people as before. They have brought a lot of progress that enables us to produce synthesized speech that is sometimes indistinguishable from natural speech, a progress that 10 years ago I would not have believed to be possible in such a short time. It came from a completely different angle.

Coming back to what I said at the very beginning, a speech synthesizer – in the old-fashioned way a modular system – can be a fantastic vehicle for testing your hypothesis or local theory about certain components of human speech processing. If you build an implemented model of one component in human speech processing or production, say intonation, and you put that as a module into the speech synthesizer, and if it improves the synthesizer, making it sound much more natural in terms of prosody, then you must have understood something about what humans do. You must have done something right in the overall system. And in this way, you can go from module to module.

I think the best example perhaps is articulatory synthesis, which is also the most ambitious one. You need to have so many partial models of the human speech production process, each of which is a major challenge. And if you do something wrong, it will probably percolate through the system; conversely if you improve your system in terms of output quality, then it's almost certain that you understood something correctly and implemented it correctly.

I think that's a very nice example and also a very nice topic for ending our conversation. Thank you very much, Bernd, for sharing your insights and for being our conversational guest today.

B: Interview with Zdena Palková

To begin with, a few questions about your field. You've been active at the Institute of Phonetics in Prague since 1961, and you're still involved today.

Now as an emeritus professor, which means I'm only here occasionally.

Could you share with us how you actually got into phonetics?

I entered the Faculty of Arts (back then it was called the 'Philological Faculty') in 1956. The system of study had already changed earlier, after 1949; in philology, only combinations of languages were available. All study programmes were double-subject and always pedagogically oriented. So in addition to the main subjects, lectures in pedagogy and psychology were included – essentially preparation for gaining a teaching qualification. It wasn't possible to pursue academic studies at all. My combination was Czech and German.

Personally, I was mainly interested in Czech and literary theory. That's actually what I originally applied for, based on an older post-war lecture catalogue. But by then, the programme no longer existed. It was a subject that had fascinated me already at grammar school. What really attracted me to the Faculty of Arts was literature – not language.

When mentioning post-war lecture catalogues, phonetics was listed there, wasn't it?

Yes, it must have been, but I wasn't looking for it. When I started at the faculty, I had no idea what phonetics even was. But I do know that the last graduate who studied phonetics as a subject was the orientalist Petr Zima. After 1954, phonetics was no longer offered as a separate subject. Our double-subject language studies were unevenly weighted: one of the subjects was the major, with the final thesis. In my case, that was Czech studies. And within that, my interest was always directed towards literature.

I first encountered phonetics right at the beginning of my studies, in the first semester. Professor Hála gave the lectures – very engaging and easy to follow. After I passed the phonetics exam, I thought to myself, 'Great, that's done, I understand it – and I'll probably never deal with it again.' I had the feeling that everything in phonetics had already been figured out. Professor Hála's lectures for beginners left no room for uncertainty. Later, when I started lecturing myself, I made a point of highlighting those uncertainties instead.

That there's always more to discover.

Yes. Then, in the fourth year, it was time to start thinking about the diploma thesis. Students either received a topic or could propose one themselves. At that time, I was interested in the structure of prose texts from a rhythmic perspective. I had the idea that analyzing the spoken interpretation of a text – performed by several speakers, especially non-professionals – might reveal something interesting. So I proposed a topic focused on trying to characterize rhythmic devices in Vladislav Vančura's novel *Markéta Lazarová*, because I felt his text was particularly well suited for that purpose.

But the Department of Czech Literature wasn't willing to accept such a topic, arguing that it was too interdisciplinary. However, the phonetician Milan Romportl was open to it. And that's how I ended up at the Phonetics Institute, which at that time was still part of the Department of Czech Language. There's a saying: 'Once the claw is caught, the whole bird is trapped.'

When you started working on your thesis with Milan Romportl, did that also mean you began attending some phonetics courses?

No, because there weren't any. The study programme only included the basic introductory courses – elective seminars in the field came later. But I did start working at the Phonetics Institute as a student research assistant. I was really taken with the insti-

tute's active and welcoming atmosphere. And suddenly, I had the opportunity to record and play back texts for my thesis. A portable tabletop tape recorder was a rare piece of equipment at the time.

Did you consult your thesis work with Professor Romportl? Did he give you any training?

