



Issue 5 (Spring 2018), pp. 99-117

DOI: 10.6667/interface.5.2018.51

Linguistic and Extra-Linguistic History Behind Roman

Jakobson's Distinctive Feature: The Perspective of European Crises and Intellectual Odyssey

CHANG-LIANG QU

Dalian University of Foreign Languages

Abstract

A full picture of the evolution of Jakobson's term "distinctive feature" is not easily achieved, partly because the texts supporting such a study were written in a multilingual way: in Czech, French, German or English. Behind the multilingual texts were the European crises that led to the involuntary odyssey that was not untypical among the scholars of his generation. As a Russian intelligentsia of Jewish origin, he experienced Russian compatriots' resettlement in inter-war Central Europe, their fleeing from the persecution under the Nazi regime, as well as their final hard emigration to the United States. This essay intends to trace the development of this phonological term in Jakobsonian texts, to reflect on the reasons for his choice of the languages, and to explore a specific case of linguistic historiography on how this émigré scholar changed the landscape of that research field.

Keywords: distinctive feature, Roman Jakobson, émigré

© Chang-Liang Qu

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

<http://interface.ntu.edu.tw/>

Linguistic and Extra-Linguistic History Behind Roman Jakobson's Distinctive Feature: The Perspective of European Crises and Intellectual Odyssey

Distinctive feature, one of the core terms in the 20th century phonology, is always associated with the insights of the prominent Russian-American linguist Roman Jakobson (1896-1982).¹ In the Chinese speaking world, the theory usually automatically reminds of his *Preliminaries to Speech Analysis* (1952, in collaboration with Gunnar Fant and Morris Halle), which not merely presents the fullest picture of the distinctive features, but remains Jakobson's only book-length work available in Chinese. Translated by the influential Chinese linguist Wang Li (1900-1986), the text was published in installment in Chinese academic journal *Linguistic Abroad* as early as in 1981, when China freshly opened the door again to the outside world. Therefore for the Chinese readers, it became one of the best known among Jakobson's 650 works throughout his academic career. However, in the history of the 20th century linguistics, this mature work stands as a "final product" on the theory of distinctive feature, in which the full picture of its development is not visible. Furthermore, depicting this history is considerably difficult, partly due to the fact that Jakobson's early idea on distinctive features were not written or published consistently in one specific language, but scattered in texts in any of the European languages he frequently employed: Czech, French, German or English. With linguistic historiographers' recent revived interest in Roman Jakobson and the Prague Linguistic Circle (e.g. Sériot [2012], Leoni [2015], Qu [2015], Qian [2016]), the development of Jakobson's idea on distinctive feature deserves serious rethinking. To fulfill such a task, one needs to reconstruct this history with the support of relevant texts that Jakobson wrote in all

¹ Part of the research project is sponsored by the National Social Science Foundation of China (16BY007). A first draft of this paper was read at the Seventh Symposium on European Languages in East Asia, September 30 - October 1, 2016, Taipei. The author is grateful to the valuable suggestions from the fellow participants of the conference and the anonymous reviewers of this journal.

these four languages.

On the other hand, these multilingual texts in retrospect turn out to be an index to the European crises that led to an involuntary odyssey, which was not untypical among the émigré scholars of his generation. As a Russian intelligentsia of Jewish origin, he experienced Russian compatriots' resettlement in the interwar Central Europe, their fleeing from the persecution under the Nazi regime, as well as their final hard incorporation into the academic world in the United States. Generally speaking, it was the different audiences and readers Jakobson met in different parts of his odyssey that decided on his choice of the language in which he wrote these works. The linguistic history of this phonological term therefore reveals its extra-linguistic value.

1 Jakobson's Less-Known Czech Articles on Distinctive Features

1.1 “Z fonologie spisovne slovenstiny” and the encyclopedic entries in *Ottův*

In 1938, Jakobson submitted an article entitled “Observations sur le classement phonologique des consonnes” [Observations on the phonological classification of the consonants]² to the Third International Congress of Phonetic Sciences in Ghent. With his announcement that “nous identifions les phonèmes d’une langue donnée en les décomposant en leurs caractères phonologiques constitutifs, c’est-à-dire que nous établissons pour chaque phonème quelles qualités l’opposent aux autres phonèmes du système en question”³ (Jakobson 1939, p. 272), he successfully persuaded the linguistic historiographers that this French article was the starting point of the “second stage” of his phonological thoughts, during which he argued for the complex instead of a single, unbreakable structure of the functional linguistic unit phoneme (e.g. Ivić, 1965; Waugh, 1987), and that his phonological belief began to diverge from what he

2 Non-English titles and quotations in this article are translated into English by the present author.

3 “We identify the phonemes of a given language by decomposing them into their constituent phonological characters, i.e. we establish for each phoneme what features it opposes to the other phonemes of the system in question”.

