

THE 'SPEECH OF THE INTELLIGENTSIA' AS THE OBJECT OF THE STUDY OF SOVIET SOCIAL LINGUISTICS

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В статье будут рассмотрены два исследования русского и советского лингвиста Е.Д. Поливанова, посвященные фонетике «интеллигентского языка». В начале 1930-ч гг. Поливанов выдвинул новаторскую теорию языка, основанную на изучении социолектов и групповых диалектов русского языка современности. Язык интеллигенции — один из излюбленных предметов исследований лингвиста. Поливанов доказывает, что изменениям подвержен не только словарный запас, но и фонетика, и приводит конкретные примеры фонетических изменений, вызванных революцией.

Ключевые слова: социолингвистика, социальная фонетика, язык интеллигенции, история социолингвистики, Поливанов, революция и язык

« Кто звонил? – Не знаю, но интеллигентный голос »¹, Evgenij Polivanov quotes this curious example to begin his paper « Fonetika intelligentskogo jazyka », 1931. « What are the peculiarities of this particular language? Simple question, complicated answer [3: 231] ».

The current paper presents an attempt to analyse the rise of social phonetics based on the study of sociolects, begun by Polivanov in the early 1930's. His first two studies dedicated to this subject focus on the language of intelligentsia.

1. Evgenij Polivanov: the man, the myth

In this paper, we will first remind some of the many activities of Evgenij Polivanov, born in 1891 and deceased in 1938: polyglot (he spoke some 60 languages), specialist of Chinese/Japanese/Uzbek/ and other Turkic languages, responsible for the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, member of the OPOIAZ (Society for the study of poetic language), and, *last but no the least*, one of the leaders of the so-called «language building» (*jazykovoje stroitel'stvo*)². His life, his extravagant hobbies, his methods of study, lead the Soviet author Aleksandr Kaverin to represent him as the mythical character of a professor in his novel «Скандалист, или вечера на Васильевском острове» (1928) [8; 10].

For what interests us here in this study, Polivanov was a representative of the Russian pre-war and then Soviet intelligentsia, as he said so himself, and spoke «Saint-Petersburg's» language (as he called himself «a St-Petersburg's language native»). Like him, almost all intellectuals between the World Wars knew many other dialects, languages and cultures of communication, which gave them the

¹ «Who was speaking (by phone)?» - «I don't know, but the voice of an intelligent person».

² «Language building» included enrichment of local languages through codification and standardization – introduction and development of normative grammar, phonetics and morphology, encouragement of a new literature in each language, compilation of dictionaries, handling of the vocabulary. Cf. works by Simonato [6, 7].

opportunity to compare idioms. Polivanov noticed as probable some differences in language which were not only territorial, but also social.

2. Backgrounds of Polivanov's phonologic doctrine

The the first point studied by Polivanov concerns the definition of the « language of the intelligentsia ». His study of the phonetics of intelligentsia made in 1931 reflects his general interest for social differentiation by language.

In my previous study [7], I argued that Polivanov's linguistic doctrine was founded under the influential approach developed by the school of Baudouin de Courtenay (1845-1929) and by Lev Ščerba (1880-1944) in particular. Like many Soviet phoneticians and phonologists, Polivanov regarded the merit of the work of Baudouin's school to be its clear distinction between phoneme as a sociological value (*veličina*) and sound as an acoustic and physiological value. Baudouin and Ščerba were the first to recognise this distinction, even if they continued to defend a psychological approach to language. Ščerba's book «Russian vowels from the quantitative and qualitative point of view», in which we find his «psychological» definition of phoneme as 'a sound representation, existing in each language, that is able to combine with sense representations and to distinguish words' [4: 134; 7: 227] continued to be quoted by linguists throughout the 1920's, even though the autor had by that time changed his position. Consequently Ščerba's ideas were often called «psychological» even though he was, in the 1920's, considered to be the father of the sociolinguistic approach to language. A separate study could be devoted to this subject.

