

Roman Jakobson and Beyond: Language as a System of Signs

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Roman Jakobson and Beyond: Language as a System of Signs

The Quest for the Ultimate Invariants
in Language

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To Ray and Iwona

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Preface

The primary aim of this volume is to present a complete overview of the theoretical and methodological principles of linguistic sign theory, and their consequences for linguistic research. The specific approach adopted is one which is held in common by two leading world linguists and Slavists, Roman Jakobson and C.H. van Schooneveld. What unites the work of these two scholars and provides the guiding principle of this study is the conviction that meaning is inherent in linguistic form, so that we cannot investigate the properties of either domain (form or meaning) without making constant and direct reference to the properties of the other. Such a view of language realizes that surface linguistic forms are much more revealing of their semantic content than is generally assumed in the current state of linguistic science, and that they in fact provide a wealth of evidence for the construction of semantic theory, which is the major subject of this study. One of the most important results of this analysis will be establishment of a theory of MEANING AS PERCEPTION which for the first time allows us to specify the locus of linguistic meaning, without having recourse to an unverifiable concept of mind. Neither imprisoned within the structure of language nor divorced from it by being defined on objects in the external world, meaning is defined here as the structuration of acts of perception given direct formal expression through vocalization. Perhaps the major achievement of this approach lies in the resolution it provides for the perennial problem of structural linguistics, that of relating linguistic structures to the phenomena in other domains upon which linguistics obviously im-

pinges, especially the world of events and things, communication about which is the primary function of language.

I would not have written this book if I did not think that it would provide, in addition to an outline of a particular philosophy of language, specific solutions to some of the major problems of current linguistic research, in phonology and syntax as well as in morphology. For example, treating formal linguistic elements as directly reflective of their informational content will also provide explicit definitions and justifications for a complete hierarchy of distinct, **relatively** autonomous levels of linguistic structure, and of the abstract units which comprise these levels. A difficulty does arise in this respect, however, and that is how to establish a common ground upon which to engage in meaningful dialogue with colleagues holding substantively different points of view. The problematics of communication in the field of linguistics are rather severe, due not so much to personalities as to the fact that linguistic science still lacks a generally accepted definition of its primary subject – language. And there remains even greater disagreement as to what the goals of linguistic theory ought to be. But there is more of a common ground when it comes to determining what the issues are that linguistic theory should address, and with this in mind I have made every effort to talk directly to the issues themselves, rather than to argue solely in terms of a particular theory. Specifically, I have tried to aim my arguments at concerns that have dominated current controversies in linguistics, and to identify all the facts that pertain to the issues in question, not limiting myself to those aspects that are of importance in any one theory.

In this context one of my primary concerns has been to dispel some of the myths about so-called structuralism with respect to a broad range of issues in phonology, morphology, and syntax. One misconception is that the structuralist approach necessarily leads to the establishment of a closed (*sui generis*) system of language, which I alluded to above. Another involves the frequent implication that European and American structuralists share an essentially taxonomic approach to language, which has had particularly important consequences for phonological research. In

arguments against the phoneme as a distinct sound unit, for example, only those aspects of the issue which lend themselves to criticisms of taxonomic phonemics, such as linearity and bi-uniqueness, have been presented. No one to my knowledge has ever disputed Jakobson's substantive reasons for insisting upon a separate, relatively autonomous phonemic level, which have little to do with taxonomies per se. The issue of whether or not there is justification for such a level has thus been obscured by limiting the arguments to just those that concern the distributional aspects of phonology. If it could be shown that Jakobson's approach, which recognizes the informational function of all linguistic forms, explains a range of facts that are not accounted for in any explicit way in a purely formal phonology – namely, facts about the distinct role of the addressee in the speech chain, certain psychologically relevant facts about sound discrimination, and so forth – and at the same time provides a completely natural solution to the current problem of how abstract are phonological elements, then there is every reason to reconsider the validity of a separate phonemic level. This is precisely what I try to establish in Chapter 1, where I present in detail Jakobson's observations on the essence of phonological elements. I follow his reasoning closely, some might say tediously, but I do so in order to insure that all the arguments that pertain to this issue are fully presented and documented.