I N T E R F A C E

believed in the classical period of the Prague Linguistic Circle (e.g. Anderson, 1985, p. 116).

However, “Observations sur le classement phonologique des consonnes” was by no means the first publication in which his idea of “distinctive feature” was expressed. His efforts to attempt at the sub-phonemic entity had first been published seven years before, in a less-known Czech article entitled “Z fonologie spisovne slovenstiny” [On Phonology of Literary Slovak]. The article was his contribution to *Slovenská Miscellanea: sborník věnovaný Albertu Pražákovi k třicátému výročí jeho literární činnosti*, a volume presented to the 30th anniversary of the literary activities of the renowned Czech literary historian Albert Pražák (1880-1965). It reminds of Jakobson’s two-decade participation as a Russian émigré in the academic world of interwar Czechoslovakia, while he actively acted as a founding member and leading figure of the Prague Linguistic Circle.

In this often neglected article, the term “*diferenciační vlastnosti*” [distinctive features] was employed as a superordinate term for several sub-phonemic components. According to his description, Czech phonemes /e/ and /i/ are “samohlásky světlo-měkké” [bright and soft vowels] while /o/ and /u/ are “samohlásky temno-tvrdé” [dark and hard vowels]; on the other hand, he labeled the opposition between Slovak /æ/, /e/, /i/ and /a/, /o/, /u/ only as “samohlásky měkké” [soft vowels] vs. “samohlásky tvrdé” [hard vowels], because Slovak /æ/ and /a/ were both interpreted by him as “světlý” [bright] (Jakobson, 1931, p. 158). These four terms, “měkký” [soft], “tvrdý” [hard], “světlý” [bright], “temný” [dark], became Jakobson’s earliest labels to describe the sub-phonemic entities and are the precursors of the more standard Jakobsonian terms “acute”, “grave”, “non-flat”, “flat” in his more established works of the 1950s.

During the same period, distinctive feature is also implied in his contribution to the Czech encyclopedia *Ottův slovník naučný nové doby* [Otto’s Encyclopedia of the New Era]. In the entry “Fonéma” [phoneme], he defined this term as “soubor zvukových vlastností, kterými se liší jedna

hláska daného jazyka od ostat” [set of sound features, that distinguishes in a language one sound from the others] (Jakobson 1932, p. 608). While most of the details in this definition are consistent with the more widely-known one in Prague Linguistic Circle’s “Projet de terminologie phonologique standardisée” [Project of standardized phonological terminology] (1931) –“unité phonologique non susceptible d’être dissociée en unités phonologiques plus petites et plus simples” [phonological units not liable to be separated into smaller and simpler phonological units]– phoneme was obviously no longer an unbreakable whole since it became “a set of sound features”.

1.2 Background to the Czech articles on phonology

While the information recorded in these Czech sources may astonish the readers who rely exclusively on the English texts, it will not be unnatural to ask why Jakobson chose to publish these important advances in Czech.

Actually the above mentioned two sources are among Jakobson’s considerable number of Czech texts written and published during his two-decade stay in Prague and Brno. They cover a large variety of themes and genres, from popular newspaper article to serious academic writings. Compared with his works in German and French of the same period, these Czech texts are largely neglected if not completely forgotten. It was not until recently that many of them were anthologized by Jindřich Toman in the newly published Volume IX (2013-2014) of *Roman Jakobson: Selected Writings*.

The fact that Jakobson wrote and published in Czech echoed the post-WWI turmoil that forced large numbers of Russian intelligentsia to leave their country, many of whom resettled in the newly independent Republic of Czechoslovakia. Under the administration of the country’s founding father Dr. Tomáš Masaryk (1850-1937), government-sponsored institutions were set up and government-sponsored grants were made available for individual academic and literary figures (Toman,

I N T E R F A C E

1995, p. 104). The young republic soon turned into what Toman calls “a republic of scholars”.

