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Roman Jakobson and the birth of linguistic structuralism

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Abstract. The term "structuralism" was introduced into linguistics by Roman Jakobson in the early days of the Linguistic Circle of Prague, founded in 1926. The cluster of ideas defended by Jakobson and his colleagues can be specified but differ considerably from the concept of structuralism as it has come to be understood more recently. That took place because from the 1930s on it became customary to equate structuralism with the ideas of Ferdinand de Saussure, as expounded in his posthumous *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916). It can be shown, however, that Jakobson's group rejected Saussure's theory for ideological reasons. As the term "structuralism" became more widely used it came to be associated with positivist approaches to linguistics rather than with the original phenomenological orientation that had characterized the Linguistic Circle of Prague. The purpose of this paper is to clarify these different approaches and to suggest that because of its extreme porosity the word "structuralism" is an example of a "terminological pandemic". More research on the varied uses to which the key terms "structure" and "structuralism" were put will undoubtedly further elucidate this important episode in 20th-century intellectual history.

1. Introduction

In this article, I shall examine the early history of linguistic structuralism and the role played in it by the Russian philologist and linguist Roman Jakobson (1896–1982). I shall show that he was the first linguist

to use the key terms "structuralism" and "structural linguistics" in the late 1920s and in this way to introduce them to the profession to which he belonged. My main purpose is to explore the abundant documentary evidence for this conclusion. I also willy-nilly confront the still commonly-accepted notion that structuralism goes back farther still to the posthumous *Cours de linguistique générale* by Ferdinand de Saussure, a book which had appeared a decade earlier (in 1916) in Lausanne and Paris. In my survey of the documentary evidence I necessarily focus on the ambivalent attitude of Jakobson and his colleagues in the 1920s to the ideas of Saussure and the other members of the Geneva School. That leads me to review certain aspects of what I hesitantly call the "Saussure cult", that is, the wave of theoretical partisanship in Saussure's favour that swept European linguistics from the 1930s onwards.

2. The role of Ferdinand de Saussure in 20th-century linguistics

Needless to say, nobody would deny that Ferdinand de Saussure was an influential theorist in twentieth-century linguistics. While affirming that fact, however, we must also admit that he was only one of several outstanding linguistic theorists active in the latter half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. In the German-speaking area we recall the influence exerted by the theoreticians associated with the Leipzig school of linguistics from about the 1870s on, such as Hermann Paul (1846–1921), and in the early twentieth century by the psychologist Karl Bühler (1879–1963), who wrote copiously on linguistic theory and the psychology of language. In eastern Europe we must recognize the significance of the Polish-Russian philologist and linguist Jan Baudouin de Courtenay (1845–1929) and his brilliant short-lived student and collaborator Mikołaj Kruszewski (1851–1887). A stellar Swiss member of the Prague German University faculty with interests in the

philosophy of language was Anton Marty (1847–1914).[1] In Scandinavia an important figure was undoubtedly Otto Jespersen (1860–1943); and in the New World we must recognize Franz Boas (1858–1942), Edward Sapir (1884–1939), and Leonard Bloomfield (1887–1947).

Among these, perhaps the most widely read in western Europe in the first half of the twentieth century was Jespersen, the illustrious grammarian of English from Denmark.[2] Baudouin de Courtenay, although he did not write a monograph that could compete with Jespersen's massive output, taught at a number of major universities in Russia (Kazan, Tartu, Saint Petersburg) and subsequently in newly-independent Poland (Warsaw), training many if not most of the foremost linguists of those two countries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[3] Franz Boas and Edward Sapir were both involved in the intensive study of American Indian languages while at the same time becoming general linguistic theorists of international stature. Another North American linguist who worked both in American Indian linguistics and general linguistics was Leonard Bloomfield (see Bloomfield 1970). Sapir's seminal contribution was undoubtedly his 1921 monograph

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[1] See his massive 1909 monograph in which he grapples with all the theoretical issues of interest to his colleagues in linguistics at that time (Marty 1909).

[2] See above all his 1922 and 1924 monographs. Note that in the following decade he wrote an important treatise on sentence analysis (Jespersen 1937). His life-long interest in the relation between logical and linguistic categories went back at least to his 1913 book *Sprogets logik* [The logic of language]. Rasmussen (1992: 63–66) discusses the impact of Jespersen's general linguistic ideas on various members of the Copenhagen school of linguistics, in particular Viggo Brøndal (1987–1942) and Louis Hjelmslev (1899–1965). For an example of Brøndal's approach, see his 1928.

[3] On Baudouin de Courtenay, see Jakobson 1971b: 394–428; Shcherba 1930; Stankiewicz 1972. On Kruszewski, see Baudouin de Courtenay 2005. Baudouin's most lasting contribution was his monograph on phonetic alternations (Baudouin de Courtenay 1895), which laid the foundation of modern phonology. The notion of the phoneme, separate from that of the speech sound, was central to the work of the Prague linguists and had been introduced a generation earlier by Baudouin de Courtenay and his students. It appears that Saussure actually met Baudouin at meetings of the *Société linguistique de Paris* and followed his work with great interest; see Saussure 2006: 97. For secondary literature on Kruszewski, see Radwańska-Williams 2006.

entitled *Language*; Bloomfield wrote two comprehensive monographs on general linguistics that came out in 1914 and 1933 respectively, and Boas edited a handbook on American Indian languages in 1911. There was, in other words, no shortage of productive general linguists active and influential on both sides of the Atlantic in the early decades of the twentieth century.

