

**ТЕОРЕТИЧЕСКАЯ, ПРИКЛАДНАЯ И СРАВНИТЕЛЬНО-СОПОСТАВИТЕЛЬНАЯ
ЛИНГВИСТИКА/THEORETICAL, APPLIED AND COMPARATIVE LINGUISTICS**DOI: <https://doi.org/10.60797/RULB.2026.75.2>**THE EXTREMISM OF BRODSKY'S LINGUOCULTURAL VIEWS**

Research article

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Abstract

Joseph Brodsky's linguacultural thought is marked by extremism and paradox, blending Christian ethics, existential philosophy and linguistic ontology. He posits language as a transcendent entity independent of material reality, with poets serving as its self-realizing instruments. His theory of "poetic relativity" asserts language's absolute dominance over thought, positioning poetry as humanity's evolutionary apex and the sole repository of civilizational continuity.

Scholarly reception of Brodsky's ideas is polarized. Supporters like Czesław Miłosz applaud his deepening of Russian literary linguistic self-awareness, while critics such as J. M. Coetzee critique his "linguistic fetishism" for eroding poetic agency. Chinese scholars emphasize his ontological view of language, poetic Salvationism, and philosophical linguistic turn, though they question his overemphasis on poet's passivity.

Key unresolved debates include the essence of language's poetic function, the validity of extremist theories, and implications for cross-cultural translation. Brodsky's candid interviews—where he explicitly deifies language (e.g., "Language is god") — offer critical insights yet remain underexplored. Future research should integrate his creative practice with philosophical roots to assess his methodology's value for contemporary linguistics, literary criticism, and cultural studies.

Keywords: Joseph Brodsky, linguacultural theory, poetic relativity, linguistic ontology, extremism, existentialism.

КРАЙНОСТЬ ЛИНГВОКУЛЬТУРОЛОГИЧЕСКИХ ВЗГЛЯДОВ БРОДСКОГО

Научная статья

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Аннотация

Лингвокультурная концепция Иосифа Бродского отличается крайностью и парадоксальностью, сочетая христианскую этику, экзистенциальную философию и лингвистическую онтологию. Он рассматривает язык как трансцендентную сущность, независимую от материальной реальности, а поэтов — как инструменты её самореализации. Его теория «поэтической относительности» утверждает абсолютное господство языка над мышлением, позиционируя поэзию вершиной человеческого эволюционного развития и единственным хранилищем цивилизационной преемственности.

Учёное восприятие идей Бродского полярно разделено. Поддерживающие его учёные хвалят его за углубление лингвистического самосознания русской литературы, в то время как критики, например, критикуют его «лингвистический фетишизм» за эрозию поэтического агенства. Китайские учёные подчеркивают его онтологическое понимание языка, поэтический спасенизм и философский лингвистический поворот, однако высказывают сомнения относительно чрезмерного подчеркивания пассивности поэта.

Ключевые нерешенные споры включают сущность поэтической функции языка, обоснованность теорий и последствия для кросскультурного перевода. Откровенные интервью Бродского — где он явно обожествляет язык — предоставляют важные выводы, но остаются недостаточно изученными. Будущие исследования должны интегрировать его творческий практику с философскими корнями, чтобы оценить ценность его методологии для современной лингвистики, литературной критики и культурных исследований.

Ключевые слова: Иосиф Бродский, лингвокультурная теория, поэтическая относительность, лингвистическая онтология, крайность, экзистенциализм.

Introduction

Brodsky, a globally acclaimed literary and cultural figure, articulated profound views on language and culture in his works. This paper, based on as exhaustive a collection as possible of writings by and about Joseph Brodsky, employs textual analysis and motif analysis to examine and synthesize Brodsky's perspectives on language and culture. These insights serve as a positive reference for further refining the theoretical foundations of linguistic and cultural studies, as well as for advancing the theoretical development of the philosophy of language and literary criticism.