Like many others in the 1920's, the dialectologist P.G. Strelkov considers Ščerba as his main teacher because of the «sociological» approach he has developed. In his brochure «Russian vowels from the quantitative and qualitative point of view», he gives an example of «social phonetics», with a sound nuance of /a/ typical of persons of ecclesiastical origin only [2:217].

Polivanov introduces us to the discussion on how linguistics should be developed.

Sociological topics were so few common in our linguistics (until a few years ago) that it is difficult to speak about social dialectology of a language without introducing general problems, those who concern the relationship between language and society and the concept of social dialect and group dialect [social'no-grupповoj dialekt]. [3: 225]

In his works on social dialectology, Polivanov stresses the influence of social life on the language. But he emphasises that social and economical facts have no direct impact on language evolution, phonetical evolution in particular. He claims that the main reason for language evolution lies in "economical and political changes that modify the contingent of speakers (its «social substrate») [2:217]. Polivanov insists that language only exists as a social phenomenon, and that the science of language needs to study its object exclusively in this way. He thinks that the main mistake of all earlier linguistics schools is their non-sociological approach to language, or as he puts it: «To be adequate to its object, linguistics must be a social science» [9:182].

Polivanov opens there a new field of linguistic research which he calls «social and dialectal phonetics» [2:217]. His field of investigation concerns first of all the language of big Soviet Russian-speaking cities. We may say here that the genesis of all Soviet language theories of the beginning of the XXth century is linked with the life of big cities - Petrograd, Moscow -, which were centres of economical, social and cultural life. We are able to reconstruct the development of Polivanov's social phonetics while reading his two papers written in 1931: «О фонетических признаках социально-групповых диалектов и, в частности, русского литературного языка» [On phonetical features of

social and group dialects and on Russian language in particular] and «Фонетика интеллигентского языка» [Phonetics of the language of intelligentsia].

3. A linguistic portrait of a Russian intellectual

«To my mind, everybody will agree that the language we speak in the year 1928, mostly the language of the generation of pioneers and komsomols which did not exist before the revolution, is very different from the language of a typical intellectual in the pre-revolutionary time», argues Polivanov.

In his article «On phonetical features of social and group dialects and on Russian language in particular», Polivanov invents a quite curious example. A Russian *petit bourgeois* falls asleep in the year 1913 and wakes up in the year 1928. He hears people speaking around him, but does not understand what they are saying. Polivanov uses this example to develop the idea of language evolution. He describes concrete differences which distinguish these «two different Russian languages». He defines the “*petit bourgeois*” idiom of and the one of a member of Komsomol not as two dialects (sociolects) of the same language, but as two different languages. According to him, if we take the criteria of *understanding* to differentiate language and dialect, there is no doubt that these are two different languages.

If we take, for example, some pages of «Komsomol novels» and try to read them to an average man fallen asleep in 1913 with a mentality of 1913, he will feel as foreign words such idioms as *в ячейку, работу ставить, я солидарен, я не такой инстанции, комсомольское слово, момент опасный* (...). What will understand a «pre-Revolutionary person»? Whereas all I quoted these words from one page of text does not exhaust all the content of one page. Since these unintelligible elements are in every phrase sentence, the whole content of these pages will be incomprehensible.

It is true that we have to deal here with a different language. It becomes obvious that the most typical social (and group) dialect of modern time is spoken by the social group that did not exist earlier (and could not exist) in the tsarist Russia, the Komsomol. [2:206-207]

Polivanov pays particular attention to the impact of the Revolution on language, and first of all on spoken Russian language. According to him, language is much more conservative than society; it cannot be controlled by a few institutes, neither in phonetics, morphology or syntax. He accurately says that it is not enough to announce changes in the language, for example in phonetics (replacement of a sound by another sound), or in morphology (abolishment of a grammatical gender) to make these changes come true.

«Does linguistic revolution limit itself to vocabulary and phraseology?» asks Polivanov. And is phonetics also concerned?

