Gustav Shpet and the Prague School: Conceptual Frames for the Study of Language

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In 1922 two members of the Moscow Linguistic Circle who had just resettled in Czechoslovakia, Petr Bogatyrev and Roman Jakobson, published, a survey of Slavic philology in Russia during the tumultuous period of 1914-1921. In it the authors note that "G.Shpet's work, 'The Tasks of Ethnic Psychology,'... demonstrates clearly the perils of the illegitimate crossbreeding of linguistics and psychology that characterizes the work of such psychologists as Steinthal or Wundt." [1] This statement is, I believe, the first mention of Shpet's name in any Czech periodical dedicated to the study of language and literature. Given the rapid development of these two fields in Czechoslovakia during the twenties and thirties and the signal role of the Russian intellectual tradition in Structuralist linguistics and poetics one would expect to find many subsequent references to Shpet's work by the members of the Prague Linguistic Circle. However, such references are extremely rare. The Structuralists seldom invoked Shpet's ideas and then only in a general way.

In fact, I have been able to locate only three other instances when the Structuralists either quoted from or referred to Shpet's texts. The introductory survey of contemporary linguistics in Bohuslav Havranek's *Genera verbi* (1928) cites a passage from volume 2 of Shpet's *Esthetic Fragments* in which the inner form of language is characterized as a logical form. Jan Mukarovsky quotes Shpet's definition of strucutre, also from *Esthetic Fragaments* in a lecture on poetics presented during the winter semester of 1930/1931. And finally, Jakobson's long 1931 essay on Tomas Masryk's contributions to linguistics observes that Masryk's critique of *Volkerpsychologie* anticipated the position of some modern philosophers of language, in particular "G.Shpet's exemplary work, *Introduction to Ethnic Psychology*, Moscow 1927." [2]

A more sustained scrutiny of Structuralist writings might unearth more references to Shpet's work. But my examples are sufficient to illustrate the general attitude of the Prague linguists to the Russian philosopher. They perceived him as a useful ally in their attack against the epistemological underpinnings of nineteenth-century positivism-its psychologism, individualism, and atomism. At the same time, they were aware of the considerable differences between their respective scholarly methods, theoretical horizons, and intellecutal emphases. Shpet was a philosopher, and tackled language from a somewhat abstract perspective. The members of the Circle were linguists, and though not entirely deaf to philosophical speculations, occupied

themselves with the detailed analysis of concrete linguistic phenomena. Hence, the paucity of quotations from Shpet in their studies.

What connects Shpet and the Prague School is not the particulars of their research but their general conceptual frameworks. Moscow and Prague were in agreement that the positivists pardigm of knowledge had outlived its usefulness and that linguistics required a new theoretical grounding. Describing this paradigm switch in 1929, Jakobson wrote: "contemporary scholarship studies every complex of phenomena not as a mechanical aggregate but a structural whole, a system, in order to discover, first of all, its internal laws, static and developmental. Today, it is not the external impulse that is at the center of scholarly interests but the internal developmental preconditions, not genesis mechanically, conceived but function." [3] The key notions of structure, sign, and function lie at the heart of both Shpet's and the Structuralists' discussion of language and the rest of this paper will be concerned with these three ideas- how their treatments coincide and differ in the work of Shpet and the Prague School.

In the Slavic intellectual traditions, Shpet was the first to define the term "structure" and apply it to linguistics and esthetics. "Spiritual and cultural formations," he observed in 1923, " are in essence structural. " [4] They differ from other types of wholes in their relational nature. A strucutre is not merely the sum total of its constitutive parts but a particular mode of their inward organization. Thus, " a structure differs from an aggregate whose complex mass permits the destruction or elimination of any of its components without a change in the qualitative essence of the whole. Structure can be analytzed only into new, self-enclosed structures which when re-asssembled restore the original structure" (EF, 12).

Language for Shpet is the structural whole *Par excellence,* the proto-image of all other cultural phenomena. "By the structure of words ," he writes," I do not mean a morphological, syntactic, or stylistic construction, not a 'surface' but an organic, deep ordering: from the sensorily perceptible to the formally-ideal (eidetic) object, with all the levels of relations between these two terms" (EF, 11-12). What seems to characterize structure, according to this statement, is that it comprises two modes of being a worldly empirical one and a non-worldly, eiditic one. As Shpet insists , "When dealing with both a structure *in toto* and its separate members we must not forget either what is actually given or what is potential ." (EF, 13).

