



An Epoch Has Ended: to Apresjan's Dear Memory

Igor MEL'ČUK✉

Observatoire de linguistique Sens-Texte, Université de Montréal, Canada

✉igor.melcuk@umontreal.ca

I beg your pardon: my heart is bleeding, and I am unable to find the proper words.

Even in normal circumstances it would be extremely difficult for me to write about Jurij Apresjan—the First Linguist of Russia, a famous scientist and scientific organizer, the author of hundreds of brilliant research works, renowned professor, member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, etc., etc., etc. Because for more than 60 years he has been for me just Jura—the closest colleague, the most intimate friend, the person whose life, thoughts and activities have been so inseparably interwoven with mine. How can I write about somebody who is so close? One cannot grasp with one's eyes a gigantic object from a minimal distance. And exactly what should I say about Jura at this tragic moment? Should I talk about Apresjan-linguist or about Apresjan-man?

No easy answer. Apresjan-linguist and Apresjan-man cannot be separated. The **amazing integrity**, the **wholeness** of Apresjan's personality is, I believe, his defining property and his major advantage.

It is this feature that allowed Apresjan to brilliantly develop a new branch of linguistics—lexical semantics. His book *Lexical Semantics: Synonymic Means of Language* (1974) determined for years the progress in this domain. Even today—half a century later—it still is a treasury of valuable ideas and interesting linguistic facts. In this book Apresjan has defined SYNONYMY—that is, PARAPHRASING—as the basic phenomenon in linguistic semantics, underlying all theories and descriptions. Synonymy has always been the focus of Apresjan's linguistic interest from the very beginning of his scientific career (he produced two dictionaries of synonyms—for English and for Russian).

Drastically simplifying the real picture, one can indicate the starting postulate and two interrelated principles that define Apresjan's linguistic approach reasonably well.

The postulate: The lexicon is at the center of linguistic endeavor. Lexicon-oriented linguistics in 1960s and 1970s? This opinion flew in the face of the approaches and theories that were dominating then. But in spite of ideological and practical difficulties Apresjan managed to swing Russian linguistics towards the lexicon. A very profound and multifaceted study of lexical stock became the main

content of the research activities of contemporary Russian linguists. This activity (in Apresjan's spirit) can be characterized in the following way.

Principle 1 The Language must be described as a whole; Saussure's slogan "La langue est un système où tout se tient" is to be taken literally. Hence Apresjan's call for an INTEGRAL language description, in which the lexicon is well tuned to the grammar and the grammar rules (\approx syntax + morphology) are constructed with a meticulous regard for the lexicon. This orientation led to the theory of SYSTEMIC LEXICOGRAPHY: the lexical stock of a language has to be presented as a well-organized system.

Principle 2 Each lexical unit is in itself a complex world: it requires a "lexicographic portrait" (Apresjan's term!)—a detailed and formal description, which covers all particularities of its use; this description is a *sui generis* model of the lexical unit. Attaining this goal requires processing a huge bulk of language materials—not computer-statistical processing, but genuinely linguistic one, where the researcher's intuition, knowledge and logic play the central role.

It seems that with respect to the sheer mass of data he had gone through Jurij Apresjan is ahead of all linguists I know. In particular, he was a highest-class professional lexicographer; his 3-volume *New English-Russian Dictionary* is beyond any doubt the best dictionary of such type in Russia. In this sense Apresjan was unique: what other linguist of Apresjan's standing has a comparable experience of lexicographic work? This practical and theoretical exposure to lexicography allowed Apresjan to launch a study of Russian lexical stock like never before—colossal as far as its volume, its precision and its scientific-cultural significance are concerned: *Active Dictionary of Russian Language*. No wonder that Apresjan was propelled to the position of the universally acclaimed head of the Moscow Semantic School.

But Apresjan's important contribution to linguistics is by no means limited to the lexicography and dictionaries. Here are a few more specific results, each one of which would secure him a place in world's linguistics.

1. The notion of regular polysemy; Apresjan established practically all types of regular polysemy in Russian.

2. The notions of 'personal sphere' (necessary for the description of such meanings as 'reproach' or of the opposition of Rus. TY vs. polite VY) and 'Observer' (a fictitious person who the Speaker postulates to mark the beginning of coordinates in the situation under description; in the sentence *The road turned left* the word LEFT means 'left with respect to the eye orientation of the Observer').