The conclusions drawn in Chapter 1 provide the basis for a discussion of morphophonemics in Chapter 2, which contains a definitive statement on the dual nature of alternations, and defines the boundary between phonology and morphology. The argumentation here again follows Jakobson, whose work has unquestionably provided the most eloquent expression of the issues involved in distinguishing between these levels. The first two chapters, then, are largely retrospective, but still indispensable in a text such as this, one of whose primary motivations is to demonstrate the theoretical consistency of the approach being taken at all levels of analysis.

Chapter 3 initiates the discussion of semantics proper, which is critical to our understanding of the essence of formal elements

in both morphology and syntax. Once more the approach derives from Jakobson the statement of its fundamental principles, but the argumentation evolves beyond Jakobson at the point where lexical meaning comes into consideration. Here the work of van Schooneveld plays a central role, and his contribution to semantic theory is fully elaborated. The subsequent discussions of semantics in syntax (Chapter 4) and of the general issues that are considered in Chapter 5 owe a great deal to van Schooneveld's persistent search for the semantic essence of all linguistic elements, while the development of the reasoning in these later chapters remains my own. Because of the special nature of Chapter 5, where the theory of meaning as perception and the outlines for a semantically based theory of syntax are presented, some readers may wish to look at this final chapter first to see where the approach ultimately leads, though I would caution that many of the points made there depend on assumptions justified and supported only in the preceding chapters.

No doubt some readers will be put off by the lack of formalization of some of the solutions presented here, especially given the present climate of linguistic research, where formalization of grammars has assumed a dominant role in theory construction and motivation. My response on this point derives from the dictates of linguistic sign theory itself, which seeks the primary motivation of all linguistic structures in their semantic essence. Determination of the nature of a mechanical device that would generate such structures is thus necessarily of secondary importance in such a theory. This is not to say, however, that the nature of these devices is irrelevant to linguistic analysis, but only that concern for this aspect of the investigation is not allowed to dominate or to become the primary motivation of the inquiry. Otherwise the nature of the devices themselves tends to dictate where we look for solutions to linguistic problems, and even, as I have already noted, how we define the issues. Such a situation is, in my opinion, especially dangerous in the present state of linguistic science, where unanimity on such basic matters as the definition of fundamental terms still has not been achieved. Formalization of the solutions suggested here, especially in the

sections on syntax, is the subject of intensive, on-going research.

Another factor that will no doubt have an impact upon the appreciation of this study by different readers is the extent to which the data presented are drawn from Russian. This is especially true of the section on morphology, where the principles and methods of semantic analysis are initially elaborated. To those not familiar with Russian or other Slavic languages I can only say that the establishment of a set of conceptual features as sophisticated as the ones required by this kind of analysis demands a great deal of time, more than has been available to treat a variety of languages to the degree necessary for presentation in a study such as this. On the other hand, Slavists and others who know the subtleties of the Russian language well may feel that not enough data from Russian has been provided to make the arguments always convincing. With them I might agree, but I would also add that my intention has been to find a middle ground between a highly data-oriented study and a purely theoretical treatise, so that the audience for this book can be both general linguists and Slavists at the same time.

Several people have contributed in one way or another to this book. Above all there is Cornelis van Schooneveld, mentor, colleague, and friend, for whom a form without meaning is like a sea without water. His remarkable eye for meaning has given the quest for invariance an entirely new dimension. Roman Jakobson's personal involvement with the early stages of this work was instrumental in giving it direction, and his writings have always proven to be an endless source of inspiration. Charles Townsend's concern and friendship over the years have been most valuable and appreciated, and his careful reading of the manuscript provided a much needed perspective that led to substantial refocussing of some of the argumentation. Edwin Ramage taught me what the real meaning of the word 'colleague' is, and without his help and encouragement I would never have completed this book. And finally there is Linda Waugh, whose own work impelled me to write a book I might not otherwise have written.

January 1981

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Bloomington, Indiana

The very essence of linguistics is the quest for meaning.

Benjamin Lee Whorf (1936)

Only the correlations between signifier and signified supply the standard for all research into meaning.

Jacques Lacan (1957)

Perception should not be viewed as a grasping of external reality, but rather as the specification of one. Thus the external world [has] only a triggering role in the release of the internally-determined activity of the nervous system.

