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Linguistic determinism and the history of early Soviet language planning

Лингвистический детерминизм и история раннего советского языкового планирования

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We cannot wait for favours from Nature.
To take them from it—that is our task
I. V. Michurin, a celebrated Soviet botanist, specialist in plant selection and hybridization.

The following three articles[1] deal with the history of early Soviet linguistics in the period of the 1920–1930s, specifically with a range of theories and practices designed to increase the efficiency of the language as a means of communication which formed a significant chapter in the development of Soviet language studies. These theories were received with various degrees of enthusiasm by both the officials and the academic community of the time, particularly in 1930, as clearly demonstrated in Valerij Gretchko's article on Marr's[2] ideas of the universal language on the one hand and Sébastien Moret's and Alexandr

[1]The articles result from the conference *Sociological Theories of Language in the USSR, 1917–1938* which was organized by the University of Sheffield in September 2006 by Craig Brandist and Katya Chown as a part of the AHRC-funded project *The rise of sociological linguistics in the Soviet Union, 1917–1938: institutions, ideas and agendas*.

[2]Nikolai Marr (1864/5–1934), Georgian-born archaeologist, philologist, specialist in Caucasian languages and culture, author of the so-called *Japhetic theory* (later known as the *New theory of language*) according to which each language type corresponds to a particular stage of socio-economic development of its speakers. Marr rejected the idea of genetic relations between languages and argued that all languages will eventually merge as a result of their multiple hybridization (*skreščivanie*). Marr's theories received significant government support in the 1930s and 1940s, which was, however, followed by their denunciation by Stalin in 1950. For more details on Marr's *Japhetic theory* see Meshchaninov (2010).

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Dulichenko's observations on the movement for language rationalization and the rise of Soviet interlinguistics on the other. Eventually, however, most of the theoretical and practical development in this area faced a very similar fate of being dubbed as 'ideologically incorrect' with the consequences all too well known for their followers.

Nevertheless, research in the field of language rationalization and language hybridization[3] continued to be carried out, albeit in a concealed form. Studies in these areas proved to be particularly important for the development of Soviet language typology, they catalyzed (and in many ways shaped) post-Revolutionary research in stylistics and contributed to the overall advancement of post-Saussurian structural and functional query into language.

The Soviet socio-political climate of the late 1910s and 1920s prescribed that academic research, language studies included, be ideologically appropriate, socially-centred and universally applicable. This clear-cut message was formulated and consolidated in a series of decrees issued by the Soviet People's Commissars (*Sovnarkom*) between 1920 and 1922. As one would expect, the immediate objective of early Soviet linguistics was that of providing a reliable base for communication within the then half-literate multidialectal and multilingual Soviet community, which resulted in the rapid rise of applied linguistics and other language-related research fields that fed into it. This can explain the significant success during the first two post-Revolutionary decades which was achieved in disciplines relatively new at that time, such as social dialectology, discursive and communication studies, language typology, psycho-, neuro- and interlinguistics and language planning, which manifested itself, *inter alia*, in the movement for language rationalization in the second part of the 1920s.

Rationalization projects, examples of which are discussed in Moret's contribution to the current issue, were generally pursuing two goals: making the language broadly accessible and understandable in order to accelerate the dissemination of revolutionary ideas, and secondly, making economies in areas associated with language use and language learning.[4] After the 16th Party Congress in 1930 which consolidated the government's new direction towards constructing socialism in one country with Russian as a sole state language, the Esperantists and propagators of language rationalization theories ceased to impress officialdom.

Interestingly, however, projects on language simplification and on its greater adaptation to the communication needs of the post-Revolutionary language community were actively developed within the Research Institute of Linguistics (*Naučno-issledovatel'skij institut jazykoznanija*, NIIJaz) which once accommodated the work of some of these unfortunate language theorists.[5] The short-lived (1930–1933), albeit extremely productive

[3]Russian studies in the area of contact linguistics, however, had strong pre-Revolutionary roots which could be traced back to the works of Jan Baudouin de Courtenay (1845–1929), e.g. Baudouin de Courtenay (1972). Some valuable observations in this area were also made by young Lev Shcherba (1880–1944) (Ščerba 1915) and Afanasij Selishchev (1886–1942) (Seliščev 1968).

[4]The Soviet campaign for Latinization of non-Latin scripts used on the territory of the Soviet Union launched in the early 1920s serves as a clear illustration of this bilateral goal of rationalization policy. It was expected that the overall use of Latin script would lower the psychological barrier between the language communities, ease the process of foreign learning acquisition and, thus, bring the Soviet peoples closer to their overseas contemporaries. At the same time, a lot of emphasis was put on the practical benefits of Latinization, such as significant savings on ink and paper (for primary sources see State Archive of the Russian Federation GARF, cf. Protokol 1929, 1930).

[5]There is some archival evidence of Andrej Andreev, one of the most prominent figures in the movement for language rationalization in the 1920s and 1930s, having held a research position at the Research Institute of Linguistics (cf. Tezisy Andreeva, 1).

and in a number of areas very influential Research Institute of Linguistics was home to the Moscow Phonological School and one of the strongest centres for social dialectology and language planning. The institute's deputy director, Georgij Danilov (1896–1937), a specialist in proletarian discourse, suggested an alternative model of turning the post-Revolutionary language into a user-friendly tool of communication. A 'user', in Danilov's view, was a representative of the Soviet working class, whose language should become a general matrix upon which to develop Soviet national languages. To achieve its simplicity, transparency and ideological purity, Danilov maintained that the proletarian discourse ought to be purged of any linguistic elements that might contain obscure overcomplicated grammatical constructions and strong references to pre-socialist economic formations. He anticipated that such a puristic approach would have a formative effect on developing a socialist mentality. It would be fair to say that Danilov's linguistic determinism, though rather crude, shared some common ground with Benjamin Whorf's theories on the one hand, and, particularly considering its strong socio-economic underpinnings, with Marr's views on the nature of linguistic diversity on the other. However, in his attempt to adjust the cause in order to regulate the outcome, he was clearly one step ahead of both Marr and Whorf. Danilov's project, despite the initial introduction of its pilot version to a number of secondary schools (Stenogramma 1932, 32), failed to secure sufficient support from the staff members of NIJAZ,[6] but his approach can certainly serve as a metaphor for a number of early Soviet language planning practices.

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[6]Most of whom belonged to the long-established formal tradition of Fortunatov School.