Reflections

The Slavic Linguistics Society Comes of Age

Steven Franks

The Slavic Linguistics Society recently met for the tenth time. The most recent annual meeting was held in the ancient university city of Heidelberg during the gloriously warm and sunny early September of 2015. There in the beautiful Alte Aula of the oldest university in Germany, I had the opportunity to reflect on the history of the field in general and on the growth of our organization in particular. This column recapitulates my comments at that presentation and elaborates on some of the points made. As such, it serves as a taking stock, after ten years of efforts to create an organization that comprehends the diverse needs, interests, and expectations of those students and scholars for whom Slavic languages hold endless fascination. It also looks back to the last Reflections piece I wrote, almost twenty years ago ("Building Bridges," *JSL* 4(1): 1–7).

In my mind, the story of SLS finds its origins in the first meeting of Formal Approaches to Slavic Linguistics, which took place in March 1992 at the University of Michigan. Although that first meeting, organized by Jindra Toman, was by invitation only, FASL quickly became a regular annual event, with increasingly competitive papers and solid proceedings. What I recall feeling after that meeting, however, was an overwhelming sense of how narrow and parochial it had been. The field, I realized, needed a forum that would be more ecumenical for the sharing of ideas of all sorts. We should be global, not insular; inclusive, not exclusive. And from that desire the *Journal of Slavic Linguistics* was born. George Fowler and I immediately got *JSL* rolling and the first issue appeared in 1993; I took over as Editor-in-Chief in 1997. The point of *JSL* was (and remains) to serve the *entire* population of Slavic linguists, regardless of theoretical orientation or topic of inquiry. As such, it gradually evolved to include a variety of formats and lengths, from topical issues to reprints of obscure papers, from brief remarks to lengthy papers, from annotated bibliographies, reviews, and review articles to

Journal of Slavic Linguistics 23(2): 189–96, 2015.

Reflections columns such as this one and to In Memorium pieces such as the one in this issue for for our dear friends Jens Norgard-Sørensen and Charlie Townsend. But the real change took place in 2006, when *JSL* was adopted as the official journal of a new society—this very organization in fact: the Slavic Linguistics Society. Since then, *JSL* and SLS have together both grown and grown together. We now have about 160 paying members and there are over 1000 subscribers to the SLS Facebook site. (Facebook is of course free to join, and it suggests potential for further membership growth.)

While this chronology of the journal anteceding the society may be somewhat unusual, it makes perfect sense in that both arose to fill the same niche. Other meetings (with proceedings but not formal organizations) such as FASL or its European counterpart Formal Description of Slavic Languages (essentially German, with its biennial meetings alternating between Potsdam and Leipzig, the 11th of which was in Potsdam this December) tended to be too specialized. And this was even more true of the so-called ".5" or "halftime" FDSL meetings, four of which have now taken place alongside the larger, more general meetings. The Slavic Cognitive Linguistics Association, founded in 2000 by Laura Janda and Stephen Dickey, also has its annual meetings, but these are narrower still in focus. As for larger organizations with annual meetings that might include (or at least tolerate) Slavic linguistics, most are national organizations and all are far too broad. (I have in mind groups such as the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages, the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (formerly the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, but still fundamentally American), the British Association for Slavonic and East European Studies, the Canadian Association of Slavists, and others). It was thus clear that, just as we needed a journal to serve the field at large, we needed an international organization dedicated specifically to Slavic linguistics. This was SLS, which, to quote from our web pages, is described as follows:

> **The Slavic Linguistics Society:** A professional organization devoted to the systematic and scholarly study of the Slavic languages. The organization brings together academics from Europe and North America (and elsewhere) through an annual conference that alternates between North American and European institutions, a mailing list, and other activities. It seeks to

promote dialogue across different sub-disciplines of linguistics and theoretical frameworks.

It took a few years for this vision to emerge. My experience as a vice-president of AATSEEL only served to bring home how marginalized the subfield of Slavic linguistics was within the U.S. community of Slavists. Organizations like AATSEEL did not reach out to the growing contingent of general linguists working on Slavic from a more theoretical and less language-teaching oriented perspective. So in December 2004 I organized a roundtable discussion panel at AATSEEL in Philadelphia with the transparent title Founding an Organization of Slavic Linguists. The participants in the panel were mostly my comrades-in-arms at the time, and consisted of: John Bailyn, Christina Bethin, David Birnbaum, Wayles Browne, Barbara Citko, George Fowler, Steven Franks, Jim Lavine, Laura Janda, Gil Rappaport, Catherine Rudin, and Jindřich Toman. Although this group was admittedly not noticeably international, it was a fairly eclectic group of indivuals who helped to define our future that day. The eventual result was SLS, with its first meeting in Bloomington in September 2006. I have to confess I did not anticipate the level of enthusiasm that permeated that initial meeting. We had three parallel sessions with roughly 90 talks and 120 participants. More to the point, going in we expected that SLS would meet every other year, just as, say, FDSL and the Balkan and South Slavic Linguistics, Literature, and Folklore Conference do, but there was overwhelming interest among the participants to hold annual meetings. There were also surprising bids to host future conferences. The minutes from that first meeting state that we went *four* years out with potential hosts: the Zentrum für Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft, Typologie, und Universalienforschung (ZAS) offered to organize the 2007 meeting in Berlin, an offer which was accepted with applause, and The Ohio State University expressed interest in organizing the 2008 meeting in Columbus, likewise accompanied by applause. Interest was also expressed by the University of Washington in Seattle for 2009, although that was ultimately deferred until 2014, and the University of Chicago proposed 2010, which indeed transpired. We decided not to make commitments for more than two years out—a decision which led in Berlin the next year to the idea of alternating between the New World and the Old. We have since held to that, as reflected in the follow table of meetings, past, current, and projected:

