

Title: "Step aside from your own body": Deixis and Personality in Joseph Brodsky's Poetry
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Abstract:

One of the important aspects of poetry language which is seldom discussed by scholars is how a poet uses so called egocentric words to construct the personality of lyrical "I" and how this personality is construed by a reader. Construal describes our "ability to conceive and portray the same situation in alternate ways" (Langaker 2008: 43).

In his poems Brodsky often plays with construals. For example, in "At Carel Willink's Exhibition" a protagonist, who accurately observes a painting of the Dutch artist, describes it in many distinct ways: as a landscape, a still life, a decoration, a portrait, a future, a past, and finally as a self-portrait. Such descriptions are semantically distinct, they reflect the poet's alternate construals of the picture, but every construal is compatible with some properties of the (unnamed) picture.

He uses the same principle for construing the image of his lyrical hero, portraying the same self in alternate ways and from different angles. In my presentation I will attempt to establish how the poet uses egocentric words to create decentered, alienated image of himself. Personal pronouns, spatial and temporal adverbs are alienated from the poem's protagonist in different ways.

I will focus on Brodsky's poem "Kellomäki", named after renamed Finnish village taken from Finland by Soviets in the Winter War. In parallel with the zero-reference name of the place that doesn't exist anymore (current name is Komarovo), Brodsky explores the referential potential of deictic words, like *I, there, then*. As a result we can see that meanings of those words can also be construed in different ways, including the same kind of zero reference. For example "I" can be construed not as a person but as "a crystal, shot with hard turquoise", and "then" can be entirely ignored in some construals ("From time's point of view, there is no then, only there").

I will argue that this way of alienation, loss of personality and identity is not so much linked with the condition of exile, as many Brodsky scholars believe, but rooted in Brodsky's philosophy of language, inspired by Plato's discussion of "conventional" vs. "natural" nature of names, and formed long before the emigration.