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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the possibility of an influence on Antonio Gramsci's conception of language by the sociolinguistics developed in Soviet Russia in the 1920s. In the first part, the paper focusses on linguistic policy, analysing the evolution of the meaning of the term between Gramsci's pre-prison and prison writings. In the second part, the paper explores the similarities between Gramsci's and Soviet linguists' stances on language policy, suggesting the latter as possible influence on the evolution of the former's ideas on language.

Introduction

In contemporary Gramscian studies, the influence of linguistics on Gramsci's political theories has been widely established. Since the 1970s, through Franco Lo Piparo's seminal work *Lingua, Intellettuali, Egemonia in Gramsci* (1979), Gramscian reflections on language have been object of worldwide interest among scholars. Among the most influential and recent publications are those of Brandist (1996, 2012), Carlucci (2013), Ives (2004a, 2004b) and Boothman (2004).

One aspect of contemporary research aims to uncover the sources of the so-called 'Gramscian linguistic theory' (De Mauro 1979: xv) contained in his most influential work, the *Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci 1975).[1] In his works, Gramsci explicitly points us towards the Italian tradition of linguistics as his primary source: Matteo Bartoli and Graziadio Isaia Ascoli, the writings on language of the Turin positivist movement,[2] and the philosopher Benedetto

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[1]Within the present paper all references to the Prison Notebooks will use the standard notation of the critical edition by Valentino Gerratana, where Q# will refer to the notebook's number, and §# will refer to the paragraph's number. For the English editions, a concordance table is provided by the International Gramsci Society at the address http://www.internationalgramscisociety.org/resources/concordance_table/. For clarity purpose I will add in square brackets the year when, according to Gerratana's critical apparatus, Gramsci supposedly wrote the notebook in question. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Italian are mine.

[2]Especially the writings by Giovanni Vailati had a considerable influence on Gramsci's notion of language. Vailati, and with him the other Italian pragmatists, saw languages as characterised by ambiguities, unjustified categorisations and crystallised concepts and argumentative patterns. Only by removing such obstacles science, both theoretical and applied, can express its full potential. Gramsci, commenting on Vailati's writings (Vailati [1908] 1987), acknowledged the underlying necessities of the pragmatist effort, though translated in his own socio-historical conception of language (Gramsci 1975 [1932–1935]: Q10 §44).

For a comprehensive discussion on the Italian positivist movement and its role in Gramsci's Prison Notebooks, see Gensini (2012).

Croce. He also provides us with interesting references to important European linguists such as Michel Bréal, Franz Nikolaus Finck (Gramsci 1975: Q5 §23) and Karl Vossler (Gramsci 1975: Q3 §74). Furthermore, numerous studies convincingly argue that the works of French linguist Antoine Meillet[3] constitute one of the linguistic sources of the *Prison Notebooks*.

Recent studies, however, point to two other possible clusters of authors who exerted their influence on Gramsci's linguistic ideas: Ferdinand de Saussure and the early structuralists, such as Roman Jakobson, and the scholars involved in debates on linguistic policies in Soviet Russia in the 1920s. As for the similarities between the linguistic ideas of Saussure and Gramsci, these were observed as early as 1959 by Luigi Rosiello (1959, 1969), and are further explored by Ives (2004a,b), Carlucci (2013) and Schirru (2010). Following these studies, an at least indirect knowledge of Saussurean ideas by Gramsci is now to be considered a highly plausible hypothesis.[4]

Other scholars, such as Craig Brandist, investigate the conceptual similarities between Gramsci and the Russian linguists working in the 1920s at the *Institut živogo slova* [IŽS, Institute of the living word][5] and the *Institut sravitenl'nogo izučenija literatur i jazykov Zapada i Vostoka* [ILJaZV, Institute for the Comparative Study of Literatures and Languages of the West and East][6] in Leningrad. Among the most prominent scholars working at the IŽS and ILJaZV were students and followers of Polish linguist Jan Baudouin de Courtenay (1845–[, 1929), such as Evgenij D. Polivanov (1891–1938), Lev P. Jakubinskij (1892–1945) and Lev V. Ščerba (1880–1944). As we will discuss more in depth later, starting from Baudouin de Courtenay's consideration of language as a psychological *and* sociological phenomenon, these scholars worked 'for […] 10 years […] to shift the centre of gravity [of linguistics – P.R.] to the sociological side of the study of language' (Polivanov [1928] 1968 : 52), in a Marxist fashion. Some contemporary scholars see in Gramsci a similar shift:

> This shared agenda among the ILIaZV-GIRK scholars, and the formulations that resulted from following it, bear a striking resemblance to the Italian Communist Party leader Antonio Gramsci's attempt to restructure the work of Italian linguistic geographers according to the principles of Marxism. (Brandist 2003a: 216)

However, we still lack documentary evidence of any contact between Gramsci and the Soviet linguists. Therefore, the aforementioned researchers rely on two arguments: the presence of Gramsci in Russia in 1922–1923 and 1925 (Carlucci & Balestrieri 2011; Grigor'eva 1998), and the strong analogies that can be traced between certain innovations that Gramsci and some Soviet linguists share in their approach to language:

> Gramsci's receptiveness to social variation may have been stimulated by the loosely Marxist theoretical framework of Soviet linguistics and dialectology, which typically focused on class variation. (Carlucci 2013: 89)

Both Brandist (2012, 2015) and Carlucci (2013, 2015) discuss at length these two arguments, especially in relation to the origin of the Gramscian concept of hegemony. The present paper

