Phonemes, Graphemes, Dabs of Paint:

Roman Jakobson, the Russian *avant-garde* and the search for the shared basic elements of painting and poetry

Bregje Hofstede

Editing and peer review managed by:
Regina Wenninger, Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte (ZI), Munich

Reviewers:
Christina Lodder, Tanja Zimmermann

Abstract

The subject of this paper is the supposed affinity between painting and poetry as theorised by the linguist Roman Jakobson who played a crucial role for the Russian *avant-garde* and its close association of painting and poetry. The paper focuses on Jakobson's relation to the two 1913 manifestos "The Word as Such" and "The Letter as Such", written by the poets Chlebnikov and Kruchenyck, and on Jakobson's own (lost) reply. It calls into question the accuracy of Jakobson's claim of having influenced the poets' manifestos, and describes what Jakobson considered to be the shared 'core elements' of the visual and literary arts. According to him, they share a visuality, not on the level of the written sign or grapheme, but on a deeper level, visible only to the mind's eye.

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Introduction

[1]   Many art historians writing about illustrated books, or *livres de peintre*, hold that poetry is the form of expression that comes closest to painting.[1] The arguments which they advance to support this shared assertion differ wildly. Yves Peyré, for instance, in his influential work *Peinture et Poésie*, writes that poetry can achieve a perfect symbiosis with painting because, unlike prose, it partakes of the visible. The importance of its visual 'incarnation' on the paper indeed almost makes it a visual art.[2] By contrast, François Chapon, in his book *Le Peintre et le Livre,* sets forth the idea that the illustrated book presents a magisterial confrontation between the specificity and materiality of the image on the one hand, and the abstraction and immateriality of the word on the other. The illustrator is challenged to match his 'evocations of space' to the infinite mental virtualities that poetry conjures. When they are combined, the poetry can lift the image above its restraining materiality into a limitless realm of vision. Apparently, poetry is not hampered by an 'intermediate materiality', but provides direct access to thought. Its

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[1] See, for instance, François Chapon, *Le Peintre et le Livre: l'âge d'or du livre illustré en France*, 1870-1970, Paris 1987, 47, and Yves Peyré, *Peinture et Poésie. Le dialogue par le livre*, Paris 2001.

[2] Peyré, *Peinture et Poésie*, 69-72.

material manifestation – sounds or visible words – is discounted completely; indeed, *im*materiality is taken as poetry's defining characteristic.[3]

[2] This contrast among art historians writing about poetry sparked my curiosity. I turned to Roman Jakobson, the linguist who famously wrote about painting, hoping to find a more informed view of this supposed affinity. Jakobson not only wrote on this subject, he was part of the very real association of visual art and poetry within the Russian *avant-garde*. His name can be found in almost any survey of the period, and it is commonly accepted that his intensive contact with the *avant-garde* had crucial influence on his later work. Jakobson himself made repeated references to its significance.[4]

[3] While the contours of this relationship have been sketched, there are scant analyses of its details. I should therefore like to analyse one of them in this essay: Jakobson's relation to the two 1913 manifestos "The Word as Such" and "The Letter as Such", written by the poets Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh, especially as regards the theoretical motivation underlying the linking of poetry with the visual arts. The latter text, Jakobson claims, was inspired by himself.[5] I shall examine this assertion, as well as the reasons why Jakobson was nonetheless dissatisfied with the manifesto. His own manifestos from this period, notably "The Phoneme as Such", written in reaction, have been lost; but perhaps related texts might give us hints about what could have been their possible content.[6] Jakobson's disagreement can be seen as the first sign of the distinctive take on this problem which he was later to develop; this makes this detail from his memoirs particularly relevant. In discussing it, I shall focus particularly on the year 1913 and on the figures of Khlebnikov and Jakobson, while their relation to Malevich shall also be considered. In my study of the written (Russian) sources, both primary and secondary, I was limited to those available in translation, of which the most important were the manifestos mentioned, as well as Jakobson's own writings addressing the relation between language and visual art. The three main parts of this paper correspond to the three manifestos under consideration, ordered chronologically.

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"The Word as Such"

[4] Many scholars have noted the similarity in methods and principles of the Russian Futurist poets on the one hand, and of contemporary painters – especially Malevich – on the other. This resemblance or even "direct transposition" of theories is no accident: the

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[3] Chapon, *Le Peintre et le Livre*, 263-266.

[4] See, for instance, Harry Polkinhorn, "Bastard in the Family. The Impact of Cubo-Futurist Book Art on Structural Linguistics", *Visible Language* 25:1 (1991), 88-109. Elmar Holenstein, *Roman Jakobson's Approach to Language. Phenomenological Structuralism*, London 1976 [1974], 23-24. Roman Jakobson, "Retrospect", in: *Selected Writings*, I,'s Gravenhage 1962, 631-633. Roman Jakobson, *Meine Futuristischen Jahre*, Berlin 1999 [1992].

[5] Jakobson, *Meine Futuristischen Jahre*, 27.

