Definition: Jakobson, Roman from Key Terms in Literary Theory


Summary Article: Jakobson, Roman

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Roman Jakobson (1896-1982) was one of the twentieth century's most influential linguists, literary theorists, and semioticians. While he had a considerable impact on the study of linguistics in general, his role in the formation of Russian formalism and in the postwar development of structuralism established him as one of the pioneering figures of literary and cultural theory. His work has been influential in a wide variety of disciplines, including cultural anthropology, psychoanalysis, translation studies, film and media studies, rhetoric, aesthetics, musicology, folklore studies, and art history. A lifelong advocate of the idea that the study of language is essential to the study of literature, Jakobson was one of the figures most instrumental in the "linguistic turn" in critical theory (Jameson 1974). Though his name and work may be unfamiliar to Anglo-American students of poststructuralism, Jakobson's influence on that movement, and in related fields like narratology, was profound.

Born in Moscow in 1896, Jakobson entered the Department of Slavic Studies at Moscow State University in 1914. The following year, he played a pivotal role in founding the Moscow Linguistic Circle (Moskovsky Lingvistichesky Kruzhok); the Moscow group and the Society for the Study of Poetic Language in St Petersburg (of which Jakobson was also a member) were the primary sites of emergence for Russian formalism. It was at this time that Jakobson developed a linguistic approach to literary theory and, in particular, to the problem of constructing a scientific basis for distinguishing literature from all other forms of linguistic communication. Together with other important figures of the formalist school such as Iury Tynianov and Viktor Shklovsky, Jakobson developed a theory of the "literariness" of literary writing that involved close scrutiny of the phonological, semantic, and metrical "devices" of the work. This linguistic approach to literature represented a radical break from the historical and biographical modes of literary analysis popular at that time. Though his early theoretical framework would be modified in his later work, Jakobson's belief in the unique importance of literature for the study of language and the rigorously formalist approach to literary texts would remain at the foundation of his thinking. His own literary contributions to Futurist publications and his influential role as a theorist of the Moscow avant-garde placed him at the center of a vibrant and far-reaching cultural movement.

In 1920, Jakobson moved to Czechoslovakia and began working toward his doctorate at Charles University in Prague, where he taught for a short while before moving on to teach at Masaryk University in Brno from 1934 to 1939. Like so many others, he fled the Nazi advance into Czechoslovakia, going first to Copenhagen, where he worked with the linguist Louis Hjelmslev, before leaving for the US. It is remarkable that, during this cataclysmic period of history, Jakobson was able to advance the discipline
of linguistics as far as he did and at the same time to make so many contributions to other fields. His
time in Prague was especially rich. By 1926 he had begun actively to participate in the Prague Linguistic
Circle, one of the early centers of research in structuralist linguistics. His involvement in both the
formalism of the Moscow Linguistic Circle and the structuralism of the Prague Linguistic Circle enabled
him to connect these two pioneering groups in an immediate and productive way. His work in formalism
- particularly with the function and purpose of devices in individual literary works and across an author's
oeuvre - became, throughout the 1920s, increasingly indebted to the fundamental assumption of
structuralism: that the significance of a text lies in the structures of linguistic difference and binary
opposition that shape a reader's encounter with it. It was also during this period that Jakobson
developed his theory of parallelism in literature and literary analysis. His famous collaboration with
Claude Lévi-Strauss, in which they used formalist methods to read Charles Baudelaire's poem "Les
Chats," demonstrates how the parallel relations of similarity and difference between linguistic levels -
phonological, syntactic, semantic - contribute to the meaning of a literary work (Jakobson 1981 [1966];
Jakobson & Lévi-Strauss 1981 [1962]).

In Prague, Jakobson began his lifelong engagement with the work of Ferdinand de Saussure. While he
would ultimately come to disagree with Saussure's abstract or formalist structuralism, the Saussurean
understanding of language - that it operates by relations of difference within binary structures, that
language as such is constituted by a paradigmatic dimension (langue) and a syntagmatic dimension
(parole) - remained a crucial element in his functional structuralism. Unlike Saussure's formalist
structuralism, Jakobson's functionalist variety conceives of language in terms of the contextual function
of speech acts or communication, rather than in terms of a pure system of signs. Jakobson's attention
to the function and context of language led him to challenge Saussure's claim that the abstract,
paradigmatic plane of language (langue) determined the limits and efficacy of individual usage (parole).
This challenge, therefore, targeted one of the most striking and influential features of Saussure's
theory, the arbitrariness of the sign. Jakobson proposed a theory of language based on a system of
"dynamic synchrony" that would allow him to reintegrate elements of the diachronic axis of language
that had been bracketed and relegated to the arena of mere usage in Saussurean linguistics (Jakobson
1971a). Jakobson's rethinking of Saussure's idea of linguistic systems permitted both a dynamic
conception of language and an objective mode of analysis of its differential and determining structure

Jakobson's analysis of "shifters" – elements in a language, such as the personal pronoun "I" and "you"
that function only by relation to their context (e.g., "I am here") exemplifies his interest in integrating a
functional and contextual perspective into a structuralist analytical framework (Jakobson 1981c[1957]).
The shifter, for Jakobson, functions structurally, in terms of the conventional, arbitrary relationship of
signifier and signified that Saussure theorized while, at the same time, indexically, as when a pointed
finger signifies "you," thus also breaking with the axiom of the total arbitrariness of the sign. Jakobson
marshaled other research, including his work on the sound symbol in poetry (Jakobson 1978), and
incorporated Charles Sanders Peirce's more expansive typology of indexical, symbolic, and iconic signs
to challenge what he saw as the limited, monolithic Saussurean conception of language (Jakobson
1971a). More broadly, Jakobson's insistence on the process of communication and the numerous
subcodes which constitute the linguistic function marked a decisive evolution of structuralism away
from the strict attention to the atemporal linguistic code (langue) and aligned his project with the
contributions of other structuralist critics of Saussure, such as the linguist Emile Benveniste and the
semiotician Algirdas Julien Greimas (Hawkes 1977).