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[3]For a list of those studies see (Schirru 2011: 965).
[4]For example, Schirru (2010) shows that among the journals possessed by Gramsci in prison there was a number of the journal *La Cultura*, in which was published an article by Jakobson, *Il circolo linguistico di Praga* (1933).
[5]The Institute operated in Petrograd between 1918 and 1924. Among its founding members were A. Lunačarskij, L. Jakubinskij and L. Ščerba. The Institute focused on researching and teaching techniques of public speech and propaganda. For a more detailed discussion on the concept of 'living word' see (Brandist 2015: 78–98).
[6]Originally founded in 1921 as *Institut im. A. N. Veselovskij*, renamed in 1923 *Naučno-issledovatel'skij institut sravnitel'noj istorii literatur i jazykov Zapada i Vostoka* (ILJaZV) and again in 1930 *Gosudarstvennyj institut rečevoj kul'tury* [GIRK, State Institute of Discursive Culture]. For a history of ILJaZV see (Brandist 2008b).

wishes to add a third argument supporting the possibility of a contact between Gramsci and the Soviet linguistic *milieu*, starting from the exploration of Gramsci's approach to the notion of *language policy*.

In the first part of the paper, I will show how the Gramscian stance on language policy in the *Notebooks* differs from his pre-prison writings, focusing on the theoretical assumptions at the root of these differences. As a working definition, I will describe *language policy* as any conscious effort aimed at changing the linguistic behaviour of a speech community (Tollefson 2011: 371).[7]

In the second part, I will try to show the conceptual similarities between the *Prison Notebooks* and some of Baudouin de Courtenay's students in Leningrad regarding the concept of language policy. I will argue that those similarities concern primarily those theoretical assumptions that are at the foundation of the difference between the pre-prison and prison stance on linguistic policy.

The 'Renunciatory' linguistic policy

Manzoni and Ascoli: the making of the Italian state

Gramsci's interest towards language policy dates as far as the late 1910s. In a letter to Tatiana dated 17 November 1930, Gramsci refers to his own, now lost work on 'the question of language according to Manzoni' (Gramsci 1996: 364), written ten years before.

In 1868 the Italian Minister for Public Education, Emilio Broglio, appointed the poet and novelist Alessandro Manzoni as president of a commission whose aim was to propose a solution for the 'question of language', i.e. the lack of a unitary language within the population of the Italian State. Shortly after, Manzoni produced a report destined to be at the centre of harsh debates: 'Dell'unità della lingua e dei mezzi di diffonderla' [On the unity of language and the means of its diffusion], published in the March 1868 issue of the journal *Antologia Nuova*. In the report, the author claims that the solution to the question is to choose, among the different dialects and variants of Italian, a single language to be employed by the institutions and the educational system as the only official mean of communication. As to which language to choose, for Manzoni 'the choice […] was already made' (Manzoni 1868: 420): the language of Florence, the most rich, and more fit to express 'all the notions [*cognizioni*], the opinions and the concepts of any sort that could be present in Italy' (Manzoni 1868, 430).

Manzoni grounds his proposal on the idea that language is a neutral tool employed in the expression of extra-linguistic ideas. According to Benedetto Croce, 'the Manzonian position on the linguistic problem appears as something reactionary, a fruit out of season' as it regards language as a mere 'collection of tools that everybody employs to communicate his own ideas to others' (Croce [1905] 1910: 205). Form and content of language appear, under these premises, as completely independent:

> we all say the same things: we just say them in different ways. The fact that we say the same things certifies the possibility to substitute one idiom to all the others; the fact that we say them in different ways certifies the need for a single mean. (Manzoni 1868: 431)

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[7]Although many authors distinguish between *language policy* and *language planning* (e.g. Mesthrie 2011: 371), in the present paper I will treat them as synonyms, since such distinction is absent in the authors under study.

As for the means to spread the unified language throughout the nation, Manzoni envisages two main institutional actions: the publication of a new vocabulary (Manzoni 1868: 430), that would serve as a normative guideline; and the massive recruitment of Tuscan teachers for the primary schools of the Kingdom, that would serve as the vessel to spread the new language (Manzoni 1868: 440).

Manzoni's proposal ultimately failed, according to Gramsci, due to 'a scholar of the history of language, Graziadio Isaia Ascoli, who opposed roughly thirty pages to the hundreds of Manzoni' (Gramsci [1918] 1982b: 670). Graziadio Isaia Ascoli (1829–1907) was one of the most important linguists of the turn of the century and contributed tremendously to the introduction of historical linguistics (golottology) in Italy. The thirty pages were those of the *Proemio* [Introduction] to the first number of the journal of historical linguistics *Archivio glottologico italiano* which he co-founded and began to publish in 1872.

In the *Proemio*, Ascoli reprimands Manzoni for considering language as a neutral and interchangeable tool, a 'new sleeve to put on' (Ascoli [1872] 2008: 34). Instead, an idiom should be regarded as 'a skin resulting from the entire organism of the national culture' (Ascoli [1872] 2008: 34). According to Ascoli, the unity of the language derives from the unity of the civil and literary activity of a nation, as were the cases of France and Germany (Ascoli [1872] 2008: 27). Manzoni's proposal instead wants to achieve the goal of linguistic unity in the opposite way from which other nations achieved it, not as 'the sediment […] of civil and literary activity', but as their 'norm' [*norma*] (Ascoli [1872] 2008: 27).

