Many Meetings. An overview of historical encounters between structuralism and phenomenology

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Abstract. *We offer here a panoramic overview of the many, but little-known, concrete historical encounters between the traditions of structuralism and phenomenology. In particular, we evoke no less than five examples of such meetings in the works of the Moscow Linguistic Circle, Hendrik Pos (1898–1955), Kita Megrelidze (1900–1944), Tran Duc Thao (1917–1993), and Giovanni Piana (1940–2019). Our objective hereby is to strengthen the case for an understanding of structuralism that is attuned more to its common achievements and shared theoretical aims with phenomenology than to the two traditions' punctual disagreements and differences. This choice of a broad, contextualising method is not meant to avoid or to divert from the question of the precise conceptual intersections and synergies (or divergences and incompatibilities) between structuralism and phenomenology: it is motivated rather by the need to set this crucial, potentially productive question in a context in which their various interactions over the course of the 20th century are freed from the distorting, anachronistic effects imposed as much by the powerful framing we have inherited from the 1960s than by our usual focus on a limited number of canonical figures and themes.*

1. Introduction

The relations of structural linguistics and structuralism with the "phenomenological movement" (cf. Spiegelberg 1960) can be characterised as *contested,* in at least two ways. Firstly, they were defined

in the 1960s by well-known and often fierce debates, through which proponents of both traditions sought to distance themselves from the other (Michel Foucault's rejection of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism, Paul Ricoeur's or Emmanuel Levinas' criticism of Claude Lévi-Strauss' formalism and atheism respectively). But, secondly, the disjunctive framing that has resulted from these antagonistic interactions is *itself* a matter of historiographical debate. Instead of seeing the two movements as competing, opposed traditions, several major structuralists (Roman Jakobson) and phenomenologists (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jan Patočka) explicitly sought to build bridges between them. A critical trend initiated by Elmar Holenstein in the 1970s (Holenstein 1975), moreover, has brought forward ever more convincing arguments in defence of the hypothesis that structuralism and phenomenology, far from being polar opposites, share some of their most fundamental methodological aims, as well as a common, entangled history (cf. Parret 1983, 2018, Puech 1985, 2013, Schmidt 1985, Cadiot & Visetti 2001, Coquet 2007, Avtonomova 2009, Rosenthal & Visetti 2010, Bondi & La Mantia 2015, Sonesson 2015, Stawarska 2015, 2018, 2020, Piotrowski 2017, Aurora 2017, 2020, Aurora & De Angelis 2018).[6]

My objective here is to strengthen the case for an understanding of structuralism that is attuned more to its common achievements and shared theoretical aims with phenomenology than to the two traditions' punctual disagreements and differences. To do so, I opt for a historical, panoramic approach that highlights and contextualises half a dozen figures in whose work structuralism and phenomenology met in constructive fashion. This choice of a broad, contextualising method is not meant to avoid or to divert from the question of the precise conceptual intersections and synergies (or divergences and incompatibilities) between structuralism and phenomenology: it is motivated rather by the need to set this crucial, potentially productive question in a context in which their various interactions over the course of the 20th century are freed from the distorting, anachronistic effects imposed as much by the powerful

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6. For the sake of full disclosure as much of self-interest, I add my contributions, summarised in Flack (2018).

framing we have inherited from the 1960s than by our usual focus on a limited number of canonical figures and themes.

Given the immense reception and prominence achieved by the likes of Foucault, Ricoeur, Derrida, Deleuze, or Chomsky, there is no need to go into too much detail regarding the fact that their views have been foundational in informing our current perception of structuralism's and phenomenology's allegedly difficult relations. It is useful, however, to remind ourselves that the theories of all the above-mentioned thinkers were themselves formulated in some form of inner polemical confrontation with either structuralism or phenomenology (or indeed with both) and that the post-war reception and transmission of these two traditions, especially in France and in the United States, was anything but neutral. The 1960s overall constitute an uneasy, historiographically problematic moment that was concerned less with hermeneutic faithfulness and tradition than with the creative, idiosyncratic, even iconoclastic appropriation of the profoundly ambiguous intellectual legacy of the interwar period – and with the formulation of its own, radically new paradigms and socio-political frameworks. This is enough, I think, to intimate that the confrontational framing of the relation of structuralism and phenomenology that was produced at that particular juncture in time should not be taken as a final, objective point of reference, but rather as a very particular, specific point of view that is open not only to criticism, but to a complete reassessment.

Next to the well-known antagonistic debates of the 1960s, another barrier or limitation to a positive reappraisal of structuralism's entanglement with phenomenology has been an excessively narrow, piece-meal focus and a disproportionate emphasis on certain selected episodes or arguments in the existing literature on the subject. Most of the ink spent so far on rehabilitating the fundamental compatibility and entanglement of phenomenology and structuralism, indeed, has usually been devoted to one of the key figures of either movement (usually Ferdinand de Saussure or Roman Jakobson for structuralism, Edmund Husserl or Maurice Merleau-Ponty for phenomenology) and to a careful analysis and staking out of the extent to which their ideas either depended upon or were influential for the other tradition. Most often, the compar-

ison is narrowed down to the concrete reception of one figure by another – e.g. Merleau-Ponty's reading of Saussure (Puech 1985, Stawarska 2015, Piotrowski 2017) or Jakobson's interpretation of Husserl's mereology and theory of *foundation* [*Fundierung*] (Holenstein 1975, Aurora 2017).

