Roman Jakobson and the Two Types of Aphasia

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We can begin by being fairly schematic. The structural linguist Roman Jakobson made the discovery that aphasia, which describes a variety of problems with verbal expression, usually caused by brain damage, tends to involve one of two types of linguistic deficiency. A stroke victim, for instance, may have lost the full power of speech and is limited to certain kinds of verbal connection. The limitation tends to work in either one of two possible ways. The deficiency can be on the paradigmic axis or the syntagmatic one. Let’s go back to a simple example:

The cat sat on the mat

A dog stood on the carpet

The syntagmatic axis moves from left to right--across the sentence--so that the linguistic elements are related contiguously. They are all present and they are ordered according to grammatical construction, in Saussurian terms, as parole. The paradigmatic axis dips downwards into the absent pool of substitutions, similarities and differences available by virtue of la langue, the linguistic system. An utterance thus encodes meaning through selection from the paradigmatic axis and combination on the Syntagmatic one. The two axes thus together allow addressees to understand an utterance by decoding the sentence on the combination axis with unconscious reference to the selection one. The sentence has selected “cat” as a paradigm (perhaps) of four-legged mammals, “sitting” as an example of posture (substituted for by “standing” in the dog example), and “the mat” as a place to rest, which might be substituted by sofa or bed, depending on the cat’s inclination or its owner’s tolerance. The dog, standing, and the carpet are thus excluded from the first sentence (the cat cannot be a dog, you cannot both stand and sit at the same time). And any terms that can be substituted for cat (pussy, feline mammal) or for sat (crouched, reclined) are similarly excluded, because their addition would be superfluous to the sentence. We can illustrate the situation with the following schema:

<table>
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Jakobson’s discovery was that aphasics tend to have a language deficiency that corresponds to one or other of the two axes. So he called the deficiencies, respectively, the similarity disorder and the contiguity disorder. The following commentary is based upon Jakobson’s 1956 paper, “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances” (Jakobson 115-133).

The Similarity Disorder

The similarity disorder restricts the victims’ ability to select words from the paradigmatic axis. They cannot find words that exist as parts of the system, the dimension of the language universe that is at any given time absent from consciousness. We all have the ability to reach for more or less obscure elements of our vocabulary at any time, though we need not be conscious of these elements most of the time. But these aphasics have severely limited access to this fund and generally need some kind of prompt before they can say anything. For these patients, Jakobson says, “context is the indispensable and decisive factor” (121). Context means two things here. First there is the context of situation, the immediate environment where there may indeed be a cat sitting on a mat. Second there is the verbal context, things that have just been said, as I say, “the cat sat on the mat.” The important thing for victims of the similarity disorder is that, having lost the power to select from the pool of language, they rely on what is already present—the present context. They cannot start dialogues but they are able to continue or complete them after a fashion. Or they can come up with sentences that are at best the sequel of imagined previous utterances (i.e., “it sits on the mat” as an answer to the imagined question, “where is the cat?”). Specific nouns (cat, dog) tend to be dropped and more general ones, or catch all nouns, take their place (so everything is a “thing,” as in the following imaginary example: “the er . . . thing sat on the . . . er . . . thing”).

Furthermore, once a picture of an object, or the word for an object, or even the object itself, is present, it is difficult for this kind of aphasic to find a similar or substitute expression (a name) for it. This is because a name has to be supplied from the pool of substitutions, access to which is restricted. So an actual cat sitting on a mat would already fulfil the selection demands of the sentence (i.e., it would be present). These patients may instead fill out their discourse with further contiguous material (“it catches mice/you do it to rest/it’s for covering floors”). Words no longer have a generic (paradigmatic) meaning for these patients, so verbal expressions tend to be strongly contextualised. A knife, in one of Jakobson’s examples, may alternately be called, “pencil-sharpener, apple-parer,
bread-knife, knife-and-fork.” and so on (122). What this means is that words on the contiguous axis are more bound by a given context and are thus less transferable to other contexts. You don’t often read about people fighting with apple-parers or pencil-sharpeners.