At the time, Milan Romportl had an exceptional amount of his own work, including a major time-sensitive publication. He was always willing to answer questions if I had any, but there simply wasn't time for systematic supervision. When it came to the things I immediately needed for the experimental part of my thesis, I was kindly and helpfully guided by Přemysl Janota. It's worth noting that, back then, university students were expected to be much more independent than they are today. I had more than enough work just processing the material and searching for and reading the necessary literature – and on top of that, I still had to finish my studies. In the fourth year alone, we had thirty-two mandatory hours per week; only the fifth year was a bit more flexible.

My thesis was well received, and after I graduated, Professor Bohuslav Hála offered me a position as an assistant. I was lucky that a position had just opened up at the institute, as there was otherwise a hiring freeze across the faculty. It wasn't until I started working there that I could really begin to systematically build up my knowledge of the field. I remember how useful my first major task was, assigned to me by Professor Hála: to compile a subject index for the book *Voice, Speech, Hearing*, which was just coming out in its fourth edition (Hála & Sovák, 1962).

When did you start teaching phonetics?

I didn't teach during the first three years. That was actually a wise rule at the time, and in my case, a necessity. Assistants weren't supposed to teach for this period, and the institute adhered to that. When I did start, I was first assigned the basic course in Czech phonetics for foreign students, which turned out to be very useful for me. Having to explain things really made me aware of many connections. And hearing the effects of cross-language interference in practical exercises helped me better understand some of the specific features of Czech, which might otherwise have remained just theoretical claims.

When you were starting out at the Institute, who inspired your work?

Given the way my interest in the field developed, I drew inspiration from distinguished figures across different areas of philological scholarship – some even during my student years – mostly within Czech studies. Chronologically:

An excellent foundation in linguistic study was provided to us by Vladimír Šmilauer, a Czech studies scholar and onomastician, but for me primarily a syntactician. Through the way he guided us in syntactic analysis, he taught us to understand the methodological steps involved in an objective, independent analysis of language in a text. Thanks to that, I later came to understand the importance of vagueness in language description. Concepts, categories, and descriptive relationships are defined precisely – but we also have to account for the possible occurrence of vagueness in how they're applied to actual linguistic material. And the question may arise: what level of vagueness is still acceptable, so that we don't need to redefine the description of a given phenomenon?

Another exceptional figure in terms of my early development was Jan Mukařovský, a scholar of verse and aesthetics, with a methodological focus on structuralism. The official ideology during my studies rejected the structuralist approach and, with it, Mukařovský's most important works. But for me, his *Chapters from Czech Poetics* were

a very instructive read. I found his concept of metrical impulse particularly inspiring for Czech verse structure analysis. I was delighted to discover that Professor Mukařovský was lecturing in the Czech studies programme, and I enrolled in his elective seminar, even though I knew it wasn't theoretical but historical in focus. When I later gave a report in the seminar on my thesis topic, Professor Mukařovský not only wasn't put off by its interdisciplinary nature – he actually gave me several helpful suggestions.

When I later became a permanent member of the Institute of Phonetics, Přemysl Janota became an invaluable mentor. I owe him a great deal for gradually and critically introducing me to the field in all its breadth and variety, as well as for familiarizing me with the principles of experimental work. Přemysl Janota himself was a versatile phonetician and also a speech therapist, with a primary interest in speech sound analysis, auditory perception, and individual timbre. He designed several devices that made listening easier; most notably the highly valued *speech segmenter*. This device made it possible to move a listening window – or alternatively, a muted segment – along a loop of magnetic tape, with both the window length and the shifting method adjustable.

From a slightly later period, when I started to get a better sense of the broader landscape of linguistics at the time, especially Czech linguistics, I'd like to mention another figure who, from my perspective, was very important. The linguist František Daneš, a bohemist, syntactician, and text linguist, was also an intonation specialist. His study *Intonation and the Sentence in Standard Czech* (Daneš, 1957) helped strengthen the foundations for suprasegmental research in Czech phonetics. But what I found most instructive was the way he engaged in academic discussions. He was a passionate debater, often in disagreement with others. But he always truly listened to the other person's argument and took their counterpoints into account. That was rare.

What topics interested you over the course of your career, beyond your teaching duties?