Foreign critiques of Brodsky's linguacultural ideas vary. Some align with Russian literary traditions, endorsing his perspectives [25, P. 6–7], while others express reservations [29, P. 4–5].



Chinese scholars have, through comprehensive translation and analysis, identified several key arguments in Brodsky's work. First and foremost is the principle of linguistic primacy, as language progressively assumes overriding importance in Brodsky's poetry [32, P. 49–51]. This view is rooted in the ontological understanding that language is Being, with poetry representing its highest form and aesthetics necessarily preceding ethics [15, P. 120–122]. For Brodsky, language became the sole material and spiritual sustenance for survival [23, P. 28–33], leading to his conception of poetry as a civilizational savior, encapsulated in the assertion that "poetry salvages civilization" [19, P. 60–64]. Ultimately, among all human creations, language serves as the bridge between past and future; poetry, as the most ordered combination of language, embodies linguistic perfection itself [20, P. 5–13].

However, dissenting voices argue that Brodsky "exaggerates poetic passivity during composition, likely stemming from his loyalty to — and fetishization of — language" [22, P. 74–85]. This body of scholarship points to several avenues for further inquiry: the essence of Brodsky's linguacultural theory, critical evaluations of his perspectives, and the poetic function of language. Brodsky himself addressed these themes in works such as Brodsky [3] and interviews [4], [5], [6], [7], although Chinese-accessible interview materials remain limited [10]. His candid dialogues offer direct insights that are crucial for advancing linguoculturology and translational studies [14].

Brodsky's Foundational Worldview

Brodsky's self-accounts serve as the foundation for understanding his thoughts. He declares that he is a Christian because he is not a barbarian. He reveres the Old Testament's themes of divine judgment, emphasizing individual responsibility. Christianity, for him, represents a cultural, structural, and configurative force. His work abounds with Christian elements — especially Old Testament motifs — with his Judaic leanings evident in metaphysical poems like *Isaac and Abraham*. He aligns poetic and translational labor with biblical exegesis but clarifies that he is absolutely Jewish and has no sense of identification with Orthodoxy. He acknowledges Russia's Christian cultural framework, stating that Christianity exists in his poetry through language itself. His theology lacks systematic form yet gravitates toward Kierkegaard, Shestov, and late Auden's existentialism, bordering on poetic/rhythmic mythologization.

On epistemology, he states that few in his profession claim systematic thought; at worst, they borrow it from environment, institutions, or childhood philosophical exertions [9, P. 33]. This hints at materialist inclinations.

Brodsky rejects ritualized religion, describing his deity as "a bearer of absolute contingency, unconstrained will" — echoing the Old Testament's punitive God. While he never systematized his ideas, scholarships on his work have established a coherent theory. Compiled evidence confirms his unique linguacultural doctrine.

In self-definition, he writes that he is neither a moral man (though he strives for ethical balance) nor a saint, neither an aesthete nor a philosopher. He identifies as a neurotic governed by circumstances or his own actions yet observant, emphasizing that he has no principles — only nerves. He concludes that it is more about eyes than convictions, as sight precedes belief [13, P. 19].

Regarding rationality, he states that he does not believe in reason's limitless power or in irrationality. He asserts that he trusts reason only because it leads him toward irrationality — that is its purpose, pushing him as far as possible — before abandoning him and creating momentary panic. He contends that revelation occurs not in capturing reason but in the mark it leaves, emphasizing this has little to do with orthodoxy. He explicitly rejects formal rituals, clarifying that if he conceptualizes a supreme being, it would be absolute free will. He further reveals a preference for the punitive Old Testament God or the Zoroastrian version, which he considers perhaps the cruelest, claiming to embrace arbitrariness more thoroughly than Israeli Jews. He concludes by stating that if he believes in anything, it is in arbitrary divinity [26, P. 58–72].

Regarding "language as god", he states that Russia's harsh anti-religious education stripped him of afterlife beliefs, hence his focus on degrees of "capriciousness". He argues that if there is a deity, it must be language, describing writing as an excavation and progression that grants freedom to voice overlooked truths — a gift of language. He emphasizes that language serves as an incredible cognitive accelerator, thereby earning his reverence [26, P. 58–72].

