Craig Brandist

Marxism and the Philosophy of Language in Russia in the 1920s and 1930s

One of the main weapons wielded by postmodernist critics of Marxism in the 1980s and 1990s was the apparent lack of attention given to language by Marxist thinkers. Some Marxists were stung by the accusation and moved towards a 'post-Marxist' position based on a poststructuralist theory of language, while others sought to uncover whether and, if so, how Marxists actually did engage with the philosophy of language in the 1920s and 1930s. There clearly were real engagements at that time, with the work of Antonio Gramsci and Valentin Voloshinov being the examples that really stand out. However, these people have often seemed to be exceptions within a relative dearth of Marxist engagements with the question of language in the period. Indeed, the Marxist credentials of Voloshinov's writings, along with his very authorship of the 1929 book *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* have been repeatedly questioned,[1] while Gramsci's writings

[1] The case for this position was put most eloquently by Clark and Holquist 1984, pp. 146–70. There has, however, never been any convincing evidence to seriously doubt Voloshinov's authorship. On the recent state of scholarship see Brandist 2002 and Hirschkop 1999, pp. 126–40. I will touch on the work of the Bakhtin Circle only tangentially in the current article.

Historical Materialism, volume 13:1 (63–84)

Also available online – www.brill.nl

on language were clearly based on the work of non-Marxist thinkers, which were then reworked according to a Marxist paradigm. Attempts to construct a specifically Marxist *linguistics* were common in Russia in the 1920s and 1930s, but as Vladimir Alpatov has recently shown, the results were always less than convincing and involved a sort of category mistake.[2] Philosophical ideas about language were often put to Marxist use, however, and, as in the case of Gramsci, this is where the interesting work was really done. In this article, I want to show that productive Marxist engagements with the philosophy of language were not as uncommon as is generally believed, and that these engagements continued in the Soviet Union well into the Stalin period.

The direction of Soviet work on language was determined by three related features: the state of language studies at the time of the Revolution, the practical tasks set for linguists by the progress of the Revolution and the influence and prestige of Marxism among linguists. In considering the first feature we must mention the influence of Western scholarship, particularly linguistic geography and Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale*, but also the very advanced formal linguistics of the Moscow Linguistic School of Filipp Fortunatov and Aleksei Shakhmatov and the general linguists of Jan Baudouin de Courtenay. Soviet linguists were well aware of international developments in linguistics, and from the outset of the new era, were at the cutting edge of contemporary linguistic thought. They were thus well prepared to take advantage of the new conditions opened up by the Revolution.

This leads to the second feature, dominated by the egalitarian and democratic national and language policies of the early Soviet government. This strove to raise minority languages to a level of development where they could achieve formal equality with Russian. This often meant the working out and codification of written language forms for the former colonies of the Russian Empire, and the spreading of literacy and educational opportunities to the masses. There were many pressing and practical tasks for linguists who supported the Revolution in these years, and this was a precondition for some of the best theorising about language of later years.

In the 1920s, the language of the Imperial ruling class was kept within the bounds of a new 'legality', while the undeveloped languages of the former colonies and illiterate social groups were raised to the level of that 'legality'.

[2] Alpatov 2000a.

No longer was Imperial standard Russian the only official language and a modified Cyrillic alphabet applied to subject languages. Instead, early Soviet linguists attempted to complete and structure the language of hitherto marginalised groups, to consolidate what was only implicit in the oral language. This was no easy task, since many language groups were split into numerous dialects, and many languages still had no written forms. Education of children in their native languages required agreement on a standard version of a language, which might have many dialects. The main criterion for choosing a dialect was its role in the literary traditions of written languages, or in the case of previously unwritten languages its suitability for adapting to a written form. This policy was initially pursued on a centrally co-ordinated but detached basis, what we might call 'democratic centralism'. Choices were made and implemented in alliance with the 'national progressive intelligentsias' of a particular region. So, too, with the promotion of the Latin alphabet in the Muslim states of the old Russian Empire. The Latin alphabet had no connotations of great-Russian chauvinism or Tsarist Russification policies and so allowed the combination of local interest with central political needs. Mass literacy and education campaigns were facilitated, while the influence of the Muslim clerical establishment, which advocated adoption of the Arabic alphabet, was undermined. The results were impressive: by 1924, 25 different languages were being published in the Soviet Union, rising to 34 the following year and 44 by 1927, while literacy among the general population rose very quickly.[3]

Such a dynamic environment was not especially conducive to extended theorising; the detachment necessary for reflection and composition was not available to most linguists at this time and, just as in other fields, the theoretical fruits were only harvested at the end of the 1920s. By this time, however, language policy had degenerated considerably. In the First Five Year Plan, a 'liquidation of the old forms of alphabets' was centrally instituted, the central office of the Latinisation movement shifted from Baku to Moscow and public support for Latinisation became a sign of loyalty to the régime. Soon afterwards, Latinisation itself became suspect for threatening to detach the national regions away from Russia. The return of Russification was signalled, and this was to coincide with the purging of undesirable elements from the Russian language

[3] See Alpatov 2000b, Smith 1998 and, with a more critical evaluation, Martin 2001, pp. 75–124, 182–207.

itself.[4] Democratic centralism was replaced with bureaucratic centralism as the language policy became regressive, reverting back to Imperial and hierarchical relations. Cultural orthodoxies and a unitary conservative order ultimately resulted from the stabilisation of the system at the end of the 'cultural revolution'.

