

A Century in Retrospect: Several Theoretical Problems of Russian Formalism From a Paradigm Perspective

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Abstract

The study of Russian Formalism from a paradigm perspective has an integrative methodological value compared with traditional approaches. From the three different levels (philosophy, knowledge and operation) inherent to the paradigm perspective, this paper reexamines several theoretical problems that were previously thought to be settled: the theoretical construction of Russian Formalism, its development and its theoretical foundation. It shows that the Russian Formalistic paradigm is not only a literary phenomenon, but also relates to the fields of linguistics and philosophy, and at the knowledge level consists of the three schools of Formalistic Literature, Formalistic Linguistics and Formalistic Functionalism. The paper also points out that the lifespan of the paradigm from beginning to decline was longer than the ten years generally believed by scholars. Finally, the paradigm's theoretical foundation does not originate from Husserl's phenomenology or the literary schools related to it, as previously assumed, but from the linguistic methodologies of historical comparativism and structuralism, as well as the common aesthetic theory within philosophy.

Keywords: Russian Formalism, scientific paradigm, theoretical construction, development stage, theoretical foundation

1. Introduction

Russian semiotics research has developed considerably since the establishment of the Moscow Linguistic Group (Московский лингвистический кружок, МЛК) in 1915 and the Society for the Study of Poetic Language (Общество по изучению поэтического языка, ОПОЯЗ) in Petrograd in 1916.¹

It is commonly recognized that the original research paradigm in the history of Russian semiotics is Russian Formalism (Русский формализм).² On the one hand, its formation marks the birth of Russian literary and linguistic semiotics; on the other, it also influenced the development of semiotics throughout the world: it had considerable impact on the formation and development of the Prague School (Пражская лингвистическая школа), Czech Structuralism (Чешский структурализм), French Structuralism (Французский структурализм), Anglo-American New Criticism (Новая критика в Англии и Америке), post-structuralism (постструктурализм) and others.

Over the past century, a large collection of works has been published on Russian Formalism in both Russia and China. Today, the movement is still the subject of increasing discussion, and will remain so for a long time to come. The most notable feature of this discussion is the way in which the focus of Russian Formalism has expanded from the field of literature to other humanities and social science disciplines, including semiotics, linguistics, culturology, and literary historiography. In other words, what was formerly the study of pure literary theory has begun to move towards a new stage of multidisciplinary and multi-perspective integration.

A paradigm can be defined as “a replacement of one dominant method system to raise and solve problems by another in a certain period of scientific research” (Прохоров, 1983, p. 669) or “a methodology of scientific research and knowledge aggregation building on philosophy proposed by some scholars in a certain historical period” (Березин, 2000, p. 10). This suggests that, in order to reexamine the Russian Formalist approach from a paradigm perspective, three problems need to be clarified: the relationship between method and paradigm; the representation of paradigm in knowledge fields; and the theoretical significance of the paradigm perspective.

Firstly, the term “method” is polysemous. Chinese scholar Xu Shenghuan argues that linguistic research methods comprise three different levels: specific methods, steps, or procedures of more concrete and even interconnected linguistic branches or specific language levels; the summarization of general methods in linguistic studies; and the abstraction of some approaches to the more general category and the principle of linguistic methodology from the viewpoint of philosophy and thinking science according to the characteristics of language (Xu, 2003, pp. 13-15). Consequently, from a paradigm perspective, the concept of “method” in the broad sense contains at least three meanings: the methodology (методология) at the level of philosophy, that is, the philosophical foundation, equivalent to a certain ism; the method (метод) of working and the totality of procedures at the level of knowledge, that is, the cognitive approach, equivalent to a

certain school; and the specific research method (методика) adopted at the operational level to implement an approach, that is, the procedure, equivalent to a theory or doctrine. Theoretically speaking, only a combination of all three points can constitute a paradigm in a scientific field. In short, a method is a paradigm.

Secondly, it must be admitted that the paradigms of different scientific fields are different at a given historical stage. For example, scholars generally believe that there have been four basic paradigms in the field of linguistics so far—the historical-comparative paradigm (сравнительно-историческая парадигма), the structural-systemic paradigm (системно-структурная парадигма), the social paradigm (социальная парадигма) and the anthropocentric paradigm (антропоцентрическая парадигма)—but this does not mean that other fields of science have developed in the same way. Zhao’s study (2016) shows that in the past century the paradigm of Russian semiotics has experienced eight linguistic paradigms, namely formalism (формализм), structural-systemism (системно-структурализм), structural-functionalism (функционально-структурализм), post-structuralism (постструктурализм), functionalism (функционализм), communicatism (коммуникатизм), semantic-centrism (семантикоцентризм) and cognitionism (когнитивизм). The main reason for this is probably that semantics has a broader scope than linguistics.

Thirdly, the most important feature of paradigm perspective study is its integration, which combines diachrony and synchrony in a complete perspective integrating “time nodes” and “semantics” together: the former relates to “the form of history”, or diachrony, while the latter reveals “the meaning of history”, or synchrony.

The methodological significance of this article therefore lies in its reexamination of Russian Formalism from a paradigm perspective. To a certain extent, it challenges the scholarly consensus on its formation, development and theoretical foundation so as to discover a new cognitive model and interpretation process.

