

Encounters with Roman Jakobson

Olga T. YOKOYAMA

It is not clear whether the already rich Jakobson mythology needs more contributions. But having been invited to share what I know, perhaps a few direct encounters with the legend, as recounted by a member of one of the last generations of those who can claim to have been influenced by him in some personal way, will provide a few details that may supplement what others have told.

I began graduate school at Harvard a few years after Jakobson had retired from the Harvard faculty. In the Slavic Department, he was still the first point of reference to come up in any conversation, whether in terms of his scholarly ideas or his mythology. He was also physically present in the area, and a University Professor at MIT. To a beginning student of Slavic linguistics, who had been introduced to the subject by Jakobson's students or his students' students, he was an awe-inspiring living icon. Given his stature, I was very nervous when I telephoned him — in English — for the first time, upon the encouragement of Horace Lunt, who thought that I should ask Jakobson for advice about a topic I was contemplating for my dissertation. Jakobson turned out to be surprisingly accessible, and told me to come the next morning to his house, which happened to be just around the corner from the Harvard graduate student housing I lived in. When I showed up, the first thing he said was that my English had palatalized consonants, and that this must be coming either from my Russian side (“Olga”) or my Japanese side (“Yokoyama”). He then thought for a moment and decided that the kind of palatalization he had heard in my telephone speech was more like Russian. After that, Russian became our language of communication.

Jakobson was encouraging about the topic I had in mind (which had to do with “brain and language”), and gave me some advice on Luria's theories and how I could try to become Luria's student. (The project did not work out because of visa issues, and Luria died shortly after this in any case.) At the same time, Jakobson sounded very enthusiastic about my research interests in general, and told me that he would be glad to read anything I wrote. This was more than could be hoped for by a graduate student only about to start

her dissertation research. In the years that followed, I remember asking him for his opinion once, about a paper I had written on the three Russian coordinating conjunctions *a*, *i* and *no*. I remember noticing, in his comments, that he was thinking in terms of binary oppositions, and my analysis was not exactly carried out in binary terms. Jakobson did not try to press his views on me, but he did advise me to include in my study the fourth and last coordinating conjunction *da*, a piece of advice I have yet to follow. (My paper on *a*, *i* and *no* was published not long after my meeting with Jakobson.¹) I must confess, however, that *da* has been bothering me ever since, and I still hope that I will get to it some day.

But my most memorable meeting with Jakobson was a meeting of a completely different kind. In the year in which I received my Ph.D., my father came from Japan to attend the graduation. He was a retired lawyer, a graduate of Tokyo University, and two years older than Jakobson, a factor that will have some significance in what follows. At the time of my father's visit, we still lived in Harvard graduate student housing, and Jakobson would take regular walks around his block, passing by our apartment. My children played outside, and Jakobson and I usually exchanged brief greetings as he slowly passed our porch supported with his cane. One day, however, he stopped and asked me if I could help him with a classical Japanese poem from the ancient anthology "Man-yo-shu". Classical Japanese was by far not my forte; but my father was visiting at the time, and he practically knew this anthology by heart. He also wrote poetry himself using Classical Japanese. So I volunteered my father to Jakobson.

My father and I went to Jakobson's house one evening shortly after that. The two old men were of similar height and, as it turned out, of a similar temperament. Jakobson offered my father a shot glass of vodka, and then a second one, and my father was delighted. They sat facing each other, with Jakobson's huge desk separating them, and I sat next to my father in my role as an interpreter. (My father was quite good at Russian, but when the social niceties were over and the conversation turned to technical matters, my help became necessary.) Jakobson explained that he was working on Takahashi Mushimaro's "nagauta" (long poem), which my father was familiar with. Jakobson's hypothesis, as he explained it to my father, was that the poet used a high ratio of those sounds which happened to be part of his name, because of poets' subconscious tendency

¹ Olga T. Yokoyama, "On sentence-coordination in Russian: a functional approach," *Papers from the Seventeenth Regional Meeting* (Chicago: Chicago Linguistic Society, Working papers, 1981), pp. 431-439.

to like those sounds. And this was when the two men clashed. It was not long before they were standing facing each other across the desk, their voices raised, gesticulating, with their opinions in complete disagreement. Probably the few shots of vodka they had had during the social part of the meeting contributed to the excitement. I myself did not drink, and sat there terrified, having to translate my father's categorical pronouncements — he clearly did not give a damn that he was disagreeing with arguably the greatest linguist of the century. To my father, this was merely a Russian man two years his junior (and even one year makes a difference in the Japanese system of seniority), who dared to tell him how Mushimaro's (and, by extension, all) poetic creativity functioned. The evening brought no solution; the men parted cordially, but each firmly convinced that his opinion was the right one. I don't recall what arguments my father had against Jakobson's analysis of the poem's phonetic texture. What I do remember, though, is that I was mortified when Jakobson called me the next day and asked me what *my* thoughts were about his hypothesis. I had no philological arguments to offer, but in terms of sheer logic I thought that any claim regarding the frequency of particular sounds in a piece of text would have to be based on a control sample of the frequency of those sounds in the language in general. When asked point blank, I could not help but tell Jakobson what my reservations were about his analysis. I had heard that Jakobson did not take criticism well, and so — having watched his fiery reaction to my father's disagreement with him the night before — I stated my opinion with the sinking feeling that this would be the last time Jakobson ever spoke to me. But Jakobson listened to my point with patience. He continued to support my work, and in fact, my discussion with him about the three Russian conjunctions occurred after his clash with my father. A couple of years later, he gave me an offprint of his paper on Mushimaro's poem,² which contains, at the end of the paper, an acknowledgment of my father's help, marking his name with "Esq.". As he handed the paper to me, Jakobson remarked that no lawyer in America would know or be able to argue about an 8th-century English poem.

This brief exercise in memoir-writing has naturally led me to some further thoughts about this complex figure, based on my few encounters with him. In the final decade of his life, I witnessed Jakobson as a gracious host, capable nonetheless of conducting a feisty argument with his guest; as a gallant old-world gentleman (always

² Roman Jakobson, "Notes on the Contours of an Ancient Japanese Poem – the Farewell Poem of 732 by Takapasi Musimarō," in *Selected Writings III: Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry* (The Hague, Paris, New York: Mouton, 1981), pp. 157-164.

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holding my coat for me and kissing my hand); and — contrary to his reputation, and most crucially — as a linguist able to accept disagreement and difference in approach from a graduate student half a century his junior.