This has of course the advantage of allowing for very precise arguments both on the concrete modalities of the historical encounter between the two thinkers under discussion in each specific case. But a significant drawback of this method is that it usually fails to embrace structuralism and phenomenology in their own diversities[7] and thus often reduces the general problem of their compatibility or common programme to technical details that are specific to the two authors under discussion. As such, it also opens up space for criticisms on these points of detail, which can then reinforce the view that structuralism and phenomenology are fundamentally incompatible traditions (e.g. Steiner 1975, Chiss & Puech 1980, Swiggers 1981, as well as all the bilateral feuds of the 1960s). Such criticisms, no doubt, are often warranted and interesting, leading to a more nuanced understanding of the relation between individual thinkers. There is certainly a case, for example, for thinking that Holenstein overstates the extent of Jakobson's debt to Husserl, or for seeing in Merleau-Ponty's reception of Saussure not an appropriation of his linguistics, but a creative, "unfaithful" reading not unlike that of Derrida. But the point remains that these punctual flashes of disagreements are only isolated aspects of what could and should be broached as a much broader, fundamentally diverse and complex relation.

My general point, in this sense, is that one would do well to move away from bilateral contrasts (whether negative, i.e. Sartre – Foucault, Lévi-Strauss – Ricoeur, or positive i.e. Husserl – Jakob-

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7. To take just the case of phenomenology, there are for example marked differences already between the early and the late Husserl, and even more so between the ontologico-existential path pursued by Heidegger or Sartre, the sociological approach of Alfred Schutz, or more recent attempts to bring phenomenology closer to the cognitive sciences (Varela, Gallagher, Zahavi). Obviously, the relation of each of these strands of phenomenological philosophy to structural thought is very different.

son, Saussure – Merleau-Ponty) when dealing with the relations between structuralism and phenomenology, and to focus instead on the multilateral processes of exchanges and dialogues between them. One is only helped in doing so, I contend, by shifting from the tutelary, canonical figures and their specific choices of theoretical emphasis to the dense network of secondary figures who took part in the development and institutionalisation of phenomenology and structuralism. Such a shift in focus, indeed, has the doubly virtuous effect of providing a wider context to both traditions, centering not authorial figures and individual texts but the networked, entangled structure of both movements.[8]

A final ingredient justifying the comparative approach I advocate is simply the astonishing quantity of marginalised and neglected historical cases where phenomenology and structuralism productively met. Without seeking to be either truly exhaustive and systematic, I will focus here on no less than five such examples, listed more or less chronologically: the *Moscow Linguistic Circle* – in particular Gustav Špet (1879–1937), Rozalija Šor (1894–1939), Maksim Königsberg (1900–1924) –, Hendrik Pos (1898–1955), Kita Megrelidze (1900–1944), Tran Duc Thao (1917–1993), and Giovanni Piana (1940–2019).[9] In passing, one can note that the national and linguistic diversity of this list (Russian, Dutch, Georgian, Vietnamese, Italian) provides a first hint as to the reasons behind their long-standing neglect and the absence, up to now, of an attempt to bring them together. As I will try to outline in the following pages, however, they are not as disparate and unrelated as first meets the eye: all of them share more or less direct and conscious relations with the contexts of the early Soviet Union and of interwar Czechoslovakia, which themselves should therefore be considered as the main "theatres" of the productive encounters of structuralism and phenomenology.

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8. Such effects have been achieved by Spiegelberg (1960) for phenomenology, by Goldsmith & Laks (2019) for the human sciences in general, and to a limited extent by myself (Flack 2016) for structuralism.

9. To these, one could add Aaron Gurwitsch (1901–1973), Jacques English, Giovanni Stanghellini, which I leave aside here, both out a lack of space and of appropriate knowledge.

2. The Moscow Linguistic Circle: Špet, Šor, Königsberg

The *Moscow Linguistic Circle* was one of the two key institutions of Russian formalism (along with the *Society for the Study of Poetic Language* [*OPOJAZ*]) and is well-known as having contributed to fundamentally transform linguistics and literary studies, in particular by advocating for a more scientific, methodologically specific approach to literature and the poetic dimension of language.[10] The *Moscow Linguistic Circle* is both an obvious and a slightly provocative choice to begin an overview of structuralism's encounters with phenomenology. The obvious reason for including the *Moscow Linguistic Circle* is that it is clearly linked to structuralism, not only through the person of Roman Jakobson, its most famous member, but also through its role as an inspiration for the *Cercle linguistique de Prague,* as well as its status as an institution of Russian formalism, a movement that is recognised as one of the main laboratories of structuralist thought. The phenomenological dimension of the *Moscow Linguistic Circle*, whilst less known, is also self-evident: Gustav Špet, a student and translator of Husserl as well as the philosopher who introduced phenomenology in Russia, was a regular member of the circle. Špet's interest in Husserlian phenomenology also influenced the linguist Rozalija Šor and the verse specialist Maxim Könisgberg, two further members of the *Moscow Linguistic Circle*.

