ROMAN JAKOBSON “LINGUISTICS AND POETICS”

Jakobson argues that every oral or written verbal message or ‘speech act’ (parole) has the following elements in common: the message itself, an addresser, an addressee, a context (the social and historical context in which the utterance is made), a contact (the physical channel and psychological connection that obtains between addresser and addressee), and a code, common to both addresser and addressee, which permits communication to occur. In communication, we are not necessarily restricted to words as a result of which anything can function semiotically: fashion, for example, can be a statement. Hence, the following chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Message</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Addresser -----------------------&gt; Addressee</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contact</td>
<td>Code</td>
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These six elements or ‘factors’ of communication are aligned each with a different ‘function’ of language as follows:

- Referential
- Poetic / Aesthetic
- Emotive -----------------------> Conative
- Phatic
- Metalinguistic

In other words, although any or all of these functions may be present in any utterance, they vary in their importance as a result of which one function is dominant over the rest. Where a particular function dominates, the message is oriented towards the corresponding factor. For example,

- when a message is emotive in function, it is designed to stress the addresser’s response to a given situation arising in the context;
- when it is conative, the stress is on the message’s impact upon the addressee;
- when referential, the stress is on the message’s denotative or cognitive purpose (what the message is about);
- when poetic / aesthetic, the stress is on the form of the message itself as a result of which the aesthetic purpose is predominant;
- when phatic, the emphasis is on establishing that given channels of communication are open and unpimped;
- when metalinguistic, the stress is on the code itself shared by addresser and addressee, that is, the medium in which communication occurs, as a result of which one metalanguage is used to comment on and explain another language.

Evidently, depending upon the purpose of a particular speech act, one of these functions will come to predominate while the others remain subsidiary.

Jakobson’s real goal here is to come to an understanding of the precise nature of those speech acts which are called poetry and, accordingly, to comprehend what ought to be involved in the practice of literary criticism (what he terms ‘poetics’). Jakobson argues that poetics is largely concerned with the question: ‘what makes any verbal message a work of art?’ Given that any verbal behaviour is distinguished by its specific aims and means, Jakobson argues, a work of art is a message in which the poetic or aesthetic function dominates. As a result, the main focus of poetics ought to be on the verbal structure of the message. Jakobson concludes that since linguistics is the “science which deals with verbal structure, poetics is best viewed as a subdivision of linguistics” (33).

In this regard, firstly, Jakobson points out that poetics deals with the dominance of the poetic function in any form of discourse, poetry or not (e.g. the novel or advertising jingles). Secondly, Jakobson warns that the “question of relations between the word and the world” (33) and, thus, the whole
issue of “truth-values” (33) (the question of realism, in short) are extralinguistic concerns which accordingly remain outside the province of purely literary analysis. Thirdly, Jakobson asserts, poetics is a form of “objective scholarly analysis” (33) that is not reducible to those evaluative modes of criticism (whereby the critic’s opinions and ideological purposes are foisted on the reader) with which poetics has been misidentified over the years. Fourthly, it is Jakobson’s view that literary analysis must come to terms with both the synchronic and the diachronic dimension that inhere in literature. He has in mind here the “literary production of any given stage” (34) as well as “that part of the literary tradition which for the stage in question has remained vital or has been revived” (34). From this point of view, any “contemporary stage is experienced in its temporal dynamics” (34). As a result, a “historical poetics” (34) (i.e. a diachronic approach to the study of literature) is a “superstructure . . . built on a series of successive synchronic descriptions” (34).

The crucial question where poetry is concerned for Jakobson is this: what is the “indispensable feature inherent in any piece of poetry?” (39) and which serves to distinguish poetry from other kinds of utterances? Jakobson argues that, like any speech act or utterance, poetry is a function of the two axes which Saussure terms the paradigmatic and syntagmatic and which he himself respectively calls the metaphoric pole (the axis of selection) and the metonymic pole (the axis of combination). Meaningful communication occurs at the intersection of these two axes. For example, if the ‘child’ is the subject of the message, the speaker selects one among the extant, more or less similar, nouns like child, kid, youngster, tot, all of them equivalent in a certain respect, and then . . . he may select one of the semantically cognate verbs—sleeps, dozes, nods, naps. Both chosen words combine in the speech chain. The selection is produced on the base of equivalence, similarity and dissimilarity, synonymity and antonymity, while the combination, the build up of the sequence, is based on contiguity. (my emphases; 39)

Along the paradigmatic axis, Jakobson is saying, each sign in a given sequence is selected by virtue of its equivalence (that is, its similarity to some and difference from other signs in the sign system). Along the syntagmatic axis, the signs chosen in this way are combined with other signs according to the rules of syntax in order to form the sequence of signs which comprise the utterance in question.

