

Roman Jakobson and the Transition of German Thought to the Structuralist Paradigm

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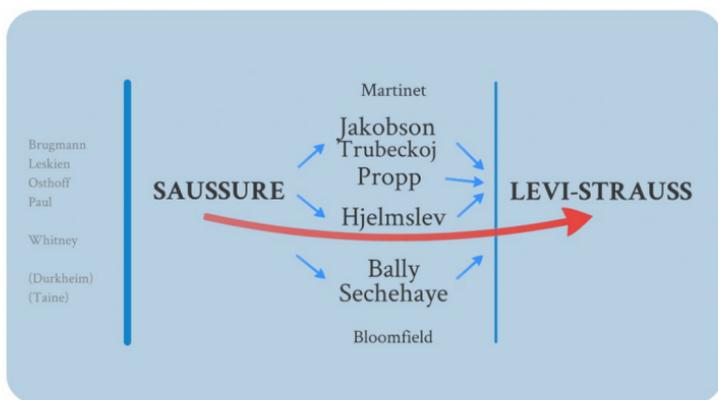
This short paper, rather than providing a thorough analysis of the very broad theme entailed by its title, aims only to programmatically outline the contours of a general framework for future research on structuralism and its genealogy. In essence, I wish to argue that mainstream approaches to structuralism's history need to be significantly broadened, not only to better account for the contributions of Eastern and Central European thinkers, but also to take into full consideration structuralism's deep, complex and rich roots in 19th Century German thought. To make this point, I will succinctly compare three distinct historiographical models of structuralism ("French", "East-West", "Jakobsonian"), each of which provides a very rough and selective, yet highly contrastive map of the intellectual and personal networks that underpinned structuralism's development up to World War II. Thanks to this basic comparative exercise, I hope to highlight the reductionistic, limiting nature of the first two models with regards to the more complete (if not exhaustive or definitive) third

one and to cast further light on Jakobson's crucial function as a communicator, synthesiser and passer of ideas between scholars, disciplines and intellectual traditions.

There are of course significant methodological problems with the schematic, "modelising" approach I will pursue here, not least its undeniable vagueness and superficiality. To be sure, my paper will not go further than cursorily mentioning a number of attested personal and conceptual ties between a rather large amount of scholars, without seeking in any serious way to explain and analyse their scope, impact or implications. As such, this paper will also mostly sideline the question of the conceptual relevance of replacing structuralism in the evolutionary context of its origin in 19th Century German thought. These are serious limitations, which I in no way wish to trivialise or brush off. The fact of the matter, however, is that the complexity and richness of the intellectual roots of structuralism in 19th Century German thought, along with the truly astonishing extent to which these roots have been overlooked and neglected (both as historically significant theories in their own right and in specific relation to structuralism), all but preclude a detailed conceptual analysis. As should become obvious in the next paragraphs, there is simply still too much to be investigated, and too many major thinkers, disciplines and intellectual traditions whose impact on structuralism has only just begun to be seriously assessed.

At the same time, after now two decades of renewed scholarship both on structuralism's genealogy and the intellectual context of the interwar, the deficiencies in mainstream accounts of structuralism have become so clear, and the presence, at its very heart, of an entire "sunken Atlantis" of

neglected thinkers and intellectual traditions so evident, that my argument in favor of a profound reorientation and reappraisal of our approaches to structuralism does not require much justification. In effect, the rough sketch I intend to propose here rests on a solid basis of evidence, which has been slowly and convincingly amassed by a number of pioneering investigations (Raynaud 1990, Seriot 1999, Dmitrieva 2007, etc.). Tellingly, calls for a broader, more differentiated approach to structuralism have already been made in recent years (Hoskovec 2011, Puech 2013) – all in an “international”, “historical” and “interdisciplinary” spirit that fully concords with the perspective I am defending here. Far from being an overly ambitious, hasty and schematic attempt to challenge our conception of structuralism, this paper thus only pretends to summarise and build upon already acquired results and to modestly contribute to clarifying the general direction and the potential scope of future research on structuralism’s genealogy.



1. The “French” Model

This first historiographical model corresponds to the accounts of structuralism’s interwar evolution one generally finds in textbooks or anthologies of history of linguistics (Seuren 1998, Robins 2001, etc.), literary theory (Selden 2005, Rivkin & Ryan 2010, etc.) or in histories of structuralism itself (Scholes 1974, Culler 1975, Dosse 1995-96, etc.). I call it the “French” model because it gives special, often nearly exclusive attention to the works of Ferdinand de Saussure (a French-speaking Swiss) and Claude Lévi-Strauss, and because it generally situates structuralism’s real blossoming and moment of significance in the Parisian intellectual context of the 1960s and 70s (Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Tsvetan Todorov, etc.). In this model, Saussure is generally presented as the founding father of structuralism, a lone genius who with only modest help from scholars such as William Whitney, Paul Durkheim or Hippolyte Taine, broke with the Neogrammarian tradition (Karl Brugmann, August Leskien, Hermann Osthoff, Hermann Paul, etc.) and launched a new era in linguistics and the science of signs (“semiology”). Lévi-Strauss, in turn, features as a key figure who was able to broaden Saussure’s insights on the nature of linguistic signs to other disciplines and thus truly kick-start the dominance of the structuralist paradigm in the 1960s.

