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Stalin's critique of the idea of the class character of language

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Abstract:

Shedding light on the different Soviet linguistic approaches to the phenomenon of the class character of language, this paper shows that Stalin's 1950 critique of Nikolaj Marr's views echoed criticism that had already been addressed to Marr by his contemporaries. The idea of the class character of language did not amount to a single coherent theory, in Soviet linguistics, of social and linguistic structures, but in many cases remained an abstract theoretical construct. Even if some linguists manifestly subscribed to the Marrist dogma, it did not immediately follow that the idea of the class character of language had exerted significant influence on the actual analysis of language material.

Keywords: linguistic discussion of 1950, N.Ja. Marr, "New theory of language", Stalin, class character of language, the concept of "national language", R.O. Šor, "Jazykofront", L.P. Jakubinskij, V.N. Vološinov

After the short-lived alliance between the Soviet Union and the United States against Nazi Germany, the world was divided into two opposing ideological and political camps in the late 1940s. In the context of the Cold War, the intimate relationship between knowledge and power became evident in both countries, each convinced of the compatibility of their political system with recent developments in modern science and of the latter as proof of the former's superiority.¹ The Soviet regime started to strengthen ideological control over science in order to enhance its competitiveness in relation to "Western" science, and scientists were expected to promote socialist ideology by producing ideologically correct science. While in the late 1920s and early 1930s the quest for the ideological purity of Soviet science had been based on the distinction between "bourgeois" and "Marxist" science, in the post-war context the Soviet regime emphasized the importance of patriotism and loyalty to the Soviet regime, opposing Soviet science to Western cosmopolitan science.

The linguistic discussion of 1950 was one of the six post-war scientific debates masterminded by "the coryphaeus of all sciences" and the Soviet political elite, in active collaboration with prominent contemporary researchers in their respective fields, to promote the ideological purity of Soviet science.² The most significant event of the discussion was the publication of Stalin's linguistic pamphlet in the newspaper *Pravda* in June 1950³ with the aim of exposing the ideological and theoretical shortcomings of Nikolaj Jakovlevič Marr's "New theory of language" that had dominated Soviet linguistics since the early 1930s. Stalin considered Marr, along with his uncritical disciples, to be solely responsible for the "Arakcheyev regime" in contemporary Soviet linguistics and for having put Soviet linguistics "into a muddle". He saw the idea of the class character [*klassovost'*] of language as the most damaging theoretical construction behind the stagnation and ideological impurity of Soviet linguistics. At the same time he assumed that the idea of the class character of language would amount to a single unified theory about the relation between language and society.

While the views established in the writings of Marr and the Marrists became a widely endorsed and finally an undisputed dogma in Soviet linguistics, the idea of the class character of language was also discussed in a more nuanced form "completely independently of Marr's theory and not infrequently even in opposition to it" by other contemporary linguists.⁴ This passed unnoticed by Stalin, who identified the idea of the class character of language only with Marr and Marrists, whose version was indeed based on a highly mechanical understanding of the relation between social formations and linguistics structures. The aim of the present paper is to shed light on the variations and alternative approaches to the phenomenon

¹ Pollock 2006: 13.

² See Pollock 2006.

³ See Алпатов 1991; Илизаров 2012.

⁴ Жирмунский 1969: 7.

of the class character of language in Soviet linguistics and to show that Stalin's critique of Marr's views often echoed the critical remarks that had already been directed towards Marr by his contemporaries.

CLASS-LANGUAGE VS NATIONAL LANGUAGE

In his critique of the "New theory of language", Stalin focused on Marr's idea of the class character of language and found Marr guilty of committing two fundamental mistakes deriving from the latter's insufficient mastery of Marxist-Leninist theory.⁵ First, Stalin saw Marr's vision of language as being part of the superstructure as non-Marxist. Second, Stalin argued that Marr's mechanical understanding of the relation between the base and the superstructure, which assumed that the superstructure merely reflects the characteristics of the base, was seriously flawed. In Stalin's view, Marr's linguistic theorizing can be seen as a showcase of the vulgarization and misrepresentation of Marxism and an unsuccessful attempt at applying basic principles of Marxism to the study of language.

Marr believed that the existence of different social classes in capitalist society with clashing social, economic and ideological interests inevitably results in the emergence of competing class-languages in the society. Thus, he held that the social stratification within society manifests itself in the form of typological differences between the various languages of different social classes, because the typological features of a particular class-language are determined by the characteristics of social structures. He also excluded the possibility of the existence of a unified national language shared by all members of the society and saw "a national language" as a hypothetical construct, or even a myth.⁶ Marr's reasoning was based on the assumption that language is part of the superstructure that mechanically reflects the characteristics and dynamics of the economic base of society. In this view, an economic revolution inevitably causes a linguistic revolution.

