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Language and its social functions in early soviet thought

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The materials presented in the current issue originated as papers presented at the conference *Sociological Theories of Language in the USSR, 1917–1938* held at the Bakhtin Centre and Department of Russian and Slavonic Studies at the University of Sheffield, UK, in September 2006.[1] The selected papers highlight various aspects of the shift towards what might be described as a functional approach to language studies during the first two decades after the October Revolution. Each in their own way shows how empirical data accumulated during the previous era of unchallenged descriptive methodology was reworked according to a new agenda, as massive practical projects drove funding decisions and research agendas more generally. New projects to catalogue and categorise linguistic phenomena were launched with the explicit purpose of spreading literacy and facilitating the development of hitherto marginalised social groups. Of course, the shift towards a linguistic science driven by social and political considerations was in no way limited to the USSR at the time, but it was precisely there that the new orientation was carried through to its full extent and articulated in a self-conscious fashion.

The reformulation of language studies acquired a particularly topical significance in the debates surrounding the national question, where the issue of relations between the imperial Russian language and hitherto subjugated local languages had long been a concern of both Party leaders and linguists alike (e.g., Lenin 1983 [1914]; Boduen de Kurtene and Baudouin de Courtenay 1906, 1913; Smith 1998; Hirsch 2005). However, debates around language acquired a more general topicality in the context of widespread concern over the large number of physically and

[1] The conference was funded by a conference grant from the British Academy and, as part of the project bearing the same name, by the British Arts and Humanities Research Council. Aumüller and Simonato were, unexpectedly, unable to attend the conference, but their proposals had been accepted and they had composed their papers.

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mentally traumatised persons, especially children, following the humanitarian catastrophes of the 1914–1918 World War and the 1918–1921 Civil War. On top of this came the question of widespread and endemic illiteracy throughout the former Russian Empire, especially among the rural Russian population and the national minorities, and the fragmentation of the old standard Russian language as the Tsarist administration was replaced by a rising bureaucracy that emerged from different social strata (Selishčev et al. 1971 [1928]; Gorham 2003). Language thus became the focal point of a myriad of social and political problems and, as such, the need for a multi-faceted and multi-dimensional approach to linguistic phenomena was apparent to many intellectuals and political leaders. This coincided with, and was articulated in terms of, the Marxist imperative of an integral bond (*ujazka*) between theory and practice in the early 1920s, which further encouraged researchers to spurn the validity of emerging disciplinary boundaries. Academic research, language studies included, now needed to be socially-oriented and universally applicable, a message that was formulated and consolidated in a series of decrees issued by the Soviet People's Commissars (*Sovnarkom*) between 1920 and 1922.

As the New Economic Policy become established and some economic stability was achieved after the Civil War, the new approaches to language developed within institutions that were either within the orbit of Party or State control. The Party-state dualism that reigned meant that ideological imperatives were much less pressing in state institutions, where fellow-traveller intellectuals were concentrated (David-Fox 1997). This was the environment in which the most interesting and valuable theoretical developments took place, spurred on by governmental funding for a wide range of socially useful projects. These form the centre of attention for the current issue of *Studies in East European Thought*.

The current collection of articles aims to discuss some of the most significant areas developed within early Soviet approaches to language, on one hand, and to highlight the importance of certain individual contributions which, due to various circumstances, were overlooked, misunderstood, or otherwise underrated, on the other. The articles discuss the questions of the perception and selective appropriation of the Western and Russian pre-Revolutionary intellectual and specifically linguistic legacy (Ekaterina Velmezova and Mattheas Aumüller), the rise of the Soviet communication theories and its impact on the development of disability studies (Irina Sandomirskaja), the questions of language regulation and language construction (Elena Simonato and Mladen Uhlik,) and the place of language studies in the multidisciplinary context of the period (Katya Chown).

Special attention has been paid the works of such scholars as Viktor Žirmunskij, Boris Larin, Lev Jakubinskij, Georgij Danilov, Nikolaj Jakovlev, Mikhail Pokrovskij, Andrej Andreev, Sergej Dobrogaev, and Ivan Sokoljanskij. Some of these figures were brought to the attention of Western scholars earlier, but their work has often been received in a one-sided fashion. Thus, as Aumüller shows, Žirmunskij's works on dialect geography and social dialects is almost completely unknown in the anglophone world, where he is known chiefly as a fellow-traveller of the Russian Formalists, while in Germany the reception has been almost completely the reverse. Aumüller thus aims to redress the balance by showing that the career of this complex and influential figure needs to be understood in the context of both his

literary and linguistic work, and with reference to his sustained contacts with scholars in Germany in the 1920s. Uhlik shows how the work of Jakubinskij and Larin, who are known predominantly as a theorist of dialogue and historian of the Russian language, respectively, in the West, were also deeply engaged in studies of the social stratification of language in the 1920s; Simonato shows that Jakovlev, who is generally known as a specialist in the languages of the Caucasus in the West, was an important forerunner of modern phonetics; Velmezova shows how the work of Pokrovskij,who is generally known only as a historian of classical literature, was also a significant figure in the history of semantics, and shows how the much-discussed dominance of the ideas of Nikolaj Marr in Soviet linguistics of the 1930s was by no means as undifferentiated as is generally supposed.