Shpet insists on this co-presence because the two aspects of structure need not coincide in reality. The potential aspect exists merely as a relational grid, a scheme of possibilities- formally complete but materially void which can be actualized in a number of quite different ways. "Structure," according to Shpet, "is a concrete formation whose individual parts may change in 'dimension' and even in quality

but cannot be eliminated from the whole *in patentia* without its destruction. *In actu*, some 'members' may be only, inchoate in an embryonic or degenerate, atrophied state. But the *scheme* of the strucutre would not suffer from this " (EF, 11-12).

Despite their actual incompleteness, parts are recognized as structural elements because of their intrinsic link to the whole to which they belong. This structural 'belonging' is based on what Edmund Husserl called the relation of foundedness or, in Shpet's terms, that of implication. Thus, a logically incomplete judgment can be perceived as correct if the implied rules are grasped. "An enthymeme, "for example, makes sense because it "implicitly contains a syllogism with all its structural members" (EF, 13). But obviously, implication is not limited to patently deformed wholes. Since every actual structure is merely a material variant of its potential scheme the implication of the eidos is what provides it with its categorical identity. "A mathematical formula," Shpet argued, " not only contains the potential relations revealed in actual numerical measurements, but also implies the algorhythm that produced it; a proposition is *implicite* a system of inferences and *in potentia* the conclusion of a syllogism, a concept (word-term)is *in potentia* and also *implicite* a proposition; a metaphor or a symbol is *implicite* a system of tropes and *in potentia* a poem, etc ." (EF 14). [5]

Not surprisingly, the Prague School understanding of "structure" was in many respects close to Shpet's . "A structure," Bohuslav Havranek stated in 1940, "is composed of individual phenomena as a higher unit (whole) acquiring holisic properties which are alien to the parts; in short, it is not simply the sum total of its parts. Individual phenomena are not separable parts of a divisible whole but are interconnected, they are what they are only and always with regard to hierarhically organized wholes." [6] Since the Structuralists read Shpet's *Esthetic Fragments* where the term "structure" is discussed in detail, one could even speculate that they borrowed the word directly from the Russian phenomenologist. In any case, what made structures different from the other wholes in the eyes of the Prague linguists was their relational character.

Havranek's definition of structure is sufficiently broad to cover its usages in a variety of disciplines : biology, psychology, philosophy. But in its application to language some additional specifications are necessary. As we have seen, for Shpet the essential feature of the structure is its dual nature: its extension between the pole of the potential (eidetic) and the actual (empirical). The Prague linguists operated with a similar premise. They did not couch the opposition in phenomenological terms, however, but proceeded along the lines suggested by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. According to him, traditional linguistics suffered from a naturalistic misconception of its subject matter. Instead of asking the essential question. "what is language?" scholars stopped at the empirical level and concentrated

on its physical, psychological, or cultural manifestation. To rectify this situation, Saussure distinguished between what is transient and accidental in language -actual speech (*parole*) and what is permanent and rule governed- the potential linguistic system (*langue*) .

In pointing out that language consists of empirical and formal aspects, Saussure was not far from Shpet's position. However, while the Russian philosopher maintained that the two must always be treated together, the Swiss linguist emphasized only one. In his tirades against naturalism he insisted over and over that the system, not its material manifestations, is what is crucial for language. The linguistic identity of speech phenomena is their liability to the abstract norms that *langue* furnishes *a priori*. Language, Saussure explained, is like a game of chess in which a missing piece can be replaced by virtually any other object. Despite the physical difference between the two markers, within the game they have the same value. Similarly, given the infinite heterogeneity of the physical substance that speech can utilize and the restricted nature of the underlying formal system, Saussure· separated *langue* from *parole* and declared the system to be the sole object of linguistic study. [7]

The Prague School's view of this issue was definitely closer to Shpet than to Saussure. This fact explains the Structuralists' aloofness from their Danish counterparts, the Glossematicians, who carried Saussure's dictum that " language is a form and not a substance" to its algebraic extreme. For the Prague scholars, abstract *langue*, devoid of its material implementation was a heuristic device, and not a linguistic reality. [8] This view was to a considerable degree conditioned by the functionalism of the Czech group.

Conceived of as a means-end structure, language inevitably finds some substances more usable than other for the goals it pursues and; therefore, cannot be fully independent of them. To recycle Saussure's chess metaphor, it is not likely that a missing piece will be replaced by an ice cube, an egg yalk, or a living spider rather than by something more suitable for the purpose. Extended to the study of language, this attitude led the Structuralists to insist that linguistic sound be studied not only as an abstract phonological system but also as an actual phone whose physical properties condition verbal communication in a particular way. [9] Similarly, the Prague scholars investigated written language, refusing to treat it as a treacherous disguise of living discourse (Saussure's position). They saw it instead as an autonomous structure employed, according to Josef Vachek, for needs which the phonic substance cannot satisfy. [10] I shall be returning to the notion of function later on.

