

The *social semantics* of Mikhail Pokrovskij and Nikolaj Marr

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Abstract Criticizing the works of “Western” specialists in semantics, Soviet academician M. M. Pokrovskij (1868–1942) comes to the conclusion that social factors are essential for semantic evolution, while psychological factors constitute an intermediate link between the “external” life of a society and the semantics of the corresponding language. This conception resembles the general explanations of semantic evolution proposed by N. Ja. Marr (1864–1934). Nevertheless, despite a number of common points in the semantic theories of these two researchers, Pokrovskij’s attitude towards Marr was negative: in particular, he disagreed with the thesis of the chronological primacy of Marr’s discoveries in the domain of semantics. The article investigates why Pokrovskij had for a long time constituted an intermediate link between Russian and “Western” “traditions” in the field of semantics.

Keywords History of semantics · M. M. Pokrovskij · N. Ja. Marr · Marrism · Social and psychological factors in semantic changes · Laws in the evolution of meaning · Semantic universals

The name of Mikhail Mikhajlovič Pokrovskij (1868–1942) is now surrounded by myths and legends. His works have not been reprinted in Russia for several decades and are read quite rarely. If he is occasionally mentioned in Russian books on semantics today, he is generally presented as a kind of a “legend” in Russian and Soviet linguistics, rather than as a researcher and author of specific theories. Earlier Soviet researchers often made Pokrovskij into an “icon” of domestic linguistics (see our analysis of this tendency and some biographical data on Pokrovskij in

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Velmezova 2006, pp. 33–36) instead of comparing his theories with those of Western linguists. As a result, Pokrovskij's semantic theories are much less well known than those of Nikolaj Jakovlevič Marr (1864–1934).¹

Pokrovskij was elected to the Soviet Academy of Sciences in 1929, most notably for his works in the field of classical philology (Tolstoj 1944). Yet Pokrovskij always considered himself a specialist in general linguistics rather than in the Greek and Latin languages and literatures.² Pokrovskij's earliest works on semantics (he still used the word *semasiology* [*semasiologija*]) appeared as early as the last decade of the nineteenth century (Pokrovskij 1894, 1895a, b, c, 1896a, b, etc.). While here only material derived from Latin and Ancient Greek was analyzed, he subsequently broadened his circle of languages to be studied considerably, and in doing so repeated the evolution of the general direction of studies in Western semantics: the first Western semanticists [such as Christian Karl Reisig (1792–1829)] had also begun their researches in this domain with the study of a very limited number of dead languages, but little by little arrived at an analysis of numerous modern languages, including their mother tongues (Hermann Paul was one of the first linguists whose theory of semantic changes was based on the analysis of German). According to Pokrovskij 'every semanticist must first practice by studying his mother tongue, a contemporary language, for it is much easier to observe [...] semantic facts there' (Pokrovskij 1936, p. 91).

As is well known, Marr declared that no semantics had been developed before his own work:

The ancient language doctrine was right in claiming to have excluded the [study of] thought from its area of competence, for it studied the language (*reč'*) without studying thought. There were phonetic laws to explain sound phenomena in this theory, but no semantic laws, no laws of the birth of words, or of the comprehension of speech and of its parts, including [particular] words (Marr 1933–1937 [1931b], p. 103).

Unlike Marr, Pokrovskij attentively analyzed the works of Western semanticists and in his own work discussed themes of common interest to Western semantics, such as the possibility of applying the notion of *law* to the evolution of semantics,³ as well as the widespread thesis of the necessity of forgetting the primary, "etymological" meaning of the word in order to understand its semantic evolution (Pokrovskij 1936, p. 79). Like some Western semanticists, Pokrovskij refused to apply "formal logic" to the study of semantics, and in so doing referred to the works of Michel Bréal (*ibid.*, p. 67). At the same time, Pokrovskij often argued with foreign semanticists as to their particular theses. Particularly interesting in this regard is Pokrovskij's 1936 article, which was written in French, and entitled "Considérations sur le changement de la signification des mots" (Pokrovskij 1936).