Furthermore, Ascoli argues that this inverted process would be harmful to the same civil and literary activity. Such a solution would force the 'labourers of intellect' [*operaj dell'intelligenza*], the intellectuals, to cease their own activity of creating and fostering a common culture and literature in order to learn or, better, to 'mock' [*scimmiottare*] the language of a Florence (Ascoli [1872] 2008: 28). From Ascoli's point of view

> the theory and proposal of Manzoni, in the end, mortifies the role of intellectuals and cultural institutions: the relationship between language and culture is an extrinsic relationship of a mean to an end, and the intellectuals are called to act as vehicles and propagators of an 'already formed language'. (Lo Piparo 1979: 34)

According to Ascoli 'Italy does not possess a linguistic unity because it lacked the conditions [*condizioni*] that occurred elsewhere' (Ascoli [1872] 2008: 29), i.e. the intellectual unity from which to draw [*attingere*] the linguistic unity. In this regard, intellectuals become the nexus of the effort as their role would be to 'inspire that large vortex of civil activity bound to engulf in a firm unity of thought and work all the people of Italy' (Ascoli [1872] 2008: 28).

Ascoli's ideas had a major influence on Gramsci. Franco Lo Piparo, in his seminal book *Lingua, intellettuali, egemonia in Gramsci* (1979), shows the enormous importance of Ascoli's theses in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*: 'there is not a single theoretical point in Ascoli's *Proemio* that hasn't an equivalent in some theory and analysis, not only linguistic, within the *Notebooks*' (Lo Piparo 1979: 35). However, even in Gramsci's pre-prison writings the linguistic ideas of Ascoli are a constant presence, which is most obvious when Gramsci intervenes in the debate over Esperanto. At the time, many members of the Socialist Party sought to adopt Esperanto as a *lingua franca* for the international proletariat. In an article titled 'La lingua unica e l'esperanto' [The unitary language and Esperanto] (Gramsci [1918] 1982b), Gramsci speaks vehemently against this solution. The main argument is centred around an analogy with the debate between Manzoni and Ascoli on the adoption of a unified language. With a direct reference to the *Proemio,* Gramsci criticises the proponents

of Esperanto who 'want to arbitrarily arise *consequences* that do not yet have the necessary *conditions* [*condizioni*]' [emphasis in the original] (Gramsci [1918] 1982b: 668–69). Gramsci regards language as an autonomous force, which can only be guided *indirectly* in its development, and whose unpredictability makes any attempt to create and impose a common language 'belong to the kingdom of Utopia. […] Each new social stratum that emerges to History, that organises for battle, injects within the language new streams, new usages, and makes the fixed schemes, established by grammarians for occasional teaching purposes, explode' (Gramsci [1918] 1982b: 672). Once cultural, social and economic unity is achieved, linguistic unity will follow 'freely and spontaneously' (Gramsci [1918] 1982b: 672). In another essay of the same period, 'Contro un pregiudizio' [Against a prejudice] in which Gramsci directly references Ascoli's *Proemio*, he makes a similar argument:

> linguistic transformations are slow, and happen due to new contacts created by the needs of the complex civil life: they are spontaneous, cannot be determined intellectually. (Gramsci [1918] 1982a: 593)

In these passages, we observe how again Gramsci develops his arguments in parallel with those of the *Proemio*. A direct intervention on language, which is aimed at changing the linguistic behaviour of the speaking mass according to a chosen linguistic norm, is criticised in favour of an indirect work, which is aimed at fostering the united social and cultural life of the nation. Linguistic unity will stem spontaneously from this 'new social organism'. I call this approach to linguistic policy 'renunciatory' as it renounces a direct intervention on language, regarded as useless, at best, if not counterproductive.

It is important to underline that the proposal by Gramsci and Ascoli cannot be defined as renunciatory in every respect. It is not a 'simple renunciation of any intervention, a 'let history make its course': there must be an intervention, but deeper, not at the level of language in itself, but at the level of diffusion and organisation of culture' (Timpanaro 1972: 158–59).

Using a contemporary terminology, it can be said that Gramsci's and Ascoli's linguistic policy actively refutes any *corpus planning*, i.e. any attempt to modify the internal structure of the language (Tollefson 2011: 372), while seeking an *indirect status planning*, i.e. an attempt to change the use and function of a language within a given society.

By contrast, Manzoni can be described as proposing both a corpus planning and a status planning. Denying the pre-existence of a unitary Italian language (Manzoni 1868: 431), Manzoni plans to modify the internal structure of every Italian variant or dialect in order to mimic nineteenth century Florentine. In parallel, State intervention will be directed at modifying the linguistic habits of society (Manzoni 1868: 436).

Language policy in the 29th notebook

When Gramsci was arrested in 1926, a new phase of his theoretical elaboration began, resulting in the now world famous *Prison Notebooks* (1975), written between 1929 and 1935. The 29th, and last, of the *Notebooks* offers extensive reflections on the possibility and opportunity of a linguistic policy. While Gramsci himself never uses the expression 'linguistic policy', it is possible to find an analogous concept when he talks of grammar as an 'act of national-cultural policy', aimed at the creation of a 'common language' (Gramsci [1935] 1975: Q29 §2). Grammar, as Gramsci repeatedly claims in the course of the 29th Notebook, is a *political act*. When Gramsci asks himself 'what is the nature of this political act, and should it raise opposition 'by principle', a de facto collaboration, opposition in its details,

etc.' (Gramsci [1935] 1975: Q29 §2), from what we have seen in the pre-prison writings, the answer to that question should be negative. Any attempt to politically, i.e. rationally, guide the development of language should belong to the 'kingdom of Utopia'. Instead, even while exercising considerable caution, the answer is surprisingly positive:

> if one starts with the assumption of centralising what already exists in a diffused, widespread but inorganic and incoherent state, it becomes clear that what is rational is not an opposition 'by principle', rather a de facto collaboration. (Gramsci [1935] 1975: Q29 §2)

A long passage in which Gramsci distinguishes between different types of grammar introduces these considerations. The first distinction made by Gramsci is between 'spontaneous or immanent grammars' and 'normative grammars, written' (Gramsci [1935] 1975: Q29 §2).

