

Jakobson's Response to Saussure's Cours

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Hardly any other western linguist played a more significant role in the formation of Roman Jakobson's own conceptual outlook than Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure's early impact on linguistics in Russia was mediated by Baudouin de Courtenay's Kazan' School, by Saussure's disciple Sergej Karcevskij after his return from Geneva to Moscow in 1917 — and subsequently by the direct contacts of Russian linguists with Albert Sechehaye and Charles Bally, the original editors of Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale*.

For Jakobson, Saussure's linguistic contributions were an enduring source of inspiration, as well as a perennial target for sharp and often devastating attacks which tried to refute Saussure by revealing his weaknesses and contradictions.

Jakobson mentioned Saussure for the first time in a booklet published in Prague in 1921 under the title *Novejšaja ruskaja poezija*. At that time he was clearly captivated not only by Saussure's ideas but also by his terminology. Accordingly he insisted that only the 'static' method of linguistic inquiry provided a possibility of isolating living processes of language from petrified forms and, thereby, a linguistic system from 'linguistic dust' (Jakobson, 1921). Jakobson's booklet was primarily devoted to the poetic techniques of the Russian futurist poet Velimir Chlebnikov. The precursor of this study was a lecture delivered in Moscow in 1919, when the Petrograd *Opojaz* (*Obščestvo po izučeniju poëtičeskogo jazyka*) joined the Moscow Linguistic Circle to discuss poetics. In certain respects, *Novejšaja ruskaja poezija* represented Jakobson's first comprehensive attempt to approach some of the problems which had been earlier argued by fiklovskij, Jakubinskij and other contributors to the Petrograd *Sborniki po teorii poëtičeskogo jazyka*. Thus, *Novejšaja ruskaja poezija* is not only a book on Chlebnikov and various problems of poetic language, but also a book on Jakobson's disagreement with certain basic tenets of the Petrograd Formalists.

The chief target of Jakobson's criticism is the *Opojaz* preoccupation with the psychology of perception and especially with the «psychophonetic» approach of Jakubinskij, expressed in his paper «On the Sounds of Verse Language» in the first issue of *Sborniki*, which Jakobson discovered in 1917, one year after its publication (Jakubinskij, 1916).

While Jakubinskij asserts that in verse language «the sounds emerge into the luminous field of consciousness and attention is focused on the sounds», Jakobson questions whether it is at all proper to talk about sounds in poetry and says :

One can produce verses characterized by emphasis on euphony. But is this sort of emphasis equivalent to the accentuation of pure sound ? If the answer is yes, then we have a species of vocal music, and an inferior kind at that. Euphony operates not with sounds but with phonemes, that is, with acoustical impressions which are capable of being associated with semantic representation.

(Jakobson, 1921)

As a matter of fact, this was the first Jakobson's study which used the concept of the phoneme and prominently mentioned Saussure's name in the theoretical introduction. Jakubinskij's «psychophonetics», which wanted to study poetic universals and examine speech sounds in poetry without being constrained by any concrete language was opposed by Jakobson's phonology based on the concept of the phoneme definable only within the framework of a specific linguistic system.

Paradoxically, Jakobson's phonological approach, as outlined in his *Novejšaja russkaja poëzija*, appeared in conflict not only with Jakubinskij and the Petrograd *Opojaz* but also with the «zaum» experiments of the Russian Futurists who were trying to transcend the phonemic system of their mother tongue. The phoneme-based approach, proposed by Jakobson under the influence of Saussure and his followers, put emphasis on the mediated way of signification and ignored the power of the immediacy of speech sounds. It did not take into account the spell of the sheer sounds of words, the joyful play with sounds by infants in their preverbal stage of development, the glossolalia of religious zealots in trance, and other related matters which were discussed by both fiklovskij and Jakubinskij in connection with their investigation of the spell of sounds in poetry.

The conflict between Jakubinskij's «psychophonetic» searching for poetic universals and Jakobson's phoneme-based poetics, which was restricted historically, caused one of the earliest and perhaps the most profound crises in the development of the Russian school of the Formal method. Jakubinskij did not follow the approach proposed by Jakobson. The same year that Jakobson issued his final version of *Novejšaja russkaja poëzija*, Jakubinskij returned to his psychophonetic speculations about the spell of sounds in poetry and about the inherent link of the transrational

«zaum» poetry to the sound play of infants, to glossolalia, speech pathology, and dreams. Instead of embracing the phoneme-based poetics inspired by Saussure and in 1921 promoted by Jakobson's *Novejšaja russkaja poëzija*, Jakubinskij the same year embraced Sigmund Freud and his psychoanalysis of the subconscious.

