
NEWS OF THE PROFESSION

ROMAN JAKOBSON, 1896–1982

Roman Jakobson, our most creative and productive Slavist, died on July 18, 1982. He was a major force in shaping American studies in Slavic languages and literatures. The foundations had been laid by Leo Wiener and Samuel H. Cross at Harvard and by George R. Noyes at Berkeley but it was Jakobson's originality, scholarly vision, drive, and example that set the tone and the pace in the crucial two decades after 1946, when American universities finally recognized the need for solid programs not only in Russian, but also in other Slavic languages.

Born in Moscow, on October 11, 1896, Jakobson received degrees from the Lazarev Institute of Oriental Languages and Moscow University. From his earliest student days he was passionately engaged in discussions of current linguistics and poetry, seeking out patterns of sound and meaning. Intimate with Maiakovskii and well acquainted with other major writers, he was a founder of the Moscow Linguistic Circle, where the incipient theories of formalist analysis of language and literature were being developed.

In 1920 he went with the Soviet Mission to Czechoslovakia, where he immersed himself in the study of all phases of Czech literature and language and quickly became friendly with vanguard Czech intellectuals. An early result was his groundbreaking study of poetic language and form, *O cheshskom stikhe preimushchestvenno v sopostavlenii s russkim*, 1923. Continuing the discussions begun in Moscow, Jakobson and Czech friends founded the Prague Linguistic Circle in 1927. The eight volumes of the *Travaux du Cercle linguistique de Prague* created a comprehensive new approach to linguistics and poetics that profoundly influenced scholarship not only in Slavic, but also in general linguistics and literary analysis. Soon after Maiakovskii's suicide, Jakobson declared himself a *nevozvrashchenets*. Awarded a Ph.D. in Prague in 1930, he found a position in Russian philology and Old Czech in Brno. He maintained close ties with Prague and was a prime mover and organizer in cultural affairs, especially in the publication of the journal *Slovo a slovesnost*.

Fleeing the Nazis in 1939, Jakobson found temporary refuge in Scandinavia. Nothing stopped the flow of his ideas: he wrote his fundamental essay about language acquisition and language loss, *Kindersprache, Aphasie und allgemeine Lautgesetze*, in Stockholm in 1940. He arrived in the United States in 1941, to teach Russian and Czech at the École des Hautes Études, the French university in exile in New York.

Despite Jakobson's European reputation, he was generally ignored in American university circles. It was not until 1946, when the energetic Ernest Simmons undertook to reorganize the Slavic Department at Columbia, that Jakobson found his rightful place as a tenured professor in his adopted country. He moved to Harvard in 1949, and accepted a joint appointment at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1957. He became emeritus at Harvard in 1967 and at MIT in 1970.

Jakobson was a cofounder of the Linguistic Society of New York and its journal *Word*. Later he was the moving spirit behind the *International Journal of Slavic Linguistics and Poetics*.

Jakobson was a brilliant lecturer and an inspiring teacher. No lecture was ever repeated, for each was directed to a specific audience for whom he shaped his presentation. His knowledge, enthusiasm, and theatrical sense imbued his words with an immediacy that seized the attention even of the student of literature who reluctantly attended lectures on such topics as the history of the Russian language only because the course was required. His Columbia courses were scheduled in the evening, and the room was always filled to overflowing, because many Russian émigrés, resident in New York or just

passing through, came to listen. He was able to draw from visitors and students alike questions and comments that he skillfully wove into the fabric of his discourse, effectively welding the audience together as participants in his creative act of teaching. Whether speaking to a small group of friends in an informal academic circle, giving a regular lecture to students, or delivering a summary report on the current state of knowledge about some topic to a crammed auditorium at an international conference, he invariably held his audience spellbound. He always brought in the latest ideas, but even when he was presenting absolutely traditional views found in standard textbooks, his intense concern made every point seem dazzlingly new.

Jakobson believed that scholarly writing should be “maximally non-redundant” — every word, every phrase must be fully endowed with precise meaning finely calculated to communicate the complete and exact meaning required. He compressed into minimal space brilliant new theories and explanations of vast bodies of facts; not every reader was able to follow his drastically condensed argumentation. His 118-page *Remarques sur l'évolution phonologique du russe comparée à celle des autres langues slaves* of 1929 is at the same time a radically innovative view of language structure and concomitant theory of historical phonology and an exemplification of the new approach. Its remarkable new insights into Russian and Slavic linguistic history escaped many readers and became known and appreciated only very slowly.

Jakobson's major contributions to general linguistic theory were illustrated by Slavic examples. Students of Slavic linguistics thus found themselves learning the basic facts of Slavic languages in terms of entirely new theory, while non-Slavists found it valuable to learn Slavic in order to understand just what Jakobson was doing. His students were automatically in the vanguard of new ideas as linguists, Slavists, and analysts of the structural problems of linguistic art.

A list of Roman Jakobson's principal fields would include general phonology, all aspects of Russian, comparative and historical Slavic linguistics, metrics and poetic form, folklore and mythology (with special reference to epic), along with special areas such as Old Czech literature, the *Slovo o polku Igoreve*, and Paleo-Siberian languages. Many of his important contributions do not fit neatly into any of these slots. Five volumes of his *Selected Works* have appeared, and the last two are nearly ready for publication. His students — and their students — at scholarly institutions all over the world will long continue to ponder and elaborate Jakobsonian concepts of structure and patterning in language and other domains of human communication and social organization.

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ARCADIUS KAHAN, 1920–1982

Arcadius Kahan died on February 26, 1982 at the age of sixty-two. At the time of his death he was professor in the departments of economics and history and in the College of the University of Chicago. He came to the University of Chicago in 1955 as a research associate. His entire academic career was spent at Chicago, though he held visiting appointments at the London School of Economics, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Helsinki University, and École des Hautes Études.

He was born in Vilno, Poland and studied law and economics at the Stefan Batory University and at the Free University of Warsaw. His graduate work in economics was at Rutgers University, where he received his M.A. degree in 1954 and his Ph.D. in 1958.

Arcadius was the author of numerous articles about Soviet agriculture and the agricultures of Eastern Europe. He also contributed significantly to a variety of other subject matters, including the history of famines in Russia and the history of prices based