The third feature, the influence of Marxism, is rather more ambivalent, but there is little doubt that Marxist ideas constituted an important element of the worldviews of many linguists in the early Soviet Union, and, while this did not in every case lead to an attempt to construct a Marxist linguistics, it nevertheless influenced their research agenda and methodology. Bureaucratic distortions were certainly very clear in academic disciplines by the end of the 1920s, but, while Marxism within official politics deteriorated in step with the Stalinist degeneration of the Revolution, Marxism within academic institutions was less immediately compromised. The very distance of many intellectuals from political life at this time actually insulated them from the cruder corruptions of Marxism, even when intellectuals were subject to vicious attacks by the self-proclaimed guardians of 'proletarian culture' during the Cultural Revolution (1928–31). From July 1931, when Stalin restrained and then dissolved the groups of intellectual-baiters, a space for intellectual endeavour was opened up, with real debates being carried out in several disciplines before the professional orthodoxies of those disciplines were finalised in the mid-1930s.[5] Even then, though, orthodoxies were not simply imposed by Party dictates. There was no 'Party line' on such issues as the philosophy of language or literary technique. As Sheila Fitzpatrick notes, while the Party required the insights of 'Marxism-Leninism' be acknowledged in the social sciences and

> applied the principle of *partiinost'* [party-mindedness] to the work of Communist intellectuals . . . the criteria and desiderata could provide only limited guidance as long as the party did not require party membership of the intelligentsia and gave equal or greater honour to cultural figures who were neither Communist or Marxist.[6]

Furthermore, in most situations, the orthodoxies of immediate practical relevance to the professions were not political. They were local professional

---

[4] Smith 1998.

[5] On the debates that led to the formulation of 'socialist realism' in the arts, see Robin 1992.

[6] Fitzpatrick 1992, p. 248.

orthodoxies, established by a process of interaction between the professionals and the Party's cultural administrators, which was only in a few cases affected by intervention or explicit direction from the party leadership.

From 1930 onwards, the so-called 'new doctrine on language' of Nikolai Marr (1865–1934) was well on its way to becoming the orthodoxy within linguistics. It dominated the field until Stalin's famous denunciation of Marr in 1950. As Alpatov and others have noted, Marr's theory amounted to little more than hitching an already formed, and highly questionable, doctrine on to well-known Marxist tenets, but, by 1934, 'Marrism had been proclaimed to be a subset of Marxism; and Marr himself had been decorated with the Order of Lenin, buried beside Lomonosov, and beatified through a series of "memory immortalisation" decrees'.[7] While there was significant resistance to the dominance of Marrism until 1932 from such important Marxist figures working within linguistics as Evgeny Polivanov (1891–1938) and Timofei Lomtev (1906–72), Marrism was regarded as 'Marxism in linguistics' and open criticism within the Soviet Union carried real risks.[8]

The victory of Marrism undoubtedly distorted relations between Marxism and the philosophy of language, but it did not mark the end of constructive Marxist engagements with it. Writers on language had to show respect for Marr's ideas and work within a framework that Marrism could accommodate, but this did leave considerable scope for research. Furthermore, while many of Marr's individual ideas were as unsound and sometimes as bizarre as some of the ideas of Lysenko in biology, not all of his ideas were of this type. Ideas such as the derivation of all languages from four primary elements and the denial of the existence of families of languages were undoubtedly the product of fancy, but other ideas proved to be compatible with some significant developments in the study of language as a social phenomenon. The linguist and literary scholar Viktor Zhirmunskii (1881–1971) publicly opposed Marr's 'four elements' theory as late as 1940,[9] but his attitude to Marrism was not totally negative. Looking back on the Marr period from the 1970s, Zhirmunskii noted that Marr's 'theoretical ideas and separate pronouncements', though 'in most cases not fully worked out and chaotic', contained

[7] Slezkine 1996, pp. 851–2.

[8] On the struggle against Marrism, see Alpatov 1991, pp. 87–100 and Leont'ev 1974, pp. 22–8. On the status of Marrism thereafter, see Alpatov 1991 and Slezkine 1996.

[9] Alpatov 1991, pp. 133–4, Berkov and Levin 2001, pp. 17–18. On the persistence of criticisms of Marrism, see Smith 1998, p. 163.

> productive and fruitful thoughts that most of us (especially Leningrad linguists) were bound to find chiming with our own work. I mainly have in mind such things as Marr's struggle against the narrowly Euro-centric theory of traditional linguistics; the stadial-typological approach to the development of languages, and comparison of them regardless of their common line of descent; research into the realm of the interrelations of language and thought; and what might be called the semantic approach to grammatical phenomena.[10]

Zhirmunskii and his fellow 'Leningrad linguists' produced some of the most interesting and sadly neglected works on language from a generally Marxist perspective of the whole Soviet era.

Institutions and history

There were several institutions that included important figures who studied language from a broadly Marxist perspective following the October Revolution and the Civil War. Some of the most important were established under the organisational umbrella RANION (Rossiiskaia assotsiatsiia nauchno-issledovatel'skikh institutov obshchestvennikh nauk [Russian Association of Scientific Research Institutions of the Social Sciences]), which included both Marxist and fellow-traveller intellectuals. Most important for our purposes was the Moscow-based IIaL (Institut iazyka i literatury [Institute of Language and Literature]) and the Leningrad-based ILIaZV (Institut sravnitel'nogo izucheniia iazykov i literature zapada i vostoka [Institute for the Comparative Study of the Languages and Literatures of the West and East]) which existed from 1924–30. The linguistic section of RANION was presided over by Polivanov, with Lev Iakubinskii (1892–1945) directing the study of linguistics in Leningrad. The most significant figures at IIaL were Mikhail Peterson (1885–1962), the specialist in general and comparative Indo-European linguistics, and the general linguist and medievalist Rozalia Shor (1893–1939). The Moscow linguists had emerged from the traditions of the Moscow Linguistic School led by Fortunatov (1848–1914), who insisted that language is a system of signs. In the 1920s, Peterson and Shor introduced a whole generation of Soviet linguists to important developments in proto-pragmatics such as the work of Karl Otto Erdmann, Anton Marty and Karl Bühler, though criticising these

[10] Bazylev and Neroznak 2001, p. 18.

