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Peirce's Harvard Yearbook Photo

Michael Shapiro

A Few Remarks on Jakobson As a Student of Peirce

Linguists are in Roman Jakobson's special debt, not least for his championing of Peirce as "a genuine and bold forerunner of structural linguistics" (1985: 249). Jakobson introduced Peirce to linguistics in his closing remarks at the Bloomington Joint Conference of Anthropologists and Linguists (July 1952), the published version of which (Jakobson 1953) contains his first mention of Peirce in print. Here Jakobson calls Peirce "one of the greatest pioneers of structural linguistic analysis"—a description that, in 1952, could only have met with the audience's incredulity.[1] Significantly, however, both of these quotations contain designations of Peirce ("forerunner, pioneer") that look backward, not forward: they bracket him as a historical figure. Nowhere in his writings, indeed, do we find Jakobson projecting Peirce into the future of linguistics, as a source of insight for linguists beyond Jakobson's own era—and beyond Jakobson's own achievements. One is tempted to interpret this attitude as resulting from a tacit (and prescient) assumption on Jakobson's part that the course linguistic analysis was likely to follow in the second half of this century would leave Peirce's legacy largely untouched.

Indeed, however one regards the fate of "structural linguistics" as Jakobson and other European structuralists understood it, this approach to language analysis has not generally resorted to Peirce's thought for methodological or theoretical guidance. Even Jakobson's own work between 1952 and 1982 (the year of his death) shows no signs of having benefited in practice from a knowledge of Peirce. As one commentator has remarked, "[Jakobson's] reading of Peirce never seems to demand any serious revisions of his own categories" (Bruss 1978: 81).[2] What is more unfortunate, Jakobson's "appropriations" of Peirce are often plain misconstruals, at variance with the meanings of Peirce's concepts. They have had the effect of substituting mere labels and undigested concepts for genuine analysis.

One important reason for Jakobson's mixed success in utilizing Peirce is surely rooted in a misunderstanding of the crucial difference between dyadism and triadism. Jakobson grew up in the tradition of Russian scholarship that was deeply influenced by German idealism and tinctured by Russian orthodoxy. Both the foreign philosophical influence and the native religious environment informing the conceptual framework of *Geisteswissenschaften* in Russia around the first two decades of this century were conducive to a dualistic view of things. This is the

intellectual baggage Jakobson carried with him throughout his long career. It produced an unwavering belief in and relentless adherence to dualisms of all sorts: oppositions, antinomies, dichotomies.

It is not surprising, then, to find Jakobson emphasizing Peirce's own statements that lend credence to a dualistic conception of signs and semiosis. In the only essay devoted to Peirce, "A Few Remarks on Peirce, Pathfinder in the Science of Language" (Jakobson 1977/rpt. 1985), Jakobson picks out passages like 1.438[3] ("natural classification takes place by dichotomies"), 1.446 ("there is an element of twoness in every set"), and 1.326 ("A *dyad* consists of two *subjects* brought into oneness") to "naturalize" Peirce as a dualist and then stitches these snippets with others from 1.457 where Peirce accords primacy to the concept of opposition: "existence lies in opposition;" "a thing without oppositions *ipso facto* does not exist," etc. (Jakobson 1985: 251).

His ironclad consistency in analyzing everything into bundles of binary features even led him—by way of a fundamental misconstrual of the icon/ index/symbol trichotomy—"to a fourth putative sign type, assumedly not envisaged by Peirce, *viz* signs based on 'imputed similarity' (or 'similitude imposée' as it was later called in French)" (Andersen 1991: 305). By superimposing the combinatorial operators "factual vs. imputed" and "similarity vs. contiguity" onto Peirce's triad, Jakobson arrives at a sign that he identifies with what he calls "introversive semiosis" (Jakobson 1971: 704–5):

> The interplay of the two dichotomies—contiguity/similarity and factual imputed—admits a fourth variety [of relation], namely, imputed similarity. Precisely this combination becomes apparent in musical semiosis. The introversive semiosis, a message which signifies itself, is indissolubly linked with the esthetic function of sign systems and dominates not only music but also glossolalic poetry and nonrepresentational painting and sculpture.