Spontaneous or immanent grammar is the implicit 'order and patterns of language' (Ives 2004a: 91) that each speaker unknowingly employs. This type of grammar pertains to the individual level: 'the number of 'spontaneous or immanent grammars' is uncountable, and could be theoretically said that each individual has his own grammar' (Gramsci [1935] 1975: Q29 §2). Lo Piparo remarks that this conception on the nature of language is derived from Croce's individualistic and idealistic notion of language: 'each individual creates for himself, each time, his own language, and the one that I speak and write today is not the same as yesterday' (Croce [1905] 1910: 205).

However, what differentiates Gramsci from Croce, and makes the former closer to structuralism than to idealism, is the dialectic relationship in which he poses the individual act of speech with the super-individual level (Rosiello 1959: 311). According to Gramsci, through reciprocal control, teaching and censorship, individual grammars are constantly interacting with each other. The result of this interaction is a 'spontaneous […] grammatical conformism' (Gramsci [1935] 1975: Q29 §2).[8] The individual moment of grammar could not exist outside the constant interaction with other grammars: unlike Croce, where each individual creates for himself his own language, in Gramsci the individual grammar is created through interaction with other grammars. It is therefore individual (as it pertains to the individual, and is never fully identical to any other), but not solipsistic, as it requires the presence of the others.

This 'other' is the immediate environment of the speaker. Therefore, the spontaneous conformism works and operates within the boundaries of the social and cultural surroundings and communicative needs of the speaker: 'a farmer moving to an urban area, due to the pressure of the environment, ends up conforming to the jargon of the city' (Gramsci [1935] 1975: Q29 §2).

National linguistic unity is achieved when the conformism can operate outside those boundaries, on a national level. This is accomplished through the elaboration of a written normative grammar, which is often derived from the dominant traits of the immanent grammar of a single, usually hegemonic, group of speakers. Creating a written normative grammar and expanding it on a nation-wide level falls outside the spontaneous dynamics of language, and is instead the result of a political act, a conscious *linguistic policy*.

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[8]For clarity purpose, in the present article I will refer only to immanent grammar, spontaneous conformism and written normative grammar. However, as Carlucci (2011) argues, Gramsci's analysis of the different types of grammar is very complex, and takes into consideration different types of opposition, such as immanent *vs* normative and written vs non-written (spontaneous). Especially the latter opposition refers to different modes of elaboration and diffusion of culture (Carlucci 2011: 268). In the light of these oppositions, spontaneous conformism could be also referred to as *non-written normative grammar*.

For Gramsci, though, the 'de facto collaboration' is not unconditional: the normative grammar, destined to be shared among the nation, should be created with the intent of 'centralising what already exists at a diffused state, scattered, inorganic and incoherent' (Gramsci [1935] 1975: Q29 §2); this would make the grammar organically tied to the existing 'linguistic volume' (Gramsci [1935] 1975: Q29 §2). The aim should not be to impose a specific language but rather to expedite and widen the spontaneous process of linguistic conformism:

> one should not consider this intervention as 'final', and imagine that the proposed goals will be achieved in all their details, in other words that a specific unitary language will be obtained: a unitary language will be obtained, if it is a necessity, and the organised intervention will accelerate the process already in place; which language would be obtained cannot be foreseen and planned: in any case, if the intervention is 'rational', that language would be organically tied to tradition, which is of great importance in the economy of culture. (Gramsci [1935] 1975: Q29 §3)

The kind of language policy sketched in the *Notebooks* entails the creation of a norm whose aim is to change the language systems and habits of the speakers: in other words, and as argued in Manzoni's proposal, it involves corpus planning. Unlike the latter, however, the policy is not aimed at substituting the idioms in use with a new, already formed language: rather, it aims to steer the spontaneous processes, already in place, towards the wanted goal, a unitary language.

Therefore, the first theoretical foundation of the difference between Gramsci's earlier and later stances on language policy is precisely the presence of the concept of 'immanent grammar'. The starting point of any linguistic policy should be, for Gramsci, the study of the 'complex of molecular processes' that result in the 'formation, diffusion and development of a unitary national language' (Gramsci [1935] 1975: Q29 §3)[9]: the countless and constant interaction between individual immanent grammars. Through a detailed knowledge of these mechanisms, it would be possible to create a normative grammar harmonically integrated with the natural process of the sedimentation of language from cultural activity.

The second theoretical foundation of the new approach on language policy is the revised role attributed to grammar. Criticising Giovanni Gentile's approach to language education, Gramsci defends the importance of learning grammar as a way to 'create a spiritual attitude that allows to orient oneself within a linguistic environment' (Gramsci [1935] 1975: Q29 §6). This argument precedes a reference to a previous passage of the *Notebooks*: 'see the note on the study of Latin in classical schools'.[10] The note in question is titled *The educational principle in the primary and secondary school* (Gramsci 1975 [1931–1932]: Q4 §55), in which Gramsci advocates for the study of Latin and Ancient Greek in schools. The main arguments are: (1) 'one learns [these two languages] in order to understand the civilisations of Greece and Rome, whose existence is posited as a foundation of world culture'; (2) 'one does not study Latin in order to learn Latin; it is studied in order to accustom children to studying,

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[9]In the 8th notebook Gramsci gives us a clearer idea of what he means by 'molecular processes': 'an endless quantity of books, pamphlets, review and newspaper articles, conversations and oral debates repeated countless times, and which in their gigantic aggregation represent this long labour which gives birth to a collective will with a certain degree of homogeneity – with the degree necessary and sufficient to achieve an action which is coordinated and simultaneous in the time and the geographical space in which the historical event takes place'. (Gramsci 1975 [1931–1932]: Q8 §195).

