

Roman Jakobson's East Slavic Zones as Presented in *Remarques sur l'évolution phonologique du russe*

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1. Jakobson's *Remarques sur l'évolution du russe*¹ from a Modern Standpoint

Morris Halle, writing about the revolutionary nature of Roman Jakobson's monograph on the history of East Slavic, described the atmosphere of the late 1920s, when both Jakobson and Trubetzkoy were concerned with establishing general and universal principles of language in its diachronic aspect. This emphasis decreased, and eventually the focus was on the general principles of synchronic systems. Halle laments the fact that most of the diachronic linguistic progress of the last 50 years or so has been in the "older pre-*Remarques* tradition" and that "the great potential of Jakobson's ideas for the study of phonological evolution has remained unrealized."² Even Trubetzkoy, in a letter to Jakobson written shortly after the publication of *Remarques*, stated that it was a work written in such a difficult style that only very few linguists would be able to appreciate the ideas Jakobson was trying to express. Among the reasons for the difficulty, Trubetzkoy cited Jakobson's tendency to conciseness at the cost of clarity ("стремление к сжатости и краткости приводит прямо к неточности формулировок," 147). Trubetzkoy also observed that the French translation was not good, and that all of the stylistic defects were made even worse by the translation ("недостатки [...] усугубляются переводным языком").³ It can be added that an additional difficulty for today's reader is caused by the fact that the only surviving version of the work is the very same French translation which Trubetzkoy criticized, due to the fact that the Russian original is said to have perished during World War II and, to my knowledge, no additional translations have been published. In order to remedy the problems noted by Halle, it would seem

¹ Roman Jakobson, *Remarques sur l'évolution phonologique du russe comparée à celle des autres langues slaves* (= *Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague*, 2 [1929]).

² Morris Halle, "Remarks on the scientific revolution in linguistics 1926–1929," *Сънпоставитлно езикознание* 11: 5 (1986): 40.

³ N. S. Trubetzkoy, *N. S. Trubetzkoy's Letters and Notes, prepared for publication by Roman Jakobson, with the assistance of H. Baran, O. Ronen, and Martha Taylor* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), 146–47.

that an analytical and/or annotated edition of *Remarques* would be needed.

This paper is an attempt to offer some solutions to this problem, by presenting a sample annotation and analysis of one of the most significant passages of *Remarques*—section VII.4., which deals with the reasons for the split of East Slavic into five separate zones recognized by Jakobson: South Ukrainian, North Ukrainian, South Belarusian, North Belarusian, and Russian (although for the purposes of this passage, North Belarusian and Russian are treated as equivalent). This particular passage was criticized by Trubetzkoy not only for its French rendering, but for Jakobson's own formulations, which Trubetzkoy claims to have had great difficulty understanding (“даваемые Вами формулы неясны до загадочности. Каковы напр. формулы, определяющие различия в протекании конфликтов связанных с падением глухих в разных невеликорусских восточнославянских говорах”).⁴

2. Preliminaries to the Passage on East Slavic Zones

I have prepared an English translation of the French passage, which appears in the Appendix to this paper. The first paragraph highlights the main issues to be analyzed. In the first place, Jakobson speaks of a phonological situation that affected all Slavic zones: the loss of phonological equilibrium due to the loss of the so-called “weak jers,” and the ensuing phonological changes which were a reaction to this jer-loss. Then, focusing on the specific dialect effects of jer-loss, Jakobson differentiates between two kinds of possible effects within the various East Slavic zones, stating that a given zone may **undergo** a systematic phonological “conflict,” while another, neighboring zone might then simply reproduce the first zone's model in order to **avoid** the conflict in question. After first touching on the issue of what the “conflicts” are and how Jakobson theoretically established that such conflicts exist in languages, this paper shall proceed to indicate how the concept of conflict applies to the various East Slavic zones and how this relates to the issue of relative chronology and rule ordering. An attempt will be made to more precisely define what Jakobson meant by the somewhat vague notions of resolving a conflict “in an autonomous manner,” as opposed to the opposite case of resolving it on the basis of a pre-existing “model.”