That being so, an obvious question to raise is why so many linguists eventually came to regard themselves as followers of Saussure rather than of any of these other linguistic theorists. How did this exclusive loyalty to Saussure come about? Clearly, the intrinsic quality of the *Cours* was an important factor, but there were undoubtedly others, and it is important to identify them as far as we can.

As regards the theory commonly referred to as structuralism, Saussure was arguably part of a broad trend in the history of ideas beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century that rejected certain aspects of the "positivism" prevalent among academics.[4] When

[4] The anti-positivist trend affected philosophy and all the other learned professions. On its impact in literary criticism see Wellek 1946. "Positivism" is perhaps not a completely satisfactory term to describe the approach to linguistics of the such late nineteenth-century practitioners as the so-called *Junggrammatiker* ('Neogrammarians'), to whom Jakobson and his colleagues were so staunchly opposed, but I adopt it here for want of a better English alternative. Although Jakobson on occasion did use the word "empirical" (see Jakobson 1971b: 393), he seems to have preferred the term *Naturalismus* to describe the approach that he disapproved of. This notion is roughly equivalent to what is conveyed by the English word "scientism". See Jakobson's article "Um den russischen Wortschatz" (Jakobson 1936: 80–81), where he makes the following significant statement: "Um unsere Jahrhundertwende hatte die Naturwissenschaft das große Wort in der wissenschaflichen Welt geführt, der Naturalismus beherrschte die Philosophie, seine Fragestellung und Methodologie war für sämtliche Forschungszweige richtunggebend. Namentlich von den verschiedenen sprachwissenschaftlichen Fragen wurden | diejenigen an erster Stelle gerückt, die anscheinend eine naturalistische Lösung am meisten zuließen. Es war dies die Zeit der phonetischen Überhandnahme in der Sprachforschung". A major earlier summation of general linguistic theory familiar to Saussure was undoubtedly Hermann Paul's *Prinzipien der Sprachgeschichte* (first published in 1880; final much enlarged version 1909). (We may assume that Saussure consulted either Paul

these new perspectives filtered into linguistics the influence may not have come from Saussure alone. To express this notion more positively, it seems reasonable to believe that to some significant extent Saussure's *Cours* confirmed and reinforced already prevailing theoretical trends.[5] One suspects in other words that many linguists had already come to believe in much of what Saussure set out to demonstrate in the *Cours* before they had even read the book. The link between that book and the rise of structuralism is the crucial question to consider here.

3. Roman Jakobson's role

At this point, let us review the early career of the Russian linguist Roman Jakobson. He had already begun to absorb non-positivist ideas by the second decade of the twentieth century, and that happened long before copies of Saussure's *Cours* reached Russia. Recall that the first edition of the *Cours* came out in western Europe in the middle of the 1914–18 war and hence was at first all but unobtainable in eastern Europe and Russia.[6] Recall that Ferdinand de Saussure (died 1913) had

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1898 or Paul 1909.) Jakobson singled out Hermann Paul for special opprobrium (see 1971b: 420). On the widespread hostility to positivism and a preference for holistic thinking in Russia, see Sériot 1999. For an important primary source for any understanding of Jakobson's thinking in the early days of structuralism, see his 1929a, an article that does not appear in his *Selected Writings* (1971ff).

[5] Thus, in his review of the 1922 edition of Saussure's *Cours*, Leonard Bloomfield wrote: "The value of the *Cours* lies in its clear and rigorous demonstration of fundamental principles. Most of what the author says has long been 'in the air' and has been here and there fragmentarily expressed; the systematization is his own" (Bloomfield 1923: 317; Bloomfield 1970: 63). Compare Bloomfield's positive reference in passing to the *Cours* in his review of Sapir's 1921 *Language* (Bloomfield 1922: 414).

[6] Thus, in a letter of Jakobson's from Prague to his friend Elsa Triolet which dates from 1920, he asks her to send him from Paris a copy of the *Cours*, which he describes as "inexpensive" (Jakobson 1992: 128). More specifically, on inquiry Jakobson once told me himself in a letter dated 12 May 1976 that "Saussure's *Cours* did not reach Russia before the early 20's, when I sent a copy of Saussure's book in its second

given his courses on general linguistics at the University of Geneva between 1907 and 1911. The *Cours de linguistique générale*, edited by two younger colleagues (Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye) and one student (Albert Riedlinger), first appeared in Lausanne and Paris in 1916. A second edition came out after the war in 1922.

Anti-positivist ideas had been propounded in Russia in the first two decades of the twentieth century not only by Jakobson himself, but also by his many artistic and literary colleagues in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, and they clearly did not get these ideas from reading Saussure's *Cours*.

In the case of Jakobson himself, moreover, documentary evidence indicates that he did not own a copy of the first edition of the *Cours*. Moreover, we must reckon with a complicating factor, namely that he was exposed to Saussure's ideas in two stages. First, a Russian colleague and friend of his from Moscow, Sergei Karcevski, went to Geneva to study linguistics at the University, where he absorbed Saussurean ideas from Charles Bally, Saussure's close friend and immediate successor at that institution. Karcevski returned to Moscow in 1917 in the middle of the war and passed on these ideas to the linguists of the Moscow Dialectological Commission.[7] We see this reflected in the fact that on the very first page of a paper on the poetry of Khlebnikov that Roman Jakobson presented orally in Moscow several times in 1919, there is an unmistakable echo of Saussure's distinction between *synchronie* and *diachronie*, but it is significant that Jakobson did not use Saussurean

edition and of several studies of his disciples to the Moscow Linguistic Circle. Sechehaye sent this material to me [i.e. Jakobson] in Prague. Before that, the only information about Saussure's general linguistics was brought to Moscow, in particular to the Moscow Dialectological Commission, by Karcevski, who returned to Russia from Geneva in 1917 and gave a lecture to this Commission on the system of the Russian verb in the light of Saussure's doctrine. He was the youngest direct student of Saussure, and he brought us certain insights into Saussurean synchronic linguistics, and even such of Saussure's terms as '*poussière linguistique*' (disparate elements which remained in the language from systems lost or modified), terms which have not been preserved in Saussure's published works."

