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# Developments in Soviet Linguistics since the Crisis of 1950

W. K. MATTHEWS

It is five years ago this year that the late Iosif Stalin made his pronouncement on the relations between linguistic science and marxist principles in the U.S.S.R. His articles, originally published in a supplement to *Pravda*,<sup>1</sup> were later collected into a booklet entitled *Marxism and the Problems of Linguistics*,<sup>2</sup> which appeared in Moscow in the autumn of 1950. This booklet very soon became a guide and source of quotations to those Soviet scholars and teachers who had occasion to publish papers and books on language subjects; and even today, two years after Stalin's death, his name still figures sometimes in the text and footnotes of such publications.

Stalin's booklet was, as he himself admitted, written by a non-specialist in linguistic matters, who nevertheless considered himself to possess 'a direct relation' to marxism in its bearing on language.<sup>3</sup> His views on this point are plainly expressed in the form of answers to a series of questions. We learn from them among much else that language is neither 'superstructure' nor 'fundament' (the former being the 'creation' of the latter), but that it is distinct from both these and outlives both.<sup>4</sup> Language, we are further informed, is not the creation of a social class, as Marr appears to have mistakenly imagined, but it has always been a 'means of communication', shared by the members of a speech community, and is therefore a 'sociological phenomenon', reflecting the rise and development of human society.<sup>5</sup> The characteristic features of language are a complex of vocabulary and grammar, and grammar is a sort of 'geometry' providing the rules for language construction, which it has previously abstracted from observed linguistic usage.<sup>6</sup> This process of abstraction is the result of prolonged and persistent mental activity and therefore, like the processes of nature, falls into the category of time. Language too is conceived as existing in time and as capable of change; but the rate of change varies in its components, vocabulary and grammar, the latter being the more stable.<sup>7</sup>

These elementary ideas represent the obverse and constructive

<sup>1</sup> From 9 May to 28 July. For the linguistic controversy see my article 'The Soviet Contribution to Linguistic Thought' (*Archivum Linguisticum*, II, 1-2, Glasgow, 1950, pp. 114-21).

<sup>2</sup> *Marksiizm i voprosy yazykoznaveniya*. The booklet consists of three unnumbered sections, viz. (a) 'Otnositel'no marksizma v yazykoznavenii,' (b) 'K nekotorym voprosam yazykoznaveniya' (answer to Ye. Krashennikova), (c) 'Otvet tovarishcham' (to Sanzhayev, D. Belkin and S. Furer, and A. Kholopov).

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 15-16, 45.

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 13-18.

<sup>7</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 52.

side of the discussions in *Pravda*. The reverse and destructive side is represented by an attack on Nikolay Marr and his pupils, among whom Ivan Meshchaninov was the most outstanding. These are shown to have misrepresented the essence of marxism. Marr is supposed to have introduced the non-marxist concepts of language as a superstructure and of the class origin of language into Soviet linguistics, and to have thereby given rise to a state of confusion, which inevitably precipitated the crisis.<sup>8</sup> This state of confusion, Stalin expressly declared, could be remedied by (a) the abolition of the dictatorial regime of the Marrists, (b) the rejection of Marr's errors, and (c) the permeation of Soviet linguistics by marxist principles.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, as Stalin observes, marxist principles embody a 'theory of the evolution of nature and society'<sup>10</sup> which is not static in itself, but evolves together with these.

While the discussions which gave rise to these 'authoritative' statements were in progress, Soviet linguistic scholars seemed to be holding their breath. The *Bulletin of the Literature and Language Department* of the Academy of Sciences,<sup>11</sup> which was the official periodical dealing with linguistic problems, suddenly suspended publication for several months in 1950, and when it began to appear again in the autumn of that year it included the *Pravda* correspondence and a record of recent decisions made by the Presidium of the Academy. Meanwhile the interval had been used to effect a purge of the Marrists. The Marr Institute of Language and Thought was renamed the Institute of Linguistics. Like the Academy of Sciences, of which it was a department, it was transferred from Leningrad to Moscow, and the Academy *Bulletin* by the beginning of 1952 no longer mentioned Leningrad on its cover. Meshchaninov and his colleagues, who had maintained the dictatorial regime at the Marr Institute, were removed from their posts by order of the Presidium of the Academy, and the academician and Russian philologist V. V. Vinogradov became director of the renovated Institute of Linguistics and chairman of the Academic Council, which nevertheless included Meshchaninov among its members, as well as others who had been prominent during the Marrist dictatorship. (These scholars, incidentally, have tried to rehabilitate themselves since then with varying degrees of success.) The editorship of the *Bulletin* of the Literature and Language Department of the Academy was moreover transferred from Meshchaninov to Professor P. Ya. Chernykh in 1950, but the original policy of the periodical, which had invited linguistic as well as literary contributions, remained in force till 1954,

<sup>8</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 67-70.