[10]*Scuola classica*, Italian secondary school focused on humanities, where the study of Latin and Greek languages and literatures is compulsory.

to analysing a body of history that can be treated as a cadaver but continually returns to life' (Gramsci 1975 [1931–1932]: Q4 §55).

These arguments are reprised for the defence of grammar within the 29th Notebook: studying a language is not useful exclusively for communicative reasons but also to acquire the skills and self-awareness necessary to 'orient oneself within the linguistic environment'. This passage can be understood against the backdrop of a previous discussion on the relationship between language and conception of the world. Since 'every language contains elements of a conception of the world and of a culture' (Gramsci 1975 : Q11 §12), a conscious approach to language means a conscious approach to the world. Rather than 'participate to a conception of the world mechanically imposed by one's environment', knowledge of the workings of language (grammar) would allow to 'elaborate one's own conception of the world consciously and critically' (Gramsci 1975 [1932–1933]: Q11 §12).

In the following chapters, I will try to show how the two ideas that characterise the position of Gramsci on language policy in the *Notebooks*, the different types of grammars and the role of normative grammar, are strikingly similar to two analogous ideas found in the works of Soviet linguists. Furthermore, by comparing the Gramsci with Soviet linguists, it is possible to pinpoint a third theoretical foundation of the new conception of language of the *Notebooks*, absent, at least in the form of a clear theoretical elaboration, in the pre-prison writings: the contradictory nature of language.

Linguistics and language policy in Soviet Russia

When the Bolshevik party came to power in 1917, following the October Revolution, the linguistic situation in the former Russian Empire was, in some respects, analogous to the Italian situation in 1861. Illiteracy was rampant, ranging from 71.6 to 100%.[11] For instance, in 1915, illiteracy in the Fergana oblast', a province of Russian Turkestan, had a literacy rate of 2.9% (Alpatov 2000: 33).

Furthermore, linguistic heterogeneity was not only very high, but also very difficult to quantify. While a 1926 census reported 194 different nationalities or ethnic groups, there were major difficulties in identifying the relationship between nationality and language, and even which was the 'primary' language of a speaker since, in many cases, the linguistic component of the perceived ethnic identity did not coincide with the speaker's daily language (Grenoble 2003: 28–9). To give a measure of the immense heterogeneity characterising the Soviet linguistic distribution, suffice to say that in 1936 in USSR were published books in 104 different languages, which represented only a small part of the total number of languages in Soviet territory, as many of them did not have a written form.

Unlike the Italian state, the primary goal of Soviet Russia immediately after the Revolution was not to impose a common, unified language, but rather to promote the languages of the various ethnicities in its territories. In that, Soviet institutions sought a radical break from the previous Imperial policy, devoted instead to the 'support and development of the dominant role of the State language' (Alpatov 2000: 30), Russian.

This course of Soviet linguistic and educational policies saw a radical halt in 1934, when at the XVII Party congress Stalin started a new policy directed towards the so-called

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[11]Unless otherwise stated, all data concerning the linguistic situation in the Russian Empire and Soviet Union is taken from (Grenoble 2003).

Russification of the other ethnicities (Grenoble 2003: 54). However, until that time, Soviet linguistic policies, inspired by Lenin's 'Critical remarks on the national question' (1913) and the 'Declaration of Rights of the People of Russia' (Lenin & Stalin [1917] 1957), actively tried to promote language equality:

> Lenin believed that no single language should be given the status of a state language; rather, he promoted national equality and self-determinism [*sic*]. All Soviet citizens were guaranteed education in their native tongue. This principle of equality, that each ethnic group had the right to use its own heritage language, became a founding principle of the early Soviet years. (Grenoble 2003: 36)

The first obstacle to early Soviet linguistic policies was the lack of a written form for most of the languages of the Union. Therefore, one of the first tasks assigned to linguists in Soviet Russia was to study those languages; many were part of state commissions devoted to the alphabetisation of non-written languages and to the standardisation and unification of existing alphabets.

Gramsci and Ščerba: two forms of grammar

Among the most important figures involved in the post-revolutionary language reforms are L. Ščerba, E. Polivanov, B. Larin and L. Jakubinskij (Alpatov 2000: 51). These scholars were students of Baudouin de Courtenay during the time of his professorship in Saint Petersburg (1900–1918). With their master, they share the idea that *language in general*, language as an abstract system, does not exist as such. For Baudouin de Courtenay, the term *language*, as something homogeneous and indivisible, applies only to an individual (Baudouin de Courtenay [1917] 1963-II: 250). In order to fully understand the nature of language, it is necessary to take into consideration psychological and sociological factors – psychological, insofar as they can be uncovered through self-analysis, and sociological, insofar as they can be explained only through the social nature of the speakers: 'an individual could not develop its linguistic capacities if not in a society' (Baudouin de Courtenay [1890] 1963-I: 222). Thus, psychology and sociology become auxiliary sciences for linguistics (Baudouin de Courtenay [1889] 1963-I: 217).