Unlike many of the émigrés, Jakobson left Russia in a “decent” way. In July 1920, Jakobson arrived in Prague as a member of the Soviet Red Cross delegation whose mission was to solve the problem of the Russian prisoners of war in Czechoslovakia, and to establish diplomatic relations with this new country. However, he also brought with him a letter of recommendation from the renowned Russian linguist Aleksej Aleksandrovič Šaxmatov (1864-1920). He left the mission two months later (Jangfeldt 2014: 208) with the consent of Solomon I. Giljerson (1869-1939), the head of the delegation, who had not disagreed with his academic plan before the mission departed from Moscow. Šaxmatov’s letter and Giljerson’s support soon made Jakobson’s enrollment possible. He became a doctoral student at Charles University in Prague.

Although he was generally remembered for his leading role in the Prague Linguistic Circle, Jakobson began to publish in Czech much earlier than the founding of the circle in 1926. A glance at the newly published Vol. IX reveals that fact that his first published voice in this central European country was an interview conducted in Czech with the title “Stav kultury v Rusku: Rozhovor s členem sovětského poselstva Červeného kříže” [State of Culture in Russia: A Conversation with the member of the Soviet mission of the Red Cross]. The interview was published in Czech daily newspaper *Lidové noviny* [People’s News] on July 21, 1920. In addition, the first academic work he published during this period was also in Czech. From 1920 to 1921, his long article “Vliv revoluce na ruský jazyk” [Influence of Revolution on the Russian Language] was published in installment in four issues of Czech journal *Nové Atheneum* [New Athens].

Altogether, among the 151 items collected in Volume IX, 85 were written in Czech. Therefore, it is not surprising to see him present his important ideas on distinctive feature in this language in the early 1930s, when his position was firmly established in the academic world in Czechoslovakia.

Paradoxically, the two above mentioned works were not among the re-published Czech texts in Volume IX, presumably because their English translations had been included in Volume I of the *Selected Writings* first published in 1962. However, several details were modified when Jakobson edited and translated the texts in person, so that one needs to be cautious of the risks of anachronism when using these translated texts. Two of these traps are the most evident:

First, the four distinctive features in the 1931 article, “měkký”, “tvrdý”, “světlý”, “temný”, were not translated faithfully as “soft”, “hard”, “bright”, “dark”, but upgraded as “acute”, “grave”, “non-flat”, “flat”, the acoustic terms popularized since the publication of *Preliminaries to Speech Analysis* (1952). One must remember that back in the early 1930s, the distinctive features were neither based on acoustic experiments nor attempted as a universal system to interpret all human languages.

Second, in the English translation of the 1932 encyclopedia entry, a very prominent keyword “concurrent” was inserted into the definition of the phoneme, which was not a part of the original Czech wording “soubor zvukových vlastností” [set of sound features]. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that back in the early 1930s, although Jakobson was certain about the functions of the sub-phonemic entities, he was not yet clear about their concurrent nature.

Had these two texts been translated into English by someone else, the above-mentioned details could have remained as they had actually been. But since Jakobson translated them on his own, he must have felt it an obligation to revise the “out-dated” parts. From the point of view of linguistic historiography, his efforts have unfortunately reduced the historical value of these texts.

2 Jakobson's German Manuscript on Distinctive Feature

2.1 Jakobson's short sojourn in Denmark

Jakobson's real step toward the concurrent nature of the distinctive feature did not appear until he discussed it in a manuscript he wrote in German in 1939. Entitled "Zur Struktur des Phonems" [On the structure of the phonemes], this manuscript remained unpublished until he included it in 1962 in Vol. I of his Selected Writings.

