

Title: Roman Jakobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss in New York in the 1940s
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After 1928, the development of Russian Formalist ideas was pursued most actively outside of the Soviet Union. As is well known, Roman Jakobson played a central role in the dissemination of these ideas—first in Prague, where he presided over the emergence of Czech structuralism, and then in New York, where he famously introduced structuralist linguistics to Claude Lévi-Strauss. This paper highlights some of the constants in Roman Jakobson’s career as an organizer and emissary of Russian Formalism, focusing on how these tendencies informed his exchange with Lévi-Strauss in the 1940s. Primary among these is Jakobson’s capacity for organizing and promoting intellectual exchange in the form of a scholarly circle. He co-founded first the Moscow Linguistic Circle (1915), the Prague Linguistic Circle (1926) and then the Linguistic Circle of New York (1944). I draw attention to the way in which these societies facilitated the application of concepts from one discipline to another, and the role that this played in the emergence of Russian formalism and then Czech and French structuralism. This history allows us to see Jakobson’s and Lévi-Strauss’ meeting less as one between the “linguist” and the “anthropologist,” but as a collaboration facilitated by a particular scholarly environment and a mutual concern with questions of language, culture and human thought processes.