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## SYMMETRY DEVICES IN PHONOLOGY, GRAMMAR, POETICS

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Jakobson's texts devoted to poetics, and more particularly "Linguistics and Poetics" (1960 – henceforth "LP") appear to be very important, of course in the field of poetics, but also to evaluate the whole of Jakobson's (henceforth ROJ) theoretical proposals : we will suggest that his conceptions of poetics are revealing of the real interest, but also of the shortcomings, of his linguistic thought. This is the reason why I shall once again discuss this text, in the light of some recent papers<sup>1</sup>.

My point of view will be that of a linguist and linguistics historian, and I will emphasize the audience and the influence of the text, rather than its roots and sources, especially within the Prague Linguistic Circle.

The literature on the subject is so huge that I will restrict myself to a subset of it :

- focusing on the crucial part played by ROJ in the history of so-called structuralism in the human sciences, I will mostly discuss his audience within the French-speaking academic world (French and Belgian) ;

- I will only consider those few comments on Jakobson's paper whose authors are both linguists and poeticsians ;

- even so, the field is very large, and I will choose to discuss only these authors' comments on symmetry devices.

### 1. ROJ and the French audience

"LP" appears in 1960, a very favourable time for its publication in France, since it is the beginning of what was to be called the "philosophical structuralism", "enlarged structuralism" or "French structuralism" area.

In the sixties, ROJ is already well-known in France, in linguistic circles of course, since the late thirties (André Martinet and other linguists who followed the work of the Prague Linguistic Circle), but also, since the fifties, through the works of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jacques Lacan. However, the first French translation of some of his works (by the Belgian linguist Nicolas

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1 I don't intend to propose a new reading of this text, since many scholars, competent in both poetics and general linguistics, already did comment it, in many interesting ways.

Ruwet, *Essais de linguistique générale*), does not appear until 1963 : "LP" is one of the translated texts.

ROJ is therefore immediately acknowledged in France, unlike in other places where he was considered mostly as a linguist, as both a poetician and a linguist : a special issue of the journal *Poétique*, edited by Tzvetan Todorov in 1971, is devoted to him, and his then most important papers in poetics are translated in 1973, and gathered by Todorov at Editions du Seuil in a book entitled *Questions de poétique*, where ROJ gives the first version ("Postscriptum") of what will become the "Retrospect" of his *Selected Writings III*.

The way the French audience greeted Jakobson's work was enthusiastic, and nevertheless opportunistic :

– enthusiastic: in the sixties, French literary and poetic studies (especially in universities) were deeply traditional<sup>2</sup> (the man and his work). Lots of people (both teachers and students) were very excited to hear that, as opposed to what they had learnt at the Sorbonne, a poem is made out of actual language<sup>3</sup>. Enthusiasm was also expressed by linguists, who hoped that poetics would provide them with means of asserting their field, at a time where linguistics was quite seldom taught in French universities ;

– opportunistic: ROJ's non-restrictive conception of linguistics and language studies served quite perfectly the purposes of those people who were then trying to establish a new structuralist "school of thought" regarding linguistics as a pilot-science. For many years, ROJ will be (wrongly) regarded by French structuralists as a faithful disciple of Saussure. And I believe that even though French non-linguist structuralists thought of themselves as followers of Saussure, their use of linguistic concepts was more influenced by ROJ's ideas than by Saussure's, for reasons I will return to below; the opportunistic motivation of French non-linguists-structuralists in their reading of ROJ is confirmed by the fact that they obviously only read some of his work, selected for no clear reasons, and read it in a quite superficial way.

