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Author(s): T. H. Rigby
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By T. H. Rigby*

A New Direction For Soviet Linguistics

Stalin's recent writings on linguistics, it is claimed,[1] have significance "far beyond the limits of the science of language", and "enrich the whole of Marxist-Leninist theory, giving guiding directions for the work of philosophers, historians, economists, jurists and students of literature".

Thus they will be of interest to all students of Soviet thought.

As both Stalin's articles and the whole "free discussion" of which they formed a part centred about the proper evaluation of the theories of academician Marr, it may be worthwhile to recall some of the main facts about this remarkable linguist.[2]

N. Y. Marr (1864-1934), though his most original theories were developed in the last decade of his life, had already before the revolution achieved distinction as a student of the languages of the Caucasus area.

His research in this field led him first to establish "cousinship" between Georgian and related Iverian languages on the one hand and the Semitic languages on the other, and to mark this relationship he renamed the former group "Japhetic".

The second step was to identify as Japhetic a number of North Caucausian languages previously unclassified.

In 1920 the scope of the Japhetic theory was vastly extended to include several pre-Indo-European languages of the Mediterranean area, such as the Pelasgian, Etruscan and Basque, and Marr speculated on the routes along which the Japhetic tribes spread from their original Caucasian home to become "the third ethnic element in the creation of Mediterranean culture."[3]

So far there was little in the Japhetic theory which was in-

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compatible with the Indo-European philology of Western scholars, and Marr employed essentially the same "comparative-historical" research methods as the latter. However, about this time Marr, an ardent supporter of the revolution and the new regime, began a thorough study of Marxist-Leninist theory, with the avowed aim of founding "a truly Marxist science of language".

The "new teaching on language" which emerged from this and whose corner-stone was a transformed Japhetic theory, was militantly opposed to Western philology. The family-tree picture of the development of language from a hypothetical protoglossa was rejected in favour of a view which took internationalism to the extreme in speaking of a "single language-building process" for all languages living and dead. Contemporary languages were now "the result of complex historical crossings", "of convergences and divergences" on a world scale. The terms "Indo-European", "Semitic", "Japhetic", referred not to "families", but to "systems" of languages, corresponding to stages (stadii) in the development of human speech.

Marr's speech stages were geared to his theory of stages of human thought, which in turn were said to reflect the development of material culture. In other words, language was now seen as part of the ideological superstructure. "Language," he wrote, "is the same sort of superstructural social value as art."[4] Everything in language was socially conditioned, and in particular "ideological changes determine sound changes".[5]

From the conception of language as superstructure followed Marr's assertion of the class-ness of language. "There is no such thing as national, all-people's language, but there is class language and the languages of the same class in different countries, given identity of social structure, manifest greater typological similarity to each other than the languages of different classes of the same country."[6]

The superstructural nature of language also explains its stadial development. In keeping with the development of society, language advances not gradually and evenly but by leaps (skachki) from one quality to another.

We have here a theory of the development of language which has all the marks of a thoroughgoing Marxism-dialectical and historical materialism, class-consciousness and internationalism.

[4] N. Y. Marr: "Yafeticheskaya teoriya," 1928, p. 130.
[5] N. Y. Marr: "Izbrannye raboty," Vol. III, p. 100.
[6] N. Y. Marr: "Pochemu tak trudno stat' lingvistom—teoretikom," *Izb. Rab.,* Vol. 11, p. 415.

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However, despite his record of valuable research into the problems of particular languages, Marr never found time to indicate in detail how his theories should be related to the concrete evidence on the history of language. On many important aspects we are left with only the vaguest hints, and even on the basic question of identifying the various language stages there is considerable confusion. The nearest indication we have here is that successive stages are typified by different types of word-structure, beginning with the amorphous-synthetic (present-day examples are Chinese and certain African languages) and culminating in the inflexional (e.g. Semitic and Indo-European).[7]

What concrete evidence Marr did advance in support of his theories was the product of research methods having little in common with the cautious techniques (referred to contemptuously by Marr as "formally-comparative") employed by Western linguists. In order to form an estimation of Marr's "palaeontological analysis" we need to know something about his theories on the origin of language, which constitute perhaps the most interesting and, one must add, most far-fetched part of his work.

