

JAKOBSON'S WORLD; HIS DIALOGUE WITH PEIRCE IMPLICATIONS FOR AMERICAN ETHNOLOGY

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Jakobson hewed an independent path in the difficult task that dominated his work, that is the investigation of the principles pertaining to the interrelated meanings and structures of texts primarily, but not limited to, verbal artistic texts in all their complexities and ambiguities. To call him a linguist is accurate but insufficient since his contributions to all the humanities were immense, most particularly to the verbal arts but to the other arts as well; certainly he contributed to anthropology and other fields of investigation such as the relation of language to the brain, to philosophy and even to physics, for example see his essay on Einstein (1982).

Jakobson never accepted what the American philosopher Hillary Putnam calls the “simplicistic” implications of scientism (Putnam 1992:60), nor was he ever attracted to the deconstruction movement which for Putnam comes perilously close to nihilism (130–131). Indeed, as Putnam recognized, the Prague school never accepted Saussure’s “incommensurability” (124). Nor did Jakobson ever omit context. As Jakobson held in a lecture of 1960, (cited from Jakobson 1971:280–285) invoking Peirce, Frege and Husserl, “The artificial treatment of messages without reference to the superposed context once more exemplifies the illicit conversion of a mere part into a seemingly self sufficient whole” (Jakobson 1963:282). Thus no closed systems and no reductionism were accepted. Jakobson was critical of “the frequent inability of students in linguistics to go from a fractional totality to another totality that is higher, or to another fraction that is lower....” (180). And he refused to accept “the separate treatment of the *signans* without reference to the whole sign which unites *signans* with *signatum*, that is the intelligible, translatable, semantic part of the *signum*” (280). Thus he criticized both the seeing of the sentence as the shortest actual verbal unit ignoring smaller entities, and as well the “... frequent limitation” of treating “the *sentence* as the highest linguistic unit.” Thus he deplored the fact that “(S)uperior wholes, namely *utterances*, which may embrace a higher integer of sentences, and *discourse*, which normally is an exchange of utterances, remained outside of the scope of linguistic analysis” (1963:281). For students of culture (excepting those who embraced a scientific, positivist reductionism and those who insisted on the

kind of holism or gestalt that rejects any structural analysis, and finally those who more recently have espoused the kind of post-modernism that approaches nihilism amounting essentially to a rejection of any kind of translatable meaning) Jakobson's view of language, which is after all the hallmark of human culture, is exemplary.

In a lecture given in Tokyo in 1967, which fortunately was recorded, Jakobson related an event that amply demonstrates his earliest attitude toward communication. He recalls that as a child he saw a Japanese drama and told his parents that though the Japanese actress spoke in Japanese he understood her. The implication of course is that the child substitutes a kind of empathy for translation. Jakobson expanded upon this insight, asking in this lecture,

What is necessary in order to understand the language of another? One must have the feeling of solidarity. One must be with the person who speaks expressively and believe in what the person said. And the mutual understanding begins. Because what is a language? A language is the overcoming of isolation. A language is a fight against isolation. And this fight is not only within one ethnic language where people try to adapt to each other, in the family, in the town, in the whole country, it is also international. One feels the desire to understand each other (1967).

Jakobson's thinking was always dominated by relations of parts to wholes. Following Nagel, he states that the whole is "a pattern of relations...whose parts stand to each other in a various relations of dynamical dependence" (1971:284). Polarity, or the dynamic relation between variants and invariants, is a dominant theme in all Jakobson's works. Thus while accepting a certain relativism, Jakobson did not abandon the view of an underlying reality, no matter how textualized (culturally coded) and imperfect our perceptions of it might be. In addition to language *per se*, other sign systems to which he paid particular attention include paralingual forms such as gestures, as well as the visual art, the cinema, theater, and music (for the latter cf. Jakobson 1992:105-128). But his most persistent investigation was of the poetic function of language which he insisted is a fundamental aspect of the science of linguistics. Thus, already the early Theses of Jakobson and Tynjanov in 1928, expanded in the Theses of the Prague Circle in 1929, spelled out Jakobson's direction from which he never departed. Form and meaning, synchrony and diachrony, were dynamic and inseparable realms, and poetic use of language as well as its other functions were an integral part of the science of linguistics.