In 1938, with the control of the Sudetenland tragically ceded to Nazi Germany under the Munich appeasement treaty, the remainder of Czechoslovakia was soon after invaded and occupied in March 1939. This political catastrophe terminated the "republic of scholars", and the classical stage of the Prague Linguistic Circle ended with the death and flight of several of its important members. As a Jewish scholar, Jakobson was immediately deposed from his professorship at Masaryk University, his personal safety being at stake. According to the study of Eli Fischer-Jørgensen (1911-2010) on the Brøndal archives in the Royal Library in Copenhagen, in the spring 1939, Jakobson's friends in different European countries began to make serious efforts to rescue him. These friends include Viggo Brøndal (1887-1942) and Louis Hjelmslev (1899-1965) in Denmark, Alf Sommerfelt (1892-1965) in Norway and Nicolaas van Wijk (1880-1941) in the Netherlands. After several weeks of hiding in Prague, Jakobson successfully obtained a visa and arrived in Copenhagen on April 21.

During his short four-month stay in Denmark, "Zur Struktur des Phonems" was his most important work on phonology. The manuscript was prepared for the two guest lectures he delivered at the University of Copenhagen. It was therefore written in German, the main-stream academic language in the Nordic countries at that time. "Zur Struktur des Phonems" witnessed a breakthrough of Jakobson's ideas on distinctive feature, where its concurrent nature was clearly presented and thoroughly examined.

2.2 Saussure, Bally and Jakobson on the paradigmatic possibility of linguistic unit

According to Saussure's classic interpretation of the dichotomy of the syntagmatic-associative relations of linguistic sign, the only legitimate way to decompose a complex linguistic unit is to segment it along the axis of successivity. Therefore, the unusual value of "Zur Struktur des Phonems" dwells in Jakobson's quest of the sub-phonemic entities in a paradigmatic way, as he redefined phoneme as "eine komplexe Einheit, die sich auf der Achse des Beisammens in distinktive Qualitäten restlos zerlegt"⁴ (Jakobson, 1962, p. 310).

Unlike Saussure, Charles Bally (1865-1947) employed a paradigmatic segmentation to linguistic unit in his morpho-semantic analysis. In *Linguistique générale et linguistique française* (1932) [General linguistics and French linguistics], Bally suggested an idea of "cumul des signifiés"⁵. For example, while the Latin verb *amo* is decomposed semantically into "first person", "singular", "present" etc., there is obviously no reason to believe in any sequential order among them. Thus, these morpho-semantic elements co-exist in the larger linguistic unit *amo* in a paradigmatic way. However, Bally did not intend to extend "cumul des signifiés" into any phonological analysis, for a speaker naturally cannot pronounce two sounds at the same time.

But Jakobson emphasized the fact that "Ja, freilich kann man nicht zwei Sprachlaute gleichzeitig erzeugen, aber zwei und mehrere lautliche Eigenschaften doch!"⁶ (Jakobson 1962: 305). He therefore concluded that the absolute insistence on the linear nature of the signifier was a fundamental error ("der grundsätzliche Fehler") of the Geneva school and a weakness of Saussure's view of linguistic sign. Consequently, the paradigmatic nature of distinctive features is no longer obscure and ambiguous. They co-exist as sub-phonemic entities that show no sequential order. This fact contradicts again with the classical Saussurean view,

4 "a complex unit, which completely decomposes on the paradigmatic axis into distinctive qualities".

5 "cumulation of the signifiers".

6 "Yes, certainly one cannot pronounce two speech sounds simultaneously, but he can pronounce two and more phonetic features simultaneously".

I N T E R F A C E

in which only *one* of the paradigmatic units is *in praesentia*, while all others are *in absentia*. It is interesting to see that Jakobson cited Danish words as examples, since he was addressing a Danish audience:

<i>lyt</i>	<i>luth</i>	<i>lidt</i>
/lyt/	/lut/	/lit/
listen	lute	little

On the syntagmatic axis, each of the three words is a linear sequence. The semantic contrasts of these three sequences rely on the distinction between vowel phonemes /y/, /u/ and /i/. But Jakobson did not regard this phonemic distinction as minimal. What distinguishes /y/ from /u/ is, according to this 1939 manuscript, the “brightness” (*die Helligkeit*) of the former and the absence of such brightness of the latter. On the other hand, it is the “muffled sound” (*der gedämpfte Klang*) of /y/ that makes it different from /i/. The oppositional system of the three phonemes was thus reduced to two “distinktiven Eigenschaften”:⁷ the presence-absence of the *Helligkeit*, and the presence-absence of the *gedämpfte Klang*.