As Andersen (ibid.) goes on to point out, "viewed in Peircean terms there is, of course, no new, special, hitherto unnoticed type of sign here.... By their actual, recognized similarity, the constituents of the iterative structures in question [i.e., music, non-representational works of art, etc.] are icons of one another. By their contiguity, they are 'really connected'. This fact, together with their similarity, makes them fit to function as indexes of one another...these signs are of a common, garden variety type: they are iconic indexes."[4]

Nowhere is Jakobson's misstep in reading Peirce more serious than in the matter of a triadic understanding of signs and semiosis. In what follows I will simply assume the appropriateness of Short's strictures (this volume). My own

remarks will focus on three topics in the analysis of language, whose treatment at Jakobson's hands could have been significantly enhanced had his acquaintance with Peirce been deeper and more consequential. All three will be examined in the light of the advantages offered by Peirce's triadic understanding of the structure of semiosis—advantages lost on Jakobson despite his oft-professed solidarity with Peirce's semiotic enterprise.

I. The structure of phonological signs[5]

There is a continuity of thought between Jakobson and Saussure that was acknowledged by Jakobson on numerous occasions (e.g., 1971: 312, 743ff.). He was fond of repeating Saussure's well-known sequence of adjectives describing the basic phonological signs ("distinctive features") by which words are distinguished as OPPOSITIVE, RELATIVE, and NEGATIVE. These three characteristics as an ensemble are taken by Jakobson, following Saussure, to define the radical difference between phonological signs and all other linguistic signs. Saussure speaks of the sound system of language as being constituted by pure differences. Accordingly, Jakobson's distinctive features are described by him (mutatis mutandis) as signs having no specific objects (signifié, signata) but signifying only the mere otherness ("alterité") of their referents, which are the signs (signifiants, signantia) of morphemes—the smallest meaningful units of language. This makes all phonological signs systematically synonymous. If the objects of all phonological signs are the same—"mere" otherness or alterity—then the oppositions into which phonological signs enter and by which they are defined refer solely to what Jakobson calls their material side, i.e. the acoustic tokens of which the signs (signifiants, signantia) are constituted.

The Saussurean triplet "oppositive, relative, and negative" is said to underlie the notion that a phonology is a system of relations between signs. But the relational character of the system is not unambiguous and pertains to different aspects of the phonology. Thus the distinctive feature terms of oppositions (minimal paradigms) are clearly "relational" in the sense that the difference between, say, +NASAL and -NASAL, does not reside in any positively defined phonetic properties but rather in correspondence rules that transform these signs into sound differences. Relations at the level of phonology (form, Peirce's LEGISIGNS) are mirrored at the level of phonetics (substance, Peirce's REPLICAS). If this is what is meant by the designation of phonological signs as "relative," in what sense do the designations "oppositive" and "negative" apply? The first characterizes phonological signs as terms of privative oppositions, since one term is always in praesentia when the other is in absentia, and vice versa. The second applies to the

characterization of the object of phonological signs as (synonymously) "pure otherness," the latter being understood as a species of negativity. But there is a discontinuity in the application of these designations. "Relative" is applied not to the relation between sign and object but to sets of sign/object relations, as is "oppositive," whereas "negative" strictly characterizes the object. Is there a way out of this inconsistency?

Post-Jakobsonian (neo-) structuralism has advanced the idea that the way out is through the concept of MARKEDNESS, understood as the INTERPRETANT of the sign/object relation. For all his championing of markedness and his espousal of Peirce for linguistics, Jakobson seems never to have arrived at the realization that markedness is, in fact, a species of interpretant.[6] With regard to phonological analysis specifically—where, incidentally, Trubetskoy and Jakobson first identified markedness with the "ideational content" of phonological oppositions—markedness is just that crucial third element that represents the paradigmatic asymmetry of the opposition. Since Jakobson steadfastly clung to a dualistic view of everything, thirdness was never a living concept in his theorizing, and that is why he did not conceive of markedness as the Third, complementing the signans (Sign) as First and the signatum (Object) as Second. If he had, his whole theory of language structure would have been endowed with the power to see the coherence of the relations at the heart of linguistic rules (cf. Shapiro 1990).

II. Teleology and linguistic structure

One of Jakobson's chief preoccupations before emigrating to the New World was teleology, or the means-ends approach to the problem of causation in language. Whether changes in language are directed toward discernible ends is, of course, a question as old as linguistics itself. But for the modern period it is associated principally with European structuralism between the world wars, and more specifically with the Prague Linguistic Circle, of which Jakobson was the chief protagonist. Much subsequent discussion of teleology relative to the question of the motivation of change in language owes a great deal to the enduring validity of the position enunciated many years ago by Jakobson (1928), that the notion of cause cannot be separated from that of goal.

Jakobson's interwar work on language change was done under the aegis of Saussure's views on the relation between diachrony and synchrony. If only Jakobson had discovered Peirce thirty years earlier, he might well have altered his views on many things, including his notable adherence to dualistic conceptions. His life-long espousal of the means-ends model of language and the teleological approach to linguistic change remained unswervingly faithful, despite his advo-

cacy of Peircean sign theory, to the Saussurean concept of the sign as a dyadic structure.