2. The Theoretical Construction of the Russian Formalistic Paradigm

It is not difficult to see that Russian Formalism as a “paradigm” is different from its use as a “term”. As a term, it usually refers to a theoretical style or critical trend prevailing in the early 20th century; as a paradigm, it refers to the sum of formalistic research methods and a knowledge system developed in the same period. Obviously, the former has a singular connotation, referring specifically to the literary theories related to Formalism representatively held by the “revolutionary troika” (революционная тройка) of Shklovsky (В. Б. Шкловский), Тунуанов (Ю. Н. Тынянов) and Eikhenbaum (Б. М. Эйхенбаум);³ while the latter is integrative, generally refers to all theoretical thinking and doctrines focusing on language expression and regards it as an independent research object in the study of the humanities and social sciences (mainly literature and linguistics).

Studies have shown that Russian Formalism as a paradigm is not only limited to a school of literary theories as previously assumed, but also encompasses the schools of

formalistic linguistics and structural-functionalism.

2.1 The formalistic literary school (формально-литературоведческое направление)

From the composition of its membership, this school was composed mainly of people from the Petersburg Society of Poetry and Language Studies and the Moscow Linguistic Group, as well as a number of other young scholars who did not belong to any academic group or organization. Judging by its research output, the school concentrated primarily on research in two major fields: formalistic literary theory and theories of prose, drama and music. The representatives of the former and their main theoretical doctrines are: Shklovsky's "defamiliarization"; Tynyanov's "systemization of literary theories"; Eikhenbaum's "formalistic methodology"; Tomaszewski's (Б. В. Томашевский) "systematic poetics"; Zhirmunsky's (В. М. Жирмунский) "methods of poetry formalization"; Gumilev's (Н. С. Гумилёв) "holistic poetics"; Engelgardt's (Б. А. Энгельгардт) "formalistic methods of literary history"; Bric's (О. М. Брик) "poetic phonetics"; Schmitt's (Ф. И. Шмит) "artistic development model"; and Argo's (Б. И. Ярхо) "text structure". The main scholars of the latter, along with their theories, are: Zamyatki's (Е. И. Замякин) "artistic prose skills"; Meyerhold's (В. Э. Мейерхольд) "drama semiotics"; Kugel's (А. Р. Кугель) "dramatic criticism"; Linzbach's (Я. И. Линцбах) "visual symbol"; Evreinov's (Н. Н. Евреинов) "dramatization"; Mandelshtam's (О. Э. Мандельштам) "dialogue"; and Asafiev's (Б. В. Асафьев) "music form" theory (e.g. Почепцов, 2001; Fang, 1989; Todorov, 1989; Mintz & Chernov, 2005).

It should be said that the literary school was not only the main battlefield of Russian Formalism, but its doctrines also became the main theme of the movement. The core theories of "defamiliarization" and "literariness" put forward by the representatives of this school became the ideological banner of Russian Formalism at the philosophical level, influencing the academic development of the other two schools.

2.2 The formalistic linguistic school (формально-лингвистическое направление)

Based on the research of its representatives, this school can be divided into several sub-fields: poetic language research, rhetorical research and language structure research.

As the representatives of poetic language research, Jakobson (Р. О. Якобсон) and Vinokur (Г. О. Винокур) devised the concepts of "poetic language structure" and "scientific poetics". Vinogradov (В. В. Виноградов) and Eisenstein (С. М. Эйзенштейн)⁴ represent rhetorical research; their theories of "stylistics" and "visual rhetoric" have had considerable influence in academic circles. In the study of language structure, theories such as "dialogue speech", as proposed by Yakubinsky (Л. П. Якубинский) of the St. Petersburg Language School (Петербургская школа в языкознании), "formal syntax", developed by Peterson (М. Н. Петерсон), Chairman of the Moscow Linguistic Group (1920), and Shpet's (Г. Г. Шпет) "internal form of the word", among others, have a certain degree of representativeness.

It should be noted that this school is consistent with the formalistic literary school in methodology, but the two differ in their perspectives: scholars of this school approached literary works from the perspective of language form and structure, exemplifying the formalistic linguistic methods. Thus, the Formalistic linguistic school is an indispensable part of the Russian Formalistic paradigm.

2.3 The formalistic functionalism school (формально-функциональное направление)

The best-known scholars of this school are Wolkenstein (В. Волькенштейн) and Propp (В. Я. Пропп). Based on the perspective of formal functionalism, their theories of “structural art” and “fairy tale morphology” have special academic value for the theoretical construction of Russian Formalism (Почепцов, 2001, p. 483). In particular, several of Propp’s theories are known as models of formal functionalism, and subsequently had a great impact on the formation of the “cultural cognitive paradigm” (когнитивно-культурологическая парадигма) in Russian semiotics studies (Zhao, 2012, pp. 72-73).⁵ Lotman (Ю. М. Лотман), the master of Russian semiotics, once equated Propp’s achievements with those of contemporary Russian thinker and philosopher Bakhtin (М. М. Бахтин). In Lotman’s opinion, Propp’s theories were able to cause widespread concern among Russian semiotics scholars in the late 1950s, because they served as a link between theories. In Lotman’s words, “The inheritance and expansion of semiotics should be attributed to Russian formalistic heritage and the study of Propp and Bakhtin” (Лотман, 1996, p. 7).

The results of all the above studies suggest that the Russian formalistic paradigm comprising these three academic schools applied not only in the field of literature, but also in other fields, such as linguistics and even philosophy (including linguistic philosophy and philosophical aesthetics, among others). This is our latest conclusion based on paradigm theory.

