

Russian 607
Slavic Contributions to Linguistics
Tulane University
Fall 2004

Topic: Jakobson and Chomsky in the Battle for Linguistic Theory

Geo. Cummins

Office: Newcomb 305C (865-5276); gcummins@tulane.edu

M 11-12, T 1-2, W 11:40-12:30 and by appointment

Website: www.tulane.edu/~gcummins; select Russian 607.

Course Description

This course is designed for (1) Russian students interested in the structure and theory of Russian linguistics (2) non-Russianists interested in learning more about formal (Chomsky) as well as empirical (Jakobson) approaches to language theory (3) all students interested in Prague School structuralism, Russian Formalism, Prague and Moscow semiotics, acoustic distinctive features, semiotics of markedness theory (4) combinations of the above. Students are *not* required to have a background in any one of these areas, but ought to bring at least *one* of the following to their study: (a) some knowledge of Russian or other Slavic language, or some knowledge of German (b) some knowledge of formal linguistic theory (c) curiosity about kinds of theory about language and literature. Works by Roman Jakobson, the premier exponent of Slavics in the past century, will be our first focus, followed by study of the thought of Chomsky.

Texts

The following texts are available at the bookstore for this course.

1. RJ (=Roman Jakobson). 1972 (and other editions). *Child Language, Aphasia, and Phonological Universals*. The Hague: Mouton.
2. RJ. 1956 (and later editions). *Fundamentals of Language*. The Hague: Mouton.
3. Cook, Vivian, and Mark Newson. *Chomsky's Universal Grammar. An Introduction*. 2nd edition. 1996. Oxford: Blackwell.
4. Haegeman, Liliane. 1991 (and later editions). *Introduction to Government and Binding Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell. [NB: not available]
5. NC (=Noam Chomsky). 1993. "A Minimalist Program for Linguistic Theory." In K. Hale and S. J. Keyser (eds.) *The View from Building 20*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1-52. [NB: not available, too difficult]

6. RJ. 1984. Waugh, Linda and Morris Halle, eds. *Russian and Slavic Grammar*. The Hague: Mouton.

Goals and Methodology

I see the first three-quarters of this course as readings and discussions of classic texts (and, in the case of Chomsky, analyses of his thought). We will have regular assignments and questions to prepare for discussion. The last quarter of the course will be devoted to individual readings and, mainly, the preparation of a course-final presentation on a topic derived from our own individual work, in progress.

Note: 1) this presentation may, but *need not be*, derived from or directly related to the readings of Jakobson and Chomsky 2) this presentation should represent the individual on-going research — outside of this course — of the student 3) this presentation should in some (small, tangential) way explicitly address *the theoretical relationship of your study to Jakobson or Chomsky*.

Throughout the course I will present some problems and solutions to language theory problems. Students will give brief progress reports on their emerging talks. At the term's end, each student will give a presentation (forty minutes to one hour).

For each reading assignment I will provide some notes and helps, explanations of terminology, and the like. Everything will be posted online at my site under Russian 607.

We will have weekly announced quizzes on the readings, no midterm, no final. Final grade will be based on quizzes (30%), class discussion and attendance, (20%), and presentation (50%).

Further Remarks on the Course

Readings will be brief and small in volume, but they are immensely difficult. Do not be concerned if you do not understand the readings at first. I will be giving you aids and explanations and I will tell you everything you need to know as we work. Do not worry.

Roman Jakobson (1896-1982) is the greatest linguist of the past century, maybe of all time. He read more in linguistics than any person ever in history and knew more than anyone. Above that, of course, he saw himself as a scientist dedicated to the discovery of the truths of language function in all of its aspects. It took me a good two to three years before I had a glimmering sense of what he was about — and I had to figure it out, as he was my teacher. Today it is fashionable in Slavics no longer to accept as gospel his every word, but it is the fact that he inspired us, all of us, and we were *all* his students, and our students are his. Many of his

doctrines are no longer accepted: the theory of acoustic distinctive features, for example, is discarded as such. Yet the seminal notion of feature and grid is all-pervasive in linguistics, although the notion *feature* is now different from the binary or ternary notations of Jakobson. The cardinal principles of Jakobsonian theory, derived from phenomenology, include the search for *function* in all varieties of language. For that reason he held to the *phoneme*, acoustically rooted in the socio-psychological reality of speech.

Jakobson inspired us to write. He told us that his teacher Shaxmatov said: *knigi ne chitajutsja, ix nado pisat'* 'books don't merely get read by themselves, they have to be written'. He told us to get going and we would find our own way to discovery.

At the same time I was learning Jakobson, I was also working with Chomsky, who told me that there was no need for a *phoneme* or a *morphophoneme*. He told me to go home and think of more examples to test the rules he was working on. He told me to disregard 'data' in the old sense and construct English examples which would shed light on the very structure of the *theory* itself. I was supposed to go into a room and reason my way into the universal grammar of Language. Chomsky is still working on in Building 20 at MIT, and his every thought influences the movement of contemporary formal linguistic theory.

And Jakobson was *his* teacher. RJ's 1948 article "Russian Conjugation" was the first formal or generative study in linguistics. Chomsky dedicated the book he was writing (*The Sound Pattern of English*) — the one I was supposed to think of examples for — to Jakobson. (Jakobson of course did not agree with the book.) Our motto: *Linguisticus sum et nihil linguisticum a me alienum puto.*

It was a heady and exciting time, the late 60's and early 70's. The thought of the period has written itself into the annals of the history of science.

Schedule of Readings

This syllabus is subject to change. We may have to take Jakobson more slowly. Please point out any errors I have made.

Week One. Tuesday, August 31.

Introduction. Remarks on *Fundamentals of Language*. Distinctive feature theory. Aphasia. Similarity disorder and contiguity disorder.

Week Two. September 7.

Discussion of *Fundamentals of Language*.