Even Years	Odd Years
Bloomington, Indiana (2006)	Berlin, Germany (2007)
Columbus, Ohio (2008)	Zadar, Croatia (2009)
Chicago, Illinois (2010)	Aix-en-Provence, France (2011)
Lawrence, Kansas (2012)	Szczecin, Poland (2013)
Seattle, Washington (2014)	Heidelberg, Germany (2015)
Toronto, Canada (2016)	Ljubljana, Slovenia (2017)

I have been to every single one of these meetings and may well end up organizing SLS 2018 again in Bloomington as my swan song at IU. With that in mind, I have to say that, while each meeting has had its own unique character, all have been both lively and fun. More importantly, these meetings have successfully brought together from around the world Slavists and general linguists doing research into the description and analysis of Slavic languages. They have more than met their goal of fostering the exchange of ideas and the building of bridges, bridges between Slavic linguists of diverse stripes.

The topic of building bridges led me to re-read my 1996 Reflections piece of that title. There I was concerned not with the building of bridges to facilitate communication among those who call themselves Slavic linguists, but rather with the building of bridges between those who see themselves as general linguists and those who are more at home being Slavists. Indeed, I even questioned the rationale and viability of a linguistic science constrained by language group, arguing that our broad discipline is properly construed not as some subset of Slavic Studies, but rather of as a branch of Linguistics where its practitioners are predominantly concerned with Slavic languages.

I tried, not without difficulty, to remember why I said what I had said back then. To be honest, much of what I wrote strikes me today more like wishful thinking rather than prophecy. Ever since my undergraduate days at Princeton, where I was torn between the meat and potatoes of Slavic grammar, generously served to me by my undergraduate advisor, the late Charles Townsend, and the popular but mysterious broth of generative grammar for which I quickly developed a taste, I felt that Slavic linguists should pay more attention to what general linguists were doing. In fact, I wanted Slavic linguists to pay *so much* attention that general linguists would no longer even think of us as "Slavic" linguists.

Like many of us of my generation, I was weaned on Townsend's magnificent 1968 textbook *Russian Word-Formation*. Because I managed to place into third year Russian—having had four years in high school plus a summer at IU's Summer Workshop in Slavic and East European Languages (now the IU Summer Language Workshop)—without learning much about morphology, I ended up enjoying twice weekly personal meetings with Charlie to remedy my ignorance. We went through the book page by page, discussing its intricacies, and when we were done I was well on my way to becoming a bona fide Slavic linguist. (After that I joined some more advanced students and we read Jakobson's "Nabljudenija" and other essential texts of the period.)

Naturally, this experience, as well as Charlie's urging me to learn about the then current rage, transformational-generative grammar (affectionately known as TGG),[1] made me also hungry for general linguistics. I had to figure out what this TGG was, and why Charlie thought it would be so important to pursue. So I signed up for whatever was being offered. My first such course, taught by Joe Emonds, was deceptively billed as the history of English.[2] Great, I was finally learning about the stuff Charlie expected me to, although I must confess it all really baffled me. It was sink or swim. Here too I recall a telling moment, a conversation with Joe in Spring 1974. He asked me "Why Slavic?" and when I started to explain the puzzles that fascinated me, he pointed out that the real reason might be much more mundane: there was so very little going on in Slavic generative grammar back then that a college freshman could read it all and by junior year already arrive at the frontiers of the field. In other words, it would be much easier for me to become a big fish in a small sea by studying Slavic generative linguistics than, say, French, let alone math or economics. And that is what I ended up spending an entire career doing: trying to meld Charlie's structuralist wisdom with the elusive abstractions of generative grammar.[3]

[1] The irony here of course is that Charles Townsend never particularly valued generative grammar himself. But even then he understood that it was going to reshape the field.

[2] This was in truth nothing more than a thinly disguised course on generative grammar. Emonds, a rising star in theoretical syntax at the time, spent the 1973–74 academic year visiting Princeton in order to write his now classic book *A Transformational Approach to English Syntax: Root, Structure-Preserving, and Local Transformations*.

