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THE “INTERNAL LAWS OF LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT” AS AN IDEOLOGICAL MANIFESTATION OF STALINIST RUSSIA¹⁻²

Introduction

In February 1952 in Moscow, a significant linguistics event took place in the prestigious Institute of Linguistics of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR: up to 1000 people took part in the event, and about 30 lectures were given by the most prominent Soviet linguists of the time (Levin 1952). This three-day conference was dedicated to a highly specific linguistic concept: the internal laws of language development [*vnutrennie zakony razvitiia iazyka*]. Viktor Vinogradov (1895-1969), the new leader of Soviet linguistics since the theories of N. Ya. Marr (1864-1934), this “simplifier and vulgarizer of Marxism” (Stalin 1950:67), had been rejected by Stalin himself in 1950,³ when evaluating the results of the conference in his concluding speech pointed out that “despite the fact that not all the issues were raised and received a deep and comprehensive solution during the discussion, [this conference] represents a step forward on the path of achievement of the goals put forth before Soviet linguists by comrade Stalin” (Levin 1952:146.). The fact that so many linguists and scientists gathered in Moscow around this particular linguistic concept was because it had been put forward by Stalin himself, in his critique of Marr’s theories, as the “main problem of linguistics” (Stalin 1950:62). The internal

¹ წაკითხულია მოხსენებად გიორგი ახვლედიანის სახელობის ენათმეცნიერების ისტორიის საზოგადოებისა და ივანე ჯავახიშვილის სახელობის თბილისის სახელმწიფო უნივერსიტეტის ერთობლივ საერთაშორისო კონფერენციაზე – იდეოლოგია და ლინგვისტური იდეები, 2015 წელი, 4-6 ოქტომბერი, თბილისი, საქართველო.

² I would like to thank Arshiya Sangchooli for having greatly improved the formal quality of this text.

³ In May-June 1950, the Soviet official newspaper *Pravda* initiated the so-called linguistic discussion whose central concern was N. Marr and his theories accused of being responsible for “the unsatisfactory state of Soviet linguistics” (*Pravda* of Mai 9, 1950, quoted in Pollock 2006:114). During the discussion, several articles of linguists were published, either supporting or condemning Marr, whose theories were quasi-official in the USSR since the middle of the 1920s. On June 20 *Pravda* published Stalin’s article “On Marxism in Linguistics” (Stalin 1950:7-70), in which he rejected as un-Marxist Marr and his theories. The main problems of these theories were, among others, the class nature of languages and the fact that Marr considered languages as super-structures. At the end, this paper will provide another explanation for the rejection of Marr’s theories. For a detailed view of the ins and outs of Stalin’s article against Marr and of the linguistic discussion, see Pollock 2006:104-135.

laws of language development are not central in Stalin's text, which is essentially dedicated to showing that N. Marr had failed in his attempt to build a Marxist and materialist science of language. They are mentioned only four or five times and briefly defined as the laws according to which a language develops (ibid.:61), but the proclamation of their privileged place among topics of linguistic investigation contributed greatly to the attention they were given by Soviet scientists and scientific journals in the years following Stalin's article.

What is to be done when the supreme leader asks for "the internal laws of language development" to be studied without further explication? The topic must be seized and explored in every possible way to "reveal the concrete sense of this notion" (Vinogradov 1951a:12) and "introduce clarity and distinctness" (Vinogradov 1951b:103) in it. And that is exactly what Soviet linguists did. From 1950 onwards, dozens of articles and booklets were entirely or partially dedicated to the issue.⁴ In every text on Stalin's intervention in linguistics, the internal laws of language development were discussed and centered as the new main topic Soviet linguists should study "first of all" (Zvegintsev 1951:319). Even a French linguist, René L'Hermitte (1918-2005), noted the growing attention the internal laws of language development had received in the USSR and published an article about them in *Word*, the journal of the International Linguistic Association (L'Hermitte 1954). Moreover, besides the 1950 Moscow conference, another one was held in St. Petersburg in 1952 (ibid.:189), and Stalin's article and the internal laws were discussed across the Union, from Armenia (Aïvazian 1952) to the Baltic States.⁵

