

Gramsci and Marxist sociology of language

LEONARDO SALAMINI

The great emphasis placed by Marxist theoreticians on economic and political issues has obfuscated the 'global' nature of Marxism. Gramsci was one of the first Western Marxists to examine the most fundamental structures of Marxism and provide a systematic theoretical reelaboration of the Marxist problematic. He sought to restore the original flexibility of Marx's theory and reformulate its *global* claims. Thus, he has developed a gnosiological, historiographic and political theory of human knowledge, history and society on the basis of the key Marxist concepts of humanism, historicism and hegemony.¹ In this attempt he has re-valued the superstructural character of Marxism and science and placed a great emphasis on the analysis of cultural phenomena in Marxist theory and praxis. The reason is simple. Socialism meant to him above all a reorganization of culture and the acquisition of a superior consciousness. Gramsci (1975c: 21) writes:

Man is above all spirit, i.e., a creation of history and not of nature. Otherwise, it would be impossible to explain why to the extent that there have always been exploiters and exploited, and producers and selfish consumers of wealth, socialism has not yet been achieved. It is only because humanity has gradually become aware of its own value and has acquired the right to live independently of the schemes and rights of historically previously-established minorities. And this consciousness has been formed not under the ugly goad of physiological necessities, but through intelligent reflection, first on the part of few and then by a whole class, reflecting on the reasons for certain conditions and how best to convert them from causes of servitude into symbols of rebellion and social reconstruction. What this means is that every revolution has been preceded by an intense critical effort of cultural penetration.

A great portion of Gramsci's writings deals with problems of art, theater, literature, literary criticism, poetry and language. He certainly did not analyze systematically all these phenomena, nor did he elaborate a Marxist theory of aesthetics, art or language. He did, however, as Anglani (1967) and Petronio (1956) have noted, delineate the fundamental framework of a Marxist analysis

and theory of literary criticism, art and language. Gramsci analyzed these phenomena from the general perspective of the philosophy of praxis and the practical goal of the conquest of hegemony by the proletariat. His analysis of cultural phenomena is then political and historicist. All cultural phenomena, that is, are essentially historical phenomena, thus, instruments in the process of transformation of the world. In this paper I choose to examine Gramsci's analysis of language, often neglected in Marxist literature.

Marxists themselves admit that linguistics and most problems related to language have been almost the exclusive concern of non-Marxist sciences (see Schaff, 1967: 199). As a matter of fact, very little has been written on the subject by the founders of Marxism. Two pronouncements by Marx and Engels have generally been considered the basis for the elaboration of a Marxist analysis of language. For Marx, in fact, the essence of language is social. It is a form of consciousness which arises from social relationship. As such, it is a superstructural activity. He writes (1972: 51): 'Language is as old as consciousness, language *is* practical consciousness that exists also for other men, and for that reason alone it really exists for me personally as well; language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men.'

Engels, in a passing remark, mentions the other aspect of language, the system of signs, and declares it autonomous, that is independent from the determination of structure and superstructure. This is the meaning that can be derived from the following text (Engels, 1958): 'Without making oneself ridiculous it would be a difficult thing to explain in terms of economics the existence of every small state in Germany, past and present, or the origin of the High German consonant shifts; which widened the geographical wall of partition.'

Until 1950, the whole field of Marxist linguistics was monopolized by the works and theories of Nikolai I. Marr (1864-1934).² The main point of Marr's linguistic theory is that all Indo-European languages descend from a single language spoken by a single race. Thus, linguistic evolution is determined by society's economic base and class structure. As a result, language, as a system of signs, is ideological and superstructural. Marr's position was opposed to that of Engels, which recognized the autonomous status of language as a system of signs. At a time when Russia was undergoing an internal process of language unification, comparative linguistic studies began to flourish, arriving at conclusions opposite to those of Marrist linguistics. Stalin intervention in 1950 put an end to the controversy between Marrists and comparative linguists.

Stalin, in his historic essay 'Marxism in linguistics', rejected the theories of Marr and affirmed the autonomy of the linguistic system, its independence from superstructural institutions, as well as economic activity (Stalin, 1972).

The thrust of Stalin's arguments is the fact that while Russia had undergone profound structural changes in its transition to communism, various national languages and systems of Russian remained unaffected and continued to develop according to their own laws. Stalin intervention was followed by the re-emergence of the 'neo-grammarians' approach to the study of language, whose major concern was the formulation of phonetic laws. This approach separated language, history and the thought process. It became anti-historicist. This explains the general anti-semantic and anti-ethnolinguistic orientation of Soviet linguistics after Stalin's death. Only during the de-Stalinization period did Soviet linguistics experience a profound change in the direction of structural linguistics (see Schmalstieg, 1969).

Gramsci is one of the few Western Marxist theoreticians to take an active interest in the study of language and arrive at a general theory of language not dissimilar from contemporary structural linguistics (so writes Rosiello, 1970). He developed an interest in linguistic studies while attending the courses of the well-known linguist M. Bartoli at the University of Turin, who, as Gramsci writes in his *Letters from Prison* (1975a: 80), saw in him the 'archangel sent to destroy the neo-grammarians once and for all'.³ To be sure, he has left only a few notes on the problems of language and history of language. However, they are sufficient for delineating the major components of a Marxist sociology of language. He was not acquainted with the *German Ideology* of Marx and certainly not aware of developments in Soviet linguistics. Before I pass to an exposition of his analysis, it is appropriate to briefly discuss the status of linguistics in Italy.

