Roman Jakobson and the Primacy of the Poetic

The influential Russian linguist Roman Jakobson is perhaps best known in semiotic and structuralist circles for three innovations: ((See Charles Lock, "Roman Jakobson," *Encyclopedia of Semiotics*, ed. Paul Bouissac, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 327-30; and David Lidov, "Jakobson's Model of Communication," *Ibid.*, pp. 330-32.))

- a sense of dynamic synchrony, which is not a slice of time frozen in place as one finds in De Saussure's quite abstract "momentary arrangement" of the terms of a system, although in De Saussure synchrony is not exactly a slice but a "span of time during which the sum of the modifications that have supervened is minimal." The adjustment of point to span opens synchrony to periods as large as centuries, as long as there is minimal change;
- his emphasis on simultaneity and equivalence over linearity, again going beyond De Saussure's principle of the linearity of the signifier;
- his placement of poetics at the heart of his theory of language, elevating aesthetics over semantics and using poetics to criticize the arbitrariness of linguistic signs through an effort to regain onomatopoeia as a rule, rather than an exception based on a strictly nonaesthetic sense of language (in De Saussure, onomatopoeia is a privileged example of a motivated relation between signifer and signified). Indeed, onomatopoetic words have achieved an emblematic status as 'other' to the dominant principle of arbitrariness in structural linguistics. It is theoretically daring, then, to create a new orientation out of an emblematic exception. However, for readers of Jakobson, what most naturally comes to mind is the first of his Six

> Lectures on Sound and Meaning dating from 1942. ((Roman Jakobson, *Six Lectures on Sound and Meaning*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1978, pp. 1-3.)) The first lecture begins with a medittaion on Edgar Allan Poe's poem The Raven and the signifying quandary posed by the onomatopoeic refrain of the croaking bird: "Nevermore." Here Jakobson subtlely evokes the "mystery" of the unity of sound and meaning the investigation of which requires an extrasemantic sensibility.

What interests me in this second lecture is Jakobson's effort to position poetics at the center of literary studies by means of the importance he gives to the poetic function in his model of communication. This lecture provides a reading of a classic text in communication theory, Jakobson's 1960 paper "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics." ((Gendered activity and the valences or limited range of potential uses of technology. See Michele Martin, Hello Central?: Gender , Technology and Culture in the Formation of the Telephone System, Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1991.)) For those who have forgotten the lessons of this remarkable paper, this lecture will refresh fading memories. However, it is worth noting that Jakobson saves what is at the center of his theory for last in his presentation of the functions of language. There is not only a certain amount of drama in this mode of presentation, but the implications are substantial because the primacy of the poetic challenges the referential function, and this challenge is posed through the fundamental ambiguity of messages (this is in a nonrestricted sense beyond poetry proper). It is useful to recall Paul Ricoeur's observation in the course of his analysis of the relationship between the poetic and referential functions in Jakobson's theory: ambiguity profoundly alters reference rather than suppress it. ((Paul Ricoeur, The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary studies of the creation of meaning in language, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977, p. 224.)) Later in this lecture series we will also see that ambiguity itself will be subjected to a challenge by a supposedly more virulent concept, that of

ambivalence. Further, one of the peculiarities of Jakobson's statement is that it may be read as an elaborate reflection on a single example given the heavy labour performed by the rhetorical figure of paronomasia.

For all of his attention to the very thing that linguistics and theoreticians of language often wrongly excluded from their considerations (emotive elements), Jakobson's turn to the study of the functions of language is seemingly devoid of emotion and quite minimalist, albeit without the trappings of the mathematical model with its doubling on the decoding side in the pursuit of the elimination of error and corrective channels ("The Addresser sends a Message to the Addressee"); however, where engineers double, Jakobson will ultimately split both Addresser, Addressee, and Message. If the engineers wanted to strangle meaning, Jakobson wanted to split it. He first reveals "constitutive features in any speech event" in a "concise survey." To these six features will correspond the six functions of language. The components of the model of communication determine or direct the distribution of the functions.