For Jakobson the search for meaning and the principles which underlie it required the broadest cross-cultural context, knowledge of past and present and a thorough analysis of whatever text or message is at hand. Jakobson was in accord with his friend in America, the great anthropologist Franz Boas,

who also proposed the universality of the aesthetic function. Furthermore, while nonverbal aesthetic texts imply the existence of language, they are not to be reduced to linguistic principles. Early on the Prague school abandoned the logocentric position of Saussure. Its limitations were fully clear in the writings of Jakobson's close colleague, Mukařovský, who discussed the semiotic principles of film, visual art, theater, objects, etc. (1970, original in Czech 1936), and Bogatyrev, also a member of the Prague Circle, who in the thirties analyzed the folk costume from a semiotic point of view as well as folk songs, theater, and other forms of semiotized behavior (1976, 13–19, 28–32, 33–50). Indeed, before Jakobson left for Prague, he and Bogatyrev had carried out field studies of Russian folklore, for Jakobson was always in spirit part ethnologist.

Here I choose one segment which is I believe fundamental for Jakobson's influence on anthropology, although its full impact for cultural studies is yet to be realized, that is his dialogue with Peirce in his American years. Particularly relevant in this respect was Jakobson's battle for iconicity which cannot be separated from his view of the self-focussing aesthetic function. Indeed the broad role of aesthetic activities, so important to the Boas group, was relatively neglected until recently by most American ethnologists. We discuss here how Jakobson invoked and interpreted various Peircean principles, including Peirce's sign types, his conception and program for the yet undeveloped and signally important concept of the human sign, and Jakobson's efforts to synthesize his and Peirce's semiotic concepts, which are pregnant with exciting possibilities for ethnological research into the manifold ways and forms used to communicate polyfunctional and polysemantic cultural messages of all types.

Anthropologists have been plagued by the difficult search for cultural meaning in a wide comparative context. Boas and his students and colleagues, particularly Sapir and Whorf but also Benedict and Mead, were well aware of the role of the universal and pervasive role of aesthetic activities in culture and were directly concerned with the ambiguities of cultural meanings. But the positivist obsession (Putnam's scientism), that followed the great period in American anthropology misunderstood Boas's reaction against nineteenth century pseudo-science that espoused universal evolutionary schemes for all aspects of culture. This for Boas was essentially mythology since such schemes conflicted with the facts established by fieldworkers everywhere. Numerous post-Boasian scholars incorrectly labeled Boas a positivist, and asserted such positions themselves, witness the oft quoted phrase of Lowie, a student of Boas, that culture is a thing of shreds and patches. Only a few voices during the forties and fifties, including those already mentioned, and also Kluckhohn who was clearly influenced by Jakobson during their common period at

Harvard, rejected this escape from ambiguity. Others turned to quantitative methods, and reduction and oversimplified schemes.

Unfortunately, I shall have to omit in this discussion of Jakobson's influence on American anthropology any adequate consideration of the tremendously important influence of Jakobson on Lévi-Strauss during their common stay in New York in the war years, a collaboration which gave birth to the whole school of structural anthropology that never took part in the wave of positivism and insisted on both universals and diversity. This association inspired Lévi-Strauss to combine Mauss's theory of exchange with a semiotic analysis of the multiple messages involved in exchanges of objects, women, and messages in what was generally called tribal cultures. While the many meanings and functions of exchanges of objects were described in Malinowski's study of the Kula trade of the Trobriand Islanders, these phenomena were explicitly and far more complexly analyzed by Lévi-Strauss to apply to various domains in all cultures and put into a theoretical framework. This led to Lévi-Strauss's famous studies of myth where he showed how through mediators and transformations the variations of particular myths among different groups were characterized by a hidden logic and meaning related to contextual ecological and psychological principles. The particular structural approach of Jakobson that influenced Lévi-Strauss focussed on often disguised relations between parts and on subliminal organizing principles in particular cultures relating to particular settings, as well as universals arising from the psycho-biological characteristics of *homo sapiens*. Furthermore, Lévi-Strauss, being in fact an international, not just French, anthropologist, influenced anthropology world wide including American scholars, although many expressed a stubborn resistance to what was considered Lévi-Strauss's cerebral structural principles which, critics complained, did not account for the highly variable and individualistic idiosyncratic, pragmatic context. While there is some merit in this type of objection, which was also leveled at Jakobson with somewhat less justification, Jakobson's and Lévi-Strauss's contributions to ethnology were incalculable. Rather than gaining from Jakobson's or Lévi-Strauss's brilliant insights, many American ethnologists dismissed them because of what they did not do.