From the point of view of linguistics, Stalin's intervention can be seen as the end of the Marrist hegemony that had led, because of its dogmatism,⁶ "to stagnation in linguistics" (Pollock 2006:125). It can be also considered (as several Soviet and Western linguists did: Alpatov 1991:188-189; Cohen 1950:102; Zvegintsev 1989:20) a return to "traditional historical and comparative linguistics" (Zvegintsev 1989:20), the "bourgeois" (Alpatov 1991:188-189; Zvegintsev 1989:20) and classical (Cohen 1950:93) linguistics that prevailed in pre-revolutionary Russia and still does in the "bourgeois" world. Indeed, Stalin in a way freed (ibid.:96) his comrades linguists to pursue linguistics as they wanted. It might be tempting to frame this as a waning of the close link between linguistics and ideology (Koerner 2001) exemplified by

⁴ See in the bibliography section the list of the articles and booklets used for this paper. Certainly, more could have been added to the list.

⁵ The Academy of Sciences of Soviet Estonia dedicated a session to the linguistic works of Stalin in June (16-19) 1951, and a conference was held in Riga in February 1952. See *Eesti NSV Teaduste Akadeemia Toimetised/Izvestiia Akademii Nauk Ëstonskoï SSR 2* (1952) and Raïet 1952.

⁶ "The slightest criticism of the state of affairs in Soviet linguistics, even the most timid attempts to criticize the so-called 'new theory' in linguistics was persecuted and stifled by the directors of linguistic circles", said Stalin in 1950, quoted in Pollock 2006:125.

Marr's theories (ibid.:255), but I argue against this interpretation. First, as noted by Ethan Pollock, "[l]inguistics encompassed issues of [...] nationality" (Pollock 2006:104), and in rejecting the class nature of languages (a central theme in Marr's work) in favor of the idea that national languages do exist (Stalin 1950:24-44), Stalin's article is contextualized, as I argue elsewhere (Moret 2014), by a wider ideological shift in the country from an internationalist to a nationalist (Soviet) perspective, "from class-based categories to geopolitical categories" (Pollock 2006:104). Secondly, references to Marxism still exist in Stalin's text, whose stated goals are the "rejection of the errors" of the un-Marxist Marr and the "introduction of [real] Marxism in linguistics" (Stalin 1950:70); moreover, the notion of the *laws* of development clearly contains a nod to Marxism, which requires from all sciences, in Engel's *Anti-Dühring's* words (1878), "to discover the laws of motion of the eternal process of transformation in each separate field" (Engels quoted in Vinogradov 1952:8). Stalin's text on linguistics is thus not free from ideology, and I focus in this paper on the ideological aspects of the concept of the internal laws of language development. As mentioned earlier, these laws are not central in Stalin's text and he had little to say about them, but his commentators did much to interpret his writing and give substance to the internal laws of language development.

After this introduction, I will now review the texts, show how the discussion of these laws was approached by Soviet linguists, and attempt to paint a picture of what they reveal about the Soviet Union of the early 1950s and the final years of Stalin's reign, a period characterized by its "nationalist vein" and "new Soviet patriotism" (Pollock 2006:7) in a world divided into two camps.

Quid est?

Stalin's article emphasized two major aspects of the internal laws of language development. He had first insisted on the importance of studying these internal laws, and then asserted that they make languages evolve and develop. Soviet linguists, who wrote on the topic after Stalin, appear to have felt compelled to follow suit. They all in turn highlighted the new significance of these laws as an "important problem of linguistics" (Iartseva 1952:193) that should be in the "leading place" (Zvegintsev 1954:5) within the scope of Soviet linguistics. On a linguistic level, Soviet linguists almost ceaselessly developed, specified, and commented on the short definition of these laws Stalin had given. The main focus of this paper is not to analyze the concept of internal laws of language development but to elucidate its underlying preconceptions, so I will provide a short survey of the key characteristics of these laws as they are discussed in the writings of some linguists.