According to paradigm theory, we can explain the above three academic schools as follows: (1) at the philosophical level, they follow the consistent methodologies that belong to formalism: as an international trend or ideological movement, formalism in essence has the nature of a philosophical epistemology; and Russian Formalism, as the birthplace of international structuralism, actually aims to replace the subjective aesthetic principle of symbolism with objective scientific methods, and therefore represents a philosophical and methodological revolution in Russian humanities and social sciences (mainly literary studies and linguistics) in a certain period of time; (2) at the knowledge level, the three schools study almost the same object, all concentrating on the form of literary works (especially poetic language), but from the very beginning adopted different methods or perspectives. As a result, three schools were formed with different knowledge orientations, namely artistic techniques, language materials (structure) and language functioning; (3) at the operational level, the different knowledge orientations of the three schools determined their specific research methods, and therefore the different theories and doctrines that they have produced. Thus, it is the paradigm theory that provides us

with a new perspective for examining Russian Formalism.

3. The Development Stage of the Russian Formalistic Paradigm

The Russian Formalistic paradigm represents not only an important academic group, but also a dramatic cultural movement in the field of literature and linguistics. It is therefore necessary to examine its development in order to identify the key stages in the evolution of this paradigm.

There seems to have been a large degree of scholarly consensus on the chronology of the development of Russian Formalism. For example, Efremov's *Culturology in the 20th Century: Encyclopedia (Культурология. XX век. Энциклопедия.)*, published in 1998, defines it as a literary school active from the 1910s to the 1920s, the organizations of which existed from 1916 to 1925.⁶ In another book, *Formalistic Methods in Literature (Формальный метод в литературоведении)*, published by Bakhtin in 1928, it is divided into two stages, the first lasting from 1915 to 1919, and the second from 1920 to 1921 (Бахтин, 1928, pp. 4-8). However, our research shows that Russian Formalism as a paradigm in fact experienced three different stages of development—the periods of establishment, prosperity and decline—which took place over an extended span of time, continuing for more than 20 years (that is, from 1914 to 1936), rather than under 10 years, as researchers previously concluded.

3.1 Establishment—The philological method period (1914 – 1919)

This stage was bookended by two articles by Shklovsky, the standard-bearer of the Russian Formalistic paradigm: *The Revival of the Word (Воскрешение слова)*, published in 1914; and *Art as Technique (Искусство как приём)*, published in 1919, the work that introduced the famous theory of “defamiliarization” (остранение).

The basic principles of Formalism were initially explained and demonstrated by Shklovsky in *The Revival of the Word*, including: (1) the word is constantly evolving and changing. Shklovsky argues that the word has vitality when it has just been generated, but will gradually “petrify” (окаменение) over time, losing its original freshness and image. Therefore, it is necessary to use a variety of methods to “revive” the word, including breaking it up, deforming it, creating a new word, or replacing a masculine word with a feminine one. In this way, the word will remain novel and perceptible; (2) the perception of art is mainly the perception of its form. He suggests that the word can reduce the burden of thinking after losing its form, but it does not meet the requirements of art; (3) poetic language is a special language. In his view, the language of poetry is not a kind of “intelligible language” (язык понятный), but a “half-intelligible language” (язык полупонятный), such as that used in Church Slavonic or Latin religious poetry. Therefore, it is necessary to create a “new, visually uncomfortable language” (новый и тугой на видение язык); (4) the revival of the word creates new life. He believes that the revival of the word does not mean a return to the state of “life before death”

(досмертная жизнь), but the beginning of a new, different life (e.g. Шкловский, 1914). As shown above, Shklovsky's central idea in this pamphlet is that the form of the word is of prime importance for art (poetry). As a result, the so-called "revival of the word" in fact entails giving everyday language a new form corresponding to these artistic characteristics.

In *Art as Technique*, Shklovsky put forward the theory of "defamiliarization" as one of the core theories of the Russian Formalistic literary school. From the perspective of semiotics, the "defamiliarization" theory has important ideological value at least in the following respects: (1) art (in this case poetry) is not an imitation of external things, but has its own laws. Therefore, literary study should not only focus on the figurativeness that was so highly regarded by the psychological school,⁷ but also pay attention to its internal form or structure; (2) "defamiliarization" is the aesthetic essence of literary works, and also satisfies the aesthetic need for freshness or peculiarity. Based on the elimination of "automation" (автоматизация), the concept is aimed at increasing the difficulty of perceiving art and prolonging its appreciation; (3) the "defamiliarization" approach refers mainly to novelty and peculiarity in the form of language expression rather than in its material, plot or structure; (4) the so-called "defamiliarized" form of language expression, in essence, is a deformed, distorted or difficult-to-understand language. In other words, the language of literature is essentially a "defamiliarized" language. The greatest difference between this language and everyday language is that the former usually has only a "signans" system, such as voice or lexical permutations, but no "designatum" semantic system (e.g. Шкловский, 1919).

It is therefore clear that during this period, young scholars such as Shklovsky, Eikhenbaum and Jakobson developed new theoretical constructions and a methodological exploration of formalistic literature, hence not only putting forward a series of new ideas and views, but also establishing the term system corresponding to Formalism. From the perspective of semiotics, however, the main task of Russian Formalism in this period was to establish a new paradigm of literary and linguistic research, that is, to dispense with the traditional "eclectic academism" (эkleктический академизм) and "symbolist impressionism" (символистский импрессионизм) and research literary works using a new "philological method" (филологический метод).⁸ In order to achieve this, formalists used the method of exaggeration and unconventionalization, seeking to overcome and transcend the limitations of "naive formalism" (наивный формализм) inherent in symbolism to accomplish the aim of depoliticization and pure formalization (that is, to abandon the analysis of ideological content) of literary studies. However, it is evident from its methodology that Russian Formalism in this period did not completely transcend the boundaries of Futurism (футуризм) and historical comparativism (сравнительно-историзм), and its understanding of literary forms retained a certain characteristic of singleness. The construction of the Russian Formalistic paradigm focused mainly on the phonetic aspects of poetry, which was not consistent with the argument that the study of poetry cannot be diverted from the general direction of linguistics, as was later insisted by

the Moscow Linguistic Group and the Prague School.