In my own research, I focused mainly on the suprasegmental level of description, especially within the sound structure of Czech: defining and organizing units of analysis (such as the stress group, prosodic phrase in two levels, or completed utterance), examining how these sound units relate to one another, and how they connect with linguistic units in the text. In terms of methodology, given the limited technical resources at the time, perceptual tests were the most practical option. But in reality, there was relatively little time left for research.

Another branch of my professional work grew out of practical spoken language use, again based on Czech, this time covering both the segmental and suprasegmental levels. One path involved taking a closer look at the features of Czech as a foreign language, in a way that could be applied in teaching – both in terms of description and in preparing learning materials. The other path, which I felt more drawn to personally, was the phonetic side of language culture in contemporary Czech: both through descriptive work and practical involvement in public media, and later in speech on the stage.

Were these, for example, people working in radio?

The Institute had a tradition in that regard. It was established by Professor Hála right after the war. Radio announcers would come to the Institute for pronunciation training. I didn't witness that period myself, but recordings from those sessions have been preserved in the archive, and I later used them in lectures. The most important achievement in this area was undoubtedly Hála's effort to stabilize the codification of Czech pronunci-

ation, which eventually led to the publication of the *The Pronunciation of Standard Czech* (Hála, 1967). Milan Romportl then continued this work, focusing on the pronunciation of foreign words (Romportl, 1978).

Almost everyone took part in the practical activities related to speech culture – often courses and lectures for various public institutions. Bohuslav Hála, for instance, regularly conducted courses for funeral speakers, while Milan Romportl focused on wedding speakers. The Institute had recently acquired a portable Tesla Sonet Duo tape recorder. I remember how I used to search through individual speeches, following Prof. Hála's instructions, to find segments with mistakes, which he would then analyze and I would play back for the seminar participants. At that time, the possibility of on-the-spot speech recording was a novelty that drew considerable attention from the audience. The tradition of promoting speech culture continued until the 1990s. I myself, for example, led regular seminars at the Radio for nearly fifteen years for staff from several editorial teams.

What range of activities did the Institute cover back then?

The effort to practically support good spoken Czech was just one part – definitely not the central focus – of the Institute's work. I think Professor Hála, in his role as director, very deliberately aimed to make sure that all the key areas of phonetic description were being developed within Czech phonetics; at that time, mainly physiological phonetics and speech acoustics. With the same determination, he made sure that knowledge about Czech was kept up to date with international developments in the field, both in cross-linguistic comparisons and in the description of both the segmental and suprasegmental levels.

Bohuslav Hála himself was a firm supporter of so-called experimental (instrumental) phonetics, in the tradition of Josef Chlumský. As for the new approaches to phonological description of sound structure that had strong roots in the interwar Prague structuralist school, let's just say he was sceptical. But when Milan Romportl often leaned in that direction, Hála accepted it as a natural thing. Looking back now, I think the parallel development of both major approaches to describing the sound level of spoken language – instrumental phonetics and phonology – as I encountered it when I entered the field, was one of the fortunate strengths of Czech linguistics as a whole. The fact that their followers occasionally got into heated arguments wasn't crucial. Neither camp was dominant enough to suppress the other, and when necessary, they were able to exchange useful information.

Abroad, it is common for researchers to move between institutions. Can you comment on your experience of having worked at the same institution for half a century?

In a word: You develop a sense of responsibility for that institution.

What was the atmosphere like at the Institute when you first arrived?

When I came to the Phonetics Institute, the impact of the major changes that had taken place – and were still taking place – in higher education and scientific institutions was already noticeable. We had, of course, been aware of them as students.

The first thing that struck me at the Institute was the sense of a strong and deliberately maintained tradition: an effort to uphold traditional standards in both the quality of work and workplace relationships. Prague phonetics was well known and respected abroad; it used to be a very well-equipped institution, with a reliable level of research and teaching.

Due to external changes, it lost its degree programme and its administrative independence; it could no longer decide its own future in terms of equipment, tasks, and to a large extent even its research orientation.

The people working there did everything they could to minimize the negative consequences for the field. What struck me most was the positive working atmosphere, the supportive environment, and the determination to take advantage of every new opportunity that arose for the benefit of the discipline. This sometimes took on a humorous side, like when we spent afternoons untangling high-quality studio magnetic tapes discarded by the Radio and 'spinning' them back into usable reels for our studio tape recorders.

