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Jacobson's Circles

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Abstract

Russian philologist Roman Jakobson (1896–1982) incubated his ideas within a sequence of "Circles", self-consciously established groups of scholars who crossed institutional affiliations to discuss shared interests and support each others' (and sometimes, the group's communal) work. Jakobson's experiences within various Circles differed: those in Moscow and Prague provided a stimulating context for social and intellectual exchange, which was valuable to the gregarious Jakobson. During his years in Scandinavia, Jakobson's professional contacts supported him politically and even economically, mitigating his experiences of forced serial exile. On immigrating to the U.S., he co-founded a Linguistic Circle of New York. But this last Jakobsonian Circle never recaptured the collegiality of Moscow or Prague. After he moved to Harvard in 1949, his activities expanded beyond the university to a joint appointment at MIT. Jakobson moved between the two institutions, although in his last 30 years he worked outside a formal "Circle" of colleagues.

Introduction

Russian philologist Roman Jakobson led a long, adventurous, and productive life. A striking feature of his career was his avid participation in a succession of locally-based, extra-institutionally organized groups, or "Circles", of language and literary scholars. Until his early 50s, Jakobson moved repeatedly from place to place. With each move, he found and befriended a new cohort of peers, with whom he collaborated, compared ideas, and reveled in intense conversation about language and literature. He was a leader in all the Circles in which he moved from adolescence onwards: the famous Moscow Linguistic Circle; the Prague Linguistic Circle, a major influence on the history of phonology and mid-twentieth century functionalist linguistics; and the Linguistic Circle of New York. In addition, Jakobson lectured repeatedly to the Copenhagen Linguistic Circle, under whose auspices he first escaped from Nazi persecution. Curiously, however, after Jakobson's final move from New York to Massachusetts in 1949, he spent the last three decades of his career working outside of any local Circle. Based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, he was affiliated with both Harvard and MIT; he maintained a vast network of friends and professional and institutional connections; traveled extensively as a guest lecturer and visiting professor; and participated in national and international groups of many kinds. But Jakobson never attempted to create a "Cambridge Linguistic Circle".

Table 1 summarizes Jakobson's participation in linguistic Circles in chronological order from 1915 until 1950, when he apparently abandoned that pattern of personal and professional fraternization.

[@@Insert Table 1 here]

My key sources consist of: biographical texts; Jakobson's several published reflections on his intellectual development; materials produced by and about the various Circles he participated in; and the rich resources of the Jakobson archives, housed at MIT, which collect his correspondence and papers.

Moscow

It is probably fair to say that Jakobson's experience in the Moscow Linguistic Circle established precedents that affected his working habits for life. At 18, an age when he was susceptible to the glamour of vigorous intellectual debate, Jakobson was the youngest of several students who established the Moscow Circle. Its first meeting was held in his parents' dining room. He served as President until he left Moscow for Prague in 1920. Reminiscing 60 years later, Jakobson described the group as "an association of young explorers" who inquired into "the burning questions of linguistics, conceived as the science devoted to language in its various functions, including first and foremost the analysis of poetic language" (1979: 279–280). Jakobson was then a student in the Historico-Philosophical Faculty of Moscow University. In the summers he and other Circle members conducted urban fieldwork by collecting dialect and ethnographic data in the vicinity of Moscow. Meetings of the Circle were taken up in lively discussion of their findings, and "arguments about the place and limits of empiricism…the role of semantics in the science of language"; the phenomenology of language; and distinctions between poetic and practical language (Jakobson 1979: 281). Poets and avant-garde writers associated with the literary movement Futurism attended as guests and presented their work for analysis by the group. The wider cultural context included Cubism, Einstein's theory of relativity, and the

accomplishments of James Joyce, Igor Stravinsky, and Le Corbusier (Jakobson 1971b: 631–632), all of which fueled debate and stimulated new ideas about language and literature. Moreover, close at hand were the giant social-political transformations of early twentieth-century Russia. Jakobson variously depicted the meetings of the Circle as "animated", "heated", and "vehement" (1965/1971a: 532–3); overall he wrote "those were impassioned times" (1992:12). The Moscow Circle must have been a heady environment for young people to articulate and to test their own intellectual commitments, within a group whose strong internal ties buffered them against an external setting of rapid, threatening, cultural and political change.