3.2 Prosperity—The linguistics method period (1920 – 1929)

This period began in 1920 when the “revolutionary troika” became the actual leaders of the Society for the Study of Poetic Language, and ended some time before 1930, when Russian Formalism was first systematically criticized.

Russian Formalism began to undergo some significant qualitative changes since the early 1920s, particularly concerning the following three aspects: (1) the membership of the Society for the Study of Poetic Language and the direction of its academic research. It is well known that in 1918 and 1919, Eikhenbaum and Tynyanov were recruited as full members of the Society for the Study of Poetic Language. Their participation greatly enhanced the “combat effectiveness” of the Society, expanding its leadership from Shklovsky and Jakobson alone to all four scholars; after 1920, when Jakobson moved from Russia to Prague, the camp led by the “revolutionary troika” was formed. However, as Eikhenbaum and Tynyanov’s academic perspectives were closer to the views of the Moscow Linguistic Group, in particular to those of Jakobson and Vinokur (Г. О. Винокур), the research direction of the Society shifted from philology to linguistics. More importantly, in 1921 a long essay by Zhirmunsky (В. М. Жирмунский) entitled *The Construction of Lyric Poetry (Композиция лирических стихотворений)*, published in *Collections on the Theory of Poetic Language*, re-iterated the argument that poetics should be classified as part of linguistics, as had originally been proposed in the article *The Task of Poetics (Задачи поэтики)* in 1919. This played a positive role in the academic turn away from the preoccupation with the phonetic study of poetry during the period of establishment (the philological direction, in other words) towards other areas of linguistics; (2) Jakobson’s proposition of the theory of “literariness”. In 1921, Jakobson published *New Russian Poetry, Sketch One: Approaches to Khlebnikov (Новейшая русская поэзия. набросок первый: Подступы к Хлебникову)*, in which the theory of “literariness” was presented for the first time (e.g. Якобсон, 1921, p. 8). This brought Shklovsky’s “defamiliarization” to the height of philosophical aesthetics, which marked the point at which Russian Formalism began to mature; (3) the study of poetic language was not confined to its phonetic aspects, but also considered poetic language as a complex unity composed of a variety of elements. During this period, Russian Formalists began to study the similar characteristics of poetic language and put forward many new ideas, such as “consonants gathering”, “tautology”, “parallelism of structure and plot units”, and so on, concluding that “experience has proved that the laws of literary works’ formation are identical” (Шкловский, 1926, p. 6). These three aspects constituted the main course of Russian Formalism’s development during this period.

In this situation, the Russian Formalistic paradigm experienced a veritable hurricane of activities, undergoing intense and flourishing development. Compared with the period of establishment, the scope of research produced in this period was more ambitious, its vision was wider and its content deeper. Many enlightening ideas and methods in the

period of establishment had matured over the previous 10 years. From an academic point of view, this period of Russian Formalism had three characteristics: (1) linguistic research had begun to occupy a predominant position, which provided fertile ground for the development of Russian semiotics (especially linguistic semiotics); (2) Formalist literature and linguistic theories were maturing, and many theories not only became valuable parts of the intellectual heritage of international formalism, but also laid the foundation for the development of Russian semiotics (especially linguistic semiotics, exemplified in the work of Jakobson) and structural-functionalism (in the work of the Prague school); (3) the study of pure literary forms began to combine with that of literary content or functional research. To a certain extent, this represented a new trend in the development of contemporary literary research.

3.3 Decline—The period of “repentance” (1930 – 1936)

This period began with Shklovsky’s publication of his “repentance” (раскаяния) in *Literary Newspaper* in 1930 and ended with his “self-condemnation” (самобичевания) published in *Literary Leningrad* in 1936.

Although after more than 10 years the Russian Formalistic paradigm had formed a relatively complete and unique theoretical system, and also had a significant and lasting impact on international semiotics, its golden age did not last long, and it soon entered the final development—the period of decline. What are the reasons which led Russian Formalism to fall so rapidly from “paradise” to “hell”? On this, scholars have expressed different views. The consensus, however, is that after the 1930s the ecological environment of the Russian Formalistic paradigm began to deteriorate sharply. This was manifested specifically in the following ways: (1) the movement suffered unprecedented pressure from the mainstream ideology of the Soviet Union. As we all know, from the late 1920s, the Russian humanities and social sciences were dominated by Marrism (марризм), also known as the “new linguistic theory” (Новое учение о языке) or Japhetic theory (яфетическая теория), propounded by Marr (Н. Я. Марр), vice-president of the USSR Academy of Sciences, a famous linguist and orientalist. The theory held that the historical comparative method in linguistic research was the product of idealism and a doctrine of the bourgeoisie, which must be rejected; language was an ideological phenomenon based on relations of production, and therefore had a class character. Obviously, Marrism branded language with ideology, which ran counter to the purpose of “defamiliarization” and the literary focus of the Russian Formalistic paradigm. It is therefore not surprising that Russian Formalism was overwhelmed by this mainstream ideology. Russian Formalism had in fact faced ideological criticisms for the first time in the late 1920s, with Shklovsky forced to publish a repentance entitled *Monument to a Scientific Error* (Памятник научной ошибке) on 27 January 1930. In the mid-1930s, the Soviet literary establishment launched its second massive offensive upon Formalism and “heretical aesthetics”. The official academy, represented by Gorky (М. Горький), Chairman of the Soviet Writers’ Association, carried out a thorough criticism