¹ About Marr and his linguistic theories see for instance Thomas 1957; Alpatov 1991; Velmezova 2007.

² Here is a parallel in the biographies of Pokrovskij and Marr: Marr was elected academician in 1912, for his merits in the field of oriental philology, but he is now known mainly for his linguistic works.

³ Already in his monograph of 1895 Pokrovskij maintained that semantic phenomena were not arbitrary, but governed by certain laws (Pokrovskij 1895b, p. III).

Here Pokrovskij argued with Western linguists (in particular, with Josef Vendryes and Albert Dauzat) about the distinction between *social* and *psychological* factors in semantic changes. In his works that were written at the beginning of the twentieth century, Pokrovskij already established several types of factors in semantic evolution:

- (a) Psychological factors. Pokrovskij claimed that ‘words and linguistic forms in general join together in our soul, independently of our consciousness, in various groups and categories, according to their formal and semantic similarity’ (Pokrovskij 1959 [1895], p. 18). In this way, Pokrovskij explained the appearance of neologisms by analogy;
- (b) Pokrovskij also insisted on the importance of factors connected with social, economic and cultural life in the semantic evolution of any language. For instance, he maintained that the progress of our civilization introduced new notions and representations into the consciousness of people (Pokrovskij 1895b, p. 15). Moreover only social factors in the semantic evolution permit one to speak of any semantic changes having a *regular* character, and of the existence of *laws* in the evolution of linguistic meanings:

Every attentive study of semantic changes shows that they often depend on historical and cultural factors, i.e. on factors that are objective. In all these cases, researchers possess a reliable foundation for their work and can constantly see that similar conditions lead to the same consequences (Pokrovskij 1959 [1895], p. 27).

Yet it is in his above-mentioned article of 1936 that the correlation between psychological and social factors in semantics was subjected to the most intense scrutiny. The article begins with Pokrovskij’s criticism of Western semanticists:

In general, it is necessary to say that social and psychological explanations of semantic phenomena have already been established solidly enough in linguistics. Yet I must point out that the correlation between psychological and social factors has still not been cleared up, even in the works of the most famous linguists interested in semantics. For instance, in the excellent book of Mr. Vendryes *Le langage*, the social factor is in general emphasized [...]; however, the author apparently has a tendency to *contrast* social and psychological factors (Pokrovskij 1936, p. 68).

In the same way, according to Pokrovskij, Dauzat (1930), distinguished social (or external) and psychological (or internal) factors in semantic evolution. Yet, nevertheless, Dauzat pointed out that the majority of “psychological linguistic phenomena” (such as, for instance, euphemisms or taboos) always come from a particular social milieu (Dauzat 1930, p. 271) and therefore have a “social” origin.

Pokrovskij proposed the following solution: social and historical factors are decisive for the evolution of semantics, while psychology only serves as an intermediate link between the “external” life of one particular society and the semantics of the corresponding language:

[...] the real changes that occur in a particular social milieu provoke changes in psychology, and thus in languages. Consequently, *psychology* cannot be considered as an independent factor in semantic evolution, but only as a kind of *canal*, through which these changes penetrate into the language (Pokrovskij 1936, p. 69).

In this way, Pokrovskij managed to reconcile “social” and “psychological” explanations of semantic changes. His solution certainly resembles the general explanations of linguistic evolution proposed by Marr, according to whom *social changes* influence languages through *thought*:

The origin of these radical [linguistic] changes [...] are the revolutionary changes that have great consequences deriving from the material life of a new type [...] and from the social organization of a new kind. As a result, we have a new type of thought and therefore a new ideology in the organization of speech (Marr 1933–1937 [1928c], p. 61).

