The Asymmetric Dualism
of the Linguistic Sign

Sergej Karcevskij

Sergej Karcevskij is one of the most intriguing figures of modern Slavic linguistics. Throughout his life (1884–1955), he managed to be present at precisely the moment when a new direction was being set for the discipline. In 1906, after a year of political imprisonment, he left Russia for Switzerland and studied linguistics with Ferdinand de Saussure. Ten years later, he returned to his native land (1917–1919) and was the first, in Roman Jakobson's words, to fire "the young generation of Moscow linguists with the Cours de linguistique generale."[1] From Russia he went to Prague, where he was a founding member of the Prague Linguistic Circle. And finally he returned to Switzerland, together with Bally and Sechehaye presiding at the inauguration of the Linguistic Society of Geneva.

Karcevskij's notion of the dual asymmetry of the linguistic sign has its roots in romantic philosophy and philology and is the basis for Hegel's definition of the symbol as an essentially ambiguous sign. According to Hegel, the form of a symbol contains its meaning within it, but at the same time the form is not fully adequate to that meaning. "A lion, for instance, is the most obvious symbol of strength, but at the same time a bull or a horn could symbolize it; and on the other hand, a bull contains a multitude of other symbolic meanings."[2] Humboldt's treatment of language as energeia is also linked to Karcevskij's dual asymmetry. Energeia is the creative language process in which speech sounds are continually matched to ideas in a new fashion. This notion of Humboldt's influenced a great many nineteenth-century linguists (Potebnja in Russia, Marty in Prague, to mention only a few), who sought to isolate the elusive category of "the inner form of language" which created the linkage between sound and meaning.

Unlike his predecessors, who tried to explain linguistic change through the human psyche, Karcevskij focused his attention on the semiotic pre-

conditions of this process. All the dialectic antinomies pervading language that destabilize its signs—general/individual, systemic/accidental, abstract/concrete, logical/psychological—Karcevskij considered merely the implementations of a fundamental semiotic antinomy between homonymity and synonymity. In other words, every application of a linguistic sign necessarily implies other possible applications of the same sign (homonymity) as well as the existence of applicable, but in this case not applied signs (synonymity). It is this homonymic/synonymic extension of the linguistic sign—unique in each case—that causes its continuous slippage between the poles of the above antinomies and renders language such a versatile tool of thought and communication.

Among the Prague structuralists, Karcevskij's model enjoyed wide popularity. As Jakobson wrote in 1932, "We fully accept Karcevskij's thesis: the asymmetric structure of linguistic signs is the essential precondition of linguistic change."[3] It proved especially seminal for the students of literature because, as the leading members of the Circle stressed in their 1935 manifesto, "Literature alone makes palpable the speech act in all its vitality and shows speech to be not a rigid system but a creative energy."[4] The function of verbal art is precisely to maintain in language the dual asymmetry of its signs, to keep realigning the link between sound and meaning. But "why is it necessary to point out that the sign does not merge with the object [it signifies]?" asks Jakobson. "Because besides the immediate awareness of the identity between the sign and object (A is A_1) we need the immediate awareness of the lack of this identity (A is not A_1). This antinomy is necessary, for without contradictions there is no mobility of concepts, the relation between concept and sign becomes automatized, activity stops, the awareness of reality dies out."[5] The same themes are also elaborated in Jan Mukařovský's writings proceeding from Karcevskij's ideas, "Poetic Designation and the Esthetic Function of Language,"[6] and "On Poetic Language."[7]

The literature about Karcevskij's work is rather meager. There is a "Notice biographique" by S. Stelling-Michaud in Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure, 14 (1956) *dedicated to the memory of Karcevskij, as well as a vivid portrait and a bibliography of Karcevskij's writings by Roman Jakobson. Wendy Steiner's "Language as Process: Sergej Karcevskij's Semiotics of Language" compares Karcevskij's ideas with those of his teacher Saussure and draws parallels between them and the recent development of poststructuralism.[8] "The Axes of Poetic Language" by Peter and Wendy Steiner attempts to reconcile the difference between Karcevskij's antinomy of homonymity and synonymity and Jakobson's metaphor/metonymy opposition.[9]*

NOTES

1. "Sergej Karcevskij: August 28, 1884–November 7, 1955," *Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure*, 14 (1956), 10.

2. *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*, vol. 1, in *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's Werke*, vol. 10, part 1 (Berlin, 1835), p. 395.