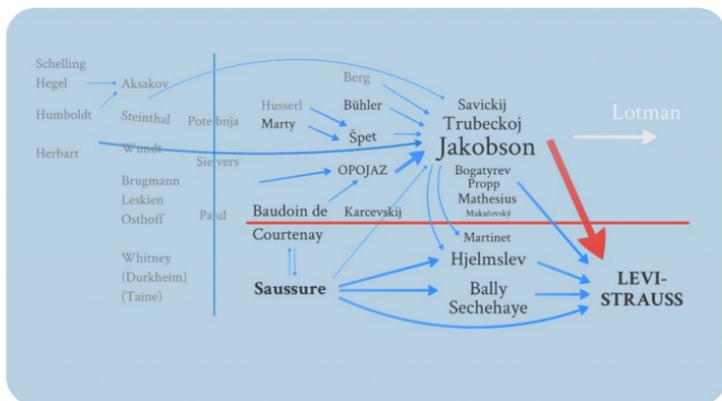
Next to the towering figures of Saussure and Lévi-Strauss, the “French” model usually also makes mention of a number of intermediary structuralist schools: the Geneva School of Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, the Prague School of Roman Jakobson and Nikolaj Trubeckoj (or, to a lesser extent

André Martinet), the Copenhagen School of Louis Hjelmslev and, much less prominently, the American “distributionalist” tradition of Leonard Bloomfield. The specialist of folk tales close to Russian Formalism, Vladimir Propp, also features as one of the most important influences on Lévi-Strauss. All these thinkers, however, are systematically presented as natural heirs to Saussure and direct forebearers of Lévi-Strauss. In other words, they are completely integrated into a linear and unique “Saussurean” tradition. More often than not, Saussure’s work itself is presented as being much more important to Lévi-Strauss than the later contributions of Jakobson, Trubeckoj or Hjelmslev. The only significant exception in this respect is Propp, whose work as a non-linguist was probably sufficiently different from the body of Saussurean ideas to be recognised as a distinct contribution and thus as a direct influence on Lévi-Strauss.

There is no doubt that this summary mapping simplifies the accounts provided by the likes of Culler, Dosse or by dozens of other scholars and that it passes over significant differences in their interpretations and depictions of structuralism’s genesis and development. In particular it glosses over clear disciplinary divergences: typically, historian of linguistics such as Seuren or Robins are more concerned by the problem of Saussure’s ties with the neo-grammarians, whereas literary theorists and anthropologists are mostly content to use Lévi-Strauss as their starting point and to treat the whole of inter-war structuralism as a mere preliminary stage (tellingly, Dosse’s authoritative *Histoire du structuralisme* begins in 1945). Despite their differences, it remains fair to state that all these accounts emphasise Saussure’s crucial role as a clear

cut-off point from previous traditions and as an isolated, unique point of departure for the whole structuralist paradigm. Similarly, Lévi- Strauss's work is systematically recognised as the major catalyst for what was a distinctly post-war extension of the structuralist paradigm, from its origins in linguistics, to nearly all the fields of the humanities. Further (and damningly), all the structuralist texts that were not written or promptly translated into French or English were never properly assimilated into this “Saussurean” genealogy and have firmly remained at its outer periphery.

2. The “East-West” Model



This second model synthesises the results of a number of studies published since the fall of the Berlin Wall, which have all sought to cast new light on the intellectual history of the interwar period in Russia and Central Europe (Raynaud 1990, Seriot 1999, Dmitriev 2002, Seifrid 2005, Sládek 2006, Dennes 2008, Ambros 2009, etc.). I choose to call it

the “East-West” model because despite integrating the contributions of Eastern and Central European scholars into structuralism’s history, it also seems to imply that the “Eastern” or “Slavic” strand of structuralism remains fundamentally different from or even opposed to its “Western” or “Saussurean” counterpart. True, this apparently dualist dimension of structuralism is not posited as a dogmatic position by any of the above-mentioned studies: in general, they prefer to underline the diversity or multiplicity of structuralist schools and to talk of “Structuralisms” in the plural form (Cf. Ambros 2009, Puech 2013), without explicitly opposing two clearly opposed “Eastern” and “Western” traditions. Still, because they often choose, for obvious heuristic reasons, to focus on the genesis and conceptual orientation of Eastern or Central European structuralist traditions and, moreover, to emphasize what is original and distinct in these traditions, they do give rise to a distinct sense of these traditions’ divergence from “Saussurean” structuralism.