This enthusiastic opportunism is revealed by the way "LP" was published and acknowledged in France : its translation only took three years, a remarkable fact in a country where translations are known to be scarce and slow ; it immediately got a number of excellent reviews by fashionable intel-

2 Jakobson frequently labels "causerie" this type of informal literary teaching.

3 Of course, this realization shows a certain lack of information on their part, considering the numerous works on poetry published at the end of the XIXth century and the beginning of the XXth, by literary theoreticians (e.g. Potebnia and then Russian Formalists, among them Tynianov), and by poets like Novalis, Mallarmé and Valéry. But it surely takes more time to teachers than to poets to admit the new. On the influence of these works on Jakobson, see e.g. Winner, 1975. This does not mean that poetry is only language.

lectuals (e.g. Roland Barthes, among many others, e.g. 1978<sup>4</sup>); some of Jakobson's proposals were mechanically applied as recipes for text analysis, even in highschools and colleges...

"LP", however, is still discussed nowadays, as shown by recent interesting but sometimes critical papers. Negative reviews start coming out in the early seventies, and ROJ replied to the first ones in a very abrupt way, in the "Retrospect" of his Selected Writings III (1981, first published in French in 1973). Among the latest reviews, the most radical ones seem to be Ruwet (1989), and Dominicy (1988, 1991).

## 2. The link between poetics and linguistics

Most of the linguistic theories of the twentieth century, either are not interested at all in poetry and poetics, or considerer them as particular deviations, as something "more" in the scope of a theory of language, with which the linguist as such has nothing to do.

From this point of view, ROJ could be compared with Saussure. Saussure's interest in poetry is only revealed to us by his work on Anagrams. And the way he was interested in Anagrams is completely different from what appears in his work on what was to become the Course in General Linguistics, even though he worked on both subjects during partly the same time in his life (he worked on Anagrams between 1906 and 1909, and taught the Course from 1907 to 1911). Anyway, there is not the slightest concept which is common in the two approaches, and even some concepts, like "linearity of the signifier", are handled in contradictory ways in both works : in the Course, it is asserted, and in the Anagrams, it is refuted (Gadet, 1987)<sup>5</sup>.

Jakobson's point of view is completely different : very early in his life, he declared it was through an intimate frequentation of poetry that the idea of the phoneme came to his mind, more especially so when, first arriving in Czechoslovakia, he was confronted with really hearing the difference between Russian and Czech verse (among others, Jakobson and Pomorska, 1980).

For my present purpose, I shall summarize "LP" by three points, which I am going to do through very well-known quotations :

1) "poetics deals with problems of verbal structure", so it "may be regarded as an integral part of linguistics" ;

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4 "Roman Jakobson nous a fait un cadeau merveilleux : il a donné la linguistique aux artistes". "Il a donné l'art aux linguistes"... would have been no more and no less meaningful.

5 ROJ seems to prefer the Saussure of the Anagrams to the thinker of the Course. He always was very critical toward the linearity of the signifier and the arbitrariness of the sign, to which he preferred motivation and iconicity. See e.g. Jakobson and Waugh, 1979.

2) poetry can be considered as bringing into play a "poetic function"<sup>6</sup>, distinct in particular of the three major linguistic functions (referential or denotative or cognitive, emotive or expressive, and conative). In such a frame, poetic function is characterized as bringing "focus on the message for its own sake", being "autotelic", in a way not necessarily exclusive, but anyhow "dominant". ROJ writes : "The set (Einstellung) toward the message as such, focus on the message for its own sake, is the poetic function of language." ;

3) as for the "empirical linguistic criterion of the poetic function", it can be acknowledged in a frame following the Saussurean model and opposing, on the one hand, "selection" on the paradigmatic axis, "produced on the basis of equivalence, similarity and dissimilarity, synonymy and antonymy", and, on the other hand, "combination" on the syntagmatic axis, "the build-up of the sequence", "based on contiguity". And there comes the probably most frequently quoted sentence of the text : "The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination".

A striking fact in "LP" is that ROJ's approach starts out as functionalist, and ends up as formalist, without his making many attempts to explain this switch of point of view ; the readers have to sort out this problem on their own.