approaches for paying inadequate attention to sociological factors.[11] They also made the first Soviet attempts to bring sociological ideas to bear directly on the philosophy of language, with Peterson supporting Miellet's contention that, hitherto, linguists had only noticed the social side of language by accident.[12] The main figures at ILIaZV were four linguists who either had been or who regarded themselves as pupils of the Polish-Russian linguist Jan Baudouin de Courtenay (1845–1929):[13] the general linguist Lev Shcherba (1880–1944), the Russianist Iakubinskii, the Germanist Zhirmunskii and the Russianist and Baltist Boris Larin (1893–1964). These figures remained at ILIaZV when it was re-organised and became GIRK (Gosudarstvennyi institut rechevoi kul'tury [State Institute of Discursive Culture]) in 1930, and remained there until its final demise in 1937. Before the Revolution, Iakubinskii and Zhirmunskii were associated with the Petrograd Formalists (though Zhirmunskii always maintained a critical distance), but Iakubinskii soon left the group and by 1923 he was siding with Marr at ILIaZV, where he published an article on dialogic discourse that was to have a profound influence on the work of the Bakhtin Circle.[14] Zhirmunskii facilitated some important translations of German philologists Oskar Walzel, Leo Spitzer, Karl Vossler and others into Russian, and criticised the Russian formalists on the basis of German philosophy in this period.[15] Larin wrote on artistic discourse in the 1920s but, like Zhirminskii, he was interested in forms of conversational discourse and urban dialects from the mid 1920s onwards. It was in the realm of dialectology and the history of the formation of the national language that the ILIaZV (GIRK) scholars were to excel in the 1930s.

Common to the ILIaZV scholars was a reorientation of their work in the late 1920s away from artistic literature and towards the sociology of language. This trend was undoubtedly strengthened during the years of the so-called 'cultural revolution' (1928–31) when RAPP, the self-appointed guardians of 'proletarian literature', launched attacks on fellow-travellers. It is likely that a limited association with Marr in these years extended a certain protection to scholars in a precarious position, intensifying the appeal of incipient

[11] See Ushakov 2001, Shor 2001 and Peterson 1927.

[12] Peterson 1927. On Meillet's influence in Russia, which was very significant in these years, see Scherba 1966 and Desnitskaia 1991.

[13] On Baudouin de Courtenay see Koerner 1972, Stankiewicz 1972 and Adamska-Sałaciak 1998.

[14] See Iakubinskii 1986a

[15] See, for example, Dmitrev 2001.

sociolinguistics. Testimony of two younger researchers at ILIaV and its successor suggest there was a strong collective orientation at the institute, and the move to a sociology of language appears to have been common there. Similarly, scholars there tried to find a practical application for their research, conducting empirical research into urban multilingualism and the patterns of language change.[16] Voloshinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929) and Pavel Medvedev's *Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics* (1928) both fitted into the orientation at ILIaZV in these years, with the former much more closely integrated into the linguistic section of the Institute than the latter. ILIaZV was also one of Marr's power bases, and all postgraduate students, Voloshinov included, were obliged to study Marr's theory as one approach among many.[17] Furthermore, the influence of Marrism spread beyond the study of language into anthropology, ethnology, literary and folklore studies, where its effects were also by no means universally negative. The influential Marrist scholars of antiquity Izrail' Frank-Kamenetskii (1880–1937) and Ol'ga Freidenberg (1890–1955) carried out research and teaching in the institute, exerting an influence on several disciplines in the 1930s and 1940s. In fact, the relationships between folklore and literature and that between dialects and the national language to some extent represented two sides of a single research programme. The relationship between Marrism as an intellectual tendency (rather than just the works of Marr) and the work of the Leningrad linguists is therefore a crucial issue in what follows.

The influence of Marr

It is essential to grasp two features of 'mature' Marrism in order to understand the work of the Leningrad linguists. First, language is understood as part of the ideological superstructure and, as such, it goes through changes in accordance with transformations in the economic base of society.[18] All societies, and therefore languages, pass through the same distinct stages, though not necessarily at the same rate of change. Different languages are therefore the result of different societies being at different stages of development and not

[16] See Zinder and Stroeva 1999.

[17] Zinder and Stroeva 1999, 210. Members of the Bakhtin Circle were enthused by at least parts of Marr's theory from as early as 1922 (Pumpianskii 2000, p. 621) and as late as 1958 (Bakhtin 1999, p. 89).

[18] The idea that language is part of the superstructure was already present in the work of Nikolai Bukharin as early as 1922. See Bukharin 1926, pp. 203–8.

the result of the existence of different families of languages. It should be noted that Marr's 'stadial theory' was already formed before its 'Marxist' recasting, being derived from such diverse sources as the historical poetics of Aleksandr Veselovskii (1838–1906), the anthropology of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939) and the philosophy of Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945).[19] However, none of these figures actually argued, as Marr did, that the formal structure of language (lexis, grammar, and so forth) indeed changed according to these stages, along with modes of thought. The other feature of Marrism to be noted is the notion that

> a national, all-national language does not exist, but there is a class language – and languages of one and the same class in different countries reveal (if there is an identity of social structure) more typological relationship to each other than languages of different classes in one and the same country, one and the same nation.[20]

This was harmonised with the stadial theory through the argument that linguistic phenomena are immortal and that a historical language shows traces of all stages of its development. These stages can be uncovered through 'paleontological analysis'. Thus, all language develops from a primordial mythical thinking in 'primitive communism', but then becomes stratified according to profession (thus the development of distinct spheres of knowledge) and then, finally, it is divided according to different classes. Ultimately, with the coming of world communism, all languages will merge into a super-language that is qualitatively different from all existing historical languages.[21] However, in their struggle for dominance in linguistics, the Marrists knew how to exploit the growing Russian chauvinism. Arguing that all languages would merge under a new socialist society and that different languages are an expression of different stages of development, the Marrists adapted this to the cause of 'socialism in one country', justifying the fusion of the languages of the USSR with the one dominant and progressive language: Russian.

---

[19] See Frank-Kamenetskii 1929 and Desnitskaia 1951, p. 55.

[20] N. Ia. Marr, 'Pochemu tak trudno stat' lingvistom-teoretikom' (1929), quoted in Thomas 1957, p. 95.

[21] A full account of Marr's work is beyond the scope of the present article. For a detailed outline see Thomas 1957 and Alpatov 1991, pp. 32–78.