[3] Throughout my career Charlie continued to have impact on whatever I did. I stayed in touch with him throughout graduate school, visiting him and his family often, and later arranged for him to spend part of his summers teaching Czech at the federal

In this light, my 1996 exhortation to build bridges between Slavists and linguists strikes me as unabashedly self-serving. I wanted company. And my upbeat musings about changes I thought were in progress now seem, from the perspective of 2015, to have been particularly naïve. (Oh future, I wonder, will we look as quaint to you as the past looks today to us?) In 1996, I optimistically described how linguistics was evolving in the context of AATSEEL, how the panels were not only blossoming in number and diversity, but also coming to reflect more linguistically informed topical divisions. In January 2016, alas, we do not even see on the program the three traditional mainstays of East Slavic Linguistics, West Slavic Linguistics, and South Slavic Linguistics (let alone the latter's poor cousin Balkan Linguistics). Vanishingly little Slavic linguistics now remains at AATSEEL. What happened, instead, was the founding of SLS. Our organization—born of AATSEEL as related above—had grown up and moved out. We Slavic linguists are proudly and self-sufficiently living on our own, with our own general (and truly international) annual meeting, alongside a variety of specialized gatherings.

But a true melding of Slavic and general linguistics did not take place. While membership is mixed, for the most part SLS is an organization of Slavists which draws general linguists into its orbit on an episodic basis. It is an autonomous, non-denominational organization of scholars interested in diverse aspects of the workings of Slavic languages. *JSL*, I like to think, mirrors this. It thus strikes me that, within the Slavic Linguistics Society as a whole, general linguists are occasional, albeit very welcome and often essential, fellow travelers. Although this was not exactly what I foresaw when the organization was conceived, and I still anticipate greater integration of general linguists, the situation is (in my opinion and for the time being) healthy and stable.

Finally, I would like to talk about two forces which I think have helped to set Slavic linguistics apart and make who we are, what we do, and how we think special. For one thing, to a far greater extent than most other language-oriented linguistic disciplines, Slavic inherited a wealth of theoretical and analytical traditions from the countries where our languages are spoken. That is, scholars in places like Prague and Moscow were discovering how language worked in general rather than

agency where I was employed for a few years after getting my PhD. He returned the favor by promoting me to Ron Feldstein for a position at IU, a job I got and have remained in for almost 30 years.

just describing Czech or Russian. They were inventing models and theories, and they took these ideas as they emigrated to the West. Trubetzkoy, for example, left Russia in 1920 and settled in Austria in 1922, and at around the same time Jakobson too relocated to Prague. (He later of course escaped from Prague and made his way to the United States.) Strength and unity of purpose thus came in opposition to Stalin and Hitler and their minions. After the war this energy to study all things Slavic was fueled by the US government and the Cold War. The community of Slavists and Slavic linguists which arose in the United States in particular was one where we were all working together, even if we had very different beliefs about the nature of language. Moreover, from the early days throughout the 1950s, 60s, and 70s and even into the 80s, a critical mass of this community was made up of linguists. But then something remarkable happened: the world changed.

Thanks to the euphoria accompanying late Soviet *glasnost'* and *perestroika*, we saw Russian language enrollments rise and peak in the United States in 1990–91, when Russian briefly became the fourth most commonly studied foreign language in the country. Brave new worlds were opening up as nation after nation in Eastern Europe and the republics of the former USSR achieved independence. This meant a new wave of linguists, especially young ones, flowing into North American and Western European academia. More often than not, these were individuals who, as linguists, worked on Slavic languages because they were native speakers of some Slavic language rather than because they had any special training in Slavic linguistics per se. This was an important force in the 1990s and 2000s, bringing general linguists and Slavists together. The Slavic linguistics community welcomed these Slavs, recognizing that, despite differences in perspective, training, and goals, we were all part of the same enterprise. The constituency of conference participants, especially FASL and FDSL, reflected this new melting pot, as speakers became as likely to have their homes in linguistics departments as in language, literature, and culture departments.

I like to see myself as archetypical here, with a BA in Slavic, a PhD in Linguistics, and a 50–50 academic appointment shared between these two units throughout my career. I publish in both Slavic and general venues and collaborate equally comfortably with both Slavists and general linguists. At Indiana University, I have even chaired both departments. I see this not as something schizophrenic, but rather as extremely productive and conducive to effective teaching and research. There was (and continues to be) a lot of cross-fertilization and collab-

oration. Organizations such as SLS and journals such as *JSL* facilitate this kind of sharing of ideas. As it should be.

I must end, however, on a pessimistic note. We have long known that the future is uncertain for Departments of Slavic Languages and Literatures (or for the ever more popular variants which elaborate with specifications such as "and East European" and/or replace "Literature" with "Culture"). But the rationale for keeping linguists in such departments is disappearing even more quickly. Academics need jobs, not just organizations and journals. And it seems to me that little has changed on that front for us as Slavic linguists: we either teach our language(s) of expertise, we market ourselves as linguists first, or we diversify our Slavic portfolio.

Either way, the lessons here are simple: we should put aside differences of background and perspective, put aside our different goals and expectations. Instead, we must work together, pull together, and most importantly come together—precisely as we do through SLS. There simply aren't enough of us folks who love to think about how Slavic languages work to do anything else!

Slavic and East European Languages and Cultures
Indiana University
GISB—4th floor
355 N. Jordan Ave.
Bloomington, IN 47405-1105 USA
franks@indiana.edu

Received: October 2015