The provocative aspect of using the *Moscow Linguistic Circle* as an example of an encounter between structuralism and phenomenology lies, perhaps surprisingly, with the term "structuralist" itself. At the time of the *Moscow Linguistic Circle*'s activities – which started in 1915, before the publication of Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916) – the name itself was not in use. In many ways, the methodological approach of the circle, grounded in folklore studies and dialectology, was still *philological* and can be considered "structuralist" only prototypically or retrospectively, as containing germs or intuitions that were developed and formalised later. In this sense, the habitual classification of the *Moscow Linguistic Circle* as belonging to Russian *formalism* rather than Russian *structuralism*

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10. For a brief introduction to the *Moscow Linguistic Circle,* cf. Glanc 2015, Šapir 1994.

is both telling and very much correct. True, if one takes the later phase of the work of the *Moscow Linguistic Circle*, which happened in *parallel* and with numerous exchanges with the activities of the *Cercle linguistique de Prague* (cf. Jakobson & Tynjanov 1966), this problem of definition is watered down. The separation between the *Moscow Linguistic Circle*'s formalism and structuralism is certainly not very strict: it itself underwent a process from the one to the other, as personified by the intellectual evolution of its most prominent members (Jakobson, Trubeckoj, Bogatyrev) and their (nearly seamless) transition to "Prague" structuralism.

The distinction between the formalist and structuralist emphasis of the *Moscow Linguistic Circle*, however, cannot be so easily brushed aside when it comes to the phenomenologically-inclined members of the circle. Both Špet and Šor, indeed, were critical of the evolution and impulses given by Jakobson to the circle, a position that lends a complex, polemical form to the relations between phenomenology and formalism/structuralism within the *Moscow Linguistic Circle*. In this sense, the *Moscow Linguistic Circle* was not a forum where "phenomenologists" such as Špet and Šor dialogued with the "structuralists" Jakobson and Trubeckoj, but rather an open, contested field where the former had recourse to phenomenology to problematise some of the options taken by the latter on the basis of formalist theory (cf. Sapir 1994, Glanc 2015). The most significant and instructive demonstration of these complex constellations are Šor's articles "The formal method in the West" [Formal'nyj metod na zapade, 1927] and "Expression and signification" [Vyraženie a značenie, 2016[1927]], where she uses the phenomenological theory of expression exposed by Husserl in the *First Logical Investigation* (Husserl 1901) to indirectly criticise Jakobson's formalist theory of expression – which, as we know from later texts (Jakobson 1960), was central to his entire conception of structural linguistics and poetics.

For both Šor and Špet, the central bone of contention and point of criticism of Jakobson's formalist-centred theory of language, which foregrounds the reflexivity of language as an autotelic expressive medium, is the need to anchor language in the socio-cultural, historical process of the constitution of meaning. Whereas the struc-

turalist-functionalist model considered and refined by Jakobson takes root in his emphasis on the autonomy of linguistic expression, its capacity for the hierarchical, distinctive organisation of its own verbal material, Šor and Špet have recourse to a different conception of the articulation of language, namely the Humboldtian concept of *inner form*. Inner form is reinterpreted by Špet in *Appearance and sense* (1991[1914]) through the lens of Husserl's theory of intuitions, in order to provide a triadic account of the constitution of meaning both in language and in experience in general (Dennes 2006b). Language and linguistic expression, for Špet, is not the functional hierachisation of verbal material, but the correlate of intuitive acts of interpretation that produce a synthesis or an inner articulation between a material and an eidetic intuition, between an external form and a formal meaning, which are progressively sedimented and stabilised in a historical process and horizon of culture and communication. In that sense, Špet's "structuralism" owes more to Hegel and Schleiermacher than to Saussure or Russian formalism (cf. Dennes 2006a, Tihanov 2009).

Two elements further complicate this picture of the apparently competing positions of structuralist and phenomenological thought within the *Moscow Linguistic Circle*. Firstly, one cannot but recall that the notion of *inner form* is also central to Anton Marty, the Prague-based Brentanian philosopher of language whose *Untersuchungen zur Grundlegung der allgemeinen Grammatik und Sprachphilosophie* (1908) were of signal importance *both* to Husserl and the Prague Linguistic Circle, including Jakobson. As such, Jakobson and Špet, despite their diverging focus, clearly drew from common sources. Secondly, one can find a re-convergence of the Špetian and Jakobsonian poles within the *Moscow Linguistic Circle* itself, namely in the work of Maksim Königsberg, a young philologist close to Špet who died at the young age of 24. Applying Špet's method to the study of verse, he produced a theory which resembles and inspired that of another Russian formalist, Jurij Tynjanov, whose own proto-structuralist theory of verse was a core inspiration for Jakobson's later functional approach to poetics (cf. Ehlers 1992).

In short, the story of phenomenology and structuralism within the *Moscow Linguistic Circle* is one of convergences as well as diver-

gences, of a sustained and multipolar debate that was made more difficult by external circumstances and that was centered on the interplay and theoretical importance of the key notions of expression, meaning and form in language. What is particularly striking is the shared recourse to Husserl, Marty, and to a lesser extent, to Saussure (who is invoked most favourably, because of his emphasis on the role of social factors in language, not by Jakobson, but by Šor). Jakobson, Špet and Šor refer to a common set of authorities that they understood not in terms of two separate schools (Šor, for instance, refers to Husserl as a representant of a "logical tradition" [logičeskoe napravlenie], Saussure as a representant of a "social theory of language"), but of general "orientations" defined above all by their "Western" character. What this episode also underlines is the *immediate* intertwining of phenomenological and structuralist approaches in the Soviet context, right at the inception of structuralism and at the very beginning of the international reception of phenomenology in the 1910s and 20s.