According to Marr, human speech originated at a time when the language of gestures was sufficiently elaborated to permit an elementary social organization. The first "words" consisted of a small number of monosyllables, meaningless in themselves, but regarded as having magic potency. This theory is given a Marxist appearance by the formulation that spoken language originated in the course of the "labour-magic" process.[8]

The number of these original speech elements, first put at six to twelve, was later fixed at four, and Marr even went on to name them —SAL, BER, YON, ROSH. The repetition of these syllables in the course of the "labour-magic" process developed the human speech organs and thus prepared them for their historic task. Meanwhile, with advances of material culture setting greater linguistic demands, sal, ber, yon and rosh and derivatives and combinations of them were accorded meanings and in time spoken language formed from these elements completely replaced non-vocal language. However, with thought still in its "cosmic" phase a single word could have a variety of meanings, Marr referring to such "semantic clusters" as heaven, blue, bird, head, top, tall, end, etc.[9]

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[7] N. Y. Marr: "Pochemu tak trudno stat' lingvistom-teoretikom," *Izb. Rab.,* Vol. 11, p. 405.

[8] N. Y. Marr: "Yazk i myshlenie," p. 58.

[9] On this see further W. K. Mathews, *op. cit.,* p. 190.

On the basis of these theories Marr devised his "palaeontological method" of "analysis according to the four elements", which, given "unity of language-building process", numerous variant forms of the original elements, and "cosmic" semantics, permitted him to equate words from languages as far apart as Chinese and Greek and having for the uninitiated no apparent phonetic or semantic connection.[10]

Research using the "palaeontological method" led Marr to conclusions on numerous questions of ethnology and pre-history which turned out to be completely congruent with Marxist sociology and his own linguistic theories.

As the most considerable linguist associated with the Soviet regime from its inception, Marr possessed the prestige and authority to give wide propagation to his theories, and by 1931, when he became a member of the Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party, his "new teaching on language" was accepted by the chief Soviet linguistic institutions.

After Marr's death in 1934, his doctrines retained the blessings of the authorities and were enthusiastically popularized by a small group of "successors" who held the chief posts in all main linguistic organs. Marr came so to monopolize the field of general theory in Soviet linguistics that young students of language might well "regard Marxism and Marrism as synonyms".[11] As recently as July, 1949, the Presidium of the Soviet Academy of Sciences could refer to Marr's theories as "the new materialist teaching on language, the new general theory of linguistics, erected on the foundations of dialectical and historical materialism".[12] Marr's views on the origin and development of language frequently became the starting point for research in other social sciences,[13] in particular history, archaeology, ethnology and anthropology, and his "materialist teaching on language" was regarded by Soviet philosophers as a valuable weapon in their struggle against idealism.[14]

However, despite the triumph of Marr's doctrines, the years following his death witnessed a growing embarrassment amongst his leading disciples. A difference of opinion appeared on the proper

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[10] Of the many examples of this quoted in the course of the recent "free discussion", the best may be found in B. Serebrennikov: "Ob issledovatel' skih priomah N. Y. Marra," *Pravda,* May 23, 1950.

[11] G. Karantsyan, *Pravda,* May 30, 1950.

[12] Postanovlenie Prezidiuma Akademii Nauk S.S.S.R. ot. 21 Iulya, 1949, goda.

[13] A. V. Topchiev: "J. V. Stalin o problemah yazykoznaniya i zadachi Akademii nauk S.S.S.R.," *Vestnik Akademii nauk S.S.S.R.,* No. 7, 1950.

[14] L. O. Reznikov: "K voprosy v sootnoshenii yazyka i mysbleniya," *Voprosy Filosofii,* No. 2, 1947.

attitude towards Marr's work, the Marrist diehards like Filin, Chemo-danov and Serdyuchenko insisting that their master had erected a complete theoretical framework for Marxist linguistics. ("The new teaching on language, based on Marxist-Leninist methodology is the general and only possible scientific theory for all individual linguistic disciplines"),[15] while the more cautious Meshchaninov claimed only that Marr had laid the foundations of a theory that must "continue to develop and grow more precise".[16]