Ironically, it was not Saussure's concept of the phoneme but its modification in terms of the distinctive feature theory that subsequently allowed Jakobson to deal more adequately with Chlebnikov's «zaum» and, in fact, with his own debut as a Futurist poet in 1914, that is to say, with «Aljagrov's» transsense-nonsense contribution to Kručnych's *Zaumnaja gniga*. Jakobson's last extensive discussion of his distinctive feature theory in the *Sound Shape of Language* returns not only to the transrational poetry of the Russian Futurists but also to the Opojaz discussion of the spell of sound and the relation of poetry to children's preverbal burbling, glossolalia and the abnormal speech of mental patients. While Jakobson's *Novejšaja russkaja poëzija* insists that poetry operates not with sounds but with phonemes, defined as acoustical impressions which mediate semantic representation - sixty years later, the *Sound Shape of Language* insists that the mediated way of signification totally disappeared in the poetic experiments of the early twentieth century, making them parallel to the abstract trend in painting and akin to the magic ingredients in oral tradition. The *Sound Shape of Language*, written sixty years after Jakobson's *Novejšaja russkaja poëzija*, asserts :

The passive prosaic submission of sounds to superposed, grammatical units can never exhaust the task of a poetic work notwithstanding its epoch, literary school, and the temporarily ruling slogans. The sounds of poetry indispensably carry a distinctly more autonomous task.

(Jakobson, 1979).

The *Sound shape of language* comprises Jakobson's final, radical repudiation of Saussure's concept of the phoneme which he initially embraced, tried to elaborate but gradually began to question to its very foundation. Step by step, Jakobson turned against Saussure's fundamental principle of linearity — caractère linéaire du signifiant —, against phonemes viewed as successive notes, against the phoneme as a minimal sense-discriminative segment which cannot be further subdivided into smaller units, and finally against Saussure's general disregard of speech sounds in their universal phonetic capacity.

The elaboration of the distinctive features theory radically distanced Jakobson from the crucial importance of the phoneme as proposed by Saussure's *Cours* and, in 1921, by Jakobson's *Novejšaja russkaja poëzija*. A delimited gamut of phonemes, which distinguishes one language from another and, in fact, one dialect from another dialect of the same language,

was subordinated to a far more abstract gamut of distinctive features believed to be of universal character.

For Jakobson's changed position on the role of phonemes is characteristic that the *Sound Shape of Language* sees the weakness of Maurice Grammont's «impressive phonetics» in its search for entire phonemes and not for their distinctive features. At the same time, the *Sound Shape of Language* highly prizes the Danish phonetician Eli Fischer-Jorgensen precisely for her observations about distinctive features and their potential symbolic values without any reference to phonemes. Her comparison of West African linguistic data with her own experiments on Danish subjects «shows clearly» — as the *Sound shape of Language* points out — «that these values are not dependent on specific languages and cultures but are universal or almost universal» (Jakobson, 1979).

In the parlance of octogenarian Jakobson, the decomposition of the phoneme into concurrent distinctive features rejected Saussure's «linearité du signifiant» and, thereby, one of the general principles of his *Cours*. In spite of this rejection, it is clear, however, that in the gradual development of distinctive feature theory Jakobson's decades-long duel with Saussure's concept of the phoneme had played a crucial role. In fact, it is perhaps not far from the truth to claim that without Jakobson's life-long duel with Saussure's *Cours*, there would not be Jakobson's distinctive features theory as we know it.

2. Jakobson's bibliography from the Prague period shows that his dissent from certain fundamentals of Saussure's doctrine started rather early in spite of his initial enthusiasm, documented in 1921 in his *Novejšaja russkaja poezija*. While Saussure insisted that the opposition between the two viewpoints, the synchronic and the diachronic, is absolute and allows no compromise, Jakobson in association with Jurij Tynjanov, rejected as early as 1928 the absoluteness of Saussure's famous antinomy by proclaiming :

Pure synchronism proved to be an illusion : every synchronic system has its past and its future as inseparable structural elements of the system... The opposition between synchrony and diachrony loses its importance in principle as soon as we recognize that every system necessarily exists as an evolution, whereas, on the other hand, evolution is inescapably of a systemic nature.

(Jakobson, 1928)

To demonstrate that Saussure's strict separation of static and historical linguistics is methodologically questionable became the underlying impetus to Jakobson's «Remarques sur l'évolution phonologique du russe», published in Prague in 1929. There, Jakobson argues that statics should not be identified with synchrony and dynamics with diachrony and that

synchrony and diachrony should not be isolated from each other but studied in their mutual interaction (Jakobson, 1929).

Jakobson's position is distinctly echoed in the Manifesto which was presented to the First Congress of Slavic Philologists by the Prague Linguistic Circle in 1929. The very first section proclaims that «it would be unreasonable to erect insurmountable barriers between the synchronic and diachronic method as the Geneva school does» (Teze, 1929).