3.1 Hendrik Pos

Leaving the Soviet Union but not the 1920s, we turn to Hendrik Pos (1898–1955), a Dutch linguist and philosopher, a student of Husserl, of the neo-Kantian Heinrich Rickert, as well as of the linguist Antoine Meillet. The little that is generally known of Pos is his role as the first to provide a philosophical analysis of Prague phonology (Pos 1939c, Fontaine 1994), and indeed to be invoked by certain Prague linguists, above all Jakobson (1974), but also Trubeckoj (1936) as a philosophical warrant of their linguistic models. In reality, Pos provided much more than this, formulating what amounts to a general theory of linguistics (cf. Willems 1998, Daalders 1999) in his dissertation *Zur Logik der Sprachwissenschaft* (1922) – a text of distinctly neo-Kantian, Rickertian flavour, but which echoes in many aspects the intuitions and the structure of Saussure's *Cours* (cf. Salverda 1991), without ever citing it. While Pos should probably not be categorised as a structuralist as such, he contributed to the formulation and development of one of its key notions, that of *opposition* (Pos 1938a) – a contribution whose importance was

underlined by Jakobson –, and provided several texts (Pos 1933, 1939, 1950, 1954) which emphasize the systematic, articulated nature of language in a way that cannot but be considered structuralist. Corroborating this impression, one can add finally that Pos's dissertation was highly regarded by yet another structuralist, namely Louis Hjelmslev (cf. Willems 1998).

Pos's interest in phenomenology takes a parallel form to his involvement with structuralist thought: while he cannot be considered a phenomenologist *per se*, he studied with Husserl and, to a lesser extent Heidegger, and provided one of the first phenomenologically oriented theories of literature in his *Kritische Studien über philologische Methode* (1923). As with structuralism, his main contribution consists in a critical discussion of the relevance of phenomenology's methodological tenets for the study of language. His most interesting or relevant production in that perspective are *Phénoménologie et linguistique* (1939) and *Valeur et limites de la phénoménologie* (1952), two texts that were not without influence on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of language (Merleau-Ponty 1952).

Rooted in Rickert's transcendental idealism, Pos's thought occupies an interesting position *between* structuralism and phenomenology, neither endorsing nor rejecting either. His dabbling in both traditions, moreover, happens in an interestingly parallel way, as a progressive assimilation of two external points of view that Pos felt inclined to probe and inspect, without fully adopting them. Pos's position in the Netherlands, a country that developed its specific traditions of structuralism (de Groot, Reichelt, van Ginneken) and phenomenology (Plessner, Buytendijk, Linschoten), none of which can be considered central to their respective core movements, is further revealing of his insider-outsider status. What also bears mentioning is that, for Pos, phenomenology and structuralism were themselves multipolar constellations, which he probably did not even consider as united schools: it is quite clear, for example, that to him someone like Ernst Cassirer (cf. Pos 1939b), and possibly Jakobson, were in fact much closer to the tradition of phenomenology than Heidegger, whom Pos saw as the author of an "irrational" philosophy (Pos 1938b), at odds with his own and indeed with Husserl's philosophical aims.

The key theme informing much of Pos's thought and much of his interest in both phenomenology and structuralism, is the methodological problem of the relation between the objects of knowledge [Gegenstand der Erkenntnis] as expressed in a scientific theory or model, and our subjective experience of the given reality conceptualised in such theories. In a certain way, Pos anticipates here the debate of the 60s over the priority of the constitutive subject over objective structures (or vice versa). The difference is that Pos does not take a side in this debate, positing *a priori,* that these two aspects are *de facto* part of any theory, of any model of the world or of a domain of objects (Pos 2013 [1925], 43–44). In that sense, Pos never finds himself arguing for or against the supreme role of the subject or of the objectivity of structures, but rather comes back to the co-existence of these two as poles or extreme positions in the ways we can formulate knowledge and articulate our experience. In a way, one can see him exploring as many avenues as possible to resolve and make sense epistemologically and methodologically of this dichotomy (Flack 2013).

The constant hesitation of Pos over the question of the respective importance of the subjective, experiential pole and its objectively constituted model is instructive of a dilemma that is in fact inherent to both structuralism *and* phenomenology: in other words, neither phenomenology nor structuralism are in a position *on their own* to thematise the paradoxical co-existence of subjective, existential elements and of objective structural features in our experience. Pos's profound intuition is that trying to use the one or the other separately in order to answer or foreground one of these aspects in isolation is thus bound to fail, and indeed to impoverish each tradition. Indeed, Pos's entire work and its positive echoes both amongst structuralists (Jakobson, Trubeckoj, Hjelmslev) and phenomenologists (Merleau-Ponty), goes a long way towards showing that the major point of contention at the heart of the antagonism of the 1960s is not one that *separates* structuralism and phenomenology, but one to which they were *both* trying to give an answer.

