



About re-learning ideas I once learned from Roman Jakobson

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Classical Inquiries

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About re-learning ideas I once learned from Roman Jakobson

February 9, 2017 By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy

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2017.02.09 | By Gregory Nagy

Thinking back on the idea of markedness theory as first learned from Roman Jakobson in the early 1960s.

[\[Essay continues here...\]](#)



As the chariot of the Sun ascends in the middle, Dawn and Night ride away in their chariots to either side, Dawn to the right of the viewer and Night to the left. Archaic black-figure, white-ground vase, ca. 500 BCE, attributed to the Sappho Painter. [Image](#) via the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The debt owed by old students to their still older teachers who are by now long gone can become a mystical kind of thing. That is what I sense as I now think back on ideas I first learned from Roman Jakobson in the early 1960s. Today I still use many of the same ideas in projects having to do with my research or with my teaching or with both—or even in casual conversation. And I often find myself wondering: are these ideas, as I remember them, really the same as they once had been? If they were really the same, how come I feel I need to re-learn each of these ideas each time I try to use them again? In this essay, I focus on one such idea, which can be summed up in two words that seem at first rather forbidding when you first see them combined with each other: these two words are markedness theory. For me the idea behind the theory comes alive every time I try to use it, and it comes to life precisely because I keep on having to re-learn it.

Markedness theory is the fourth of four ideas I had in mind when I spoke in the first paragraph about ideas I first learned from Jakobson. Just for the record, here are all four of the ideas:

1. the idea of shifters in language
2. the idea of a horizontal axis of combination and a vertical axis of selection in language
3. the idea of a Sprachbund—a linguistic contract, as it were—between languages that happen to be in contact with each other

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4. the idea of a marked member as opposed to an unmarked member in any pair of oppositions that exist in language as a system (see in general Waugh 1982)

Just for the record, in the Bibliography for this essay, I list under the name of Jakobson a selection of publications where he addresses these four ideas. The selections are minimal, confined to those of his published works that make it relatively easier for me to remind myself how exactly he once expressed himself in live encounters with his students.

Also just for the record, I now list here some examples where I applied these four ideas, correlating the applications with published work of mine as listed in the Bibliography for this essay:

1. I applied the idea of shifters in studying the grammatical use of the first/second/third persons in pronouns and verbs, with reference to the use of masks in ancient Greek theater. [H24H 21§§19-29](#)
2. I applied the idea of a horizontal axis of combination and a vertical axis of selection in studying the mechanical process of pattern-weaving on a single-beam warp-weighted vertical loom. [MoM 0§04](#), in correlation with [MoM 2§§41-45](#)
3. I applied the idea of Sprachbund in studying the interactions between the East Greek song cultures of Aeolian "lyric" as represented by the songmaking of Sappho and of Ionian "epic" as represented by the Homeric poetry of the Iliad and Odyssey. [Nagy 2016.10.08](#)
4. I applied the idea of a marked member as opposed to an unmarked member in studying the etymology of the name Zeus, designating the god of the bright sky. Nagy [2016.05.05](#); also Nagy [2016.05.12](#)

I epitomize here what I said about the fourth application in the two publications I have just cited. I concentrated on a basic theological view of Zeus as god of the sky. The Greek form Zeus is derived from an Indo-European noun that linguists reconstruct as *dyeu-, which meant 'sky' in general and 'bright sky' in particular. This meaning, as I argued, indicates that the brightness of the daytime sky is being foregrounded while the darkness of night is kept in the background. By way of wishful thinking, the unmarked or "default" meaning of the root *dyeu- refers only to the bright sky in the light of day, not to the dark sky in the dead of night. This idea of 'bright sky' can be seen clearly in a Latin derivative of the Indo-European form *dyeu-, which is the noun diēs, meaning 'day'.