1. Gramsci's historicist approach to language

The idealist philosophy of Benedetto Croce was no doubt the reigning philosophy in Italy. It dominated all fields of inquiry, particularly history, aesthetics, literature, art and language. Gramsci took upon himself the task of writing the most systematic critique of Croce as Marx did with regard to Hegel and Engels with Duhring. The only common element between Croce and Gramsci seems to be the historicist approach to the analysis of sociocultural phenomena. This is apparent in their treatment of language. The concepts of language as a *Weltanschauung*, of its historicity and relation to the 'national spirit' is a derivation from Crocean philosophy. These ideas were indeed dominant in the philosophy of language not only in Italy but also and above all in Germany. They were the cornerstone of the philosophical school of thought which included Herder, Humboldt, Vossler, Trier and Weisgerber. They were all in agreement on the creative role of language in the cognitive process as well as on the definition of language as a *Weltanschauung*. They analyzed the linguistic

phenomenon in relation to the German national character, the *Volksgeist* and *Weltgeist*. Language was conceived of as a means of understanding reality and a given *Weltanschauung*. Language creates symbols and through them reality. The subjectivistic tendency of this approach is beyond doubt (Schaff, 1967: 3–27).

In Italy, in opposition to the positivist, neo-grammarian school of thought, Croce posed the problem of language as that of aesthetics. Every language is a subjective art of expression. As in art, 'intuition' is the essence of language. Thoughts, in their deepest level, are free from specific linguistic structures. They derive from a very general, abstract and universal human experience. One can understand Croce's famous assertion that a language, as art, can never be translated. Only through intuitive understanding can the inner essence of language be grasped. How influential such an approach became in linguistics is demonstrated by the fact that Croce greatly influenced the noted German philosopher of language Vossler and the American ethnologist Edward Sapir. The latter expressly acknowledged his indebtedness to Crocean aesthetics. Sapir noted that deep symbolism in language does not rest on the 'verbal associations of a particular language' but 'on an intuitive basis underlying linguistic expression'. 'The phonetic, rhythmic, symbolic and morphological elements of language constitute a set of aesthetic factors which make every language unique' (Sapir, 1949: 244–225).

To Croce's subjectivist conception of language Gramsci opposed a historicist one. Language is a social product, the expression of the culture of a given society. The essence of language is history. It follows that the major concern of linguistics is the history of language. Given the historical character of languages the identification of art and language is useless. A historicist linguistics studies languages 'not as art, but as the material of art, as a social product, and cultural expression of a given population' (Gramsci, 1975b: 6, VIII, vol. 2, 738). Linguistic innovations are to be understood, in a historicist perspective, as collective innovations become part of the 'history of languages'.

The history of languages is the history of linguistic innovations, but these innovations are not individual (as in the case of art). They are innovations of an entire social collectivity which has renewed its culture, and progressed 'historically' (Gramsci, 1975b: VIII, vol. 2, 738).

As Rosiello notes, Gramsci saw in the neo-linguistic methodological approach the empirical confirmation of his linguistic historicism. Such neo-linguistics, propounded by Matteo Bartoli, combined an objectivistic and historicist methodological approach. It sought immanent causes in linguistic phenomena but always from a historical perspective. Its goal, in the words of Bartoli, was that of establishing a chronology and causes of linguistic innovations. Bartoli's observation that innovations are caused by the influence of culturally and historically superior languages indicated to Gramsci the

serious 'historicist perspective' present in neo-linguistics, thus its superiority in relation to Croce's abstract and subjectivistic approach and that of the neo-grammarians (see Rosiello, 1970: 362).

The neo-linguistics of Bartoli, to which Gramsci adheres, was in effect influenced by the more important linguistic tradition of the Geneva school, founded by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1914), whose impact on contemporary linguistics is universally acknowledged (See Hertzler, 1965: 10-13). Saussurean linguistics and Durkheim's school are the indirect intellectual sources of Gramsci's historicist linguistics. Durkheim's conception of language as a spiritual phenomenon transcending individuals and historical societies was concretized and historicized by the more prominent spokesman, A. Meillet. A sociology of language was thus born based on the assumption that language is a social process by which a community of men establishes an institution as a collective means of communication. This approach had the merit of establishing an intimate relationship between language and culture of societies. Malinowski's studies of primitive societies are an example of how difficult it is to understand primitive languages apart from their cultural and social context.

Durkheimian linguistics did not press further the problem of the historicity of language. It limited itself, because of its positivistic orientation, to search for the linguistic laws of development not in *history* but in *society*. Societal structural changes became the real condition for linguistic changes. It was Saussure who combined historicism and objectivism into a historical objectivism, which Bartoli's neo-linguistics wholeheartedly accepted. Saussure's distinction between language and speech (*langage* and *parole*), a universally accepted idea in linguistics today, had the effect of establishing two types of linguistic analysis: the synchronic and diachronic. The first deals with linguistic systems as independent and autonomous systems. The latter concerns itself with the general, societal, historical context in which linguistic systems develop. The two complement each other. Language, thus, can be analyzed in its static and dynamic aspects.