Baudouin de Courtenay and Marr

Clearly much of this theory is difficult to take seriously, and one famous linguist, Nikolai Trubetskoi, was even moved to label Marr a 'lunatic', though, unfortunately, 'not sufficiently insane to put in an institution'.[22] However, the Leningrad linguists found much in Marrism that converged with certain key ideas of Baudouin, who had himself shown Marr's early and more reasonable work considerable respect.[23] For example, as Zhirmunskii in particular recognised, dialectology, in which Baudouin had been a pioneer, converged with the cause of 'linguistic paleontology' to the extent that studying living languages was regarded as a precondition for the 'study of paleontological remains' and uncovering the earlier stages of a language's development.[24] Similarly, one finds Marr's idea that all languages are the product of 'cross-breeding' anticipated in Baudouin's insistence in 'On the Mixed Character of All Languages'.[25] Furthermore, like Marr, Baudouin was influenced by the *Völkerpsychologie* of Steinthal and Wundt, and linked linguistic change to changes in the collective consciousness. However, unlike Marr, Baudouin distinguished rigorously between pure linguistics, the subject of which is 'the sum total of more or less homogenous facts that belong totally to the so-called manifestations of human life, and applied linguistics, whose subject is the application of the results of pure linguistics to questions pertaining to other sciences'. He further distinguishes between the internal history of a language, which studies the 'changes that occur within a language' and the external history 'which approaches language ethnologically, from the point of view of the fate of its speakers, and which is consequently a part of applied linguistics'.[26] The interaction between these factors should be studied, but the distinction between them should on no account be effaced.

In his 1932 book on language, Iakubinskii developed this idea, insisting that language has two distinct *functions*, from which the other functions identified by contemporary 'bourgeois linguistics' are derived.[27] According

---

[22] Trubetskoy 1969, p. 317.

[23] See, for example, Baudouin de Courtenay 1972, p. 303.

[24] Baudouin de Courtenay 1972, pp. 214–15, 317.

[25] Baudouin de Courtenay 1972, pp. 216–26. This was a theme returned to by Shcherba in 1936. See Scherba 1958.

[26] Baudouin de Courtenay 1972, pp. 60, 63–4 and 76–7.

[27] Iakubinskii seems to have had in mind notions such as Bühler's isolation of expressive, representative and 'triggering' functions, and the communicative and expressive functions noted by Miellet and Bally. These were all discussed widely in Russia in the 1920s and were instrumental in the development of the ideas of Voloshinov and Lev Vygotskii, on which see Brandist forthcoming. The functions were a Marxist

to Iakubinskii, the two basic functions are '1) *language as a medium of intercourse* and 2) *language as ideology*'. While the distinction is essential, '*in no cases must these fundamental functions be separated from one another*: in all its phenomena language fulfils both these functions at once'. Marxism must show how, driven by socio-economic forces, these two aspects 'enter into contradiction' at various stages of a society's development and how this acts as the 'inner motor' of language development.[28] Iakubinskii argues that it is the second function that can be linked to the stratification of language according to profession and class, but this does not mean that the first function is unaffected by social transformations. They form a unity at any moment, but they are not fused. Language is, therefore, stratified according to profession and class, but one cannot (as Marr thought) simply read profession, class and the level of a society's development off the formal structures of language. There is a dialectic between these functions. Under capitalism there is a tendency to unify i) language as a medium of intercourse while dividing ii) language as ideology.

> The same capitalism that maximally differentiates language as ideology strives to transform it into an all-national inter-class means of intercourse. In this way language, having taken shape in capitalist society, is characterised by the intensification of that internal contradiction that we mentioned above. This contradiction may be formulated as the contradiction between the commonality of language as a means of intercourse (form), and the class differentiation of language as ideology (content).[29]

The contradictory tendencies toward a unified (trans-class) national language and towards the 'class differentiation of a language as ideology' are but two sides of a single process inaugurated and pursued by capitalism.

National language and dialects

In the 1930s, the Leningrad linguists all studied the issue of the formation of the national language. Larin and Iakubinskii concentrated on the Russian and Zhirmunskii on the German languages. Crucial in this was the relationship between regional dialects and the national language, and the changes brought

---

recasting of Baudouin de Courtenay's argument that change in language was driven by the human mind's attempts to 'bring about correspondence, harmony between content and form'. On this, see Adamska-Sałaciak 1998, p. 45.

[28] Ivanov and Iakubinskii 1932, p. 62.

[29] Ivanov and Iakubinskii 1932, pp. 62–3.

about by the encroachment of capitalist economic relations and urbanisation. In this, they followed an agenda set by Baudouin de Courtenay and by the Moscow Linguistic School (Fortunatov, Peshkovskii, Shakhmatov, and so on), which initiated significant studies of Slavonic dialects. However, the sociological orientation of the Leningraders was much more pronounced, and, in this respect, it converged with contemporary 'linguistic geography' in France, Germany and Italy. The key figures in these countries were Anton Meillet (1866–1936) and Jules Gillérion (1854–1926) in France, Georg Wenker (1852–1911) and Ferdinand Wrede (1863–1934) in Germany and Graziadio Ascoli (1829–1907) and Matteo Bartoli (1873–1946) in Italy. Baudouin had attended Ascoli's lectures in Milan in 1872, published some work in Italian, and knew Miellet and Saussure personally.[30] Zhirmunskii travelled to Germany to study Germanic dialectology several times in the 1920s, while Larin held Western dialectology, especially the work of Gillérion, in high regard, and led a research project to study 'urban dialectology' at ILIaZV. He ultimately hoped to edit an atlas of Slavonic dialects on the model of Gillérion's 1902 *Atlas linguistique de la France*.[31] While all the scholars worked closely at ILIaZV and IRK, it seems only Iakubinskii never published on dialectological research. Rather, he worked out many of the methodological principles for a Marxist sociology of language that arose from the practical problems being pursued by his colleagues. Thus, whereas Mikhail Peterson had sought to fully sociologise the ideas of his Moscow School predecessors by viewing the philosophy of language through the sociology of Durkheim,[32] the Leningrad linguists turned to Marxism to sociologise the ideas of their predecessor, Baudouin de Courtenay.[33]