Marr’s thesis here seems very close to the theory of semantic changes elaborated by Pokrovskij, but despite this similarity in the explanation of linguistic changes, Pokrovskij’s attitude towards the creator of the “New Theory of Language” was extremely negative. The very fact that Pokrovskij did not mention Marr in his article of 1936 seems indicative of his antipathy, since Marr considered his own study of semantics as one of the principal merits of his linguistic doctrine in general: ‘The principal fields of the purely linguistic successes of the Japhetic theory are semantics and paleontology’ (Marr 1933–1937 [1929a], p. 65). Since, in the late 1930s, Marr’s theory was still “officially recognized” in the Soviet Union, to discuss semantic problems without mentioning Marr certainly implied a refusal to recognize his authority in this domain.⁴ Moreover, Pokrovskij’s 1936 article contained an indirect criticism of Marrist theories, and especially of Marr’s thesis about the chronological primacy of his semantic researches. Speaking of the necessity of not limiting the study of semantic changes to material from Indo-European languages, Pokrovskij mentioned the works of the Marrist linguist Levon Gevorkovič Bašindžagjan (1893–1938):

Hitherto, we have exclusively studied the facts of Indo-European languages. However, the same semantic processes could be observed in other groups of languages. In this aspect, the works of Levon Bašindžagjan concerning the modern Georgian language seem very interesting (Pokrovskij 1936, p. 93).

Relating Bašindžagjan’s reflections about the name of the ancient Chain bridge (*Cepnoj most*) in Kutaisi (a bridge which was no longer made of chains and had already quite another form in the twentieth century but still kept its ancient designation), Pokrovskij noted that ‘the author first tried to understand this archaic name by resorting to etymology. However, he failed and unraveled the whole mystery only when he had the lucky idea, as he says, of leaving the field of so-called

⁴ While Pokrovskij did not mention Marr in his works on semantics, in Marr’s researches, as far as we know, there are no references to Pokrovskij.

“formal linguistics” and to look for an answer in the social and material milieu’ (Pokrovskij 1936, p. 93).

Pokrovskij seemed to agree with Bašindžagjan’s idea of the necessity of studying the historical and social backgrounds against which the changes of names of various objects took place. For Marrists in general, this was a question of a particular semantic law: that of functional transposition (see our detailed analysis of this law in Velmezova 2007, pp. 237–248). According to this law, which Marr himself formulated, the designation of any object can be transposed to another object on condition that the latter has the same function in the corresponding society at a new stage of its evolution. Marr often referred to this semantic tendency as to the “principle of functionality” in semantics (see *inter alia* Marr 1933–1937 [1927c], p. 265; 1933–1937 [1927f], pp. 224–225). This law had often been considered as a particular achievement of Marr’s semantic studies and this is why it was popularized and referred to by Marr’s followers even after his death (see *inter alia*, Isserlin 1940, p. 22; Cukerman 1941, pp. 64–65). Marr gave several examples of this law:

- (1) With the development of agriculture, when people began to eat cereals or bread grains instead of what they could find while collecting (fruits or insects, nuts or acorns, for instance), the first bakery products obtained the names of nuts or acorns (Marr 1933–1937 [1926e], p. 104; 1933–1937 [1927g], p. 146; 1933–1937 [1927h], p. 240; 1933–1937 [1928c], p. 75; 1933–1937 [1930c], pp. 264, 268–269; 1933–1937 [1930d], p. 263; 1933–1937 [1930j], pp. 415, 449; 1933–1937 [1936], p. 132, etc.). In particular, Marr claimed that it was the case of Georgian (Marr 1933–1937 [1926e], p. 105; 1933–1937 [1930g], p. 166). The Georgian verb ‘to eat’ was derived from the noun meaning ‘acorn’ as well (Marr 1933–1937 [1926j], p. 214); Marr also referred to the derivational semantic chains ‘acorn’ → ‘corn’ in Basque (*ibid.*, p. 212) and ‘acorn’ → ‘barley’ → ‘wheat’ reconstructed for the Basque and Armenian languages (Marr 1933–1937 [1931b], p. 101). For the same reason, in accordance with the law of functional transposition, Marr claimed the Greek word *bal-an* ‘acorn’ was etymologically closely connected with the Latin word *pān-is* (derived from *pal-an*) ‘bread’ (Marr 1933–1937 [1926j], p. 213; 1933–1937 [1927a], p. 121; 1933–1937 [1927g], p. 152; 1933–1937 [1929b], p. 168; 1933–1937 [1930a], p. 224; 1933–1937 [1930g], p. 162; see also Marr 1933–1937 [1927h], p. 237, etc.).⁵ For Marr, this semantic tendency could also explain the fact that the Georgian word *kver* ‘bread baked in the ashes’ was etymologically close to the Latin noun *quercus* ‘oak’ (Marr 1933–1937 [1930g], p. 163). At the same time, to the Georgian word meaning ‘wheat’ corresponded nouns meaning, in Basque, ‘walnut’ (Marr 1933–1937 [1926e], p. 106) and, in Finnish, ‘tree’ (Marr 1933–1937 [1927g], p. 152). Thus, said Marr, in Finnic languages the word

⁵ As we have shown elsewhere (Velmezova 2007, pp. 294–295), and as one can see in the linguistic examples that Marr provides, when trying to “prove” his semantic laws (formulated by a process of deduction) Marr could easily exceed the limits of any language families. That is why he sometimes analyzed even very distant (non-cognate) and different languages (such as Russian and Chinese, Georgian and Chuvash, etc.).

- 'bread' was etymologically close to the words meaning 'oak' and, in general, 'tree' (Marr 1933–1937 [1929b], p. 168), while in Komi and in Udmurt the noun meaning 'bread' was derived from 'lime' (Marr 1933–1937 [1926j], p. 213);
- (2) when horses replaced dogs as means of transport, they were called *dogs*, for the same reason (Marr 1933–1937 [1926f], p. 47; 1933–1937 [1927h], p. 240; 1933–1937 [1928a], p. 27; 1933–1937 [1928c], pp. 61, 68, 75; 1933–1937 [1929b], pp. 176–177; 1933–1937 [1930a], p. 221; 1933–1937 [1930c], pp. 239, 257, 268; 1933–1937 [1930h], pp. 453–454, 459; 1933–1937 [1930j], p. 413; 1933–1937 [1931c], pp. 503, 517; 1933–1937 [1931d], pp. 264, 273, 285; 1933–1937 [1933], p. 429; 1933–1937 [1936], p. 132). In particular, it was the case in Abkhaz where the words meaning 'dog' and 'horse' resembled each other (Marr 1933–1937 [1930g], p. 167), and of Udmurt (Marr 1933–1937 [1931c], pp. 502–504). According to Marr, the law of functional transposition could explain the fact that the nouns meaning 'dog' and 'horse' were etymologically close or even "the same" in Breton, Basque, Berber, Armenian, Ancient Georgian, Russian etc. (Marr 1933–1937 [1930a], p. 221). Marr also claimed that it was no accident that the Georgian and Russian words meaning 'horse' (*hune* and *kon*', respectively) resembled the Armenian word *mun* 'dog' (Marr 1933–1937 [1933], p. 429). In accordance with the law of functional transposition, several centuries later the Russian noun meaning 'horse tramway' or 'slow train' (*konka*) was transposed to 'streetcars' (later called *tramvaj* 'tramway') (Marr 1933–1937 [1930j], p. 413). Similarly, in various languages the words meaning 'sheep' were transposed to 'cow' and 'bull' (Marr 1933–1937 [1928a], p. 35); in the Nama language, for instance, there existed only one word to refer to 'ewe' and to 'cow' (Marr 1933–1937 [1927a], p. 120), while words meaning 'domestic animals' in general were transposed to 'wild animals' (Marr 1933–1937 [1926k], p. 148; 1933–1937 [1928c], p. 75; 1933–1937 [1930c], p. 242; 1933–1937 [1930j], p. 415; 1933–1937 [1931b], p. 105). In particular, 'wolf' obtained the name of 'dog' (Marr 1933–1937 [1928c], pp. 61, 75; 1933–1937 [1929b], p. 177; 1933–1937 [1930b], p. 270; 1933–1937 [1930c], p. 242; 1933–1937 [1930h], pp. 453–454; 1933–1937 [1930j], p. 415; 1933–1937 [1931c], pp. 593, 517): this was the case of the Latin (Marr 1933–1937 [1929b], p. 180; 1933–1937 [1930c], p. 235) and of the Mari languages (Marr 1933–1937 [1931c], pp. 453–454). The word meaning 'dog' has also been transposed to 'lion' (Marr 1933–1937 [1928c], pp. 61, 75; 1933–1937 [1929b], p. 177; 1933–1937 [1930c], p. 242): as in every language (Marr 1933–1937 [1927h], p. 240; 1933–1937 [1928c], p. 75; 1933–1937 [1929b], p. 179; 1933–1937 [1930h], p. 453), according to Marr, the Sumerian word 'lion' literally means, 'big dog' (Marr 1933–1937 [1926k], p. 127). Besides, it was no accident that the Russian word *lev* 'lion' meant 'dog' in Mordvin (Marr 1933–1937 [1926i], p. 376; 1933–1937 [1927h], p. 240). 'Fox' has also obtained the name of 'dog' (Marr 1933–1937 [1929b], p. 177; 1933–1937 [1930c], p. 242). That is why, for instance, the word 'fox' means literally 'small dog', while the word 'wolf' means 'big dog' (Marr 1933–1937 [1926k],