Turning to our main theme here, that again harmonizes in many ways with the views of Putnam we noted, we consider the conversion of Jakobson's principles with those of Charles Sanders Peirce which grew increasingly marked after Jakobson's discovery of Peirce in his American years, and what that means for anthropology. Let us agree that Jakobson essentially accepted Peirce's definition of the sign as something that stands to someone for something else in some respect or capacity, which does not disagree with the implications of the early Prague school approach.

The issues we discuss here are: first of all the role of nonarbitrary levels of signs in culture, and particularly iconicity which for both Peirce and Jakobson refers to the past, but also indexicality which Jakobson agreed with Peirce referred to the present; secondly, the interaction of iconicity and indexicality at the abstract, relational and general level, that is the symbolic level referring to the future; thirdly, Jakobson's discovery of Peirce's concept of the human sign; fourthly Jakobson's attempt to synthesize his sign schemes with those of Peirce, thus modifying the Saussurean signifier/signified dichotomy and adding a fourth dimension, the timeless artifice; and finally, the relation of Jakobson's variants and invariants to Peirce's immediate and dynamical object.

Peirce's nonarbitrary levels, index and icon, which have a relation to the object by similarity or contiguity, are the building blocks of Jakobson's metonymic metaphor, a trope which for Jakobson was almost the *sine qua non* of the artifice, though not limited to artistic texts. Peirce dubbed the nonarbitrary levels of signs degenerate, but this is not pejorative since what is meant is that such levels of signs, dominant in some of the many sign types Peirce discerned, do not have a conventional relation to the object, but rather one of similarity or contiguity, although all signs have a symbolic or conventional relation to the object which, however, in some cases may be less important than other levels.

The convergence of Peircean and Jakobsonian concepts implicates the role of the Peirce's object, both the immediate and the dynamical one, which cannot be considered independently anymore than can Jakobson's variants and invariants. To state this somewhat differently, Peirce's various interpretant signs are all related to the original sign through some kind of common quality discerned in the immediate object. Peirce called this the ground of the sign. The interpretant is marked in Jakobson's sense, differing from the original sign by adding some new information. Furthermore, Peirce hypothesized a relatively independent dynamical object behind the immediate object. The dynamical object motivates the sign to institute a particular immediate object, just as Jakobson's presupposed invariants are held by him to underlie and relate variable signs. These concepts, the dynamical sign and invariants, anchor Peirce's iconicity and Jakobson's similarity, allowing these levels to signal, however ambiguously, some aspects of some reality.

Peirce's concept of the object to which the sign refers is very broad and may subsume a quality, an occurrence, a fact, an event, a law, a habit, etc. Accordingly, the potential semiotized object ranges from the most concrete to the most abstract. In the last analysis, or had we better say in the first analysis, the sign being reflexive at some underlying level at least, refers to itself as object, as in the case of the artifice or the human sign. But reflexive signs have the ability to powerfully connote, or denote objects outside the text,

although the meanings that may be interpreted are often highly ambiguous. To give a small cultural example of the nostalgic power of signs: in a Slovene peasant village, the memory of the insistent repeating of a traditional sound made by an individual who is threshing wheat in the traditional manner on a still existing but now unused threshing floor, by virtue of the reflexive referring back to such an individual and his or her activities invoked by the indexical and iconic aspects, becomes a powerful sign of past practices associated with older values and emotive qualities as well as a symbol of the general meaning of ethnic identity.

The relation of the sign to the object is for Peirce dependent on contextual and epistemological factors. Complementing the discrete icon, related by similarity to a possible object and cast in the mode of the past, and the discrete index, existentially related to an object and cast in the mode of the present, there is the nondiscrete and mediating abstract symbol, which results from the uncontrollable rush to perceptual judgments on the part of the human mind. Thus the symbol, being general, is actuated only by replicas and is related to the object through an interpretant's referral to a law or an association of general ideas or to other regularities including customs and conventions. Similarly, Jakobson's aesthetic function means that metaphor (iconicity) and metonymy (indexicality) are forever infecting each other, imparting new similarities, and thus giving rise to new relationships on a symbolic level.

For both Peirce and Jakobson, while the mediating symbol operates through interpretants, it is always in *cultural context*. Jakobson's polysemic and multifunctional signs imply Peirce's interpretants which Jakobson equated with translation. They are always, as Jakobson put it, *context-sensitive*. For Peirce the interpreting mind is shaped by community and its habits, in other words a Peircean cultural context. Thus, for both Jakobson and Peirce, meaning is always dynamic and contextual but not totally arbitrary.