Shpet's definition of structure, we recall, involves not only its dual nature but also the relation of implication endowing the individual elements of a structure with their categorial identity. Shpet's treatment of this topic was heavy on explanation

but light on examples. However, what the *Esthetic Fragments* merely suggested, Roman Jakobson's phonological studies exploited to the full. As Elmar Holenstein has pointed out these inquiries "are to be regarded as a pattern and model for eidetic phenomenology." [11] In contrast to Saussure, who considered the phoneme the ultimate unit of the signifier, Jakobson argued from the 1930s on that the phoneme can be dissolved into smaller constitutive elements which he labeled distinctive features. As a "bundle of such features " [12] a phoneme implies, in Shpet's terms, the universal system of correlated distinctive features which in one way or another are realized in every linguistic sound belonging to this class. To push the parallel between Shpet and Structural linguistics yet further, a phoneme is not only implicitly an inventory of distinctive features but also, *in potentia,* a morpheme. Here we are broaching another field of inquiry advanced by the members of the Circle-morphonology-a discipline that "studies the phonological structure of the various morphological parts of the word." [13]

Until now I have dwelt on the points of similarity between Shpet's and the Prague School's notions of structure. The affinities revealed so far should not, however, blind us to their differences. Among these the most important is the way the two traditions accounted for the dynamism of language. For the Russian philosopher the essential antinomy fuelling structural transformations was that of potentiality versus actuality. A formally complete eidetic scheme is incessantly permuted in the variety of its realizations because of the physical heterogeneity of the implementing matter. For the Prague School, on the other hand, the engine of linguistic dynamism was the historical incompatibility of the elements comprising the structure. In their view, language is in no way a harmonious, symmetrical system but an on-going struggle between revolutionary tendencies aiming to alter the status quo and conservative tendencies set on preserving it. At any moment the structure is both balanced and unbalanced; it is simultaneously a stage and a mutation. The ruptures in previous equilibria coexist with the equilibria that mended these ruptures, and all of them point to subsequent changes that will redress the situation in the future.[14] This conscious attempt of th Prague linguist to merge system with diachrony differs significantly from Shpet's approach to linguistic structure, which, despite all of its historical awareness, remains primarily synchronic.

The second major concept shared by Shpet and the Structuralists is the semiotic nature of the word, the fact that it is a sign. Both Shpet and the Prague linguists concurred on this point. As Shpet put it, " The word is a sign *Sui generis* " (EF, 8). This insistence on the uniqueness of the word vis-a-vis all other signs, for example, symptoms or signals, can be attributed to the influence of Edmund Husserl's semiotic typology elaborated in the *Logical Investigations.* The introductory paragraphs of "Investigation I" divide the domain of signs into two uneven categories: 1)

expressions, i.e. signs capable of remaining self-same regardless of the actual context in which they signify : and 2) indications, i.e., signs lacking such identity and merely representing fluctuating states of affairs. Expressions are generally linguistic signs and are resistant to displacement beacause of one particular facet of their strucutre that indications' lack.''In the case of a name," Husserl explains, "we distinguish between what it 'shows forth' (i.e., a mental state) and what it means. And again between what it means (the sense of 'content' of its naming presentation) and what it names (the object of that presentation)."[15] Both the "showing forth" and the "naming" are contingent upon empirical reality and, therefore, cannot retain their sameness in repetition. Only the "content of an expression's naming presentation", the "meaning" (*Bedeutung*) of the liguistic sign, is independent of a phenomenal context. It is this lexical meaning inherent in the word prior to its representing other entities that endows the expression with its identity and distinguishes it from all other signs.

In general, Shpet accepted Husserl's conclusions about the make up of the verbal parcel. "The word," he wrote, "is a sensory complex which fulfils specific functions in human intercourse: the primary ones- semantic and synsemantic ; the secondary ones- expressive and deictic " (EF, 7). Shpet's secondary functions correspond to what Husserl called "showing forth" and "naming," whereas the primary semantic function carries out the "meaning" of the word. And this is so because for Shpet (as for Husserl) the specificity of the word *qua* sign lies in "its link to meaning (*smysl*) " (EF,8).