Viktoriiia Iartseva (1909-1999) argued that "qualitative changes in the structure of the language are made on the basis of internal laws of language development" (Iartseva 1952:199), and, according to her Georgian colleague Ketevan Lomtadze

(1911-2007), changes induced by the internal laws can affect any part of a linguistic system, from morphology to syntax, lexicon, and phonetics (Lomtatidze 1952:60). Moreover, Soviet linguists claimed that these laws will lead languages toward progress and improvement. The internal laws that govern language development are positive laws that work to improve languages, making them better, clearer, and more precise and appropriate (Zvegintsev 1951:334).

It is important to note that Stalin's writings on linguistics and the study of the internal laws were used in works dedicated to particular languages (such as Bulgarian or the Iranian languages: Tolstoï 1951; Freïman 1951), and that the study of these laws would likely have lasted longer and influenced even more later research had Stalin not died in 1953. Indeed, according to Iartseva, many outstanding issues concerning these laws still existed in 1952 (Iartseva 1952:200), and only the common work of "the collective of Soviet linguists" (Zvegintsev 1951:319) could resolve them.

I shall now leave aside the purely linguistic level of analysis and consider the ways in which the notion of the internal laws of language development can be viewed in the ideological context of Stalin's Russia.

The internal laws in the new Soviet context

Stalin's article on linguistics was an explicit attack on Marr's theories. Soon after its publication in *Pravda*, linguist Vinogradov listed the "ideological oppositions" [*ideologicheskie kontrasty* (Vinogradov 1950:38)] that distinguished Marr's and Stalin's views on language and linguistics, casting the linguistic discussion in explicitly ideological terms. Among differences between Marr and Stalin, two are of interest for the purposes of this paper: 1) "Marr's notion of the unity of the language-creating process [*iazыkotvorcheskii protsess*]" vs "Stalin's demand for a careful study of the history of particular languages" (ibid.:36), and 2) Marr's conviction that "all linguistic phenomena as superstructure" were indissolubly linked to the economic base and its changes vs Stalin's opinion that there was "no direct relationship" between the economic base and language development (ibid.:37). For a time until 1950 and following Marr's theory, all languages were assumed to develop according to one "single glottogonic process [*edinyi glottogonicheski protsess*]" (ibid.:35) that was connected with the changes in the economic base of a given society. With Stalin's text, things changed radically.

What is essential here is not the notion of *law*. Marr did believe that languages developed according to laws⁷, even if some Soviet linguists noted that he had spoken against the study of the internal laws of language development (Zvegintsev 1954:5). The essential difference is in the scope of the laws in question. While Marr's laws were said to be general and valid for all languages, internal laws of

⁷ For a detailed analysis of the semantic laws in Marr's theory, see Velmezova 2007.

language development are not: they “cannot be a universal formula [...]. Inevitably they possess a specific nature within each language” (Zvegintsev 1951:321). That is a significant change in perspective. Marr’s general laws under his “transnational linguistic theory” (Pollock 2006:128) were suited to the universalist discourses of the first few years after the October Revolution, not to the centralist and even nationalist paradigm of the 1950s.⁸ Several articles reveal what was then considered problematic in Marrism: “[t]he path of development for all languages is the same” (Lomtadidze 1952:57), “the national and historical identity of languages suffered complete disregard” (Zvegintsev 1951:325), as did the “history of individual languages” (Vinogradov 1950:38).