If we jump ahead ten or twenty years, how did the working conditions change?

The institute had a stable staff of 5–6 people, and until the late 1980s we didn't get any additional positions – I remained the youngest until I was fifty. Such a situation is literally fatal for the field. It was similar with the equipment. The last modern innovation had been two portable tabletop tape recorders at the beginning of my career. Then, only around 1988–89, we acquired one of the first simple desktop computers. Not because the school cared about the phonetics discipline, but simply because there was still no interest in it at the faculty then.

A fortunate fact for Prague phonetics was that Přemysl Janota was also a skilled engineer and could adapt available devices for phonetic work. For example, his segmenter – a very clever device that made repeated listening easier – gained international recognition.

Which instruments commonly used abroad were clearly missing?

We didn't have a sonagraph. We were probably the only phonetics institute in Europe, if not in the world, without one.[1] The closest sonagraph occasionally available to us was in Prešov, Slovakia. In Prague, there was one at the phoniatric clinic, but using it required complicated requests and long waiting times. It was easier to simply go, for example, to Dresden.

What did you replace it with, if at all?

You can always calculate the spectrum manually using harmonic analysis based on Fourier. But I'm joking. Still, much can be calculated, for example from oscillographic recordings. Přemysl Janota wrote several papers relying on acoustic analysis, usually designing original innovations from the available equipment. For his publication *Personal Characteristics of Speech* (Janota, 1967), he built a simple synthesizer that allowed him to manually set and simulate any individual vowel composed of five tones, based on specified frequencies and with controlled duration and loudness.

A truly game-changing moment in the development of fields dealing with sound was the digitization of the audio signal and its computer processing. This brought a major shift in what was possible, especially for a place like our institute – small, fairly underfunded, and not favoured by institutional authorities. Still, we already had some experience with computer speech processing since we had long worked with acousticians studying the speech signal. I remember visiting the big mainframe computer at the Research Institute

[1] JT & PŠ: At the Institute of Phonetics in Saarbrücken, there was also no sonagraph. First spectrographic analyses were performed with digital devices at the beginning of the 1990s.

for Communication Technology several times, where the first attempts at Czech speech synthesis were taking place.

But the new possibilities that came along later were substantially different. The advanced demands for describing phonetic phenomena in all kinds of acoustic processing – especially handling the suprasegmental layer of continuous texts – required specialized and costly equipment. When using computers, though, more accessible specialized software could do the job. Plus, computers with rapidly increasing memory made it possible to process large datasets. For the research activities of the Phonetics Institute, this basically meant a lifeline. By a lucky coincidence, these changes happened almost simultaneously with a turning point in the social and political scene in our country.

Were there other changes at the Institute in the 1970s and 1980s besides the technological lag?

Fortunately, the working atmosphere within the Institute remained unchanged. However, there were two significant and sad changes in personnel: in 1970, Bohuslav Hála passed away, and already in 1982, so did Milan Romportl. What unfortunately did begin to change over time was the overall atmosphere at the faculty. When I first started, being part of the academic community at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University, was regarded as a prestigious responsibility. Many outstanding figures worked across various disciplines. Students came with respect and expected demanding work. A natural consequence of this was a certain collegial decency that extended across the academic community as a whole, including administrative staff. I think this helped to some extent buffer the restrictive pressures coming from above. As the older generation of academic personalities gradually disappeared, this sense of responsibility visibly weakened, although this varied across departments and disciplines.

How did the fact that the phonetics department was part of a larger unit affect its functioning?

I would say that in terms of its academic orientation, it didn't have any significant impact. Phonetics is – whether that's an advantage or a drawback – a fairly self-contained field by its very nature. Whether collaboration arose or not didn't depend on administrative affiliation. At first, the Institute was included as part of the Department of Czech Language. Later, comparative and general linguistics, as well as Czech for foreigners, were added. This overly large unit was eventually split again, and for a long time the Institute functioned as part of the Department of Linguistics and Phonetics. But collaboration between linguists and phoneticians wasn't any better or worse in either structure.

However, the coexistence of multiple disciplines within a single unit also has a second, very material dimension: staff positions, teaching loads, funding. And there, obstacles certainly existed.

If I may, let's move on to phonetic congresses. By coincidence, your first one was held in Prague, in 1967. What do you remember most vividly about it?

