



HAL
open science

The linguistic theory of relativity

Jean-Philippe Watbled

► **To cite this version:**

Jean-Philippe Watbled. The linguistic theory of relativity. *Quinquereime, new studies in modern languages*, 1981, 04 (02), pp.236-239. hal-03159083

HAL Id: hal-03159083

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-03159083>

Submitted on 4 Mar 2021

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

THE LINGUISTIC THEORY OF RELATIVITY

by J.-P. WATBLED

University of Bath

THE SOUND SHAPE OF LANGUAGE. By Roman Jakobson and Linda Waugh (assisted by Martha Taylor). Hassocks, Sussex, Harvester Press, 1979. xii + 308 pp. 0 85527 926 5.

In spite of his impressive number of contributions to general and applied linguistics, Jakobson has not previously produced a work of synthesis, a sort of general introduction to his linguistic thought and philosophy. The task seems to have been achieved with his recent The Sound Shape of Language, written in collaboration with Linda Waugh.

One of the main qualities of the book is its style, both attractive and stimulating, which makes it accessible not only to the professional linguist, but also to the educated reader, to 'l'honnête homme'. The inflation of notational devices is carefully avoided; the reader who is more familiar with the generative school will be surprised, especially if he forgets the historical situation of Jakobson's doctrine. A superficial and condescending judgement might be passed and the work might be labelled 'taxonomist', 'structuralist', 'descriptive', or 'pre-generative' — the problem is that divisions and classifications are not so clear-cut and, although there is no real novelty in the book (and, in this, it is disappointing), the authors' insights are certainly most valuable. As their theory and methodology are specific, they should not be criticized in strictly Chomskyan terms. For example, Jakobson's most notable achievement is his strict definition of the phoneme (which links his name to all subsequent works in phonology) and his demonstration that, far from being a mere theoretical construct, it has an ontological status. Whilst Chomsky and Halle rejected the concept of phoneme in their monumental work, The Sound Pattern of English,¹ the paradox is that some post-Chomskyan phonologists have re-introduced it because, they claim, no serious argument has been put forward against it!² We must therefore be cautious when we criticize a precursor: for example, what is now being re-discovered as 'substantive' or 'external' evidence has never been ignored by Jakobson (hence his interest in pathology, child language,³ spoonerisms, speech errors, poetical devices, language variation,

speech styles, explicit and elliptical codes, and so on); of course, he is in favour of autonomous phonology, another pejorative label; for Chomsky and his followers, phonological rules merely convert syntactic structures into a phonetic representation, and phonology is only a peripheral 'interpretive' component, because of the precedence of syntax. For Jakobson, phonology is a relatively autonomous science, dealing with speakers' phonetic (and not morphophonemic) competence; the authors are primarily concerned with the perceptual aspects of speech and Jakobson's abstract features are supposed to refer to relative, but universal, acoustic properties, and not to physical absolutes. His theory might be defined as a general theory of linguistic relativity (compare the central idea of 'relational invariance' (pp. 80, 83, 93, etc.)). The features, or ultimate components of speech, are phonological, and are not designed to be used for rules of phonetic, articulatory detail (the omission of this fact vitiates current criticism); by adopting this point of view, Jakobson and Waugh implicitly assume that one phonological framework cannot be used on two different levels; binary features can have only phonemic values; the confusion of phonemic statements and of sub-phonemic, allophonic rules in Generative Phonology, which uses the same entities on both levels, has been a source of frequent misunderstandings in comparative studies dealing with different theories of phonology.⁴

However, other criticisms are more serious, as the most debatable point in the book is of course the defence of the 'dyadic principle' (see, for instance, the quotation from Balzac, p. 80). A binary framework is very practical for the evaluation of the complexity of a system, or for the quantification of information (and let us recall that Jakobson was strongly influenced by information theory): the problem is that the authors' point of view is not purely methodological, but is also ontological. For them, the binary system has a biological, perceptual basis; however, in the field of diachrony, for example, Trubetzkoy's theory of gradual, equipollent and privative oppositions is apparently more fruitful:⁵ one of the main causes of phonetic change is certainly articulatory inertia in conflict with perceptual necessities, and indeed specialists in the field have repeatedly accused Jakobson of a reductionist attitude. Regarding phonemic systems, Jakobson's views are likely to oversimplify the facts, in as much as he reduces all oppositions to the privative type, which leads him to analyse systems as networks of correlations and, controversially, to extend the principle of complementary distribution to interlinguistic comparisons. An epistemological question must also be raised: the authors' claims about binary features, defined on a perceptual basis, can hardly be proved or disproved, in spite of the development of research and current progress in the fields of neurolinguistics, speech recognition, and speech synthesis: the hypothesis is therefore exempt from possible falsification.

The second part of the book, entitled 'The Spell of Speech Sounds' reminds the reader that Jakobson has never separated

linguistics and poetics, that he belonged to the Russian formalist movement, and has always supported the idea of interdisciplinary collaboration. This open-minded scholar is unique in the history of linguistics: he bridged the gap between European, Praguian linguistics and American linguistics; he was a founding father of modern linguistics, but the bibliography of The Sound Shape of Language also contains much recently published material. We would readily contend that the man is a genius, even when he is wrong.

1. N. Chomsky and M. Halle, The Sound Pattern of English (New York etc., Harper and Row, 1968).
2. See P. Linell, Psychological Reality in Phonology: a theoretical study, Cambridge Studies in Linguistics 25 (Cambridge and London, CUP, 1979).
3. R. Jakobson, Selected Writings I (The Hague, Mouton, 1971).
4. J. McCawley, 'The role of phonological feature systems in any theory of language', in Makkai (ed.), Phonological Theory: Evolution and Current Practice (New York, 1972), pp. 522-28; also reproduced in J. McCawley: Adverbs, Vowels and other Objects of Wonder (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 20-29.
5. L. Hyman, Phonology: Theory and Analysis (New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), p. 55.