Except for the first pages, the core of the text is formalist. This discrepancy between function and form involves some problems :

- The definition of functions requires the notion of teleology, understood as an intentionality. This is nothing new in 1960 : it is already so within the Prague Theses of 1929<sup>7</sup> (and even before), and constitutes one of the sharpest differences with Saussure (who can be considered as anti-teleologist) ; see Fontaine (1974) ;

- The formalist definition, the most detailed and perhaps the most interesting, does not necessarily proceed from the functional definition ;

- Shall we consider that to every function, there will correspond some precise formal property ?

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6 Jakobson's teleological point of view is one of the keys of his linguistic conceptions, expressed through the notion of function, from the formalist period in Moscow to the very end of his life (notion which is completely different from the Saussurian formulation of structuralism). From the first model, adopted from Bühler, with three functions, to the formulation of "LP", with six functions, the difference is not such a big one, and the first formulations of a poetic function, in *Novejšaja russkaja poezija* (1919-1921) appear to be very close to those of "LP". See Fontaine, 1974.

7 "La langue est un système de moyens d'expressions appropriés d'un but" says the first Prague Thesis (1929), a few lines below "l'intention du sujet parlant est l'explication qui se présente le plus aisément et qui est la plus naturelle".

As for the relationships between poetics and linguistics, ROJ's thesis, which was to be felt as an utmost requirement, can be summarized by two complementary phrases I borrow from Jean-Claude Milner (1982): "Nothing in poetry is foreign to language" on the one hand; and on the other: "No language can be completely understood and analyzed without taking its poetry into account".

ROJ views poetics as a primary field of research: the general feeling is that his linguistics was highly influenced by his love for poetry, even though some points of the relationships between the two have to be revisited.

### 3. Symmetry devices in Jakobson poetics and linguistics

Ruwet (1981) tries to make ROJ's proposals more explicit: he shows that, for him, poetry is organized in a dual way. Of course, it obeys the grammatical rules of a language: rules of grammar and rules of discourse and text, governing different kinds of relationships and combinations; another specific principle is superimposed upon the first one, what he calls "equivalence"<sup>8</sup>: in the part of the definition which is formalist, the major key of Jakobson's building in poetics relies on equivalence.

In poetics, equivalence involves repetition or recurrence, organized in symmetries or parallelisms, and it appears on different levels and in different ways, according to different poetic traditions: either identity (equality), or contrast relationships. Some are explicitly given, through obligatory rules, which can be different from one culture to the other; and some are not obligatory. Aspects of obligatory metrical phenomena, on the phonetic and phonologic levels, are metric organization<sup>9</sup> (number and/or form of syllables), rime, the organization of the poem in stanzas; aspects of non-obligatory structures are paronomasia, alliteration and perhaps sound symbolism... On the grammatical level, parallelism is most of the time not obligatory, but its relevance is quite obvious (word order, syntactic structure, the same nature of the categories in similar grammatical positions...). For example, no grammatical parallelism is explicit in French versification rules, but it nevertheless plays a role, e.g. in poems of Baudelaire, Verlaine or Mallarmé.

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8 For at least part of this conception, it is not far from the Russian formalist notion of "prijom" ("device" in English, "procédé" in French). Jakobson was probably closer to it in the first part of his life. See Winner, 1975.

9 It has been noticed that ROJ's theory of metrics is weak. Of course, metrics is not ignored; but there are implications of his relative silence, in the way he conceives the interaction between syntactic and metric structuration; except if we consider that it is what he tries to do through the interesting but not very explicit notion of "frustrated or defeated expectation". See Ruwet, 1989.

Because it links together a large variety of linguistic phenomena, the notion of parallelism is a crucial one, and it brought about a real revolution in the study of poetics. ROJ is even tempted to see the essence of poetics in this single device of equivalence, as he writes in 1966: "we must consistently draw all inferences from the obvious fact that on every level of language the essence of poetic artifice consists in recurrent returns".