How dependent Gramsci was on the Saussurean method is indicated by the fact that he, too, postulated a static-dynamic approach to language. The grammar of a language is at the same time a photograph of a phase in the historical evolution of language and the historical affirmation of a linguistic system over others, as we shall see further on.

Italian neo-linguistics developed in close affiliation with Saussurean linguistics and, together with Crocean idealist philosophy, was instrumental in the liquidation of the neo-grammarian method from Italian linguistics. Yet, neo-linguistics was unable to topple Croce's theoretical dominance, Gramsci notes. To be sure, Gramsci acknowledged the theoretical superiority of Bartoli's method over Croce's intuitive approach. Neo-linguistics is a new, original and

progressive method of linguistic analysis. Gramsci writes (1975b: XX, vol. 1, 352): 'The innovation of Bartoli is exactly this: he made linguistics, conceived narrowmindedly a natural science, a historical science, whose roots are sought in "space and time" and not in the phonetic apparatus, in the physiological sense.'

Despite a strong historicist orientation in Bartoli's method, Gramsci was quick in perceiving a serious weakness in it. Bartoli did not develop, on the basis of his empirical acquisitions, a theory of language. It remained an empirical method, committed to the task of ascertaining only technical laws in linguistic development. And rightly so. He could not arrive at a theory of language for it lacked a philosophical perspective, such as that of Marxist historicism. This perspective would have rendered linguistics theoretically independent from, and superior to, Croce's system. Instead, neo-linguistics capitulated to and was theoretically undermined by Crocean linguists, such as G. Bertoni. In a critical assessment of Bertoni's work, Gramsci brings to the fore and ridicules the shallowness of his linguistics. Bertoni's linguistics as a 'subtle analysis discriminating the poetic sounds from the instrumental ones' is a return to the old theoretical conception of language. It is concerned with isolating 'beautiful' words from the 'bad' ones, and establishing what in language is poetic, non-poetic or anti-poetic. Thus, Bertoni's linguistics reintroduces the old and naive distinction and classification of languages in 'beautiful or bad', 'civilized or barbarian', 'poetic or prosaic' (Gramsci, 1975b: VIII, vol. 2, 700). Bertoni's insistence on the definition of language as aesthetics fell into a vulgar form of positivism, which Croce himself criticized and rejected eloquently. Refuting Bertoni, Gramsci asks (1975b: VIII, vol. 2, 700): 'What are words when they are isolated and abstracted from a literary work? No longer an aesthetic element, rather an element of history and culture, and as such the linguist studies them.'

Neo-linguistics, thus, came to a standstill. It did not develop a theory of language. What is worse, Gramsci notes, it accepted the theoretical framework of Bertoni. Hence its capitulation to Croce's philosophical perspective.⁴ In prison, Gramsci planned to revive the neo-linguistic method and complete it with an organic, systematic historicist theoretical perspective. But before we embark on a discussion of Gramsci's notes on the subject, some general observations are in order on the characterization of Gramscian linguistics.

Luigi Rossiello, one of the few analysts of Gramscian linguistics, has critically evaluated his linguistic notions and contrasted them rightly with those of the Saussurean school and the contemporary school of structuralist linguistics. He has established the common points between Gramsci and Saussure, such as their emphasis on the importance of history in linguistic analysis and the social character of language. Yet an incomplete image of Gramsci emerges from Rossiello's essay. Gramsci is viewed as the precursor of contemporary

structuralism, the eager defender of objective, concrete and scientific linguistic analysis. What is more serious, the linguist Gramsci is seen as a detached academician, distinct from the revolutionary Marxist theoretician he really was. Important questions have not been asked: How is his analysis of language related to and integrated into his more general theory of 'absolute historicism'? What is the nature and place of a 'science' of language within his historicist theory of science? How consonant is his adhesion to neo-linguistics, and its objectivistic orientation, with his humanistic Marxism? How can a disinterested study of language be justified given the *practical* interest of Gramsci in not writing the history of an aspect of culture, but attempting to modify it (Gramsci, 1975b: 29, XXI, vol. 3, 2342)? The association of Gramscian linguistics with structuralist linguistics seems forced and exaggerated. Certainly linguistics has a method and an objective of its own. Gramsci was interested in developing a historicist theory and methodology of the linguistic system. He was interested in the 'history of language' from the standpoint of political history. The empirical investigation of phonetic and morphological aspects of language is not his concern. It is relegated to non-history, but not denied, however. Gramsci writes (1971: 451): '... the absence of a critical and historicist conception of the phenomenon of language, can lead to many errors in both the scientific and the practical field.'