[6] Jakobson, *Meine Futuristischen Jahre*, 35.

major figures of the *avant-garde* – Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh (the poets), Mathiushin (the composer) and Malevich (the painter) – were close friends, and their theories were *intended* to apply to all the arts.[7] Malevich, in his letters to Mathiushin, consequently writes of "our idea" and "our common task" when he refers to his work.[8]

[5] The heyday of the collaboration of these men was in the year 1913. In July of that year, they staged "The First All-Russian Congress of Singers of the Future (Poet-Futurists)" and began working on "The Victory over the Sun", which was performed on the 3rd and the 5th of December 1913. This groundbreaking opera, in which Futurist man vanquishes the sun (rationality, logic, dependence on nature), was written in *zaum,* a 'beyond-sense' language of pure sound deprived of logical meaning.[9] "*Zaum*", a term which first appeared in publication in September 1913, found its theoretical justification in "The Word as Such", a manifesto by Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov published shortly before the performance. Opera and manifesto are recognised as two crucial sources of Malevich's Suprematism.[10]

[6] In "The Word as Such", Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov lash out at the Italian Futurists (who were also experimenting with 'words in freedom'), calling them imitators and noisy self-promoters, and claim for themselves the idea that the poet should be "face to face, always and ultimately, with the word (itself) alone."[11] This is to say that the word is treated as a material to be worked with 'as such', as a pure presence, regardless of referential meaning. The material form of the word becomes autonomous, just like the *factura* (texture) of the paint in Cubism.[12] Khlebnikov, the central figure of the Russian Futurists, had been experimenting with the pure, material form of language since 1908, aiming to liberate "the discrete and independent substance of the word" as a means of expression in itself.[13] In the hands of the *zaum*-poets, language disintegrates into minimal discrete elements of autonomous value; words, sounds and letters lose their

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[7] Rainer Crone and David Moos, *Kazimir Malevich. The Climax of Disclosure*, London 1991, 70. Charlotte Douglas, "Birth of a 'Royal Infant': Malevich and Victory over the Sun", *Art in America* 62, March/April 1974, 45-51, 45.

[8] Kazimir Malevich, "Lettres de Malévitch à Mathiouchine (1913-1916)", in: J.-Cl. Marcadé (ed.), *Malévitch. Actes du Colloque International tenu au Centre Pompidou*, les 4 et 5 Mai 1978, Lausanne 1979, 181-189. Letters of 19 October 1915 and of 23 June 1916 respectively (my translation).

[9] Khlebnikov missed the 'Congress', but did write the preface of the opera, for which Kruchenykh wrote the libretto, Mathiushin composed the music, and Malevich painted the sets, which he would later see as the beginning of Suprematism. Douglas, "Birth of a 'Royal Infant'", 45-51.

[10] Dora Vallier, "Postface aux Lettres de Malévitch à Matiouchine", in: Marcadé, *Malévitch*, 191-193. See also Douglas,"Birth of a 'Royal Infant'", 45-51, and Charlotte Douglas, *Swans of Other Worlds. Kazimir Malevich and the Origins of Abstraction in Russia*, Ann Arbor 1980, esp. 35-47.

[11] A. Kruchenykh and V. Khlebnikov, "The Word as Such" [1913], in: Velimir Khlebnikov, *The King of Time: Selected Writings of the Russian Futurian*, ed. Charlotte Douglas, Cambridge 1985, 119-120, 120.

[12] See also Charlotte Greve, *Writing and the 'Subject'. Image-Text relations in the Early Russian Avant-Garde and Contemporary Russian Visual Poetry*, Amsterdam 2004, 14-27.

[13] Crone and Moos, *Kazimir Malevich*, 65-86.

everyday meaning to become independently meaningful.[14] Ultimately, this would lead to the discovery of "a general unity of all world languages" (Khlebnikov).[15] These principles were not limited to poetry. The stress on the *faktura* or palpability of the material, the elimination of the representational and symbolic meaning of form, the disintegration of the painterly/verbal language into its smallest or basic elements (which are made autonomous, pure and expressive 'as such'), as well as the supposition of a system of geometrical relations underlying these basic elements, are the main characteristics shared by *zaum*-poetry and by a-logic cubo-futurism and suprematism.[16]

[7]   This, in very broad outlines, was the set of personages and ideas Roman Jakobson (1896-1982) came into contact with as a teenager. Again, the crucial year was 1913. In February, Jakobson heard the poet Majakovskij (whom he would later befriend) speak about Khlebnikov, after which he read and memorised everything Khlebnikov wrote. Jakobson finally sought him out at the end of December 1913, bringing *zaum*-like formula he had collected, at which occasion he also met Kruchenykh. Both Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh became his close friends, while the latter also was a frequent correspondent, and invited Jakobson – alias Aliagrov, futurist poet – to contribute his own *zaum*-poetry to their joint publication *Zaumnaia gniga* (*Transrational Boog*) of 1914 or 1915.[17] Jakobson's other friends included Matiushin, Filonov, Majakovskij, Pasternak and Brik.[18] Moreover, Jakobson tells us that in 1913, when he was 16 or 17, Malevich looked him up and invited the schoolboy to accompany him to Paris, to act as a translator and theoretician of his new work.[19] The trip never took place, but the two had frequent meetings and discussions, and during the summer of 1915 Jakobson stayed with the painter in Kuncevo.[20]

[8]   Jakobson's own *zaum*-poems, the articles he published about the Russian *avant-garde*, and the core elements of his later work as a linguist, all show how deeply he was influenced by his close relations to this milieu.[21] In his 1919 article "Newest Russian

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[14] Greve, *Writing and the 'Subject'*, 19-33.

[15] Richard Bradford, *Roman Jakobson. Life, Language, Art*, London 1994, 66. He takes the Khlebnikov quote from Edward J. Brown (ed.), *Modern Soviet Writers*, London 1971, but without further reference.