Marr's skepticism relating to the idea of a unified national language was attacked by Stalin, who insisted that language "is always a language common to the whole people and can serve both bourgeois and socialist culture".⁷ This is because languages, unlike superstructural phenomena such as culture and social institutions, are not created by a single base but by "the whole course of the history of the society and of the history of the bases for many centuries".⁸ What is more, a language is not created by a particular class, but "by the entire society", which makes a language "a single language for the society" and enables it to function as "the common language of the whole people".⁹ In this, language differs from culture be-

⁵ Stalin 1950 [2020].

⁶ Mapp 1929: 33.

⁷ Stalin 1950 [2020].

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

longing to the superstructure, which, according to Stalin, can be either “bourgeois” or “socialist”.

Despite the fact that Stalin emphasized the unified nature of a language and rejected the notion of class-languages, he nevertheless admitted that the social differentiation of society is not irrelevant from the point of view of language, because different social groups “strive to utilize the language in their own interests, to impose their own special lingo, their own special terms, their own special expressions to it”.¹⁰ He emphasized that sociolinguistic variation between different groupings of people does not undermine the concept of a “shared unified language”, because the “dialects” and “jargons” associated with different classes are merely “offshoots of the common national language”.¹¹

Given Stalin’s insistence on the unified nature of national languages, his account of linguistic crossing is somewhat puzzling, because it represents a case of *contradictio in adjecto*. In his reply to comrade Kholopov, who had asked about the mechanisms behind linguistic crossing, Stalin argued that in the era of world-scale socialism, “old” national languages would merge into a “new” unified language characterized by unique typological features.¹² It can be argued that Stalin’s explanation of the process of crossing implies a causal relationship between the economic base and language, because the emergence of the new unified language is triggered by a change in the economic base, that is, the transition from capitalism to global socialism. Thus, Stalin clearly failed to see that his account of linguistic crossing is based on the assumption that there exists a causal link between socio-economic and linguistic structures – an argument that was in fact the cornerstone of the very Marrist linguistic theorization that was the object of Stalin’s criticism.

CONTEXTUALIZING STALIN’S CRITICISM

The linguistic discussion of 1950 can be characterized as a maneuver that was orchestrated by Stalin and the Soviet political elite with the active help of Soviet linguists and motivated by two different albeit related aspirations. On the one hand, the aim of the Soviet regime was to enhance the competitiveness of Soviet linguistic research in relation to Western linguistics in the context of the Cold War and to promote its ideological correctness in the spirit of Soviet patriotism. On the other hand, Soviet linguists, encouraged by Stalin and other key figures to participate in the discussion, were motivated by this unique opportunity to turn over a new leaf in Soviet linguistics by changing its ideological, intellectual and institutional context, and to promote their personal and professional interests as well.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

While the fact that Stalin denounced Marr's linguistic theorizing as non-Marxist must have felt surreal and had an earth-shaking effect on Soviet linguists and linguistics, Stalin did not present any new arguments, but often repeated the same critical remarks that had already been directed at Marr in the late 1920s and early 1930s by his contemporaries. Marr's views on the class character of language in primordial societies, for instance, had been criticized as un-Marxist by a group of young linguists called "Jazykofront".¹³ In his reply to their criticism Marr had conceded that his definition of "class" did not correspond to the established Marxist sense of the term.¹⁴ Marr was well aware of his lack of mastery of Marxist-Leninist theory and had readily admitted this to his son in a letter written in 1931.¹⁵ Marr's insufficient familiarity with Marxism was also noted by his biographer Vera Andreevna Mixankova (1892-1952), according to whom Marr's incorrect use of the concept of "class" illustrates the fact that "at that time his mastery of Marxist-Leninist theory was far from sufficient".¹⁶ In this respect, the strength and impact of Stalin's arguments were primarily based on *who* said something as opposed to *what* was said.

The notion of class-language was often given meanings that diverged from Marr's understanding of the notion, which had become an officially endorsed linguistic dogma by the early 1930s. As Agnija Vasil'evna Desnickaja (1912-1992) points out, Marr's vulgar Marxist views were often combined with ideas stemming from the pre-revolutionary Russian sociological tradition which, in turn, had been inspired by Antoine Meillet and Joseph Vendryes.¹⁷

For instance, Rozalija Osipovna Šor (1894-1939) had argued as early as in 1926 that "social differentiation must be reflected in linguistic differentiation, any linguistic change must reflect the social (and underlying economic) changes in the life of the group whose property that language is. Where in the structure of a society there are isolated groups and classes serving different production purposes, the language of the society is divided into corresponding social dialects".¹⁸

For Šor, the social differentiation of society results in the social stratification of a language expressed in the existence of *social dialects* within that language. This was basically the same argument Stalin made in his pamphlet. Šor's formulation clearly challenges Marr's notion of class-language and she would continue to criticize Marr's theory in her 1930 review of the collection *Jafetidologija i marksizm* [*Japhetidology and Marxism*],¹⁹ where she would argue that Marr's definition of "class" was un-Marxist and that class-language had, for him, been mistakenly equated

¹³ Thomas 1957: 92.

¹⁴ Marr 1932: 39.

¹⁵ Миханкова 1949: 451.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*: 379-380.

