This paper focuses on aspects of Roman Jakobson's theory of phonology which have had very little impact on contemporary phonology, but hold promise for its future development. Four specific contributions are mentioned: (1) the semiotic analysis of distinctive features; (2) the delineation of the content categories of phonic signs; (3) the understanding of language structure as a system of diagrammatization; and (4) the relation between code structure and phonetic regularities in messages. These contributions form the semiotic foundations of phonology.

The title of this panel discussion holds an implicit, but obvious invitation to look back over the development of modern phonology and to assess the relationship between Roman Jakobson's work and the course this development followed. But the topic of this session does not have to be understood as an invitation only to look back. It would indeed be more in keeping with Jakobson's undaunted forward-looking spirit to examine the relationship between his work and contemporary phonology with a view to the future. One might ask whether there are still important lessons we can learn from this great teacher and look to see if there are elements of his understanding of phonology or insights of his which, for whatever reasons, were left unexplored and remain to be exploited, and which might enrich the development of phonology in the years to come. This is the task I have chosen for this brief presentation.

Jakobson early saw that the question of phonological universals was the most important task on the agenda. And from his programmatic statement at the First International Congress of Linguists (SW I:3ff.) to The Sound Shape of Language (1979), he made this task a central topic in his scholarly work.

It is perhaps not surprising, in view of this research emphasis of his, that he came to be understood as an advocate of the description of all sound patterns in terms of universals. This understanding, though, is a misunderstanding in several respects.

In the first place, universals and description are categorically distinct. Universal phonology is concerned with the species general laws that constitute the phonological aspects of our faculté de langage and explain the relative uniformity of all phonological systems. Descriptive phonology, on the other hand, is concerned with the given language particular sound pattern, which must be grasped as a synchronically constituted part of a cultural tradition, fulfilling a multitude of functions in a given community. A sound pattern is like all other parts of a linguistic code a product of history. In the individual, it is a technique which has been acquired through an interplay of nature and nurture. As a social code, however, it is a system of historically transmitted, voluntarily imposed semiotic conventions. The description of such patterns is an entirely different undertaking from the explanation of their relative uniformity.

In the second place, even though Jakobson can perhaps be faulted for permitting this essential distinction to be blurred in some of his writings, there is no doubt that he himself had a constant and clear conception of the object of description, of what a sound pattern is, as distinct from the laws that govern phonological systems (cf. SW I:3).

To Jakobson a sound pattern was first and foremost a sort of ideology, that is, a system of signs constituting social values (SW I:9). As such it forms part of a cultural pattern, that all-encompassing ideology through which members of a commu-
nity cognize their world. This conception was the basis of the parallels he drew between twofoldness and the asymmetrical relations observable in other phenomena. The latter, for instance, may be equally culture-specific, be superficially similar, but organized differently in different cultural milieux and subject to revaluations in the course of history (cf. Trudgill 1983).

It is not difficult to see here a consistent line of thought in Jakobson's style and substance. Jakobson acknowledged this consistent line of thought with reference to the Saussurean well-known phrase--oppositional, relative and negative. Hence they can remain invariant in the vocal tracings of the speakers in vocal tracings. This recognition makes it possible for them to serve as a conceptual carrier or of the categories of other phonic signs.

The fact that diacritic opposites are defined and form oppositions on the basis of their signifiants entails that a phonological theory that treats them as mere names, without regard for the substance in which they are manifested, is essentially meaningless, as Chomsky & Halle very succinctly showed (1968:40ff.).

Also, since the diacritic opposites have no positively defined phonemic signifiants, the language-specific implementation rules that specify their realization cannot be captured by rewrite rules of the new customary kind. To conform to their nature, the linguist's rules will have to transform diacritic oppositions into sound differences.

Jakobson repeatedly spoke about the systems of diacritic oppositions as structured, hierarchized, and phonemic categories of phonemic variables of such structures (cf. SW I: 709, 1979). There are enough indications of variable-class elements, and categorization of diacritic oppositions in different languages, which was the subject of his systematic phonological typology (cf. Andersen 1979) and to explain the general principles of phonological drift (cf. Andersen 1978).

In 1939 Jakobson contrasted the minimal units of phonology with other linguistic signs and determined that the distinctive features, or, as we will call them here, phonemic or diacritic oppositions, that serve to distinguish and identify the signifiants of segmental morphemes are signs in their own right. These signs include the signifiant a signifiée, but differ radically from all other linguistic signs, in that (1) they have no specific signifiée, but signify the signifiant, they belong to the signifiant of morphemes; thus they are all systematically synonymous; (2) unlike other linguistic signs, which are defined and form oppositions in terms of their signifiants, the diacritic oppositions are defined and form oppositions on the basis of their signifiants.

The first of these characteristics is essentially related to their function: without such purely diacritic signs, the rich inventories of content signs of human languages would be impossible. Their synonymy, asJakobson tended to view it, the wisest possible understanding as he repeatedly emphasized the interpretative inversion or cutting off of the parts of the over-all code, the consequent impossibility of making it incompatible with its own isolation, and in particular, the importance of consistently analysing speech sounds as phonemic categories, is the basis of the parallels he drew between phonology and the Saussurean sense, that is, comprise a system of semiotic systems emplaced in language. It is reflected in his writings on all the fields he contributed to in which the role of phonetic elements is central, from descriptive linguistics to language acquisition and aphasia, to poetic language and to the relations between linguistics and other sciences.

