

ON 'MODERNISM' IN LINGUISTICS

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0. At present all the signs of a new discussion in the basic problems of linguistics can be observed in the Soviet Union. Such a discussion is certainly welcome: the last one took place a long time ago (the ill-famed "Stalin" discussion), and linguistics in the Soviet Union is now in a state of crisis. It is characteristic that in the Soviet Union little attention is being paid to the basic questions of theoretical linguistics whereas great effort is being made to elucidate particular questions; (the fact that this work is often done brilliantly and with important results is especially admirable since modern methods of research are rarely employed).¹ One must remember that since Marr's time, no new theory of language has appeared in the Soviet Union, no new answers to the basic questions of linguistics have been obtained, and no new methods of research have been elaborated, although in this same period of time linguistics in other parts of the world has been enriched by new methods of research and new theories about language, thereby producing new answers to the old linguistic questions. Furthermore, these new achievements in linguistics reach the Soviet Union with rather great difficulty and considerable delay, and not only are they ignored by the majority of Soviet scholars, but those few (usually young) scholars who do propagate them, or who simply speak well of them, are severely criticized by some of their colleagues, and this criticism is sometimes particularly impolite.² These facts are unpleasant, but they nevertheless remain facts, and concealing them will not benefit the development of linguistics in the Soviet Union (just as discussing them is no manifestation of any anti-Soviet spirit).

But if the raising of such issues is to be constructive, some conditions must be imposed:

¹ I do not intend to discuss here the reasons which led to such a situation; reasons cannot change facts.

² See A. Degtereva, *Puti razvitiia sovremennoj lingvistiki*, part III (Moscow, 1964).

a) the scientific terms used must retain their generally-accepted definitions, if such exist. If a term is ambiguous, or if it is new, it must be precisely defined.

b) only those opinions which an opponent genuinely believes in can be considered; (scientific) honesty forbids attributing to someone views he does not hold.

c) each statement must have a secure basis in facts;

d) participation in the discussion must be constructive, that is, one must offer new material for consideration and/or one's praise or criticism of the views in question must be justified.

Although these conditions are elementary and well known, they are not always respected.

The paper by V. I. Abaev, "Lingvisticski modernizm kak degumanizatsia nauki o jazyke" [Linguistic modernism as dehumanisation of the science of language], *Voprosy Jazykoznanie* (Moscow), 1965, 3, pp. 22-44, is a pregnant example of the violation of all these conditions.

1. Abaev's article deals mainly with the following questions:

1. the history of Soviet linguistics;
2. modernism (in general, and in linguistics in particular);
3. structuralism;
4. linguistics and mathematics;
5. the tasks of (Soviet) linguistics.

I will not touch on the history of Soviet linguistics, since this has no direct connection with the problems of theoretical linguistics. However, it is interesting to draw attention to the words of Abaev about the state of linguistic facts in the Soviet Union: after the "discussion" of 1950 "Soviet linguistics did not get its own face" (23)³ and "with the liquidation of the cult of Stalin ... emptiness, vacuum became evident ... and into this vacuum fashionable foreign theories rush" (24).

1.1 The definition of "modernism" is given by Abaev as follows: "... the search for the new is occurring essentially along the line of form, formal means, formal procedures, formal shifts, formal tricks. Content, if any, remains extremely miserable and primitive. That's what modernism is" (24). To this, a little further, Abaev adds that "the characteristic feature of the new modernism is an open or veiled antihumanism" (24).

If observed more closely it can be seen that in this definition Abaev puts side by side non-equivalent notions, beginning with the notion he

³ Henceforth, figures in brackets indicate pages in Abaev's paper.

wants to criticize and ending with the notion he actually does criticize (this method Abaev uses more than once). In reality, the "definition" begins with the notions "formal means, formal procedures" and ends with the notions "formal shifts, formal tricks". Although it is trivial that these two groups of notions are not equivalent (Abaev does not try to show that they are equivalent; he simply enumerates them one after the other), Abaev speaks further about formal shifts, formal tricks.

