

# Russian Formalism

Russian Formalism, which emerged around 1915 and flourished in the 1920s, was associated with the OPOJAZ (Society for the Study of Poetic Language) and with the Moscow Linguistic Society (one of the leading figures of which was Roman Jakobson) and Prague Linguistic Circle (established in 1926, with major figures as Boris Eichenbaum and Viktor Shklovsky) The school derives its name from “form”, as these critics studied the form of literary work rather than its content, emphasizing on the “formal devices such as rhythm, metre, rhyme, metaphor, syntax or narrative technique.

Formalism views literature as a special mode of language and proposes a fundamental opposition between poetic/literary language and the practical/ordinary language. While ordinary language serves the purpose of communication, literary language is self-reflexive, in that it offers readers a special experience by drawing attention to its “formal devices”, which Roman Jakobson calls “literariness’ — that which makes a given work a literary work.

Jan Mukarovsky described literariness as consisting in the “maximum of foregrounding of the utterance”, and the primary aim of such foregrounding, as Shklovsky described in his *Art as Technique*, is to “estrangle or “defamiliarize”. Thus literary language is ordinary language deformed and made strange. Literature, by forcing us into a dramatic awareness of language, refreshes our habitual perceptions and renders objects more perceptible.

Though Formalism focused primarily on poetry, later Shklovsky, Todorov and Propp analysed the language of fiction, and the way in which it produced the effect of defamiliarization. They looked at the structure of a narrative and explored how elements like plot and characterization contributed to the narrative’s effect. Propp studied folk narratives () and Shklovsky treated Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, as a novel that parodied earlier conventions of writing.

Jakobson and Todorov were influential in introducing Formalist concepts and methods into French Structuralism. Formalism was strongly opposed by some Marxist critics, proponents of Reader

Response theory, Speech Act theory and New Historicism – all reject the view that there is a sharp and definable distinction between ordinary language and literary language.