<sup>9</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 70.

<sup>10</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 113.

<sup>11</sup> *Izvestiya Akademii Nauk SSSR. Otdeleniye literatury i yazyka*. This began to appear under its present title in 1940.

in the course of which the publication of articles on linguistic subjects was discontinued. A new policy was apparently being sought, and before the end of the year the *Bulletin* again unaccountably ceased publication. In the meantime the literary historian D. D. Blagoy was appointed editor, and the first new issue (vol. XIV, 1), containing only literary contributions, came out belatedly in April 1955.

Early in 1951 a new periodical with exclusively linguistic interests was founded under the name of *Problems of Linguistics*<sup>12</sup> in imitation of the already established journals devoted to the discussion of the 'problems' (*voprosy*) of history, philosophy, and economics. Throughout 1951 and in the early part of 1952 both the Academy *Bulletin* and *Problems of Linguistics* mobilised the energy and pugnacity of their contributors in a concerted frontal attack on Marrism, into which Stalin himself had made a considerable breach with his 'authoritative' exposition of marxism. The protracted assault, which covered a limited gamut of variations, finally defeated its own purpose, because almost from Stalin's first unfavourable words, Marrism in the persons of Marr's pupils had lost spirit, and none other than Meshchaninov had made an abject public confession, in which he disavowed his former tenets. The attack on Marrism after all was like beating a dead lion—and the sight was unedifying and unwholesome, more especially as many who now turned against the dead master had not been wholly impervious to the fascination of his theories. And not only did the official periodicals join in the fray, but elaborate linguistic symposia were published in Moscow, among them one entitled *Against the Vulgarisation and Perversion of Marxism in Linguistics*, which appeared in two massive volumes of large format in 1951 and 1952,<sup>13</sup> Several linguistic scholars of repute contributed to this symposium, among them Vinogradov, S. B. Bernstein, and the ex-formalist V. Zhirmunsky. Moreover the 'destroyers' included such manifestly 'tainted' scholars as A. V. Desnitskaya and F. P. Filin.

When the work of verbal and ideological destruction was more than complete, constructive work began to appear in the two special periodicals and also in the form of another symposium entitled *Problems of the Theory and History of Language in the Light of I. V. Stalin's Works on Linguistics* (Moscow, 1953).<sup>14</sup> It will be noticed here that it is obviously an error to describe Stalin's booklet as 'works on linguistics', but no doubt this was a deliberate exaggeration intended to carry more weight. The symposium, covering nearly five hundred large pages, was edited by a group of scholars, including the ubiqui-

<sup>12</sup> *Voprosy yazykoznaniya*.

<sup>13</sup> *Protiv vul'garizatsii i izvrashcheniya marksizma v yazykoznanii*.

<sup>14</sup> *Voprosy teorii i istorii yazyka v svete trudov I. V. Stalina po yazykoznaniyu*.