[16] For a detailed account of these shared principles, see Jirí Padrta, "Malévitch et Khlebnikov", in: Marcadé, *Malévitch*, 31-46.

[17] 1916 is often given as the year of publication, as in Bradford, *Roman Jakobson*, 68. Jakobson, however, writes that Kruchenykh had 1916 printed in the book in order to make it a book of the future, while the manuscript was finished by 1914. Jakobson, *Meine Futuristischen Jahre*, 28-29.

[18] The biographical information is taken from Jakobson's own memoirs: Jakobson, *Meine Futuristischen Jahre*, 9, 28, 37, 65, 72.

[19] Ibid., 34-35.

[20] Ibid., 36-39.

[21] For an analysis of Jakobson's contribution to the *Transrational Boog*, see Bradford, *Roman Jakobson*, 68-70. The foregrounding of the materiality of the signans, especially the repeated diphthong 'ja', and the frequent use of neologisms and nonsensical words, firmly indicate Khlebnikov's and Kruchenykh's *zaum*-influence.

Poetry", for instance, he dutifully echoes Khlebnikov's and Kruchenykh's manifesto: "*Si la peinture est une mise en forme du matériau visuel à valeur autonome […] alors la poésie est la mise en forme du mot à valeur autonome*."[22]

[9] The fundamental ways in which his linguistic work is indebted to the theories outlined above has been described by Bradford, Holenstein and Polkinhorn, among many others. Suffice it to note that at the core of Jakobson's work is the fundamental conviction that the material substance of the sign cannot be separated from its signifying properties, a characteristic of language which is made central in poetry. All poetry, according to Jakobson, is characterised by "a structural and functional dependence upon the material, non-signifying elements of language" – indeed, "poetry is indifferent to the referent of the utterance".[23] Jakobson even used the phrase 'word as word' to characterise this poetic function of language.[24]

[10] Clearly, the greatest common factor is the focus on the materiality of the word. But in what form? Words can be written or spoken. The question of whether the fundamental elements of language with which *zaum* deals include both graphemes (written letters) and speech-sounds, or only sounds, will occupy us for the remainder of this essay.

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"The Letter as Such"

[11] In the theoretical justifications of *zaum*, we find references to both letters and speech-sounds as part of the material side of language that is to be emphasised and made autonomous. Overall, the greatest focus is on sound, but the futurists do address the question of the material written sign.[25] For instance, in the preface to the publication "A Trap for Judges II" of February 1913, Majakovskij, Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh, among others, proclaim:

> We started to endow words with content on the basis of their graphic and *phonic characteristics*. [...] considering handwriting a component of the poetic impulse […] and therefore, having published in Moscow "hand-lettered" (autographic) books.[26]

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[22] Roman Jakobson, "Futurisme", in: Roman Jakobson, *Questions de Poétique*, Paris 1973 [1919], 25-30. Jakobson also writes that the new painting is no longer figurative, but is directly concerned with the perception of colour and space, "la perception à valeur autonome". Compare this to Malevich's assertion that colour and texture are the essence of painting and are ends in themselves. Roman Jakobson, "La Nouvelle Poésie Russe", in: Roman Jakobson, *Questions de Poétique*, Paris 1973 [1919], 11-24. Kazimir Malevich, "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting" [1916], in: Charles Harrison, Paul Wood (eds.), *Art in Theory 1900-2000. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Oxford 2006 [2002], 173-183.

[23] Bradford, *Roman Jakobson*, 26-27. See also Polkinhorn, "Bastard in the Family", 81-109, and Holenstein, *Roman Jakobson's Approach to Language*, 12-24, for the parallels between Russian formalism, structuralism, and the ideas of the Russian *avant-garde*.

[24] Günter Bader, *Die Emergenz des Namens. Amnesie, Aphasie, Theologie*, Tübingen 2006, 223.

[25] Greve, *Writing and the 'Subject'*, 14.

[26] Vladimir Majakovskij, Velimir Khlebnikov, Aleksei Kruchenykh a. o., "A Trap for Judges II" [1913], in: Anna Lawton (ed.), *Russian Futurism through its Manifestoes*, 1912-1928, Ithaca/London 1988, 53-54.

[12]   Similarly, in his essay on the "*faktura* of the word", Kruchenykh writes that this *faktura* can be conveyed by sound-texture, but also by outline and colouring. This suggests that he made no distinction between poetic material as speech sounds and as graphic marks. The Danish art historian Charlotte Greve writes that "with the concept of *faktura,* the cubo-futurists [...] were able to move effortlessly between the material of sound and the material of the letter."[27] In line with these assertions, the futurist poets emphasised the visual aspects of their work, experimenting with handwriting, illustration and typography.[28] This is especially clear in their important production of artistic books, for which they often collaborated with visual artists, and in which picture and text often permeate each other, the letters becoming autonomous graphic elements.[29]

[13]   The clearest and most direct discussion of the material quality of the grapheme is the declaration "The Letter as Such", which is entirely dedicated to the subject.[30] There, Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh compare printed letters to prisoners, "strung out in straight lines with shaved heads, resentful, each one just like all the others – gray, colorless – not letters at all, just stamped-out marks." A letter, if it is to convey the mood and "wild snowstorm of inspiration" of the poet, and if it is to *live,* should be hand-written, preferably by an artist.[31] This would intensify the poetic experience.

