

Roman Jakobson's Conception of «Sprachbund»

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In the linguistic literature one frequently comes across the term «Sprachbund», which is generally accepted these days as a linguistic term. One has only to think of the Balkan Sprachbund as an example. This term, however, as will be shown later, has not been given an absolute definition, but has nevertheless been applied since 1930 to languages of different families which show linguistic similarities. In addition to «Balkan Sprachbund», the terms «Europäischer Sprachbund», «Donausprachbund», «Eurasischer Sprachbund», «Evrazijskij sojuz» were also in existence.

To illustrate the vagueness of the notion «Sprachbund» since Trubetzkoy and Jakobson, I should like to make a survey of its usage and then attempt to come to some definition with special reference to the «Balkansprachbund». The notion «Sprachbund» was first mooted by N. Trubetzkoy first of all known as the founder of the phonological method in 1923 in «Vavilonskaja bašnja i smešenie jazykov», then at the First International Congress of Linguists in The Hague in 1928, in order to add to language families and groups another term, which takes into account the linguistic peculiarities which have arisen from mutual influences between languages. Trubetzkoy writes :

Viele Missverständnisse und Fehler entstehen dadurch, dass die Sprachforscher die Ausdrücke Sprachgruppe und Sprachfamilie ohne genügende Vorsicht und in zu wenig bestimmter Bedeutung gebrauchen.

Trubetzkoy therefore made the following suggestions :

Unter den Sprachgruppen sind zwei Typen zu unterscheiden: Gruppen, bestehend aus Sprachen, die eine große Ähnlichkeit in syntaktischer Hinsicht, eine Ähnlichkeit in den Grundsätzen des morphologischen Baus aufweisen, und eine große Zahl gemeinsamer Kulturwörter bieten, manchmal auch äußere Ähnlichkeit im Bestande der Lautsysteme, — dabei auch äußere Ähnlichkeit im Bestande der Lautsysteme, — dabei aber keine systematischen Lautentsprechungen, keine Übereinstimmungen in der lautlichen Gestalt der morphologischen Elemente und keine gemeinsamen Elementarwörter besitzen, — solche Sprachgruppen nennen wir Sprachbünde. Gruppe, bestehend aus Sprachen, die eine beträchtliche Anzahl von Elementarwörtern besitzen, Übereinstimmungen im lautlichen Ausdruck morphologischer Kategorien aufweisen, und vor allem konstante Lautentsprechungen bieten, — solche Sprachgruppen nennen wir Sprachfamilien.

(Trubetzkoy, 1928, p. 17-18)

Thus Bulgarian belongs on the one hand to the Slavic family of languages together with Serbo-Croatian, Polish, Russian etc., on the other hand to the Balkan Sprachbund together with Modern Greek, Albanian and Rumanian. The terms «language family» and «Sprachbund» must be kept strictly separate. If one wishes to define which group a language belongs to, one must decide if it belongs to a Sprachbund or to a language family. Trubetzkoy himself talks about two different preconditions for a Sprachbund :

First, the languages of a Sprachbund show certain similarities in the field of phonetics, morphology, syntax and lexis.

Secondly, the languages of a Sprachbund belong to different families. They are neighbouring geographically, as Trubetzkoy has shown, using the example of the Balkansprachbund.

Long before N. Trubetzkoy (1890-1938) and R Jakobson (1896-1982), Hugo Schuchardt (1842-1927) in «Slawo-deutsches und Slawo-Italienisches» with reference to common features of non-related languages, spoke of historical relationships, something like a condition for Sprachbund. Eduard Schwyzer, in 1914, used the term «kulturelle Sprachenverwandtschaft», in English «cultural relationship» and later on rejected Trubetzkoy's Sprachbund. For Roman Jakobson it was mainly the similarities of the phonological systems which persuaded him to adopt the term Sprachbund. Through this particular conception the term has become more widely applicable. Thus, with the theory of Sprachbund was also taken the term Sprachbund as «parentele acquisite» or «affinita culturale». Vittore Pisani used the term «lega linguistica». In Soviet linguistics the exact translation of Sprachbund «Jazykovej sojuz» is used as well as «vtoroe jazykovoje rodstvo», to be translated by «second relationship of languages». In American linguistic literature, Sprachbund crops up as well as «convergence area», a term which stresses the geographical point of view.¹ R Jakobson published three articles about the question of Sprachbund, which all appeared in 1931 :

- «Les unions phonologiques des langues», *Le Monde slave* 1931, p. 388-395 ;

- «O fonologičeskich jazykovych sojuzach», *Evracija v svete jazykoznanija*, Prague 1931, 7-12 ;

- «Über die phonologischen Sprachbünde», *Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague IV*, 1931, 164-183².