This double nature of language in Baudouin de Courtenay stems from his contact with the *Völkerpsychologie* movement, which saw 'language and social consciousness […] as embodiments of 'national-popular psychology' '(Brandist 2003b: 261), on one hand, and with sociological linguistis on the other.[12] For Baudouin de Courtenay, however, the socio-logical aspect of language is often identified with social psychology: 'we identify sociology with the so-called psychology of nations (Völkerpsychologie)' (Baudouin de Courtenay [1904] 1963-II: 94)

The works of Lev Ščerba represent a prime example of this approach. In his paper 'O trojakom aspekte jazykovyh javlenij i ob eksperimente v jazykoznanii' [On the triple aspect of the linguistic phenomena and on experiment in linguistics] (Ščerba [1934] 2004: 24–38),[13] the author distinguishes three aspects of the linguistic phenomenon [*jazykovoe javlenie*]: discursive activity [*rečevaja dejateľnost'*], linguistic system [*jazykovaja sistema*] and lin-guistic material [*jazykovyj material*].

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[12]In particular, Bauduoin de Courtenay maintained a long-standing correspondence with Antoine Meillet (Brandist 2015: 68), and in 1872 attended Ascoli's lectures in Milan (Koerner and Szwedek 2001: 179).
[13]Originally delivered during a conference in 1927.

The discursive activity includes 'processes of utterance and understanding' (Ščerba [1934] 2004: 24). According to Ščerba, those processes are not a passive reproduction of previous discursive experiences but rather an active 'idiosyncratic elaboration' [*svoeobraznaja pererabotka*] (Ščerba [1934] 2004: 25) through which discourse is organised. Through the study of discursive activity, it is possible to infer the general form of discursive organisation, the 'linguistic system', which correspond to the vocabulary and grammar of a language. The result of an individual psychological process, the grammar implicitly employed by a speaker is not accessible to immediate experience. The linguistic system needs to be inferred through the observation of a whole speech community, as well as the analysis of what Ščerba calls its linguistic material, or texts.

Those three aspects of the linguistic phenomenon (discursive activity, linguistic system and linguistic material) are deeply interwoven: 'the linguistic material outside the processes of understanding [the discursive activity – P. R.] is dead, and the understanding outside some kind of organised linguistic material (i.e. the linguistic system) is impossible' (Ščerba [1934] 2004: 26).

Regarding the source of linguistic norms, Ščerba appears to be following the trend, common among Soviet linguists (Gorham 2014: 30), of deriving them from the literary language, from the 'works of the good writers' (Ščerba [1934] 2004: 29).

In previous papers, however, the author showed a different position on linguistic norms, probably influenced by his work as a school director. In 1904, Ščerba publishes the article 'O služebnom i samostojateľnom značenii grammatiki kak učebnogo predmeta' [On the ancillary and autonomous value of grammar as an object of study], criticising the teaching of grammar in schools.

Traditional grammar, according to Ščerba, relies on the written form of language, and its goal is to acquire a 'proper' form of speaking and writing. Grammar should instead originate from the observation of the spoken, living language in its everyday use. The ultimate goal of grammar, along with any other subject taught in schools, should not be the imposition of some norm but rather to give pupils 'the habit […] to independent thinking' (Ščerba [1904] 1957: 17). For these reason, argues Ščerba, the 'traditional' approach should be replaced by a 'new' grammar.

The main argument of the paper rests on the observation that even illiterate people are in possession of grammar and make use of it in their daily discursive activities, even if, when asked, they are not able to explain the rule behind their use of language. Therefore, the learning of grammar should start from the observation of the implicit grammar rules of the living language. By reflecting on their daily discursive praxis, pupils are encouraged to induce and generalise those rules: 'children coming to school fully possess their own mother tongue, which constitutes a rich and ready material for observation, very easily susceptible to inductive generalisations' (Ščerba [1904] 1957: 18).

These Ščerban positions on the teaching of language are also remarkably similar to those proposed by Ascoli his report to the IX Pedagogical Congress in Bologna, delivered in his absence by Francesco d'Ovidio (Ascoli [1874] 1982): instead of forfeiting the teaching of language in schools, or imposing it as a fixed ensemble of strict rules, children should approach the study of a new language through a constant critical comparison with their own mother language (the different dialects, in Ascoli's case). As Ščerba, Ascoli sees the final goal of the teaching of grammar in 'stimulating the thought, making the child aware of what he unconsciously already possess and uses' (Ascoli [1874] 1982: 1142). Similarly,

Gramsci argues that the goal of grammar is to provide the learner with the competence to 'orient oneself within the linguistic environment' (Gramsci [1935] 1975: Q29 §6).

Both Gramsci and Ščerba share the idea of language as multiple, individual linguistic systems that, through a constant 'molecular' interaction, tend towards homogeneity; as well as the idea that it is possible to create a new kind of grammar through knowledge of these processes. While already present both in Ascoli's and in Gramci's pre-prison writings, it is only in the 29th of the *Prison Notebooks* that the latter makes of this conception of language the cornerstone of his language policy.

Jabukinskij and the contradictory nature of language

The theory of language and language acquisition explained above has the characteristic of giving great importance to the *active* role of the speaker. According to Jakubinskij, one of the main capacities of poetic language is to direct attention on itself, on its own form and sound. *Poetic* language is opposed to *practical* language, whose main goal is communication. In later works, Jakubinskij dulls this distinction and recognises that the poetic function of language can be found in any of its manifestations, including those of practical and communicative nature. This capacity for directing the attention thus moves from the language to the bearer of that language. This argument is the basis for Jakubinskij's critique of Saussure, on the topic of the possibility of a linguistic policy in his paper: 'F. de Saussure on the Impossibility of a Linguistic Policy' (Jakubinskij [1931] 2012).[14] Jakubinskij criticises the idea of an inaccessibility of language as presented in Saussure's *Course in general linguistics* (Saussure 1959). What is most interesting in this essay is the theoretical frameworks that Jakubinskij employs in his critique, rather than the appropriateness of his interpretation of the *Course*.[15]

The 'inaccessibility' of conscious linguistic change would entail 'the impossibility of an organised interference (*organizovannoe vmešatel'stvo*) of society over the linguistic process, […] the impossibility of a linguistic policy' (Jakubinskij [1931] 2012: 186). Jakubinskij specifically refers to the paragraph of the *Course* titled 'Immutability', in the chapter 'Immutability and Mutability of the Sign' (Saussure 1959: 71).