Once again, it was that strong sense of a binding tradition. Officially, the congress was held under the auspices of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, but the main organizers were university people: Bohuslav Hála served as President, Milan Romportl as Secretary General, and Přemysl Janota as Secretary. Most of the actual work was done by the Phonetics Institute, and there was a clear, shared effort to ensure that the congress lived up to the pre-war reputation of the Institute.

There were no concerns about the academic level of the event. The programme was rich, clearly structured into thematic sections, and balanced as much as possible in terms of the languages covered. Representatives from more than thirty countries attended. The worries came from elsewhere – namely, the economic and political situation in the country. The economic conditions at the time were, to put it mildly, poor. The gap between everyday life in Prague and in major cities of Western Europe was already quite visible. Throughout the congress, we did our best to keep that gap from showing, at least during the official programme. When choosing venues, we relied heavily on the beauty of the city.

There were also more serious concerns, especially for Romportl and Janota as the main organizers. It was important to allow experts from the West to attend, possibly even Czech émigrés. The state security service was given a preliminary list of all congress participants and granted permission. It was 1967, a time of relative thaw in international relations – otherwise the congress couldn't have happened at all – but there was still a lingering fear of some kind of politically sensitive incident. You could feel the tension in the Institute right up until the end of the event. Luckily, nothing happened.

How about the other congresses? You attended a total of nine.

The congresses were very important to us not only from a professional point of view. Even in the most difficult times, the Institute made a point of staying visible within the international phonetics community. Attending congresses, held regularly every four years, offered a good opportunity to do so. We always tried to present at least one paper – preferably more – and to arrange for as many people as possible to attend in person, even if only passively.

After the Prague congress came Montreal (1971), where Romportl was the only one from the Institute. I didn't attend in person until Copenhagen (1979). That time, we travelled as a group – it was called 'professional tourism,' or something like that. It was a joint trip for which participants were granted an exit permit because it had a work-related purpose. Such trips usually included people from several different institutions and had to be recommended and approved by the Ministry of Education.

At the next six congresses, I presented a paper of my own: Utrecht (1983), Aix-en-Provence (1991), Stockholm (1995), San Francisco (1999), and Barcelona (2003).

So you were covering the costs yourselves? Or did the Institute pay?

The Institute didn't have its own funds – any contribution had to come from the Ministry via the faculty. Sometimes they contributed, but based on their own (non-professional) criteria. Most of the time, we paid the expenses ourselves. But at least we were allowed to travel.

Starting with the congress in Aix-en-Provence (1991), we were finally able to attend all the following ones freely, on our own passports. Later on, we even received some financial support from the university, more or less, depending on what grants the Institute managed to secure. My last congress was Saarbrücken (2007), where we attended a meeting within the international project Sound to Sense (S2S), a Marie Curie Research Training Network, in which the Institute was involved at the time. And of course, in 2023, I followed the 20th congress back in Prague – this time just as a guest.

Which congress did you like the most?

I think the best-organized congress I experienced was Copenhagen. It was led by Professor Eli Fischer-Jørgensen, and phonology was a hotly debated topic. The number of

participants and the range of thematic areas still felt manageable, 'human' – rich, but not overwhelming. It was possible to get an overview and choose what interested you. Surely, this was thanks to the great effort of the organizers: carefully scheduling presentations so that related topics wouldn't overlap in time. For example, if the sessions on linear and nonlinear phonology are held simultaneously, while their essence is to be discussed in relation to each other, the interested attendee won't be thrilled. Such cases multiplied when specialized firms took over organizing the ever-expanding congresses and controlled not only the logistics but also the programme. Maybe it started in Sweden? I'm not sure. But I was probably least happy with the organization in Aix-en-Provence – it was the hardest for me to follow the flow of events there.

Which congress did you like best in terms of social atmosphere, meaning the participants and the informal parts of the programme?

The organizers of all the congresses I attended made a real effort to ensure that participants felt welcome, had a good time outside of the sessions, and saw as much as possible of the host city. And all the places I visited as part of this 'professional tourism' had something remarkable to offer: Barcelona, San Francisco, all of them.

But congresses also had another memorable aspect. Many colleagues returned time and again. We knew each other. It became part of our professional curiosity to see who turned up at the next congress – and who didn't. And to ask why, if they were missing. As I've already said, attending congresses gave our institute a chance to maintain international contacts. That proved to be incredibly valuable later on.