Each of the contributions show that, contrary to the stereotyped image of narrowly dogmatic Soviet scholarship that one sometimes still encounters in academic and popular literature, the practical agenda that drove funding decisions in the early USSR yielded a variety of interpretations resulting in a wide spectrum of conceptual approaches to the sociological study of language phenomena. Thus, ideas from, *inter alia*, contemporary mathematics, anthropology, reflex physiology and dialect geography were absorbed into language study, contributing to a methodological universalism that facilitated the integration of sociological linguistics into what were previously considered essentially unrelated areas, such as disability studies (as discussed by Irina Sandomirskaja) or cranial neurology (as discussed by Katya Chown).

While many intellectuals cooperated with the young Soviet state out of a shared sense of a duty to contribute to social progress, there were tendencies within the Party and growing bureaucracy that viewed the intelligentsia with suspicion. The theoretical basis of this distrust was most forcefully articulated by Aleksandr Bogdanov, who viewed the intelligentsia as bearing the experience of the old world and as such threatening the Revolution with degeneration and the rise of a new ruling class (see Biggart 1990).[2] While Bogdanov was personally unpopular in the Party due to his high profile arguments with Lenin in the pre-Revolutionary period, his ideas of the necessity of a Cultural Revolution were championed within the Party by Nikolai Bukharin, who strove to reformulate Bogdanov's ideas about 'proletarian culture' according to Party imperatives (Biggart 1987, 1992). Indeed, what came to be officially accepted as 'Leninism' in the later 1920s was largely a Bogdanovite perspective recast in Leninist terminology. Thus, as the Party leadership consciously sought to construct a ruling apparatus with specific sociological origins through the so-called Lenin levy,[3] the idea that the state sector should ultimately come under the more direct control of the Party gained influence. With the launch of Stalin's 'revolution from above' in late 1928 the Party-state dualism that had facilitated the rise of the new approaches to language was, by degrees, elminated. Now all approaches needed to be justified in terms of narrowly ideological criteria as much as their topicality, and utility was redefined as work in the cause of 'socialist

[2] This idea particularly came to official prominance following the notorious trial of the Shakhti engineers in 1928. On this see Fitzpatrick (1992).

[3] See Carr (1970), pp. 193–246.

construction'. The 'social utility' of particular lines of research was now also subjugated to the needs of economic development, driven by the pressure to compete militarily with more advanced powers.

While this change ultimately resulted in a serious narrowing of the intellectual field in the USSR and, at the end of the 1930s, some of the figures discussed here faced political repressions (Danilov, Polivanov), the contributions to the current volume show that vibrant and innovative work continued to be produced, even as it encountered obstacles from the authorities. Consideration of the works discussed here should therefore contribute to the erosion of the engrained, cold-war image of Soviet scholarship of the period, as one-sidedly obstructed by official structures and that genuine scholarship took place away from institutions, by isolated dissidents. Recent decades have seen rising awareness of the significance of certain individual Soviet scholars, among which one can highlight Lev Vygotskij, Ol'ga Freidenberg, and Mikhail Bakhtin but these figures have too often been presented as heroic exceptions rather than indicative of Soviet institutions constituting rich arenas of intellectual activity.[4] This is not to diminish the individual contributions of these and other scholars nor, in certain cases, their courage. It is, rather, to argue that the contributions of individual scholars needs to be understood as integrated, at a molecular level, as it were, into the institutional and intellectual structures of their time. As in all ages, such structures were both restraining and enabling, and in no way monolithic, since they depended on the ongoing contributions of talented people who partially perpetuated and partially transformed the practices in which they participated. In this sense, the exceptionality of the Soviet intellectual world is too often exaggerated, and this is something that is especially worth remembering in present conditions when the permeation of Western university life by market imperatives and a culture of targets increasingly dominate higher education and research.[5]

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[4] The first two pursued successful careers in Soviet institutions in the 1930s, while the last sought a position within an institution and increasingly echoed the concerns of intellectuals within institutions. Vygotskii disappeared from soviet psychology only posthumously, as a result of the repression of psychotechnics (*psikhotekhnika*) and child studies (*pedologiia*) in 1937, while Freidenberg was compelled to retire earlier than she would have liked following Stalin's attack on Marrism in 1950.

[5] On the consequent narrowing of the intellectual field and rise of bland conformity within economics see Lee (2007).

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