[14]   The visual approach reveals the qualities that handwriting shares with painting – it is static, spatial and autographic, and every particularity of its form can have expressive significance – and is to deinstrumentalise and 'make strange' the everyday word.[32] The theoretical writings of Khlebnikov are especially abundant with references to writing as a material, visual sign system. Handwriting was an important concept to him, and "The Letter as Such" is one of the texts in which he expresses the demand for a visual language.[33] Kruchenykh likewise produced many manuscript books, in which he explored the pictographic principle and the expressive role of the handwritten text.[34]

[15]   In his memoirs, Roman Jakobson remembers explaining to Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh his theories on the word and the speech-sound as such:

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[27] Greve, *Writing and the 'Subject'*, 27.

[28] Polkinhorn, "Bastard in the Family", 94-95.

[29] Sabine Hänsgen, "Handwriting-Typography. Two standpoints regarding the book in the Russian avant-garde", in: Anne Thurmann-Jajes, Martin Hellmold, *Malerbücher-Künstlerbücher. Die Vielseitigkeit eines Mediums in der Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Bremen 2001, 116-118. See also Deborah Wye, "Art Issues/Book Issues: An Overview", in: Margit Rowell, Deborah Wye, *The Rusian Avant-Garde Book 1910-1934*, New York 2002, 10-23.

[30] The declaration was possibly inspired by the inclusion of alphabetic and numerical characters in the cubist paintings of Picasso and Braque. Greve, *Writing and the 'Subject'*, 27-29.

[31] A. Kruchenykh and V. Khlebnikov, "The Letter as Such" [1913], in: Khlebnikov, *The King of Time*, 121-122.

[32] Greve, *Writing and the 'Subject'*, 27-29, and Hänsgen, "Handwriting-Typography", 116-118.

[33] Greve, *Writing and the 'Subject'*, 85-86.

[34] Gerald Janeck, *The Look of Russian Literature. Avant-garde visual experiments*, 1900-1930, Princeton 1984, 69-121.

> Ich beeilte mich, Khlebnikov meine frühreifen Überlegungen zum Wort als solchem und zum Sprachlaut als solchem, das heißt, zur Grundlage der *Zaum*-Poesie mitzuteilen. Ein Nachklang dieser Gespräche mit ihm und bald auch mit Kruchenykh war ihr gemeinsames Manifest "Der Buchstabe als Solcher".[35]

[16] That the manifesto is indeed an 'echo' of these conversations seems doubtful considering Jakobson's previous assertion that he only met the two poets on the 30th of December 1913: they would hardly have had time to publish the manifesto, dated 1913.[36] But if we allow for the possibility of a mistaken dating, the import of his influence is still unclear. Especially because Jakobson tells us he disagreed with the content of the manifesto, and wrote his own, different versions:

> [Ich] überdachte meine eigenen, nur für mich selbst geschriebenen Deklarationen und Manifeste – Deklarationen des befreiten Worts, und dann, als nächster Schritt, des befreiten Sprachlauts. (Ich besaß dicke Hefte mit meinen Thesen und Deklarationen, doch sie sind alle verlorengegangen, als die Deutschen in der Tschechoslowakei einmarschierten.) […] Dieses Thema hat mich damals […] brennend interessiert: Die Frage nach dem Verhältnis zwischen den poetischen Lauten und den Noten dieser Laute, das heißt, den Buchstaben. Ich war deshalb nicht einverstanden, als auf "Das Wort als solches" der "Buchstabe als solcher" folgte – für mich hätte es "Der Laut als solcher" heißen müssen.[37]

[17] The apparent reason why Jakobson was dissatisfied with the text is that it should, in his view, have been about the speech-sound (or phoneme) as such, not about its notation. At first glance, this seems an understandable objection from the side of a (budding) linguist. Phonology – the study of speech sounds – was crucial in all his later work, which revolved around the central question of the relationship between sound and meaning.[38] It is not surprising that, from this vantage point, Jakobson regarded writing as merely a parasitical superstructure upon speech. As a scientist studying verbal behaviour, he knew that speech is a constant in all languages, while writing is only an optional supplement, and cannot be learnt without the possession of a phonemic system. Indeed, deaf-mute children cannot acquire language through reading and writing.[39] This fact makes it understandable when Jakobson laments that most literates seem "to think in terms of letters rather than sounds. Linguists are well aware of the difficulty of training students to think in sounds rather than in letters."[40]

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[35] Jakobson, *Meine Futuristischen Jahre*, 27.

[36] Ibid. This applies even when allowing for a possible two-week difference in the count of the Russian and Western calendars.

[37] Jakobson, *Meine Futuristischen Jahre*, 35.

[38] Jakobson, "Retrospect", 631, and Bradford, *Roman Jakobson*, 36-39.

[39] His preference for "The Speech-sound as Such" indicates that Jakobson, who had been a pupil at the Lazarev institute of Oriental Languages since 1905, realised the primacy of speech at the time of his contact with the *avant-garde*. Jakobson, "Retrospect", 654-654, and Roman Jakobson, "About the Relation between Visual and Auditory Signs", in: Weiant Wathen-Dunn (ed.), *Models for the Perception of Speech and Visual Form*, Cambridge/London 1964, 1-7.

[40] Roman Jakobson, Gladys A. Reichard and Elizabeth Werth, "Language and Synesthesia", in: *Word. The Journal of the Linguistic Circle of New York*, vol. 5, no. 1 (April 1949), 127-128.