Briefly, the Addresser/encoder sends a Message to the Addressee/decoder. Messages are embedded in or refer to Contexts which the Addressee must be able to grasp and perhaps even verbalize. The Addresser and Addressee need to partially share a Code between them, that is, the rules governing the relationship between the Message and its context; and the Message is sent through a physical channel and Contact, a psychological connection, is established between Addresser and Addressee so that they may enter and stay in communication. Jakobson writes: "Each of these six features (Addresser-Message-Context-Contact-Code-Addressee) determines a different function of language." (353) Jakobson places his greatest emphasis on the Message and the Poetic function; others, such as Baudrillard, have emphasized the Code and Metalingual function through a political economy of the sign that exposes

the “reign of the code” that is built on the destruction of reference. To put the matter somewhat crudely, a theory of communication or critique of the model of communication may be accomplished emphasizing a specific constitutive feature and the function it determines. This perspective is already suggested by Jakobson with regard to all verbal messages oriented, for example, to referents: “the leading task of numerous messages, the accessory participation of the other functions in such messages must be taken into account by the observant linguist.” Even denotative messages are not limited to one function; yet, the referential function will remain atop the hierarchy of functions pertaining to such messages. (353) But Baudrillard, for instance, will shift his attention to the Contact or Phatic function in a critique of non-communication in the information age of networks (thereby turning the supposedly psychological connection into a merely technological one). ((For Jean Baudrillard’s idea of communication as a “simulation pact” based on “tele-phasis,” see his Seduction, trans. Brian Singer, Montréal: New World Perspectives, 1990, pp. 163-66. Baudrillard writes: “The phatic function of language, used to establish contact and sustain speech’s formal dimension: this function first isolated and described by Malinowski with reference to the Melanesians, then by Jakobson in his grid of language’s functions, becomes hypertrophied in the tele-dimension of the communications networks. Contact for contact’s sake becomes the empty form with which language seduces itself when it no longer has anything to say.” (164))) It certainly makes an interesting and worthwhile exercise to imagine a theory of communication and/or a critique of another such theory as a result of emphasizing different features/functions and/or experimentally mixing a particular hierarchy of functions, downplaying the predominant function of a verbal message, etc.

Parallel to Baudrillard’s critique of communication as simulation and the phatic function as nothing but a technical tele-point, one finds an array of

Addressee and Conative function-based approaches such as Ien Ang's. ((Ien Ang, 'In the Realm of Uncertainty', in Communication Theory Today, eds. D. Crowley and D. Mitchell, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994, pp. 198-99.)) Ang's "theoretical inversion" is accomplished through a critique of the presupposition of successful communication between Sender and Receiver in an incoherent space of contemporary culture (global capitalist village) in which failure of communication results from the radical uncertainty of meaning (it is never given and cannot be assumed). However, the features/functions still act as guideposts to the indeterminacy of meaning and the increasingly strange figure of the Addressee (audience) in the chaos called late capitalist, postmodern culture.

Let's not get ahead of ourselves.

"The verbal structure of a message depends primarily on the predominant function," writes Jakobson. (353) Context-oriented messages are predominantly referential; Jakobson uses the terms "denotative" (oriented toward perceptible extra-linguistic objects) and "cognitive" (suggesting the core meaning by contrast with subsidiary emotive content, as in the Port Royal tradition). The important point is that the factor "Context" is a general concept crossing Fregean and Port Royal logics, among many others presenting the nuances of denotation. The Emotive function is focussed on the Addresser. It is essentially attitudinal (about the subject matter of the communication) or "expressive" in that it "produces an impression of a certain emotion whether true or feigned." (354) This production of an impression is illustrated with an example of how an actor may give a wide range of "expressive tint" to a single phrase. Although the emotive function is "laid bare in the interjections," Jakobson writes, "it flavors to some extent all our utterances." (354) In this statement Jakobson sets himself apart from those who would restrict their analysis of language from the informational perspective to its strictly cognitive aspect, relegating emotion

to a non-linguistic feature. (354) While Jakobson explicitly counters this position, the order in which he presents the function turning immediately from referential to emotive assures the inclusion of the second, weaker, often “subsidiary” or even extraneous side of the couple, as a further source of information conveyed by messages. He underlines the difference between the emotive and referential functions on the basis of the former’s peculiar sound patterns and their syntactic role as equivalents of sentences rather than components of them. But this difference is only relative because of the circumstantial or contextual sensitivity of emotive utterances (the example of the theatre breaks down even further into the Russian theatre and of Stanslavskij’s test in particular, decodable by Moscovite listeners, an audience familiar with this local, specialized code); in other words, the utterance of an emotively tinted message involves the implicit construction of an Addressee, the factor to which Jakobson next turns.