The Saussurean inspiration led Jakobson to two important advances. One was the semantic analysis of distinctive oppositions. The other was a gradual identification in lectures in 1939 (SW I:280ff.) and in 1942, especially p. 59ff. (SW II:297, 312 and especially SW I:743ff.).

The structuralist conception of phonology as a system of signs constituting social values served as the major premise for Jakobson's consistent efforts to grasp the sounds of language in semiotic terms, to illuminate the phonemic side of speech as a system of semiotic systems embedded in culture. It is reflected in his writings on all the fields he contributed to in which the role of phonetic elements is central, from descriptive linguistics to language acquisition and aphasia, to poetic language and to the relations between linguistics and other sciences.

The Saussurean inspiration led Jakobson to two important advances. One was the semantic analysis of distinctive oppositions. The other was a gradual identification in lectures in 1939 (SW I:280ff.) and in 1942, especially p. 59ff. (SW II:297, 312 and especially SW I:743ff.).

The structuralist conception of phonology as a system of signs constituting social values served as the major premise for Jakobson's consistent efforts to grasp the sounds of language in semiotic terms, to illuminate the phonemic side of speech as a system of semiotic systems embedded in culture. It is reflected in his writings on all the fields he contributed to in which the role of phonetic elements is central, from descriptive linguistics to language acquisition and aphasia, to poetic language and to the relations between linguistics and other sciences.

The Saussurean inspiration led Jakobson to two important advances. One was the semantic analysis of distinctive oppositions. The other was a gradual identification in lectures in 1939 (SW I:280ff.) and in 1942, especially p. 59ff. (SW II:297, 312 and especially SW I:743ff.).
The great variety of diagrammatic relations in language awaits a thorough analysis. But Jakobson's contributions offer us a key to an understanding of language structure, which can be used to disclose in explicit terms the integration of phonology with the content systems of individual languages, the interplay between meaning and sound in historical phonology, and eventually the universal determinants of these interrelations between linguistically formed sound and sense.

1. The analysis of contextual variation forms a lacuna in Jakobson's investigations of sound patterns. He did not go beyond his understanding of 1939 that all phonological variants refer to the significance of diacritic opposites (cf. FW 1:469 and 1979:42).

The reason for this neglect is consistent with his Saussurean understanding of the linguistic sign, which does not acknowledge the need to specify the syntactic status of each linguistic sign. At the same time this neglect may be related to the absence in Jakobson's thinking of the fundamental distinction between language system and language norms (cf. Coseriu 1952).

It is in fact a question of phonological norms whether or not flattened consonants in a given language are realized as labialized, retroflex, or pharyngealized, and whether a given five-vowel system is normally realized in one or another of several ways in a given language (cf. Vysotskij 1967). Similarly it is a question of norms whether or notJakobson is known primarily as the originator of the search for phonological universals, or as someone who contributed to the modern understanding of the conceptual and morphological systems of the world's languages. Finally, the phonetic norms as a whole are described by him to be characteristic of the poetic function of language. However, it has been shown to be a much more general principle, in evidence whenever a value system is manifested syntactically (Andersen 1987). The phonetic co-occurrence relations thus codified in variation rules are the phonological counterparts of the lexical and morphological systems of the world's languages which were mentioned above.

Secondly, variation rules produce distributional patterns which carry information about the system of diacritic oppositions. Note that the phonetic values in different phonological norms are in complementary distribution and the marked values are assigned to marked contexts, and unmarked to unmarked. This principle, by which equivalences in markedness are diagrammed by contiguity relations, was first discovered by Jakobson (1960) and by him held to be characteristic of the poetic function of language. However, it has been shown to be a much more general principle, in evidence whenever a value system is manifested syntactically (Andersen 1987). The phonetic co-occurrence relations thus codified in variation rules are the phonological counterparts of the lexical and morphological systems of the world's languages which were mentioned above.

Finally, since the phonetic norms as a whole are established by convention, they serve to symbolize the speaker's allegiance to the social and defined community for which the given set of norms holds (1979:42).

2. To most phonologists today, probably Jakobson is known primarily as the originator of the search for phonological universals, the scholar who contributed to the modern understanding of the conceptual and morphological systems of the world's languages. And yet Jakobson's work is marked, in his own words, by its "axiomatic" signs for communication, signs which are an important starting point in the exploration of contextual variation.

First, variation rules expand complexes of diacritic oppositions with subsidiary phonetic signs that act as indexes, pointing to the context to which they have been assigned. The importance of these "auxiliary" signs for communication was recognized and repeatedly emphasized by Jakobson (cf. FW 1:469, 1979:42).

Second, variation rules produce distributional patterns which carry information about the system of diacritic oppositions. Note that the phonetic values in different phonological norms are in complementary distribution and the marked values are assigned to marked contexts, and unmarked to unmarked. This principle, by which equivalences in markedness are diagrammed by contiguity relations, was first discovered by Jakobson (1960) and by him held to be characteristic of the poetic function of language. However, it has been shown to be a much more general principle, in evidence whenever a value system is manifested syntactically (Andersen 1987). The phonetic co-occurrence relations thus codified in variation rules are the phonological counterparts of the lexical and morphological systems of the world's languages which were mentioned above.

References


