ROMAN JAKOBSON

Critical Assessments of Leading Linguists

Edited by
Margaret Thomas

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The four volumes of *Roman Jakobson: Critical Assessments of Leading Linguists* collect the writings of over 100 scholars, working in 21 countries, which analyse or reflect on the contributions of Roman Jakobson (1896–1982). Jakobson famously characterized himself as a ‘Russian philologist. Period’, and he had ‘Roman Jakobson – Russkij Filolog’ engraved on his gravestone by way of identification (Bradford 1994: 7). In fact, Jakobson was a force in twentieth-century scholarship across many disciplines. His influence was felt most strongly in linguistics (especially phonology and Slavic linguistics) and in poetics, but his ideas also spread to the fields of semiotics, folklore, psycholinguistics, cybernetics, and cultural and literary history. Although the exact relationship of Jakobsonian linguistics to the structuralist linguistics associated with Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) has been much debated, many historians of linguistics attribute to Jakobson a key role in transmitting from Europe to the United States some of the tenets and methods of structuralism. Through Jakobson’s influence on other scholars, structuralist ideas infused into anthropology and literary criticism, and from there into many other fields worldwide.

The international and trans-disciplinary scope of Jakobson’s influence is in part the product of his own life story. He was born in Russia, died an American citizen, and in between held passports from Czechoslovakia, Sweden, and Norway. At the peak of his career, he travelled and lectured extensively and was honoured by institutions and organizations around the world. Holquist (2010: 85) points out that Jakobson’s international influence was both personal and academic: he was an ‘ebullient cosmopolitan’ who attracted and inspired admirers – as well as critics – wherever he went. He had an ‘uncanny ability to connect’ (Renský 1977: 381), that is, to synthesize ideas, span institutions, cross disciplinary and cultural boundaries, and above all, to connect with other people. Jakobson’s preferred working context was to be surrounded by a circle of colleagues. His personal papers, archived at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, materialize this fact in the traces of his correspondence with almost a thousand people. Jakobson co-founded (in succession) the Moscow Linguistic Circle, the Prague Linguistic Circle, and the Linguistic Circle of New York: all locally based, extra-institutionally organized groups of language and literary scholars, with whom he
collaborated, compared ideas, and revelled in intense give-and-take about language, literature, art, culture. One is reminded of an early manifesto written by the Russian Futurist poets who were an important influence on him as a young adult. Among other hyperbolic statements the Futurists demanded respect for poets’ right to ‘stand on the rock of the word “we”’ (Burliuk et al. 1912/1988: 52; see Thomas, forthcoming). It is an arresting figure of speech. It communicates both the image of a solitary, heroic, artist or scholar and the image of that individual’s rootedness in a community. From within the successive Circles that Jakobson built around himself, he “[stood] on the rock of the word “we””.

The contents of volumes I to IV in Roman Jakobson: Critical Assessments of Leading Linguists are organized topically. Each volume has a central theme, or sometimes two closely-related themes, and comprises four or five parts that each bring together a collection of individual chapters that address particular aspects of that theme. Volume I sets the stage for the study of Jakobson’s contributions. Part 1 of volume I opens with four brief chapters surveying published and archival resources available to scholars for study of Jakobson’s accomplishments and experiences. Part 2 of volume I provides synthetic reviews of Jakobson’s scholarship overall, as construed from various writers’ perspectives. The remainder of volume I narrates in chronological order the complex story of how his thought developed in a succession of intellectual contexts, and through a succession of personal relationships, from Moscow (Part 3), to Prague (Part 4), to the United States (Part 5).

Volumes II to IV focus on particular facets of Jakobson’s work. The order in which I present this material largely shadows the order of presentation that Jakobson himself imposed in his collected publications, with volume I of his Selected Writings, ‘Phonological Studies’, preceding volume II, ‘Word and Language’, and volume III, ‘The Grammar of Poetry and the Poetry of Grammar’. Taking this succession of topics as my model, volume II begins with eight chapters reviewing and commenting on diverse aspects of Jakobsonian phonology, including some discussion of its historical origins. Part 2 of volume II presents one of the cornerstones of Jakobson’s reputation in phonology, namely, his development of the notion of distinctive features. Part 3 explores the applicability of Jakobsonian phonology to the study of language development in children, speech pathology, speech errors, and sound symbolism. Part 4 comprises four chapters that look back on Jakobson’s research on sound structure from the point of view of twenty-first-century developments in phonology.

Volume III takes on Jakobson’s work in grammar and morphology. Part 1 provides overviews of his contributions in these domains. Part 2 assesses specific Jakobsonian innovations, namely markedness; the ‘zero sign’; shifters; the ‘six functions of language’; and language universals. Part 3 discusses his work on aphasia. The remaining two parts of volume III address two other subfields of Jakobson’s œuvre: Part 4, Slavic philology, and Part 5, Jakobson’s ideas about history of linguistics, alongside other scholars’ assessments of Jakobson’s own place in the history of linguistics.

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Volume IV turns to what Jakobson called ‘the poetic function of language’, the study of poetry using the tools of linguistic analysis. Part 1 surveys his general approach to poetics, while Part 2 applies Jakobsonian techniques of analysis in four case studies of particular poems, dissecting their successes and their limits. Part 3 places Jakobsonian poetics in historical context. The final two sections assess Jakobson’s contributions to folklore, anthropology, and semiotics (Part 4) and, late in his career, the applications he made of both information theory and cybernetics to the study of language (Part 5). Each volume contains its own brief Introduction, which provides further guidance to readers about the organization and contents of the 111 individual chapters. Naturally, not all of the contents of these texts fall wholly into the categories imposed by the organizational scheme of volumes I to IV, but judicious use of the index should help readers pursue streams of commentary across chapter boundaries.

In selecting texts for inclusion in Roman Jakobson: Critical Assessments of Leading Linguists from among the vast quantity of commentary on Jakobson’s work, I prioritized (first of all) quality of insight and exposition and (secondly) diversity. ‘Diversity’ ranges over several dimensions. It means diversity of assessment of Jakobson’s ideas (sceptics and outright critics as well as supporters – and those holding the full range of positions in between) and diversity of relationship of writers to the man and the work (former students of Jakobson; his co-authors and colleagues; scholars who knew him only professionally; scholars with no firsthand connection to him). It also means that I sought diversity in the writers’ positions in time (so as to represent, as far as possible, the voices of Jakobson’s contemporaries and those of the earlier and immediately following generations; and the voices of twenty-first-century scholars looking back on Jakobson’s work); diversity in the writers’ cultural perspectives (favouring scholars who would add to the national and cultural range of the total collection); and diversity in the writers’ disciplinary affiliations. In short, I have tried to include the best available examples of the full breadth of commentary that Jakobson’s writings have provoked. As much as possible, I have tried to avoid overlap of coverage across chapters, while recognizing that some redundancy is inevitable, and that it can provide a useful parallax insofar as it displays different readers’ differing reactions. I have not tried to resolve controversies that Jakobson’s work sparked, or make uneven ends meet. Rather, my goal has been to present a wide range of interpretations, and a rich array of voices, commenting on the work of this seminal twentieth-century language scholar.

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