The Conative function is illustrated by imperative verbal sentences that are not subject to a truth test (unlike, he thinks, declarative sentences). Although Jakobson seems to inherit the term Conative from psychologist Karl B&uumlaut;hler’s triadic model of language (expression-appeal-representation or transmitter-receiver-object) in which it is illustrated by incantations that convert something or someone into an Addressee (355), some authors such as Eco simply refer to the function as imperative. ((Umberto Eco, A Theory of Semiotics, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976, p. 262.)) Jakobson’s additional example of magic spells as Conative messages is fascinating because it involves the conversion of an inanimate thing or “absent third person” (not a person, at all, really, if we follow the examples of the incantations, spells addressing Water, Sun, Moon) into an Addressee; in other words, an orientation toward a certain kind of absent referent is transformed into an Addressee with whom or it, some characteristics are shared. But Jakobson has surprisingly little of an explicit nature to say about this function’s orientation toward the Addressee.

The Phatic function is derived from Malinowski's concept of "phatic communion," the use of language to maintain a social relation through ritualized formulas such as greetings, chit-chat about the weather, and related formal niceties of social communication. If Jakobson advances this social function, it is by inclusion of the means of discontinuing communication rather than simply prolonging it (including confirmation of the interlocutor's attention). The "mere purport," as Jakobson puts it, of prolonging communicative contact suggests the emptiness of such contact; the example from Dorothy Parker is illustrative: 'Well, here we are', he said. 'Here we are', she said, 'Aren't we?' 'I should say we are', he said. (354) This not only makes the function susceptible to the aforementioned critique launched by Baudrillard, but in addition suggests that the emptiness of contact has a propitious technical function as a test of the system itself: testing 1-2-3 or as Jakobson writes: 'Hello, do you hear me?' Yet in order to arrive at this conclusion, one would have to suppress the other functions which, in the Parker example, are richly suggestive in emotive terms. The focus on what language does in establishing social solidarity leads Jakobson to suggest, zoosemiotically, that talking birds and humans share the Phatic function of language; and, like parrots and budgerigar, infants communicate before they can communicate (exchange information). These examples are underdeveloped in Jakobson's paper.

The Phatic function shares a great deal with the Metalingual function. The former "checks whether the channel works" (353); the latter is used by Addresser and Addressee "to check up whether they use the same code." (356) A double check: first on the channel and then on the code. Jakobson also calls it a "glossing function" an explanation added between the lines or in the margins; and, since he develops an exasperating example of someone whose unfamiliarity with school vocabulary leads to repeated requests for definitions ("The sophomore was plucked"), such

requests for “equational definitions” are dull, repetitive, “strictly metalingual” (356), yet vital.

Finally, Jakobson reaches the Poetic function, focused on the message itself. Irreducible to poetry as such (verbal art is dominated by its poetic function while the poetic remains subsidary in other verbal activities [356]), which would unduly confine linguistics, study of the poetic function is embedded in general problems of language and proper scrutiny of language must include the poetic. This function “focus[es] on the message for its own sake” and in this way “promot[es] the palpability of signs.” (356) Jakobson’s first illustration conveys this palpability. “‘Why do you always say Joan and Margery, yet never Margery and Joan ? Do you prefer Joan to her twin sister? Not at all, it just sounds smoother’. In a sequence of two coordinate names, as far as no rank problems interfere, the precedence of the shorter name suits the speaker, unaccountably for him, as a well-ordered shape of the message.” (357) In this example the sound shape of the conjoined names short followed by long, with syllable gradation – determined their order of presentation. Attention to the sound of the conjoined names reveals this as long as no questions of rank (the elder Joan, perhaps) interfere with such poetic considerations about language’s palpability. Let’s put this another way: the smooth sound shape of the combination may produce the effect of rank and all the little orthodoxies that may mark a secondary literature or reception of ideas. Recently, I has occasion to compile a three volume collection of secondary literature on French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, whose collaborative works are well-known. ((See Genosko, ed. Deleuze and Guattari: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers, Vols. I, II, III, London: Routledge, in press [2000]. The Table of Contents is available in ‘The Guattari Project’, www.lakeheadu.ca/~ggenosko.)) Why Deleuze and then Guattari? The effect of rank may be seen in the synecdochial strategies of representation that erase Guattari in the name of Deleuze who stands for both, part to