[18] Thinking in terms of sounds rather than letters may have been what Jakobson sought to teach his *avant-garde* friends. That he was not shy of the role of teacher becomes clear from his memoirs, throughout which he sketches his position as that of an influential, if precocious, explanator.[41] The suggestion that arises is therefore that Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh misunderstood Jakobson's "*Überlegungen zum Wort als solchem und zum Sprachlaut als solchem*", mixing up the primary speech-sound and its secondary notation. The reality, however, may well have been less clear-cut.

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"The Phoneme as Such"

[19] In trying to surmise what could have been the possible content of Jakobson's lost manifesto, "The Phoneme as Such", and on which points it would have disagreed with Khlebnikov's and Kruchenych's publication, two methods seem to recommend themselves. The first is a comparison of Jakobson's (later) theories with those of Khlebnikov, who, as we have seen, was the main advocate of the importance of the materiality of the grapheme.[42] The second is to look at the 1916 letter of Malevich to Mathiushin, which, Jakobson tells us, echoes his conversations with Malevich.[43]

[20] To start with the first, we have seen that Khlebnikov's experiments with *zaum* were meant to lead to a universal 'star' language of pure materiality generating poetic meaning. Language had to be brought back to its minimal elements, which on their own conveyed emotions and a range of pure sensations. Khlebnikov believed that the senses are interlocked at some deep, primal level. This means that speech-sounds are not just a sound, but have other manifestations as well. For instance, each one is charged with 'energetic' potential and has its own law of movement (acceleration, oscillation, circular movement, etc.).[44] It also has a spatial, geometrical form, so that language is "a constellation of moving points, lines, surfaces and so forth". Moreover, while the letters of everyday language have no intrinsic meaning, poetic 'soundletters' can reveal the essence of things: every 'soundletter' has an 'inner form' or idea. Its meaning is both

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[41] The above quotations concerning Malevich, Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh provide good examples. Jakobson underlines his influence on Malevich on 38-30, and on Majakovskij on 83, 86-87, 94.

[42] For a detailed account of the different poetics of Kruchenykh, who concentrated on 'making strange' existing language structures, and Khlebnikov, who created a new, mythopoetical, expressive 'word world', see Aage A. Hansen-Löve, "Randbemerkungen zur frühen Poetik Roman Jakobsons", in: Hendrik Birus, Sebastian Donat and Burkhard Meyer-Sickendiek (eds.), *Roman Jakobsons Gedichtanalysen. Eine Herausforderung an die Philologien*, Göttingen 2003, 89-120.

[43] Jakobson, *Meine Futuristischen Jahre*, 36, on the letter of June 1916: "Darin spiegeln sich nicht nur unsere ersten Gespräche wider, sondern auch mein Besuch bei ihm in Kuncevo im Sommer 1915, als ich bereits Student war."

[44] Padrta 1978, 32-44, without further reference, but possibly taken from Khlebnikov's "Alphabet des Geistes. Wörterbuch der Sternensprache", in: Velimir Khlebnikov, *Werke*, Hamburg 1972, vol. 1, 150-154, which is listed without specific reference. Several sketches of this 'moving' alphabet have survived, dating from 1912-1913 and later.

fixed and irrational, a 'direct cry to the soul'; and on the basis of the intrinsic meaning of all its elements, the universal language is constructed.[45]

[21]   Khlebnikov believed that there should be an iconic relation between the outer form of the letter (its shape) and the inner form (the geometrical, moving form). The form of the soundletter should correspond to the representation inherent to the sound. Khlebnikov wrote instructions for a new system of written characters which would satisfy this need. The soundletter 'v', for example, which "in all languages means the turning of one point around another", is written as a circle with a point in its middle. The grapheme thus becomes an icon, and even an ideogram.[46]

[22]   The idea that letters (indicating sounds) can independently convey meaning was, as we have seen, central to *avant-garde* poetics. We also find it in the joint preface to "A Trap for Judges II" of 1913: "We understand vowels as time and space [...], and consonants as color, sound, smell."[47] The poet who went furthest in stressing the visual aspect of this meaning was undoubtedly Khlebnikov.[48] Jakobson, although he provided a scientific polish, also incorporated many of its elements, as we shall see. In his letters and memoirs he refers to Khlebnikov's "attempts at a coloured speech" and his dissatisfaction with the poverty of the common alphabet.[49]

[23]   The impression left by Jakobson's remarks, that Khlebnikov mistakenly settled on the wrong 'core element' of poetry in his "Letter as Such", is misleading. Khlebnikov certainly realised that the phoneme, or speech sound, was a more fundamental element of language than its printed form. Indeed, the manifesto is a protest against that visual form. Instead of lifeless printed letters Khlebnikov envisaged handwriting as the graphic form of his universal language, a handwriting, moreover, in which the form of each letter had the special task of visualizing the inner meaning of each sound. To him, the grapheme was not (or should no longer be) a mere superstructure upon sound, but should have a motivated, iconical link to it. Rather than focusing on a superficial level of language, Khlebnikov sought to bring the grapheme into one line with the phoneme and pull it to the same core level.

[24]   Jakobson's linguistic work incorporates much of the ideas described above. Both Harry Polkinhorn and Richard Bradford note that his theories, though generally rigorous and empirical, are sometimes surprisingly unscientific, incorporating "the pseudo-mystical notion of supraconscious, subliminal exchange", which shows the lingering influence of (Khlebnikov's) *zaum* theories.[50] Jakobson himself writes that *zaum* provided the impetus

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[45] Greve, *Writing and the 'Subject'*, 85-95.