Temperamentally Calvinist, he asserts that he judges himself more harshly than any god could, refusing to defer judgment or trust external verdicts. He argues that self-judgment surpasses divine mercy, identifying himself as his own implacable final judge. He adds that he does not plead, merely hoping to act in ways pleasing to the divine.

His lyrical protagonists often lack Russia's celebrated "warm heart". Brodsky systematically distances poetry from the world, consciously "cooling" it into absolute images of isolation, perfection, and death — a philosophy of stillness and mortality. His prose centers on existential annihilation: the cooling of worlds, emotions, bodies, and humanity. Studying his work demands engagement with its absolute and extremist dimensions. His core worldview paradoxes:

- Materialist empiricism coexists with idealist linguistic divinity.
- Rationality serves as a tool to access irrational revelation.
- Self-judgment supplants divine redemption.
- Judaic themes intersect with Russian Orthodox cultural substrata.
- Dual extremism: "belief in arbitrary gods" and "language as god".

Concept and Reality

In linguoculturology, one critical category is *концепт* (concept). How does Brodsky interpret this concept? Brodsky posits that raw reality is insignificant until *концепт* elevates it to meaning. Concepts form hierarchical systems (with corresponding meaning hierarchies), where those filtered through the most refined and sensitive prisms occupy the apex. Refinement and sensitivity derive from their sole source: culture/civilization, whose primary tool is language. Thus, evaluating reality through such prisms yields the most accurate — and perhaps just — interpretations [11, P. 127]. When civilizations falter, it is language — not military might — that preserves their coherence [11, P. 137]. Russian's highly inflectional nature — nouns at sentence ends, declension variations for gender/number/case — imparts three-dimensionality to *концепт*, sharpening and evolving ideas during expression [11, P. 103].



Brodsky also addresses *понятие* through vivid imagery: "When navigating the unique semantics of a foreign kingdom like Russia, you can at least console yourself with the awareness of becoming a victim of something. Your analytical habits — dissecting experience via language (English) — impoverish intuition. A neat *понятие* is beautiful but always simplifies meaning, severing messy ends. Yet those ends matter most in reality, where they interweave" [11, P. 24].

Brodsky's poetic works embody linguoculturological *концепт-понятие* relationships [27]. His *Elegy* (1960) contrasts lived experience with rationality/logic through images, privileging holistic existence over analytical frameworks — a quintessentially Russian philosophical stance. This extreme opposition recurs in *Now I Often Feel Exhausted* (1960), where soul clashes with reason. These poems form conceptual polarities, expressing Brodsky's engagement with cultural traditions like death, rebirth, fate, heaven. His efforts to transcend convention manifest in radical semantic structures that demand systematic analysis.

Poetic Relativity

We argue that Brodsky developed his perspective of "poetic relativity" based on the linguistic relativity hypothesis [8, P. 10]. This idea recurs throughout Brodsky's essays, with the following prerequisite knowledge he deemed necessary for readers to grasp his viewpoint: "Before one learns to turn his phrases into a cartload of meaning... before these things [soul, verses, etc.] course through his veins, he remains part of the speechless tribe. Most people belong to this group, which might offer some solace" [12, P. 219].

Philosophically, Brodsky's thought traces back to Humboldt, who shared Kant's position: consciousness exists as an independent entity governed by its own laws, separate from material reality. "Language is the totality of the soul, developing according to spiritual principles" [17, P. 210]. Each linguistic structure represents a distinct cognitive framework, with linguistic diversity reflecting perspectival pluralism. Humboldt emphasized the inseparable unity of thought and language — a view anticipatory of Marx's materialist assertion that "language is the sole reality of thought" [17, P. 211].