Prague

In 1920, with the Moscow Circle still in its heyday, Jakobson moved to Prague in search of wider horizons. According to a transcript of a 1973 French radio interview, within weeks of his arrival, Jakobson met Professor of English at Charles University Vilém Mathesius (1882–1945). When he regaled Mathesius with stories of the Moscow Circle, Jakobson quoted Mathesius as responding that such a group was also needed in Prague, because "for us Czechs…we become bold ('*hardi*') when working collectively. It's necessary for our work. But at present it's too early. What is needed is a number of young people who understand" (Archives Box 36/Fol. 23: 7). By 1926 apparently the time was ripe to launch a Prague Linguistic Circle. The first meeting, attended by Mathesius, Jakobson, and four others, was held in Mathesius' study. A visiting German scholar presented a paper comparing the communicative capacities of European languages (Mathesius 1966: 140). The group set up more meetings, which quickly accelerated in frequency. Members took

turns presenting their work, although visitors from abroad also contributed.

It was an external event, however, that famously cemented the group's solidarity. In 1928, the Catholic University of Nijmegen hosted the First International Congress of Linguists in The Hague. Organizers asked attendees to respond in advance and in writing to six questions about fundamental methods in the study of language. Members of the Prague Circle discovered that their individual responses converged, and moreover that their stance in general and their reservations about the Neogrammarians were congenial to some of Saussure's former colleagues in Geneva. With that, Mathesius proposed a collaborative presentation to the Congress of the two groups' shared positions. The Prague contingent returned from The Hague exhilarated, with new self-consciousness that they were developing an ideology that highlighted the relationship of language form to function, and that applied linguistic theory in literary analysis. With Jakobson at center stage, they began to publicize their ideas locally and at scholarly meetings throughout Europe. By the group's tenth anniversary, Mathesius wrote with obvious satisfaction that internationally, they had earned a reputation as the "Prague School" while domestically, they had brought "many fresh impulses to Czech linguistic and literary theory" (1966: 149).

Jakobson appears to have found ideal working conditions at the center of the Prague Linguistic Circle. The group provided a context for developing and refining his ideas, which came to influence others in ways that he found satisfying. As in Moscow, Jakobson thrived on stimulating give-and-take. It is striking that photographs of Jakobson from the Prague period show him conversing, drinking, or interacting playfully with colleagues, often while standing or sitting so close together as to lean on or touch them (Toman 1995: 134ff; Jakobson 1992: 192ff; Baran *et al.*, 1990: 204). The political situation deteriorated steeply in the 1930s, but

fortified as he had been earlier through the fellowship of the Moscow Circle, Jakobson was in his element professionally within the Prague Circle. Jakobson's friend Jaroslav Seifert (1901–1986) recalled that when the two men met by chance in the train station as Jakobson fled Czechoslovakia in 1939, Jakobson told him "I was glad to live in this country and I was happy here too" (Toman 1995: 238).

Copenhagen and Scandinavia

Meanwhile, linguists from Denmark who had met Jakobson and his colleagues at conferences decided in 1931 to try to replicate the Prague Circle. They modeled the Linguistic Circle of Copenhagen on the Prague group in several ways: it was officially autonomous (although most members were affiliated with the University of Copenhagen); meetings were held in homes or offices and comprised the presentation of papers followed by discussion; the group's membership was small and its organizational hierarchy minimal; participation was by a member's own initiative, outside any institutional superstructure. When the University of Copenhagen hosted the Fourth International Congress of Linguists in 1936, Jakobson introduced a plenary session. Over the next two years he tried to bring the Prague and Copenhagen Circles together to co-sponsor a new journal. But with the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1939, he had to abandon the idea of a joint publication.