The “East-West” model presents at least three major innovations – or ameliorations – in comparison with its “French” equivalent. Firstly, and unsurprisingly, it provides a far more detailed and differentiated picture of the Prague School itself. Whereas the “French” perspective is only ever interested in Jakobson and Trubeckoj, much more attention is afforded in this second model to the Czech members of the *Cercle Linguistique de Prague* (Vilem Mathesius, Bohuslav Havranek, Bohumil Trnka), as well as to non-linguists such as Petr Bogatyrev, Dmitro Čiževskij and Jan Mukařovský, the founder of the Prague School of aesthetics. Instead of being considered almost exclusively through the prism of its contribution

to phonology, the Prague School is thus presented as a multi-disciplinary project of great significance to fields such as aesthetics, literary theory, theatre studies and semiotics.

The second major change brought by the “East-West” model is its relativisation of the importance of Saussure as a unique and direct source of inspiration for the Prague School. The Polish linguist Jan Baudouin de Courtenay, Eduard Sievers, the main proponent of *Ohrenphilologie* (acoustic philology), or even the neo-grammarians Hermann Paul (Cf. Albrecht 1994) are cited as important alternative contributors to the early genesis of structuralism. The original contribution of the Russian Formalists (Jurij Tynjanov, Lev Jakubinskij, Evgenij Polivanov, Grigorij Vinokur) is also emphasised: whereas in the “French” model they are reduced to playing a derivative, delayed role to Parisian structuralism made possible only by their “rediscovery” by Tsvetan Todorov in the mid 1960s, they figure in the “East-West” perspective as *bona fide* contributors to the early stages of structuralism. Further, other sources beyond linguistics or philology are mentioned as being crucial to the Prague School, in particular phenomenology (Edmund Husserl, but also his Russian student Gustav Špet), the School of Brentano (Anton Marty, Christian von Ehrenfels, etc.), as well as the psychologist Karl Bühler.

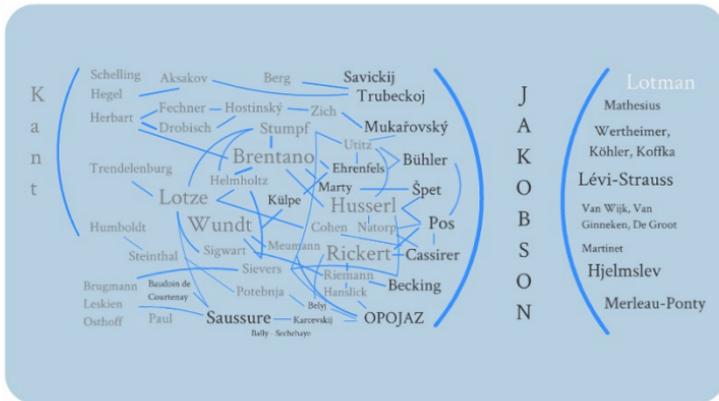
The third innovation of the “East-West” model is its weakening of the notion that Saussure’s work marked a clear discontinuity either in linguistics or in the history of ideas. This point is already implicit in the afore-mentioned critique of Saussure’s role as a unique inspirator of a new science of language and the contextualisation of his ideas with those put forward by Baudouin de Courtenay, Sievers, Paul, the Russian

formalists or Husserl and the School of Brentano. But the case against a sudden, discontinuist irruption of structuralism through Saussure's work is made most strongly by Patrick Sériot in his seminal book *Structure and the Whole* (1999). There, Sériot pinpoints the long history of the essential concepts of the Prague structuralists (structure, system, function, etc.) in the traditions of Neo-humboldtian linguistics and psychology (Heymann Steinthal, Aleksandr Potebnja) and, most strikingly, in the conservative ideology of Eurasianism (Petr Savickij) and 19th Century slavophile philosophers (Konstantin Aksakov). In Sériot's reading, instead of appearing suddenly thanks to a clear break with neo-grammarians positivism, the central concepts of structure and system slowly arose and crystallised on the basis of a drawn-out conceptual struggle, in particular with key ideas (*Ganzheit, Form, Organ*) elaborated within German organicism (Goethe), idealism (Hegel) and *Naturphilosophie* (Schelling).

