
Shklovsky objects to the now widespread view, advanced in particular by a Russian critic and theorist named Alexander Notebnya in his Notes on the Theory of Language (1905), that art in general and literature in particular amounts to "special way of thinking and knowing" (5): to be precise, in this schema, art is tantamount to "thinking in images" (5), a cognitive process predicated on an "economy of mental effort" (5). For Potebnya and his successors, the purpose of "thinking by means of images" (6) is to "help channel various objects and activities into groups and to clarify the unknown by means of the known" (6). Potebnya contends that the "relationship of the image to what is being clarified is that: (a) the image is the fixed predicate of that which undergoes change. . . . (b) the image is far clearer and simpler than what it clarifies" (qtd. in Shklovsky, 6). The "purpose of imagery is to remind us, by approximation, of those meanings for which the image stands" (qtd. in Shklovsky, 6). Equating the claim that "art is thinking in images" (7) with the "making of symbols" (7), Shklovsky attributes this model of art and literature to the Symbolists and argues that it survived their demise long after their heyday during the late nineteenth century.

Shklovsky contends that this conception of art and literature has given rise to the view that the "history of 'imagistic art'" (7) is tantamount to a "history of changes in imagery" (7). The problem with this view, however, is that images change little; from century to century, from nation to nation, from poet to poet, they flow on without changing. Images belong to no one: they are 'the Lord’s.’ The more you understand an age, the more convinced you become that the images a given poet used and which thought his own were taken almost unchanged from another poet. The works of poets are classified or grouped according to the new techniques that poets discover and share, and according to their arrangement and development of the resources of language; poets are much more concerned with arranging images than with creating them. Images are given to poets; the ability to remember them is far more important than the ability to create them. (7)

Shklovsky believes, in short, that images are almost always inherited from previous poets and that poets are more concerned consequently with rearranging them to different effect rather than creating entirely new ones.

For Shklovsky, Potebnya’s view that "poetry equals imagery" (8) gave rise to the view that "imagery equals symbolism" (8) but fails to "distinguish between the language of poetry and the language of prose" (8). Potebnya "ignored the fact that there are two aspects of imagery: imagery as a practical means of thinking, as a means of placing objects within categories; and imagery as poetic, as a means of reinforcing an impression" (8). "Poetic imagery is a means of creating the strongest possible impression" (8) and is "neither more nor less effective than other poetic techniques” (8) such as "ordinary or negative parallelism, comparison, repetition, balanced structure, hyperbole, the commonly accepted rhetorical figures, and all those methods which emphasise the emotional effect of an expression” (8-9). Poetic imagery is "but one of the devices of poetic language” (9), Shklovsky points out. By contrast, prose imagery (e.g. comparing a ball to a watermelon) is only an "abstraction of one of the object's characteristics” (9), in this case, of “roundness” (9).

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techniques” (8) designed to make it as "obviously artistic as possible” (8).

Shklovsky contends that the "law of the economy of creative effort is also generally accepted” (9) by thinkers like the nineteenth century English philosopher Herbert Spencer (in his The Philosophy of Style) and Richard Avenarius, to wit, that a “satisfactory style is precisely that style which delivers the greatest amount of thought in the fewest words” (10). However, while these notions are arguably applicable to the “laws of practical language” (10), they do not apply to the “laws of poetic language” (10). This, Shklovsky believes, is borne out by “one of the first examples of scientific criticism” (11) in which a critic called leo Jakubinsky showed “inductively the contrast . . . between the laws of poetic language and the laws of practical language” (11). Shklovsky’s argument is that one must “speak about the laws of expenditure and economy in poetic language not on the basis of an analogy with prose, but on the basis of the laws of poetic language” (11).