Thus, according to Abaev, the constituent parts of modernism are:

1. the search for the new along the line of formal means, formal procedures;

1'. the search for the new along the line of formal shifts, formal tricks;

2. absence of content or the presence of an extremely miserable and primitive content;

3. antihumanism;

and (the original) definition

$$\text{modernism} = 1 + 2 + 3$$

he replaces by the definition

$$\text{modernism} = 1' + 2 + 3$$

Instead of proving that some contemporary ("foreign") theories are linguistic modernism (as he claims), Abaev acts more simply; he creates a certain "humanitarian section" to which, Abaev states (not proves), linguistics belongs, then he postulates (not proves) that the constituent parts of this "humanitarian sector" are so closely connected that if in any of them what he calls modernism can be revealed then this same modernism must be present in all the other constituent parts. In the end it remains for him only to show that in some constituent parts of the "humanitarian sector" (the so called) modernism is really present.

Really, Abaev says: "All these branches ... philosophy, the social sciences, literature, the arts ... are closely linked and form one complex which we shall call the humanitarian section. Those who want to approach an estimation of the state ... of linguistics seriously, impartially and thoroughly, should in no case isolate this science from the "context" of the whole humanitarian section and consider it isolated ... The humanitarian sector lives the same life ... That's why linguistic modernism cannot be considered something isolated. It adjoins on the one hand modernist philosophy and sociology, and modernist arts and literature on the other hand" (25-26).

After such “general” reasoning about contemporary (“foreign”) linguistics, Abaev passes on to what he calls structuralism.

1.2 Abaev begins his consideration of structuralism with the statement that “structuralism is linguistics in vacuum” (27). It is true that after this it is incomprehensible that, although “comparative-historical linguistics provoked in its time a revolution in linguistics, and its merits are extremely great and unsurpassed ... and it will indisputably remain among the aims of the Soviet science” (38), and thus comparative-historical linguistics is something positive to the highest degree, yet “between comparative-historical linguistics and structuralism there is no conflict” (38). Indeed, not everybody who comes to the 38th page forgets what he has read on the 27th page (which is perhaps, Abaev’s aim!).

Not only does Abaev not understand structuralism, but neither is he acquainted with contemporary (“foreign”) linguistics.

In fact, he creates the impression that contemporary “foreign” linguistics is nothing more than structuralism. That he really thinks so, follows from his second footnote: “under our eyes descriptive linguistics falls into decay, giving way to a new trend [of structuralism? — S.A.], to the so-called transformational linguistics. Under this impressive name pseudo-scientific experiments on the well-known phenomenon of syntactic synonymy are hidden (father loves mother - mother is loved by father)”. This same footnote reveals such ignorance of generative grammar, one of the most important linguistic theories, and particularly of transformational grammar, that it is impossible (and not worthwhile) to argue with Abaev on these questions. One can only suggest that he read at least those works of N. Chomsky, R. Lees (and others who work on this theory) which have been translated into Russian.

Abaev does not speak separately about the generative theory of language although it is this theory that is the most attractive to those he criticizes. Maybe this is because it would be rather difficult to show that the generative view of language is “linguistic modernism”, especially since this theory is (in some sense) a contemporary development of the views of Humboldt on language, i.e. a traditional point of view, which Abaev appreciates very much. Of course, it is obvious that this can be recognized only by one who is acquainted with both the theory of generative grammar and with the views of Humboldt.

That Abaev is not acquainted with structuralism, is evident from some of his statements on it.

According to Abaev “specific for Saussurianism is not the view of

language as structure ..." (28), and for proving this he affirms that "the point of view of language as a system is so emphasized by Humboldt, that if for Saussure this would be the main point, he (Saussure — S.A.) would certainly declare himself a follower of Humboldt" (28). To understand why Saussure, stating the systematic character of language, does not consider himself a follower of Humboldt, one must know well the character of the system Humboldt attributes to language and the character of system Saussure attributes to it; then the difference between the points of view (on this question) of the two scholars would immediately become clear.