According to Jakubinskij, Saussure does not take into consideration the 'dialectical' nature of language. While agreeing on the arbitrary nature of the connection between *signifiant* and *signifié*, he finds fault with the *Course* for not taking into consideration the relation of the linguistic system with other linguistic and extra-linguistic systems. Such a relationship would reveal the contradictory nature of language. From an internal point of view, it is 'arbitrary, random, indifferent', while from the point of view of its relationship with society, it is 'not arbitrary, not random, and not indifferent' (Jakubinskij [1931] 2012: 198).

These passages refer to the notion, recurring in Soviet linguistics, of the two functions of language: as mean of communication and as ideology (Brandist 2008a: 73). Through the ideological, non-arbitrary aspect of language, which connected with class stratification, it is possible for the speaker to have a conscious and direct grasp of language and its use as well as to play an active role in linguistic transformations. Consequently, for the policy-maker,

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[14]Originally delivered during a conference in 1929.
[15]For a more detailed discussion on Jakubinskij's interpretation see the 'Translator's preface' in the French translation of the paper in (Ivanova 2012).

it is possible intervene with a political act aimed at modifying the language to meet the needs of the nation.

This position finds a close parallel in Gramsci's discussion on the metaphorical nature of language (Gramsci 1975 [1930–1931]: Q7 §36; Gramsci 1975 [1932–1933]: Q11 §24), where the author states that history of semantics is a part of the history of culture (Gramsci 1975 [1930–1932]: Q4 §17; Gramsci 1975 [1932–1933] Q11 §28). At the same time, Gramsci recognise the independence of the 'formal' (i.e. morphosyntactic and phonological) aspect of language: 'no new historical situation […] can completely transform language, at least in his external, formal aspect' (Gramsci 1975 [1931–1932]: Q8 §171). The relationship between language and the superstructure is limited to the semantics.

Rosiello, in discussing this question, sees Gramsci's position as the most coherent and genuinely Marxist approach to language, diametrically opposite to the one formulated by Nikolaj Marr.[16] According to Rosiello, Marr's 'new theory' did not distinguish between the two contradictory aspects of language. The issue concerns the assimilation of language to the superstructure, and the consequent possibility of its reduction to the economic aspect of society (Rosiello 1959: 303, 307). However, the position that Rosiello attributes to Gramsci is the same as many other Soviet linguists, some of whom fiercely opposed Marr. Beside Jakubinskij, another chief example is an article by Polivanov written in [, 1929 titled 'The Circle of the Contemporary Problems of Contemporary Linguistics' [*Krug sovremennyh problem sovremennoj lingvistiki*]. In it, while stressing this time the independent aspect of language *contra* Marr, Polivanov parallels Jakubinskij in arguing for its contradictory nature. Just as Jakubinskij reprimands Saussure for not taking into consideration the interdependence of language with the semantic, hence social and historical aspects of language, according to Polivanov:

> an attempt to explain all the facts of a contemporary language [...] with the social-economic history […] would be a completely ridiculous simplification […] if the explainer does not wish to know anything else, i.e. if he leaves out from his sight the technical moment of the evolution of the language. (Polivanov [1929] 1968: 181)

Thus, the two aspects of language are not to be reduced one to the other: 'they form a unity at any moment, but they are not fused' (Brandist 2008a: 73).

The conception of language in Ascoli as well as in Gramsci's pre-prison writings does not recognise the contradictory nature, both 'spontaneous' and 'intellectual', of language and only considers the first. Therefore, the relationship between society and language is limited to that of conditions and consequences, in an almost mechanist fashion. In other words, the evolution of language is a natural and spontaneous process, to which the speaker cannot have access. The social conditions under which this evolution happens, and that will ultimately influence its outcome, can instead be subject to a direct, conscious and rational (i.e. political) intervention. This is possible only insofar as those conditions are extra-linguistic, hence what I called the renunciatory approach to language policy.

The relationship between language and society as described in the *Notebooks* is instead closer to the approach of Soviet sociolinguists such as Jakubinskij. It recognises the possibility

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[16]On Marr and his linguistic theory, see (Thomas 1957). Since Stalin's first attack in *Marxism and linguistics*, Marrism was subject to harsh critiques. It is necessary to point out that numerous scholars tried to revaluate the works of Marr and some of his students: e.g. see Sériot, Patrick, ed. 2005. *Un paradigme perdu: la linguistique marriste*, Cahiers de l'ILSL n°20 and Lotman Jurij M. 1976. 'O. M. Freidenberg as a Student of Culture'. *Soviet Studies in Literature: A Journal of Translations.* 12 (2): 3–11.

for the speaker to have control over the evolution of language through its semantic, non-arbitrary aspect, directly connected with the social needs of speakers:

> the farmers transform their own system of linguistic signs on the basis of, and according to, the transformation of technique, lifestyle and common thought, striving to obtain the level of the class group above him. (Jakubinskij [1931] 2012: 198)

Through language, the social actors strive to transform their own and others' world-view in order to achieve their goals, whether these goals are survival in an ever-changing society or the achievement of political hegemony. The importance of language and linguistic change, and their effects on society are recognised as a fundamental part of an effective political strategy.