[7] Not surprisingly, Karcevski's published work on the grammar of contemporary Russian shows the deep influence of Saussurean ideas; see Kartsevski 1922.

terminology. Instead of Saussure's own term *synchronique*, for instance, Jakobson uses the already well-established term "static".

On the other hand, Jakobson does mention Saussure by name in this same passage and attributes to him the term *poussière linguistique*, 'linguistic dust'. According to Jakobson, Saussure used that expression to refer to isolated, non-productive elements or features present in the language of a particular period that had survived from earlier stages of the language. The term 'linguistic dust', strangely enough, occurs neither in the posthumous *Cours* nor as far as is known in any of the three courses on general linguistics that Saussure gave at the University of Geneva. So much for this fragmentary but suggestive documentary evidence! The passage just mentioned at least provides us with a definite link between Jakobson and Saussure, but it does not suggest either that Jakobson had already read the *Cours* or that he thought of himself as in any sense a follower of Saussure's.[8] Jakobson left Russia permanently a year after giving his lectures on Khlebnikov's poetry and published a book based on them in Prague in 1921. In that way these ideas have been preserved for posterity.[9]

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[8] A significant fact is that this entire topic of "isolation" is covered in great detail by the Neogrammarian theorist Hermann Paul in the tenth chapter of his influential *Prinzipien der Sprachgeschichte* (see Paul 1898: 170–196; Paul 1909: 189–216). It is perhaps not surprising that Saussure did mention Paul's contribution in this area to the undergraduate students in his Geneva courses on general linguistics. After all, they could be trusted to read Paul's discussion on their own. But whether Jakobson was aware of Paul's prior discussion of isolation is obviously impossible to say. As far as I am aware, Jakobson is the only person who ever reported on Saussure's using the expression *poussière linguistique*.

[9] See Jakobson 1921. For a complete re-edition of this early book of Jakobson's provided with a facing German translation, see Striedter, Kośny 1972: 18–135, at pp. 18, 19. Excerpts from this work in English translation were provided by Brown (1973: 58–82, reprinted in Jakobson 1992: 173–208). It is interesting that Jakobson quotes Saussure's expression *poussière linguistique* in his very first major publication, an application of linguistic theory to the analysis of poetic language. In fact, it plays quite an important role in his opening argument (see Striedter, Kośny 1972: 18; Jakobson 1979: 299), in which he discusses the complicated relations existing between three factors: the poetic language of, say, Pushkin, the everday language

To sum up, a group of linguists in Moscow, including the young Roman Jakobson, were influenced by some of Saussure's ideas as conveyed to them orally by Karcevski, but it seems likely that they had not yet read the *Cours de linguistique générale* itself, although the first edition had already appeared in Western Europe. Later, sometime after 1922, Albert Sechehaye, one of the editors of the *Cours*, sent Jakobson, now a graduate student at the University of Prague, a copy of the second (1922) edition of the *Cours*. In all likelihood, the influence of the posthumous *Cours* was from that point on added to the earlier influence mediated by Serge Karcevski.

4. Early structuralism

As for the important term *structuralism*, it was never used by Ferdinand de Saussure himself and in general was not used by linguists at all until the late 1920s, that is, a full decade after the *Cours* had first appeared and over a decade after its author died. Specifically, the word is first attested in writings issuing from the "Linguistic Circle of Prague" (*Cercle linguistique de Prague*), founded by Vilém Mathesius and Roman Jakobson in 1926. An important early document emanating

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of the poet's contemporaries, and the new tendencies that Pushkin embodied in his poetry. Similarly, Jakobson relates the poetic language of his own contemporaries Velimir Khlebnikov (1885–1922) and Vladimir Mayakovskij (1893–1930), to the conversational language of the present time, the special poetic language used by these poets, and the trends and tendencies found in their work, in other words a similar triad of factors. Basic to Jakobson's preoccupation was the dynamic impact of creative writing. Poetic language is to some extent independent of the language of everyday life but also has a dialectical relationship with the ever changing poetic tradition. Arguably, Jakobson found Saussure's rigid two-way relationship between the synchronic and diachronic perspectives in linguistics inadequate to handle these complex relationships. In essence, while he finds Saussure's neat antinomies intellectually stimulating on the one hand he does not find them true to the complexities of actual linguistic usage on the other.

from that group was a manifesto presented collectively by a group of members of that Circle at a congress on Slavic philology held in Prague in October 1929 and published that same year in the very first volume of the *Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague*.[10]

Also in 1929, Roman Jakobson gave the following thumbnail definition of the term, which may be earliest use of the word "structuralism" by a linguist:

> Were we to comprise the leading idea of present-day science in its most various manifestations, we could hardly find a more appropriate designation than structuralism. Any set of phenomena examined by contemporary science is treated not as a mechanical agglomeration but as a structural whole, and the basic task is to reveal the inner, whether static or developmental, laws of this system. What appears to be the focus of scientific preoccupations is no longer the outer stimulus, but the internal premises of the development; now the mechanical conception of processes yields to the question of their functions. (Jakobson 1929b: 11)