Unfortunately for Meshchaninov, attempts to develop the "new teaching" and render it more precise led to anomalies. Most efforts to apply Marr's theories to concrete historical and linguistic material ended in the "revision" of the theories themselves. For instance, in "rendering more precise" Marrist theory on the characteristics of language stages, Meshchaninov tacitly rejected Marr's views on this question[17] in favour of a theory of the "stadial development of sentence construction". However, he was subsequently obliged to drop even this, and by 1947 he was limiting himself to the vague opinion that "Stadial transitions may be observed in the material of particular languages, and even of particular language groups (families). Perhaps there will also be success in bringing to light a general scheme of stadial transitions".[18]

Underlying the difficulties of Marr's successors was their complete lack of success in using the master's "palaeontological method" of linguistic analysis. After years of confusion on this point, Meshchaninov declared in 1949 that "there is nothing to be got from analysis of the words of contemporary speech according to the four elements".[19] On the other hand, Comrade Serdyuchenko, although neither he nor anyone else had yet written anything on the basis of four-element analysis which was generally accepted by Soviet linguists, was still claiming that "palaeontological analysis according to the four elements . . . may be quite applicable and useful."[20]

Under these conditions it is not surprising that the rank and file of Soviet linguists found it hard to confine their research within

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[15] F. P. Filin: "O dvuh napravleniyah v yazkoznanii," *Izvestia Akademii nauk S.S.S.R. Otdelenie literatury i yazyka,* No. 6, 1948, p. 488.

[16] I. I. Meshchaninov: "O polozhenii v lingvisticheskoi nauke," *ibid.,* p. 484.

[17] See above, p. 4. The difficulties of Marr's position here will be obvious to all familiar with the problems of the history of language.

[18] I. I. Meshchaninov: "Problema stadial' nosti v razvitii yazyka," *Izvestia Akademii nauk S.S.S.R. Otdelenie literatury i yazyka,* No. 3, 1947, p. 187.

[19] I. I. Meshchaninov: "Marr-osnovatel' sovetskogo yazykoznaniya," *Izvestia Akademii nauk S.S.S.R. Otdelenie literatury i yazyka,* No. 4, 1949, p. 295.

[20] G. P. Serdyuchenko: "Akademik N. Y. Marr-osnovatel' sovetskogo materialisticheskogo yazykoznaniya," 1950, p. 63.

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the bounds of the new teaching. There was a mounting tendency towards "anti-Marrist sallies" which the leading circles attempted to suppress by "creating an unbearable regime, by virtue of which no criticism of the so-called new teaching of N. Y. Marr on language was permitted. All conflict of opinion and freedom of criticism was banished from scientific work in the field of linguistics. Persons critically disposed towards Marr's doctrines were removed from their posts; scientific workers were nominated to posts not on the basis of their work but of their factional allegiance . . ."[21]

This is the background to the "stagnation in the development of Soviet linguistics" which was quoted by *Pravda* as the reason for the "free discussion" organized in its pages last year. Over 200 articles, it was claimed,[22] were contributed to this discussion, of which some 30 were published, giving expression to a wide variety of viewpoints.

The Marrists, put on to the defensive, were nevertheless not lacking in explanations of the stagnation, which they ascribed to such factors as "insufficient scientific and organizational activity", insufficient creative elaboration of the progressive materialist teaching on language built by N. Y. Marr", and "the almost complete absence of popularization and penetration of the fundamentals of Soviet linguistics into the practice of teaching". While admitting "certain mistakes" of Marr, they claimed it was "impossible . . . to build a truly Marxist science of language without Marr".[23] Their sole counter to their opponents' criticism of specific doctrines of Marr was to repeat the old line that in rejecting Marr their opponents were falling back into the Anti-Marxist positions of bourgeois comparative historical linguistics.

The Anti-Marrists mostly began their articles by citing arbitrary actions of the "Arakcheyev regime" in Soviet linguistics. Almost every aspect of Marr's work in the field of general linguistic theory was subjected to withering attack, in which the weapon of concrete linguistic and historical fact predominated over that of reference to the Marxist-Leninist classics. At the same time there were cautious attempts to keep open their way of retreat by appeals to develop the "positive" side of Marr's work. Even Chikobava, who

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21 "O sostoyanii tsentral'nyh organov yazykoznaniya Akademit Nauk S.S.S.R.," *Vestnik Akademii Nauk S.S.S.R.*, No. 7, 1950, p. 130.