Let us admit that one does not notice big phonetical innovations due to revolution in the standard Russian common language [*standartnyj obščerusskij jazyk*]. Standard language (and especially written language) is always more conservative than non standardised dialects. [2:207]

The rhythm of language evolution becomes faster after the revolution, concludes Polivanov. He describes the change in the social substrate, in the society which speaks Russian.

Why can we not notice any phonetic or morphological differences between the language of 1926 and the one of 1915 or 1913, except for this unique phonetic fact of pronunciation by the young generation of [ɣ] by standard Russian [g] in words «бора», «благ» (even if this new phenomenon could hardly be noticed as a result of the revolution)?

The reason is that to form a language of revolutionary generation we have to have a whole generation grow up during the revolutionary epoch, in other words, we need time. For the moment we can observe a series of individual new phenomena. (...) That is why it is now too early to speak of collective innovation in our speech, except in the domain of phraseology and lexis.

Craig Brandist writes, correctly in my opinion, that the early soviet dialectology was given a considerable push on its way to becoming a sociological discipline by the rapid urbanisation of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union. Within an urban context regional particularisms and the official language were correlated with various social functions and class distinctions³.

Linguistic portrait of an intellectual

«One could argue that a person born in 1891 would not have changed his pronunciation by 1917», writes Polivanov. «It is true that I pronounce the following sounds the same way as in 1913:

- combinations ‘hard consonant + [e]’
- the ‘middle’ [l] (neither hard or soft), as in the name of the musical note ‘la’ (and in other foreign words) ;
- the sound [õ] as in German or in French in the word [peur], in Russian in the word блѣф».

But these are precisely these phonetic features (and some others) that characterise the language of pre-revolutionary intelligentsia. The fact is that all these features lost their role of *criteria* by which an *intellectual* (a speaker of the standard language) could recognize his similar. Nowadays, explains Polivanov, one could speak correctly without observing these «social dialectisms». As the phonetical characteristics of a majority of speakers changed, people’s appreciation of these features changed as well. Thus, they lost their social significance.

Polivanov argues that it is possible to establish a linguistic characteristic, a kind of «linguistic passport» which shows that a person belongs to a given social group. He quotes the following linguistic features of language of an *intellectual*:

1) The first feature is the knowledge of French, or, more exactly, the high level of French proficiency as a criterion of nobility. By the beginning of the XXth century several social groups were supposed to know French: financial burgess, intelligentsia of provinces [2: 215-216]. According to Polivanov, one could explain many phonetical phenomena in the standard language of pre-revolutionary Russian intelligentsia by the influence of French.

2) In phonetics, Polivanov quotes the pronunciation of [čto] instead of the common [što];

3) The pronunciation of [jeja] in Genitive opposed to [jejo] in Accusative case.

A « caste phonetics »

Polivanon calls «caste phonetics» [kastovaja fonetika] these kind of studies, and suggests to collect linguistic data and to observe groups of speakers in order to build a complete picture of the situation.

Here are the prolegomena on which we could expose any concrete characteristic of modern standard language. The following stage will consist in describing social dialects and group dialects of our time. But a huge linguistic work has still to be done, and my article may only serve as an introduction. [2:217]

Who is right, asks Polivanov: Those who defend the historical-natural theory of language evolution or those who stress the relation between language and social life [3:226]? Before answering this question, Polivanov quotes two examples from English and Estonian.

The first example if one presented by Bernard Shaw in his romance *Pygmalion* (1912). Professor of phonetics, Henry Higgins makes a bet that he can train a bedraggled Cockney flower girl, Eliza Doolittle, to pass for a duchess at an ambassador's garden party by teaching her to assume an impeccable

³ Brandist, 2003, p. 217.

speech. In English, explains Polivanov, phonetics are a basic element of social differentiation through language. It is true that only in the city of London social dialects can be distinguished by their phonetic features, as for example a so-called «vulgar» dialect.

The second example concerns Estonian. In Estonian, the difference between the phonological system of the intelligentsia and the one of common people, independently from territorial differences, is expressed in categories of consonants⁴.