From the last mentioned paper should be quoted the following sentences :

Das Überwiegen des Interesses an genetischen Problemen in der Sprachwissenschaft drängte die Fragen nach gemeinsamen Erscheinungen zurück, die in der Struktur benachbarter Sprachen vorkommen und nicht durch gemeinsamen Ursprung bedingt sind. Die Sprachwissenschaft muß aber neben den Sprachfamilien auch die Sprachbünde berücksichtigen, «Sprachbünde» nach der Terminologie Trubetzkoy's, die auf dem Haager Kongreß angenommen wurde... So bildet z. B. gewöhnlich die Polytonie weitgreifende Sprachbünde. Der ostasiatische polytonische Bund umfaßt die große tibeto-chinesische Grup-

¹ Schaller, 1975, p. 49.

² Compare the new edition of these papers in Jakobson, 1971.

pe, die anamitische Sprachfamilie, das Malaiische, das Japanische und mehrere angrenzende Sprachen. Bedeutende polytonische Sprachbünde finden wir auch in Zentralafrika und Amerika. Ebenso bilden die Sprachen des Baltikums einen Sprachbund, den die Polytonie kennzeichnet.

(Jakobson, 1971a, p. 137-138)

Jakobson used the term *Sprachbund* after Trubetzkoy, but his notion of Sprachbund was evidently another one, when he speaks about «Sprachbünde» with the feature of polytony. Jakobson also speaks about one polytonic language island, namely the Serbo-Croatian «without its south-eastern dialects and the neighbouring Slovenian dialects of Kraina». The phonological system of Serbo-Croatian, Jakobson says, is a remnant of proto-slavic language features.

Languages obviously eligible for the Balkansprachbund are Albanian, Bulgarian and Macedonian, and also Rumanian. With regard to Modern Greek and Serbo-Croatian, their eligibility is not without qualification. In any case, the Balkansprachbund comprises four languages, which belong to three different language families, whereas two languages, namely Bulgarian and Macedonian, are South Slavic languages and as such belong to the same family of languages. The common features of the Balkansprachbund extend to the fields of phonetics/phonology, e. g. the so-called «Mittelzungenvokal», vowel articulated at the middle of the tongue, which is elevated to a middle position, for instance in Bulgarian *a'*, in Albanian *ë* and in Romanian *a'*, corresponding articulations of such a vowel are to be found in Northern Greek dialects, but not in Literary Modern Greek. The common features of the Balkansprachbund also extend to the field of morphology, e. g. the lose of differentiation between genitiv and dative case endings and also to the field of syntax, e. g. the reduplication of the direct or indirect objects, designed by short forms of pronouns with accusative or dative forms.

In contrast to the Balkansprachbund the criteria for the Donau-Sprachbund as defined by the Czech linguist Vladimír Skalička (1968) are difficult to assess. It is unclear here which languages it comprises and which criteria it embraces. He mentions the accent on the first syllable in Hungarian, Slovak, Czech and German words, also the fact that in German and Hungarian the article is placed before the noun. H. Becker (1948) seems to have formulated his European Sprachbund on the basis of extralinguistic criteria, when he speaks of a «Eintritt neuer Sprachen in die Sprachbünde der Hochkultur», in English translation «Introduction of new languages into the Sprachbünde of a literate civilization» or when he, Becker, sees the Balkansprachbund only as a subdivision of his European Sprachbund. Roman Jakobson works on the basis of phonological considerations, as for example when he talks about the Far-Eastern Sprachbund or the Baltic Sprachbund which consists of Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian and North Kashubian and finally also some of the North German dialects. The German Baltist Viktor Falkenhahn (1963) had attempted to establish a Lithuanian-Polish Sprachbund on the grounds of the similarities between two languages in the verbal reaction. The two languages belong to different families, yet there is only one pattern which they share.

