

NONSENSE AND TRANS-SENSE IN THE RUSSIAN XX-CENTURY AVANT-GARDE: AN ANALYSIS BASED
ON KARCEVSKIJ'S THEORY OF ASYMMETRIC DUALISM

Sergej Karcevskij (1884-1955) is known in the history of twentieth-century linguistics as the man who introduced Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de Linguistique Générale* to Russian academic circles upon his brief return to Russia after the October Revolution. However, Karcevskij inscribed his name among theorists of the relationship between literature and language in an essay that marked a break with standard Saussurean theory. In his great 1929 essay "The Asymmetric Dualism of the Linguistic Sign,"¹ he argued that *parole* exerts influence on *langue* as much as *langue* influences *parole*, i.e. the socially-imposed value of language influences *a priori* any individual manifestation of the language. By creating this shift from Saussurean doctrine, Karcevskij revealed a new trend in linguistics, a trend that would pose a significant yet little studied influence on the ideas of later authors, both within and after the Prague Linguistic Circle.

Karcevskij deals with the intrinsic ambiguity of the linguistic sign, as it oscillates between the poles of *langue* and *parole*, of the sign's socially-accepted value and its existence as part of an individual utterance. As the signifier and the signified (to use the Saussurean terminology) tend towards opposite poles, each sign is formed at the conjunction of two coordinates in relation to the two series of its components. In other words, given an axis of form (signifier) and an axis of meaning (signified), each sign can be said to be in a unique position in relation to these two axes: it is a unique combination of a determined signifier and signified. The oscillation of the linguistic sign between the two poles raises a number of important questions: what is the process by which an author ascribes meaning to signs that then are grasped by the reader? How much meaning can be imposed by an author on a linguistic sign without compromising its functionality as part of a socially-based form of communication?

The fundamental issue is therefore, to what extent the "psychological," subjective meaning of a word can be rendered in any text, and more particularly in a text in which context itself, that is the entire combination of signs, forms an *a priori* hermetic system incomprehensible to the reader?

Examples of such texts are nonsense and trans-sense literature, which, by radically subverting conventions of what a work of literature should contain and express, put to test the theories used in literary interpretation. The aim of the present essay is to demonstrate that Karcevskij's theory, by creating a framework for a study of literary form and the creative process, provides substantial material for an analysis of nonsense and trans-sense texts. In this essay we will apply the theory of the asymmetric dualism to works by two of the most prominent authors in the Russian avant-garde of the first half of the twentieth century: Daniil Harms (1905-1942) and Velimir Hlebnikov (1885-1922).

1 Karcevskij's article was originally published in: Karcevskij, Sergej. "Du dualisme asymétrique du signe linguistique." *Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague*, I (1929): 88-92, and reprinted in *Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure*, 14 (1956): 18-24.