What precisely distinguishes poetry in general from other verbal messages is the predominance of the poetic function. What distinguishes poetry from other forms of literature (e.g. prose narrative) is that, in Jakobson’s famous formula, the “poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination” (39). Jakobson contends that the principle of equivalence is

promoted to the constitutive device of the sequence. In poetry one syllable is equalised with any other syllable of the same sequence; word stress is assumed to equal word stress, as unstress equals unstress; prosodic long is matched with ling, and short with short; word boundary equals word boundary, no boundary equals no boundary; syntactic pause equals syntactic pause, no pause equals no pause. Syllables are converted into units of measure, and so are morae or stresses. (my emphasis; 39)

In other words, poetry is distinguished from other speech acts by the way in which the principle of equivalence which is usually synonymous with the axis of selection (the paradigmatic axis or metaphoric pole) is superimposed on the axis of combination (the syntagmatic axis or metonymic pole) which is normally subject only to the principle of syntactical contiguity. This equivalence manifests itself in two principal ways: in terms of prosody (metre) and sound (rhyme). The hallmark of poetry is regularity of rhythm and “parallelism” (47) of sound, the function of the organisation of the axis of combination in order to stress rhythmical regularity and phonological balance: all poetry is, to cite Hopkins, the “reiterative ‘figure of sound’” (40) which “always utilises at least one . . . binary contrast of a relatively high and relatively low prominence effected by the different sections of the phonemic sequence” (40). By the same token, “only in poetry with its regular reiteration of equivalent units is the time of the speech flow experienced . . . with musical time” (39). The defining feature of poetry is the “regular reiteration of equivalent units” (39) principally in order to foster rhythm and harmony of sound.

Jakobson argues that generic differences within poetry are explained by reference to the importance of subsidiary functions. In other words, what differentiates one kind of poetry from other
kinds is an additional (albeit subordinate) emphasis on other factors. Poetics, he writes, “treats the poetic function in its relationship to the other functions of language” (40). In other words, if the poetic is the dominant function of works of poetry, it is not the only function: the particularities of diverse poetic genres imply a differently ranked participation of the other verbal functions along with the dominant poetic function” (38). For example, in epic poetry, the focus is on the third person as a result of which the referential function of language is strongly emphasised; the orientation of lyric poetry to the first person implies an emphasis also on the emotive function of language and the author; some poetry is didactic (poetry is utile et dulce) as a result of which the emphasis is on the conative function of language and on the reader.

The metrical regularity and phonological harmony characteristic of poetry are derived from a number of constituent features among which the following figure prominently:

- metre or “verse design” (40): this “underlies the structure of any single line—or . . . any single verse instance. . . . The verse design determines the invariant features of the verse instances and sets up the limits of variations” (44);
- rhyme or the “regular recurrence of equivalent phonemes or phonemic groups” (47): rhyme, Jakobson points out, “necessarily involves the semantic relationship between rhyming units” (47). In other words, “equivalence in sound, projected into the sequence as its constitutive principle, inevitably involves semantic equivalence” (48). The reason for this is that any “conspicuous similarity in sound is evaluated in respect to similarity and/or dissimilarity in meaning” (51): in a sequence “where similarity is superimposed on contiguity, . . . words similar in sound are drawn together in meaning” (50). In poetry, “not only the phonological sequence but in the same way any sequence of semantic units strive to build an equation” (49) the outcome of which is “parallelism” (47).

In short, Jakobson’s goal is to understand how a certain metrical, phonological and even semantic balance is the product of an agglomeration of poetical devices principally along the axis of combination. What Jakobson evidently fails to consider in this phonologically-oriented model of poetry is what modernists call ‘free verse’ and where, to some degree at least, the goal is to mimic the patterns of ‘normal’ a-poetical conversation / written discourse / inner monologue, and which consequently exists in opposition to traditional forms of verse arranged along structurally organised or even rigid lines.

Even though his primary focus is on the syntagmatic axis / metonymic pole, Jakobson does not entirely ignore the paradigmatic axis / metaphoric pole, contending that there is a number of devices associated with the axis of selection which also help to distinguish poetry. One of these devices is the use of “poetic tropes” (53) (metaphors, similes, metonymy, etc.), that is, the process by which one sign is compared to another and which is implied by every effort to represent the ‘Real.’ Poetic discourse is distinguished by great emphasis on figurative language. However, what Jakobson calls ‘poeticalness’ is not, in his view, merely a “supplementation of discourse with rhetorical adornment” (55) (what Pope would term ‘wit to advantage dressed’), but a “total re-evaluation of the discourse and of all its components whatsoever” (55). Moreover, the study of poetic tropes has been “directed mainly toward metaphor” (53) and at the expense of metonymy, Jakobson points out. What is more, what complicates matters in poetry is that “where similarity is superinduced upon contiguity, any metonymy is slightly metaphorical and any metaphor has a metonymical tint” (49).

Another device along the paradigmatic axis which is characteristic of poetry is ‘ambiguity.’ This ambiguity is the consequence of the use of tropes by which signs are compared to other signs and as a result of which the exact relationship of signs to their referents is downplayed. Jakobson points out that the “supremacy of poetic function over referential function does not obliterate the reference but makes it ambiguous” (50). In short, “[s]imilarity superimposed on contiguity imparts to poetry its thoroughgoing symbolic, multiplex, polysemantic essence” (49). As a result, “ambiguity is an intrinsic, inalienable character of any self-focused message, briefly a corollary feature of poetry” (49).

It is, in short, the syntagmatic axis of poetry which really interests Jakobson, not the paradigmatic axis. The goal of Structuralist analysis is largely not hermeneutical (i.e. interpretive, a quest for meaning) as much as it is descriptive: the goal is to merely describe or rehearse the verbal structure of the text in question. His analyses of lyric poetry (for example, his famous “Shakespeare’s Verbal Art in ‘Th’ Expence of Spirit’” which analyses sonnet 129) are entirely devoted to examining the
rhythm and sound effects created by the poet along the axis of combination through a variety of poetic
devices. His attention is almost entirely absorbed by textual or aesthetic considerations in isolation from
all other concerns. For example, any Benvenistean concern with the relationship between pronoun and
subjectivity, the poem and its poet (the familiar territory traditionally traversed by most critics of lyric
poetry) is absent.