There is a monumental irony in this, which has gone unperceived by the myriad commentators, translators, and epigones in the "Jakobson industry," but which is all the more crucial to the proper consideration of the entire vexed question of teleology and language. As anyone acquainted with Peirce's semeiotic can attest, the concept of the (linguistic) sign as a dyadic structure is fundamentally incompatible with the notion that (linguistic) change is teleological. Jakobson's misprision has to do with the ontology of the sign, where sign as First and object as Second are subordinated to interpretant as Third. Sign, object, and interpretant as relations constituting the linguistic legisign, i.e., words, are epitomically relations in a unity—the kind of unity Peirce has in mind when he talks about final causation (1.220). The particular organizing principle that binds the relations together into an organic whole is also the final cause of the whole: it gives the relations LIFE AND DIRECTION. The intelligibility, rationality, or intellectual purport that characterize the unity is the same as an idea of *vera causa,* a power that endows instances of the idea with the kind of existence that makes sense. The type of causation involved is final, not efficient, because the conferral of order or direction or intelligibility upon a class involves the power of law and not blind force (ibid.).

In the Saussurean conception of sign which Jakobson appropriated, it is the indissoluble link between signans and signatum that is emphasized. But this Secondness cannot be the essential relation of semiosis in language. Given that all linguistic units are purposively significant, semiosis in language always relies BY DEFINITION on the participation of a Third. For semiosis in language takes place when the three constituents—sign, object, and interpretant—cooperate in a "trirelative influence" that brings the sign into relation with its object, on one hand, and with its interpretant, on the other, in such a way as to bring the interpretant into a relation to the object corresponding to its own relation to the object. The role of the interpretant is obviously central in Peirce's conception; there is nothing strictly comparable in Saussure's (with the possible exception of his inchoate ideas about *valeur linguistique*).

Jakobson clearly understood and stressed the idea that all linguistic semiosis is teleological, but he undercut his own position by failing to incorporate the understanding of the interpretant—the crucial Third element—as the entelechy of the sign. This had the deleterious result (among others) of keeping language history bracketed off from language theory, despite Jakobson's strenuous effort to integrate the two.[7]

III. Metaphor and metonymy

No other investigator in modern times is more closely associated with discussion of the two master tropes, metaphor and metonymy, than is Jakobson, who subsumed entire ranges of linguistic (and cognitive) phenomena under what he called "the metaphoric and metonymic poles" (1956: part 2; rpt. 1990: 116-133). The most important structural analogy Jakobson draws here is between metaphor and similarity or SELECTION, on one hand, and metonymy and contiguity or COMBINATION, on the other.[8] The two tropes are, of course, distinguished by their different focus: on similarity relations in the case of metaphor, and on contiguity relations in the case of metonymy.

But here again, Jakobson's penchant for dichotomies keeps him from perceiving the VIRTUAL THIRD, which is the RELATION BETWEEN metaphor and metonymy—defined by RANK, DOMINANCE, OR HIERARCHY. The two master tropes are not "poles;" rather, they are criterial points on a continuum defined by BOTH the selection AND the combination of meaning elements in the figural syntagm. Moreover, the combination is always hierarchical: for a trope to signify its figural status, there must be a rank order of meanings such that the figural dominates the literal. Without this dominance, no figural meaning would ensue.

That is why tropes are Thirds and their structure triadic. There are always THREE rank-ordered aspects of the figural situation, which are, in turn, triadic in structure (cf. Shapiro 1983: 198). First, the pre-existing condition or quality inherent in the meanings being combined in tropes is defined by (a) the species (similarity), (b) the context (contiguity), and (c) the rank (value) of the meanings. Second, the juxtaposition or relation of the meanings in tropes is tantamount to three (not two!) operations: (a) selection (paradigmatization), (b) combination (syntagmatization), and (c) ranking (hierarchization). Third and finally, there is a triaspectual—resultant or cumulative—semantic state or representation whenever figural meaning is present, two constituents of which go by traditional designations, while the third is always their virtual connection: (a) metonymy (establishment/instantiation of hierarchy), (b) metaphor (reversal/neutralization of hierarchy), and (c) relation between metonymy and metaphor. It is the necessarily virtual (immanent) presence of a CONNECTION BETWEEN metonymy and metaphor in every trope, whatever its class membership, that explains the known "life spiral" of tropes, in which metonymy has the teleological propensity to slide into metaphor and metaphor, in turn, to become lexicalized.