tous Vinogradov and the 'philosopher' G. F. Aleksandrov.<sup>15</sup> The latter's presence among the other contributors would be more than incongruous if it were not accounted for by collaboration between the Institutes of Linguistics and Philosophy in the production of this volume. Aleksandrov's article 'The Tremendous Force of Stalin's Ideas' shows only too plainly the familiar features of Soviet political journalese and the irrational ideas that often inform it. This article is the only intellectually inferior and ephemeral contribution to the symposium, and its inclusion somewhat diminishes the value of this publication as a corporate scholarly effort. The unsigned preface invokes the historical principle which, we are told, 'has now become the slogan of Soviet linguistics and differentiates it from bourgeois idealist trends in the development of linguistic science'.<sup>16</sup> The historical aspect of language in its various manifestations on Soviet territory engages the attention of some of the contributors to the symposium, but others appear to be preoccupied with grammatical theory, and their attitude to this is markedly conservative. The methods of 19th-century comparative-historical philology are strictly adhered to, in spite of the imposition of a marxist framework. Once 'traditionalist' linguistic principles are accepted—and Stalin encouraged their adoption—marxism has nothing to say, because its dialectic is not a linguistic method and cannot interpenetrate with linguistic theory any more than water can mix with oil. The comparative-historical method then has been manifestly adopted in full,<sup>17</sup> and the traditions of linguistic scholarship in Russia, interrupted for a short time by the Marrist adventure of the 1940's, have been reinstated. This conservative school of linguistics, which is at present being assailed in Western Europe and in the Americas by the intolerance and dogmatism of an ascendant linguistic fashion, now generally called 'structuralism', has, as we have seen, come under the protection of marxism not as interpreted by Marr, who introduced the leaven of the marxist dialectic into his personal theory of 'stadialism', but as interpreted by Stalin according to the canons of Leninist exegesis. From now onwards Soviet linguistic scholars are on their guard against the intrusion of fashionable and enticing Western linguistic heresies, which they insist on classing together as 'idealism'. This term is not used in its usual philosophical sense, but as the anti-

<sup>15</sup> This author has written an 'expanded' version of the contents of Stalin's booklet in a stout volume entitled *Trudy I. V. Stalina o yazykoznanii i voprosy istoricheskogo materializma*, Moscow, 1952. By comparison the 'original' seems to have the proportions of an epigram.

<sup>16</sup> See my notice of this book in *The Slavonic and East European Review*, XXXIII, 80, London, 1954, pp. 231–6.

<sup>17</sup> As confirmation of this see B. Gornung's introduction to A. V. Diligenskaya's version of A. Meillet's *La méthode comparative en linguistique historique*, Oslo, 1925, in which he says that there is little to criticise in the French scholar's exposition, except a few details, such as over-emphasis on substratum and hybridisation and an insufficiently clear recognition of the marxist concept of gradualness in linguistic evolution.

thesis of 'materialism': it means all that marxist materialism is not. The subtle seepage of Western ideas into Soviet scholarship has provoked determined onslaughts against the leading representatives of the esoterically abstract conceptions of West European and American 'structuralism', namely L. Hjelmslev and L. Bloomfield respectively; and Prince N. Trubetzkoy's 'phonology', the dominant linguistic theory of the 1930's, has been canvassed in detail, but not accepted, for it arose essentially as a deliberate reaction against comparative-historical philology,<sup>18</sup> which is now under marxist protection.

Interest in the traditionalist conception of linguistics in the U.S.S.R. is shown not only by the prevalent treatment of linguistic problems, but by a growing curiosity with regard to some of the newer standard works of European comparative-historical philology. Stalin had emphasised the importance of the 'fundamental vocabulary' and of the 'grammatical system',<sup>19</sup> and inevitably both these aspects of language are now often investigated in learned papers and linguistic works which are concerned with the languages of typological groups represented in the U.S.S.R.<sup>20</sup> Slavonic linguistics, the prehistoric contacts of Baltic and Slavonic,<sup>21</sup> the Russian literary language and the problems of its structure and style,<sup>22</sup> descriptions of individual languages,<sup>23</sup> and comparative studies of groups to which they belong, for instance Finno-Ugrian, Turkic, Mongolian, and Iranian<sup>24</sup>—these appear to be among the main interests of Soviet linguistic scholarship, and some versatile investigators, like P. S. Kuznetsov and V. I. Lytkin, have shown a praiseworthy simultaneous interest in languages of disparate groups.<sup>25</sup> Along with the foregoing interests goes an attraction to the language-groups and languages

<sup>18</sup> N. S. Troubetzkoy, *Principes de phonologie* (trans. J. Cantineau), Paris, 1949, pp. xv-xxix.

<sup>19</sup> *Marksizm i voprosy yazykoznaniya*, pp. 47-52.

<sup>20</sup> See my *Languages of the U.S.S.R.*, Cambridge, 1951.

<sup>21</sup> J. Endzelin, 'Drevneyshiye slavyano-baltiyskiye yazykovyye svyazi' (*Trudy Instituta yazyka i literatury Akademii Nauk Latvyskoy SSR*, Riga, 1953, pp. 67-82). See also the articles by the Polish scholar J. Otrębski on the theory of prehistoric Balto-Slavonic unity in the last two numbers of *Voprosy yazykoznaniya* for 1954.