2. The linguistic fact as a political act: the essence of Gramsci's sociology of language

Language, as a system of signs, cannot be analyzed apart from the study of ideologies. Meanings embodied in words are ideological. That is to say, ideologies are signs. Gramsci, however, avoids Marr's error of equating language and superstructure. He was aware of the necessity of rendering language 'autonomous' from both structure and superstructure. He, thus, distinguished within language, a *form* and a *content*, that is, a linguistic system proper (organization of signs) from a linguistic content (semantic values). The first develops and is governed by its own internal laws, thus independent from the determination of the structure. The latter is superstructural and as such should be analyzed in terms of ideologies and political praxis. Gramsci chose to analyze this second aspect of language, of primary importance in the process of socialist transformation of society. The content of language indirectly can affect its form. He writes (1971: 453): '... no new historical situation, however radical the change that has brought it about, completely transforms language, at least in its external formal aspect. But the content of language must be changed, even if it is difficult to have an exact awareness of the change in immediate terms.'

The most important aspect of language is then for Gramsci its cultural content. He agrees with the Saussurean principle of the arbitrariness of signs, by speaking of the *metaphorality* of language. Every language is metaphorical, Gramsci writes, insofar as it contains 'meanings' which derive from past periods of civilization. It was the concept of the metaphorality of language that led the Italian sociologist Vilfredo Pareto and Italian pragmatist, Vailati, among others, to conceive of languages as a source of error and linguistic explanations as non-logical explanations. They set about to eliminate metaphors from language and replace them with new meanings and scientific concepts. In contrast to Pareto, Gramsci argues that metaphorical meanings cannot be eliminated from language. The transformation of these metaphors is eminently a political fact and is associated with the transformation of whole civilizations.

'Language is transformed with the transformation of the whole civilization, through the acquisition of culture by new classes and through the hegemony exercised by one national language over others, etc., and what it does is precisely to absorb in metaphorical form the words of previous civilizations and cultures. . . The new "metaphorical" meaning spreads with the spread of the new culture, which furthermore also coins brand-new words or absorbs them from other languages as loan-words giving them a precise meaning and therefore depriving them of the extensive halo they possessed in the original language' (Gramsci, 1971: 452-453).

2.1. *Historicity of language: its practical and political character*

If in language there is a continuous process of formation and transformation of metaphors it is because the 'history' of culture transforms itself. Language is a political fact and an instrument of politics. It aids the development of a cultural social unity through the welding together of a multiplicity of dispersed wills in a common conception of the world. In this political context, Gramsci writes (1971: 349), 'great importance is assumed by the general question of language, that is the question of collectively attaining a single cultural "climate"'.

Important methodological observations can then be made. Linguistic facts are not individual but collective and cultural facts. This has for Gramsci a great political significance. By characterizing language as a 'collective' phenomenon, one stresses the social and dialectical nature of language. Language is social, that is, a social product, in the Durkheimian and Saussurean sense. But it is also dialectical, Gramsci adds. Within a given language there is a dialectics between the individual and collective language, individuals' language contents being absorbed by cultural ones. Gramsci writes (1971: 349):

It seems that one can say that 'language' is essentially a collective term which does not presuppose any single thing existing in time and space. . . . At the limit it could be said that every speaking being has a personal language of his own, that is his own particular way of thinking and feeling. Culture, at its various levels, unifies in a series of strata, to the extent that they come into contact with each other, a greater or lesser number of individuals who understand each other's mode of expression in differing degrees, etc.

This signifies that far from being the subjective realization and expression of culture, language is the expression of concrete interests of given groups. The difference between the Gramscian historicist approach to language and that of Durkheim is fundamental. While for Durkheimian linguists, linguistic changes are a product of changes in society, for Gramsci they are the consequences of the hegemony of a social class or group over society's culture. Gramsci insists on the interrelationship between linguistic stratification and social stratification. Each class has its own language and a *Weltanschauung* of its own. Linguistic innovations are to be explained in terms of the molecular influence of the new hegemonic class over all others. In this respect, Gramsci notes (1975b: 29 XXI, vol. 3, 2341): 'Every time the question of language surfaces in one way or the other, it means that a series of other problems are beginning to emerge: the formation and expansion of the ruling class, the necessity of establishing closer and firmer ties between the leading groups and national-popular masses, that is of reorganizing the cultural hegemony.' The most important linguistic changes, Gramsci continues, are caused by external factors. A given language mirrors more profound changes that have occurred in the cultural, moral and psychological world.

In language also there is no parthenogenesis, that is, the phenomenon of language producing another language, but innovation through the interferences of diverse languages. The interference and 'molecular' influence can take place within a nation, between various strata (Gramsci, 1975b: 6, VIII, vol. 2, 739).

From the above cited texts and from the general context from which Gramsci approaches the study of language, an organic set of propositions can be established:

- Linguistics concerns itself with the history of languages.
- The history of languages is the history of semantics, itself an integral part of the history of culture.
- The source of 'meanings' in language is history, more specifically the political praxis of a given group.
- Meanings are always 'ideological'; they reflect the interests of a given group.
- Meanings are *critical* insofar as they indicate the presence of elements derived from old or new conceptions of the world.

- There is a dialectics of meanings, reflecting a dialectics taking place in society.
- Linguistic truths are established by the political praxis of a dominant group.