[46] Greve, *Writing and the 'Subject'*, 96-100.

[47] Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh, Majakovskij a. o., "A Trap for Judges II", 54.

[48] Greve, *Writing and the 'Subject'*, 85.

[49] Jakobson, *Meine Futuristischen Jahre,* 28 (my translation). Greve, *Writing and the 'Subject,*101.

[50] Polkinhorn, "Bastard in the Family", 89. Quote from Bradford, *Roman Jakobson*, 62.

for his work on phonemes, which he defined as "acoustic representations capable of being associated with semantic representations", i. e., sounds linked to meanings.[51] While the Saussurian dogma holds this link to be wholly arbitrary, Jakobson – who first learnt about Saussure in 1917, by which time he was steeped in *zaum* – supposed an *indissoluble, necessary* link between sound and meaning.[52] He firmly believed in sound symbolism and synaesthesia, which he ascribed to neurophysiological laws:

> Owing to the neuropsychological laws of synaesthesia, phonic oppositions can themselves evoke relations with musical, chromatic, olfactory, tactile, etc. sensations. For example, the opposition between acute and grave phonemes has the capacity to suggest an image of bright and dark, of pointed and rounded, of thin and thick, of light and heavy, etc. […] In poetic language, in which the sign as such takes on an autonomous value, this sound symbolism becomes an actual factor and creates a sort of accompaniment to the signified.[53]

[25]   The 'accompaniment' of meaning created by poetic sounds, though clothed in linguistic terminology, is none other than Khlebnikov's 'inner meaning'. It entails not only geometrical form, but also colour, and even weight and smell. In an article on synaesthesia, Jakobson discusses the correspondence of vowels and colours, "even among persons speaking different languages". He mentions not only colour, but also several other visual elements: shading, form, texture, and motion.[54] This sound symbolism only applies to speech sounds, not to music.

[26]   Sound and colour do not merely have a coincidental neuropsychological link, they are similar phenomena: "Obviously, both series of qualities, lightness-darkness and chromatic-achromatic, are common to sound and visual sensations, and the structure of sound and colour systems shows marked agreements." For example, the development of the colour instinct shows striking parallels to that of the phonological system, while Jakobson also suggests connections between colour blindness and the vowel system.[55]

[27]   For Jakobson, as for Khlebnikov, these elements of inner meaning – colour, form – are located in the basic elements of language. This irreducible 'zero' was first represented by the phoneme, until the phoneme was further resolved into its ultimate distinctive qualities, representing minimum phonological differences. These 'atoms' of language Jacobson calls 'distinctive features'.[56] He calls sound symbolism "the inner value of the distinctive features": apparently, it was these features that carried an inner meaning of

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[51] Jakobson, "Retrospect", 633. For a detailed account of Jakobson's understanding of the bipolar character of the phoneme in relation to the two linguistic 'axes' (selection and combination), see Bader, *Die Emergenz des Namens*, 197-225.

[52] Ibid., 631. Bradford, *Roman Jakobson*, 112-114. Roman Jakobson, *Six Lectures on Sound and Meaning*, Hassocks 1978 [1976], 111.

[53] Jakobson, *Six Lectures*, 113.

[54] Jakobson, Reichard and Werth, "Language and Synesthesia", 224-231. Quote from 224.

[55] Roman Jakobson, "Agreements between the Systems of Sound and Colour", in: Roman Jakobson, *Child Language Aphasia and Phonological Universals*, The Hague/Paris 1972, 82-84. Quote from 82.

[56] Jakobson, "Retrospect", 634-637.

form, colour, etc.[57] Jakobson's search for the smallest independently significant elements of language can be interpreted as a direct continuation of the poet's ambition, transferred to phonology.

[28] The above assertions on sound symbolism were not valid for Russian only, but had universal significance. Jakobson believed the distinctive features of language to be reducible to an inventory of fifteen universal 'atoms', drawn upon by all languages.[58] The resolution of language into these ultimate components would give us the key to the structural laws underlying the phonemic system – laws which were "universal and near-universal".[59] If we consider that Jakobson also mentions a 'geometrical order' underlying poetry, this brings us very close to the geometrical systems imagined by Khlebnikov and Malevich.[60] Moreover, the phonetic 'laws' Jakobson imagined are not only universal to all languages, but also have links to visual art, with which they are correlated within a greater whole of structural laws.[61] Clearly Jakobson, like Khlebnikov, was a universalist, arguing for the recognition of ties between the linguistic system and other systems.[62]

[29] Jakobson's belief that distinctive features partake of a (universal) sound symbolism sheds light on some puzzling remarks from his memoirs. Thus, he writes about Malevich:

> Wenn ich seine Aufzeichnungen lese, sehe ich, wie er sich unsere Gespräche zu Herzen nahm und wie er von seiner Warte als Maler über etwas nachzudenken begann, was nicht Malerei ist und der Malerei zugleich so viel näher ist als die Musik. […] Da war die Frage der einander ausgesprochen ähnlichen Grundelemente, die in der Poesie die Zeit und in der Malerei den Raum ausfüllen […].[63]

[30] According to Jakobson, the core elements of poetry are much closer to visual art than to music; indeed, they are 'stridently similar' to the basic elements of painting. Since Jakobson regarded the visual aspect of written signs as merely a parasitical superstructure upon speech, it is not this visuality which makes poetry close to visual art. Rather, the resemblance must be sought at the deeper level of the 'inner meaning' or sound symbolism of the distinctive features of the phoneme. These evoke colour and form, and can therefore be seen to resemble the basic elements of painting. The grapheme, though directly visual, apparently has no part in this resemblance (or, for that matter, in the *faktura* of poetry) because it belongs to a wholly different and more

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[57] Jakobson, *Six Lectures*, 113.