This agenda, and the formulations that resulted from following it, bear a striking resemblance to Gramsci's attempt to restructure the work of Italian linguistic geographers according to the principles of Marxism. As Franco Lo Piparo has shown, Gramsci's writing on hegemony was deeply indebted to the 'neo-linguistics' of Bartoli who, according to Gramsci, had established linguistics as a historical discipline.[34] Gramsci, in fact, related to Bartoli just as the Leningrad linguists related to Baudouin. Gramsci found in Bartoli's work on linguistic conflict and patterns of innovation an extremely useful

[30] See Adamska-Sałaciak 1998, p. 29 and Berezin 1968, p. 102.
[31] See Kornev 1969.
[32] See Peterson 1927. On Durkheim's considerable influence in Russia, see Gofman 2001.
[33] Polivanov 1974, pp. 60–1.
[34] See Lo Piparo 1979 and Brandist 1996.

way of theorising political and cultural power relations, but he thought that Bartoli's reliance on the psychologistic idealism of Croce seriously weakened the analytical power of neolinguistics.[35] The Leningrad linguists similarly valued Baudouin's studies of Slavonic dialectology, along with his account of language change through conflict, but were unwilling to follow him in basing this on an ethno-psychology akin to that of Wundt.[36] The roots of the inherited linguistic conceptions nevertheless remained significant. The inheritance from Croce, Vossler and Wundt led to the belief that linguistic facts are embodiments of ideas. Form can, therefore, not be treated in isolation. Shared roots in Gilliéron's linguistic geography are also important. They led to an understanding of language as both a synchronic system and a historically developing institution, and, in this, they resembled Saussure's bifurcation of synchronic and diachronic sciences of language. However, once they began to seek out the antecedent forms of linguistic phenomena, both innovations through borrowing and inherited factors were given equal weight. This last point fundamentally divided the linguists we are discussing from those in a broadly neo-grammarian tradition, who treated innovations as marginal phenomena.[37] It also explains the Leningrad linguists' hostility to the work of Saussure, which they understood in the spirit of Gilliéron. Like many structuralists, though with a diametrically opposed evaluation, Iakubinskii misunderstood Saussure's *la langue* as a description of how a language actually exists at a certain instant rather than a methodological principle.[38] For both Gramsci and the Leningrad linguists, Marxism was to provide the methodological basis for reworking these central notions of linguistic idealism and linguistic geography.

In an important article of 1932, Zhirmunskii argues that linguistic geography shows that, in contradistinction to the 'old idea that there exist more or less isolated dialects that are characterised by the totality of several dialectological features', one should use the methods of 'social geography' to trace linguistic change brought about by trade and other factors and the formation of advanced and 'backward' areas. One should also study linguistic hybridisation and

[35] On Bartoli's eclecticism see Iordan and Orr 1970, pp. 273–8.

[36] See Boduen de Kurtene 1963, p. 95 and Adamska-Sałaciak 1998, pp. 33–4. Like Gramsci, however, the 'Baudoinians' tended to think of language as an uninterrupted process of collective thinking, as linguistic activity.

[37] On this distinction, see Jankowsky 1972, pp. 230–1.

[38] See Iakubinskii 1986b. On the prevalence of this misinterpretation, see Thibault 1987, pp. 80–2.

bilingualism that results from such changes.[39] Zhirmunskii argued for the Marxist utilisation of this approach and carried out detailed studies of German dialectology from such a perspective, linking this to the study of folklore, which he similarly considered to involve the study of 'relic' phenomena.[40] In his *National Language and Social Dialects* (1936), Zhirmunskii went on to argue that forms of bilingualism under feudalism reflect a blunt difference between the languages of the victor and the vanquished.[41] Under capitalism, however, the difference between national language and social dialects is one of *social function*. The two are tied together by a 'complex interaction of hierarchical subordination and struggle, conditioned by the common direction of social development in a given epoch and country'. Referring to Marx's *German Ideology*, Zhirmunskii argues that economic and social domination leads to ideological domination, and 'the ruling class' cultural hegemony in turn conditions linguistic hegemony'.[42] The passage from linguistic geography to the study of class hegemony, which Gramsci also travelled, is clearly stated here.

The sociolinguistics of the cultural revolution

The sociolinguistics of capitalist development and its envisaged transformation under the dictatorship of the proletariat was most systematically developed in a series of articles written by Lev Iakubinskii at the height of the 'cultural revolution' in 1930–1. Iakubinskii linked his dialectic of form and content to the accounts of the development of capitalism found in the historical writings of Marx and Lenin, especially the latter's pioneering *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1889). Iakubinskii's account begins with an examination of the language of the peasantry under feudalism, where society 'was divided into a series of linguistic regions corresponding to feudal estates [*pomest'e*]'. Feudal linguistic relations were generally characterised by regional 'enclosure' and 'isolation', for 'peasants spoke differently in various regions and within a region common features of language arose naturally, though still retaining features inherited from previous epochs'.[43]

---

[39] Zhirmunskii 1932, 84. Zhirmunskii evidently had in mind Wenker's discovery that the boundaries of regional dialects were impossible to draw with any degree of precision. On this, see Iordan and Orr 1970, p. 147.

[40] See Zhirmunskii 1934.

[41] See Zhirmunskii 1936, p. 21.

[42] Zhirmunskii 1936, pp. 15–16.

[43] Iakubinskii 1930a, p. 85.

With the uneven development of capitalist relations within the framework of a feudal society, linguistic relations began to change. These new relations were first apparent within a growing town, where, from its inception, the population is to some extent a mixture of people from various feudal estates. A certain common conversational language arose as a result, reflecting the features of those local dialects of the population that arrived and settled there. The language of each separate town was, however, formed in the grasp of intensifying inter-urban relations, on the basis of the conversational language of the largest centre(s) of the society. This forms the nucleus of the common-national [*obshchenatsional'nyi*] language, which develops as the bourgeoisie concentrated wealth in fewer and fewer hands, centralised production and thus the population, and brought about political centralisation. Paraphrasing Marx, Iakubinskii argues that 'linguistic sociality becomes ever less like that sack of dialects that it was under feudalism'. Giving earlier schematic accounts of centrifugal and centripetal forces within language some sociological concreteness, Iakubinskii argues that the formation of the national language is a 'tendency, (*striving* [*stremlenie*]) towards commonality', the progress of which depends on factors such as the arrival of new peasants with their own dialects, the stage of capitalist development and the size of the capitalist centre. More importantly, however, the urban population is divided into classes and a stratum of 'professional intellectuals':

> *the degree of commonality of various social classes of a city is different.* Different classes generalise their language to different degrees depending on the extent to which they are compelled to do so by their objective class interests and the extent to which this generalisation is permitted by the objective political conditions within which a given social class exists and develops.