«The same does not hold true in Russian», notes Polivanov. In Russian, phonetic features have a territorial character, not social. There are much less phonetical differences in social dialects than in English (and, probably, less than in Estonian). He explains that by the fact that social groups were formed more recently.

If we make a comparison in this regard, social differentiation began very lately in Russia compared to Great Britain. In the XVIIIth century, in the majority of cases, nobility lived in their villages and spoke local dialects; the source of the common Russian language in the XVIIIth was the language of the capital city, of the administration. The whole process of formation of Russian language belongs to the XIXth century. So many years later, in our century, we still speak about the possibility to speak about common language of people [prostonarodje] as a social dialect, so I still have to prove its existence. [3 :230]

Three phonemes to define an *member of the intelligentsia*

How does Polivanov describe the language of the intelligentsia? In his opinion, the easiest feature to erase is, surprisingly, the phonetical features of the *non-intelligentsia*. As a matter of fact, the sound system of a member of the intelligentsia has three additional phonemes:

1) the phoneme /l/, between the soft and the hard /l/. The sound system of the intelligentsia has a middle [l], as in the name of the note «ЛЯ» [la], and in some other foreign words [lokomobil’], [locatif]. Polivanov clarifies that the spread of this «third /l/» is not fix; its presence varies according to individual and professional peculiarities. Thus, what counts is the presence of this phoneme as a typical criterion of a group dialect [3:233].

2) The phoneme /œ/, as in French [bœuf], [cœur].

3) The phoneme /y/ as in the french word [lune], as well as in some german and ancient greek words. «He who could not pronounce correctly these sounds, who said [t’u] instead of [ty], was not worthy to be called an intellectual» [3 :234], argues Polivanov.

Polivanov notes a factor which determinates some phonetic peculiarities of the so-called «pre-revolutionary standard language». This relates to the spelling, which explains some missing features in the pronunciation of other social groups. He notes that writing system is always much more conservative than pronunciation, as we can see it in french words which keep end consonants that are not pronounced. The more progressist field of language usually affects the more conservative one, here the spelling. Spelling changes come always later, up to 1’500 years sometimes. Among this kind of changes in the language of the Russian intelligentsia, Polivanov quotes two phonetical changes as follows. The first one is the pronunciation of [što] instead of [čto], the second is the pronunciation of ея [jeja] in Genitive opposed to еѣ [jejo], in Accusative. These two phenomena were considered as «peterburgese» and typical of the petersburg intelligentsia. Polivanov precises here that these facts are typical of his own pronunciation as well [2: 219].

⁴ Polivanov explains this phenomena is similar to the prononciation in Russian of foreign words ([demon] vs [d’emon]).

Finally, Polivanov characterises the language of intelligentsia as due to a particular pronouncing culture, a speech culture (орфоэпическая культура) that noble children were taught in their families, where «side by side with the necessity of *soigner les dents (take care of the teeth)* one paid attention to *soigner le langage des enfants*» (take care of the language of the children) [3:222].

This speech culture will interest us because it embraces not only lexis and phraseology, but also morphology and phonetics. Indeed, we were taught to say «А?» instead of a question mark (as in French you should not say *Quoi?* but *Plait-il?*), to say *нравится* and not *ндравится*, as well one should not say *кушаю* while speaking about himself [3:222]⁵.

Conclusion

Resolving language and communication problems in a multilingual situation was a linguistic and sociological issue for the Soviet linguists. The key issue was how to set a standard language that was different from the pre-revolutionary language. On the paper was lying the idea of one single Soviet nation, but in practice there were many social and regional dialects. It seems that the intellectual elites were well aware that the intelligentsia for example had a specific dialect. The language of *intelligentsia* is then with no doubt the most characteristic example of how social changes can have an impact on language evolution.

To sum up, one finds similarities in the researches made by Polivanov in the early 1930's and the studies made by W. Labov in the 1960's. The «russian» way of social linguistics becomes surely less obscure.

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⁵ Nowadays, these forms are considered as popular.