Jakobson’s paper is a good example of the ways in which damaged faculties can illuminate the actual functioning of the faculty itself. It is one of those situations where you need something to go wrong before you really understand how it properly works. What we learn here is that the total context (verbal and situational), which makes up the contiguous axis of the language universe, embodies something like the entire empirical field. This is shown by the inability of these patients to add anything that would be superfluous. Using the word cat when faced with a picture of a cat would be the equivalent of using two nouns where one would do, “the cat/the four-legged mammal sat on the mat.” The difficulty that the victims of a similarity disorder have reveals the dimension of instituted meaning negatively.

Related to these aspects of the substitution deficiency are two essential aspects of language, translation and metalanguage, both of which are compromised in aphasics with a similarity disorder. Bilingual or multi-lingual aphasics usually lose the ability to operate between different languages and they become monolingual.

**Metalanguage**

Metalanguage means language on or about language. Without this ability to speak about language in language there’d be no linguistics at all. But the phenomena of metalinguistic usage are with us nearly all the time. I say, “do you know what I mean?” and, if the answer is, “no, not really, I don’t understand your use of . . .” I translate into another word or provide another description. If one holds a pencil up for an aphasic with a similarity disorder and asks, “what is this?” the patient may not be able to find the right word. The reason that Jakobson gives for this is that most linguistic operations are condensed forms of a logic that the linguist can make explicit. So giving the name of an object is in fact acknowledging the use of a name in a specific code (“in our language it is called ¼”) and it thus has a metalinguistic purpose. The full answer, taking the metalinguistic aspect into consideration would be, according to Jakobson, “In the code we use, the name of the indicated object is pencil” (124). A similarity disorder would restrict the speaker to forms like scribbler, depending on the context. Loss of the metalinguistic ability means that such aphasics cannot switch from a word either to any of its synonyms or to any words meaning the same thing in different languages. They would not be able to substitute for the word cat either the word feline or the word chat. Finally, in the dimension of figurative language, it should already be fairly clear that aphasics with a similarity disorder would not be able to use metaphor easily. A metaphor is a use of language where one term, a word or image, stands in for another; it is a kind of implicit simile. In our example, having noticed the cat’s regal occupation of the centre of the mat, I might say: “The queen sat on her throne.” It’s a metaphor. That doesn’t mean that the similarity disorder bars aphasics from figurative language. Figurative language operates on both axes. Rather the similarity disorder restricts aphasics to metonymic
operations, which are based upon contiguity rather than similarity. A metonymy is a figure that substitutes an associated element, or even a part, for the whole. Jakobson provides the following example: “fork is substituted for knife, table for lamp, smoke for pipe, eat for toaster” (125). Words that often go together (knife and fork) can be substituted and, because a toaster produces toast, which can be eaten, the word eat can be used instead of toaster. In our example, the sentence produced through metonymy might be “whiskers sits on the cat” (the metonymical cat substituted for mat because the example is so common).

The Contiguity Disorder

Aphasics with what Jakobson calls “the opposite” of the similarity disorder lose the ability to combine linguistic elements. Their grammar fails them and they can express only “heaps” of words. The order of the words becomes chaotic and any words with purely grammatical functions (reference words like he, she, it; conjunctions like and and but; articles like a and an) tend to drop out of the picture all together. These aphasics thus tend to sound infantile and can manage only very short sentences. They can indicate the name of something, perhaps, with some brief descriptive words, but little else. In severe cases sentences can be as short as a single word (“Cat”). On the level of word construction aphasics need to understand the word before they can utter it. “A French aphasic recognised, understood, repeated, and spontaneously produced the word café (coffee) or pavé (roadway) but was unable to grasp, discern, or repeat such nonsensical sequences as féca, faké, kéfâ, pafé” (128). French speakers would not normally have a problem with these constructions. Because they are phonetically possible (like the English nonsense words kulb and bluk) a normal speaker can pronounce them, even perhaps accepting them as existing words that they do not know. We often find a similar situation with the game Call my Bluff, in which contestants on one team are given an obscure word and they take turns in convincing contestants on the other team that it means what they say. Only one gives the correct definition. The other team then has to guess which was the right one. An aphasic with a contiguity disorder would be utterly lost with Call my Bluff.