<sup>22</sup> E.g. A. N. Gvozdyov, *Ocherki po stilistike russkogo yazyka*, Moscow, 1952; V. Vinogradov, Ye. S. Istrina, and S. G. Barkhudarov, *Grammatika russkogo yazyka I-II* (in three volumes), Moscow, 1953-4; A. M. Finkel' and N. M. Bazhenov, *Sovremennyy russkiy literaturnyy yazyk*<sup>2</sup>, Kiev, 1954; L. A. Bulakhovsky, *Russkiy literaturnyy yazyk pervoy poloviny XIX veka*, Moscow, 1954; A. I. Yefimov, *Istoriya russkogo literaturnogo yazyka*, Moscow, 1954.

<sup>23</sup> E.g. N. A. Baskakov, *Karakalpakskiy yazyk I-II*, Moscow, 1951; V. A. Todayeva, *Grammatika sovremennogo mongol'skogo yazyka*, Moscow, 1951; S. Ye. Malov, *Uygurskiy yazyk*, Moscow, 1954.

<sup>24</sup> E.g. D. V. Bubrikh, *Istoricheskaya grammatika erzyanskogo yazyka*, Saransk, 1953; G. D. Sanzhayev, *Sravnitel'naya grammatika mongol'skikh yazykov I*, Moscow, 1953; V. S. Sokolova, *Ocherki po fonetike iranskikh yazykov I-II*, Moscow, 1953.

<sup>25</sup> P. S. Kuznetsov is interested in both Permian and Russian linguistic problems, and V. I. Lytkin has written the capital *Drevnepermkiy yazyk*, Moscow, 1952, as well as phonetic studies of Russian. Indeed, many other Soviet linguistic scholars have not confined themselves to the materials of only one group of languages.

spoken outside the countries of the 'Iron Curtain', for instance to Germanic, Romance, and even Celtic languages, as well as to the 'peripheral' Arabic, Persian, Indo-Aryan, Khalkha Mongolian, Korean and Chinese.<sup>26</sup> The Germanic and Romance groups of languages in Western Europe appear to be particularly fascinating to the young scholars associated with the Military Institute of Foreign Languages,<sup>27</sup> which was founded in recent years perhaps on German and possibly on American prototypes and cultivates linguistic research at a rather lower academic level, as may be seen from a scrutiny of the contributions to its *Transactions* between 1952 and 1954.<sup>28</sup> Such widespread curiosity about language and languages has a long tradition in Russia. In the Marrist period it was particularly intense. And the scholarship of today merely continues from where the Marrist authors of grammars of the most diverse languages had left off. The only difference between the grammars of the early 1940's and those of the early 1950's is that Stalin's name appears in text and footnotes where Marr's had appeared before.<sup>29</sup> This goes to prove that theoretical considerations were secondary to the recorders of languages and the compilers of bilingual dictionaries, and the long tradition of collecting and publishing linguistic material, in spite of Marrism and marxism, could be maintained unbroken.

When we think of the changes that have taken place in Soviet linguistics we are inevitably, though mistakenly, prone to confine our attention to changes in linguistic theory, the 'superstructure' of linguistics, which may or may not entail changes in linguistic method. Changes of method, broadly speaking, have not occurred; for even during the prevalence of Marr's vagaries, no one made a serious attempt to follow him in tracking down the 'four elements', or four syllables, to which he had reduced the vocabulary of the world's languages; and 'stadialism', for what it was worth, could be illustrated, as Meshchaninov did, without resort to such flights of linguistic imagination.

Meanwhile the sober pedestrian work of collecting and sifting material, as we have already noted, proceeded undisturbed. It is a curious illustration of this statement that works with the marks of Marrism upon them, which seem to have been shelved during the crisis of 1950, have now begun to appear. Professor B. V. Miller's

<sup>26</sup> E.g. B. V. Miller, *Persidsko-russkiy slovar'*, Moscow, 1953 (with a grammatical sketch of Persian by V. S. Rastorguyeva); V. M. Beskrovnyy, *Khindi-russkiy slovar'*, Moscow, 1953 (with a grammatical sketch of Hindi by the late A. P. Barannikov); R. Rinchine, *Uchebnik mongol'skogo yazyka*, Moscow, 1952; A. A. Dragunov, *Issledovaniya po grammatike sovremennogo kitayskogo yazyka*, Moscow, 1952.