The proletariat has an interest in generalising its language, but being politically subordinate, exploited and oppressed, it is unable to become a 'class for itself'. The contradictions of capitalism thus both drive and limit the development of a common national language.[44]

Public discourse and its genres

Iakubinskii argues that the 'capitalisation' of linguistic relations is crucially tied to the development of 'public discourse [*publichnaia rech*]', which is to

[44] Iakubinskii 1930a, pp. 86–8.

be distinguished from conversational language in terms of possible numbers of participants and length of utterance. Platforms for public discourse only really arise as a result of the 'capitalisation' of linguistic relations, for 'public discourse begins to "bloom" in parliament and at court, in higher education institutions and at public lectures, at rallies and conferences; even the public square becomes its platform':[45]

> Parliamentary discourse, a diplomat's address to a conference, a statement in a dispute or at a rally, a political speech, the discourse of a lawyer or prosecutor, agitational speech on the street etc. etc. These are genres of public discourse characteristic of capitalism as opposed to feudalism, regardless of the fact that we find their embryos under feudalism. Capitalism speaks publicly incalculably more and in a different way than feudalism. Public speaking under feudalism is *narrowly specialised*, limited by the narrow domains of sociality; public speaking under capitalism pretends to universality; it wants to be as universal a form as conversational language. . . . In accumulating the various genres of oral public discourse, capitalist sociality also accumulates corresponding written genres.[46]

Linguistic unification

Iakubinskii's next points of focus are '1) how the peasantry accommodates itself to the conversational language arising in capitalist society and 2) how the peasantry joins the process of the transformation of public discourse into the universal form of intercourse on the basis of its new genres (that are alien to feudalism)'.[47] This dual problem leads to three theses: a) the peasantry's assimilation of the common-urban language is an uneven process depending on the variety of social groups in a given village, the distribution and character of capitalist centres and the penetration of market forces into villages generally; b) the process of assimilation is not linear as a result of peasant resistance to the common-urban language; and, consequently, c) assimilation is to a large degree a conscious process on the part of the peasantry. It is thesis c) that we are most concerned with here. According to Iakubinskii, the peasantry's move towards the common-urban language is a 'conscious act':

---

[45] Iakubinskii 1930a, pp. 89–90 [emphasis in original].
[46] Iakubinskii 1930a, pp. 91–2 [emphasis in original].
[47] Iakubinskii 1930b, p. 51.

> By counterposing the common-urban language to local way of speaking [*govor*], capitalism introduces linguistic facts into the peasantry's consciousness, forcing them to notice, recognise and evaluate these facts. It [capitalism] transforms unconscious language, *language-in-itself into language-for-itself*. Destroying feudal fixity, the traditionalism of peasant linguistic intercourse, through the class stratification of the village and the complex counterposition of the city to the village, capitalism forces the peasantry to choose between its own, old, local and the new urban, 'national' [language]. On this soil arises a struggle, and one of its weapons is mockery, linguistic parody of the speech of the backward or the innovators.[48]

From *raznoiazychie* to *raznorechie*

Moving on to the language of the proletariat, Iakubinskii argues that the proletariat is a collective of social groups that arise from the division of labour:

> These intra-class groupings do not contradict the working class' objective interests as long as the specialised professional vocabulary is used within the narrow sphere of a given form of production and does not permeate the *whole* language of the worker, does not *completely* detach him, in linguistic relations, from the worker of another professional group.

The linguistic relations between professional linguistic groups in capitalist society are therefore sharply distinguished from those between the professional groups of feudalism, where 'secluded' groups developed their own mutually incomprehensible languages. The professional stratification of language within the proletariat is thus quite different from the 'raznoiazychie' that the proletariat inherits from the peasantry. This latter contradicts the objective interests of the working class and must be 'liquidated' in the formation of an independent proletarian language.[49]

In its transformation from a 'class in itself' to a 'class for itself', the proletariat must develop its own language in contradistinction to the language of the bourgeoisie. The manifestation of this distinction is not, and here Iakubinskii shows considerable distance from Marr, in the proletariat's pronunciation, grammar or vocabulary, but in the proletariat's '*discursive method*'. This is 'the *mode of usage* of the material of the common-national language', the '*treatment*

---

[48] Iakubinskii 1930b, pp. 58–62 [emphasis in original].
[49] Iakubinskii 1931a, pp. 24–5.

[*obrashchenie*]' of this material, 'the *mode of selection* from it of facts necessary for concrete purposes', the '*attitude* toward these facts and their evaluation'. This 'proletarian discursive method' is formed spontaneously during the proletariat's struggle with the bourgeoisie 'in the order of everyday conversational intercourse and is organised by the most advanced linguistic workers, the ideologues of the proletariat (writers and orators) in the various genres of oral and written public discourse'. This method is at first mainly formed in the 'political, philosophical and scientific genres of public discourse', but after the proletariat's seizure of political power the process acquires a 'mass character' and spreads to 'all discursive genres'.[50]

Iakubinskii's series of articles ends with a characterisation of current 'linguistic politics' during the cultural revolution. All unnecessarily technical vocabulary associated with 'bourgeois specialists' must be shunned in favour of a truly 'popular-scientific language [*nauchno-populiarnyi iazyk*]'.[51] Under the dictatorship of the proletariat, the common-national language must be 'common in its tendency towards all the genres of discourse'. It will be 'more democratic the more it is accessible to the masses, and the less it is differentiated according to genre' overcoming the enormous differentiations of the 'assimilation of actuality in discursive genres' introduced by capitalism.[52] The development of a common-national language, and thus the overcoming of 'raznoiazychie', can reach fruition. This is because capitalism's contradiction between town and countryside can be overcome and the subordination of previously oppressed classes can cease. Since the proletariat is a universal class, it aims to destroy the class structure once and for all, and so the national language can now become 'common to all classes of society'.[53]