3.2 Konstantin Megrelidze

Pursuing the idea suggested by Pos that structuralism and phenomenology can be synthetically combined rather than pitted against each other, we return now to the Soviet Union to discuss Konstantin Megrelidze (1900–1944). A Georgian psychologist and philosopher who studied with Edmund Husserl in Freiburg and Max Wertheimer in Berlin, Megrelidze is today almost completely forgotten – indeed, he was never acknowledge at all beyond the borders of the Soviet Union. A tragic figure who fell victim to the persecutions of the Stalinist regime, his intellectual influence was precluded during his own lifetime and in the Soviet Union itself by the fact that his magnum opus, *Major problems of the sociology of thought,* written in 1936, was published only in 1965, after a forced process of editing that, among other, made him cut out long passages devoted to Nikolaj Marr and to change the title from the original *Social phenomenology of thought* (cf. Zedania 2014, 77). His work, maybe more than any of the figures mentioned here, deserves to be included because, along with the better known efforts of Tran Duc Thao, it is one where phenomenology and structuralism are both explicitly mobilised, with direct references to the works of Husserl, Saussure, as well as to Gestalt psychology.

In one of the very rare articles in English on Megrelidze, Giga Zedania captures the source and inspiration behind Megrelidze's theoretical project as follows:

> Megrelidze developed a theory of human consciousness, which was both part of the historical context of early Soviet epistemology and attempted to break out of its limitations. Megrelidze's thought originated at the intersection of different disciplines and disciplinary traditions: phenomenology (in its Husserlian form), Gestalt psychology, Marrism .... Another important current of thought, which had influence on Megrelidze's conception, was the French sociological tradition, together with nascent structuralism. E. Durkheim, L. Levi-Bruhl and F. de Saussure are authors often referred to in the book. Megrelidze's aim was to show – in contrast to the traditional empiricist approaches – the social nature of human consciousness. The above-named authors were

interesting for him, first of all, because they went beyond the empiricist tradition, which entailed a reduction of consciousness on sensory data and association mechanisms. (Zedania 2014, 80).

Fundamentally, as Zedania also correctly notes, *Major problems of the sociology of thought* is also "a book that wanted to present itself as standing firmly on the ground of orthodox Marxism" (*ibid.* 80).

To summarize, Megrelidze's ambition is to provide an explanation of human consciousness that is both founded in and completely compatible with Marxism *and* that recognizes the fundamental autonomy of the subject and the independence of the realms of culture and history. His main tools to contest the naïve Marxist theory of consciousness as a reflection of reality, all while preserving the materialist grounding of consciousness in the social activity of work, are Husserl's concept of the *noema* on the one hand, the concept of *Gestalt* of Köhler and Wertheimer on the other. In his analyses of language, which he layers on top of his concept of consciousness (cf. Friedrich 1993), Megrelidze resorts to Saussure and to the linguistics of Marr, for whom the Humboldtian notion of *inner form* and of the historical sedimentation of linguistic and cultural forms (along the lines of the theory developed by Špet) played a central role.

This is not the place to reconstruct Megrelidze's arguments in further detail. But even on this summary basis, his work allows us to make a number of interesting comments on the relations between structuralism and phenomenology. The most obvious point is of course to underline how both traditions are solicited by Megrelidze as epistemological tools that can contest naïve empiricism, all while providing theories that can fit in what is a profoundly historically and sociologically-oriented model. As Zedania emphasises, moreover, Megrelidze's "sociological" framework is in fact more correctly called an "inter-subjective" one, since his focus is in fact the possibilities of emergence and constitution of an *individual, subjective* **consciousness** in the material and social conditions described and prescribed by Marxist philosophy. As such, it is to the age-old problem of the link between the subject and the objective conditions of his experience that Megrelidze brings us back – and it is precisely to

answer this conundrum that he makes use of both phenomenology and structuralism.

A striking aspect of Megrelidze's thought, in this context, is the specific recourse he makes of both traditions to construct his theory of a Marxist consciousness that is free to orientate itself in a subjective, cultural and historical world that is not over-determined by the materialist structures of work and sociality. Megrelidze, indeed, inverts the traditional roles attributed to phenomenology as a transcendental theory of subjectivity and to structuralism as a formalist model of objective structures. Instead, Megrelidze uses Husserl's phenomenological concept of the *noema* as an explanation for the processes of the *objective* constitution of contents in consciousness, and for the *material* process of the crystallisation of conscious representations; conversely, he proposes an interpretation of the notion of *Gestalt* that underlines the degree of subjective variation and indeterminacy in the process of the structuration of the objective forms of consciousness that it allows. According to Megrelidze, all objects of consciousness are instituted as noemas but in the form of *Gestalts*, i.e. as wholes that derive their unity of structure from their appearing to a subject.[11]

As we can see, for Megrelidze, it is a recourse to the structuralist paradigm that allows him to reintroduce a subjective element in a theory that is otherwise overdetermined by its materialism and the conditions of the material emergence of consciousness. In complete opposition to the debates of the 60s, structuralism is the paradigm of subjectivity in Megrelidze's thought. Phenomenology, conversely, provides the theoretical explication of the material-objective conditions of emergence of consciousness, and is thus the guarantor of the objective pole of knowledge: its main role is to allow Megrelidze to introduce the notion of intentionality, whose potential to introduce a subjective pole is then only deployed through the structural notion of Gestalt. Megrelidze, in other words, does not only offer an example of convergence between structuralism and

11. Megrelidze's "subjectivist" use of Gestalt psychology to productively criticise and complement Husserl's theory of the noema is of course not unlike that of Merleau-Ponty's in *Phenomenology of perception*.

phenomenology on the problem of consciousness and subjectivity, but the illustration that their role can be *reversed*. If nothing else, this underlines how neither of the two traditions are bolted to a certain perspective (subjectivist or objectivist) but are indeed dealing with a core epistemological problem that they can *both* broach from one or the other end.