There are both “brightness” and “muffledness” inside the phoneme /y/, making it differ from /i/ (which does not possess the feature of “muffledness”) and /u/ (which does not possess the feature of “brightness”). These two sub-phonemic entities exist simultaneously inside the phoneme /y/, without any sequential order. Their concurrence has refuted the classical Saussurean belief in the linear and temporal characteristics of the signifier. Phoneme is thus redefined as a set of *concurrent* distinctive features rather than *successive* ones. This unusual side of distinctive feature, though unclear in the 1932 encyclopedia entry, became clear and unambiguous when Jakobson composed this German manuscript. The paradigmatic nature makes distinctive feature different from the phonological units of higher levels (e.g. phoneme, syllable etc.)

7 “distinctive features”.

3 Distinctive feature after Jakobson's emigration to the United States

3.1 *Six leçons* at l'École Libre des Hautes Études

Jakobson's ideas on distinctive feature were restated in another series of his manuscripts, *Six leçons sur le son et le sens* (1942) [Six lectures on sound and sense]. This French work was originally his lecture notes at l'École Libre des Hautes Études, New York, where he was appointed to the chairs of both the Faculté des Lettres and the Institut de Philologie et d'Histoire Orientale et Slave. These French manuscripts were published in 1976 and soon translated into English. The French text was also included in Vol. VIII of *Selected Writings* released in 1987.

Back in 1939, Jakobson's safety in Denmark was unfortunately only temporary. As the danger of the war loomed, he proceeded to retreat to Norway and arrived in Oslo on September 1. Although he obtained professorship in this country and organized with Alf Sommerfelt a sophisticated project on comparative phonology, the Nazi forces' invasion of Norway in April 1940 forced him to flee once more. The most dangerous part of this journey, as recorded by linguistic historians Toman (1995) and Rudy (1997), included a cart ride across the snowy mountain area in the far northern Norwegian-Sweden border. He served in Sweden as visiting professor at the University of Uppsala, until in May 1941 he eventually obtained the visa to the United States. During the trans-Atlantic voyage, having experienced the inspection of the Nazi marine police, the severe storm and the terrifying sight of the ocean battlefield wreckages, he arrived in New York on June 4. The era of his influence on American linguistics was about to begin.

Jakobson spent his first few years in the United States as a typical European intellectual-in-exile. Jewish scholars from Czechoslovakia were not the only émigrés resettling in America in that era. In 1933, Alvin Johnson (1874-1971), the director of The New School in New York, specially created a graduate division inside his institution to help the European scholars escape persecutions. This "University in Exile" effective-

I N T E R F A C E

ly harbored the German and Italian intellectual émigrés who escaped from the political intolerance in their home countries and took refuge on the other side of the Atlantic.

To the dismay of the émigré scholars of Jakobson's generation, the atmosphere was not always cordial to them in the United States. The isolationist tendency as an American tradition, the cutting of the educational budget due to the Great Depression, together with the fear for the influx of the European refugees combined and led to repulsive xenophobia in the American academic world. Morris Halle noted that there was "an active effort to block Jakobson from ever obtaining a regular university position in the United States" (Halle, 1988, p. 737). The same xenophobia was also denounced by Thomas Sebeok as "a sinister stain on the otherwise magnificent tapestry of achievements of American linguistics in the 1940s" (Sebeok, 1977, p. 416). But fortunately in summer 1942, with the financial aid from the Rockefeller Foundation, l'École Libre des Hautes Études was organized in New York by the charter of French and Belgian governments-in-exile. It soon became another important harbor for the intellectual émigrés who escaped the persecutions in Europe. Jakobson was appointed as Professor of General Linguistics and Professor of Slavic Philology. He remained teaching there until in 1946, when he was appointed to the chair at Columbia University.

Six leçons sur le son et le sens, the lecture notes Jakobson prepared for his teaching at l'École Libre (therefore composed in French), can be read as an enlarged and elaborated version of "Zur Struktur des Phonems". Jakobson again emphasized that "le phonème est un faisceau d'éléments différentiels"⁸ (Jakobson, 1987, p. 371). And Saussure's syntagmatic / paradigmatic dichotomy was again introduced to show the concurrent nature of the distinctive feature, as he reiterated that "une qualité est irréductible, ponctuelle, sur l'axe des simultanités"⁹ (ibid., p. 385). "Zur Struktur des Phonems" was concise because it was the notes prepared for the two short lectures, while *Six leçons sur le son et le sens* was elaborated because it was prepared for a half-semester course.