3. "Zur Struktur des russischen Verbum," *Charisteria Gvilelmo Mathesio qvinqvagenario a discipvlis et Circvli Lingvistici Pragensis sodalibvs oblata* (Prague, 1932), p. 83.

4. "Úvodem" [By way of introduction], *Slovo a slovesnost*, 1 (1935), 5.

5. "Co je poesie?" *Volné směry*, 30, (1933–1934), 239. English translation by M. Heim, "What Is Poetry?" in L. Matejka and I. R. Titunik (eds.), *Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), pp. 164–175.

6. "Dénomination poétique et la fonction esthétique de la langue," *Actes du Quatrième Congrès international des linguistes tenu à Copenhague du 27 août au 1er septembre 1936* (Copenhagen, 1938), pp. 98–104. English translation by J. Burbank and P. Steiner in J. Mukařovský, *The Word and Verbal Art* (New Haven, 1977), pp. 65–73.

7. "O jazyce básnickém," *Slovo a slovesnost*, 6 (1940), especially pp. 129–135; English translation in *The Word and Verbal Art*, especially pp. 33–46.

8. L. Matejka (ed.), *Sound, Sign and Meaning: Quinquagenary of the Prague Linguistic Circle* (Ann Arbor, 1976), pp. 291–300.

9. J. Odmark (ed.), *Language, Literature and Meaning I: Problems of Literary Theory* (Amsterdam, 1979), pp. 35–70.

A sign and its signification do not form a perfect fit. Their extensions do not coincide point for point, for a single sign always has several semantic functions and a single signification is always expressed by several signs. Every sign is potentially a "homonym" and a "synonym" at the same time—that is, it is constituted by the intersection of these two conceptual series.

As a semiotic mechanism, a language operates between two poles that can be characterized as the *general* and the *individual*, the *abstract* and the *concrete*. On the one hand, language must supply a means of communication for all the members of a linguistic community. But on the other hand, it must serve equally as a means of self-expression for each of the individuals in this community, and however "socialized" the forms of our psychic life may be, the individual cannot be reduced to the social. The semiotic values in a language necessarily have a potential, and hence general, character in order for language to remain above the whims of the individual, above individuals as such. At the same time, these potential signs must apply to a concrete reality that is constantly changing.

If signs were static and each had only a single function, language

would become a mere set of labels. It is equally impossible to conceive of a language whose signs would be dynamic to the point of signifying nothing outside of concrete situations. Thus, the nature of a linguistic sign must be both static and dynamic at the same time. Called upon to adapt to a concrete situation, it can modify itself only partially; a certain part of it must remain static if the sign is to remain identical to itself.

Whether in a concrete situation we tend to focus on the new, the unknown, or on the old, the known, the simultaneous presence of these two possibilities is indispensable for any act of comprehension (or of recognition). The new is incorporated into old categories; it is recognized as a new type in an old class. But it is always a type, and not an individual. To comprehend or recognize a fact means to incorporate it into the set of things that we already know, to establish the coordinates at whose intersection it can be discovered. What is really new here is the relation, the intersection of the coordinates, and not the coordinates themselves. It follows that an act of knowing cannot, properly speaking, become utterly "individual." Reality is infinite; in each situation we retain only certain elements, rejecting all the rest as insignificant to our interests. We arrive, in this way, at a concept—the schematic product of an integration—which is required from the start to serve as a general type.

The linguistic sign corresponds in its internal structure to an intersection of coordinates of varying degrees of generality, depending upon the semiotic plane to which it belongs.[1] What is really new, for example, in a word that has just been coined, is the intersection of coordinates and not the coordinates themselves. It could not be otherwise, for from its very appearance every word designates a type and not an individual. If we witness a displacement of the boundary between a seme and a morpheme within a word, as often happens in children's etymologies like the pair *Mamagei* and *papont*, this phenomenon is possible only because of the existence of the German *Papagei* and the Russian *mamont* [mammoth], which in turn are affected by this displacement of coordinates. Even at the moment of its "invention," a coordinate is necessarily general and not individual, i.e., not created ad hoc for a single phenomenon. One could even claim that it is impossible to create a single word, that one must create at least two at a time.

The general and the individual in any semiotic system exist not as entities but as relations between two coordinates or two series of semiotic values, each serving to differentiate the other. One cannot insist too much on this differential character of the linguistic sign.