22 *Pravda,* 4 July, 1950.

23 I. I. Meshchaninov: "Za tvorcheskoe razvitie naslediya akademika, N. Y. Marra," *Pravda,* 16 May, 1950.

For a more uncomprising Marrist view see F. Filin: "Protiv zastoya, za razvitie Sovetskogo yazykoznaniya," *Pravda,* 30 May, 1950.

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went further than anyone else in criticising Marr's views on the class-ness of language, emphasized that "the indisputable service of N. Y. Marr to Soviet linguistics was his posing the question of the superstructural character of language."[24]   None of Marr's critics challenged the doctrine of language as superstructure, and the Marrists were not slow to point out that once accepting this doctrine it is difficult to reject the other main elements of Marr's theory— the class-ness of language, single language-building process, and the stadial development of language.[25]

The confusion of views apparent in the first stage of the "free discussion" demanded the indication of an official line, and when this duly appeared on June 29th it was printed over the signature of no other than Stalin himself.

The linguistic theory outlined in Stalin's articles[26] contradicts almost every position taken by Marr. Firstly, language is not super- structure. How could it be, when the language spoken in present-day Russia is essentially that of pre-revolutionary days?   And indeed "what could the revolution gain from such a change in the language"?

Language differs from superstructure in that it is connected directly with production, whereas superstructure is connected only indirectly, through the medium of the economic foundation.   Being directly bound up with production, language changes as production changes, but it does not change like the superstructure by means of the revolutionary destruction of the old and its replacement by the new, but by the gradual supplementing of the old by new words and constructions, while the basic word-fund and grammatical structure remain the same.

Consequently "language arises not from this or that foundation, from an old or new foundation within the given society, but out of the entire course of the history of society and the history of founda-

24 A. Chikobava: "O nekotoryh voprosah sovetskogo yazykoznaniya," *Pravda,* 9 May, 1950.

25 N. Chemodanov: "Puti pazvitiya sovetskogo yazykoznaniya," *Pravda,* 23 May, 1950.

26 "Otnositel'no marksizma v yazykoznanii," *Pravda,* 29 June, 1950.

ENG. TRANS.: "On Marxism in Linguistics," *Communist Review,* Sydney, Aug., 1950.

"K nekotorym voprosam yazykoznaniya," *Bolshevik,* No. 12, 1950.

ENG. TRANS.: "Concerning certain questions of Linguistics," *For a Lasting Peace and a People's Democracy,* No. 27, 1950.

"Ot vet tovarischam," *Bolshevik,* No. 14, 1950.

ENG. TRANS.: "Reply to Comrades," *Communist Review,* Sydney, October, 1950.

tions over the centuries. It is created not by any single class but by
society as a whole, by all classes in society, by the efforts of hundreds
of generations". Though there is no such thing as class language,
there certainly is class jargon, arising from the attempt of ruling
classes "to use the language in their own interests". But such class
jargons cannot be regarded as languages, as they have no basic word
fund or grammatical structure of their own—they merely borrow
these from the national language—and they are useless as a means
of intercourse from society as a whole.

Stalin's characterization of language is likely to become a
favourite quotation in all the Soviet social sciences. He writes:
"Language is a medium, an instrument, by means of which people
communicate with one another, exchange ideas and reach mutual
understanding. Being directly associated with thought, language
registers and establishes in words and combinations of words in
sentences, the results of the working of the mind, the achievements
of man's cognition, and thus makes possible the exchange of ideas
in society.

"Exchange of ideas is a constant and vital necessity, since with-
out this it is impossible to have common action by people in the
struggle against the forces of nature, in the struggle for the pro-
duction of the essential material benefits; it is impossible to secure
success in the production activity of society—consequently, the very
existence of social production is impossible. Consequently, without
a language, understandable to society and common for all its mem-
bers, society ceases production, disintegrates and ceases to exist as a
society. In this sense, language, being an instrument of intercourse,
is at the same time an instrument for the struggle and development
of society."

