Course Description

This course is designed for (1) Russian students interested in the structure and theory of Russian linguistics (2) non-Russianists interested in learning more about formal (Chomsky) as well as empirical (Jakobson) approaches to language theory (3) all students interested in Prague School structuralism, Russian Formalism, Prague and Moscow semiotics, acoustic distinctive features (4) combinations of the above. Students are not required to have a background in any one of these areas, but ought to bring at least one of the following to their study: (a) some knowledge of Russian or a language other than English (b) some knowledge of formal linguistic theory (c) curiosity about kinds of theory about language. Generally accessible works by Roman Jakobson, the premier exponent of Slavics in the past century, will be our first focus, followed by study of the thought of Chomsky.

Texts

The following texts are available at the bookstore for this course. Don’t buy them until we have discussed them on the first day! I am concerned about the cost of these books, while I am pleased that we may have them.


Goals and Methodology

I see the first half to two-thirds of this course as readings and discussions of classic texts (and, in the case of Chomsky, explications of his texts as well). We will have regular daily assignments and questions to prepare for discussion. The second one-third to one-half of the course will be devoted to individual readings and the preparation of a course-final presentation on a topic derived from our study. While individual readings are going on, I will present some problems and solutions to language theory problems and, each meeting, students will give brief progress reports on their emerging talks. At the term’s end, each student will give a presentation (forty minutes).

We will have weekly announced quizzes on the readings, no midterm, no final. Final grade will be based on quizzes (30%), class discussion (20%), and presentation (50%). Attendance is absolutely required. See me right away if you have a disability.

Readings will be short but difficult; it will be a lot of fun explaining and digesting this! Don’t be daunted. *When this is over you will have party conversation fodder for the rest of your life.*

I will probably put some volumes on reserve for reading in the library. See my site for assignments as they develop.

Suggestions for Further Readings

The literature in this field is vast. I cite below just a few of my favorites.


Birth certificate of the Prague school (1927).


Study of the relationship of categories and their morphophonemic expression. Russian is the model.

Tiny (13 page) article with enormous influence on the beginnings of generative grammar.


Last, summarizing and often popularizing works of Jakobson, including “Six lectures sure le son et le sens,” “Preliminaries to Speech Analysis,” others.

**Semiotics, Poetics**


Major speech on the application of Peirce’s semiotic to language and art.


Collection of Jakobson’s best known works of literary analysis and poetic theory, translated into English.

**Formalism and Prague School linguistics**


**Chomsky Classics**