3. Jakobson's Concept of Phonological Conflicts A and B

One of the most important characteristics of the *Remarques*, which clearly separates it from virtually all other descriptions of Slavic historical phonology and justifies Halle's description of the work as “revolutionary,”

⁴ N. S. Trubetzkoy, *N. S. Trubetzkoy's Letters and Notes*, 147.

is the fact that it attempts to deal with general and universal principles of historical linguistic evolution, rather than the specifics of the Common Slavic or East Slavic situation, recalling the distinctions of explanatory vs. descriptive adequacy in linguistic studies⁵

East Slavic linguistic history is explained primarily on the basis of Jakobson's concept of the compatibility and/or incompatibility of certain distinctive features (referred to as "phonological" features in *Remarques*, but called "distinctive," of course, in Jakobson's later work). The full implications of the concept of feature incompatibility are not very easy to infer directly from the paragraph about East Slavic dialect zones. In fact, many of Jakobson's implicit ideas on this topic are based either on other sections of *Remarques* itself, or on earlier works of Jakobson, Trubetzkoy, and others. Section II.5. (17) of *Remarques* attempts to state the possible types of feature incompatibility. It is important to emphasize that Jakobson is dealing with the compatibility and incompatibility of **distinctive** features, rather than phonetic features *per se*. These relations are said to be determined by "rigorous laws," one of which specifies that certain pairs of distinctive features must co-occur, while the other states that other feature pairs cannot co-occur. Jakobson's law of feature co-occurrence states that "if distinctive feature *a* exists, then *b* also does." It is exemplified by phonemic pitch and phonemic quantity, said to imply each other. Jakobson attributes the first discovery of this "law" to Trubetzkoy.⁶

The next principle, which states the opposite relationship of two features that cannot co-occur, is the one directly relevant to the specific passage of *Remarques* under discussion (VII.4). It states that "if *a* exists, *b* is absent." It is exemplified by dynamic stress and quantity, and Jakobson cites his own work⁷ as the source for this principle. Section VII.4 of *Remarques* refers to yet another important manifestation of the principle that a given distinctive feature can exclude another: the notion that if phonemic palatalization exists, phonemic pitch must be absent.

Thus, we can conclude that for Jakobson, two of the most significant pairs of incompatible, mutually exclusive features, for the purposes of analyzing the phonological evolution of East Slavic, are:

⁵ Cf. Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1965), 26–27.

⁶ See N. S. Trubetzkoy, "Einiges über die russische Lautentwicklung und die Auflösung der gemeinrussischen Spracheinheit," *Zeitschrift für slavische Philologie* 1 (1925): 287–319, esp. 303–04.

⁷ Roman Jakobson, *О чешском стихе преимущественно в сопоставлении с русским* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1969), 24.

1. Consonant palatalization and pitch (i.e., consonantal/inherent tonality and vocalic/prosodic tonality, in terms of Jakobson and Halle).⁸
2. Dynamic stress and quantity (both non-tonal prosodic features).

The universal aspects of the two preceding statements of mutually exclusive phonological features are beyond the scope of this paper. However, at least within the Slavic languages, it seems clear that phonemic pitch is never combined with phonemic palatalization. All Slavic languages seem to fall into three groups, in conformity with this principle:

1. Those that possess phonemic palatalization, but lack phonemic pitch (e.g. all three East Slavic languages, Bulgarian, Polish).
2. Those that possess phonemic pitch, but lack phonemic palatalization (e.g. Serbo-Croatian, Slovene).
3. Those that lack both phonemic palatalization and phonemic pitch (e.g. Czech, Slovak, Macedonian).

4. Phonemic Pitch, Stress, and Quantity

In contrast to the mutually exclusive distinctive features of phonemic palatalization and phonemic pitch, the second pair of mutually exclusive features—that of phonemic stress and vowel quantity—has been a subject of some dispute. Let us consider the relationship between phonemic pitch, stress, and quantity from the perspective of Prague School phonology.