How do you see the change in topics at the congresses?

I think it's a result of how much technical possibilities for professional and interdisciplinary communication have evolved. Probably an inevitable consequence. At earlier congresses, it was fairly easy to define clear and distinct thematic areas, and you could also tell which issues were central at the time and which were more on the margins. As the congresses grew larger, the content of the sessions started to scatter more and more. Just take a look at the long list of sections – within one congress, the same topic might appear in multiple places, under different titles, with only minor shifts in focus. That lack of clarity was already noticeable in San Francisco. Back when we didn't have easy access to foreign academic literature, congress proceedings were a valuable way to get a solid overview of current topics across the broad field of what's called the phonetic sciences. That kind of clarity would be impossible now.

The very concept of what a congress is seems to have changed, too. It used to be that research teams wanted to present what they considered their most important results – sort of their calling card. When I watched the 2023 Prague congress, my impression was that quantity outweighed quality. It felt less like showcasing a lab or spotlighting a problem, and more like an opportunity for the younger generation to practice giving presentations. And to see a bit of the world.

Substantive debate, presentation of results, and exchange of ideas now seem to happen online. That's not a flaw – it's simply a change. Probably a natural one. I think the same applies elsewhere today, not just in the phonetic sciences.

Which foreign institutions did you maintain contact with?

I'll leave out the Slavic studies contacts, which had a long tradition and mostly meant visits to us, not trips abroad. Thanks to Milan Romportl, there was ongoing cooperation

between the Institute and several institutions in East Germany, especially in Halle/Saale. Contacts in the western direction were more of a continuation from earlier times and were tied to individual people.

What form did that cooperation take?

The institute in Halle/Saale focused broadly on spoken language ('Sprecherziehung') and on cultivating standard German pronunciation. Access to East Germany was relatively easy. The institute in Halle regularly organized conferences, which we often attended. I myself spent a two-week internship there already before the Prague congress. Conversely, colleagues from the German Democratic Republic (i.e., East Germany) were happy to come to Prague. Through Halle, we also had contacts with Jena. There was further cooperation with East Berlin and with the Technical University in Dresden. Milan Romportl himself also spent a year as a visiting scholar in Bonn (West Germany).

Professor Hála had numerous professional ties with France, and later these were maintained by Marie Dohalská, a specialist in French. She spent time in France on multiple occasions, including a long-term research stay. The English specialist Alena Skaličková often recalled her meeting with Daniel Jones and kept in touch mainly with institutions in London. Přemysl Janota spent part of his studies in the Netherlands, with Professor Louise Kaiser. Even though later he wasn't allowed to travel for many years, he preserved warm connections with Dutch colleagues even from afar (Nijmegen, Amsterdam, Utrecht). He also taught Dutch phonetics and grammar at the faculty. His other connections led to Sweden (to Professor Fant's team) and to Norway. One figure who must be mentioned in this context is Professor Martin Kloster-Jensen, a Norwegian phonetician from Bergen (who also worked in Bonn, Hamburg, and Oslo). He was very fond of the Institute and of Prague, and somehow always found a way to visit us, no matter the circumstances.

In 1970, Professor Antonie Cohen offered me a one-year research stay in Utrecht. However, the ministry found out that my sister had emigrated, and that was the end of it.

How did the Institute find its footing after the fall of the regime?

When the socio-political situation changed dramatically, we were happy, but we couldn't ignore the fact that, after all those years, the Institute was on the verge of professional collapse, and people completely exhausted. But it turned out that our efforts to keep Prague phonetics visible internationally hadn't been in vain.

Soon after, friends reached out with practical support. Professor Johan Liljencrants came to visit from Sweden and generously gave us access to his state-of-the-art acoustic spectrum analysis software, free of charge for research and teaching. We had a computer, but no money to buy such programmes ourselves. Then we heard from Professor Hans-Walter Wodarz in Frankfurt am Main, an émigré and graduate of Prague phonetics. In a short time, he secured substantial funding to help us buy new academic literature. Personal connections started turning into institutional ones.

Starting in the 1990s, I had several productive research stays in Frankfurt am Main, and over time, also gave a number of talks in Jena and to the Slavic scholars in Bonn.