Let us now turn to the relation between Peirce's human sign and Jakobson's artifice. Perhaps there is no more fundamental concept for a semiotic anthropology than the concept of self and associated identity, personal, social, and cultural. The investigation of self-identity, a precondition for cultural identity, has recently engaged a wide range of ethnologists, including those whose approach is phenomenological and hermeneutic, such as Geertz (1973) and Turner (1982). This search has also haunted those expressing more directly post-modernist trends, such as Marcus and Fisher (1986), Tylor (1986), and to some extent Clifford (1988), and of course the philosopher Richard Rorty, some of whom are influenced to a considerable extent by the French deconstructionists and by German philosophers, particularly Heidegger and Nietzsche, while the more moderate and qualified approach to self and cultural identity also affected by post-modernist concerns are exempli-

fied by Fernandez (1988), Crapanzano (1991), Babcock (1980), Kondo (1987), Carrithers (1986) and others. As Jakobson recognized, the concept of self or of identity is anchored not only in the individual psyche but in the culture in question and involves the aesthetic function. Thus when he discovered Peirce's concept of the human sign he compared it to independent concepts of the Russian ethnographer Petr Bogatyrev whom he praised as an expert in transfigurations, noting that the dualism of transfiguration is implemented not only by actors but that our entire life is saturated with theatrical elements. This was, Jakobson noted, a spontaneous realization by Bogatyrev of the program launched over a century ago by Peirce under the slogan "man: a sign" where Peirce called for a systematic inquiry both into the 'meaning of the human sign' and into 'the material quality of the man-sign', (CP 5.5 quoted by Jakobson, 1976). And Jakobson called for a further development of this Peircean program. As I have noted elsewhere (1983), the human sign in Peircean terminology is an iconic, indexical and symbolic text, a sign, the object of which is first of all the self. The realization of self as other, in other words self-consciousness is for Peirce predicated on the experience of surprise and the unexpected, on its first occasion, causing the infant to reflect upon himself as object. As ego's experiences continue, he extends this insight beyond ego/nonego, there develop many complex feelings relating to individual others and categories of others, including other gender, other social and ethnic or social and cultural groups and so on. Thus the complexities of ethnic identity are forever being investigated and are fundamental issues for anthropological studies.

It is important for our problem to see that Peirce's human sign and Jakobson's artifice, which both share certain reflexive qualities and which consciously or unconsciously exploit the aesthetic function, lead the creator and interpreter to reflect at various levels, including, on the meta-level, reflections on the meaning of cultural codes and values that are indirectly evoked by artifice and the montage-like human sign. Furthermore the iconic aspects of the human sign stimulate memory of past cultural traditions which, as we realize more and more in the contemporary world, are hard to erase no matter how much a dominant group or repressive power may attempt to do this.

Jakobson's artifice is a development from his famous six-factor six-function communication model pronounced in 1960, where he first proposed that poetic language is characterized by the projection of the axis of similarity upon the axis of contiguity which makes every metonymy slightly metaphoric and gives every metaphor a metonymic tint. (Peirce had used the same expression when he spoke of the three categories as tints or tones on conceptions not separable in the imagination [Peirce C.P 1.353]). Not only did Jakobson find examples of this form in the established verbal arts but also in

myths, jokes, puns, paralingual activities such as gesture, the visual arts, music, syncretic forms such as cinema and, by extension, rituals, ceremonies, etc. As early as 1964 Jakobson had introduced the term *artifice* which he described in his address in Milan 1974, borrowing from Gerald Manley Hopkin's use of *artifice* („all artifice reduces itself to parallelism"). Jakobson added the *artifice* to Peirce's triad, icon, index, symbol (Jakobson 1987: 466–473). The *artifice*, Jakobson held, is based on imputed similarity, borrowing from Peirce's *imputed* which Jakobson described as Peirce's felicitous expression of 1867 (Jakobson 1970:7) where for Peirce the ground of the sign imputes attributes to the object. In this same address of 1974, Jakobson applied these insights to music and the visual arts. Thus he introduced the opposition *factual* (which he sometimes called *effective*) vs. *imputed* alongside the essentially Peircean opposition of *similarilarity* vs. *contiguity*. The question for Jakobson became: is the similarity or contiguity relation *factual* or *imputed*? For the *artifice* he saw it as *imputed* similarity, for the *icon* as *factual* similarity, for the *symbol* as *imputed* contiguity, for the *index* as *factual* contiguity. This four-part entity is cast in four temporal modes. To Peirce's icon of the past, index of the present, and symbol of the future, Jakobson adds the *atemporal artifice*. A final opposition sets the *artifice* off from the other three sign levels, namely *introversive semiosis* of the *artifice* is opposed to *extroversive semiosis* for the *iconic*, *indexical* and *symbolic* levels of signs. *Introversive semiosis* is reflexive, focussing on the sign itself; but it is my position that the *artifice*, by this very means, heightens impressions and associated memories; and moreover, since *imputed* means that equivalences are learned but are not purely arbitrary, the *artifice* involves, at least subliminally, *iconic representation*. Finally, these texts, the *artifice* and the *human sign*, also bring to the fore a *meta-level*, reflections on what it means to be a particular ethnic member, reflections on what artistic codes might be broken or changed, or on what is art, and so on. While Jakobson saw the *meta-level* and the *aesthetic level* as diametrically opposed (1960), I believe this conclusion was not, in fact, supported by many of his examples.