<sup>27</sup> *Voyennyi Institut inostrannykh yazykov*.

<sup>28</sup> *Trudy Voenennogo Instituta inostrannykh yazykov* 1-5, Moscow, 1952-4. A review of this will be found in *Voprosy yazykoznaniya* 1, Moscow, 1955.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. R. Shaumyan, *Grammaticheskiy ocherk agul'skogo yazyka* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1941) with N. A. Baskakov, *Karakalpakskiy yazyk* I-II, Moscow, 1951-2.

study of Talysh,<sup>30</sup> an Iranian language of the southern Caucasus, was published in the year of Stalin's death. And in this study the author over-emphasises the Talysh variety of the so-called 'ergative construction', popularised by Marr, in which the predominance of the verb reduces the subject to the inferior status of an oblique case.<sup>31</sup>

The feeling of release from the strait-jacket of Marrism has assumed many forms during the last few years. Not only have there been several translations of Western linguistic compilations, for instance H. Lewis and H. Pedersen's *Comparative Celtic Grammar* and E. Prokosch's *Comparative Germanic Grammar*, both translated in 1954, as well as detailed rebuttals of the pretentious American 'mechanicism', now called 'structuralism', and of Danish 'glossematics';<sup>32</sup> but Marr's former pupils have been gradually admitted to the company of the non-Marrist linguistic scholars, from which they had been banished during the anti-Marrist revolution of 1950. The names of S. D. Katsnel'son and Meshchaninov (to mention two) have appeared on the pages of linguistic publications over discreet articles. And—stranger than this—references to Malenkov's speech at the 19th Party Congress were made by Vinogradov in the *Academy Bulletin* in February 1953, shortly before Stalin's death, and a short article by two authors appeared in the same periodical exactly two years later, emphasising the importance of Lenin to Soviet linguistics.<sup>33</sup> This article contained no reference at all to Stalin, although the German members of the 'quadrumvirate' were mentioned. Stalin's name indeed figures only in an indirect footnote in this issue of the periodical.<sup>34</sup>

One might legitimately think that, in view of this, Stalin's authority in Soviet linguistics had suffered eclipse. This may in effect be so; but it is nevertheless true that so long as marxism is interpreted in the orthodox Leninist fashion and so long as Western 'structuralism' remains dogmatic,<sup>35</sup> it is unlikely that there will be any accommodation between Soviet and Western linguistic theory, for there can hardly be compromise between 'materialism' and 'idealism' in the marxist sense of these terms. In any case linguistic theory, both in Western Europe and in the United States, which claims to be up-to-

<sup>30</sup> *Talyshskiy yazyk*, Moscow, 1953.

<sup>31</sup> For an account of the ergative construction see my article 'The Ergative Construction in Modern Indo-Aryan' (*Lingua* III, 4, Haarlem, 1953, pp. 391-406); also S. Katsnel'son, *K' genezisu nominativnogo predlozheniya*, Moscow-Leningrad, 1936.

<sup>32</sup> M. M. Gukhman, 'Lingvisticheskiy mekhanitsizm L. Blumfil'da i deskriptivnaya lingvistika' (*Trudy Instituta yazykoznaniya* IV, Moscow, 1954); S. K. Shaumyan, 'Protiv agnostitsizma v fonologii' (*Uchonyye zapiski Moskovskogo universiteta* 150: *Russkiy yazyk*, Moscow, 1952).

<sup>33</sup> N. A. Kondrashov and V. M. Filippova, 'V. I. Lenin i voprosy yazykoznaniya' (*Voprosy yazykoznaniya* I, Moscow, 1955, pp. 3-6).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>35</sup> The American linguistic periodicals *Language* (Baltimore) and *Word* (New York) are cases in point.



date would do well to consider the last sentence of Stalin's booklet: 'marxism is the enemy of all dogma.' This may mean no more than the all-sufficiency of marxism. But Western linguistic scholarship can learn from it something that the author probably never intended, namely that intellectual tolerance is the only way that leads out of the slough of dogma to what we fondly like to think of as the truth.