In the 1920s, furthermore, we already see members of the Linguistic Circle of Prague relating their ideas whenever they could to the theoretical positions expressed in the *Cours*. An early example occurs in an article by Sergei Karcevski entitled *Études sur le système verbal du russe contemporain* [*Studies on the system of the Russian verb*] published in Prague in 1922 in the first volume of a new journal entitled *Slavia*. Karcevski, who (as mentioned above) had studied at the University

[10] For a reprint of the *Thèses*, see Vachek 1964: 33–58. This document may be regarded as epitomizing the credo of Prague School linguistics. Note especially the emphasis on "nomogenesis", that is, inherent developmental laws, or as it was termed in the *Thèses* the "lois d'enchaînement des faits d'évolution linguistique" (Vachek 1964: 36). This was an open challenge to the Saussurean notion that linguistic changes take place singly and fortuitously. Recall that the notion of "nomogenesis" (Russian *zakonomernosti*) was part of the vast anti-Darwinian theory of biological evolution proposed in the 1920s by the eminent Russian geographer Leo S. Berg (1876–1950), who argued that organisms have inherent characteristics independent of external environmental influences (see Berg 1969; Russian original appeared in Leningrad in 1922). For Jakobson, analogously, the "structural" approach to linguistics entails a belief in particular sets of developmental laws characterizing each language or group of languages.

of Geneva under Charles Bally from 1916 to 1917, hence shortly after Saussure's death in 1913, begins his article with the following verbatim quotation from the *Cours* (Saussure 1916: 127; 1922: 124):

> La langue est un système dont toutes les parties peuvent et doivent être considérées dans leur solidarité synchronique.
> [Language is a system all parts of which can and should be investigated in their synchronic inter-dependence.][11]

5. Structural psychology

The key terms "structure" and "structural", connected with the word "structuralism", were, however, not coined by linguists in the late 1920s but had already been current among psychologists a generation earlier.[12] At that time, they referred to a distinctive feature of the theories professed by the British-born American psychologist E. B. Titchener (1867–1927), who had studied at the University of Leipzig under the founder of experimental psychology Wilhelm Wundt. The essence of the approach that he had acquired there consisted in using evidence from introspection to determine the irreducible elements of consciousness and to investigate the way in which they combine. Titchener also recognized the importance of a functional approach that would investigate the way in which these elements functioned in human behaviour, but enjoined his colleagues to concentrate first on isolating these elements, since function logically presupposes structure. It may be recalled that functional psychology was represented at this time by the work of Franz Brentano and his students.

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[11] Compare Saussure 1922: 176–177 and Tullio De Mauro's commentary thereon in endnotes 256 and 257 of his critical edition (Saussure 1976: 447–448).

[12] On the history of psychology in this period, and in particular the structuralist movement, see Schultz 1969: 87–111. On earlier uses of the concept of structure by nineteenth-century linguists in Germany, see Koerner 1975: 721–725.

In an earlier period still, we should never forget, the terms "structure" and "structural" had been current in the nineteenth century in various scientific and technical fields. It is instructive to consult the relevant entries in *The Oxford English Dictionary*. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the use of "structure" to refer to language was already commonplace.

6. Jakobson's concept of structuralism

As I have argued, these structure terms were prominently used by Roman Jakobson. We do not know what made him decide to coin the word *structuralism* to refer globally to his approach to linguistics. It is clear that from the very beginning of his career he was familiar with much of the philosophical, artistic, literary, and linguistic literature current in the early decades of the twentieth century. It is conceivable that he had heard about Titchener's psychological structuralism from colleagues in psychology such as Christian von Ehrenfels (1859–1932), but it may also be possible that he decided to adopt this terminology for special reasons of his own.[13] However, while that starting point is

[13] On relations between linguistics and contemporary pychology, see the 1931 article *Phonologie und Psychologie* by Dmytro Čyževśkyj. Jakobson mentions Christian von Ehrenfels' name in his 1971b: 716. On the importance of Čyževśkyj, see Toman 1995: 112–113. Holenstein comments on the key term "structural" in his 1976: 14 and mentions the fact that it had been used earlier by Titchener. Wellek makes an interesting but questionable claim (1991: 442): "The word *structure*, which in Czech is a technical, foreign term with none of the associations of building that it has in English, occurs in Mukařovský's *Máj* in 1928". One recalls, however, that the English counterpart had already lost its associations with building by the eighteenth century — see the entry "structure" in *The Oxford English Dictionary*. This metaphorical use of the word "structure" in the vernacular languages had been prepared for centuries by the use of the Latin word *structura* in literary contexts (see the relevant entry in any unabridged Latin dictionary, such as the *Totius Latinitatis lexicon* of Egidio Forcellini). Wellek also comments on the role played by the term

tantalizingly shrouded in mystery and may for ever remain so, Jakobson certainly disseminated both the term and his own notion of structuralism to fellow linguists in the 1930s. Later, his association in the early 1940s with Claude Lévi-Strauss in New York at the *École libre des hautes* études, the Free French and Belgian University housed at the New School for Social Research, led to the dissemination of some of the key ideas of structuralism to anthropology and from there to other social sciences (one thinks in this connection of Jacques Lacan in psychology).[14] It is interesting to note that the American linguist Zellig Harris adopted the term "structural" that appears in the title of his seminal monograph *Methods in Structural Linguistics*, published in 1951.[15]

"structure" in Russian formalism (see Wellek 1991: 321). On the relation between Prague School literary criticism and earlier Russian formalism, see Steiner 1976. Especially informative from a general historical perspective is Toman 1995. In any case, we must remember that by the nineteenth century the metaphorical use of the word "structure" had become so commonplace in most European languages that its use in the twentieth century is hardly significant. What looks more significant was the need felt at some point to create an *–ism* derivative (*structuralism*), which in the case of linguistics entailed a strong recommendation that languages should be described primarily as structured objects. This became a crucial methodological requirement. The underlying notion was clearly that language could be regarded as "a whole where all parts hold firmly together", as Jakobson himself worded it in a 1944 article (see Jakobson 1971b: 479).