Nevertheless, despite this affinity, Shpet departed from Husserl's semiotic doctrine in one important respect, namely in his emphasis on the communicative nature of language. According to Husserl, meaning in its purity exists only ideally (like numbrs or geometrical figures) and is fully realized only within the confines of a single consciousness, i.e., in the mental soliloquy. Once the expression enters the world in the process of communication, it degenerates into a meaningless indication. In contrast to this, Shpet insisted that " the word is *Prima facie* communication (*soobshchenie*), and consequently a means of *intercourse (obshchenie)*" (EF, 7). And as he reiterates subsequently, " the communicative function of the word is not only the most important one, but also the one, upon which all the others are founded " (EF, 29). As these quotations suggest, for Shpet the semiotic nature of the word (its link to meaning) is closely related to the function it serves (communication). This fact leads us back to the notion of function.

As early as 1914, Shpet drew a sharp line between two types of phenomena: natural and social. Whereas social phenomena possess inner meanings (*smysl*), natural ones do not. "Let us take a concrete object; let us recall Aristotle's example of an

axe and, true, we will find its 'inner meaning' in its 'cutting.' " [16] This inner meaning has its source in the fact that the axe was made by somebody with a particular purpose in mind. Harking back to Aristotle, Shpet calls this inner meaning of social phenomena their entelechy. "Language, art, every social object," he writes, "always presents itself as a sign with internal, intimate meaning. We do not see, hear, or feel it yet we always *"Know"* it. We know that *der Tisch means* table, the table *means* an instrument for a particular end whence its meaning, its entelechy" (JS,205).

What is significant about such knowledge, however, is its origin. It is not constituted in our consciousness in the intentionl act of perceiving the social object but only through the process of interacting with others. Social phenomena, Shpet argues, "are facts which we perceive in no other way than in the transmission from somebody else" (JS, 207). And it is in this transmission of collective experience that the entelechy of language lies. As a structure of intersubjective signs it is the primary vehicle of communication among the members of a group. "Meaning," Shpet wrote, "is the dialectical accumulator of thought always ready to transmit its intelligible [*myslitel'noe*] charged to the proper receiver" (EF,88). From this perspective, the meaning of a word cannot dissipate in communication but, on the contrary, only in this process does it find its genuine realization.

Shpet's purposive explanation of social phenomena was very near to the hearts of the Prague Structualists. As I argued earlier, they conceived of language as a means-end structure and, hence, categorically rejected Saussure's "fundamental idea" that " *the true and unique object of linguistics is language studied in and for itself.*"[17] In 1925, Jakobson succinctly summed up his objection: "Language," he wrote, "according to the correct definition of contemporary French linguists, is a system of conventional values very much like a pack of cards. But because of this, it would be wrong to analyze it without taking into account the multiplicity of possible tasks without which the system does not exist. Just as we have rules for a universal card game valid equally for rummy, poker and building card houses, linguistic rules can be determined only for a system difined by its goal." [18] What is under attack here is not *Langue per se* but Saussure's conceptualization of it as a homogeneous system unifromly governing all speech activity. From the teleological standpoint of the Structuralists, language is a set of functional dialects each with its own set of rules structured in a way best suited to a specific purpose.

To analyze these means-end linguistic structures requires that we specify all the functions verbal intercourse carries out. And given the heterogeneous roles that language plays in our life, this could be a formidable task. Here the Prague Structuralists turned to Husserl's analysis of the expression, which I mentioned in connection with Shpet earlier. For Husserl the uttered word intimates the mental state of the speaker,

names some objectivity, and presents its meaning. From this beginning, Jakobson developed a typology of linguistic functions which became the cornerstone of the structuralist theory of language. To each of the three aspects of expression corresponds a specific goal-oriented functional dialect- the emotive, the practical, and the poetic[19]. The individual *langues* of these dialects organize linguistic devices in such a manner that one component of the speech act - the speaker, the referent, or the sign itself, becomes foregrounded.

Given their common phenomenological origin it is not surprising that Jakobson's typology so resembles Shpet's outline of verbal function. Yet ,there are also important difference between them, of which I shall mention one. Shpet, faithful to Husserl, considers the semantic (meaning-presenting) function of language to be primary and relegates the expressive and deictic ones to a merely ancilliary position. The apriori hierarchy reflects a logocentric view of language according to which the word is, above all, "an embodiment of reason [*razum*]" (EF,7), and the process of understanding (*urazumenie*) is the actualization of the thought (*mysl'*) contained in a word's meaning (*smysl*) in a particular mind (*um*).