As the Nazis closed in on the Czech universities, Jakobson was dismissed from his faculty position in Brno, and went into hiding. Through connections forged between the Prague and Copenhagen Circles, he arranged a way out of the country, by soliciting an invitation to lecture at the University of Copenhagen. Jakobson then spent two years moving repeatedly to evade capture, assisted by his colleagues in Denmark,

Norway, and Sweden. In accounts of his Scandinavian odyssey, what stands out is Jakobson's robust preoccupation with linguistic and literary issues amidst inhospitable circumstances, and his dependence on a dense network of personal relationships. For example, Jakobson wrote that he arrived in Oslo on 1 September 1939, the official first day of World War II. Unperturbed, he immediately joined "a close-knit group of Norwegian linguists" and initiated an ambitious collaborative project, a phonological atlas of the world (Jakobson & Pomorska 1983: 37–38). Moreover, Jakobson conceived, researched, wrote, presented, and published one of his most distinctive works, *Child Language, Aphasia, and Phonological Universals*, while repeatedly moving one step ahead of the Nazis, aided by friends and colleagues. Therefore even during the unsettled interval in Scandinavia, cut off from participation in an organized literary-linguistic Circle, Jakobson nevertheless re-created the core attributes of that experience, doggedly pursuing his scholarly work within a context of intensive interdependence with his peers.

New York

In 1941 Jakobson immigrated to New York. He left behind both much of his reputation as a scholar, and the social networks that had supported his intellectual growth. In America, he struggled to find employment, and to recreate the collegial environment in which he felt at home. Unsurprisingly, once he got his bearings Jakobson tried to draw others together into a working group on the familiar model. By design, the Linguistic Circle of New York of 1943 shared many attributes of the Moscow and Prague groups: a focus on language and literature; a local orientation, delimited by association with the host city; voluntary membership not tied institutional affiliation; relatively flat hierarchical

structure; meetings dominated by presentation and discussion of members' and guests' original works; and, soon, a house publication. However, Jakobson's integration into American professional life was difficult. He arrived among other wartime academic refugees, whose numbers and cultural assumptions threatened the U.S. disciplinary status quo (Hall 1975: 105–107; 138–148). Moreover, Jakobson's by then well-developed linguistic ideology, honed through his peregrinations in Europe, fit poorly with the categories of American structuralist linguistics. In particular, some scholars evinced skepticism about Jakobson's investment in language universals. Others considered Prague School functionalism teleological and therefore inappropriate in a descriptive linguistics (Hymes & Fought 1981: 175).

Either because of, or despite, Jakobson's leadership, the Linguistic Circle of New York grew. However for Jakobson it never recaptured the value or the collegiality of Moscow or Prague. He started out as co-Vice President in 1945, but by 1949 receded to one of about 10 members of the Executive Committee. By 1958 Jakobson's name disappeared from the list of officers. His last publication in *Word* dates to 1955. There are also explicit signs of trouble. Jakobson's papers include a letter dated 23 May 1955 from then-Vice President of the New York Circle Elliot V.K. Dobbie (Archives Box 2/Fol. 12). Dobbie bluntly rebuked Jakobson for a letter Jakobson had apparently sent to the Executive Committee, which Dobbie read as containing the threat of a lawsuit over the Circle's decisions to enlarge its Executive Committee and to move production of the journal *Word* to France in order to reduce costs, both changes Jakobson opposed.

Dobbie's letter signals Jakobson's advancing disaffection. Although Jakobson's papers contain no further record of this dispute or its outcome, the letter is not the only evidence that rather than finding the New York Circle a source of professional solidarity, Jakobson became alienated from a group he helped found. In 1965, he published an article

asserting the historical connectedness of the Moscow, Prague, Copenhagen, and New York Circles (and relating them to linguistic circles founded in the 1930s through 1960s in Tokyo, Bratislava, Bucharest, Florence, Padua, and Canberra). When the 1965 article was reprinted in 1971, Jakobson added a bitter postscript commenting on the fact that the Linguistic Circle of New York had changed its name in 1968 to become the "International Linguistic Association" on the grounds that (in the words of then-President Eugene Chang-Rodriguez) it was no longer a mere "circle" in the sense of a "pleasant little group"; and moreover that no relationship now held between the New York group and European linguistic Circles. Jakobson dismissed Chang-Rodriguez's assertions as "pompous" and "ludicrous" (1965/1971: 538). The organization's change of name may have been a turning point for Jakobson, as his papers contain a form letter from the International Linguistic Association dated October 1970, indicating that his dues had been in arrears for two years (Archives Box 6/Fol. 14). It is probably significant that, when Jakobson died 12 years later, *Word* seems not to have published an obituary.