Thereafter, almost all commentators of Stalin’s text insisted that these laws had to be considered as entwined with nationality. For every language, these laws were said to be the “essence of its specificity” (Iartseva 1952:194) and the “fundament of [its] national originality [*samobytnost*]” (Vinogradov 1951a:13). Some said that in the internal laws of each language lies its “historical and national originality” (Zvegintsev 1952:185) that distinguishes every language from others (Iartseva 1952:198), and the existence of different languages is explained by the lack of interaction between them: “The differentiation of languages is only possible if the society, hitherto united and having one language, is divided into several parts and each part, having lost contact with others, starts to live its own life” (Sharadzenidze 1952:67). We also find the idea that the internal laws serve as “protectors” of language: referring to Stalin who wondered why the Balkan languages did not disappear under Turkish rule even though they borrowed many Turkish words (Stalin 1950:53), Iartseva asserted that the “internal laws existing in each Balkan language submitted all foreign elements coming into the language, crunching and converting them, according to the peculiarities of the structure of the given language” (Iartseva 1952:195). Finally, from the point of view of the language sciences, it was argued that Soviet linguistics has to change course:

The task of Soviet linguistics should be the study of a language in all its uniqueness, the identification of the system of categories and laws of development in the studied language, not the squeezing of a living language in one or another scheme, more or less universal, established in advance, and therefore inevitably contrary to the studied language (Avrorin 1952:411).

⁸ Why did Stalin wait until 1950 to reject Marr’s theories if they were no longer suitable for the new ideological context that rose in the USSR from the 1930s on? Maybe because Stalin already had a lot to do: the great purge, the Moscow trials, World War II, the reconstruction of the country, the different scientific discussions that kept him busy after the war... Perhaps also, Marr’s “antagonism toward Western European linguistic schools [...] and loyalty to the Soviet regime served his legacy well in the late 1940s” (Pollock 2006:106).

After this survey of some of the literature written following Stalin's intervention in linguistics and his arguing for attention to the internal laws of language development, I am inclined to consider these discourses in the broader ideological context of Stalinist Russia: Universality, internationality, general rules or laws were no longer in fashion, all languages did not develop and evolve in the same way, and every language was considered the mark of a particular national entity, with its own original laws of development. In the works of the linguists who wrote about them, these laws seem to imply a new vision of languages and societies as individual and separated entities. This is associated with the dominant Soviet ideology of the time that professed the end of global fraternity and internationalist ideals, and the rise of a world divided into closed, partitioned, and incompatible parts.

Conclusion

In 1950 and a few months after Stalin's article in *Pravda*, French linguist Marcel Cohen (1884-1974) wrote that Marr's theories were a "danger for the good health" (Cohen 1950:98) of Soviet linguistics and that their repudiation was beneficial. In the USSR, Stalin was considered to have contributed to the "recovery" (Vinogradov 1951b:74) of linguistics in the country, but this rebirth (See *Voprosy Iazykoznanii* 1, 1952:3) took place in a very peculiar moment of Soviet (and world) history. Since the end of World War II, Soviet ideologues, and in particular Stalin and Andrei Zhdanov (1896-1948), sought to promote within the Soviet Union what would later be called "a Cold War mentality" (Zubok, Pleshakov 1996:112), shaped by patriotism, "loyalty", fear, suspicion, and "anti-cosmopolitanism" (Pollock 2006:7). Given that context, we should not view this development in Soviet linguistics as a purely scientific one. On the contrary, like other scientific debates in the USSR after World War II,⁹ the linguistic discussion had an "impact on [...] the Soviet conceptualization of the Cold War" and was "fundamental to the [...] worldview" (ibid.:2) that was on the rise in the Soviet Union.

Stalin said almost nothing about the nature and implications of the internal laws of language development, unlike the Soviet linguists who developed the concept in hundreds of pages of writing. What emerges from these texts is a peculiar conception of languages, viewed as individual and separated entities, governed by individual laws, radically breaking with Marr's idea of a "single glottogonic process". This conception echoes the new Soviet Cold War ideology, no longer envisioning fraternity and internationalism but a fragmented world whose separated peoples had lost contact and lived divergent lives. It is difficult to discern what Stalin expected in emphasizing the importance of studying the internal laws of language development, perhaps his goal was only to put Soviet linguistics back on a traditional,

⁹ For a detailed survey of these "science wars" (in physics, philosophy, or economics), see Pollock 2006.