In the introduction to my *Système du verbe russe*, I wrote: "It has become a commonplace to affirm that linguistic values exist only by virtue of their opposition to one another. So stated, this idea leads to an absurdity: a tree is a tree because it is neither a house nor a horse nor a river. . . . Opposition pure and simple necessarily leads to chaos and cannot serve as the basis of a *system*. True differentiation presupposes a simultaneous resemblance and difference. Concepts form a series founded on a common element and are opposed only within this series. . . . It is in this way that homophony becomes possible and justifiable, when two values belonging to two *different* series . . . are found to have the same phonic sign" (pp. 13–14).

Thus, it would be absurd to ask what the value of *a* is as a morpheme in Russian. One must first determine the series of common values within which this *a* appears: *stol, stola, stolu* . . . ; *parusa, parusov* . . . ; *žena, ženy* . . . ; and so on.[2] It is only then that we can understand which differential value is introduced by this morpheme and in which series.

If, as we have just seen, the same phonic sign can signify different values in different series, the reverse is equally possible: the same value can be signified by different signs in different series, as in the masculine nominative plural endings of *stoly, parusa, krest'jane*. Homophony is the general term for this phenomenon. Homonymy is only a particular case of it, occurring in the conceptual planes of language; the opposite phenomenon, "polyvocity" or heterophony, occurs in the conceptual planes as synonymy. But these are really two sides of the same general principle which could, though rather imprecisely, be formulated as follows: every linguistic sign is potentially a homonym and a synonym at the same time. It belongs simultaneously to a series of transposed values of a single sign and to a series of analogous values expressed by different signs. This is merely a logical consequence of the differential character of the sign. And a linguistic sign must necessarily be differential—otherwise it would be indistinguishable from a signal.

Homonymy and synonymy, in the sense that we give them here,[3] constitute the two most important relational coordinates of language because they are the most dynamic, flexible, and adequate to concrete reality.

A homonymic series is psychological in essence and rests on associations. A synonymic series, on the other hand, is logical in character, for its members are to be thought of as different variants of the same phenomenal class. Nevertheless, the number of its members is not definite. The series always remains open: it may even be merely

potential, but the possibility always necessarily remains for the meaning of a class to be actualized. This idea of a class, connected to a concrete situation, is the source from which analogous values radiate.

A homonymic series also remains open, for it is impossible to predict where a given sign will be carried in the play of associations. However, at each concrete moment, we find ourselves in the presence of two chains related as transposed sign to "adequate" sign and held in contact by a *tertium comparationis*. The source for the generation of homonyms is the set of representations associated with the value of a sign; these vary from one situation to another, and it is the concrete situation that furnishes the *tertium comparationis*.

In a "complete" sign (a word as opposed to a morpheme), there are two opposed centers of semiotic functions, one for formal values, the other for semantic values. The formal values of a word (gender, number, case, aspect, tense) represent aspects of significations known to every speaking subject which are more or less safe from any subjective interpretation on the part of interlocutors; they are assumed to remain identical to themselves in all situations. The semantic part of a word, in contrast, is a residue resistant to any attempt to decompose it into elements as "objective" as formal values. The exact semantic value of a word can be adequately established only as a function of the concrete situation. Only the value of scientific terms is fixed once and for all (or so the story goes!) by their inclusion in *systems* of ideas. But the set of ideas corresponding to what one could term the ideology of daily life is far from being a system, properly speaking.

Each time that we apply a word as a semantic value to concrete reality, we gain a set of more or less new representations. In other words, we continually transpose the semantic value of the sign. But we do not notice this unless the gap between the "adequate" (usual) value of the sign and its occasional value is sufficiently large to strike us. The identity of the sign is maintained, in the first place, because our thought tends toward integration and refuses to note any modifications in the set of representations; and second, because we have introduced a *tertium comparationis* which motivates the new value of the old sign.

However concrete this transposition may be though, it does not become individual. From its inception, the new creation is a sign: it is capable of signifying analogous situations, it is already generic, and it is part of a synonymic series. Suppose, for example, that in a conversation we dubbed someone *ryba* [fish]. We would, thereby, have created a homonym of *ryba* (a case of transposition), and at the

same time we would have added a new member to the synonymic series: *flegmatik* [phlegmatic], *vjalyj* [flaccid], *besčuvstvennyj* [impassive], *xolodnyj* [cold].