3.3 Tran Duc Thao

While there doesn't seem to be direct evidence that our next hero, the Vietnamese dissident and philosopher Tran Duc Thao (1917–1993), knew of Megrelidze's work, there are many interesting convergences and similarities between their works, which we will mobilise here to confirm some of the perspectives just evoked. Perhaps the best known in the gallery of neglected figures presented in this paper, Tran Duc Thao is widely acknowledged as having played a significant role in the early development of phenomenology in France in the post-war era, attracting in particular the interest of Jacques Derrida (Giovannangeli 2013). Several publications have recently been devoted to the Vietnamese philosopher (Espagne & Benoist 2013, D'Alonzo & Feron 2021) and it is notable that his main works, including *Marxism and phenomenology* (2009 [1946]), *Phenomenology and dialectical materialism* (1986 [1951]) and *Investigations into the origin of language and consciousness* (1984 [1973]) have been translated into English (the originals, in French, were in any case much more widely available than the works in Russian of Špet, Šor or Megrelidze, or some of the outputs in Dutch by Pos).

The most obvious parallel between Tran Duc Thao and Megrelidze is that they both explicitly and unreservedly ground their approach in Marxist philosophy. Just like Megrelidze, moreover, Thao also seeks to explicitly thrush out an interpretation of the conditions of emergence of consciousness in a Marxist perspective with the help of phenomenology, and in particular of Husserl. Just like Megreldize, finally, he integrates structuralism to his framework, in this case through a recourse to Saussure's general linguistics. As pointed out by Feron (2013) or D'Alonzo (2017), Thao's entire work, not unlike that of Pos, is a repeated attempt to solve a single, given

problem, with the successive but neither exclusive nor decisive re-
course to a number of different frameworks, namely Marxism, phe-
nomenology, and structuralism. As with Pos, this repetition itself,
far from being a tedious sign of stubborn failure, contributes to a
slow blossoming, aconceptual maturing, and, retrospectively, allows
for a convincing comparative contrast of the different methods.

Not unlike what is the case in Megrelidze's approach, Hus-
serl's phenomenology constitutes a sort of first relay to establish
the fundamental framework of the emergence and constitution of
consciousness, and – what is particularly significant for Thao – its
relation to the material world of work and social activity. Saussure's
structuralism intervenes only at a later stage, when Thao seems to
have exhausted the possibilities of both Marxism and phenomenol-
ogy: he then turns to an analysis of language to help him out of the
apparently unresolvable paradoxes into which the transcendental
idealism of Husserl's phenomenology and the blind materialism
of Marxist philosophy repeatedly lead him (cf. D'Alonzo 2017). In
Thao's philosophy, to simplify, the problem of the origins of lan-
guage thus slowly replaces the more direct and apparently general
question of the origins of consciousness, a displacement that is both
possible and plausible because of Thao's constant obsession with
the problem of "meaning", and in particular the "meaning of the
real world" (*le sens du réel*) (cf. Flack 2021).

Again, without going into the details or the merits of Thao's
arguments, we witness here a synthetic, even dialectic recourse to
phenomenology and structuralism as tools to expand, correct, and
ground a Marxist philosophy. Thao's theory, in other words, is one
where phenomenology and structuralism are not used against each
other, but together. As was the case with Megrelidze, moreover,
the paradigm of subjectivity and of the possibility of cultural and
historical expression, is structuralism, not phenomenology. It is
only by invoking Saussure's conception of the arbitrary sign and
by elaborating a complex theory of the origins of language from
the gesture of indication, indeed, that Thao is able to formulate a
theory that allows him to link linguistic or symbolic meanings (that
are subjective and culturally constituted) with the "meanings of
the real world" in a way that is not strictly deterministic. Whereas

phenomenology offered only a shift from the objective structures of the real world to the absolute meanings of the transcendental subject, Saussure's arbitrary sign provides a gap where the historical moment of the emergence, constitution and sedimentation of language can be conceived as a subjective process.

On this specific point, it is also interesting to compare Thao with Pos: in his later years, the Dutch philosopher also turned regularly to Marxism and socio-historical interpretations and, in particular, also wrote about the problem of indication and the progressive constitution of ideal meanings in language from communicative gestures (cf. Flack 2021). As I have argued, Pos's answer is superior to Thao in that it takes into account the creative, symbolic moment of gestures (whereas Thao only concentrates on their imitative character). Be that as it may, the crucial point is the convergence of three quite different approaches and biographies (Thao, Megrelidze, Pos) both on a given set of problems (the emergence of consciousness and language) and on the methodological frameworks needed to find a solution to it, namely Marxism, phenomenology and structuralism.