What distinguishes this type of aphasia from the first type is the dependence on the signified part of the sign. Where the first kind relied on connections between signifiers (on the syntagmatic axis), this type is reliant on connections between signifiers and signified meaning (on the paradigmatic axis). This, of course, is just what we’d have expected because the signified, as we have established, is always invisible, which is what allows for actual events of reference when they occur (whether the referent is another word or a thing). The syntagmatic axis runs across the utterance and is dependent upon present context:
Contiguity:  S - S - S - S - S

While the paradigmatic axis dips down into the absent pool of substitutions:

Similarity:

\[
\text{S} \\
\text{S} \\
\text{(S)}
\]

So the two axes together make up the linguistic universe, just as Saussure had described it, with the utterance itself moving across in time whilst simultaneously yet invisibly dipping down into the system of signs and thereby producing meaningful sentences:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signified Meaning:</th>
<th>Sd</th>
<th>Sd</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Syntagmatic Axis:</td>
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The signified (sd) is produced in the double action of contiguity (a combination of selected signifiers) and similarity (the system of possible substitutions). Without the system the line of contiguity would be made up of meaningless marks (imagine “bluk tic ob fu lafe” or something) and signified meaning (sd) would not occur. It is very important to see here that the elements of signified meaning (sd) are not actually existing things but emerge negatively through the subtle exclusions that are the flip side of selection. We can see that two aspects are simultaneously necessary, as follows: 1) context, made up of present elements, which may or may not include actual cats, and 2) the system, comprising principles that govern the relations between absent elements. It is also very important not to try to define context too precisely, for the moment. For now it just means, “elements found next to each other” (contiguous and present). “Elements” can be objects, words, pictures or observable marks of any kind.

I have included, in the following schema, suggestions as to some of the ways that the paradigmatic axis might make available certain kinds of signification. It is only schematic
and there are many possibilities. Experiment with some of your own, but remember that any attempt to be too precise will tangle you in knots and controversies (but then you can institute your own school of linguistics!):

**Syntagmatic Axis:**  
the cat  
sat on  
the mat

**Grammatical Paradigm:**  
nouns  
verbs  
nouns

**Generic Paradigm:**  
mammals  
postures  
platforms

**Substitutive Paradigm:**  
dog  
stood  
sofa

**Figurative Paradigm:**  
queen  
reclined  
throne

### Metaphor and Metonymy

One of the most influential aspects of Jakobson’s paper is his development of the wider implications of the two types of aphasia. As we have already seen, the two deficiencies imply recourse to two different types of figurative language, metaphor and metonymy. The two types of aphasia are polar opposites, yet there are many different varieties of aphasic disturbance, which all lie between the similarity disorder and the contiguity disorder. In the final section of his paper he suggests that a similar situation is the case for all discourse. According to a range of determining factors, which include history, culture, personality, psychology, etc., we each tend to use these aspects of language with more or less emphasis on one or other of the two axes. This is observable in our own use of language and ultimately in our texts. Jakobson’s text, for instance, clearly tends towards the paradigmatic axis, which is why I’ve found it useful in this section to come up with all those little schemata. Let’s take a look at what we’ve ended up with:

