

ROMAN JAKOBSON ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LINGUISTICS AND POETICS

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Abstract

Roman Jakobson argues that poetics and linguistics are integral and indispensable parts of one another. He makes an attempt to explain the similarities that exist between them and proposes that both should be viewed as interrelated. He claims that the basic parts of linguistics; addresser, message, context, contact, code and addressee, unknowingly combine the elements of poetics. According to Roman Jakobson “Since linguistics is the global science of verbal structure, poetics may be regarded as an integral part of linguistics.” So, linguistics and poetics are closely and entirely inter-related. This paper attempts to support the point that linguistics and poetics are inherently combined by quoting the examples given in his essay which are strong to demonstrate that poetic devices are interwoven into the linguistics of our everyday lives. Poetics is about verbage and Linguistics is the science behind that verbage, so both merge in this way.

Keywords:- linguistics, poetics, verbage, addresser, message, context, contact.

Roman Jakobson was one of the most powerful minds in the 20th century intellectual history. As a front line member of the Moscow Linguistic Circle, his contributions to phonology, grammar and structural linguistics are very well-known and gratefully acknowledged all across the linguistics world. But he has also made an outstanding contribution to literary analysis i.e. poetics, by using linguistics as a tool. Using his immense learning, Jakobson very lucidly and maturely clarifies in his essay “Linguistics and Poetics” that linguistics (a scientific discipline) and poetics (one of the humanities) are not opposed to each other as commonly believed among ‘bigoted’ linguists and ‘hard core’ literary critics. Rather they complement each other and their combined application i.e. a work of art enhances its ‘wonder’ and ‘beauty’ and does not destroy it (as literary critics insist). The essay offers clever and convincing arguments to prove that there exists an inseparable bond between linguistics and poetics and therefore a linguistic model can be used for the study of literature.

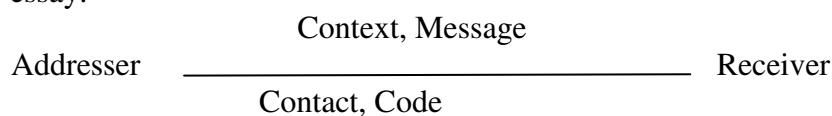
Jakobson begins in “Linguistics and Poetics” by defining the two terms in the title of the essay. He says that “Poetics” is the study of literature and it explores the qualities that make a verbal structure (a structure consisting of words) a work of art. On the other hand, “linguistics” is called the global science of verbal structure i.e. it studies language in all its manifestations. Now poetic or literary language is obviously one of the many uses of language. So, “the linguist whose field is any and every kind of language may and must include poetic (literary) language in his study.” Thus Roman Jakobson’s principal point in the essay is that poetics and linguistics are both concerned with the verbal messages. Linguistics studies verbal structure and poetics analyses the elements in these verbal messages that award them the qualities of being the works of art. Hence there is no opposition between them and their common concern is verbal messages and their structure.

Jakobson goes on to forward many more arguments to prove similarities between poetics and linguistics.

- The first similarity, of course, is that both deal with verbal messages and their structure.
- Secondly, both literature and language are part of the theory of signs i.e. semiotics and semiology.
- Thirdly, being, sign-systems, both are concerned with meaning generation.
- Fourthly, poetics and linguistics both deal with their data (literature and language) objectively and in a non judgmental way.
- Fifthly, synchronic and diachronic approaches are equally applicable and used in linguistics and poetics. We study literature through historical development (diachrony) and also study literary works of a particular time (synchrony). Similarly language is also studied synchronically (of a particular time) and diachronically (across time, historically).

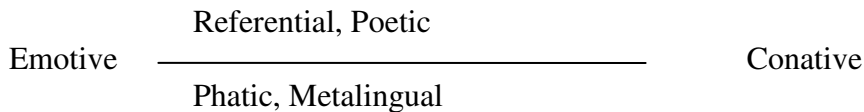
Generally, poetics is considered to be a purposeful, value-based, human discipline while linguistics is regarded as a mechanical, objective discipline serving no purpose. Jakobson rejects this distinction and claims that “all verbal messages, whether poetic or linguistic are purposeful and goal-oriented.” Thus, according to Jakobson, poetics and linguistics are not separate. Both are equally needed for a complete understanding of literature.