The theoretical and practical implications of Gramsci's historicist perspective in linguistics will be discussed further on. It suffices here to say that for Gramsci a historicist linguistics is not concerned with discovering immanent laws, specific changes or new directions occurring in the linguistic system. Rather, it focuses on the 'practical reasons' why a given law, a certain development or direction finally prevailed. From a practical standpoint, that of socialist revolution, for instance, the problem of language is crucial. A revolutionary change must be preceded by a transformation of meanings, a 'linguistic conformism', to use a Gramscian term. As new meanings are developed, the old ones become metaphors.

'Usually, when a new conception replaces the previous one, the previous language continues to be used but is, precisely, used metaphorically. The whole of language is a continuous process of metaphor, and the history of semantics is an aspect of the history of culture' (Gramsci, 1975a: 450).

Linguistic conformism is dictated by praxis. Marcuse's thesis of one-dimensionality in language, a process by which critical meanings and concepts are eliminated by technological praxis and replaced by scientific, operational ones, corroborates this point. The difference between them lies in the fact that *any* praxis for Gramsci engenders a linguistic conformism.

2.2. *Historical and political character of grammar*

From what has been said thus far, language in its content and history belongs to the realm of the superstructures, and, as such, it does not escape the determination of the structure. However, grammars within languages are autonomous systems. This needs further elaboration. In a series of notes on *Grammar*, a sort of introductory guide to the study of grammar, Gramsci posed several problems, some partially answered, others barely enunciated. His discussion of grammar is also conducted from a practical perspective, that is, of how to teach a grammar *historically*.

The first question raised, in his polemic with Croce, was that of the *definition* of grammar. Croce wrote a provocative essay entitled 'This round table is square'. This sentence, he concluded, is wrong from the standpoint of aesthetics and logic but correct from the point of view of the grammarians. It must be remembered here that the essence of language is, for Croce, aesthetics. Gramsci criticized Croce's misconception of grammar, characterized as a 'technical' system. A grammatical error denotes a lack of 'discipline to the historicity of language' or simply a lack of knowledge of the historical reasons

for grammatical norms (Gramsci, 1975b: 29, XXI, vol. 3, 2341). Thus, what is grammatically exact can also be justified from the point of view of aesthetics and logic, Gramsci concludes. What is in dispute is the definition of grammar. Gramsci writes (1975b: 29, XXI, vol. 3, 2341):

The grammar is 'history' or a 'historical document': it is the 'photograph' of a specific phase of a (collective) national language, which was formed historically and continues to develop, or it is the fundamental traits of that photograph. The question, in the practical sense, can be: what is the purpose of such a photograph? To write the history of one aspect of civilisation or to modify an aspect of civilisation?

In defining grammar as a 'historical document', Gramsci draws a distinction between two types of grammar: *immanent* and *normative*. The first is inherent in language, in the technical sense. Everyone speaks according to grammar and is influenced by it. As a matter of fact every cultural expression or moral or intellectual activity, Gramsci notes, has a historically determined language. The second consists of a system of norms derived from reciprocal controls, reciprocal teaching, reciprocal 'censorship'. 'This whole complex of actions and reactions, to establish "norms", and standards of correctness or incorrectness' (Gramsci, 1975b: 29, XXI, vol. 3, 2341). Normative grammar, particularly when written, is instrumental in creating a national or regional linguistic conformity.

Rosiello has seen in Gramsci's distinction of grammars, an initial formulation of the structuralist method, which associates the concept of 'immanent grammar' with that of 'generative grammar' of which N. Chomski speaks. Gramsci's recourse to a structuralist form of linguistics has been explained in terms of his opposition to the idealist subjectivism of the Crocean school (Rosiello, 1970: 358). In effect, Gramsci opposed Croce not by resorting to an objectivistic, scientific linguistic method. Rather he opposed him on *historicist grounds*. Historicism, as we have seen, is the scientific method *par excellence* for Gramsci! The best grammarians are the historians of language, and the best type of normative grammar is the historical grammar. In fact, teaching a particular grammar means teaching about a particular phase of the history of language, from a certain class position. And, learning a grammar means learning a particular interpretation of the historical past. This is the sense of the following text:

It is evident that a writer of normative grammar can not ignore the history of the language of which he wants to propose an 'exemplary phase' as the 'sole' one worthy of becoming 'organically' and 'totally' the 'common' language of the nation, in struggle and competition with other 'phases' and types or

schemes already in existence (tied to traditional developments or inorganic and incoherent attempts of forces, which, as has been seen, operate continually in spontaneous and immanent 'grammars' of the language) (Gramsci, 1975b: 29, XXI, vol. 3, 2342).

From the historicist point of view, Gramsci continues, the historical grammars *par excellence* are the comparative grammars, the only ones capable of grasping the essence of language. Historical grammar cannot but be 'comparative', an expression which, analyzed in depth, indicates the profound consciousness that the linguistic phenomenon, like any other historical phenomenon, cannot have narrowly defined national boundaries but that history is always 'world-history' (Gramsci, 1975b: 29, XXI, vol. 3, 2342). The political context is thus central in Gramsci's analysis of grammars. With no hesitation he states that a normative grammar is a *political act*.

