In 1977, five years before his death, Roman Jakobson wrote a short article entitled “Mutual Assimilation of Russian Voiced and Voiceless Consonants”, which appeared first in the Bertil Malmberg Festschrift (Jakobson 1978) and was later reprinted in Volume 7 of his Selected Writings (1985). As its opening words indicate (“to sum up the two-decade exchange of insights into the title topic”), this piece is intended to write finis to a controversy over one of the most important sectors of the phonological system of contemporary standard Russian, its rules of non-distinctive voicing in obstruents. But on closer examination (as will be shown below) much of what Jakobson there claims as fact turns out to be marginal at best and somewhat dubious at worst. Given the enduring influence of his publications and the undiminished importance of the phenomena under scrutiny to the complete understanding of the contemporary Russian sound system, a final stocktaking of non-distinctive voicing based on a thorough sifting of the published sources is both necessary and long overdue.

The “exchange of insights” referred to by Jakobson is a series of publications whose first installment was his own contribution to the Max Vasmer Festschrift (1956; rpt. with one significant difference, pertaining to the treatment of /ff/, in SW I, 1962 & 1971) and whose most salient reverberations were Shapiro 1966, Jakobson 1968, Andersen 1969, Reformatskij 1975, and Zaliznjak t975. The amnesia induced by twenty five years of separation from the temper of the times makes the 1968 piece (rpt. SW I, 1971) particularly worthy of being reread: with its aporetic first footnote (730) and massive name drop (729) simulating corroboration it provides ample evidence of the emotionalism that colored the debate.¹ In his response, Andersen (126) accurately (if somewhat anodinely) characterized it as “a polemic against Shapiro [that] contains no new data but reiterates Jakobson’s conviction that word final f and f’ in his pronunciation are not subject to ‘genuine assimilative voicing, do not change into [v] or [v’]’ before a word initial obstruent.”²

Whatever its intent, Jakobson 1968 does make one partial concession in the direction of Shapiro 1966. While insisting (731) that “many Muscovites” distinguish in the “explicit code” between дроп бы[fb] съскать and дроп бы [vb] съскать, Лед же [f2] не сдавался (Лед = Левый фронт) and лев же [v2] не сдавался, Jakobson also states (731-32):
He quickly adds, however (732), that "звукность этимологического f в таких примерах, как лифт бы [vdb], не в счет, потому что в подобных словах щелкный губной лишен автономного глухого альтернанта." One cannot help observing, however, that ruling these examples out of court ("не в счет") seems to have as its sole purpose the setting aside of facts that contradict Jakobson's claim (729, 731) about f not being subject to voicing before voiced obstruents. Moreover, in this age of near-universal penetration of the written word, of course no Russian would fail to identify the [f] in лифт with /f/, just as the [v] in Афганыстан would never be identified with anything but the orthographically supported /f/.

Before proceeding one needs to be made aware of the far-reaching conclusions of Andersen, which Jakobson 1978 elides even as it tacitly reflects them. Andersen begins (121) by recapitulating the description of the distribution of voicing in obstruents contained in Jakobson 1956:

I. Voiced and voiceless obstruents are distinguished in position before a vowel, glide, liquid, or nasal of the same word, regardless of whether the latter follows immediately or a v or v' intervenes between the obstruent and the sonorous phoneme.

II. In all other environments only voiced or voiceless obstruents are admitted.
   (a) If an obstruent precedes a voiced obstruent, it becomes voiced, whether or not it is separated from the voiced obstruent by one or two v or v'.
   (b) In all remaining environments obstruents are voiceless.

As Andersen points out (121-122), this formulation of Jakobson's correctly describes the "dual position in the Russian sound system" of v and v': they function as sonorants before sonorants and as obstruents elsewhere (Jakobson 1956, 199). But Jakobson contradicts himself (here and at 1968/1971) by ignoring his own formulation and classifying the phonemes of Russian into

'sonorants' (vowels, the glide j, liquids and nasals) and 'obstruents' (stops, affricates and fricatives, except v and v') which does not accord v, v' dual membership in two phoneme classes. Although v, v' function BOTH as sonorants AND as obstruents, Jakobson classes them NEITHER with the former NOR with the latter. Nor does he set them up as a separate category, intermediate between his 'sonorants' and 'obstruents'. He explicitly treats them as members of the subcategory of fricatives, exceptional only in that they are not included in the class of obstruents. (Andersen, 122)