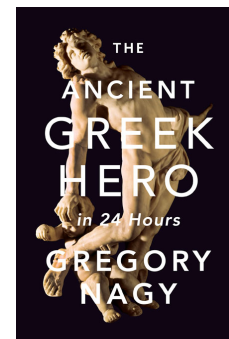
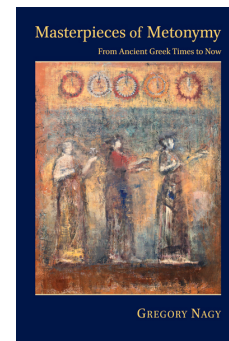
By way of further wishful thinking, as I also argued, the unmarked meaning of the Indo-European noun *dyeu- refers to good weather as signaled by bright skies, while the marked meaning refers to bad weather as signaled by rain either with or without thunder and lightning. That is why, as I noted in the posting for 2016.05.05, the Russian word for 'rain', *dožd'*, derives from *dus-dyu-, which means basically 'bad sky'. Although good things can be expected to happen when Zeus shines as a personified god, there can be bad things happening when the same personified god decides to darken the skies, gathering his clouds to make rain either with or without thunder and lightning. At such moments, Zeus is the *nephelēgereta* or 'cloud-gatherer' (Iliad 1.511, etc.). In the theology of Greek mythmaking, as I went on to argue by way of markedness theory, the 'badness' of Zeus is bad only for those who are unrighteous and are therefore struck down by the personalized god of rainstorms—while the same personalized divine action is good for the righteous, since the god is striking down only those who are supposedly unrighteous. And this divine action of Zeus is good also in a less personalized and more naturalistic way, since the rain that the god makes will sustain the livelihood of mortals by giving them water.

In terms of markedness theory, then, the idea of 'bad sky' is the marked member of an opposition, whereas 'sky' is the unmarked member. While the idea of 'bad sky' is in some ways negative—as when it harms the unrighteous—and in other ways positive—as when it helps the righteous—the idea of 'sky' as expressed by *dyeu- is in and of itself neither negative nor positive but simply neutral. As the unmarked member of an opposition, 'sky' can be a bright sky when its opposite is 'bad sky', but it can be either a bright sky or a dark sky if there is no opposition. To say it another way, the unmarked meaning can include the marked meaning if there is no opposition.

To make more clear what I meant, I turned to an easier example in my posting for 2016.05.12. Again I epitomize. Let us take the opposition of unmarked 'day' and marked 'night'. When this opposition is absent, the idea of 'day' can include the idea of 'night', as when I say 'I worked on this problem for seven days'. What I just said can mean that I worked on this problem for seven days and seven nights. But when I say 'I worked on this problem for seven nights', then I am excluding the days from the week and including only the nights. As we see here most clearly, the idea of 'day' as the unmarked member of the opposition can include the idea of 'night' when there is no opposition, whereas the idea of 'night' as the marked member of the opposition excludes the idea of 'day' when the opposition is in effect. Similarly in the case of the opposition between unmarked 'sky' and marked 'bad sky': the idea of 'sky' as the unmarked member of the opposition can include the idea of 'bad sky' when there is no opposition, whereas the idea of 'bad sky' as the marked member of the opposition excludes the idea of 'bright sky' when the opposition is in effect.

In sum, as I argue more fully in PH 5-8 = [0§§12-14](#), the unmarked category is the general category, which can include the marked category, whereas the reverse situation cannot hold (see also HQ 120 with reference to Martin 1989:29). On the surface, then, the opposition between marked and unmarked categories seems to contradict what philosophers call the "principle" or "law" of noncontradiction, as formulated by Aristotle (Metaphysics 4.3 1005b19-20; 4.3 1005b24; 4.6 1011b13-20) according to which the two propositions "A is B" and "A is not B" are mutually exclusive.

I bring this brief essay to a close with a most instructive example of marked and unmarked members of an opposition. Here is my formulation, quoted from PH 8:



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The descriptive term oral in oral poetry has come to have an overly narrow meaning, restricted by our own cultural preconceptions about writing and reading. We feel the need to define oral in terms of written: if something is oral, we tend to assume a conflict with the notion of written. From the general standpoint of social anthropology, however, it is written that has to be defined in terms of oral. Written is not something that is not oral, rather it is something in addition to being oral, and that additional something varies from society to society. It is dangerous to universalize the phenomenon of literacy. To restate the problem in terms of the distinction between marked and unmarked: if we juxtapose oral and written, it is written that functions as the marked member of the opposition, while oral is unmarked. The definition of written is predicated on the given of oral.

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This formulation, as I just quoted it, is cited (with approval) by Lord 1995:105n26. I followed up with this further formulation in my essay "Orality and Literacy" (Nagy 2001:535):

[T]he only universal distinction between oral and literary traditions is the historical anteriority of the first to the second. Beyond this obvious observation, it is pointless to insist on any universalizing definitions for the "oral" of "oral tradition." "Oral tradition" and "oral poetry" are terms that depend on the concepts of "written tradition" and "written poetry." In cultures that do not depend on the technology of writing, the concept of orality is meaningless ([see again] Lord 1995:105n26).

In terms of markedness theory, then, we need to reconsider what it would really mean to say that the written and the oral "are as different as night and day."

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