[14] See Lévi-Strauss 1958. On the passage of structuralist ideas from Jakobson to Lévi-Strauss, from Prague to Paris, and from linguistics to the social sciences, see Merquior 1986: 36–106. Merquior also examines the impact of structuralism on literary theory, as exemplified especially in the work of Roland Barthes; see Merquior 1986: 107–188.

[15] See Hymes, Fought 1981: 8–11 for an account of this terminological shift. Harris' book was originally to have been entitled *Methods in Descriptive Linguistics*. The kind of linguistics practised by the followers of Leonard Bloomfield was usually called "descriptive" since it aimed at describing unwritten languages, and a keen need was felt for a uniform method for conducting this kind of research and publishing the results thereof. Composing a grammar for such a previously unknown language was thought of at that time as a form of description. Saussure and the linguists who regarded themselves as his followers in Europe were not interested in composing grammars of unwritten languages; nor were they active in describing the

7. The traditional notion of structure

The use of terms such as "structure" and "structural" by Jakobson was in part a manifestation of the desire that linguists have felt since the early nineteenth century to adopt words redolent of the biological and natural sciences. One recalls, for instance, the general term "analysis", and especially words like "organism" and "morphology", borrowed by comparative philologists of the first half of the twentieth century from biology and geology, two fields with unimpeachably scientific legitimacy at that time. Such words were an important component in the scientific window-dressing that professional linguists constructed for themselves from the early nineteenth century onward. Perhaps for that very reason, it was not necessary that such key terms have unequivocal meanings. In this instance, the vagueness and open-endedness of the term "structure" may have contributed to its cachet. The very fact that it was non-committal may have made it an especially ideal slogan for the promoters of new methods of linguistic research in the interwar years and later who had otherwise very little in common. Expressed in positive terms, the situation in linguistics is that there has always been a tendency to borrow theoretical terminology from the sciences. Moreover, in the case of the term "structuralism" that we are considering here, Jakobson even suggested that the concept was already in use in Russia and in the natural sciences.[16]

The increasing vogue of the term 'structuralism' coincided chronologically with the appearance of the notion that Saussure was the founder of structural linguistics.[17] Perhaps, therefore, we may be

familiar vernacular languages of Europe either. In a letter to Jakobson, Trubetzkoy complained bitterly about this neglect on the part of Saussure's followers (Jakobson 1975: 242).

[16] See the suggestive comments in Jakobson's article entitled *Über die heutigen Voraussetzungen der russischen Slavistik* (Jakobson 1929a). It would be interesting to investigate to what extent either the term structuralism or the associated notion was current at that time in Russia, as Jakobson suggests.

[17] Despite his crucial role in introducing the term "structuralism" in linguistics, Jakobson himself never publicly claimed ownership of the term subsequently and

tempted to conclude that the two were different sides of the same coin. If that is so, it may be that in a strange sense Saussure was indeed the founder of structuralism: the self-styled structuralists themselves saw to that. At the same time, however, it is clear that no *immediate* Saussurean paradigm was unleashed by the publication of the *Cours* in 1916 (see Percival 1981). The later vogue of the term "structuralism" may well have been connected with the need felt by readers of that book to believe in ideas that they read into it and also by their desire to imagine that they were members of a single coherent scientific movement opposed to the theorizing of their immediate predecessors. While we certainly know something about how these beliefs first took shape, the question of how they were disseminated and came to be accepted by later generations of professional linguists remains to be clarified. What would be useful is to track the use made by linguists of the cluster of terms surrounding the concept "structure". Imagine comprehensive entries for these terms in the style of *The Oxford English Dictionary* or *Le Grand Robert*!

Needless to say, the phenomenon of "structure talk", that is, the use of the terms "structure" and "structural" across different academic fields, coupled with the concomitant notions of holism and system raises a number of tantalizing questions for intellectual historians. Here are a few of them: How did linguistic structuralism come to be associated retrospectively with the trend away from historical linguistics, a trend that was in reality alien to the thinking of the Linguistic Circle of Prague and to many other structuralists?[18] In general, moreover, what factors

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even endorsed the notion that Saussure was the creator of modern linguistics. In an article written soon after he arrived in New York, he argued (Jakobson 1944: 78) that "the pioneer who tamed the field [of linguistics] and led to a new movement in language-science was the great discoverer of linguistic antinomies, the founder of the French school and in essence *the founder of modern linguistics in general — Ferdinand de Saussure*" (emphasis mine, W.K.P.). I am much indebted to my colleague Kenneth L. Miner for providing me with an English translation of this important article, which since it appeared in Yiddish has been largely ignored.

[18] Clearly, the early structuralists were grounded in historical linguistics and continued to practise it throughout their careers. Trubetzkoy's initial focus was the

brought about this "synchronic turn" in linguistics? Were there then perhaps not two but three fundamental developments in twentieth-century linguistics, namely the vogue of "structuralism," the turning away from historical studies, and the popularity of Saussure's *Cours*. Subsequently, as we have seen, the term "structuralism" was adopted by researchers in the social sciences, literary studies, philosophy, and even by physicists, biologists, and mathematicians. In the social sciences, we may ask, to what extent had the ground been prepared by the earlier use of the term "structuralism" among psychologists of Titchener's persuasion? In any case, what is the relation between European structuralism and the structuralism of the New World? What role did various brands of structuralism play in the rise of "critical theory", post-structuralism, and post-modernism in literary studies and philosophy? Can parallels be drawn between "structure talk" and more recent talk involving the slippery term "postmodern"? In general, what can we discern behind these various intellectual fashions? One hopes that there was more to structuralism than a bizarre kind of discourse. What, in other words, was the positive scientific yield of "structure talk"?