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<tr>
<td>signifier</td>
<td>signified</td>
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The schema itself (with all its substitutions matched up on each axis) clearly owes its possibility to the paradigmatic axis. Jakobson, whose discourse resides largely in the metalinguistic universe, makes an ideal linguist (he was able use a multitude of languages, in each of which he was fluent). The deficiencies of aphasics have thus allowed Jakobson to sharpen up his understanding of the ways in which relatively unimpaired individuals operate in the world through language. At the extremes language fails altogether, so there needs to be at least some influence from each of the two axes. What is revealed is that most, if not all, discourses (from the arts to the sciences) can be understood in terms of rhetorical tendencies. If that is indeed so then knowledge itself is grounded in rhetoric. For we have learned that the syntagmatic axis (where context is the decisive factor) involves the whole empirical situation, that is, everything that is at any time present to my experience. Yet this “whole” remains meaningless without its interaction with the paradigmatic axis, which provides resources for understanding and expression that are fundamentally the province of systems, institutions, laws, principles and rules of operation. Some of these principles are personal, habitual patterns, while others seem socially sanctioned and still others would seem to obey some more deeply inscribed necessity. Take the example of grammar. Some linguists have believed that there is at the most basic level a universal grammar, which organises the way all peoples speak. It seems that humans have the capacity to pick up particular grammars between certain ages, as those examples of children who have grown up among wolves or chickens show. If they have passed the age after which it is no longer possible to “tune in” to a particular grammar they are confined to the languages of wolves or chickens (which one might think is a little limiting in a post-industrial world, but we’ll come back to this issue). These children have to learn a national dialect as a second language (French or English, for instance) by making translations between “Wolf” or “Chicken” and French or English. That’s a lot of work on a rather limited paradigmatic axis. What seems likely to be the case, then, is that there is no universal grammar, but a universal ability to pick up particular grammars, and that these grammars are grounded in historicity, their rhetorical evolution. In other words, speakers of languages are historical beings through and through.

The situation has been explored effectively in art criticism and literary theory, where Jakobson’s paper has been particularly influential. Verbal works of fiction or poetry, as well as image-based artworks, like painting, photography and film, can lay bare the rhetorical dimensions of representation. We must also take into consideration that these forms of what we call representation are also aspects that cannot be dissociated from the total context for addressees, readers, spectators and observers. They therefore contribute integrally to any given perception of reality. Thus if, as we have already established, all
perception of reality is in some essential respects always interpretation of reality, then Jakobson’s schemata may help us to understand the operation of these representations better.

**The Map on the Wall**

I want to finish up by taking a short example of some modern literary writing. Here we should see how a close analysis is capable of revealing the operation of rhetoric in texts, and we can interpret a particular text in terms of what it has to say itself about the rhetorical dimension. The example is from the British writer Henry Green’s *Loving*, published in 1945 and written during the darkest days of the 2nd World War. The novel is set in (by then) post-colonial Ireland and the story takes place in a British Castle called Kinalty, the home of a family (the Tennants who, as their name suggests, are not landed gentry but *nouveau* rich) and their servants. The scene we are going to examine concerns Charley Raunce, newly promoted to butler (following the previous butler Eldon’s death) and the young Mrs Tennant (recently married to Jack Tennant, away at the war). Mrs Tennant has been having a secret affair with a local man, Captain Dermot Davenport of Clancarty castle, a few miles from Kinalty. We catch up with Raunce who, armed with the previous butler’s notebooks, is investigating the castle for clues as to how he might make profitable use of the written remains of Eldon’s knowledge:

What this forenoon halted Charley in the study while on his weekly round rewinding clocks was a reminder in the red notebook to charge 10s. 6d. for a new spring to the weathervane. This was fixed to the top of the tower and turned with a wind in the usual way. Where it differed from similar appliances was that Mr Tennant had had it connected to a pointer which was set to swing over a large map of the country round about elaborately painted over the mantelpiece. Raunce did not yet know how the thing worked. He stood and pondered and asked himself aloud where he could say he was going to fix replacements if she asked him.

This map was peculiar. For instance Kinalty Church was represented by a miniature painting of its tower and steeple while the Castle, which was set right in the centre, was a fair sized caricature in exaggerated gothic. There were no names against places.

As Charley stood there it so happened that the pointer was fixed unwavering ESE with the arrow tip exactly on Clancarty, Clancarty which was indicated by two nude figures male and female recumbent in gold crowns. For the artist had been told that the place was a home of the old kings.