'Written normative grammar thus always presupposes a "choice", a cultural orientation, and is therefore always an act of national-cultural politics. There can be discussion of the best way of presenting the "choice" or "orientation" so that it could be accepted willingly, that is, a discussion of the most suitable means to attain the end; there can be no doubt that there is an end to attain, which necessitates proper and suitable means, that is a question of a political act' (Gramsci, 1975b: 29 XXI, vol. 3, 2342).

By insisting on the historical and political nature of grammar, Gramsci attempted to develop a Marxist approach to various theoretical and practical problems. First, he sought to argue against Croce and Gentile, the representatives of the dominant philosophy and political liberalism in Italy, that a grammar is more than a 'technique'. It is a 'historically determined' mode of expression. As such, it should have a place in a general theory of knowledge. Second, the identification of grammar and technique made by Croce had the effect of excluding the grammar from history, philosophy and theory and relegating it to practical activity. His position justified Gentile's educational policies in Italy, which opposed the teaching of any grammar in school and proposed a *laissez-faire* practical stance: grammar is learned from speaking! This is a politically reactionary position, Gramsci notes. It strengthens the existing social stratification, it prevents the accession of the popular masses to the high culture of intellectuals and cultivated social strata, which is learned and transmitted orally from generation to generation in a caste-like manner. Hence, the necessity of teaching a *historical grammar*, whose purpose is to facilitate the attainment of a homogeneous culture with the active participation of the masses. The teaching of a grammar as a 'technique' and as a 'historically determined' mode of speaking would in fact enable socialism to accomplish its goal of elevating the cultural and intellectual level of the

masses and transforming their *Weltanschauungen*, common sense and folklore into a superior one.⁵

Only from this perspective do Gramsci's notes on linguistics and the study of language have their true meanings. They must be analyzed in relation to the central themes of the *Prison Notebooks*, the notion of hegemony and socialist construction of a new intellectual order. Gramsci's interests in linguistics are opposed to those of contemporary structuralist and positivist linguistics. He is concerned with the political context of language, the place of the study of languages in a general historicist theory of knowledge, and the role of language in socialist transformation.

We now pass to the discussion of a related theme, Gramsci's analysis of the history of the Italian language, a case which historically confirms the general methodological and theoretical criteria just presented. Such analysis is an attempt to elaborate a Marxist sociology of language, whose objective is that of demonstrating the practical and historical relation between language and the cultural and political hegemony of a given class and its intellectuals.

2.3. *Linguistic conflict as a political conflict: the case of the origin of the Italian language*

Leonardo Paggi (1970: 76) has observed that Gramsci's interest in linguistic studies led him to examine the role and the historical function of intellectuals in Italy. Simply by reading Gramsci's notes on the Italian *Risorgimento* one can see how interrelated the problem of language and that of the intellectuals really are. Various phases of Italian history are determined by a specific relationship between the popular language and that of the intellectuals. When the intellectuals wrote and spoke in a language that was not understood by the masses, there existed a separation between a high culture and a popular culture.

Gramsci (1975b: 3XX, vol. 1, 353) notes that a real history of the Italian language has not been written. He outlined such a history, to include a discussion of language as an 'element of culture' and thereby of a 'general history'. Already in an earlier essay (1975d: 30), examining the question of language in Manzoni, Gramsci raised the issue of how a unified language could be created in Italy. Manzoni had stated that the linguistic unification of Italy was possible only after the realization of the political unification of the country and the creation of a unified State, that is, only when all Italian regional dialects had been eliminated and replaced by that of Tuscany through the intermediary of the unified State. In contrast to Manzoni, Gramsci argued that the creation of a common national language is not an artificial process. The diffusion of a language is due to literary production and commercial ac-

tivities conducted in that language. Gramsci writes (1975d: 30): 'Between the 14th and 16th centuries in Tuscany there were writers like Dante, Boccaccio, Petrarch, Macchiavelli and Guicciardini who spread the Tuscan language; there were bankers, artisans, and manufacturers who brought Tuscan products and the names of these products throughout all of Italy. Later, when the production of goods and books was restricted, so too was the productivity of the language limited.'

Very early in life, then, Gramsci was convinced of the intimate connection of linguistic history and political history (Paggi, 1970: 77). 'Every new social stratum, which comes into history, organizes itself for a struggle, infuses a language with new currents and new usages and breaks up the fixed schemes which grammarians established for practical and opportunistic reasons' (Gramsci, 1975d: 33). This is true of the origin of the Italian language during the early period of Italian history, particularly the Renaissance and Humanism, between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries.

From 600 A.D. to about 1200, a period of 600 years, Europe experienced a complete separation between the masses and the culture of the intellectuals. There was the *literary Latin* of cultured men and ecclesiastics, and the *vulgar Latin*, from which various neo-Latins developed all over Europe. The crystallization of these two types of Latin is the historical result of the monopolization of knowledge and ideas in general in the hands of the ecclesiastic class of intellectuals. Religion, which dominated the whole culture of Europe, became increasingly abstract and understood, studied, and preached in literary Latin among clerics and monks.