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prehistory and history of the Slavic languages. An unrealized ambition of his was to write a book entitled *Vorgeschichte der slavischen Sprachen*. See Trubetzkoy's valuable autobiographical sketch in Trubetzkoy 1962: 273–278, esp. p. 278. Moreover, the trend among linguists away from historical work does not appear to have been explicitly promoted by the structuralists themselves or before them by Ferdinand de Saussure, who as is well known began his career by making an outstanding contribution to the problem of the Proto-Indo-European vocalism. Nevertheless, the trend away from historical work was indeed a reality that had already begun to manifest itself by the time the structuralists came to the fore. Baudouin, whose phoneme theory was grounded in historical considerations, argued that linguists need to focus on the observable speech of their own contemporaries and away from the records of past periods of language. The trend was already reported as under way by Jakobson in the opening sentence of his first major publication, his 1921 treatise on Khlebnikov's poetry: "For some time, linguistics has not been content to study dead languages and distant linguistic periods" (Striedter, Kośny 1972: 18; Jakobson 1979: 299). Trubetzkoy ruefully comments on the fact that younger linguists in Moscow had already abandoned historical work; see Trubetzkoy 1962: 278.

8. The genealogy of Jakobsonian structuralism

Regarding the genealogy of the structuralism proposed by Jakobson, a problem-area of vast dimensions, let me mention an important source that must not be ignored in any well-balanced account, namely the linguistics which he imbibed in Moscow in the early years of the twentieth century.[19] Baudouin de Courtenay never taught in Moscow, but Jakobson studied Baudouin's writings assiduously.[20] Mathesius, one of the founders of the Linguistic Circle of Prague, made it clear that the renovation of linguistics that they pushed had two principal sources, namely the ideas of Baudouin de Courtenay in the East and those of Ferdinand de Saussure in the West. At the same time, however, it seems that they found it politic at times to avoid mentioning Baudouin de Courtenay when addressing an audience of linguists from western Europe.

For example, Vilém Mathesius himself presented a paper at the Second International Congress of Linguists held in Geneva in August 1931, published in a different version in the Czech journal *Časopis pro moderní filologii*, and in it there occurs the following significant phrase: "[…] functional and structural linguistics going back originally to the ideas of Ferdinand de Saussure in the West and those of Baudouin de Courtenay in the East. [. . .]"[21]. On the other hand, however, in the "Propositions reçues en réponse aux questions qui seront traitées en séances plénières" [Propositions received in answer to the questions to be dealt with in plenary sessions], attached to the proceedings of the meeting, one finds the same paper by Mathesius (*Deuxième*: 60), with the phrase corresponding to the one just quoted appearing as follows: "[…] functional and structural linguistics going back originally

[19] This is a major theme of Sériot 1999.

[20] For a interesting sample of Jakobson's evaluation of Baudouin's work in the late 1920s, see Jakobson 1971b: 389–393.

[21] In the original French formulation "[…] la linguistique fonctionelle et structurale, remontant dans ses origines aux idées de Ferdinand de Saussure à l'Ouest et à celles de Jean Baudouin de Courtenay à l'Est. […]" (Congrès International de Linguistes II 1933: 145).

to the ideas of Ferdinand de Saussure"[22], with no mention of Baudouin de Courtenay.[23] In a similar vein, Jakobson's student Edward Stankiewicz once wrote me "There is not the slightest doubt in my mind that both Trubetzkoy and Jakobson were somehow bent on throwing all the credit for 'structuralism' to Saussure (with whom they had little in common) and on underplaying the role of B[audouin] d[e] C[ourtenay] (from whom they took a great deal). I recently asked Jakobson point blank why they (the Praguians) did not state more clearly the importance of B d C and Kruszewski and he answered that 'nobody would have listened to us, had we talked about the Poles.'"[24]

From a genealogical point of view, moreover, we must recognize the importance for the Praguians of the Russian Formalist school of literary analysis, mediated first and foremost by Roman Jakobson himself. At the same time, however, we must not forget that the various members of the Linguistic Circle of Prague also developed theories of literary analysis their own, and these differed from those of the Russian Formalists; hence the two movements, although they are historically connected, cannot by any means be equated.[25]

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[22] In the original French formulation "[…] la linguistique fonctionelle et structurale, remontant dans ses origines aux idées de Ferdinand de Saussure".

[23] Note also that an earlier variant of a paper by Mathesius on a similar topic had appeared in Prague the year before (see Mathesius 1926).

[24] This is from a letter to me from Stankiewicz dated 7 October 1977.