¹⁷ Десницкая 1991: 480.

¹⁸ Шор 1926: 100.

¹⁹ *Яфетидология и марксизм* 1930.

with group-language.²⁰ However, only a year later she had succumbed to Marrism, stating that “the most serious and original constructions in the area of materialist linguistics can be found in the works of the Academician N.Ja. Marr”.²¹

The notion of class-language was also used in a revamped form by Lev Petrovič Jakubinskij (1892-1945) who, like Šor, was unable to withstand the growing institutional power of Marrism in Soviet linguistics. He continued to pursue some of Marr’s controversial ideas based on vulgar sociologism in his own linguistic research till the late 1930s,²² in addition to which he had actively taken part in the Marrist campaign against the members of “Jazykofront” by writing an article for the collection *Protiv buržuaznoj kontrabandy v jazykoznanii* [*Against Bourgeois Contraband in Linguistics*]²³ which appeared in 1932. Jakubinskij seems to have made somewhat contradictory arguments regarding the relationship between socio-economic structures and the social stratification of language in different texts. On the one hand, he held that “the unity of language of different social classes of a given nation could be accomplished only on the condition that those classes be destroyed”.²⁴ He assumed that the social stratification of a language derives from the class structure of a society and a unified language could exist only in a classless society. Regardless of the unifying tendencies towards a common language in a capitalist society, the concept of a “common unified language” (as discursive method) shared by all classes remains a myth, because the conflict created by the class structure of a capitalist society sets limits on its unifying tendencies.²⁵ This seems to suggest that Jakubinskij accepted Marr’s idea of language as part of a superstructure reflecting the characteristics of the base and the notion of the class character of language.

On the other hand, a crucial difference between Jakubinskij and Marr lies in the fact that the former did not posit an identity of linguistic and socio-economic structures. He argued that phonetic, grammatical and lexical differences between various language forms are basically irrelevant from the point of view of the class character of language. For Jakubinskij, the class character of the language of the proletariat does not manifest itself on the “formal-technical” or linguistic level, but rather in a specific way of using linguistic material that is shared by all classes.²⁶ Different social classes develop their own “modes of usage” of the same linguistic material and, consequently, the language of the proletariat is distinguished from the

²⁰ Шор 1930: 201.

²¹ Шор 1931: 27.

²² According to A.N. Leont’ev (Леонтьев 1986: 7), Jakubinskij became interested in Marr’s ideas as early as in 1923. However, Vladimir Mixajlovič Alpatov (Алпатов 1991: 82) emphasizes that Jakubinskij’s writings published before 1927 had nothing to do with the “New theory of language”.

²³ *Против буржуазной контрабанды* 1932.

²⁴ Иванов, Якубинский 1930: 62.

²⁵ Якубинский 1930: 92.

²⁶ Якубинский 1931: 31-32.

languages of other social classes by its specific “discursive method”.²⁷ Thus for Jakubinskij class-languages spoken by different social classes are differentiated by their class-specific discursive method, and not by certain linguistic features, as Marr assumed.

Moreover, Jakubinskij argued that a class-language, as a specific discursive method, is inseparable from a particular ideological point of view. Accordingly, all members of the same social class share a particular ideological point of view associated with their class-specific discursive method. His view of class-language as discursive method bears a certain resemblance to that of Valentin Nikolaevič Vološinov (1895-1936) who also assumed a close connection between social, ideological and linguistic stratification. Vološinov rejected the notion of class-languages as separate languages and argued that “a class does not coincide with the sign community, i.e., with the community which is the totality of users of the same set of signs for ideological communication. Thus various different classes will use one and the same language”.²⁸ While Jakubinskij explicitly uses the notion of class-language, he nevertheless argues that all classes use the same “linguistic material” which corresponds to Vološinov’s “same set of signs” shared by all classes.

CONCLUSION

Unlike what Stalin’s linguistic pamphlet seems to suggest, the idea of the class character of language did not amount to a single coherent theory in Soviet linguistics about the dynamics of social and linguistic structures. Marr’s contemporaries gave the notion different definitions that diverged from his original formulations, which were based on a “vulgar sociologism” that assumed a causal link between socio-economic and linguistic structures. In this respect Marr’s view of class-languages as separate languages, the typological characteristics of which were determined by the characteristics of the socio-economic base, can be characterized as a fuzzy set of enigmatic ideas that left room for the development of creative variations on the theme. Moreover it seems that in many cases the idea of the class character of language remained an abstract theoretical construct, the methodological implications of which were somewhat insignificant. It often served as mere window-dressing, the aim of which was to signify the ideological correctness and purity of the linguist in question. Even if a given author explicitly subscribed to the Marrist dogma, it did not automatically follow that the idea of the class character of language had exerted significant influence on the actual analysis of linguistic material.

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²⁷ See Brandist 2003: 224.

²⁸ Vološinov 1929 [1973: 2]. For a discussion on Vološinov and Marr, see Lähteenmäki 2005; Ляhteенмяки, Васильев 2005.

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