Cambridge

Returning to the historical narrative in 1949, Jakobson removed to Cambridge, Massachusetts to assume a Chair in Slavic at Harvard University. His career went into high gear, with publications, lectures, and honors crowding his *curriculum vitae*. Between 1957 and his retirement from Harvard in 1965, Jakobson held professorships concurrently at Harvard and MIT, as if a single position could not slake his ambition and energy. Ever outgoing, he gave talks, met with students and scholars, hosted friends, attended meetings, and participated in panels

and symposia to almost the end of his life in 1982. But after New York he never cultivated another linguistic Circle.

Jakobson continued, however, to acknowledge the power and efficacy of his earlier experiences. He wrote nostalgically about the Moscow and Prague Circles, depicting them as modern versions of nineteenth-century Russian literary and philosophical groups, which he praised as "dynamic, creative, and flexible" (1965/1971a: 528) intellectual incubators relative to an older, more staid, tradition of academic societies. He listed the hallmarks of such groups:

> Each one of them met in the home or study of its initiators and attempted to maintain an informal atmosphere; each included but a limited number of active, mainly young and identically oriented participants; each favored discussion and was patently opposed to ready-made authoritative doctrines; and each tended to promote some collective acts. (Jakobson 1965/1971a: 528)

The Moscow, Prague, and Copenhagen Circles all exhibited these traits. The New York Circle, less so. For example, while the Moscow, Prague and Copenhagen Circles met informally in members' living rooms, offices, and favorite cafés, the New York Circle favored impersonal institutional settings such as auditoriums. The New York group was much larger, right from the start. It was also older—its first President, Henri F. Muller, was 64 when the group was inaugurated—and its membership was informally stratified into U.S. versus European affiliates. Adherence to an identical orientation was not a characteristic or even an objective of the New York Circle. Rather, Muller (1945) stressed the diversity of outlook and interests of the group in his introduction to the first volume of *WORD*. All four Circles centered on discussion, but whether the New York group was "patently opposed to ready-made authoritative doctrines" is debatable.

Finally, although the Moscow, Prague, and Copenhagen groups produced explicitly collective works, there is no record of a convergent "New York School" of language study.

In short, the New York group stands out among Jakobson's Circles as exhibiting fewer of the defining characteristics of what was for him a key social-intellectual institution. Jakobson once made a list of vices that, happily, he found absent from the Prague Circle—isolationism, scholarly chauvinism, seclusiveness, unchecked "narrow-minded fear of teamwork" (1965/1971a:m534–535). One wonders whether that list comprises a tacit sketch of what, by unfortunate comparison, he felt to be present in New York.

Returning, in conclusion, to the question of why Jakobson never attempted to organize a Cambridge Linguistic Circle, one obvious possibility is that he concluded that he could no longer replicate what had so captivated and inspired him in Moscow and Prague. The New York experience might have led him to believe that the social-cultural preconditions were simply unavailable in post-war America. However, even if New York had proved as disappointment to him, a very different environment obtained in Cambridge. In the 1950s and 1960s Cambridge was the epicenter of the turbulent development of transformational-generative grammar, where (in Jakobson's terms) opposition to ready-made authoritative doctrines ran high; where active, young and "identically oriented" participants abounded, discussed linguistic issues tirelesly, promoted collective acts, and strictly maintained an informal atmosphere (Murray 1994: 225–247; Newmeyer 1986: 17–80; Lakoff 1989). Moreover, in another echo of Moscow and Prague, the 1960s were an era of marked social-cultural change, if not on so dramatic a scale as that of revolutionary Russia or interwar Czechoslovakia. If Jakobson had wanted to create a Cambridge Linguistic Circle, he would have found willing company among those who were not enslaved by (in his terms),

"isolationism, scholarly chauvinism, seclusiveness, [and] narrow-minded fear of teamwork". Therefore Jakobson's failure after 1950 to re-create a Circle on the pattern of his previous initiatives may have less to do with a lack of external opportunity, and more to do with the stages of his life and career. In 1950 he turned 54 years old. Although he remained active and engaged intellectually for many more years, perhaps by then he wanted to consolidate his findings. In an autobiographical account, Jakobson remarked that one of the advantages of his peripatetic years was that "the succession of scientific environments, each with its own interests and local watchwords, allowed me to reformulate my own questions and enlarge their scope" (Jakobson & Pomorska 1983: 35). By the middle of his career, Jakobson's interests may no longer have been best served by reformulating questions and enlarging their scope.