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The essay by Jakobson most familiar to students of literary and cultural theory is doubtless "Linguistics and poetics" (1981b [1960]), the most frequently anthologized and cited of his works. It contains some of his most important contributions to our understanding of how language works: his typology of linguistic functions, his theory of metaphor and metonymy and his definition of the poetic function. His theory of linguistic communication is founded on a division of linguistic function into six aspects: Context (referential), Addresser (expressive), Addressee (conative), Contact (phatic), Code (metalingual), and Message (poetic). While each of these elements is present in any act of communication, Jakobson posits that the function of any individual speech act can be determined according to which of these six elements is dominant. Thus his theory of communication, in turn, leads to a corresponding typology of the six functions of linguistic communication, each oriented toward one of the constitutive elements of linguistic functionality. The Referential Function is oriented toward the context and describes the majority of linguistic messages, particularly those that make noncontroversial statements about the world, such as, “The temperature today is six degrees.” The Emotive Function focuses on the Addresser, while in the Conative Function the message is oriented toward the Addressee. The Phatic Function describes messages oriented toward contact and serve to establish, terminate, or extend communication (“Hmm” or “I see,” for example). The Metalingual Function is directed toward the code; for example, a definition. The Poetic Function is oriented toward the message itself and, while less common in everyday communication, it is recognizable in puns or word play.

For Jakobson, the poetic function, the most important for the study of literary texts, is determined by the action and interaction of the metaphoric and metonymic poles of language. Jakobson first noted the distinct operation of these poles while studying aphasic disorders, psycho-physiological conditions in which an individual is unable, on the one hand, to select an adequate substitute for a word (i.e., metaphor) or, on the other hand, to combine words in order to continue a grammatical sequence (i.e., metonymy). His work with aphasia taught him that the two poles of selection and combination corresponded to Saussure’s syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes of language. His innovation was to argue that speech acts in general correspond to the two fundamental cognitive processes of selection (on the paradigmatic axis) and combination (on the syntagmatic axis). The axis of selection draws upon the set of possible, equivalent terms made available by the linguistic code (e.g., “chalky” for “pale” or “ship” for “car”), which Jakobson associated with the figure of metaphor. By contrast, the axis of combination relies upon relations of contiguity (cause and effect, temporal ordering, logical sequence), which he associated with the figure of metonymy. In poetry, he argued, the vertical “axis” of selection or substitution predominantly determines linguistic equivalences; as he famously put it in “Linguistics and poetics,” “the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination ... in poetry the equation is used to build a sequence” (Jakobson 1981 [1960]: 27). In other words, in the Poetic Function, similarity, rather than contiguity, creates the meaning-effects of literary discourse. Thus rhyme, meter, stanza form, assonance, alliteration, paronomasia, and so on all work to produce effects based on formal and phonological similarity. In the later part of his career, Jakobson argued that the distinction between metaphor and metonymy could be used to analyze all manner of literary, artistic, and cultural phenomena. His speculation about the analogies between metaphorical and metonymic operations in language and the processes of “displacement” and “condensation” in Freud’s theory of the dream work was later taken up by Jacques Lacan who argued the case for the linguistic structure of the unconscious.

Jakobson’s time in the United States, where he lived and worked from 1941 until his death in 1982, was
largely spent in refining and consolidating the research he had done in Europe. He held positions at the French university-in-exile, École libre des hautes études in New York (1942-6), Columbia University (1946), Harvard (1949-82) and MIT (1957-82). His most influential work of this period, co-authored with Morris Halle, was Fundamentals of Language, which proposed a system of 12 binary oppositions that accounted for the basic phonological distinctions of all languages (Jakobson & Halle 1971 [1956]). This successful application of the concept of distinctive features represented a defining moment for the study of linguistics as well as an effective application of Saussurean linguistic theory.

Jakobson's move to the United States also marked the introduction of Russian formalism and the structuralism of the Prague Linguistic Circle to US and émigré intellectuals. Claude Lévi-Strauss was at this time introduced to structural linguistics through his collaboration with Jakobson at the École libre des hautes études, a development that was to have profound effects on structuralist and poststructuralist thought. It was in the US that Jakobson first studied the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce. Jakobson's integration of Peirce's ideas about signs - particularly his conception of indexical signs and iconic notation - into structuralist theory was an important contribution to the project of fusing the Saussurean and Peircean branches of semiotics.

Jakobson's importance for literary and cultural theory is difficult to overestimate, in part because his work lies at the foundation of poststructuralism, but also because it informs so much theoretical reflection in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Jakobson's thinking about language is vital to contemporary theories of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, and nationalism insofar as they rely, as on first principles, on the concepts of dynamic, contextual difference, and linguistic function.

SEE ALSO: Form; Formalism; Functions (Linguistic); Greimas, A. J.; Lacan, Jacques; Lévi-Strauss, Claude; Peirce, Charles Sanders; Poststructuralism; Psychoanalysis (to 1966); Saussure, Ferdinand de; Semiotics; Semiotics/Semiology; Shklovsky, Viktor; Speech Acts; Structuralism

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