[58] Bradford, *Roman Jakobson*, 112.

[59] Jakobson, "Retrospect", 645, 655.

[60] See footnote 14. For the 'geometrical order' in Jakobson, see Roman Jakobson, "Sur l'art verbal des poètes-peintres Blake, Rousseau et Klee" [1970], in: Roman Jakobson, *Questions de Poétique*, Paris 1973, 378-400. It also mentions the 'brilliant colour' of the diphtongues of a Klee poem.

[61] Roman Jakobson and Joerij Tynjanow, "Problemen van literatuur- en taalonderzoek", in: Sjef Bogman (ed.), *Russies formalisme: Sjklowkij, Jakobson, Ejchenbaum, Tynjanow*, Nijmegen 1982, 105-107.

[62] Bradford, *Roman Jakobson*, 168.

[63] Jakobson, *Meine Futuristischen Jahre*, 38-39.

superficial system than the phoneme, and has a different sign structure which moreover fails to convey the finer points of the phonemic pattern.[64]

[31]   This suggests what might have lain at the heart of Jakobson's disagreement with "The Letter as Such". For unlike Khlebnikov, Jakobson assumed the irreversibility of the signifying relation between phoneme and grapheme: "the letter *b* irreversibly symbolizes the phoneme /b/."[65] That is to say, the letter b can evoke the phoneme /b/, but the phoneme cannot symbolise the written sign. (Just like the picture of a cow symbolises a cow, but not vice versa.) For Khlebnikov, by contrast, the sound /v/ could and did connote 'a circle with a point in its middle' – his alternative letter *v*. He envisaged the new alphabet as an "instrument of exchange between auditory and visual modes", implying the mutuality of the signifying relation.[66]

[32]   The only time I have found Jakobson to assign any significance to the graphic form of writing is in an article from 1949 written in cooperation with Gladys Reichard. The two note that some combinations of "color, form, and motion symbolism" appear to be partly determined "by the letters, that is, the writing". While this may seem to bring Jakobson close to Khlebnikov's position, the impression is quickly defeated when he adds that "the interpretation of letter form connected with sound" must be interpreted as "culturally determined", while suggesting that the correlation between *sound* and colour is "generally" the same in various language groups.[67] Again, the grapheme is merely an optional, arbitrary addition, in great contrast to Khlebnikov's universal, visual 'star' language which would even enable 'soundless' conversation.[68] Some critics think Jakobson too categorical in his dismissal of the grapheme. Harry Polkinhorn writes that, because Jakobson focused so exclusively on phonology, his theories fail to account for the important visual dimension the work of futurist poets, notably their artistic books.[69]

[33]   The second way to try to surmise Jakobson's early thoughts on this topic is to look for his alleged influence on the letter Malevich wrote to Matiushin in June 1916. Jakobson describes this letter as reflecting his conversations with Malevich between 1913 and 1916.[70] The letter tells us some of Malevich' ideas on poetry, while also suggesting some things he may have taken from Jakobson.

[34]   In the letter, which is several pages long, Malevich sets out his new ideas on the word and the composition of 'verbal masses'. He distinguishes three types of poetry. Firstly,

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[64] Holenstein, *Roman Jakobson's Approach to Language*, 74.

[65] Jakobson, "Retrospect", 654.

[66] Greve, *Writing and the 'Subject'*, 108.

[67] Jakobson, Reichard, Werth, "Language and Synesthesia", 292-231.

[68] Greve, *Writing and the 'Subject'*, 108.

[69] Polkinhorn, "Bastard in the Family", 99-100. For a detailed account of the visual effects in Russian *avant-garde* literature, see Janeck, *The Look of Russian Literature*.

[70] Jakobson, *Meine Futuristischen Jahre*, 36. Jakobson makes no mention of direct contact with Malevich in a later year.

there is the 'old', descriptive poetry, dominated by things and by thought. Secondly, there is the new trans-sense *zaum,* which aims to liberate the word 'as such'. This word has to be incarnated *in something,* but in what is still obscure. And because the poets do not know what form to give to the word 'as such', they are still stuck in the old poetry. The reason for this deadlock is that the *nature* of the letter is still obscure to them: "Obscure, because they thought, when they should have 'listened'." The word has not yet been completely liberated, Malevich writes, and he continues: "And it seems to me that the new poets should choose the side of the sound (not of music)." He supports this by explaining: "At first, there were no letters, there was only the sound. Using sound, they indicated this or that thing. Afterwards, they divided the sound in different sounds, and these divisions were represented by signs." The new poetry is a return to the sound as poetic fundamental. "And the letter is no longer a sign to express things, but a sound note (not musical). […] more expressive than musical notes." Finally, the principle of sonority leads up to the composition of 'sonorous masses', the third form of poetry: "the distribution of sonorous masses of letters in space, parallel to pictorial suprematism."[71]

[35] Malevich's focus on sound, and his chiding of the 'new poets' for not having understood the real nature of the letter and of the word 'as such' (namely, sound), both point to Jakobson, who was dissatisfied with the same elements.[72] Moreover, Malevich repeatedly uses the rather awkward formula "sounds (not of music)", adding that music is less expressive. This sounds like a layman's description of what a phoneme is, while also recalling Jakobson's explicit exclusion of music from sound symbolism.[73] Malevich's remarks on the primacy of speech over writing, likewise described in a dilettante's vocabulary, might also come from Jakobson.