Trubetzkoy is credited with establishing the principle that phonemic pitch must co-occur with quantity. This results from the notion that phonemic pitch can be functionally treated as stress placement on a mora, within a syllable, where either the first or second mora of a long vowel can be stressed, and the long vowel itself is equal to a two-mora sequence). First mora stress is equivalent to falling pitch, while second mora stress equals rising. Thus, the combination of two-mora syllables and pitch represents the phonological equivalent of free stress, with the proviso that the stress can freely occur not simply on any syllable, but on any mora. Next, let us consider what would happen to this scheme if pitch were to be lost as a distinctive feature in the process of language evolution, but stress and quantity remained. The first sound-change would have to specify that two-mora sequences could only admit a single stress position; if rising pitch were to generalize, then the second mora would automatically be stressed in any stressed long syllable. Yet, if the stress position itself remained free, than stress could appear on any syllable of the word. This would mean that stress position would be fixed

⁸ Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1956), 22, 31.

within a two-mora syllable (intrasyllabically), but it would be free within the syllables of the word (i.e. intersyllabically). Such an apparently contradictory co-existence of the opposing principles of both fixed and free stress is at the basis of Jakobson's contention that phonemic stress and quantity are incompatible features. Within such a "conflicted" system, the loss of quantity would mean that stress is no longer strangely fixed on only the first or second mora of a quantitatively long syllable, and has become truly free (as in East Slavic), while the loss of free stress would mean that the stress has become completely fixed (as in West Slavic), having resolved then the contradictory model of intrasyllabic fixed and intersyllabic free stress. Notably, Pavle Ivić questioned Jakobson's assertion that free stress and quantity cannot co-exist, on the basis of counterexamples found in Old Štokavian dialects of Montenegro and Boka Kotorska.⁹ However, Ivić also demonstrated a change in Jakobson's views on this subject; Jakobson first absolutely denied the possibility of free stress and quantity (in 1931), but later (in 1956) only referred to such systems as "quite exceptional." In any case, the incompatibility of these features forms a major part of the treatment of East Slavic dialect history in *Remarques*, dating from Jakobson's earlier period. I would suggest that the apparent contradiction can be resolved by viewing the rather small and compact Old Štokavian area as a relatively small zone of unresolved phonological conflict, which has become resolved elsewhere either by developing new retracted pitch to go with its distinctive quantity (e.g. Neo-Štokavian), or has lost the distinctive quantity entirely (e.g. Torlak dialects, similar in prosody to Bulgarian). In other words, it should be understood that Jakobson's notion of incompatibility cannot, by its very nature, imply a zero timespan for the co-existence of the incompatible features, since a certain period is required for the elimination or modification of one of them. This situation is the result of the fundamental contradiction between historical evolution and single synchronic states, referred to by Coseriu as "la aparente aporía del cambio lingüístico."¹⁰

5. The East Slavic Dialect Zones

The catalyst for the appearance of the two sets of incompatible features A and B was *jer fall*. The fall of weak *jers* served as the first sound-change in a chain reaction, insofar as it introduced a new instance of distinctive inherent consonantal tonality (phonemic consonant palatalization) into the system, which turned out to be incompatible with distinctive prosodic vocalic tonality (phonemic pitch), producing "conflict A." I would define the

⁹ Pavle Ivić, *Die serbokroatischen dialekte: Ihre Struktur und Entwicklung* (The Hague: Mouton, 1958), I: 101.

¹⁰ Eugenio Coseriu, *Sincronía, diacronía, e historia: El problema del cambio lingüístico* (Madrid: Gredos, 1973), 11–12.

essence of a Jakobsonian phonological “conflict” as the existence of a period in which incompatible features are, nevertheless, at least temporarily thrown together in a type of phonemic collision which results not just in the expected total elimination of one of the two features, but, rather, in the full elimination of one feature, plus the partial curtailment of the other feature during the period of conflict. Jakobson advanced the intriguing hypothesis that conflicting phonological systems are more characteristic of emotive and artistic speech, while intellectual speech is less likely to contain the disparate phonological elements that constituted a “conflict.”¹¹ In the case of the incompatible tonality features of consonant palatalization and pitch, conflict A meant not only that pitch was eliminated by a rule which might have transformed all phonetic manifestations of falling into rising (or vice versa), but also that the victorious feature—phonemic palatalization—was itself partially lost, as seen in the de-palatalization of consonants before front vowels (such as consonants before original front vowels *i*, *e* in Ukrainian), though only after jers themselves were lost.