and liquidation of Formalism. In early 1936, *Pravda*, as the “mouthpiece” (глашатай) of mainstream ideology, published a series of articles—*Muddle instead of Music* (*Сумбур вместо музыки*), *Ballet False* (*Балетная фальшь*), *The Would-Be Artists* (*О художниках-пачкунах*)—and a comprehensive encirclement of Formalism was carried out in the fields of music, dance and painting. Against this background, Shklovsky was compelled to publish a self-criticism entitled *On Formalism* (*О формализме*) in the second issue of the magazine *Literary Leningrad*. In our view, this text can be regarded as a symbol of the retirement of Russian Formalism as a paradigm; (2) certain views and acts of “overcorrection” were criticized within academia. When establishing the Russian Formalistic paradigm, the Formalists had followed the Futurists, who, in the judgment of some scholars, were against “the historical trend”, placed too much emphasis on the importance and uniqueness of formal analysis of literary works, deliberately highlighted Objectivist methods, categorically denied the dialectical unity of form and content, strongly advocated eliminating the content and ideology from literary analysis, completely refuted the value of symbolism, and so on. This not only had a tremendous impact on the work of other schools, but also fragmented Russian literary and linguistic tradition to a certain extent. Given the abundance of different voices and perspectives in academic circles, this criticism from all sides remained relentless. For example, as early as 1922, there was an argument on the issue of Formalism between Zhirmunsky and Eikhenbaum. The focus of the debate was the question of whether the organic unity of form and content should be preserved, or whether formal one should be retained. In 1924, Formalism was criticized by the field of literary sociology: Lunacharsky (А. В. Луначарский), the former Soviet state activist, writer and critic, published *Formalism in the Science of Art* (*Формализм в науке о искусстве*) in the journal *Newspaper and Revolution* (*Печать и революция*), in which he made an incisive criticism on the Formalistic approach advocated by Eikhenbaum. In 1925 and 1927, Soviet academia witnessed two thematic debates focusing on “art and revolution” (искусство и революция) and the “Formalistic method” (формальный метод). In 1928 and 1934, Bakhtin (Medvedev) published *Formalism in Literature and Art* (*Формальный метод в литературоведении*) and *Formalism and Formalists* (*Формализм и формалисты*), which together made a comprehensive criticism of the basic ideas and views of Formalists; (3) the emerging structural-systemic paradigm had a “irreversible” impact on the Russian Formalistic paradigm. It is established that in the field of international linguistics, the 19th century was dominated by the historical comparative paradigm, whereas by the beginning of the 20th century, a new and revolutionary paradigm represented by Saussure, the structural-systemic paradigm, had begun to take shape. The direct impact of this paradigm on Russian Formalism had become especially pronounced by 1926, when the Prague Group (Пражский лингвистический кружок) was established. The new structural-systemic paradigm marked the birth of a new branch of linguistics, and its vigorous vitality not only gradually replaced the historical comparative paradigm that had lasted for more than a century, but also took the wind out of the sails of Russian Formalism. This can be

considered one of the main reasons why the Russian Formalistic paradigm was not able to continue. This is similar to the fate of Humboldt's "ethnic spirit" theory in the history of international linguistics. Its light should have illuminated the development of international linguistics for a long time, but was extinguished by the ferocious historical comparative paradigm.

It is the combination of the above-mentioned three factors related to the political, academic and international environments that led to the decline of the Russian Formalistic paradigm. During this period, or to be more specific, following Shklovsky's publication of his "repentance" in 1930, "repenting" or "going underground" became the watchwords of Russian Formalists. For example, Shklovsky, Brik (Р. М. Брик) and others were no longer engaged in literary research; Eikhenbaum, Tynyanov and other scholars began to study the history of literature or the field of social culture; and most of those originally engaged in Formalistic linguistics turned to other areas of linguistics, such as phonemes or grammar. However, despite the fact that there were few articles on Formalism in Russian domestic newspapers and magazines, a small number of works were still published—such as *On Artistic Prose (О художественной прозе)* (1930) and *The Language of Pushkin (Язык Пушкина)* (1935) by Vinogradov (В. В. Виноградов),⁹ and *Russian Dramaturgy. Essays in Theatrical Criticism (Русские драматурги. Очерки театрального критика)* (1933) by Kugel (А. Р. Кугель)—which focused on the Russian Formalistic perspectives and techniques. This indicates that the Formalistic paradigm was not completely eradicated after 1930. It is worth mentioning in particular that Jakobson, who had emigrated early, had not been influenced by the domestic political and academic upheavals, and remained committed to the study of Formalism (and later structuralism) in linguistics and literature, to some extent. This provided strong support for the continuation of Russian Formalism after the 1930s.

Finally, it is necessary to add that, since the mid-1930s, although Formalism as a paradigm has ceased to exist, Formalism as a method has not withdrawn from the stage of history and has continued. The movement has not only inspired the neoformalists (младоформалисты),¹⁰ led by Gukovsky (Г. А. Гуковский), Ginzburg (Л. Я. Гинзбург) and Buhstabs (Б. Я. Бухштаб), but has also been further developed through the Tartu-Moscow School's semiotics theory since the 1960s.