At the beginning of the eleventh century, various dialects developed. In France, while the country underwent great political, economic, religious and cultural changes, the literature of *langue d'oc* and *oil* began to develop. Likewise in Italy, as popular movements began to assert themselves in political life, various regional dialects emerged. During the period of the Communes, various dialects were already in existence. Among them, only one, the *volgare illustre* prevailed, due to the expansion of the intellectual hegemony of Florence (Gramsci, 1975b: 3, XX, vol. 1, 353-354). A characteristic of this dialect of Tuscany, known as the Florentine, which became the Italian language in the twelfth century, was that while it developed a vocabulary and phonetics of its own, it remained Latin in its syntax. This is due, Gramsci writes, to the pre-eminence of traditional intellectuals, the ecclesiastics, who were not national but cosmopolitan intellectuals, writing for a Christian European audience. Let us sketch the successive developments of the Italian language with Gramsci's own words (1975b: 3, XX, vol. 1, 353-354):

With the fall of the Communes, the advent of Principalities, and the creation of a governmental caste removed from the people, this dialect crystallized. Again, Italian is a written but not spoken language, a language of literati, and

not of the nation. There are now two cultural languages in Italy, the Latin and the Italian. The latter finally prevails and becomes completely dominant in the XIX century with the separation of the lay intellectuals from the ecclesiastics.

How do we explain these linguistic developments? Gramsci makes two important observations. The birth of various dialects marking the historical break with medieval culture and the affirmation of a dialect, the Florentine, over all others result from the concentration of intellectual groups. Gramsci strongly rejects the interpretation of linguistic developments advanced by the historian Vittorio Rossi, as well as the general interpretation of the *Renaissance* period. According to Rossi, the early *Renaissance* movement is the culmination, and the spontaneous manifestation, of creative energies springing from the depth of man's consciousness, eager to feel and live the 'antiquity'. Gramsci instead argues that the emergence of new dialects represents a dramatic break with medieval culture and feudal institutions and values. The conflict between the Latin language and the new dialects was the manifestation of a more profound conflict between two conceptions of the world. On the one hand, there was an aristocratic-feudal intellectual world, attached to the Roman antiquity and expressing itself in Latin; on the other hand, there was a new, progressive bourgeois-popular civilization expressing itself in new languages to affirm new exigencies and values. The spontaneous Italian Renaissance of the eleventh century was a bourgeois reaction against the feudal regime, which affected all aspects of society, particularly the economic, political and cultural life. The new bourgeois class developed agriculture, industry and commerce, which culminated in the phenomenon of the Communes. This spontaneous *Renaissance* was followed by the humanist and cultural *Renaissance*, which extended into the fifteenth century. It represented a rebirth of Latin as the language of the intellectuals in opposition to new dialects. The progressive bourgeoisie, after the fall of the Communes, was contained and finally suppressed by regressive-reactionary forces, an aristocracy separated from the masses.

The new Italian culture, which emerged in the eleventh century, was not 'national' but 'regional' and 'communal culture'. The linguistic unification of Italy took place in the fifteenth century. The bourgeoisie reacted against a European, catholic, abstract universalistic culture and expressed its practical interests through the new dialects. Yet, Gramsci continues, the newly emerged bourgeoisie could not create a 'national language' precisely because its intellectuals were absorbed by the traditional and reactionary ones. Humanism, with its cult of classic antiquity, is for Gramsci a reactionary period. It demonstrates how strong and how powerful were the intellectual strata attached to the feudal-aristocratic world (Gramsci, 1975b: 5, IX, vol. 1, 640).

But, how to explain the crystallization of the *volgare illustre*? In Gramsci's

words, why was the Florentine dialect able to become hegemonic in literature and culture while the new popular-bourgeoisie lacked a sociopolitical hegemony? Gramsci himself answered the question by sketching a brief analysis of the role of the intellectuals during the *Renaissance* and *humanist* period.

The period of the Communes, of communal liberties, Gramsci writes, was characterized by a political ascent of popular masses. New intellectuals, attached to the bourgeoisie, issued from the popular(-bourgeois) classes, prospered and developed to such an extent that they were able to create a new Italian literature, written and spoken in the new dialects. In the post-communal period, these intellectuals were absorbed into the traditional caste of the aristocracy. To be sure, the intellectuals continued to issue from the popular masses, but they were individually selected and assimilated into the traditional caste of intellectuals, the ecclesiastics. The limited success of communal bourgeois and popular literary activities can be explained, Gramsci continues, only if one considers the ambivalent role of the intellectuals. Petrarca, for instance, was a poet of the bourgeoisie and wrote in the Florentine dialect. But he wrote also in Latin in matters of politics. Thus, he was the intellectual of the anti-bourgeois reaction in the period of the Principalities. The *Renaissance period*, in which the new dialects emerged, is for Gramsci a *progressive period* in the history of Italy. At this time, new popular forces made their appearance in history but could not affirm themselves politically, for their intellectuals were unable to maintain their political autonomy *vis-à-vis* the traditional intellectuals, the social stratum of clerics, intimately attached to the old feudal-aristocratic regime. Humanism is a *reactionary period*, the period of the restoration of the old feudal world and lost cultural unity. The humanist movement prevailed both politically and ideologically. Politically, through the containment and repression of the revolutionary bourgeois classes, intellectually, through the assimilation of the ideological principles of the bourgeoisie. The return to the 'Latin' language and cult of the classics was thus a political and ideological movement which led to the counter-reformation. The triumph of the cult of *romanitas* is to be explained in terms of the re-assertion of the political power of the Popes, and the re-establishment of the Holy Roman Empire (Gramsci, 1975b: 5, IX, vol. 1, 645).