Mrs Jack came in looking for a letter from Dermot. The carpets were so deep that Raunce did not hear her. He was staring. She noticed he seemed obsessed by the weathervane and turned to find what in particular held him.
When she saw and thought she knew she drew her breath with a hiss.

“Raunce,” she said and he had never heard her speak so sharp, “what is it?”

He faced about, holding himself quite still.

“Why Madam I never heard you. The thing seems to have got stuck Madam.”

“Stuck? What d’you mean stuck?”

“It does not seem to be revolving Madam and I’m sure the wind is not in that quarter.”

She reacted at once. She strode up to that arrow and gave it a wild tug presumably to drag the pointer away from those now disgusting people lying in a position which, only before she had known Dermot, she had once or twice laughed at to her husband. The arrow snapped off in her hand. The Vane up top might have been caught in a stiff breeze or something could have jammed it.

Charley knew nothing as yet about Clancarty. “It’s the spring Madam, “he said cheerful as he took the broken piece from her. “You not iced the arm did not have any give Madam?”

“Oh get on with your work,” she said appearing to lose control and half ran out. Shaking his head, grumbling to himself, Raunce made his way upstairs. (39-40)

Through the two characters, Mrs Tennant and Charley Raunce, we are treated to two different perspectives of a single situation, marked conspicuously by the different versions of their respective names (Mr Tennant, Mrs Jack--wife of Jack Tennant--Charley or Raunce). For each of them, the empirical situation is significantly different, by virtue of the different interpretations they are constantly making, both of each other and of the situation itself. The dialogue is largely context-bound. What Mrs Tennant is doing is mistaking a metonymic relation (the pointer on the naked figures) for a paradigmatic (symbolic) message. She may believe that Raunce is attempting a little bit of subtle blackmail. Whatever, she cannot help but see the symbolism as pointing directly to her. Thus she inserts herself (and Dermot) symbolically into the position on the map beneath the pointer. In other words she mistakes a metonymic relation for a metaphorical one. Raunce, on the other hand, is positively looking for hidden significance, but rather literally. He wants to know where the “clockwork” mechanism that connects the pointer to the vane is housed. Metaphorically he is looking for the hidden workings behind the empirical situation. As it happens, the pointer is jammed because a small mouse has its
foot caught in one of the cogs. This could be another metaphorical hint for the reader, suggesting that the servants (the maids are often referred to as mice) are “caught” in the workings of the house. But the perspectives are all important here. As such, perspective involves metonymic relations, relations of contiguity, of being proximal to, that is, being next to something or someone. Yet each perspective is related by some apparently meaningful interpretation of the situation, dipping into the pool of substitutable significations. There are many clues in the above passage. There is the map, first of all, which is a representation of the house and the country lying round about, inside the house itself. A form of metaphorical centrism is implied here, especially with respect to the other key sites, which are partially drawn, or represented by metonyms, parts for the whole (the single steeple for the church). The map itself stands for the house, stubbornly remaining in the centre although doubly displaced (representing the English in an ex-colony). The map represents not by name (which would be the paradigm) but by caricature. However the names themselves are less than paradigmatic, more metonymic in their slightly farcical suggestiveness. Kinalty, like a slightly disguised pun, forces the forms *kin* and *alty* together. *Kin* suggests the familiarity of kinship relations yet *alty* links to the alterity of otherness (same and different combined). Clancarty, on the other hand, gives us the more Celtic-sounding *clan*, putting it yet more clearly in the Irish camp. On the metaphorical level the map represents a general picture of centric perspective broken up into metonymic part-relations, as if everyone has an imaginary map with their home in the centre and everything else represented partially round about. In this case the transcendental is nothing more than the personal matrix of selfish interests.

**Bibliography**


Jakobson, Roman. “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances” (Jakobson 115-133).


*Structural Anthropology*

*Structural Linguistics*