4. The Theoretical Foundation of the Russian Formalistic Paradigm

At present, there seems to be considerable consensus in academic circles on the causes of the emergence of the Russian Formalistic paradigm. It is generally believed that the formation of the Russian Formalistic paradigm was the result of external and internal factors: external factors such as Husserl's phenomenology (which emphasized the use of a positivist approach to examine all phenomena, and was opposed to all subjective and causal inferences) and the work of the German and French formalistic poetics (which focused on the autonomy of art and its inherent laws of development); and internal factors

such as the influence of symbolism (символизм), Acmeism (акмеизм) and Futurism in modernist literature. On this point, research literatures in both Russia and China seem to be in agreement, as evidenced in *Anthology on Russian Formalism*, translated by Fang Shan (1988) and Wang Weisheng (2005), as well as *The Technological Poetics of the Formal School* (Технологическая поэтика формальной школы) by Russian scholar Suhin (С. И. Сухин) (2001). But it is hard to agree with the above conclusion, for the following reasons: (1) this point of view confuses the two Russian Formalistic concepts of “theoretical reason” and the “theoretical foundation”: the former means that the formation of Russian Formalism drew nourishment or useful ingredients from previous theories, while the latter refers to the theoretical basis on which Russian Formalism was established; the former is a diachronic analysis of the movement’s theoretical evolution, while the latter is a synchronic interpretation of its methodology; (2) from a paradigm perspective, Russian Formalism is the originator of both literary semiotics and linguistic semiotics (Степанов, 2002, p. 441). For example, we can see from the research priorities of the above-mentioned three schools of the Russian Formalistic paradigm that they are not concerned with the forms of literary works, but their language (as well as the formalistic literature, in which “form” is highly regarded, apparently not referring to “poetic form”, but “poetic language”). Therefore, in our view, in order to discuss the theoretical foundation of the Russian Formalistic paradigm, we need not only to trace the source from one field of literature, but also to provide an explanation from the perspective of linguistics; we cannot only focus on the influence of particular schools or theories on the Russian Formalistic paradigm at the level of knowledge and operation, but should pay more attention to its philosophical aspects, that is, to the methodology peculiar to the paradigm. This is the perspective from which the theoretical foundation of the Russian Formalistic paradigm will be explored.

Based on the above two points, we believe that the theoretical foundation of the Russian Formalistic paradigm comes primarily from the two major methodologies of linguistics and common aesthetics.

4.1 The linguistic foundation—The historical comparative and structuralist approach

When examining the theoretical foundation of the Russian Formalistic paradigm, most scholars have paid attention only to the influence of the structuralist approach in linguistic research originating in the early 20th century, particularly Saussure’s theory of “langue” and “parole” (e.g. Fang, 1989, pp. 8-9; Wang, 2005, p. 3). However, this is an overly narrow view. Russian Formalism, devoted to the study of the forms and expressions of literary works (especially poetic language), is essentially concerned with the aesthetic pursuit only of language forms separately from language contents, particularly focusing on the description and analysis of the “verbal column” (словесный ряд) and the “phonetic column” (фонетический ряд). Therefore, the linguistic foundation only can be examined from relevant theoretical doctrine with the general linguistic nature. In our opinion, the historical comparative method in linguistic research is an indispensable theoretical source

for understanding both the historical origins of the Russian Formalistic paradigm and its academic core.

Historical comparativism in linguistic research originated in Europe in the late 18th century and was popular throughout the 19th century. The discipline focuses mainly on the laws of phonetic evolution of Indo-European languages; that is, it prioritizes diachronic research of language forms (including phonetics, phoneme and morphemes and similar areas). Taking the exploration of general commonalities between Indo-European languages as its starting point, the reconstruction of proto-languages (проязык) in each language branch from the same family as its goal, and positivism (позитивизм) as its methodology, it calls for the comprehensive investigation and description of the main language in a given language family so as to construct the first paradigm of linguistic research with a truly scientific nature in human history—the historical comparative paradigm. As a methodology, the paradigm includes a number of specific methods of comparison and operational mechanisms, such as: determining the genealogical attributes of different corpora; establishing a system of similarities and differences between languages at different linguistic levels; and patterning the forms of proto-languages (Нерознак, 2002, p. 485). These methods are based on the systematic description of the language form, with the result that the paradigm is of general significance to scientific research: it can be used not only for the study of Indo-European languages, but also for that of other languages; it applies not only to linguistics, but also to other fields in the humanities and social sciences. The Formalistic paradigm, which arose in the field of Russian literature and linguistics at the beginning of the 20th century, is undoubtedly based on the historical comparative approach, as is clear from the following: (1) the focus on form rather than content is not only common to historical comparativism and Formalism, but also the main basis for the theoretical construction and development of the latter; (2) the diachronic method for researching Indo-European proto-languages under the historical comparative paradigm is “more applicable to the studies on morphology and phonetics” (Звегинцев, 1962, p. 87), which are also the main areas of literary and linguistic research under the Russian Formalistic paradigm; (3) the description of poetic language under the Russian Formalistic paradigm is not only synchronic, but also involves the investigation of its etymology at the diachronic level, which is entirely compatible with the historical comparative approach. This shows that it is one-sided to regard the Russian Formalistic paradigm as a purely synchronic or static approach.