whole, in reference to their collective works. Paraphrasing Jakobson: “Why do you always say Deleuze and Guattari, yet never Guattari and Deleuze ? Do you prefer Deleuze to Guattari? Not at all, it just sounds smoother.” Considerations of efficiency, compactness, sound shape of a verbal sequence, and syllable gradation all contribute to the resulting ranking of Deleuze before Guattari and the widespread deployment of the former as a synechdoch of both authors. Jakobson’s Poetic function is suggestive of delicate problems of rank; problems that cannot be adequately analyzed alone within the limits of the perception of verse shape in which rank order is determined by meter, for instance, or sound shape gives prominence to stressed and unstressed elements, peaks and valleys, lows and highs. Still, the poetics of the name order in Jakobson’s example works so well because it has become customary, unaccounted for, by those who repeat it. This is the point about the ‘Deleuze and Guattari’ example. ((Further, the order is suspicious if we think of the “Matthew effect,” a concept developed by Robert K. Merton (Science 159 [1968]) to describe the tendency to attribute responsibility and reward fame to the first in line in co- or multiple-authored papers. The one whose name comes first gets primary credit. The better-known author garners greater attention and this generally leads to a retroactive revalorization of his/her early, less well-known publications, perhaps to the degree that even an entire stratum of rejected works – Deleuze’s ‘repudiated’ Christian works prior to 1953 – are now dutifully listed in bibliographies and busily translated.)) Jakobson’s reorientation of linguistics also has its political moments since “poeticalness is not a supplementation of discourse with rhetorical adornment but a total re-evaluation of the discourse and of all its components whatsoever.” (377). It was Julia Kristeva who saw in Jakobson’s turn to the poetic the foundation of the “linguistic ethics” which would have as its object poetic language, understood as the swelling of a heterogeneous process, a rhythm inassimilable to structure; nothing less than the struggles of the Kristevan subject-in-process. ((Julia Kristeva, “The Ethics of Linguistics,” in Desire in

Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardin, Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1980, pp. 23-35.))

Jakobson then turns to several paronomastic images as illustrative of the poetic function. Why paronomasia, this recurrent trope of substitution and play on words, sometimes reduced to assonance and alliteration? Play on the sound and meaning of words is indicated by the example of “the horrible Harry.” Why horrible? It just seems to fit him better than dreadful or disgusting. Jakobson writes: “Without realizing it, she clung to the poetic device of paronomasia.” (357) A more complex example follows: “I like Ike” [with reference to Dwight David Eisenhower]. The sound shape of this political election slogan – /ay layk ayk/ – consisting of three monosyllables, three diphthongs (the nucleus is /ay/) with the second diphthong framed by two consonantal phonemes (l and k), the phrase ending with /k/. Taken together with the echo rhyme in which /ayk/ is contained in the previous word /layk/, “I like Ike” displays “a paronomastic image of a feeling which totally envelopes its object.” (357) The poetical economy of alliteration is at work here in this envelopment “the loving subject enveloped by the beloved object.” The slogan’s Poetic function “reinforces its impressiveness and efficiency.” (357)