The ultimate loss of phonemic pitch, which resulted from the establishment of phonemic consonant palatalization, left the prosodic features of free stress placement and phonemic quantity, i.e. conflict B. As explained earlier, Jakobson also viewed these features as incompatible: their coexistence in East Slavic was resolved by the loss of distinctive quantity, while in West Slavic it was the free stress that was changed into a predictable, fixed type, leaving only the prosodic feature of quantity as a distinctive prosodic feature. The East Slavic evidence that conflict B occurred can be seen in the reflexes of compensatory lengthening in the southernmost regions of East Slavic. As possible evidence of the curtailment of the victorious feature of phonological dynamic stress, I would suggest that one might point to the absence of mid-vowel reduction (*akan'e*) in the southernmost regions of East Slavic, a development which further emphasized marked and unmarked prosodic sonority by means of redundant inherent sonority features.

6. Rule Ordering as the Key to Unraveling Jakobson’s East Slavic Zones

Jakobson also offers a somewhat cryptic explanation as to how the very same rule of weak jer loss could produce such dramatically different results, including strong evidence of conflicts A and B in the south of East Slavic, but little or no evidence of such conflicts in more northern zones. I would suggest that the key to understanding Jakobson’s point can be found by considering that there were several different possible orderings of the following three rules in the various East Slavic zones:

¹¹ Roman Jakobson, “Prinzipien der historischen Phonologie,” *Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague* 4 (1931): 247–67, esp. 265–66.

1. loss of weak jers
2. loss of pitch
3. loss of quantity

It must be emphasized that Jakobson's statements in the French translation are couched in some of the most difficult phrasing to understand. The first historical East Slavic rule ordering involving jer-fall applies to South Ukrainian, since this was the first East Slavic territory to experience jer loss. The ensuing conflicts A and B make it clear that jer fall had to occur first in this zone, which led to the conflict of consonant palatalization and pitch, leading to the next ordered rule of pitch loss. Conflict B then ends with the third rule of this group—specifying the loss of quantity. Therefore, the earliest East Slavic rule order must have been (1) jer loss, (2) pitch loss, and (3) quantity loss. In dealing with the more northern zones, Jakobson speaks of a more northern zone having its model “prepared” by a southern one, or a northern zone “reproducing” a more southern model, in order to avoid either of the two phonological conflicts, A or B. Since the South Ukrainian rule order served to maximize the two conflicts, I would suggest that Jakobson's notion of using a southern model to avoid conflict is just another way of saying that the more northern zones applied the three basic rules in different orders. In terms of isoglosses which were advancing across the East Slavic territory, the process could be best viewed as a motion picture, rather than a series of stationary isogloss maps. The Ukrainian ordering of jer loss, pitch loss, and quantity loss eventually changes in South Belarusian, where pitch loss precedes jer loss. In this way, pitch is lost before phonemic palatalization ever comes into existence, so that no conflict between the two ever occurs. Therefore, South Belarusian has no conflict A and, consequently, does not harden consonants before front vowels. In terms of isoglosses, it is as if the second of the three isoglosses of Ukrainian, that of pitch loss, speeds up so as to overtake that of jer fall. The point at which pitch loss advances ahead of the jer fall line can be defined as the Ukrainian-Belarusian border, north of which there was no longer any conflict between consonantal and vocalic tonality. Jakobson describes the South Belarusian situation as follows: “conflict A, caused by the loss of the weak jers, was made harmless by copying the Ukrainian model.” This metaphorical language—continuing the extended analogy of phonological war and conflict by the use of the term “harmless,” unfortunately, complicates the comprehension of Jakobson's extremely interesting thesis. Since there are manifestations of compensatory lengthening in South Belarusian, Jakobson assumes that conflict B did occur there, although conflict A did not. By the time the next zone of North Belarusian is reached, there are no manifestations of either conflict, meaning that both the pitch loss and the quantity loss lines overtook that of jer loss. The

absence of conflict B must have meant that pitch and quantity were lost at approximately the same time (Trubetzkoy already assumed that this had to be the case, since he felt that free stress and quantity could never co-occur¹²). This point is stated rather clearly by Jakobson in part 4 of the passage about East Slavic zones (see Appendix, section 4.). The reason given for the change in rule ordering is that North Belarusian and Russian copy the southern solution to conflicts A and B without experiencing the conflicts themselves. Using the terminology I am proposing in this paper, one could rephrase this to state that it was the deceleration of the advance of jer fall—together with the maintenance of the advancing isoglosses of pitch and quantity loss—which accomplished this end.