Of course, in addition to the historical comparative approach, the influence of modern Saussurean Structuralist Linguistics on the formation of the Russian Formalistic paradigm is self-evident. Structuralism regards language as an autonomous symbolic system, which not only defines two different attributes of “langue” and “parole”, but also differentiates between language form and content, between external and internal elements. More importantly, it replaces the diachronic methods of historical comparativism with synchronic analysis. All of these are important principles on which the Russian Formalistic paradigm relies. A number of ideas proposed by the Russian Formalists have

some similarity or consistency with structuralist methods, such as: literary works are autonomous; literary language is different from everyday speech; artistic content cannot be separated from its form; the analysis of internal structures on the level of literature is superior to that of external elements; synchronic research reflects the group consciousness and constitutes a logical system.

We can draw the conclusion that, from a paradigm perspective, its linguistic basis is one of the most important sources of the theoretical foundation of Russian Formalism: Russian Formalists learned and applied corresponding research methods from linguistic methodology in order to analyze the attributes and characteristics of literary language (especially poetic language). As Zhirmunsky said, the special part of theoretical poetics can correspond to every part of language science (Жирмунский, 1977, p. 28). However, historical comparativism and structuralism played different roles in laying the theoretical groundwork for the Russian Formalistic paradigm. In our view, from historical comparativism, the paradigm derived methodology mainly at the philosophical level, that is, positivism,¹¹ while structuralism mainly bequeathed concrete research methods or analytical techniques; it might be said that a breakthrough in the orientation of literary (poetic) and linguistic research came from the “binary opposition” inherent to structuralism.

4.2 The philosophical foundation—Common aesthetic theory

Russian Formalists repeatedly claimed that they would not set any philosophical or aesthetic prerequisites either in the construction of Formalistic theories or in their concrete analysis, but would follow an objective scientific attitude toward facts. For example, Eikhenbaum, one of the founders of the Russian Formalistic paradigm, once said, “The new enthusiasm for scientific positivism unique to Formalists lies in rejecting the prerequisites of philosophy and rejecting the interpretation of psychology and aesthetics” (Эйхенбаум, 1927, p. 120). But in fact, any new science is built on a particular philosophical basis, and the Russian Formalistic paradigm is no exception. Studies have shown that one of the foundations of the Russian Formalistic paradigm is derived from the theories of common aesthetics (общая эстетика) in terms of methodology.

A core concept underlying all literary research under the Russian Formalistic paradigm is that of “literariness”. This refers to the special composition or characteristic that can make a work literary, that is, the “artistry” or “aesthetics” of a literary work. What exactly is literariness? There are three different ways of examining this question. Firstly, literariness is the integral composition of a literary work, that is, all the elements in a literary work (both its constituent elements and the work as a whole) seem to have an aesthetic quality. For example, when we pose the question “what are the characteristics of the literary work as a whole?”, we in fact focus on the aesthetic value of this work. Secondly, literariness is not the integral composition of a literary work, and only some elements or characteristics of literary work are regarded as aesthetic. Alternatively, in the composition of a literary work, there are not only positive components, but also

aesthetically neutral, or even non-aesthetic components. In this case, the question we will raise is different from that in the first case, and should be “which elements of the literary work have aesthetic value (or “which have no aesthetic value)?”. The third perspective does not pay attention to the aesthetic elements of a literary work, but rather the aesthetic effect of the work. The corresponding question will be “what characteristics of the literary work (whether as a whole or as a component) have the ability to elicit aesthetic effects?”, or, “which characteristics can be understood as part of the literariness of the work?”¹² Obviously, the first two perspectives relate only to the subject or carrier (the aesthetic value is embodied in the whole or part of the literary work) of aesthetic characteristics, a topic of interest to “individual aesthetics” (частная эстетика) or theoretical research; only the third perspective is relevant to common aesthetics, because only from the general principles of common aesthetics can the answer be found. The Russian Formalistic paradigm adopts the third perspective; the core problem it focuses on is the aesthetic effect or characteristics of a literary work.

From the academic theory, the relevant ideas, put forward by the German philosopher Hamann, are much close to the common aesthetics theory—the philosophical foundation of Russian Formalistic paradigm. In his book *Aesthetics* (Эстетика), published in 1911 (the Russian translation was published in 1913), Hamann states that the aesthetic value of an object is “significant in its own right” (самозначимость). This means that the aesthetic content (function) of an object should be examined not only from the perspective of the percipient’s consciousness, but also from the perspective of the percipient’s characteristics (Гаман, 1913, pp. 29-31). This idea is perfectly consistent with the Russian Formalists’ understanding of the aesthetic object, according to which the main feature of a literary work is the “work” (вещь) itself. The “work” is a “product of activity,” as argued by Potebnja, the founder of the Russian psychological school, rather than the “activity” (деятельность) itself, as argued by Humboldt, the renowned German linguist and philosopher. As an objective reality, the existence of the “work” is completely independent of its creator and the percipient’s consciousness.

In sum, these two basic theoretical foundations are indispensable at the philosophical level, and together form the methodological basis of the Russian Formalistic paradigm: if the linguistic basis provided formalists with “positivist” methodology and the method of “binary opposition”, then common aesthetics gave them the aesthetic methods needed to interpret the feature (work) and characteristic (with “significant in its own right”), which laid the theoretical foundation of the two most important theories of the Russian Formalistic paradigm—“defamiliarization” and “literariness”.