If one compares the various Sprachbünde within and outside Europe contrastively, above all the question arises which the common characteristics of the constituent languages of a Sprachbund are. Thus there are postulated Sprachbünde which have only one linguistic characteristic, e. g. the polytony in the Baltic Sprachbund as a phonological conformity or as a syntactical conformity the verbal rection in the Polish-Lithuanian Sprachbund. In contrast to these, there are quite a number of linguistic similarities in the Balkansprachbund. But strictly speaking, all the Sprachbünde mentioned above share only one characteristic, namely that they consist of languages of various families, as Trubetzkoy laid down as early as 1923 and 1928. The question which arises again and again as to how many similarities are required to constitute a Sprachbund has led to subdivision of two kinds of Sprachbünde, namely the *intensive* and *extensive*. As an example of the extensive Sprachbund, we may take the Baltic Sprachbund, with its only one characteristic of polytony, whereas for the intensive Sprachbund the Balkansprachbund may serve as the prime example, which stands out on account of its various correspondences, in the phonetical field as well in other linguistic fields. Unlike «language» which is a fixed concept, the word Sprachbund can be replaced by more or less synonymous terms like «Sprachverband» or «Sprachenbund», at least with regard to German terminology. If we try to find the *genus proximum*, I would suggest the notion of the family of languages in which the languages are closer to each other in their genetic similarities than in a Sprachbund the similarities of which are of a typological order : *differentia specifica*. The characteristics of a Sprachbund, as mentioned above, arise from mutual influences. Therefore a definition of the term Sprachbund could be made as follows :

In contrast to the genetically defined family of languages (*genus proximum*), the Sprachbund comprises a typologically defined group of geographically neighbouring language whose common features are derived from mutual influences (*differentia specifica*).

Neither an extensive nor an intensive Sprachbund can consist of two languages, with the exception of the Lithuanian-Polish Sprachbund. It is questionable whether the extensive Sprachbund with only one common feature is in line with the definition of a Sprachbund. Therefore one might arrive at the following extended definition :

In contrast to genetically defined families of languages, the Sprachbund comprises a typologically defined group of at least three geographically neighbouring languages, whose common features are derived from mutual influences.

Not only Trubetzkoy's, but also Jakobson's influence on the development of linguistics has been a very great one. The latter was one of the founders and movers of the Prague Linguistic Cercle. On the basis of the new structuralist concepts, he set forth theories like that of an extensive Sprachbund and illustrated it with demonstrations based on Slavic and other languages. So he examined prosodic problems of languages as diverse as Ancient Greek, Norwegian and Chinese. Also, Slavic accentological evidence plays a small or secondary role in his works on phonological «convergence areas», Sprachbünde, particularly the «Eurasian linguistic alliance», said to be characterized by the combination of accentual monotony and distinctive palatalization in consonants.

Yet, although the phenomenon is familiar, the term «Sprachbund» introduced by Trubetzkoy and Jakobson, is admittedly unsatisfactory. Its fundamental fault seems to be that it implies a unit, as if a language either were or were not a member of a given Sprachbund. U. Weinreich (1948, p. 378) proposes that it would be preferable to abandon these terms and speak simply of cases of convergent development and, if necessary, of convergence areas. He would then say that in the Caribbean area, as for example in the Balkans, a number of Indo-European languages have undergone intensive convergent developments³.

So we can sum up, in the sense of N. Trubetzkoy, that a lot of misleadings and mistakes were originated by the fact that linguists used the notions «language group» and «language family» without sufficient examination and in not sufficiently defined meaning. Within language groups we have to see two different groups, consisting of languages which show a great similarity in syntax, similarity in the principles of morphological structure, and also a great number of common cultural words, sometimes an external similarity in the stock of their phonetic systems, but no systematic phonetic correspondences, no identity in the phonetic shape of morphological elements and no common words.

These groups of languages are named 'Sprachbund', but groups consisting of languages which show a great number of common words, identity of morphological categories, and last not least fixed phonetic correspondences, — these groups of languages are named language families.

So we have two categories of Sprachbund : the *intensive* one, constituted by N. Trubetzkoy, the *extensive* one, constituted by Roman Jakobson, based on phonological marks in contrast to phonological, morphological, syntactic and even lexical marks of Balkansprachbund. Both concepts of Sprachbund, the intensive and the extensive one are discussed up to today and so we remember in 1996 the great ideas of Roman Jakobson and the Prague School of linguistics.

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³ Birnbaum, 1977, p. 29.

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