It is all this history that Gramsci had in mind when he wrote that language is a political phenomenon, and a historical grammar has not yet been written. The Italian language is the dialect of a class; it asserts itself, in reaction to the feudal, aristocratic and universal interests and in defense of the newly emerged popular-bourgeois interests.

In conclusion, one will not find an organic and systematic analysis of language to speak of a Marxist sociology of language in Gramsci. However, from all his fragmentary notes on language, a clear Marxist analytical framework has certainly been developed by Gramsci. Every grammar reflects the

history of class in its ascendancy toward political and cultural hegemony. Gramsci searched for an empirical, historical confirmation of this idea. The history of the origin of the Italian language provided him with the best illustration of his thesis. Thus, linguistic conflicts are part of a struggle among groups, classes aiming at cultural and political hegemony. This is the objective of a Gramscian sociology of language.

Bradley University

Notes

1. On the central themes of Gramsci's thought, see Salamini (1974, 1975, 1976, f.c.).
2. For the best exposition of Marr's linguistic theories, see Thomas (1967).
3. In this same letter Gramsci reveals his plan to write a work *for ewig* on four major subjects, one of which is a study in comparative linguistics from a theoretical perspective.
4. Gramsci severely criticized Bartoli for cooperating with Bertoni in the compilation of a *Manual of Linguistics*, whose theoretical fact was written by Bertoni. For a more detailed analysis of the relationship between Bartoli, Bertoni and Croce on the problem of linguistics, see Rosiello (1970).
5. See Gramsci's note on 'Grammar and technique' (1975b: 29, XXI, vol. 3, 2348ff.).

References

- Anglani, Bartolo (1967). La critica letteraria in Gramsci. *Critica Marxista* 3, 208-230.
- Engels, F. (1958). Letter of Engels to J. Bloc. In *Selected Works*, vol. 2, 489. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House.
- Gramsci, Antonio (1971). *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (trans.). New York: International Publishers.
- (1975a). *Letters from Prison*, Lynne Lawner (trans. and ed.), 80. New York: Harper.
- (1975b). *Quaderni del Carcere. Edizione critica dell'Istituto Gramsci*, Valentino Gerratana (dir.). Torino: Giulio Einaudi Editors.
- (1975c). Socialism and culture. In *History, Philosophy and Culture in the Young Gramsci*, Pedro Cavalcanti and Paul Piccone (trans. and eds.). Saint Louis: Telos.
- (1975d). Universal language and esperanto. In *History, Philosophy and Culture in the Young Gramsci*, Pedro Cavalcanti and Paul Piccone (trans. and eds.). Saint Louis: Telos.
- Hertzler, Joyce O. (1965). *A Sociology of Language*. New York: Random House.
- Marx, Karl (1972). *The German Ideology*, C.J. Arthur (ed.). New York: International Publishers.
- Paggi, Leonardo (1970). *Gramsci e il moderno principe*. Rome: Editori Riuniti.
- Petronio, Giuseppe (1958). Gramsci e la critica letteraria. In *Studi Gramsciani*, 223-241. Rome: Editori Riuniti - Istituto Gramsci.
- Rosiello, Luigi (1970). Problemi linguistici negli scritti di Gramsci. In *Gramsci e la*

Cultura Contemporanea, Pietro Rossi (ed.), vol. 2, 354. Rome: Editori Riuniti – Istituto Gramsci.

- Salamini, Leonardo (1974). Gramsci and Marxist sociology of knowledge: An analysis of hegemony-ideology-knowledge. *The Sociological Quarterly* 15(Summer), 359–380.
- (1975). The specificity of Marxist sociology in Gramsci's theory. *The Sociological Quarterly* 16(Winter), 65–86.
- (1976). Towards a sociology of intellectuals: A structural analysis of Gramsci's Marxist theory. *Sociological Analysis and Theory* 6(1).
- (f.c.). *The Sociology of Political Praxis: An Introduction to Gramsci's Theory*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Sapir, Edward (1949). *Language*. New York: Harvest Books.
- Schaff, Adam (1967). *Langage et connaissance*. Paris: Editions Anthropos.
- Schmalstieg, William R. (1969). Structural linguistics in the Soviet Union. In *Social Thought in the Soviet Union*, Alex Simirenko (ed.), 361. Chicago: Quadrangle Books.
- Stalin, Joseph (1972). Marxism in linguistics. In *Marxism and Art*, Berel Lang and Forrest Williams (eds.), 80–87. New York: David McKay.
- Thomas, Lawrence L. (1967). *The Linguistic Theories of N.J. Marr*. Berkeley: University of California Press.