Conclusion

Despite this apparent shift in his working habits from 1950, scholarship remained for Jakobson a kind of team sport to the extent that many of his longest and most important works after moving to Cambridge were co-authored, such as books with former students Morris Halle (b. 1923) and Linda Waugh (b. 1942). In these works, as in all of his oeuvre, a distinctive Jakobsonian voice prevails. One is reminded of the first, famous, manifesto by the Futurist poets whom Jakobson both admired and influenced in his Moscow days. Among other hyperbolic statements the Futurists demanded respect for the right of poets to "stand on the rock of the word 'we'" (Burliuk *et al*., 1912/1988: 52). It is an arresting figure of speech. It asserts both the image of a solitary, heroic, artist or scholar and the image of that individual's rootedness in a community. From within the successive Circles that he built around himself, and even after he

abandoned affiliating himself with a Circle of peers, Jakobson persistently "[stood] on the rock of the word 'we'".

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Table 1: Comparison of the Linguistic Circles of Moscow, Prague, Copenhagen, and New York

	Moscow Linguistic Circle	Prague Linguistic Circle	Linguistic Circle of Copenhagen	Linguistic Circle of New York
DATES	Mar. 1915–24	Oct. 1926–c. 1950	Sept. 1931–	1943–; renamed 'ILA' 1969
JAKOBSON'S ROLE	Co-founder; Pres., 1915–20	Co-founder; founding Vice Pres., 1926–39	Guest lecturer 1936, 1939, 1950, 1964	Co-founder; Vice Pres., 1943–49; Exec. Com., 1943–58
OTHER KEY PARTICIPANTS	P.G. Bogatyrev (1893–1971) N.F. Jakovlev (1892–1974) G.O. Vinokur (1896–1947) V. Majakovskij (1893–1930)	V. Mathesius (1882–1945) B. Havránek (1887–1942) B. Trnka (1895–1984) N.S. Trubetzkoy (1890–1938)	L. Hjelmslev (1899–1965) V. Brøndal (1887–1942) L.L. Hammerich (1892–1975) E. Fischer-Jørgensen (1911-2010)	H.F. Muller (1879–1959) A. Martinet (1908–99) M. Swadesh (1909–67) J. Whatmough (1897–1964)
SIZE	7 founders 1920: 34 active particip.	6 founding members 1930: 17 members	1935: c. 15 active particip. out of c. 50 members	1944: 100 members
INTELLECTUAL ORIENTATION	Futurism; poetics; formalist semiotics; folklore	Prague School functionalism	Structuralism, both that of Hjelmslev & of Brøndal	Muller's introduction to 1st vol. of *WORD* stresses range
FORMATION INSPIRED BY	1830s Russian informal study groups, acc. RJ	Moscow Linguistic Circle	Prague Linguistic Circle	Société linguistique de Paris
LEADERS' AFFILIATIONS; RJ'S CONNECTION	Moscow Univ.; RJ student 1914–18; Res. Assoc. 1918–20	Charles Univ. & German Univ. of Prague; RJ PhD 1930	Univ. of Copenhagen; RJ Hon. PhD 1979	École Libre Hautes Études; RJ Prof. 1942–6; Columbia Univ., Prof. 1946–9; NYU
PUBLICATIONS	———	*Travaux du Cercle ling. de Prague* (1929–); *Slovo a slovesnost* (1935–43; 1947–)	*Bulletin du Cercle ling. de Copenhague* (1934–70) *Travaux du CLC* (1944–) *Acta Linguistica [Hafniensia]* (1937–)	*WORD* (1945–) RJ Ed. Board 1945–49