[25] On the Russian formalists, see Erlich 1965. Jakobson's personal involvement with the so-called Futurist poets is well known; see his reminiscences entitled "My Futurist Years" (Jakobson 1992). For a seminal treatment of the Futurist movement in Russian literature up to the revolution of 1917, see Markov 1968. Toman discusses in some detail Jakobson's involvement with the Futurist movement in Toman 1995: 7–41. For a long period before leaving Russia in 1920 Jakobson was of course not only strongly attracted to Futurism as a theory but was himself active as a poet. Moreover, that Futurist notions were reflected in his linguistics is a fact that he himself mentions in his reminiscences (see, for instance, Jakobson 1992: xii–xvi). On this crucial component in Jakobson's thought, see Gasparov 1997. For an original contribution to the theory of poetics by an important member of the Linguistic Circle of Prague, see Mukařovský 1931. On the later history of Prague School literary theorizing, which needless to say is a vast topic in its own right, see Schwarz

Facts of this kind lead me to raise the question of the relation between linguistics and literary criticism in the period up to the emergence of structuralism in Prague in the second half of the 1920s. It seems abundantly clear that in this area linguistic theory was tributary to early twentieth-century movements in literature such as Modernism, not to mention various movements in the fine arts. I realize that historians of linguistics may be reluctant to investigate links between their own field and the study of literature and art, which they, perhaps understandably, regard as unscientific and hence of no relevance to the history of their own discipline. But sooner or later these issues will have to be faced.

There were also links at various times between structuralism and contemporary philosophical trends. As we have seen, early structuralism in Czechoslovakia owed much to the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Franz Brentano. Later, the French variant of structuralism came to play a role in the 1960s in the acrimonious debates in the pages of Philippe Soller's avant-garde periodical *Tel Quel* between the followers of Martin Heidegger on the one hand and those of Jean-Paul Sartre on the other.[26] Another equally significant development is the fact that in the United States the term 'structuralism' came to be associated with extreme empiricism. A similar philosophical slant was true of the linguists in Copenhagen, and among them especially of Louis Hjelmslev and Hans Jørgen Uldall.[27] Like their American counterparts, but unlike Jakobson and Trubetzkoy, these Danish linguists

1997. Merquior contrasts the theoretical approaches of the Futurists and the Formalists in his 1986: 32.

[26] Needless to say, these are extremely complex developments. For valuable orientation, see Merquior 1986; Dosse 1991; Ffrench 1995.

[27] Partly due to circumstances over which Hjelmslev had no control, such as his geographical separation during Word War II from his close collaborator Hans Jørgen Uldall, Hjelmslev never quite succeeded in completely working out "glossematics", his and Uldall's linguistic theory (see Hjelmslev 1943: 113; Hjelmslev 1961: 131–138; Hjelmslev, Uldall 1957). It is well to remember that Hjelmslev's relatively well-known 1943 monograph was but a preliminary sketch and was never meant to represent his entire system (Part 2 never appeared). For a comprehensive examination of Hjelmslev's linguistic theorizing, see Rasmussen 1992.

were outspoken empiricists. That the term *structuralism* could be used by proponents of two different philosophical movements is a clear indication that it was not a well-defined philosophical persuasion. The term "structuralism" was in effect an ideological slogan that could be moved about and re-used in whatever way was needed.[28]

9. Agenda for future research

As regards future research in this extremely complex area, central to so many streams of twentieth-century thought, I might tentatively suggest the following as a reasonable agenda. First, the relations, personal, institutional, and theoretical, between the various schools of linguistics that used the terms "structure" and "structuralism" need to be investigated. Second, the initial local theoretical tradition of each school needs to be delineated. For instance, it would be salutary to examine Trubetzkoy's and Jakobson's publications from the early 1920s before the term 'structuralism' came into use.[29] Third, the precise impact of Saussure's *Cours* on each group of scholars needs to be traced. Fourth, the impact of other influential (both non-Saussurean and anti-Saussurean) contributors to theoretical linguistics needs to be brought into the picture.[30] In particular, the contribution of Russian and Polish linguists like Baudouin de Courtenay, L. V. Shcherba, and others must be brought out into the open. Fifth, the cross-disciplinary

[28] Elia (1978: 51) comments appositely: "Il termine 'strutturalismo' è in parte svuotato di significato in quanto si è esteso talmente da diventare una *tipica parola di moda intellettuale*, che, come tale, essendo stata usata per coprire domini molto disparati tra loro, ha finito per non coprirne realmente piú nessuno" (emphasis mine, W.K.P.).

[29] In this area, see, for instance, Toman 1995: 87–102.

[30] It would be interesting to document in greater detail the possible inhibiting or stimulating effect on the fame of the *Cours* of adverse criticism by the Prague School linguists. See Elia 1978: 51f., fn. 2 for a interesting discussion of earlier suggestions. The crucial issue here is the extent to which French linguists actually read and appreciated the *Cours* before it was attacked by the linguists of the Prague School.

relations between linguists, scholars, and scientists in the entire field of language study need to be kept in mind throughout. Sixth, the wider ramifications of twentieth-century linguistic theorizing will need to be brought into the picture.[31] Needless to say, the political and geopolitical aspects of structuralism should not be swept under the rug.[32]

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[31] I do not wish to imply that no progress has so far been made. For surveys of the various structuralist schools of linguistics see Lepschy 1975; Albrecht 1988. The nature of structuralism and its history was much illuminated by Merquior 1986 and was re-examined by Sériot in his 1999 monograph. For a typical philosopher's perspective on structuralism, see Blackburn 1994: 364–365. The ideological aspect of Jakobson's structuralism with an emphasis on recent developments is examined in Waugh 1998. On the overall history of linguistics, especially in North America, see also Joseph 2002: 54ff. On early European structuralism, see Koerner 1975. For valuable information on the peculiar form that structuralism took in France from the 1960s onwards, see Dosse 1991 and Merquior 1986. On the politics as well as the geopolitics of Czech intellectual life in the formative period of structuralism in the 1920s and 1930s, see Toman 1995.