The new application

Iakubinskii's articles of the 1930s clearly grew out of the practical work of linguists in the 1920s, but they were composed and published in a very different era when linguistic standardisation and the relations between Russian and minority languages were controlled by a centralised bureaucratic élite. The fact that the articles were published in Gorky's *Literaturnaia ucheba* was significant, for it is here that the official political idiom was formulated and

[50] Iakubinskii 1931a, pp. 32–3.
[51] See Iakubinskii 1931b.
[52] Iakubinskii 1931c, p. 74.
[53] Iakubinskii 1931c, p. 71.

passed on to young writers not yet attuned to the standard literary language. Iakubinskii's articles were used to argue that the traditional forms of correct usage must be maintained, along with a 'proletarian' lexis and style as defined by the bureaucracy through its official organs. The dialects of the 'rabble', which threatened to fragment the supposedly proletarian worldview should therefore be marginalised, while social dialects should serve limited social functions within an overarching standard.[54]

To what extent the Leningrad linguists consciously participated in the regressive tendencies of the cultural revolution is difficult to judge, for, while they certainly participated in the establishment and consolidation of the Soviet cultural hierarchies that crystallised in the 1930s, their work was not simply an expression of that drive. The methodology of their research programme granted their work a certain autonomy from the ideology which it ultimately ended up serving. The insights of any scientific study, whether Marxist or not, can ultimately prove to be useful for a ruling class seeking to pursue its own interests. Furthermore, the emancipatory impulse that initially motivated their work, and the critical spirit that permeates it, had become detached from progressive linguistic policy and reverberated differently in the new circumstances and served new ends. Marxists were undoubtedly to a significant extent confused by recent developments, and it is at least arguable that the ideologically motivated members of the Stalinist bureaucracy were themselves ignorant of the kind of society they were creating. This is a question for sustained historical analysis, but the time has now arrived when such a type of analysis can be carried out and some of the obscured potential of the revolutionary era can once again be made to serve progressive ends.[55]

References

Adamska-Sałaciak, A. 1998, 'Jan Baudouin de Courtenay's Contribution to Linguistic Theory', *Historiographia Linguistica*, XXV, 1/2: 25–60.

Alpatov, V.M. 1991, *Istoriia odnogo mifa: Marr i marrizm*, Moscow: Nauka.

[54] See Smith 1998, p. 147.

[55] Research for this article was carried out as part of the project 'The Rise of Sociological Linguistics in the Soviet Union 1917–1938: Institutions, Ideas and Agendas' in the Bakhtin Centre and Department of Russian and Slavonic Studies at the University of Sheffield with the support of the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB). More information about this project is available at <http://www.shef.ac.uk/uni/academic/A-C/bakh/sociolinguistics.html>.

Alpatov, V.M. 2000a, 'What is Marxism in Linguistics?', in *Materializing Bakhtin: The Bakhtin Circle and Social Theory,* edited by Craig Brandist and Galin Tihanov, Houndmills: Macmillan.

Alpatov, V.M. 2000b, *150 iazykov i politika 1917–2000: sotsiolingvisticheskie problemy SSSR i postsovetskogo prostranstva*, Moscow: KRAFT + IV RAN.

Bakhtin, M.M. 1999, *Lektsii po istorii zarubezhnoi literatury,* Saransk: Izd. Mordovskogo universiteta.

Baudouin de Courtenay, J. 1972, *A Baudouin de Courtenay Anthology: The Beginnings of Structural Linguistics*, translated by E. Stankiewicz, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Bazylev, V.N. and V.P. Neroznak 2001, 'Traditsiia, mertsaiushaia v tolshche istorii' in Neroznak 2001.

Boduen de Kurtene, I.A. (Jan Baudouin de Courtenay) 1963, 'Iazyk i iazyki' [1903], *Izbrannye trudy po obshchemu iazykoznaniiu,* Moscow: Akademia nauk, Volume 2.

Berezin, F.M. 1968, *Ocherki po istorii iazykoznaniia v Rossii (konets XIX – nachalo XX vekov)*, Moscow: Nauka.

Berkov, N.N. and Iu.D. Levin 2001, 'Kratkii ocherk nauchno-issledovatel'skoi, pedagogicheskoi i obschchestvennoi deiatel'nosti Viktora Maksimovicha Zhirmunskogo', in *Akademik Viktor Maksimovich Zhirminskii: Bibliograficheskii ocherk,* Third Edition, St. Petersburg: Nauka.

Brandist, Craig 1996, 'The Official and the Popular in Gramsci and Bakhtin', *Theory Culture and Society*, 13, 2: 59–74.

Brandist, Craig 2003, 'Voloshinov's Dilemma: On the Philosophical Sources of the Bakhtinian Theory of the Utterance', in *The Bakhtin Circle: In the Master's Absence*, edited by Craig Brandist et al., Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Bukharin, N. 1926, *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology*, London: Allen and Unwin.

Clark, K. and M. Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin,* Cambridge, MA.: Belknap.

Desnitskaia, A.V. 1951, 'O roli antimarksistskoi teorii proiskhozhdeniia iazyka v obshchei sisteme vzgliadov N. Ia. Marra', in *Protiv vul'garizatsii i izvrashcheniia marksizma v iazykoznanii,* edited by V.V. Vinogradov i B.A. Serebrennikov, Volume 3, Moscow: Izd. Akademii nauk SSSR.

Desnitskaia, A.V. 1991, 'Frantsuzskie lingvisty i sovetskoe iazykoznanie 1920–1930-kh godov', *Izvestiia akademii naul SSSR, Seriia literatury i iazyka*, 50, 5: 474–85.