You also apply phonetics in theatrical practice. Could you tell us more about your collaboration with the National Theatre?

It's not only the (large) National Theatre, but also smaller stages. I started in a very intimate setting, at the Theatre on the Balustrade around the 1979/80 season. I've been working at the National Theatre continuously since 1990. Working with actors in smaller

theatres is a bit different from working at the big stage, though not as drastically as people sometimes assume. My phonetic collaboration isn't what's commonly referred to as 'voice coaching' – actors bring that with them from school – but primarily it's about working with the text. I provide actors with something like feedback on their spoken performance, including discussions about possible corrections or the implications of using a different variant.

A basic responsibility is to make sure the actors speak clearly enough to be easily understood. Unfortunately, this task is more relevant today than it used to be. Everyday spoken Czech is often not easily intelligible anymore. It has sped up, mostly at the cost of very sloppy pronunciation. The ambition among actors to 'speak well' is also gradually declining. At the beginning of my work (at least at the National Theatre), it was almost a given: 'If I speak on stage, I must be understood even in the second gallery.' Actors themselves used to request feedback. Some of today's graduates from acting schools (often stars of TV series) not only lack this ambition, but they believe that clear pronunciation wouldn't sound natural – according to the current buzzword, 'authentic.'

Czech theatre doesn't really have a tradition of speech consultants, as they (hopefully still) do in Germany. I consider it a professional success that this supporting role is now seen as a regular part of production at the National Theatre.

Are you present at all rehearsals?

Not all of them, but I'm there quite often, depending on how rehearsals are going (and what my schedule allows). At certain stages, I try to follow rehearsals continuously. For example, during the early table-read sessions when the text is being analyzed. And later on, once longer sections of the play are being run continuously on stage and the rehearsal isn't being stopped all the time. Naturally, I want to be at all the so-called main and general rehearsals. And I never skip the public general rehearsal with an audience. – I might skip some of the blocking rehearsals, where the actors are mostly figuring out their positions on stage and often just improvise the text (which they may not even know by heart yet).

Do you focus on anything other than intelligibility?

I absolutely have to make sure that the pronunciation matches the style of the production. For instance, the epenthetic /v/[2] can't be allowed in a Shakespearean text, unless it's a line from a character who, even in the original, is linguistically marked as a folk or lower-class figure. In a classical play costumed in the style of Mary Stuart's court, traces of a Prague accent or, say, a Moravian dialect would be completely out of place. But even when a particular dialect forms the basis of the spoken text, it's important to monitor the degree and manner of its use. Speech on the stage isn't a copy of reality; it's a functional stylization.

But what I focus on the most – and what also requires the most effort, because it's often the most challenging for the actors themselves – is the relationship between the written text of the play and its spoken realization on stage; the shifts in meaning that happen along the way between those two poles. Actors are quite receptive to comments in this area; in fact, it's often the best ones who ask for them. They know that the way they perceive themselves may not be how the audience interprets their lines. A phonetician who

[2] A non-standard process in Czech; e.g., /okno/ (*window*) realized as [vokno] rather than [ʔokno].

attends the rehearsals can point out problematic spots in the text before an actor settles on a version that would later need to be changed. I think that's the main reason the actors don't see my presence as a nuisance, but as genuinely helpful.

And that relationship to the text brings us to a lovely conclusion. Thank you for such an inspiring conversation.

RESUMÉ

Článek představuje dva rozsáhlé rozhovory s význačnými fonetiky Berndem Möbiem a Zdenou Palkovou, kteří se v nich ohlížejí za svou profesní dráhou i proměnami oboru, jichž byli svědky. Jejich odborné cesty se sice výrazně liší – od výzkumu v oblasti řečových technologií až po zkoumání řeči na jevišti –, oba však sdílejí pevné ukotvení v základních metodách a otázkách fonetiky. Rozhovory reflektují vývoj fonetických věd v průběhu několika desetiletí, proměny výzkumných priorit, akademické kultury i mezinárodní spolupráce. Otevřená, dialogická forma přináší nejen odborné postřehy obou osobností, ale také jejich osobní zkušenosti, motivace a představy o budoucnosti disciplíny. Článek zároveň ukazuje, že rozhovor je cenným formátem pro dokumentaci dějin a rozmanitosti fonetického výzkumu.

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