The new direction in Soviet linguistics brings it immeasurably
closer to traditional concepts. Stalin even pays a back-handed com-
pliment to the comparative historical method. Marr, after a reign
of almost a quarter-century, is now seen as a man who tried hard to
be a Marxist but failed, and who consequently "only succeeded in
becoming a vulgariser of Marxism".

"A bright feeling of joy seized everyone after the appearance of
J. V. Stalin's classic article,"[27] which indicated "direct and true
means for overcoming the stagnation"[28] in Soviet linguistics. This

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[27] E. Galkina-Fedoruk: "Tol'ko vperyod," *Pravda,* 4th July, 1950.
[28] V. Vinogradov: "Programma marksistskogo yazykoznaniya," *Pravda,* 4th
July, 1950.

was not limited to linguistics. "There is no hiding the sin—I, like the majority . . . of anthropologists, historians, archaeologists, ethnographers—regarded the views of academician N. Y. Marr sympathetically."[29] Meshchaninov declared that "Only now that we have deeply pondered the essence of language, disclosed by Comrade Stalin . . . have we seen all the viciousness of the theoretical path along which our research has gone and along which we have lead the younger generation after us."[30]

The following weeks saw the Soviet scientific and popular press flooded with articles making extremely broad claims for Stalin's new writings. They are said to give Soviet linguistics "a true and accurate compass, with which they may boldly enter the various fields of linguistic research".[31] They are invested with great importance on the level of general Marxist theory.[32] It is claimed that they clarify the distinction between production and the economic basis, as well as the question of the reciprocal relations between the basis and the superstructure. They demonstrate the error implicit in the tendency to identify all social phenomena as belonging to either the basis or the superstructure. Those "functioning throughout the whole period of the existence of society, and not liquidated with the destruction of the old basis, which can serve both the old and the new basis, the old and new classes" cannot be regarded as part of either the basis or the superstructure. Not only language, but the instruments and technique of production come under this heading. In clarifying this point, Stalin "unmasks the narrow, sectarian, vulgar conception of Marxism as a doctrine severed from all attainments of the past". The new works are also held to develop further the Marxist theory of knowledge and the law of the unity and struggle of opposites.

Meanwhile the task of liquidating the "Arakcheyev regime" in linguistics was under way. Academic Meshchaninov was removed from the post of director of the Institute of Language and Thought, and Professor Serdyuchenko from that of vice-director, while Professor Filin lost the position of scientific secretary to the Presidium

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[29] S. Tolstov: "Primyer tvorcheskogo marksizma," *Pravda,* 4th July, 1950.

[30] I. I. Meshchaninov: "Pis'mo v redaktsiyu gazety Pravdy," *Pravda,* 4th July, 1950.

[31] V. Vinogradov: "O lingvisticheskoi diskussii i rabotah," J. V. Stalin, *Bolshevik,* No. 15, 1950.

[32] G. Alexandrov: "Novy vyadyushchisya vklad v sokrovishchnitsu leninizma," *Bolshevik,* No. 14, 1950.

G. Glezerman: "Marksizm-Leninizm o bazise i nadstroike," *Bolshevik,* No. 18, 1950.

"Razvitie dialekticheskogo i istoricheskogo materializma v trudah J. V. Stalina po voprosam yazykoznaniya," *Vestnik Akademii Nauk S.S.S.R.,* No. 9, 1950.

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of the Academy of Sciences. The Institute of Language and Thought itself, founded by Marr, has been united with the Institute of Russian into a single Institute of Linguistics, under the directorship of Academic Vinogradov.[33]

All research projects of students working in linguistic institutions and all linguistic works being prepared for publication are being reviewed by Professor Vinogradov, who has also been charged with the task of organizing the review of language courses in schools, teacher-training institutions and universities.[34]   A start has been made on the enormous task of providing new text books on language free from Marrist "vulgarizations and simplifications of Marxism."[35]

[33] *Vestnik Akademii Nauk S.S.S.R.,* No. 7, 1950, p. 130.
[34] *Vestnik Akademii Nauk S.S.S.R.,* No. 8, 1950, p. 90.
[35] *Vestnik Akademii Nauk S.S.S.R.,* No. 9, 1950, p. 11.