# Russian Formalism

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# A Synecdoche

The three metaphors of Russian Formalist theory, decisive as they were in their proponents' thinking, still do not account for perhaps the most fundamental Formalist conception: the notion of language as the material of poetry. "Insofar as the material of poetry is the word," Žirmunskij wrote, "the classification of verbal phenomena provided by linguistics should be the basis for a systematically constructed poetics. Because the artistic goal transforms each of these phenomena into a poetic device, every chapter of theoretical poetics should correspond to a chapter from the science of language."[1] Language thus generated a fourth Formalist model. But the trope underlying it was not a metaphor, as in the cases of the mechanistic, morphological, and systemic models. These posited a similarity between the literary work and a machine, organism, and hierarchical system, respectively, but the model described by Žirmunskij is a synecdoche, a *pars pro toto* relationship. It substitutes language—the material of verbal art—for art itself, and linguistics—the science of language—for literary studies.

The linguistic model, as this theoretical synecdoche might be termed, has its roots in the early Formalist preoccupation with

1. "Zadači poètiki," *Voprosy teorii literatury: Stat'i 1916–1926* (Leningrad, 1928), p. 39.

"poetic language." The importance of this notion for the entire Formalist enterprise cannot be overstated. Pavel Medvedev, a Marxist critic of the movement, quite correctly claimed that the "hypothesis of the distinctness of poetic language is the basis upon which the entire Russian Formalist method is built."[2] The Formalists themselves were aware of the privileged status of this concept. Indignant at the label of "Formalism" foisted upon them, these young literary scholars proudly presented themselves as students of poetic language and even as linguists. The names of their two original groups, the Society for the Study of Poetic Language and the Moscow Linguistic Circle, and the title of their first two collective publications, *Studies in the Theory of Poetic Language,* clearly indicate the image they strove to project at the inception of the movement.[3]

The acceptance of any concept among the whole Formalist membership was never a simple matter and "poetic language" was no exception. Because of the inherent heterogeneity of the movement and the fluidity of its concepts over time, the Formalists never reached a general definition of either poetic language or the linguistic frame of reference for its description. Moreover, as Formalist theorizing unfolded, the fortunes of the linguistic model in general and the notion of poetic language in particular fluctuated widely. OPOJAZ's initial infatuation with the two gave way to a sharp backlash in the early twenties. But just as the stock of the linguistic model was dipping in Petersburg, it was rising in Moscow. Obviously, the idea of a single theoretical synecdoche in Russian Formalism is an oversimplification. In fact, this fourth model encompasses several distinct theories, each of which treated literature as the art of language and used methods borrowed from linguistics. In the discussion that follows, I shall attempt to describe some of the most important currents among them.

2. *Formal'nyj metod v literaturovedenii: Kritičeskoe vvedenie v sociologičeskuju poèt-iku* (Leningrad, 1928), p. 111.
3. *Sborniki po teorii poètičeskogo jazyka* 1 (1916); 2 (1917) (both published in St. Petersburg).