3.4 Giovanni Piana

The final figure I will evoke here is the Italian phenomenologist Giovanni Piana (1940–2019). A student of Enzo Paci (1911–1976) and a member of the "Milan School" – a research group at the University of Milan that was the main vector of the implantation of phenomenology in Italy in the post-war years (cf. Buongiorno 2020) – Piana was an influential voice in contemporary Italian phenomenology, as witnessed by the vibrant homage paid in the recent volume devoted to his memory (Caminada & Summa 2020) by many of today's prominent Italian phenomenologists (Roberta de Monticelli, Carlo Sarra, Vincenzo Costa, Andrea Staiti, etc.). Piana's body of work is large and varied, touching upon the philosophy of perception, Gestalt theory, epistemology, aesthetics, philosophy of mathematics, logic and mereology, as well as to interpretations of other philosophers (Hume, Schopenhauer, Wittgenstein, Cassirer, Bachelard). Despite this variety, it is unified by two constants: a

life-long commitment to a careful reading and discussion of Husserl on the one hand, the refinement of his own practice of the phenomenological method into what he himself called a "phenomenological structuralism" on the other.

Caminada & Summa provide an apt summary of Piana's particular approach to phenomenology in their introduction to the aforementioned volume: "[Piana's] contribution is not only remarkable for the way in which it clarifies complex issues in Husserl's work–particularly valuable, in this sense, is the discussion of Husserl's theory of wholes and parts, published as "Introduction" to the *Third* and *Fourth Logical Investigation*. It is also important because it operatively shows that phenomenology is primarily a philosophy that departs from speculations in favour of the logic of display. In this sense, Piana's work on philosophers not belonging to the phenomenological tradition (notably Plato, Schopenhauer, Hume, Wittgenstein, etc.) often suggests that – if we consider phenomenology fundamentally as a method and not as an already formed theory – we should be able to recognize that, at least implicitly, an implicit phenomenology can be retraced also in the texts of other philosophers" (Caminada & Summa 2020: 10).

Despite his status at the very institutional heart of Italian phenomenology (both through his direct connection to Enzo Paci and the Milan School and his inspirational impact on the current generation of scholars), Piana was also a highly private, self-reflexive kind of intellectual figure, a Socrates preoccupied by the constant re-examination and idiosyncratic development of this own themes, rather than noisy public debates and front-line polemics. While this might seem an anecdotal point of detail, I believe Piana's particular attitude to the practice of philosophy is in fact typical of several other figures mentioned in these pages (Pos, Tran Duc Thao, but also Holenstein or Natalia Avtonomova) and goes some way to explaining the absence of their moderate approach to the relation between structuralism and phenomenology in the face of the vociferous, high-drama polemics conducted by Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida and the likes.

Piana's place in the present enumeration of encounters of structuralism with phenomenology is best exemplified by a text pub-

lished in 2013, "The idea of phenomenological structuralism" [L'idea di uno strutturalismo fenomenologico]. In this short essay, Piana seeks to clarify his use of the term phenomenological structuralism in reference to his own ideas. Piana's reticence to engage in the usual polemics between structuralist and phenomenological positions is reflected particularly clearly in this text and in the back-story to two points of clarification Piana makes right at its start. Despite the title, which seems to promise a direct discussion of phenomenology and structuralism, Piana starts indeed with the following remark:

> First of all, it should be noted that my perspective does not derive from a blending of phenomenology with structuralism, understood here as the specific philosophical and cultural tradition that derived its methods from linguistics. Similarly, it is not concerned with the presence of phenomenological themes in the context of that specific tradition (Piana 2020).

Rather, Piana's continues, "What my phenomenological structuralism stands for, really, is the possibility of discerning in the German word Wesen a nuance of meaning which – if we can manage to free ourselves from the habitual philosophical terminology – is expressed by the term structure better than essence" (*ibid.*).

Piana's dissociation from the tradition of structural linguistics can safely be taken at face value: none of the major structuralists appear in his essay, or indeed in any significant way in his work. Similarly, the account he provides of his conception of the structure as arising from his direct engagement with the work of Husserl is both honest and conceptually revealing: as mentioned, Piana's entire work, including its expression in the original, synthetic form of a "phenomenological structuralism" takes the form of a helicoidal reflection on the foundational works of Husserl. For instance, the intuition of translating *Wesen* by *structure* came to Piana when translating Husserl's *Logical Investigation* into Italian, and its hermeneutic function is very much to provide an immanent interpretation of the Husserlian text itself, to deploy its own meaning, not to invest or contaminate it with another point of view. If anything, as Piana remarks, it is the standard translation of *Wesen* by *essence* that con-

veys to Husserl's analyses a Platonic meaning which they do not necessarily carry.

As truthful and convincing as Piana's own distancing from structuralism may sound and actually be from the strict perspective of the inner development of his own thought, a contextual approach suggests however that, at the very least, one should not understand Piana's reticence as an explicit rejection of structural thought as a whole, but rather of the specific moment of structuralism's "French" period in the 1960s. Indeed, when Piana proposed the translation to his master Paci, his suggestion was rejected "with horror" (cf. de Monticelli 2020) because of the probable association with French structuralist theories. If one turns, however, to the definition of structure that Piana provides after the two above-mentioned comments, however, one sees no such dramatic contrast:

> The word 'structure' implies here the idea of a skeleton, of an internal schema, a sort of internal constitution–in short, the idea of a characteristic form which, in my opinion, directly prescribes its goal to all phenomenological research.