Asserting that a linguistic model can be used for the study of literature, Jakobson says that literary texts are linguistic structures. So, when a linguist is studying literary utterances, he is very much within his field i.e. the study and analysis of the structure of language. According to Roman Jakobson, every language has a system of codes and sub-codes which perform different functions. It is very important to understand these functions of language because poetic function of language is one of them. According to Jakobson, every act of verbal communication (whether literary or any other) requires the following elements shown in a diagrammatical form by him in the essay:



That is to say, every verbal act requires an addresser who wants to convey a message this message. This message is addressed to someone, the receiver. But the message can be understood when there is a proper context, a proper contact between the speaker and the receiver and when both follow and understand the same code.

The about six elements, according to Jakobson must be present in each speech-act. Depending on whether the focus is on the receiver, addresser, context, message, contact or code, there is a corresponding function which has been shown in the following scheme:



1. Emotive function

A verbal message performs emotive function when it is directed towards or aimed at the speaker/addresser/sender. It indicates the sender's attitude towards what he is speaking/writing about. It expresses emotions. All personal writings, autobiographies, interjections belong to this function of language. Jakobson refers to the audition of an actor who had to convey different meanings from a message consisting of a limited number of words. First person pronouns are common when language performs the emotive function in a particular writing. Lamb's essays and many of Wordsworth's poems employ the emotive function of language.

2. Conative function

A verbal act which is oriented towards the addressee/listener/receiver is said to perform the conative function. All imperative sentences, political speeches and odes make use of conative function of language. Second person pronouns frequently occur in this function. Commands and prayers also employ this function.

3. Referential function

This is the most common function of a verbal message because most of the messages are related to the context. It means that they refer to some objects, ideas, or things. So when context is the element, the corresponding function of language is referential or denotative.

4. Phatic function

Some speech acts or messages are phatic. Such messages serve to establish or prolong contact. Words like 'well', 'bye', an infant's sounds to his mother and expressions like Nice weather for this time of the year!, How do you do?, Hello, is that Mary? belong to the phatic function of language. It is a very useful social function of language.

5. Metalingual function

Some messages are metalingual because they require an orientation to the code itself. This is true in case of children learning the meanings of words during the process of language learning. Meaning or message is conveyed when the addresser and the addressee share the same code. The lack of understanding the code results in expressions like "I did not understand" or "What do you mean?" Jakobson gives an interesting dialogue to convey the metalingual function of language.

A- The sophomore was plucked.

B- But what is plucked?

A- Plucked means flunked.

B- And flunked?

A- To be flunked means to fail in an exam.

B- And what is sophomore?

A- A sophomore is a second year student.

In other words, when we use language to talk about language, we are using metalanguage. Metalanguage is language about language. When we are learning a new language or a book on grammar are examples of metalingual function of language.

6. Poetic function

A verbal act performs poetic function when it draws the attention of the reader to its own diction, sound patterns and syntax. The verbal acts which perform poetic function focus on the aesthetic features of language like metaphor, simile, paradox, irony, assonance, consonance etc.

After listing the six compulsory elements in each utterance namely sender, receiver, context, message, contact, code and the six corresponding functions of each utterance namely emotive, conative, referential, poetic, phatic and metalingual, Jakobson asserts that all instances of language fulfill at least one of these six functions. It means that in each speech act, one function is predominant but others may be a little suppressed. Thus in a poetic utterance, the poetic function will be predominant but it will be accompanied by other functions at a lower level. Poetic function does not operate in literature exclusively. It is just predominant over other functions. Jakobson gives a beautiful example to prove that even ordinary conversation may contain the poetic function of language. Anyone who says “She sells sea shells at the sea shore” is making a plain statement in poetic language.

Jakobsen refers to a girl who was always heard saying ‘Horrible Harry’. She never said Dreadful Harry or Frightful Harry. Though horrible, dreadful, frightful mean the same thing. When asked why she said only horrible, she said, “Because horrible suits better.” Now she was unconsciously using a literary, poetic device called, paronomasia, similarly, one would always say Joan & Margery and not Margery & Joan because the first combination is smoother.

Literary theories, too, tend to place an emphasis on one or the other function of language. Thus the function diagram of language would be redrawn as under:

Marxist (Context-Referential)
Formalistic (Message-Poetic)
Romantic (Addresser- Emotive) ___ Reader- Oriented (Receiver-Conative)
Structuralist (Contact-Phatic)
Metalinguist (Code-Metalingual)

To sum up poetics and linguistics need not be hostile to each other. Both are competent to study literature. But the literary scholar should not believe that he can study literary work without giving due attention to the medium i.e. language. And no linguist should try to justify the investigation of literary language without taking guidance from those who devote themselves to the study of literature. Jakobson comes down heavily on those who oppose combining linguistics and poetics for literary studies: “A linguist deaf to the poetic function of language and a literary scholar indifferent to linguistic problems are equally inadequate and lop sided.”

References

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