Even the center of formal values in a word can be transposed. Here is an example of the transposition of the grammatical function. The imperative normally expresses a volitional act on the part of the speaker which eclipses the interlocutor's role as agent of the process, as in *Zamolči!* [Be quiet!]. But the imperative expresses a different function in "*Tol'ko posejali, a moroz i udar'*" [They had barely finished sowing, when the frost struck][4] (*tertium comparationis*: an unexpected act, thus independent of the agent of the process), or better, in "*smolči on, vsë by oböšlos'*" [If he had only kept quiet everything would have worked out all right][5] (*tertium comparationis*: an act [grammatically] forced upon the agent of the process). Finally, the imperative form has homophones in such idiomatic phrases as "*Togo i* gljadi" [I'm afraid that . . .] and "*To i* znaj" [continuously]. Of course, there are always synonyms of the imperative: "*Zamolčat'!*" [the infinitive, "to be silent"], "*Molčanie!*" [the noun, "Silence!"], "*Tss!*" [the interjection, "Shh!"].

In its essential traits, grammatical displacement is analogous to semantic displacement. The two exist as a function of concrete reality. We cannot pause here over all that distinguishes them, but we should note one essential difference. Formal values are naturally more general than semantic ones and must serve as types, each encompassing an almost unlimited number of semantic significations. This is why grammatical values are more stable, and their transpositions less frequent and more "regular." The displacements of a grammatical sign on either the homonymic or synonymic axis can, up to a point, be at least registered if not predicted. But it is impossible to predict where a sign could end up as a result of its semantic displacements. In the domain of grammar, however, the subdivisions always occur in pairs, and the two correlative values occur as paired opposites.[6] We know besides that as a function of certain concrete situations, values as different as the perfective and imperfective may cease to be opposed.[7] Thus, under syntax one should not only study the homonymic-synonymic displacements of each form (which would be the only way to understand what the proper function of each form is), but one should also try to determine in what concrete situations and as a function of what notions the value of a sign leads to its opposite.

One might resort to the following scheme to illustrate the asymmetric character of the sign:
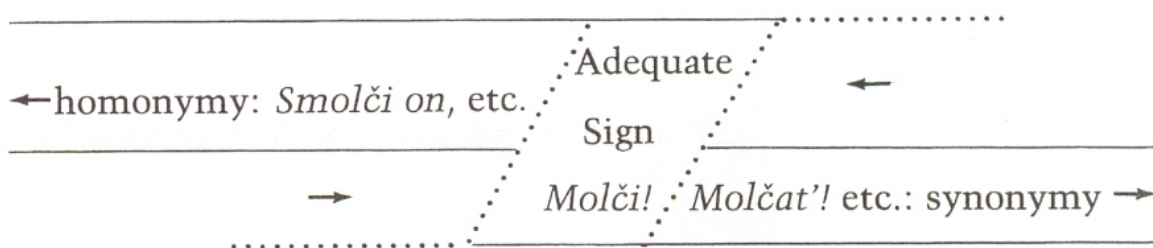
The signifier (sound) and the signified (function) slide continually on the "slope of reality." Each "overflows" the boundaries assigned to it by the other: the signifier tries to have functions other than its own; the signified tries to be expressed by means other than its sign. They are asymmetrical; coupled, they exist in a state of unstable equilibrium. It is because of this asymmetric dualism in the structure of its signs that a linguistic system can evolve: the "adequate" position of the sign is continually displaced as a result of its adaptation to the exigencies of the concrete situation.

Translated by Wendy Steiner

NOTES

1. Concerning the semiotic planes of language, see the introduction to my *Système du verbe russe* (Prague, 1927), pp. 13–42.

2. In the Russian declensional paradigms for *stol* (table), *parus* (sail), and *žena* (woman), the desinential morpheme *-a* signifies the masculine genitive singular, the masculine nominative plural, and the feminine nominative singular, respectively—*editor's note.*

3. I reserve the term "homonym" here for transposed signs; where the transposed value is no longer felt, it would be more precise to speak of homophony (thus, *ključ*, "key," and *ključ*, "source," are homophones). But the distinction applies in its full rigor only in limited cases.

4. The English translation cannot express the imperative form used in the verb "struck," but merely renders the Russian sentence that Karcevskij supplies as a synonym: *Tol'ko posejali, vdrug udaril moroz—translator's note.*

5. See note 4 above. The Russian synonymic sentence in this case is *Esli by smolčal on, vsë by obošlos'.*

6. *Système du verbe russe*, pp. 22, 23, and *passim*.

7. Ibid., pp. 118–119.