[36] Yet Malevich is far from echoing Jakobson. His 'suprematist' version of poetry, with its letters in space, most directly recalls Khlebnikov's moving soundletters, although we cannot know whether Jakobson shared this idea. And while Jakobson writes that it was his influence which made Malevich create a section for phonology when he was head of the state institute of artistic culture, this does not mean that Malevich was unequivocally 'on the side of sound' in the grapheme/phoneme debate, if such a 'side' existed.[74] Rainer Crone and David Moos point out that "The Letter as Such", the manifesto with which

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[71] Malevich, "Lettres de Malévitch à Mathiouchine (1913-1916)", in: Marcadé, *Malévitch*, 184-185 (my translations). Malevich's 1919 article "On Poetry" elaborates this idea, explaining how "rhythm and tempo divide the mass of sound into intervals". Kazimir Malevich, "On Poetry", in: Troels Andersen (ed.), *Kazimir Malevich. Essays on Art, 1915-1928*, vol. I, Copenhagen 1968, 81. The article is no longer contemporary with the conversations Jakobson reports, and it is hard to discern any elements which might be attributed to his influence.

[72] Aage Hansen-Löve has stressed another point in which Jacobson and Malevich criticised the poetry of especially Khlebnikov. It had an expressive aim, which was therefore not immanent but external to art. Hansen-Löve, "Randbemerkungen", 107-111.

[73] Hansen-Löve interprets these remarks quite differently, as marking Malevich's 'decidedly anti-musical attitude'. Hansen-Löve, "Randbemerkungen", 109.

[74] Jakobson, *Meine Futuristischen Jahre*, 39.

Jakobson was dissatisfied, finds direct correlation in Malevich's inclusion of graphemes in his paintings of 1913-1914 (see fig. 1).[75]

1 Kazimir Malevich, *Lady at a Poster Column,* 1914 (reprod. from: Rainer Crone and David Moos, *Kazimir Malevich. The Climax of Disclosure*, London 1991, 103)

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Conclusion

[37] Roman Jakobson, who came into close contact with the major figures of the Russian *avant-garde* when he was still a teenager, has remained deeply influenced by them. He wrote his own *zaum*, following the principles of the new futurist poetry as outlined by Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh in "The Word as Such", among other sources. Jakobson's first partial divergence from the general line of reasoning appears to have been his dissatisfaction with their next manifesto, equally of 1913, entitled "The Letter as Such", with its focus on the poetic, expressive qualities of the grapheme. In the futurists' production of artistic books, this stress on the visual qualities of the grapheme allows word and image to merge.

[38] While the accuracy of Jakobson's claim to have inspired "The Letter as Such" is debatable, his disagreement points to one of the major tenets of his later work as a linguist: the primacy of speech over writing, and the central importance of the phoneme. In reply to this declaration he therefore wrote his own, entitled "The Phoneme as Such".

[75] Crone and Moos, *Kazimir Malevich*, 107-110.

[39]   From his focus on the phoneme, it follows that Roman Jakobson provides a very different answer to the question of why poetry and painting seem to go together so well. For him, the answer lies neither in the immateriality of poetry (as Chapon suggests), nor in the importance of its visual appearance on the page (cf. Peyré). Rather, it lies in the sound symbolism or 'inner meaning' attached to the smallest elements of speech. These core elements of language can evoke form, colour, and texture – the basic matter of painting. For Jakobson, therefore, the connection between painting and poetry does lie in their shared visibility, but for poetry this is to be found on a deeper level than that of the grapheme, a level visible only to the mind's eye. In Jakobson's words, poetry and painting share "*ähnliche Grundelemente*"*.* His lost declarations on speech sounds 'as such' may have contained the bud of these ideas, which recur in many of his later writings; Jakobson repeatedly evokes structural and synaesthetic links between the systems of sound and colour.

[40]   It seems possible that Jakobson sought to teach his *avant-garde* friends, notably Malevich, Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh, the precedence of the phoneme over its written notation, and that he interpreted their stress on the latter as a lack of understanding. From a linguistic point of view, the primacy of oral over written language is indeed uncontestable. But the impression that Khlebnikov failed to distinguish between the superficial visuality of the written sign and the 'deep' visuality of the speech sound is false. Instead, Khlebnikov, who also assumed sound to have numerous synaesthetic links, aimed to pull the grapheme from a superficial to a 'deep' level, where it would be an icon of the sound's link with colour, meaning, movement, and form. That way, the grapheme would partake of the phoneme's link to visuality.

[41]   It seems, therefore, that both Jakobson's 'influence' and Khlebnikov's 'misunderstanding', which are more or less directly suggested in Jakobson's memoirs, must be reconsidered. Moreover, Jakobson's complete dismissal of the grapheme is now sometimes regarded as a blind spot in his theories, making them unsuited to analyse those Russian futurist book works which combine painting and poetry, the very means of expression he believed to be so fundamentally similar.