According to Abaev the most important discovery (and the only one he mentions) of the Prague Circle is the theory of phonemes as meaning-carrying units. Let this remain on the (scientific) conscience of Abaev. But this is followed by rather transparent hints at the "formal scholastic" character of phonology as elaborated by Trubetzkoy and Jakobson. This can be motivated only by the incomprehension (of the importance) of the work of these (great) linguists.⁴

By discussing American descriptivism (to which he devotes only a few lines), Abaev states (evidently he cannot prove it) that the method elaborated as fit for the study of languages with unknown history, cannot be applied to the study of languages with known history.

As at present glossematics has more a historical importance than a practical one, I shall not discuss Abaev's conceptions of it.

In closing this section, let me ask Abaev: does English structuralism exist or does it not?

1.3 The title "mathematical fashion" clearly reveals Abaev's attitude towards mathematical methods of linguistic research. Indeed, this section of Abaev's paper shows that he does not know (or does not understand) what mathematical methods in the study of language — and some other (social) sciences — are accomplishing (and have already accomplished). At the same time it also shows the surprisingly low level of Abaev's ideas about mathematics. Certainly, many people, even specialists in their own field, have only very vague ideas about contemporary mathematics and its role in the other sciences. But fortunately, they don't discuss this problem (at least in print). Maybe, they haven't enough courage; Abaev certainly has.

First Abaev "proves" that no mathematical linguistics exists. This is done very simply. First the notion of "statistical methods" is substituted

⁴ Nobody can deny that R. Jakobson is one of the greatest linguists alive, in spite of his views on other problems.

for that of “mathematical methods”, and then “statistical methods” are replaced by “counting” (a well-known method of “proving”!). After this it is easy to prove⁵ that in linguistics something is counted, but it does not follow that we can speak about mathematical linguistics. Then Abaev gives the final “conclusion”: “crossing of pseudo-linguistics with pseudo-mathematics — this is the essence of mathematical linguistics” (32). Mathematicians might be interested in finding out what “pseudo-mathematics” is.⁶ For mathematicians Abaev holds in reserve a sensational “discovery”: “Everything which exists in space and time can be submitted to measurement and counting, and thus can be the object of mathematical procedures” (32)!

If Abaev himself believes that no mathematical linguistics exists, how should we understand his words: “It is said that mathematical linguistics is necessary for machine translation. Very well. Machine translation, if the experiments are crowned by success, will be a great achievement” (33). Are we to understand that mathematical linguistics, which does not exist and which is the result of crossing “pseudo-linguistics” with “pseudo-mathematics”, is necessary for the realization of a great technical achievement?

In such a short paper I can hardly consider all the problems touched upon by Abaev.⁷ However, in conclusion, I should like to indicate the features, which, according to Abaev, should characterize “Soviet linguistics”. These are: historicism, primacy of meaning, and a close connection with the entire humanitarian sphere (this is explained by Abaev as the refusal to formalize the science of language).

Abaev exclaims pathetically: “Not to eliminate the human factor, as structuralists recommend, but to completely reveal its role in language ... this is the supreme purpose of linguistics as a social science” (38). It is now only a question of proving that contemporary “foreign” linguistics is reduced to structuralism, that contemporary “foreign” lin-

⁵ Even this proof is done on the basis of a very primitive analogy: “historians and archaeologists have often to do with chronology, i.e. again with mathematics. But this does not lead to the appearance of new sciences: mathematical history or archaeology” [32].

⁶ “Pseudo-mathematics” and “pseudo-linguistics” in the context “mathematical linguistics” somehow remind one of “pseudo-science” in the context “cybernetics” (an association which served the development of science in the Soviet Union badly).

⁷ I should also like to note that from the section “What is backwardness” it appears that Abaev does not understand the connections (one could say dialectical connections) between the new and the old and that he is unacquainted with the Port-Royal Grammar (and logic).

guistics eliminates the human factor, and that linguistics is entirely a social science. Abaev's paper proves none of these.

Unfortunately, on the basis of the above mentioned features of "Soviet linguistics" which Abaev finds necessary, it is impossible to imagine "the single unified linguistic conception which could be the basis of Soviet theoretical linguistics" (23).

By now, there should be no doubt that Abaev's paper is far from satisfying the elementary conditions for a fruitful discussion. Therefore, this paper can only be characterized as a negative phenomenon.

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