Brodsky aligned with 1930s-40s linguist Edward Sapir, who posited those grammatical structures shape speakers' worldviews [18, P. 286]. Sapir likened language to phonographic grooves guiding mental processes. Heidegger argued that Being actualizes only through language, while Auden added that poets sustain language's vitality [18, P. 140].

Brodsky maintained that besides existence itself, language fundamentally shapes consciousness [11, P. 160]. As humanity's oldest living force, language teaches poets its sounds, wisdom, and foresight [9, P. 79]. Language — specifically poetry as its highest form — defines humanity's purpose: he asserts that if anything distinguishes humans from other animals, it is language, which is literature, including poetry. He states bluntly that poetry is the goal of the human species [9, P. 37].

Only poets recognize that what common language calls "the Muse's voice" is actually language asserting its agency: "Language is not his tool — he is its means of survival" [9, P. 43]. He states that Muse's voice is language's voice and argues that it is essentially humanity's response to all we hear and read [26, P. 58–72].

Poetry represents language's apex, providing "the highest possible standard for linguistic operations — especially those on paper" [9, P. 68]. Without poetry, societies risk linguistic degradation, adopting "the language of politicians, businessmen, and charlatans... thereby losing evolutionary potential, since speech alone distinguishes us from animals" [12, P. 218].

Drawing from interviews and critical sources [1, P. 96–120], [2], [4, P. 183–189], [5, P. 202–206], we distill Brodsky's own explanations of "linguistic relativity" and "poetic relativity", clarifying his linguistic-cultural theory:

1. Language as Autonomous Entity: Language predates individual poets and operates independently like nature. Poets merely "gather its ripe fruits". Literary works like *Dead Souls* or *The Possessed* emerged not from geography but from linguistic imperatives. Poetry constitutes humanity's biological purpose and evolutionary beacon, with poets embodying linguistic perfection.

2. Poetry's Transcendent Logic: Literature operates beyond existential constraints. Writers serve as tools of historically prior languages, which possess inherent directionality. Brodsky's Russian-language works resist translation, as English prose he later wrote could not be authentically rendered back into Russian.

3. Language as Metaphysical Homeland: Exiled from Russia, Brodsky deified language: "Only speech is homeland". Patriotism equates to linguistic devotion. The Russian language became his transcendent substitute for physical Russia, purified of oppressive realities.

4. Baroque Metaphoric: Russian lacked tools for existential inquiry until Brodsky imported European baroque techniques. His "remote metaphors" followed linguistic logic rather than authorial intent, surprising even him.

5. Language as World Antithesis: Brodsky aligned with Heidegger ("Language is the house of Being") but rejected nihilism. He viewed language as divinely bestowed, greater than humanity, and inherently sacred.

6. Linguistic Necessity: Brodsky emerged to restore Soviet-era corrupted Russian, countering political jargon and camp slang through poetic renewal.

7. Spiritual Linguistic Foundation: Brodsky sought solace in language rather than faith, mirroring 20th-century linguistic philosophy. He described himself as "half-horse, half-rider" — the horse being language guiding his poetic journey.

8. Poetry's Cognitive Function: Reading poetry accelerates spiritual evolution through semantic-sonic synthesis. A single poem can encompass vast mental landscapes, yielding enduring revelations: "You become the poem's linguistic state... evolution consists in acquiring this irrecoverable fullness" [12, P. 220].

While Brodsky never explicitly used "poetic relativity", his theories demonstrate this concept through innovations in Russian prosody, complex syntax, and translational experimentation. His ideas rest on both lived experience and mastery of literary traditions, solidifying his claim that poetry represents language's ultimate form.

Critical Evaluation

Konradshov's *History of Linguistic Theories* critiques Humboldt's doctrines, anthropological linguistics, and Neo-Humboldtianism while providing dedicated analysis of the methodological foundations of dialectical materialism and historical materialism [16, P. 55–63, 202–205, 205–208]. Essentially, language constitutes an intricate interweaving of material and ideal



components, serving all dimensions of human activity. Language represents practical, concrete consciousness existing both for others and thereby for oneself. Like consciousness itself, language emerged solely from necessity — the urgent need for social interaction [16, P. 222–229].