After introducing these examples, Jakobson turns immediately to the statement of a theoretical principle based on what is “the indispensable feature inherent in any piece of poetry.” There are two axes describing “modes of arrangement used in verbal behavior” selection and combination. ((
I do not intend to dwell on the enormously influential nature of these two concepts. However, taking a cue from Kristeva in the essay cited above, who links Jakobson and Freud on the basis their recognition that language was “always-already poetic,” the deployment of the two axes in

psychoanalysis has created lively debate, and has been taken up by those mining the Lacanian vein. A useful way into this debate is through the dream work. In The Interpretation of Dreams, Freud developed the processes of the dream work, one of which was condensation [Verdichtung], an operation of spatial compression, reduction, transformation. The question for psychoanalysis was how to understand Freud's suggestion that this spatial process was unlike "the linguistic" in general. If condensation is dismissive of discourse, then any attempt to find in it linguistic operations may run against the grain. This was, however, precisely the approach taken by Jacques Lacan it is the superimposition of signifiers constitutive of the poetic, etc, a position he outlined in "Agency of the letter in the unconscious" (Ecrits, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: W.W. Norton, 1977, p. 160). The Kristevan homage to Jakobson is also found here in a footnote in Lacan's essay (p. 177, note 20): "I pay homage here to the works of Roman Jakobson to which I owe much of this formulation; works to which a psychoanalyst can constantly refer in order to structure his own experience ." Lacan converts linguistic into psychoanalytic principles using the two axes to seperate metaphor and metonymy, similarity and contiguity, vertical and horizontal, condensation and displacement (in the dream work). The selection of a noun from a reservoir of more-or-less equivalent nouns in a message about a particular topic "child" rather than "kid" to which an appropriate verb is added as a comment "sleeps," "walks" results in a combination of chosen words. Selection is governed by equivalence (similarity and dissimilarity, synonymity and anonymity) while combination is governed by contiguity. Jakobson specifies: "The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination." All sorts of "equalizations," "equations," and "matches" result: between syllables, stresses, pauses. Equation is the cornerstone of sequence and the measurement of sequences is essential to the poetic. Poetics is perfused with similarity, with likeness, and repetitiveness. The projection of

similarity on contiguity makes poetry “thoroughly symbolic” and gives a metaphoric tint to metonymy, and vice versa. It also raises the poetic function above the referential function through ambiguation. This is the hallmark of any poetic message, “any self-focused message,” (371) and entails the splitting of Addresser and Addressee into author-reader as well as the “I” of the storyteller, for instance, and the “Thou” of monologues, epistles (“alleged addressee”). If the poetic ambiguates referentiality, does referentiality disambiguate the poetic? Not exactly, because the double sense of the message, and splitting of Addressee and Addresser may also involve the splitting of reference itself: “It was and it was not”; “Once upon a time, or maybe twice.” The best one can hope for in this system is that disambiguation reveals the splitting at issue.

Why the refrain of paronomasia, then? Jakobson explains: “In a sequence, where similarity is superimposed on contiguity, two similar phonemic sequences near to each other are prone to assume a paronomastic function. Words similar in sound are drawn together in meaning.” (371) This brings us back to “The Raven” with its “repetitive alliteration”: “And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting.” The next line in the final stanza displays the merger of the bird’s perch and the bust upon which it sits through “‘sonorous’ paronomasia”: “On the pallid bust of Pallas, just above my chamber door” (pallid Pallas). Jakobson continues to catalogue the “ingenious paronomasias” (the chains and strings of them) in this primary text. Jakobson’s attention to paronomasia seques into the significance of sound symbolism (especially “conspicuous similarity in sound”) as a fundamental reorientation of semiotic attention to the acoustic above the semantic. While he does make his strongest case with reference to a poem, it is useful to recall his earlier appeal to the political slogan in which paronomasia was present in another kind of message. The repeated example of paronomasia is itself, if we may read Jakobson against or with himself, to be understood as yet another example of the repetition (echoes)

he made so much of in his theoretical work. Even a “Closing Statement” has a Poetic function.

A good critical reading of this situation was developed by Jean-Francois Lyotard in “The Dream Work Does Not Think” (OLR 6/1 [1983]:3-35; Discours, figure [1974], pp. 239-61). Lyotard argues against both Lacan and Jakobson. Lacan, borrowing Jakobson’s terminology, equates condensation with metaphor and displacement with metonymy, asking: “What distinguishes these two mechanisms [condensation and displacment] from their homologous function in discourse. Nothing, except a condition imposed upon the signifying material, called consideration of the means of representation.” For Jakobson, condensation is aligned with the trope synecdoche, and thus metonymic; for Lacan, condensation is aligned with metaphor. What needs to be interrogated, Lyotard responds, is “the desire to find in the dream-work the operations of speech.”))