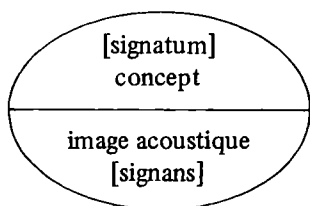
Humberto Maturana (1980)

Introduction

Language as a System of Signs

The concept of sign has been central to the study of language since at least the time of the Stoics. Jakobson inherited the concept through the intermediary of Baudouin de Courtenay and Ferdinand de Saussure.¹ It is the principle of language as a system of signs that thoroughly unites the various theoretical postulates in this approach.

“The essential property of any sign in general, and of any linguistic sign in particular, is its twofold character.”² The linguistic sign, at whatever level in language it may occur, is a bipartite entity consisting of a *signans* and a *signatum*. Saussure’s elaboration of the nature of the linguistic sign was worked out primarily at the level of the morpheme, the smallest linguistic unit charged with its own meaning. Every morpheme is composed of a sound form – the *signifiant* or “image acoustique” in Saussure’s terminology – associated with a meaning – the *signifié*. Saussure diagrammed this fundamental relationship in the following manner:³

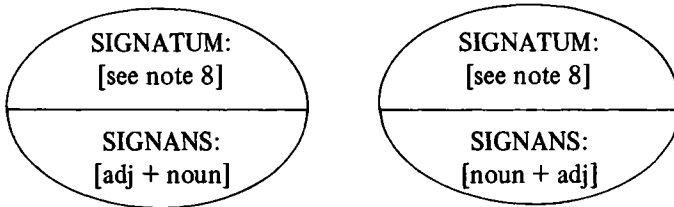


In Jakobson's formulation **all** linguistic units are signs: "every linguistic unit is bipartite and involves two aspects – one sensible and the other intelligible."⁴ "Any linguistic, and in general semiotic, analysis resolves more complex units into smaller **but still semiotic** units."⁵

The phoneme is a semiotic unit, hence a sign, since it unites an invariant, recurring bundle of acoustic properties (signals) with a constant signification. Though the phoneme does not have a meaning of its own, it does signify "mere otherness": "the semiotic function of a phoneme within a higher linguistic unit is to denote that this unit has another meaning than an equipollent unit which *ceteris paribus* contains another phoneme in the same position."⁶

By the same reasoning the distinctive feature is also a sign. The definition of any phonological distinctive feature necessarily involves the isolation of an invariant set of physical properties – its *signans*,⁷ and as the ultimate components of phonemes, distinctive features are the most elementary constituents that carry the capacity to distinguish meaning. As with the phoneme, therefore, the distinctive capacity of the feature is its *signatum*.

Likewise in syntactic analysis we have to do with signs. The study of word order, for example, can be treated in the same manner as that of phonology or morphology. The concept of linguistic sign implies that there exists a constant, recurring formal property or set of properties correlated with an invariant of meaning. A typical problem of word order would be, for example, the investigation of the change in *signata* brought about by the formal difference between pre-position and post-position of the adjective with respect to the noun in a given language. That such a syntactic problem is indeed a matter for semiotic analysis can be seen from the following diagram, which represents this particular syntactic property in terms of sign relationship.⁸ This and other examples of syntactic phenomena are considered in Chapter 4 below.



Thus the concept of sign basically involves a correlation between sound form and meaning. Stated in this manner, however, it is probably true that virtually all modern linguistic theories operate in some sense with the concept of sign, since all modern theories are ultimately concerned with the relationship between form and meaning in language. What distinguishes the present approach from other interpretations of this fundamental linguistic relationship is not so much a concern for the fact of the relationship itself as the particular understanding of the **nature** of the relationship.