Gramsci and the Soviet Union. Final considerations

In the present paper, I sought to point out the analogies in the notions of language, grammar and grammar learning between Gramsci and some of the Russian students of Baudouin de Courtenay. All the scholars in question appear to be structurally analogous in their mode of adapting language theory to a Marxist framework, which resulted in a common understanding of language as a *contradictory* object, collective and individual, mutable and immutable.

In Gramsci's early writings the approach to language and language policy was considered a fundamental element of a socialist political strategy, but the essential tenets of the '*philosophy of praxis*'[17] were not yet included as systematic elements of his theory on language. Gramsci's position regarding language policy reflected this state of being, bringing him to what I have called a 'renunciatory' approach, i.e. a language policy actively refusing any corpus planning. It is only in the *Prison Notebooks*, and in a manner surprisingly similar to Soviet authors such as Ščerba and Jakubinskij, that a rational intervention on language not only is considered as possible, but is also integral part of Gramsci's broader political theory.

Following these considerations, a question spontaneously arises, that cannot be evaded any more: is it possible that the differences between the pre-prison writings and the Prison Notebooks were directly influenced by a contact between Gramsci and the Soviet linguistic *milieu*? Or these coincidences should be explained as a mere conceptual convergence, the necessary consequences of 'translating' European linguistics of the late XIX century within a Marxist framework?

For many years, Gramsci's visits in Russia were considered to be of secondary importance for his intellectual biography: commonplace was that, especially in the first 1922–1923 visit, he spent most of his time in a sanatorium, afflicted by health problems and very little engaged in the Russian political life (Carlucci and Balestrieri 2011: 645–46). Furthermore, numerous Gramscian scholars argued that several central concepts of the *Prison Notebooks*, first and foremost that of hegemony, were absent from the Soviet political debate after 1917 (Brandist 2015: 8). Therefore, even if Gramsci did participate in Soviet political life, that influence could not concern the most important and original aspects of his thought.

However, recent developments in historical research provide us with a completely different picture of Gramsci in Russia, and a new understanding of the Soviet political and cultural life of the time.

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[17]*Filosofia della praxis* [Philosophy of praxis] is the denomination that Gramsci gives to his own 'philosophical foundation of the historical materialism' (Frosini 2004: 93), as defined in the *Notebooks*.

Recent archival research suggests that Gramsci's participation in Soviet political debates, and his contacts with the protagonists of the October Revolution, were much more relevant than previously assumed (Grigor'eva 1998). Furthermore, many debates within the IV Congress of the Comintern, to which Gramsci attended as delegate of the Italian Communist Party, revolved around the notion of *hegemony*. Brandist goes further in showing that the notion of hegemony as conceived in post-revolutionary Russia was comprised of what he calls 'multiple dimensions': not only political but also cultural and linguistic (Brandist 2015: 221), which would have found the linguistically-trained Gramsci very attentive.

Especially interesting to point out is Gramsci's involvement in the Soviet political schools for Italian communists (Lussana 2007: 55), which led to his visit to the *Voenno-političeskaja akademia Krasnoj Armii im. Tolmačeva* [Military-political academy of the Red Army 'Tolmačev'] in Leningrad in February 1925 (Lussana 2007: 58): at the same time, and in the same city, linguists such as Ščerba, Jakubinskij and Polivanov were the most active in pedagogical and propaganda institutions, working together with Soviet state in order to face the concrete and practical problems of the new government. Therefore, in the words of Craig Brandist:

> [w]hile the theoretical work [of Soviet linguists – P. R.] only really began to find systematic exposition in the later part of the 1920s, when the political situation had changed quite drastically, the practical work at this time laid the basis for important theoretical work that [...] has so many conceptual and terminological parallels with the later work of Gramsci, that it seems very unlikely that there was no significant influence. (Brandist 2012: 33)

Thanks to new archival material and, hopefully, more that is yet to be discovered, some form of, at least indirect, contact between Gramsci and Soviet linguistics appears more and more plausible. As I tried to show in my paper, such a contact could also contribute to explain why and how Gramsci changed his stance towards language policy.

Regardless, however, of any discussion upon possible contacts with Soviet linguistics, from the analysis I presented in the article is possible to draw another conclusion: that is the peculiarity of Gramsci's linguistics and its relationship to Marxism and European linguistics

Many have attempted to explain this apparent peculiarity as revealing of the non-Marxist essence of the *Prison Writings* (Lo Piparo 2010). Gramsci's debt to the Italian and European sources such as Ascoli for the elaboration of its concept of hegemony is not in question, but cannot explain alone certain passages of the *Notebooks*.

A closer inspection on the general evolution of Gramsci's linguistic ideas, especially on language policy, shows that the Italian and European linguistics were without a doubt the essential background of Gramsci's linguistic education, and in many respects influenced his linguistic theory and, by extension, his political views. However an analysis of the *Prison Notebooks* reveal the underlying presence of a complex dialogue between the classical tradition of European linguistics and Marxism.

If one were to take into consideration just Marr and Vološinov as the only other linguistic theories adopting a Marxian point of view, Gramsci's reflections on language appear to be 'an exception to the relative dearth of Marxist engagements with the question of language' (Brandist 2005: 63). This brought some scholar to state that '[Gramsci's] reflections on language [*linguaggio*] and his linguistic culture were the generative mechanism of his originality and what renders him radically different from other Marxists' (Lo Piparo 2010: 23).

On the contrary, it is only by taking into consideration, beside Italian, French and German, also Soviet linguistics, that Gramsci's ideas on language could find a more appropriate place

and meaning within the general history of ideas, among those scholars that attempted to combine the most productive aspects of Marxism and historical materialism, on one side, and linguistics on the others.

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