In linguistics, equivalence is bound to the only Saussurean concept ROJ never criticized, difference<sup>10</sup>; more specifically, it is related to the Saussurean opposition between two axes, the associative axis and the syntagmatic axis: ROJ, following Saussure on this point, considered as an important and general property of language, the fact that it is organized via selection and combination. But, generalizing Saussure's analysis, he progressively broadened the scope to a series of binary oppositions: two types of aphasia, and two types of figures, metonymy and metaphor; poetry arises from selection, similarity and metaphor.

Ruwet (1981) acknowledges the importance of equivalence for analyzing the underlying structure of a poem, for underlining some decisive although often very subtle meaning effects, for explaining some syntactic deviations (the so-called "poetic deviations"), and for understanding why it is so difficult to translate poetry. But he, however, emphasizes that "those linguistic levels where equivalence devices work in the most obvious way are surface levels (phonetics, phonology, morphology, and surface-structure syntax)".

If this projection of equivalence relationships on sequentiality involves only superficial linguistic levels, then other types of linguistic relationships are not really taken into account. In particular, the place devoted to syntax is very limited, apart from syntactic parallelisms, which are described in a simplistic and mostly traditional way (Ruwet says "taxinomic")<sup>11</sup>.

This problem is bound to the reduction of linguistic analysis to the two axes, syntagm and paradigm. At the time he wrote "LP", ROJ was surely not the only one to consider that a language could be exhaustively described through such a conception, but after another thirty years of syntactic research, from various points of view, we can now be sure that it is impossible not to suppose more abstract levels of representation, whatever they are.

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10 The relationship of Jakobson to Saussure's concepts is not a simple one. See Jakobson, 1975, where he criticizes in particular the concept of linearity of the signifier, and the "Retrospect" of Selected Writings II (1971), where all Saussurian concepts are sharply criticized, at a time where Jakobson went on proclaiming his interest in Saussure's work (in other circumstances, e.g. in conferences held at the Collège de France in Paris, in 1972).

11 Jakobson's empirical descriptions are quite convincing, however it can be argued that the sets of equivalences he brings out do not constitute a system of equivalence.

Dominicy (1988) shows that there is a confusion about the conception of "paradigmatic relationships". When Saussure first defined what he calls "association", the class is for him very broad, showing several kinds of relationships (enseignement: enseigner, apprentissage, changement, clément). The structuralist tradition then narrowed it into the notion of "paradigm", which selects only "the elements which can commute in one particular syntagmatic environment" (Dominicy, 1988). ROJ is a structuralist among the others<sup>12</sup>, and is thus led to consider as prominent those parallelisms which also fit in a paradigmatic class, and most of the time bear a semantic relationship (synonymy or antonymy). Consequently, the risk is to lose the poetic specificity into metalinguistic properties of the language.

The predominance of these symmetry principles, and the temptation to define them in a kind of geometric formulation, can surely be related to the importance ROJ always acknowledged to symmetry notions. This importance has often been emphasized as well in his conception of general linguistics. Very early, he was deeply inspired by symmetry. It's through it that he made his most important phonological discoveries: between 1927 and 1929, in close relationship with Trubetzkoy (see Jakobson 1975), he defined such notions as opposition, correlation, archiphoneme, marked and unmarked, and neutralization: some of them emphasize symmetry, some of them absence of symmetry. Later, he will be fascinated by binarism, according to which every phoneme can be analyzed into distinctive features, which constitute the purest instantiation of symmetry (a bare property, with a positive or negative value).

Later on (in the thirties), he will extend this kind of analysis to grammatical categories: cases, double structures and especially shifters, the analysis of Russian inflected verbs...

Is it possible to generalize ROJ's liking to symmetry, and to say, as Todorov proposes to do (1984), that his mind was attracted by Sameness (parallelism, metaphor, iconicity), a fact which Todorov proposes to interpret as an inheritance of Romanticism? In one of his last papers (1981), ROJ writes "To conclude, I avow that binary solutions attract me".

"Parallelism" should therefore be considered together with the other ingredients of his terminology, which are also effects of this "acknowledgement of symmetry in languages" which Milner (1982) regards, in a positive way, as the ultimate explanation of the unity of ROJ's multi-facet work, and which Genette (1976), more negatively, calls "obsession of symmetry".