5. Conclusion

Clarifying the theoretical construction, development and theoretical foundation of the Russian Formalistic paradigm will, in our view, help deepen the understanding of its academic value and theoretical significance in the following respects: (1) while the

paradigm is one of a few original theories with worldwide influence¹³, it remains under-researched and its methodological significance under-appreciated both in China and abroad; (2) the formation of the paradigm was not only the starting point of Russian semiotics, but also the original model for international semiotics; therefore, the study of Russian Formalism has the potential to inspire new discoveries in the field of international semiotics; (3) the paradigm is essentially a movement to defend the ontology of literature, that is, to return literature to the true state of reflecting objective reality with language as a tool. Although this kind of return may seem as another extreme, its academic value and methodological significance are beyond doubt; (4) as is clear from the course of the paradigm's formation, based on the pursuit of the "language art" (словесное искусство) of a literary work, the Formalists were prompted to turn to the study of the internal laws of literature and linguistics; this in turn shifted the focus of Russian semiotics research, from literature to "works", and then from works to "form", and ultimately from form to "language". To us, in short, the Russian Formalistic paradigm is in no way inferior to Saussure's structuralist semiotics theory in terms of its influence on the development of international literature and linguistics. Indeed, the principle of semiotics pursued by Saussure is no different from that of the Russian Formalistic paradigm: one has as its aim to "research language for language on language", and the other to "research form for form on form". Moreover, "language" in the sense used by Saussure is actually confined to "the form of language", while the "form" pursued by Russian Formalists encompasses not only the "form of literature", but also the "the form of language", even "the form of culture".

Notes

- 1 There is a great deal of controversy concerning the origins of Russian Formalism. Some scholars believe that the movement began in 1913, regarding Shklovsky's presentation of his paper *The Place of Futurism in the History of Language* (Место футуризма в истории языка) in December 1913 in an artists' bar called The Stray Dog (Бродячая собака) as its starting point; others point to 1914, when Shklovsky's Stray Dog paper was published in a booklet entitled *The Resurrection of the Word*. Still others argue that it should be marked by the establishment of the Moscow Linguistic Group and the Society for the Study of Poetic Language. However, there is disagreement in academic circles on the exact time at which these two organizations were founded. According to Jakobson, the former was founded at some point from "1914 to the winter of 1915", and the latter at "the beginning of 1917" (e.g. Jakobson, 1989, p. 1), but according to Shklovsky's recollection, the latter was established in 1914 (e.g. Fang, 1989, p. 1). The *Linguistics Encyclopedia Dictionary* published by the Science Press Encyclopedia of Russia does not agree with the above statements, identifying the birth of the two organizations as 1915 and 1916, respectively (e.g. Касаткин, 2002, p. 318; Левинтон, 2002, p. 347). This article takes the publication of *The Resurrection of the Word* as the origin, in accordance with the majority academic view.
- 2 The term Русский формализм is generally translated by Chinese academics as "Russian Formalism" or "Soviet formalism". In this article, these two expressions will be used

- interchangeably. Both Russia and the Soviet Union will be referred to as “Russia”. In English, Western literary critics are accustomed to capitalizing the word “Formalism” when referring to the movement, in order to distinguish it from formalism more generally.
- 3 That’s the fact. Whether in Russian or Chinese academia, when it comes to “Russian Formalism”, the first association is with the vigorous formalistic movement in the field of Russian literature in the early 20th century, and it is impossible to move beyond this and ask whether the same theoretical style of formalism occurs in other areas.
 - 4 Eisenstein is a famous Soviet film industry film director and film theorist, rather than a linguist. However, his concept of “visual rhetoric” has a distinctive characteristic of linguistic semiotics.
 - 5 The cultural cognitive paradigm here mainly refers to the theoretical style of the Tartu-Moscow School (Тартуско-московская школа) led by Lotman (Ю. М. Лотман) known as cultural semiotics (Семилтика культуры).
 - 6 It is clear that this definition is based primarily on the lifetime of Petrograd’s Society for the Study of Poetic Language.
 - 7 This refers mainly to the doctrine that art is “thinking in images” (мышление образами), proposed by Potebnja (А. А. Потебня), the founder of the Kharkov Language School (Харьковская лингвистическая школа).
 - 8 The philological method is not entirely literary, but also linguistic, and can therefore be described as a mixed view of language and literature.
 - 9 Vinogradov is widely regarded as the greatest Russian linguist of the 20th century. As a member of Petrograd’s Society for the Study of Poetic Language, he made a deep study of literature and linguistics in the early years and formed his own linguistic school in the 1950s.
 - 10 Most of the “neoformalists” were the students of Russian Formalists, who applied the Formalistic approach to the study of literary history when inheriting their teachers’ theories in the late 1930s and early 1950s. However, due to the limitations of the time, their research was conspicuously influenced by the mainstream ideology of the Soviet Union; they are, for instance, close to some of Bakhtin’s theories.
 - 11 In this sense, Russian Formalism can also be called “neopositivism” (неопозитивизм) as applied to the study of literature and linguistics.
 - 12 Relative to other genres, literariness corresponds to the “artistry” (художественность) of artworks, “painterliness” (живописность) of paintings, “musicality” (музыкальность) of musical compositions, and so on.
 - 13 In the field of literature, there are not many theories of Russian originality. Suhin holds that, in Russian indigenous literary theories or thoughts, in addition to the formalistic paradigm, there are Vsevoljsky’s (А. Н. Всеволовский) historical comparative school and Potebnja’s psychological school (Сухих, 2001, p. 4). It is questionable, however, whether the latter two can be regarded as authentically Russian, because they are greatly reminiscent of historical comparativism in linguistic studies and of Humboldt’s theory of “linguistic spirit”.

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