Or again: "the phenomenological method seeks to characterise acts of experience by outlining their differences in structure". Such a definition could have been voiced by Jakobson or Hjelmslev, and the concepts of "structural method" and "structural research" could replace "phenomenological" here without problem.

My point here is not to force a structuralist origin or the use of structuralist references into Piana's work but simply, as was the case with the other figures mentioned here, to outline a certain way in which these two traditions effectively met. In Piana's case, his inclination towards structuralism seems to have happened in a way that is almost entirely immanent (but with some help from Gestalt psychology) to his conception of phenomenology as a method of laying bare the structures of experience. This in itself is of course a powerful argument in favour of a general compatibility and commonality of aims and methods between structuralism and phenomenology. Piana, indeed, shows that it is possible for the exponent of one of the traditions, rooted what is more in an exposition and

development of that tradition through dialogue and self examination, to land upon the formulation of a theory that expresses general and fundamental aims that are deeply connected, if not identical in spirit with those of the other tradition.

4. Prague and its Russian emigration

I would like to conclude this paper by tying the figures and works considered and compared so far from a conceptual point of view to a common historical context and geographical space. The reason for providing this context at the end rather than at the beginning of this paper is that I do not wish to present it as the causal framework or vector of the encounters between structuralism and phenomenology. Rather, the relevance of this context appears as an after-thought, as a result of noticing the conceptual convergences between the *Moscow Linguistic Circle*, Pos, Megrelidze, Tran Duc Thao and even Piana and asking if they might not have something more in common than their double interest for structuralism (or structural thought more generally) and phenomenology. The hypotheses I offer here are thus nothing more than an invitation to think about their common context in further detail and to thus potentially discover further essential features of the historical encounters between the two paradigms (which for lack of space and research, I cannot yet fully provide here). In that sense also, my suggestions are certainly not exclusive, they hint only towards the existence of *at least one* concrete historical time and space where phenomenology and structuralism consistently interacted.

The common context of all the mentioned thinkers is the intellectual milieu of interwar Prague (1918–1938), and in particular, the strong but often overlooked presence there of Russian émigrés. The most famous of these émigrés was of course Jakobson himself, one of the key organisers of Prague structuralism. Jakobson allows us to tie all the actors of the *Moscow Linguistic Circle* (Špet, Šor, Königsberg) as well as Pos firmly to the Prague context, two connections that are well established and which we mentioned as such above. Further, the polemics between Špet, Šor and Jakobson over the role of expression and social factors in language, and the general con-

text of early Soviet debates around language also provide a direct link to Megrelidze. The same applies, although in a much more indirect manner to Tran Duc Thao, who was keenly interested in Soviet debates on language (cf. d'Alonzo 2017). Albeit in differing ways and perhaps not always with direct knowledge of parallel efforts, one can tentatively suggest that almost all attempts before WWII to bring structuralism and phenomenology together were linked to the Soviet intellectual revolutions of the 1920s (Russian formalism, Michail Bachtin, Valentin N. Vološinov, Nikolaj J. Marr, Lev S. Vygotskij) and their explorations of new ways to think about language and the historical constitution of meaning.

This diagnosis seems to hold also for post-war attempts: this is true of Merleau-Ponty, who was profoundly influenced by Pos, Lévi-Straus and Jakobson. But it also seems to apply to Piana. One can start by noting Piana's concern for art and aesthetics, which places him spiritually close to Jakobson's poetics. But one also finds many direct links to the Prague context: one such link is the Russian émigré philosopher Boris Jakovenko (1884–1949). A student of Windelband and Rickert, he produced a philosophy which, through critical studies of Husserl and Hegel, transformed basic Neo-kantian tenets in the direction of a so-called "transcendental intuitivism". Jakovenko himself lived in Italy for almost a decade and kept close contacts with prominent Italian philosophers and intellectuals (e.g. his correspondence with Benedetto Croce, cf. Renna 2004). Of particular interest to us here is his activity as the editor of the Prague-based journal *Der russische Gedanke* (*Russian thought),* the first two volumes of which were dedicated to Masaryk (Jakovenko 1930) and in which one finds contributions by Italian philosophers such as Benedetto Croce, Antonio Aliotta and, most importantly to us, Piero Martinetti, one of the founders of the Milan School. If nothing else, this combination of Jakovenko's relations with Italy (which also include his involvement as editor of the journal Logos, published in German, Russian and Italian versions), the interest of Croce and Martinetti for Masaryk, and Masaryk's own ties to Brentano and Husserl certainly constitute an interesting background to the early story of Italian phenomenology.

As mentioned, these connections on their own do not mean anything and should not be taken as the condition for justifying the conceptual convergence of structuralism and phenomenology. They do however strongly emphasis the multilateral, entangled and persistent character of structuralism's and phenomenology's many encounters, their constant recourse to foundational texts such as Husserl's *Logical Investigations* and Marty's *Untersuchungen,* as well as general tendencies (a strong focus on the epistemic role of art, on aesthetics, on the notions of expression and form, and a frequent engagement with neo-Kantianism, a sensitivity to the inter-subjective, social aspects of consciousness). The fragile, often fluctuant and evanescent quality of the network of "structural phenomenology" also underlines under how much political and ideological pressure it came, having to face directly the disastrous impact of the Russian Revolution, Stalinist repression, the two World Wars and the Cold War.

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