Dmitrev, A.N. 2001, 'Polemika V.M. Zhirmunskogo s formal'noi shkoly i nemetskaia filosofiia', in Kazanskii (ed.) 2001.

Fitzpatrick, Sheila 1992, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia,* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Frank-Kamenetskii, I.G. 1929, 'Pervobytnoe myshlenie v svete iafeticheskoi teorii i filosofii', *Iazyk i literatura*, 3: 70–155.

Gofman, A.B. 2001, *Diurkgeim v Rossii: retseptsiia diurkgeimskoi sotsiologii v rossiiskoi sotsial'noi mysli*, Moscow: GUVSE.

Iakubinskii, L.P. 1930a, 'Klassovyi sostav sovremennogo russkogo iazyka: iazyk krest'ianstva. Stat'ia chetvertaia', *Literaturnaia ucheba*, 4: 80–92.

Iakubinskii, L.P. 1930b, 'Klassovyi sostav sovremennogo russkogo iazyka: iazyk krest'ianstva. Stat'ia chetvertaia', *Literaturnaia ucheba*, 6: 51–66.

Iakubinskii, L.P. 1931a, 'Klassovyi sostav sovremennogo russkogo iazyka: iazyk proletariata. Stat'ia piataia', *Literaturnaia ucheba*, 7: 22–33.

Iakubinskii, L.P. 1931b, 'O nauchno-populiarnom iazyke', *Literaturnaia ucheba*, 1 (new series): 49–64.

Iakubinskii, L.P. 1931c, 'Russkii iazyk v epokhu diktatury proletariata', *Literaturnaia ucheba*, 9: 66–76.

Iakubinskii, L.P. 1986, *Izbrannye raboty: iazyk i ego funktsionirovanie,* Moscow: Nauka.

Iakubinskii, L.P. 1986a [1923], 'O dialogicheskoi rechi' in Iakubinskii 1986.

Iakubinskii, L.P. 1986b [1931], 'F. de Sossiur o nevozmozhnosti iazykovoi politiki' in Iakubinskii 1986.

Ivanov A.N. and L.P. Iakubinskii 1932, *Ocherki po iazyku*, Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia literature.

Iordan, I. and J. Orr 1970, *An Introduction to Romance Linguistics: Its Schools and Scholars,* Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Jankowsky, K.R. 1972, *The Neo-Grammarians: A Re-Evaluation of Their Place in the Development of Linguistic Science,* The Hague: Mouton.

Kazanskii, N.N. (ed.) 2001, *Materialy konferentsii, posviashchennoi 110-letiu so dnia rozhdeniia akademika Viktora Maksimovicha Zhirmunskogo*, St. Petersburg: Nauka.

Koerner, E.F.K. 1972, 'Jan Baudouin de Courtenay: His Place in the History of Linguistic Science', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 14, 4: 663–83.

Kornev, A.I. 1969, 'B.A. Larin i russkaia dialektologiia', in P.A. Dmitriev et al. (eds.), *Voprosy teorii i istorii iazyka*, Leningrad: Izd. Leningradskogo universiteta.

Leont'ev, A.A. 1974, 'The Life and Activities of E.D. Polivanov', in E.D. Polivanov, *Selected Works: Articles on General Linguistics*, The Hague: Mouton.

Martin, Terry 2001, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union 1923–1939*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Neroznak, V.P. (ed.) 2001, *Sumerki lingvistiki: iz istorii otechestvennogo iazykoznaniia*, Moscow: Akademia.

Peterson, M.N. 1927, 'Iazyk kak sotsial'noe iavlenie', in *Institut iazyka i literatury: uchenie zapiski tom 1.*, Moscow: Ranion.

Lo Piparo, Franco 1979, *Lingua, intellettuali, egemonia in Gramsci*, Bari: Laterza.

Polivanov, E.D. 1974. 'The Last Decade, 1917–1927, in 'Our Linguistic Thought', in E.D. Polivanov, *Selected Works: Articles on General Linguistics*, translated by D. Armstrong, The Hague: Mouton.

Pumpianskii, L.V. 2000, 'Lermontov' [1922], in *Klassicheskaia traditsiia: sobranie trudov po istorii russkoi literatury*, Moscow: Iazyki russkoi kul'tury.

Robin, R. 1992, *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic*, translated by C. Porter, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Shcherba, L.V. 1966, 'Pamiati A Meillet', *Voprosy iazykoznaniia*, 3: 97–104.

Shor, R.O. 2001, 'Krizis sovremennoi lingvistiki', in Neroznak 2001.

Smith, M.G. 1998, *Language and Power in the Creation of the USSR 1917–1953*, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Stankiewicz, E. 1972, 'Baudouin de Courtenay: His Life and Work', in Baudouin de Courtenay 1972.

Thibault, Paul, 1987, *Re-Reading Saussure: The Dynamics of Signs in Social Life*, London: Routledge.

Thomas, L.L. 1957, *The Linguistic Theories of N. Ja. Marr*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Trubetskoy, N.S. 1969 [1924], *Principles of Phonology*, translated by C.A.M. Baltaxe, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Ushakov, D.N. 2001, 'Kratkii ocherk deiatel'nosti lingvisticheskoi sektsii nauchno-issledovatel'skogo instituta iazyka i literatury', in Neroznak 2001.

Zhirmunskii, V.M. 1932, 'Metodika sotsial'noi geografii (dialektologiia i fol'klor v svete geograficheskogo issledovaniia)', *Iazyk i literatura* 8: 83–117.

Zhirmunskii, V.M. 1934, 'Problema fol'klora', in *Sergeiu Fedorovichu Ol'denburgu: k 50 letiiu nauchno-obshchestvennoi deiatel'nosti 1882–1932*, Leningrad: Izd. Akademii nauk SSSR.

Zhirmunskii, V.M. 1936, *Natsional'nyi iazyk i sotsial'nye dialekty*, Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia literatura.

Zinder L.R. and T.V. Stroeva 1999, 'Institut rechovoi kul'tury i sovetskoe iazykoznanie 20–30-kh godov' in *Iazyk i rechevaia deiatel'nost'*, 2: 206–11.