As Jakobson has remarked, the “two constituents of any linguistic sign (and of any sign in general) necessarily **presuppose and require each other.**”⁹ This very strong and unequivocal position implies a direct and immediate relationship between form and meaning. “Speech sounds must be consistently analyzed with regard to meaning, and meaning, in its turn must be analyzed with reference to the sound form.”¹⁰ “An analysis of any linguistic sign whatever can be performed only on condition that its sensible aspect be examined in the light of its intelligible aspect (the *signans* in the light of the *signatum*) and vice versa.”¹¹ From Jakobson’s own statements as well as from a careful examination of his analysis of both sound and meaning in various languages, it is clear that, for him, there can be no *signans* without a *signatum*, and conversely, no *signatum* without a *signans*.¹²

This very special view of the nature of the linguistic sign was already explicit in Saussure. Jakobson actually derives from Saussure the notion that the meaningful properties of the sign are inseparable from its formal aspect. When Saussure defined language as a system of signs, each considered an “entité à deux

faces," he meant quite literally that it is the sound form that carries the meaning directly. It was Saussure's conviction that "une entité matérielle n'existe que par le sens, la fonction dont elle est revêtue," and vice versa, that "un sens, une fonction n'existe que par le support de quelque forme matérielle."

In his recent review of the first two volumes of Jakobson's *Selected Writings*, Ladislav Matejka notes Jakobson's "recurrent emphasis on the indissoluble bond between the physical and mental aspects of verbal signs."¹³ The inseparability of sound and meaning is, as Matejka points out, still very much a critical issue in Jakobson's thinking, something that he is at pains to emphasize even in his most recent writings. Such a view of the sound-meaning relationship is not only a cornerstone of his theory, but, I intend to show, a principle which, if applied rigorously, can give new direction to semantic investigation in the 1980's, just as it did to phonological research in the thirties and forties.

What is implied by the phrase "the inseparability of sound and meaning?" Clearly, the relationship between surface structure and semantic interpretation – between surface form and meaning – is not isomorphic in natural language. There is never a perfect one-to-one correlation between the formal and the semantic aspects of any language. What languages do present us with is a form-meaning relationship which is essentially asymmetrical. Now as linguists we have a choice: we can decide that this asymmetry implies a fundamental lack of correspondence between formal and semantic units in language, such that a separate set of abstract properties – deep structures – must be postulated to mediate between the two. Or we can conclude, with Jakobson, that such asymmetry does not imply a lack of solidarity between form and meaning, and that the essential operating principle of language remains one in which form and meaning directly support each other. In fact, this is the essence of the sign principle, that on the phonological level, sound forms (phonological oppositions) function primarily for the purpose of distinguishing meaning, and conversely, on the semantic level,

“there is no conceptual opposition without a corresponding formal distinction.”¹⁴

This latter view can have far-reaching consequences for semantic research. For one thing, such an interpretation suggests that, rather than assuming that the formal, surface data of language do not provide sufficient information for the construction of a semantic theory, we should instead consider the possibility that surface structures contain far more clues to semantic structure than we may be presently aware of. In fact, I shall argue that the most fruitful approach to semantic investigation is one where we actually adopt a principle of “formal determinism” for the purpose of extracting semantic invariance in natural language.

To argue successfully for such a position, however, some groundwork needs first to be laid. Specifically, in order to establish an adequate framework in which to present such an approach to semantic theory, we need first to consider the essential features of this approach as it has been applied to phonological description.

CHAPTER ONE

Phonology

1. THE SIGN PRINCIPLE AS APPLIED TO THE STRUCTURE OF SOUND

In 1958–1960, Jakobson wrote a most instructive article which places the concept of the linguistic sign in its historical perspective. “The Kazan’ School of Polish Linguistics and its Place in the International Development of Phonology” traces the development of the application of the sign principle from the time of the Sanskrit and Greek theoreticians down to the modern interpretations of the first structuralists.¹ The article begins with the consideration of a set of related concepts that were established in Indian, Greek, and medieval thought. The Sanskrit grammarians, for example, invented the term *śphota* to designate “the sound form in respect to its semiotic value, which ‘flows forth’ from that form.”² Thomas Aquinas operated with speech sounds as “‘primarily designed to convey meaning’ (*principaliter data ad significandum*).”³ What each of these two views has in common is a concern with the immediate semiotic function of speech sounds, their necessary correlation with and capacity for distinguishing meanings. In Aquinas’ case, Jakobson notes the primary concern with “the problem of the conversion of sounds into sign vehicles.”⁴ “The main object of study is the way in which gross sound matter is processed and made usable for semiotic purposes.”⁵

Equally revealing is the way in which Jakobson presents the work of Baudouin de Courtenay in this same article. The older Baudouin is specifically distinguished from the earlier, younger