“healthy” track; but we can argue that Soviet linguists, through their choices of words, metaphors and images, whether consciously or not (Koerner 2001:254), attempted to develop the concept as they thought Stalin would have wanted given what they saw as the prevailing ideological atmosphere of the time.

Ten years after the 1952 Moscow conference mentioned at the beginning of this paper and nine years after Stalin’s death, Vladimir Zvegintsev (1910-1988) would say of the linguistic discussion in which he had participated that:

Unfortunately, Soviet linguists at first, when defining the essence of the concept of the internal law of language development, i.e., essentially linguistic law in the proper sense, did not stem from the observations of the processes of language development, but from the dogmatic interpretation of the works of Stalin, although however in a number of papers this issue was also addressed in properly linguistic terms (Zvegintsev 1962:57).

We see here that the promotion by Stalin of the investigation of the internal laws of language development as the central task of Soviet linguistics led Soviet linguists, in the ideological context of the time, to study the concept not primarily from a neutral linguistic point of view, but from one shaped strongly by dogmatic ideology.

The quote from Zvegintsev elucidates “a matter of *prise de conscience* and of intellectual honesty” (Koerner 2001:269). As a social science, “linguistics, past and present, has never been ‘value-free’; but has often been subject to a variety of external influences and opinions” (ibid.). This is probably more the case in specific contexts, like the Soviet Union after World War II. Linguistic discourses and concepts should not be separated from the “extra-disciplinary contexts” (Koerner 1999:40) in which they grow and evolve, and “linguists must become aware of the possible uses and abuses to which their research posture and their findings have been or could be put” (Koerner 2001:269). To attribute to linguistic texts a meaning or undermeaning perhaps unintended by their authors might be what I have attempted in this article.

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სებასტიენ მორე

„ენის განვითარების შინაგანი კანონი“, როგორც სტალინისტური რუსეთის იდეოლოგიური მანიფესტაცია

რეზიუმე

გაზეთ „პრავდის“ ფურცლებზე 1950 წელს დაბეჭდილ წერილში – „მარქსიზმი და ენათმეცნიერების პრობლემები“ – სტალინმა უარყო ნიკო მარის ლინგვისტური თეორია, რომელიც 25 წელზე მეტ ხანს იყო საბჭოთა ენათმეცნიერების ოფიციალური დოქტრინა. სტალინმა არა მარტო დაგმო მარქსიზმი, არამედ აჩვენა, როგორ უნდა განვითარებულიყო მარის შეცდომებისგან განთავისუფლებული საბჭოთა ლინგვისტიკა, რომ იგი ქცეულიყო ჭეშმარიტ მარქსისტულ მეცნიერებად. სტალინის აზრით, საბჭოთა ენათმეცნიერება უნდა დაბრუნებოდა ენების ისტორიისა და განვითარების კვლევას, განსაკუთრებით კი „ენათა განვითარების შინაგანი კანონების“ შესწავლას. სწორედ ეს უნდა გამხდარიყო „ენათმეცნიერების მთავარი ამოცანა“. საბჭოთა ენათმეცნიერებმა მაშინვე აიტაცეს ეს თემა და უკვე 50-იანი წლებიდან ათობით სამეცნიერო ნაშრომი იწერებოდა ამ საკითხზე, იმართებოდა შეხვედრები და კონფერენციები. იგი იქცა ძირითად საენათმეცნიერო საკითხად.

მიუხედავად იმისა, რომ იმ პერიოდში გამოცემულ ნაშრომთა უმრავლესობა „ენის შინაგანი კანონების“ გამოვლინებებს ეხებოდა, ჩვენ ვმსჯელობთ ამ ცნების არა ლინგვისტურ ასპექტებზე, არამედ ამ ცნებაში ნაგულისხმევ ფარულ იდეებზე, რომლებიც სტალინისტური რუსეთის იდეოლოგიურ მახასიათებლად გვევლინება.