While Saussure's *Cours* insisted that the opposition between the synchronic and the diachronic viewpoints is absolute and allows no compromise, for Jakobson a study of the interrelationship between the two viewpoints became his analytic goal. Jakobson himself comments on this life long effort in the sixth volume of his *Selected Writings* in the «Retrospect», which he completed in February 1982, just a few month before his death. There we read :

Notwithstanding the discrepancy between the Neogrammarians' absorption in the history of changes and Saussure's predilection for a longitudinal section of linguistic systems, there still remains one striking feature which unifies both these standpoints.

(Jakobson. 1982)

By bridging the gap between synchrony and diachrony and, more generally, between the neogrammarian historicism and the program of static linguistics in Saussure's *Cours*, Jakobson hoped to surmount both the neogrammarian and the saussurian legacies. While questioning both of them, he was in fact trying to replace them by his own conceptual role and by his own legacy in the development of modern linguistics. As a dialectician, he aimed at a higher synthesis to be achieved by surmounting of opposites.

3. Among the numerous antinomies, which Saussure's *Cours* wanted to impose on linguistic analysis, rigidly and without any compromise, Jakobson found most challenging Saussure's fundamental separation of «la langue» from «la parole» and, thereby, studies of speech systems from studies of speech acts. In 1928 the Jakobson-Tynjanov *Theses* called Saussure's separation of «la langue» from «la parole» exceedingly fruitful while, at the same time, claiming that not only the separation but also the relationship between these two differing concepts is important. With an implied disagreement with Saussure's insistence on rigid separation without any compromise, the Jakobson-Tynjanov *Theses* programmatically proclaimed that the principle involved in relating these two categories (i.e. the existing norm and the individual utterance) must be elaborated (Jakobson, 1928).

The separation of «la langue» from «la parole» played an important role in Jakobson's studies for years. In 1929 Jakobson together with Bogatyrev, metaphorically used Saussure's distinction and terminology in their

paper «On the Boundary between Studies of Folklore and Literature». There we read :

A folklore work is extraindividual and exists only potentially; it is a skeleton of actual traditions which the implementers embellish with the tracery of individual creation, in much the same way as the producers of verbal utterance (la parole, in the Saussurian sense) act with respect to the system of norms (Saussure's la langue).

(Jakobson-Bogatyrev, 1929).

Jakobson's figurative usage of Saussure's dichotomy is clearly echoed by the program for poetic language in the *Manifesto* of the Prague Linguistic Circle in 1929. According to the *Manifesto* :

Poetic language has a form of poetic expression (parole), that is to say, the form of an individual creative act evaluated on the one hand against a background of the poetic tradition (poetic langue) and on the other against a background of the language of communication.

(Teze, 1929)

Saussure's terminology is also frequently and freely used by other members of the Prague Linguistics Circle such as Jan Mukařovský in his semiological aesthetics or Pet Bogatyrev in his semiological ethnography.

While crediting Saussure's impulses and using his terminology, Jakobson, in fact, never accepted Saussure's insistence that the domain of «la langue» and the domain of «la parole» are two absolutely distinct things and that the boundaries separating the two domains should never be crossed. For the same reason Jakobson remained adamantly opposed to Hjelmslev and the so called Copenhagen structuralism which, like Saussure himself, wanted to study «la langue» alone.

4. The impact of cybernetics and information theory, together with the renewed interest in semiotics in the fifties, helped to shape Jakobson's attempts to deal with Saussure's separation of «la langue» from «la parole». Figuratively using the jargon of the communication engineers, Jakobson replaced Saussure's pair of «la langue and «la parole» by a far more technical pair of «code» and «message». In his statement at the International Symposium on Anthropology in 1952 he justified the renaming by saying :

There is a direct help that linguistics is in line to receive from mathematics... especially from the so-called «information theory» or theory of communication. The fundamental dichotomous notions of linguistics», particularly singled out by Ferdinand de Saussure... and called «langue» and «parole» ... now receive a much clearer, simpler, logically less ambiguous, and operationally more productive formulation, when matched with the corresponding concepts of communication theory, namely with «code» and «message».

(Jakobson, 1952)

In the indexes of Jakobson's *Selected Writings* both *langue/parole* and *code/message* appear together as a single entry. Since the early fifties, however, Jakobson consistently used the new technical terminology, whether he wrote on language, or more generally, on semiotics, poetics, or pathology of speech. While using the pair *code/message*, he nevertheless continued to give credit to Saussure. At the same time, however, he never ceased to attack Saussure's insistence on the radical divorce of opposites and the prohibition against crossing boundaries.

5. Jakobson's fascination with Saussure's *Cours* together with his constant urge to refute it, gave a perennial impetus to all aspects of his academic effort. While trying to suppress his own admiration of Saussure, he became his most ingenious critic and, by the same token, one of the most influential actors in the development of the humanities in the second half of the twentieth century. By attacking Saussure's *Cours*, he kept its legacy alive everywhere, not only in Eastern and Western Europe, but virtually in the whole world.

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