Matter holds primacy: there exists no pure thought divorced from its natural material form — language serves as thought's immediate actualization. Language shares the same historical trajectory as consciousness. A "soulless" language without consciousness is as impossible as consciousness without language; both originate synchronously and share social essence. Neither thought nor language constitutes an independent realm — they merely manifest lived reality. From its inception, "spirit" remains inherently entangled with matter, here incarnated as vibrating airwaves, sounds — in short, language. Language attests to thought's existence, materializing it into perceptible form for others' sensory faculties.

Thought forms the foundation of linguistic content. Through mental activity — the brain's reflective processes — linguistic units establish relationships with objective phenomena. Without this mediation, human communication would be impossible. Language connects to reality exclusively through thought. Phonetic structures serve as material symbols reflecting objective reality, solidifying cognitive achievements.

Both language and thought represent unique, highly complex phenomena, each with distinct forms and contents. Objective reality enjoys ontological primacy: it imprints upon human consciousness and is designated through linguistic means.

Language's primary function is communication. Secondary functions include cognitive (summarizing/consolidating human knowledge), nominative (naming), and sociocultural (transmitting historical experience). Specific languages "partition" reality according to their own characteristics, encoding both universal and ethnocultural knowledge. Lexical peculiarities reveal distinct conceptualizations of shared phenomena across cultures. While Konradshov rejects interpreting these nominative differences as evidence of divergent racial thinking, he acknowledges unique internal word-formations across languages. Additional non-universal functions include expressive, aesthetic, and poetic dimensions — especially complex poetic functions lacking definitive interpretations.

Zvyagintsev's *Outline of General Linguistics* reviews Humboldt's and others' perspectives on language-thought relations [33, P. 325–366]. New developments in philosophy and linguistics—especially cognitive linguistics and linguacultural studies — necessitate reevaluating Soviet-era textbook perspectives. Qian Guanlian has expanded upon Sapir-Whorf's linguistic relativity hypothesis and Heidegger's theories, adapting them to Chinese academic terminology [24, P. 233–274].

Brodsky's linguistic-cultural perspectives focus primarily on sociocultural and poetic functions. Given the unresolved nature of poetic function debates, his insights demand serious consideration—hence the significance of systematizing his theories. Brodsky emphasizes language's ideational/spiritual dimensions and relative autonomy, focusing on individuals' engagement with linguistic-cultural legacies. He highlights language's preexistence and constraining influence on individual thought/expression. From a materialist standpoint, language/culture remain secondary forms of consciousness. Brodsky's emphasis on language's reactive power reflects his ideological "extremism". Nonetheless, integrating Brodsky's valid insights remains valuable. His perspectives on language's constraining effects on individual praxis provide fruitful material for ongoing discourse.

Conclusion

"Russia's soul lacks the quality of moderation. Russians do not have a buffering intermediate layer connecting the links between two extremes. The contradictions within Russians directly abut one another, their harsh friction tearing at the soul. Rudeness and gentleness, cruelty and sentimentality, sensuality and asceticism, sin and holiness — these coexist side by side", outlining the fundamental coordinates of Russian character. Russian identity represents a complex amalgamation of Eastern and Western archetypes, with Russian history reflecting alternating influences from both spheres [8, P. 4–31]. Brodsky maintained close ties with both the Soviet Union and Russia, and his viewpoints similarly exhibit characteristics of extremism. From a poetic perspective, Brodsky's verse from the 1990s demonstrates that the hidden structure of his poetic thinking [mentality — see 28] remained unchanged despite a 30-year gap compared to his 1960s works.

Конфликт интересов

Не указан.

Рецензия

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Conflict of Interest

None declared.

Review

All articles are peer-reviewed. But the reviewer or the author of the article chose not to publish a review of this article in the public domain. The review can be provided to the competent authorities upon request.

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