A summary of conflicts A and B and their chronologies, has been presented below in tables 1 and 2.

Table 1

Conflicts A and B, both based on the principle that two distinctive features can be mutually exclusive, i.e. “incompatible” (“If *a* exists, *b* is absent”).

Conflict A: Incompatibility of segmental consonantal tonality and prosodic vocalic tonality (= pitch)

Chronological reason for conflict A: Jer-fall precedes loss of phonemic pitch.

Linguistic evidence of conflict A: Loss of palatalization in certain environments (e.g. *t'e* > *te*); maintenance of front-back opposition without rounding.

Conflict B: Phonemic dynamic stress and phonemic quantity are incompatible

Chronological reason for conflict B: Dynamic stress and quantity co-exist after the loss of pitch.

Linguistic evidence of conflict B: Compensatory lengthening of *e*, *o*.

¹² Trubetzkoy, “Einiges,” 304.

Table 2

The East Slavic zones with respect to conflicts A and B. (JF = jer fall, PL = pitch loss, QL = quantity loss; $t'e > te$ symbolizes the de-palatalization of consonants before front vowels, as found in Standard Ukrainian.)

	Conflict A	Conflict B	Chronology of JF/PL/QL	$t'e > te$	Comp. Length
S. Ukrainian	+	+	JF, PL, QL	+	Total
N. Ukrainian	+	+	JF, PL, QL	+	Partial (under stress)
S. Belarusian	-	+	PL, JF, QL	-	Partial (under stress)
N. Belarusian/ Russian	-	-	PL/QL, JF	-	None

6. Conclusion and Implications for Other Slavic Zones

The scope of this paper does not permit detailed consideration of some of the issues that touch on the Jakobsonian chronology just discussed. Further work along these lines might consider the relative chronologies which differentiated the other Slavic zones, beyond East Slavic. For example, Serbo-Croatian and Slovene seem to have avoided the symptoms of conflict A, as Russian did, but most likely due to a very early loss of pre-front-vowel palatalization, before the loss of jers, which would have insured the conflictless maintenance of pitch upon jer fall. In fact, this chronology suggests that some of the differences between the Ukrainian and Serbo-Croatian consonant hardening can be attributed to the fact that Ukrainian hardening took place after jer-fall, while the Serbo-Croatian type had to occur before that event (based on the fact that Ukrainian softs survive before fallen jers, e.g. *den'*, in contrast to Serbo-Croatian, where such softs do not survive, e.g. *dan*). Many other possible chronologies and differences in rule application can be deduced for other events in the remaining Slavic zones. This might serve to demonstrate Halle's 1986 contention that "it is not impossible that the highly original ideas that Jakobson advanced in 1929 will yet find fuller development in the research of a generation of scholars who never knew their originator."

Appendix

English translation of the relevant passages of Jakobson's *Remarques sur l'évolution phonologique du russe*. Section VII.4. (66–67):

1. The southern Ukrainian dialects resolved the problems of re-establishing phonological equilibrium, caused by the loss of weak jers, in an autonomous manner, without a ready-made model. In this zone, the loss of weak jers gave rise to a veritable struggle between the “hard vs. soft” consonant opposition and the pitch opposition (= conflict A). The struggle ended with the elimination of the latter. As a result, there was a collision of the oppositions “stressed vs. unstressed” and “long vs. short vowel” (= conflict B), which ended with the triumph of the former.
2. North Ukrainian dialects experienced conflict A due to their loss of weak jers; however, conflict B was prearranged by these dialects' use of the southern model for eliminating it. The symptoms of the peaceful resolution of the conflict are discussed below (IX.6).
3. In South Belarusian dialects, conflict A, caused by the loss of the weak jers, was made harmless by the copying of the Ukrainian model. That is why these Belarusian dialects do not manifest the contrary tendencies which were characteristic of conflict A in Ukrainian. The “hard vs. soft” consonant opposition could be established without obstacle in the phonological system. The subsequent conflict B had the same fate in south Belarusian as in north Ukrainian.
4. North Belarusian and 5. Russian dialects prevented both conflicts A and B by ordering the loss of both pitch and quantity before the loss of weak jers. The southern solutions to the phonological problems were thus copied in advance—even before the problems themselves could arise. These preventative measures assured a loss of weak jers without conflicts.

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