[32] It is a well-known fact, of course, that Trubetzkoy and Jakobson ran afoul of totalitarian political regimes of both the Left and the Right. Moreover, Jakobson and Trubetzkoy (and especially the latter) were politically active after the 1917 Revolution in the "Eurasian" movement in the Russian diaspora, on which see Sériot 1999: 31–75. For a number of significant primary sources see Trubetzkoy 1996. However one may evaluate the geopolitical notion that the Russian Empire, as defined by its 1917 borders, was a cohesive region that belonged neither in Europe nor in Asia, that notion certainly provoked fruitful linguistic theorizing. For a revealing primary source, see Jakobson 1929a. On Trubetzkoy's published contributions in the Eurasian cause; see Sériot 1999: 335. The notion of *Sprachbund*, which was to become standard in linguistics and hence rank as a permanent discovery, was an incidental benefit deriving from Eurasian ideology. In this regard, see Jakobson's seminal article entitled "Über die phonologischen Sprachbünde" (Jakobson 1931). See also Schaller 1997. In precisely the same vein as Jakobson, Trubetzkoy composed a pungently-worded critique of Indo-European comparative-historical linguistics in his article "Gedanken über das Indogermanenproblem" (Trubetzkoy 1939, republished in French, entitled "Refléxions sur le problème indo-européen", in Troubetzkoy 1996: 211–230; English translation, entitled "Thoughts on the Indo-European problem," in Trubetzkoy 2001: 87–98). Note that Toman comments at some length on this article, see Toman 1995: 207–211. On Trubetzkoy's entire scholarly trajectory, see Toman 1995: 185–215 and Troubetzkoy 1996. An earlier seminal article of Trubetzkoy's is undoubtedly his 1923 "Vavilonskaya bashnya i smeshenie yazykov" [The Tower of

Nationalism and chauvinism played a significant role in the vogue of Saussurean doctrine. Perhaps the most remarkable feature of structuralism has been the fact that although it is often regarded, especially by philosophers and literary critics, as a more or less clearly definable *Weltanschauung,* its extreme theoretical porosity belies that. The extraordinary success of the term 'structuralism' across a wide spectrum of disciplines is surely an example of what may be called a "terminological pandemic".

In this entire area, if I may return to the issue raised at the beginning of this essay, I hope that the vogue of the *Cours* within and outside linguistics will function like Ariadne's thread. Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale*, and the vast secondary literature spawned by it both in linguistics and related fields will surely provide us with an invaluable key throwing light on many aspects of the history of ideas in the twentieth century.

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Babel and the Mixture of Languages], see Troubetzkoy 1996: 115–126. Here it seems clear that Trubetzkoy was indebted to Baudouin de Courtenay for having raised the difficult question of language mixture, see Stankiewicz 1972: 216–226.

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Роман Якобсон и рождение лингвистического структурализма

Термин «структурализм» был введен в языкознание Якобсоном в первые годы деятельности основанного в 1926 году Пражского лингвистического кружка. Совокупность идей Якобсона и его коллег того времени можно определить довольно точно, но это понятие структурализма существенно отличается от того, как его привыкли толковать в более поздний период. Перемена в понимании этого термина произошла благодаря тому, что начиная с 1930-х гг. стало привычным уподобление структурализма идеям Фердинанда де Соссюра, представленным в его посмертно изданной книге *Cours de linguistique générale*. Все же представляется возможным доказать, что группа Якобсона по идеологическим соображениями противостояла теории Соссюра. Чем шире применялся термин «структурализм», тем более он ассоциировался с позитивистским языкознанием, а не с характерным для начальной стадии ПЛК феноменологическим направлением. Цель настоящей статьи — разъяснить эти разные подходы и показать, что благодаря своей крайней «диффузности» слово «структурализм» является прекрасным примером «терминологической пандемии». Более углубленное изучение разных способов применения понятий «структура» и «структурализм» несомненно помогло бы в понимании этого наиболее важного эпизода интеллектуальной истории XX века.

Roman Jakobson ja lingvistilise strukturalismi sünd

Termini „strukturalism“ tõi keeleteadusse Roman Jakobson 1926. aastal asustatud Praha Lingvistilise Ringi algusaegadel. Jakobsoni ja tema kolleegide toonaste ideede kogumit on kindlasti võimalik määratleda, kuid see erineb oluliselt sellest, kuidas me oleme strukturalismi mõistet hilisematel aegadel mõistma harjunud. Muutus selle termini mõistmises sündis tänu sellele, et alates 1930ndatest muutus tavaks strukturalismi võrdsustamine Ferdinand de Saussure'i ideedega, nii nagu neid esitati tema 1916. aastal postuumselt ilmunud teoses *Cours de linguistique générale*. Siiski on võimalik tõestada, et Jakobsoni grupp oli ideoloogilistel kaalutlustel Saussure'i teooriale vastu. Sedamööda, kuidas „struktualismi“ mõiste leidis järjest laiemat kasutamist, võrdsustati seda üha enam positivistliku keeleteadusega, mitte Praha Lingvistilist Ringi algselt iseloomustanud

fenomenoloogilise suunitlusega. Käesoleva artikli eesmärgiks on neid erinevaid lähenemisi selgitada ja näidata, et tänu oma äärmisele „poorsusele“ on sõna „strukturalism“ väga hea näide „terminoloogilisest pandeemiast“. Ulatuslikum teaduslik uurimistöö mõistete „struktuur“ ja „strukturalism“ erinevatest kasutusviisidest aitaks kahtlemata kaasa selle 20nda sajandi intellektuaalse ajaloo ühe tähtsama episoodi paremale mõistmisele.