8 "the phoneme is a bundle of differential elements".

9 "a feature is irreducible, point-like, on the axis of the simultaneity".

However, it must be noted that *Six leçons sur le son et le sens* exerted a much larger influence than the nearly forgotten “Zur Struktur des Phonems”. This impact is partly owing to the special atmosphere at l’École Libre des Hautes Études, where the audience was not limited to students in the regular sense. Émigrés scholars and professors of different fields often listened to each other’s classes, facilitating ideas to flow from one discipline to another. As for the case of distinctive feature, Jakobson’s influence is highly visible in Claude Lévi-Strauss’ (1908-2009) ideas on structural anthropology. For example, his suggestion that the system of kin terms be dissociated into connotations with positive-negative values was exactly based on the fact that “pour atteindre une loi de structure, le linguiste analyse les phonèmes en ‘éléments différentiels’, qu’il est possible alors d’organiser en un ou plusieurs ‘couples d’oppositions’ ”¹⁰ (Lévi-Strauss, 1958, p. 42). Therefore, Jakobson’s idea of distinctive feature also provided new insights to other disciplines of the social science and efficiently demonstrated its trans-disciplinary value.

3.2 Postwar new stages for Jakobson’s distinctive features

When l’École Libre des Hautes Études was established in 1942, Alvin Johnson optimistically anticipated it to be not merely a temporary harbor for the intellectual refugees, but “une fondation permanente s’ajoutant à notre système américain d’éducation”¹¹ (Johnson, 1942, p. 425). However, as the World War II ended in May 1945, the intellectual émigré community in New York were quickly prepared for a joyful moving back to their home countries in Europe. École Libre ultimately failed to become the expected permanent institution. As noted by François Chaubet and Emmanuelle Loyer (2000, p. 970), “avec le départ rapide et massif de presque tous les enseignants français, elle ne fut ni l’institution dynamique qu’elle avait été dans les années exceptionnelles de la guerre, ni une nouvelle structure de dialogue entre les deux rives de l’Atlantique qu’on avait rêvé qu’elle devint”.¹² But after all, its academic

10 “to achieve a law of structure, the linguist analyzes phonemes as ‘distinctive features’; then it becomes possible to organize them as one or more ‘pairs of oppositions’ ”.

11 “a permanent institution added to our American educational system”.

12 “with the rapid and massive departure of almost all the French teachers, it was neither the dynamic institution as it had been during the exceptional years of the war, nor a new agency of dialogue

I N T E R F A C E

splendor during the war years became perpetuated, demonstrating an intellectual version of the *France Libre*.

In Czechoslovakia, the collapse of the Nazi regime ended the German Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Masaryk University, which was closed in November 1939 and experienced savage losses, damages and massacres during the Nazi occupation, was re-opened in 1945. With his professorship to be recovered, Jakobson may well have been one of the intellectual émigrés who were ready to return to Europe. However, as mentioned by Toman (1995, p. 251), “although his chair in Brno was explicitly reconfirmed by the university, Jakobson’s security in Czechoslovakia could not be guaranteed”. Toman also noted that hundreds of Russian and Ukrainian émigrés were arrested when the Red Army entered Czechoslovakia (*ibid.*). A.L. Bem (1886-?1945) and P.N. Savitskij (1895-1968), both active members of the Prague Linguistic Circle, were among the arrested. One disappeared ever since and the other was deported back to the Soviet Union and imprisoned for ten years. It would not be difficult to guess what Jakobson’s fate would have been had he really returned to Czechoslovakia where the Soviet Union was soon to establish a firm control. Henry Kučera (1983, p. 878) indicated that in the Eastern bloc countries in the early 1950s, “Jakobson was viciously attacked, for his linguistic theories as well as his literary opinions”. This climate of intolerance provides indications regarding the consequences Jakobson would have faced, should he have returned.

To our great relief, he chose to continue to stay in the United States. In 1946, he was appointed to the newly formed Thomas G. Masaryk Chair of Czechoslovak Studies at Columbia University. During his three years’ teaching at Columbia, two of his articles announced another new stage of Jakobsonian phonology. One is “On the Identification of Phonemic Entities” (1949); the other is “Notes on the French Phonemic Patterns” (1949, in collaboration with John Lotz).