So, it appears that, for ROJ, the link between phonology, grammar and poetics is not a mere matter of level hierarchy. Something is common to all of them: the presence of regularities and symmetries. For him, analyzing a poem

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12 The confusion can still be seen in Jakobson and Pomorska, 1980.



is not very different from analyzing a language, and both activities can be accomplished with the same methods : the search for the symmetries underlying the perceptible forms.

### Conclusion : On totalisation

A number of scholars have emphasized the fact that Jakobson's theory of poetics is disappointingly a partial failure. This is the case for linguists, who couldn't figure out the limits of these parallelisms ; this is also true for literature specialists, who often were not absolutely convinced by the results of the practical studies<sup>13</sup>, and who, sooner or later, gave them up and came back to tradition. As time goes, the comments made on "LP" seem to become more and more critical. This probably means that this text, which played a real intellectual role in the beginning, is now considered as out of date. This is exemplified by Ruwet's comments, much more critical in 1989 than they were in 1975.

If the question "What makes a verbal message a work of art ? " (and "what is literature ?" or more specifically "what is poetry ?") is a good one, then ROJ contradicts himself when he favourably reports Mayakovski's words that "any adjective appearing in a poem [is] thereby a poetic epithet". Which means that poeticity (or literarity) does not lie in the forms themselves, and that Jakobson's attitude can be viewed as "linguistic imperialism" (Dominicy, 1991).

ROJ cannot solve this problem without proceeding to the notion of function, and without making reference to the Husserlian notion of "intention". Trying to locate the difference between true poetic messages from true poets, and slogans like I like Ike, he resorts to the notion of "dominant" function. By doing so, he quite surprisingly seems to go back to some aesthetic norms we would have thought to be incompatible with his own way of thinking.

Dominicy (1991) suggests that there really is something like a "poetic intention", that ROJ unfortunately tried to define through a "poetische Einstellung" and mistook for the form of the message. We must evaluate here the phenomenological roots of ROJ<sup>14</sup>.

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13 See e.g. Culler (1975), who considers that all poems can be analyzed by the parallelism method ; in contrast, Genette (1976) believes that this approach cannot apply to some poets. Baudelaire's poem "Les chats" was so often the object of comments (obviously after Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss's paper), that it was possible to edit a book gathering lot of these papers (Delcroix and Geerts, 1980).

14 References to the Husserlian thought are constantly present in ROJ's work. See Holenstein, 1974.

“Linguista sum, linguistici nihil a me alienum puto”, ROJ liked to define himself through this well-known adaptation of Terence’s formula. Which can be reported in two ways: totalisation of language, or, more negatively, linguistic imperialism.

This “imperialism” of Jakobson’s linguistics is, I believe, the reason why many French-speaking structuralists, who were most of the time not linguists, preferred his universal theory of Language to Saussure’s restrictive model, whose dichotomies were precisely contrived to exclude a number of peripheral aspects from the field of linguistic studies.

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## LA SYMÉTRIE EN PHONOLOGIE, GRAMMAIRE ET POÉTIQUE

Cet article étudie, à partir de la réception en France, la façon dont la poétique jakobsonienne (spécialement telle qu'exposée dans "Linguistique et Poétique") est révélatrice à la fois des qualités et des limites de la théorie linguistique de Jakobson.

On montre que Jakobson, dans le rôle qu'il accorde à l'équivalence et à la recherche des parallélismes, est spécialement sensible à des notions soulignant la symétrie dans la langue, comme il l'est en définissant les notions d'opposition, corrélation, archiphonème, marqué et non marqué, neutralisation et le binarisme. Type d'analyse qui n'est pas sans conséquences sur la conception de la langue, dont le faible développement de la syntaxe.

Le parallélisme est donc à voir comme une clef de l'organisation de la pensée de Jakobson et de sa position de totalisation linguistique.