If, on the basis of these brief exposés of three staples of Jakobson's thought about language as a semiotic system, we wish to arrive at a generalization concerning Jakobson as a student of Peirce, then the common thread is clearly Third-

ness. More specifically, it is Jakobson's inability to comprehend the cardinal importance of triadicity to semiosis. With his antennae perpetually at the ready to sense the significance of intellectual movements, Jakobson was quick to assimilate his own thought to scientific discoveries like Einstein's relativity theory—for instance, by stressing the importance to structuralism of invariance under transformation. But it is a measure of the tenacity of mental habits acquired early in life that he was never able truly to leap over the great divide that relativity in physics and the continuum in mathematical thought had created between the twentieth and all past centuries. Jakobson was an inveterate Cartesian dualist all his life. Hence his appropriation of Peirce's semeiotic enterprise remained, in the mathematical sense, a degenerate one at best.

Endnotes

[1] Cf. the following later (retrospective) sentiment: "I must confess that for years I felt bitterness at being among linguists perhaps the sole student of Peirce's views" (Jakobson 1985: 250).

[2] Bruss goes on to discuss some of the ways that Jakobson diverged from Peirce. She attributes this non-assimilation to the fact that Jakobson came to Peirce too late in his career (his late 50s), when his own attitudes toward basic matters of analysis were already beyond the point of easy accommodation to a new body of thought. At the same time, Bruss emphasizes (correctly) Jakobson's eagerness to claim Peirce as his American forebear, as a way of legitimating himself in his new country of residence. I might add that Jakobson had a blitzkrieg approach to research and scholarship: he tackled a dazzling array of topics with stunning success, but his attention rarely lingered on any one topic for very long. This trait may explain in part the curious fact that Jakobson's oeuvre is full of short articles but no long book other than his doctoral dissertation on Czech verse. It may also explain why he never devoted himself to a deep and thorough study of Peirce. Even in the matter of semeiotic, Jakobson betrays no awareness of the fundamental watershed represented by the year 1906, more specifically the impossibility of squaring the mature, post-1906 Peircean view of signs and semiosis with that of the author of the "New List of Categories" of 1867. He is thus able uncritically to combine statements Peirce made at different periods in his long working life. For more on the development of Peirce's semiotic views, see now Short in press.

[3] All Peirce citations of the *Collected Papers* follow the customary form: volume, dot, paragraph.

[4] In my Peirce Bicentennial Congress paper (Shapiro 1981) I follow Jakobson down the primrose path in a vain attempt to improve on Peirce's trichotomy and call the aesthetic sign a "rhythm." Perhaps there is still something to be salvaged from this designation of a self-referential sign type that is not encompassed by the category of iconic indexes, if by "rhythms" we understand specifically the RECIPROCAL iconic indexes that—by their recurrence—constitute an automorphism (in the sense of symmetry theory), i.e., impart to the work of art its internal cohesion.

[5] Jakobson's fundamental positions on this topic are to be found throughout volume 1 of his *Selected Writings*; also in his *Six Lectures on Sound and Meaning* (1978), which (silently) incorporates the two 1939 Copenhagen lectures "Zur Struktur des Phonems," first published in *SW* I (1962: 280–310). What appears in the co-authored book *The Sound Shape of Language* (1979 = 1988 [*SW* 8: Part 1]), while no doubt intended as a pioneering phonologist's summing up of a long and distinguished career of research in that field, is decidedly inferior to his early (interwar) work. In my own discussion I have been guided by Andersen 1987, insofar as this short paper gives a valuable restatement of Jakobson's theory of phonology. But I have silently recast some of Andersen's formulations for the purposes of my comparison of Jakobson and Peirce, a move necessitated by Andersen's faithful adhesion to his teacher's dualistic mind set and a "nomothetic" conception of phonological theory that are fundamentally incompatible with Peirce's theory of signs and semiosis.

[6] For whatever reason, this blinkering is shared by Andersen (e.g., 1989).

[7] The most telling indication of this methodological failure is Jakobson 1963, "Parts and Wholes in Language," where while citing Peirce among others Jakobson betrays no knowledge of the centrality of teleology to Peirce's conception of part/whole relations in signs and semiosis. Needless to say, the word SYNECHISM is not to be found in any of the Jakobsonian texts.

[8] It is typical of Jakobson's approach to the complexity presented by Peirce's concepts that he identifies "these two operations [as] provid[ing] each linguistic sign with two sets of 'interpretants"' and justifies it by asserting that "there are two references which serve to interpret the sign—one to the code and the other to the context, whether coded or free, and in each of these ways the sign is related to another set of linguistic signs, through an *alternation* in the former case and through an *alignment* in the latter" (1990: 120).

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