The two articles published in 1949 announced a new stage of Jakobson’s ideas on distinctive feature in the sense that they no longer dealt with

between the two shores of the Atlantic as we had dreamed that it would become”.

sporadic examples like in “Z fonologie spisovne slovenstiny” or “Zur Struktur des Phonems”. Instead, they were serious attempts at establishing a system of distinctive features that exhaustively describes the whole phonological aspect of a specific language.

In this stage, Jakobson also began to analyze the distinctive features with the aid of matrices in tabulation. In both articles, phonemes are decomposed into six inherent distinctive features and specified with a positive (+), a negative (-), or a mixed (\pm) value. The six distinctive features are Vowel-Consonant, Nasal-Oral, Saturated-Diluted, Grave-Acute, Tense-Lax, and Continuous-Intercepted. Jakobson limited their number to six as part of his quest for a minimal system. However, he had to allow a third value (\pm) in this system, making it an imperfect binary system.

It was not until he introduced more features in the 1950s that the third value (\pm) was abandoned and the system became purely binary. The result was the standard version of the Jakobson-Halle system of 12 distinctive features as English readers see in the more familiar *Preliminaries to Speech Analysis* (1952) and *Fundamentals of Language* (1956). The new system reveals its universal value as Jakobson applied it effectively to the analyses of more languages, best exemplified by his studies on the phonological systems of Arabic and Gilyak in late 1950s.

In January 1949, he was appointed as the Samuel Hazzard Cross Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures and of General Linguistics at Harvard University. The émigré was gradually accepted by the mainstream academic world in the United States, culminating by his election in 1956 as President of the Linguistic Society of America.

After he immigrated to the United States, especially after he left l'École Libre, Jakobson began to face an English speaking audience and readers. It was thus predictable that English would become the dominant language in which his works of this new stage were mainly written. The augmentation of English as a lingua franca in the post-WWII academic world explains the reason why linguists today are more familiar with

I N T E R F A C E

Preliminaries to Speech Analysis and *Fundamentals of Language*, his final products on the theory of distinctive features.

4 Conclusion

To sum up, Jakobson's phonological term "distinctive feature" was first proposed in a less-known, if not forgotten, Czech article and the idea turned mature only gradually. During the WWII years he spent in Northern European countries and the United States, it came to deepen in his German and French lecture manuscripts. And in the last stage, his postwar English writings became the best-known among his works of this topic.

The crises brought danger and instability, but they also offered the opportunity for academic ideas to spread, intermingle and reconstruct. Contrasted with the fates of some other linguists of his generation who had been active in pre-WWI Russia, Jakobson was evidently among the luckiest. E.D. Polivanov (1891-1938), who stayed in Russia, defended the scientific truth and died tragically in the Great Purge. N.F. Jakovlev (1892-1974), who chose to stoop and follow the notorious doctrines of Nicholas Marr, was dismissed from the public position when these doctrines were severely criticized in the 1950s, and finally died in poverty and mental disease. N.S. Trubetzkoy (1890-1938), who escaped the chaos in Russia, fell victim to the persecutions of the Nazi regime. To this sense, Jakobson's odyssey proved exceptionally valuable, not only for the sake of his own safety, but more importantly, for the sake of the linguistic science in the 20th century.