The structuralist position on verbal meaning was more flexible. They would agree with the Russian philosopher that words are by definition signs and hence endowed with meaning. However, they treated the presence of meaning in an utterance in terms of a relative rather than absolute hierarchy. Language, from the functional point of view, serves a number of purposes not all of them inevitably rational and the structure of a linguistic sign in each instance reflects this fact. In some speech acts (e.g., scholarly discourse) the semantic plane clearly predominates. In others (e.g., expressive interjections) meaning might be reduced to a bare minimum- the superimposition of a phonological grid on an otherwise inarticulate scream. But it is precisely because of its capactity for such a radical realignment, the Structuralists would insist, that language is "the most important semiotic system, the sign kat' exochen.... the cement of human coexistence [which]regulates man's attitude toward both reality and society." [20]

I have now come to the end of this short comaparison of Shpet's and the Prague School's approaches to language. I hope that the many affinities and also divergences between their frames of reference are apparent. The most important fact, I believe is that the two intellectual traditions rejected the nineteenth-century paradigm of knowledge and conceived of language in structural, semiotic, and teleological terms. Elmar Holenstein, who has studied the connections between Husserl and the Prague Circle, has proposed including the circle in Phenomenology as its structuralist branch. [21] Given the numerous links between Shpet and the Prague

School, we might follow Holenstein's lead and call Shpet's philosophy of language a phenomenological branch of Structuralism.

Notes & References

1. "Slavjanskaja filologija v Rossii za g.g. 1914-1921, "*Slavia* 1,1922,p.458.

2. B. Havranek, *Genera verbi v iazycich slovanskych*, Vol.1 (Prague, 1928),p.7, J. Mukarovsky, "Eufonie a rym ." *Prazske prednasky* vol. 1.ed M. Cervenka and M.Prochazka (Ann Arbor forthcoming) p. 125; R. Jakobson, "Jazykove problemy v Masarykove dile, " *Vudce generaci* (= *Masarykuv sbornik*, vol. 5, 1931), p.399

3. "Romanticke vseslovanstvi-nova slavistika," *Cin* 1. 1929,p. 11.

4. *Esteticheskie fragmenty*, vol.2 (Petersburg, 1923), p. 12. Further references to this text will be given within the body of the essay with the abbreviation "EF" followed by page number.

5. In this quotation I have corrected what seems to me a mistake. The Russian text reads : "a proposition is in *potentia* the system of inferences and *implicite* the conclusion of a syllogism."

6. "Strukturalismus," *Ottuv slovnik naucnynove doby*, vol. 6 (Prague 1940), p. 452.

7. See F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, tr. W. Baskin (New York, 1959), esp.pp. 7-23 and 101-122

8. Cf., e.g., V.Skalicka, "Kodansky strukturalismus a 'Prazska skola' ," *Slova a slovesnost* 10, 1947/48,pp.135-42.

9. See, e.g., B. Trnka, "O soucasnem stavu badanive fonologii," *Slovo a slovesnost* 6, 1940,pp.165-66.

10. "Zum Problem der geschriebenen Sprache, :" *Travaux de Cercle linguistique de Praque* 8, 1939, pp.94-104

11. "Jakobson and Husserl : A contribution to the Genealogy of Structuralism" *The Human Context* 7,no.1, 1975,p.76.

12. Cf., e.g., R. Jakobson *et al., Preliminaries to Speech Analysis, The Distinctive Features and their Correlates* (Cambridge, Mass ., 1951), p.3.

13. R.Jakobson, "Fonologie, " *Ottuv Slovnik naucny nove doby* vol. 2 (Prague, 1932), p. 612.

14. For an extensive discussion of the Prague School's conception of "linguistic structure," see Josef Vachek,

The Linguistic School of Prague: an Introduction to its Theory and Practice (Bloomington, 1966), esp. pp. 15-39.

15. *Logical Investigations*, vol.1, tr. J. N. Findley (New York, 1970), p. 276.

16. *Javlenie i smysl : Fenomenologiia kak osnovnaia nauka i ee problemy* (Moscow, 1914), p. 189. Further references to this text willl be given within the body of my essay with the abbreviation "JS" followed by the page number.

17. *Course*, p. 232.

18. "Konec basnickeho umprumactvi a zivnostnictvi," *Pasmo: Revue internationale moderne* nos. 13/14, 1925, p.1.

19. *Noveishaja russkaja poezija: Nabrosok pervyi* (Prague, 1921), p.10.

20. J. Mukarovsky, "O jazyce basnickem," *Slovo a slovesnost* 6, 1940, p. 117.

21. See, e.g., "Prague Structuralism-a Branch of the Phenomenological Movement," in J. Odmark, ed. *Language Literature & Meaning I: Problems of Literary Theory* (Amsterdam, 1979), pp. 71-97.