Whether in fact Jakobson's consideration of the *artifice* as a fourth dimension added to Peirce's triad is in fact a productive construct, when the *artifice* seems really to be a particular case of the *iconic indexical symbol*, needs further consideration. But the concepts of *imputed similarity* and *introversive semiosis* are clearly powerful and extremely useful for interpretations in cultural studies. Thus what is learned, and culture is learned, is not entirely arbitrary, requiring us to search deeper for subtle *iconic* and *indexical* levels.

In conclusion, we should note some fundamental epistemological compatibilities between Jakobson and Peirce which clearly are relevant to arguments in modern ethnology. Thus Jakobson's position had much in common

both with Peirce's view of synechism, which meant for Peirce that there is no absolute discreteness since "elements of thirdness cannot entirely be escaped (CP 7.653), and also with Peirce's concept of continuity, which meant for Peirce "fluidity," (CP 1.164), "infinity" (CP 1.165), "and continuous expanse" (CP 7.166). Thus Peirce's thirdness is a kind of continuity, relating or connecting firstness and secondness through generality (CP 1.337).

In his "Afterword" to the *Sound Shape of Language* Jakobson wrote in a similar vein, repeating his guiding position: "There is no autonomy without integration and no integration without autonomy" (1979:234). Or as Jakobson so frequently reiterated, there is no diversity without unity and no unity without diversity. This means that for the study of culture, if we agree with Peirce and Jakobson, there is no necessary conflict between a search for culturally diverse realities and a search for unifying underlying themes and structural principles rooted in basic cultural and human concepts of time and space and in the psycho-biology of all humans. This also includes, of course, the specifics of the human brain—their effect on human creativity and thus on all aspects of culture, all in the context of the physical world in which we live. Indeed research into the brain and its relations to language, which Jakobson engaged in early in his life (1971 original 1941), bears upon the later work of various anthropologists, for example Turner who wished to consider the relation of cultural diversities and unities to the human brain (1986: 156–178).

Those who turn to the facile post-modern varieties of nihilism and extreme relativism might heed some of Jakobson's insights. He laid the foundation for a semiotics of culture first called for by Saussure and being powerfully developed by the Moscow-Tartu school, particularly in Lotman's innovative concept of the "semiosphere" (1990). Much was also foreseen by Bakhtin who shared directly or indirectly many of Jakobson's and the Prague school's tenets such as dialogue, polyphony, and opposition to closed systems. Thus we might consider as a metaphor for culture Bakhtin's process of novelization, which he wrote about decades ago (Bakhtin 1981 and see Portis Winner in press). We have only touched upon the potentially rich concept for ethnology of Jakobson's artifice, Peirce's human sign and nor have we discussed Lotman's and Uspenskij's investigation into the semiotics of culture history (1985) where iconicity and memory play fundamental roles, nor could we discuss Ivanov's many studies of basic cultural concepts particularly of time (1973: 1–45). All these may act as guide posts in the search for the inseparable and dynamic structures and meanings of ethnic cultures, and in the investigation of the power of history and memory in shaping human cultural behavior. Indeed, particularly today in our so called post-modern age of turmoil and confusion and ethnic explosions, we need a perspective such that suggested by the various approaches to a semiotics of culture that do not

reduce and that rule out closed systems and statics, and that remain forever open to new interpretations.

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Winner, Irene Portis. See Portis-Winner, Irene.