References

- Anderson, S. (1985). *Phonology in the twentieth century*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Cercle linguistique de Prague. (1931). "Projet de terminologie phonologique standardisée", *Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague*, IV, 309-323.
- Chaubet, F. & Loyer, E. (2000). "L'école libre des hautes études de New York: exil et résistance intellectuelle (1942-1946)", *Revue Historique*, 4 (616), 939-972.
- Fischer-Jørgensen, E. (1997). "Roman Jakobson and Denmark", *Acta Linguistica Hafniensia*, 29 (1), 13-28.
- Halle, M. (1988). "The Bloomfield-Jakobson correspondence, 1944-1946", *Language*, 64 (4), 737-754.
- Ivić, P. (1965). "Roman Jakobson and the growth of phonology". 69-107, in C. Kreidler (Ed.), 2001, *Phonology: Critical concepts*. Vol. 1. London: Routledge.
- Jakobson, R. (1920). "Stav kultury v Rusku: Rozhovor s členem sovětského poselstva Červeného kříže", in J. Toman (Ed.), 2013, *Roman Jakobson: Selected writings IX* (1) (pp. 22 – 24). Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter.
- . (1921). "Vliv revoluce na ruský jazyk", in J. Toman (Ed.), 2013, *Roman Jakobson: Selected writings IX* (1) (pp. 28 – 60). Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter.
- . (1931). "Z fonologie spisovné slovenštiny", in J. Jirásek & F. Tichý (Eds). *Slovenská miscellanea* (pp. 155-163). Bratislava: Universum.
- . (1932). "Fonéma". In K. Mádl (Ed.), *Ottův slovník naučný nové doby*. Díl II. sv. 1 (p. 608). Praha: J. Otto.
- . (1939). "Observations sur le classement phonologique des consonnes", in 1962, *Roman Jakobson: Selected writings I* (pp. 272-279). The Hague: Mouton.
- . (1949). "On the identification of phonemic entities", in 1962, *Roman Jakobson: Selected writings I* (pp. 418-425). The Hague: Mouton.
- . (1957a). "Mufaxxama – the 'emphatic' phonemes in Arabic", in 1962, *Roman Jakobson: Selected writings I* (pp. 510-522). The Hague: Mouton.

I N T E R F A C E

- . (1957b). “Notes on Gilyak”, in 1971, *Roman Jakobson: Selected writings II* (pp.72-97). The Hague: Mouton.
- . (1962). “Zur Struktur des Phonems”, in 1962, *Roman Jakobson: Selected writings I* (pp. 280-310). The Hague: Mouton.
- . (1987). “Six leçons sur le son et le sens”, in S. Rudy (Ed.), 1987, *Roman Jakobson: Selected writings VIII* (pp. 321-392). The Hague: Mouton.
- Jakobson, R., Fant, G. & Halle, M. (1952). “Preliminaries to speech analysis”, *Roman Jakobson: Selected writings VIII* (pp. 583-654). The Hague: Mouton.
- Jakobson, R & Lotz, J. (1949). “Notes on the French phonemic pattern”, *Roman Jakobson: Selected writings I* (pp. 426-434). The Hague: Mouton.
- Jakobson, R. & Halle, M. (1956). *Fundamentals of language*. The Hague: Mouton. The Hague: Mouton.
- Jangfeldt, B. (2014). *Mayakovsky: A Biography*. H. Watson (Trans.), Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Johnson, A. (1942). “L’Ecole libre des hautes études”, *The French Review*, 15 (5), 425-426.
- Kučera, H. (1983). “Roman Jakobson”, *Language*, 59 (4), 871-883.
- Leoni, F. (2015). “Les parties et le tout: Jakobson, Husserl et la phonologie”, *Histoire Épistémologie Langage*, 37 (1), 27-42.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1958). *Anthropologie structurale*. Paris: Plon.
- Qian, J. (2016). “An introduction to *The linguistic school of Prague*”. (《布拉格语言学派》导读), in the reprint of J. Vachek, 1966. *The linguistic school of Prague*. (pp. 1-154). Beijing: World Publishing Corporation.
- Qu, C. (2015). *A study of Jakobsonian phonology: Opposition, distinctive features and sound shape*. (《雅柯布森音系学理论研究: 对立、区别特征与音形》) Beijing: World Publishing Corporation.
- Rudy, S. (1997). Introduction to *My futurist years* (pp. ix-xxvi). New York: Marsilio Publishers.
- Sebeok, T. (1977). “Roman Jakobson’s teaching in America”, in D. Armstrong & C. Van Schooneveld (Eds.), *Roman Jakobson: Echoes of his scholarship* (pp. 411-420). Lisse: The Peter de Riddle Press.

QU

- Sériot, P. (2012). *Structure et totalité: Les origines intellectuelles du structuralisme en Europe centrale et orientale*. Limoges: Lambert-Lucas.
- Toman, J. (1995). *The magic of a common language*. Cambridge: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.
- Waugh, L. (1987). Preface to the second edition of *Sound shape of language*, in S. Rudy (Ed.), *Roman Jakobson: Selected writings VIII* (pp. 1-5) The Hague: Mouton.

[received November 25, 2017
accepted January 22, 2018]