As is the case with the "French" model, my short characterisation does not pretend to exhaustively and adequately represent the analyses expressed in the mentioned studies. Here, even more than in the first model, I have proceeded by collating a variety of studies that often significantly differ from one another in their focus or their conclusions. But here again, I think it is possible to highlight some common salient points and limitations. Most obviously, by affording much more attention to structuralism's sources in Eastern and Central Europe, this model completely frees itself from a narrowly "French" understanding that restricts structuralism to a unilateral development along a "Saussure to Lévi-Strauss" conceptual axis. Further, the idea that structuralism really

only blossomed and expanded after the war is clearly refuted by the reality of its interwar disciplinary diversity in the practices of the Prague School itself and by the strong evidence that it possessed profound, diverse roots outside of linguistics (in philology, philosophy, psychology, etc.) from its very inception, deep into the 19th Century. One crucial question this model fails to answer – though it does raise it (e.g. Sériot 1999:307-313) – is that of the relation between the epistemologically original “Slavic” or “Eastern” structuralism and its “Saussurean” counterpart, which seems to retain an integrity and evolutionary dynamic of its own.

3. The “Jakobsonian” Model



This final model integrates most elements of the first two, in particular all the corrections and additions brought by the “East-West” model. Additionally, it builds upon a set of studies of 19th Century German and Austrian philosophy not directly concerned with structuralism (Köhnke 1991, Mulligan

2001, Dmitrieva 2007, Rollinger 2008, Maigné 2013, etc.) and includes the conclusions of a number of analyses and hypotheses I have formulated myself (Flack 2013, 2015, in print). In contrast to the first two models, which intend to provide a “neutral” perspective on structuralism, this one consciously emphasises the role of Roman Jakobson for visualisation and heuristic purpose. In other words, although it is strongly skewed towards Jakobson, this model does not mean to imply that he was a unique epicentre of structuralism’s development. It aims rather to present the personal and conceptual networks of structuralism in such a way that their profound roots in the 19th Century become most immediately and intuitively apparent. Jakobson is an obvious choice in order to obtain such an effect, as his work functioned as a platform where many traditions (phenomenology, neo-kantianism, School of Brentano, Herbartian aesthetics, Formalism, etc.) all converged, merged and diverged again.

The guiding principle of this model is its generalisation of the approach adopted by Sériot (1999) to a larger number of Jakobson’s attested intellectual sources. Thus, on top of reconstituting the origins of Jakobson’s thought in Humboldt (by following the Potebnja-Steinthal filiation) or in Schelling, Hegel and Goethe (by following the Savickij/Trubeckoj-Berg-Aksakov line), it adds Jakobson’s close connections with Herbartian aesthetics (Mukařovský-Zich-Hostinský-Fechner-Drobisch) and anti-Herbartian psychology (Bühler-Ehrenfels-Stumpf-Brentano); with post-Kantian epistemology (Pos/Cassirer/Rickert-Lotze-Helmholtz-Trendelenburg) and psychological aesthetics (Becking-Riemann/Hanslick-Sigwart), as well as with experimental psychology (Sievers-Meumann/

Külpe-Wundt). All of these reconstructed filiations and conceptual lines, it goes without saying, would need to be qualified and analysed at much greater length. What is clearly and immediately evident through this model, however, is the amazing extent to which they are all closely interrelated. Most of the relations indicated in this model, it should be added, are not vague affinities or alleged “influences”: they denote close personal ties (e.g. teacher to student), extensive correspondences (both friendly and antagonistic), detailed reviews, as well as explicit acknowledgements of intellectual debt or refutations and polemics.

In truth, there is not much point in trying to draw any conclusions from, or indeed to justify or comment this last model any further at this point. Its complexity and scope make this an utterly pointless endeavour in the context of this paper. I do believe, though, that the sheer density of the personal and conceptual networks that this “Jakobsonian” model maps out between major figures of the history of philosophy, psychology and linguistics constitutes in itself a sufficient argument for reconsidering structuralism’s roots in the 19th Century. As I hope to have shown, the two other historiographical models do not offer serious arguments against broadening our approach in that direction. Much more, they are only sustainable as alternatives thanks to an erasure, i.e. their complete or partial neglect of a historical background whose existence and importance is however simply beyond doubt. This is especially true of the “French” model, which blacks out structuralism’s 19th Century roots almost completely, but it also holds for the “East-West” model, which only partially reconstructs those roots, and only for the “Eastern” brand of

structuralism. As such, the simple realisation that major structuralists such as Jakobson were indeed closely bound to 19th Century German traditions – and, moreover, that these traditions were themselves organised and connected in a dense, fertile and significant network – must surely be enough to entice us into exploring those interrelations more carefully and to seek to obtain a much more exhaustive and balanced picture of structuralism as a paradigm that slowly emerged through a long transition out of 19th Century German thought.

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