3. Strict distinction between the meaning of a lexeme and its connotation. It was Apresjan who introduced into consideration the immortal contrast OŠEL ~ IŠAK: both lexemes mean 'donkey', but have different connotations: *rabotat' kak ošel* ('stupidly') vs. *rabotat' kak išak* ('too much and resignedly').

4. The deep link between linguistic anomaly and grammatical/semantic phenomena such as presupposition and locutional frame, which supplies the means to distinguish between linguistic anomaly and logical absurdity (**one books* is

linguistically bad, but *many books in quantity of one* is linguistically absolutely OK, although absurd).

5. The necessity to describe prosody in a lexicon. Thus, the following two Russian lexemes are formally distinguished by prosody: NASTOJAŠČIJ#I and NASTOJAŠČIJ#II (both translated ≈ ‘real’):

Èto nastojáščij̄ saxar ‘This is genuine sugar’ vs. *Èto nastojáščij̄ | sáxar* ‘This is quite similar to sugar’.

6. The Apresjan-Green criterion (first introduced by Georgia Green, but rigorously formulated by Apresjan) allows the researcher to check logical disjunction in a lexicographic definition: If the definition of lexeme L includes logical disjunction—a component of the form ‘ σ_1 or ‘ σ_2 ’, then it is possible to find a sentence containing L in which a lexeme L_1 is semantically related to ‘ σ_1 ’ and another lexeme L_2 , to ‘ σ_2 ’: e.g., ‘X cools down’ = ‘X becomes colder or cold’ in the sentence *The coffee cooled down first slightly_{L1}, and then completely_{L2}*; if such a sentence is impossible, L must be split into two lexemes.

7. The notion of semantic quark: this is a “portion” of meaning smaller than a semanteme (= the meaning of a lexeme of the language), such as ‘stativity’. The semantic difference between Russian verbs XOTET’ ‘to want’ and ŽELAT’ ‘to desire’ seems to be a semantic quark, as is the semantic component ‘kauzirovat’, widely used in Russian semantics (Russian has no lexeme expressing the meaning ‘to cause’).

And that is far from all: Apresjan produced a full-fledged theory of antonymy and successfully studied the semantics of Russian verbal aspect, revealed interesting communicative distinctions between close synonyms and...—but I have to stop, since it is impossible to list all Apresjan’s linguistic achievements.

Apresjan’s scientific style is characterized by extreme clarity, transparent purity (nothing spurious!) and artistic elegance. To read his texts is easy and pleasant, no matter how logically complex they are. One of preferred Apresjan’s words is NEPRINUŽDĚNNO ‘easily, effortlessly, naturally’: he wrote exactly *neprinuždĕnno*, which guarantees the reader’s admiration.

In the 1970s, during Brezhnevian “stagnation,” Apresjan was fired from the Institute of Russian language—because of his unflinching principled attitude with respect to an open letter he had signed in defense of two writers unjustly thrown in gulag (Sinjavskij and Daniel). Having refused to play in the Communist theater according to Communist rules, Apresjan went to work in an information-processing research center of the Ministry for Electric Machinery. An excellent organizer, he managed to create there a kind of shelter for a team of extra-class Russian linguists sacked previously from official research institutions for political reasons. This team was forced to develop two machine-translation systems (French and English to Russian), and as a result they discovered and described a huge mass of Russian

syntactic facts. Once again, by creating this quite unconventional and unimaginable linguistic research center, Apresjan demonstrated his strong and integer personality and his brilliant mind, as well as his incomparable human qualities.

With Gorbachev's "perestroika" Apresjan returned to the Academy of Sciences—to the Institute of Russian language; he was elected academician and headed a newly formed research team; the most ambitious and promising project was launched, mentioned above: *Active Dictionary of Russian*. The semantic and syntactic description of Russian lexicon was carried out with such precision and exhaustiveness that it seems impossible to do something like that any better or more complete. As everything that Apresjan has created, the *Active Dictionary* is irradiating boundless and unconditional love for Language, this necessary attribute of real linguistics. And Apresjan's instruction for the compilation of this dictionary—in point of fact, a brilliant detailed description of the format of a modern semantics-based dictionary—would alone be sufficient to make him one of the leading linguists of our times.

Apresjan "exegit monumentum aere perennius": his immense research work, his four grandchildren and an invisible kingdom of love and admiration in the hundreds of human hearts. On May 12, 2024 he completed his earthly journey, leaving behind such a rich inheritance.

2024.05.15