When one examines the “general laws of perception” (11), one realises that “as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic” (11). “Such habituation explains the principles by which, in ordinary speech, we leave phrases unfinished and words half expressed. In this process, ideally realised in algebra, things are replaced by symbols” (11). “Complete words are not expressed in rapid speech; their initial sounds are barely perceived” (11); this

characteristic of thought not only suggests the method of algebra, but even prompts the choice of symbols (letters, especially initial letters). By this 'algebraic' method of thought we apprehend objects only as shapes with imprecise extensions; we do not see them in their entirety but rather recognise them by their main characteristics. We see the object as though it were enveloped in a sack. We know what it is by its configuration, but we see only its silhouette. The object, perceived thus in the manner of prose perception, fades and does not leave even a first impression; ultimately, even the essence of what was is forgotten. Such perception explains why we fail to hear the prose word in its entirety . . . and, hence, why (along with other slips of the tongue we fail to pronounce it. The process of 'algebrisation,' the over-automatisation of an object, permits the greatest economy of perceptive effort. Either objects are assigned only one proper feature – a number, for example, or else they function as though by formula and do not even appear in cognition. (11-12)

This automatisation of perception must be zealously guarded against, otherwise life is reckoned as nothing. Habitualisation devours work, clothes, furniture, one's wife and the fear of war. . . . [A]rt exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony . . . to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known . . . to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the length and difficulty of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important. (12)

Shklovsky's point is that after "we see an object several times, we begin to recognise it. The object is in front of us and we know about it, but we do not see it” (13). Art "removes objects from the automatism of perception in several ways" (13). Tolstoy, for example, "makes the familiar seem strange by not naming the familiar object" (13) but by describing an "object as if he were seeing it for the first time, an event as if it were happening for the first time. In describing something he avoids the accepted names of its parts and instead names corresponding parts of other objects” (13), or describes something from an unusual point of view (e.g. that of a horse). Whatever the precise
strategy used (e.g. describing in his later works the “dogmas and rituals he attacked as if they were unfamiliar, substituting everyday meanings for the customarily religious meanings of the words common in church ritual” [16]), Tolstoy “uses this technique of ‘defamiliarisation’ [ostranenie] constantly” (13). Shklovsky provides several examples of Tolstoy’s and others’ “method of seeing things out of their normal context” (17), not least sexual experiences, over pp. 12-21.

Defamiliarisation, Shklovsky argues, is accordingly the basic principle of artistic "form" (18). It is “found almost everywhere form is found” (18). An image, he contends, is not a permanent referent for those mutable complexities of life which are revealed through it; its purpose is not to make us perceive meaning, but to create a special perception of the object – it creates a ‘vision’ of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it. (18)

Defamiliarisation is the artistic trademark – that is, we find material obviously created to remove the automatism of perception; the author’s purpose is to create the vision which results from that deautomatised perception. A work is created ‘artistically’ so that its perception is impeded and the greatest possible effect is produced the slowness of perception. As a result of this lingering, the object is perceived not in its extension in space, but, so to speak, in its continuity. Thus, ‘poetic language’ gives satisfaction. (22)

The “language of poetry is, then, a difficult, roughened, impeded language “ (22) designed to prolong the act of perception by contrast to the smoothness of prose which is designed to facilitate comprehension. One can accordingly “define poetry as attenuated, tortuous speech. Poetic speech is formed speech. Prose is ordinary speech – economical, easy, proper” (23).

Having spent the bulk of the essay focusing on the paradigmatic axis of poetry (i.e. the discussion of images), Shklovsky concludes by turning his attention to the syntagmatic axis of poetry. To this end, he considers whether a poem’s rhythm would undermine the distinction between prose and poetry which he has drawn to this point. He admits that the use of rhythms in ordinary language (e.g. the songs which workers sing while they work or soldiers when they march) can make tasks easier to perform. However, he maintains, this is not the case with poetry: there is “order” in art, yet not a single column of a Greek temple stands exactly in its proper order; poetic rhythm is a similarly disordered rhythm” (24), notwithstanding attempts to “systematise the irregularities” (24). There is a disorder to poetry, a “disordering that cannot be predicted” (24). Saying that he intends to write a book on the question of rhythm, Shklovsky curtails his discussion at this point.