- p. 127; 1933–1937 [1927h], p. 240; 1933–1937 [1928c], p. 75; 1933–1937 [1930h], p. 453; 1933–1937 [1930j], p. 415): it was so in Abkhaz (Marr 1933–1937 [1927e], p. 386) and, in the case of the ‘fox’, also in Mingrelian (Marr 1933–1937 [1931c], p. 468). Also in Abkhaz and in accordance with the same tendency, the word meaning ‘dog’ was transposed to ‘jackal’ (Marr 1933–1937 [1928c], p. 76). Marr also claimed that ‘horse’ could obtain the name of the ‘stag’, for before stags had carried out the functions of horses (or of dogs) in the household work (Marr 1933–1937 [1926k], pp. 137, 144, 147–149; 1933–1937 [1927h], p. 239; 1933–1937 [1928a], p. 27; 1933–1937 [1930d], p. 263; 1933–1937 [1931b], p. 99);
- (3) this also explains why ‘gold’ has obtained the name of the ‘fur’, which had once been a symbol of wealth in society (Marr 1933–1937 [1926j], p. 198), or the name of ‘livestock’ (*ibid.*; Marr 1933–1937 [1930b], p. 267): such was the case of the Scythian language (Marr 1933–1937 [1930g], p. 168). In any case, Marr claimed the existence of semantic links between the words meaning ‘gold’ and ‘livestock’ (‘animals’) had already been evident to “traditional linguists” (Marr 1933–1937 [1930b], p. 268): for instance, in the history of the Russian language the word *belka* ‘squirrel’ could once mean a ‘monetary unit’, and in this respect Marr referred to Izmail Ivanovič Sreznevskij (1812–1880) (Marr 1933–1937 [1925b], p. 105). In turn, and according to the same law of functional transposition, ‘gold’ later gave its name to ‘silver’ (Marr 1933–1937 [1926j], pp. 198–199, 201, etc.);
 - (4) ‘boots’ obtained the name of ‘bast shoes’ (*lapti*) (Marr 1933–1937 [1928c], p. 68). Similarly, the first nouns meaning ‘boots’ could have derived from the word meaning ‘foot’ (*ibid.*, pp. 70–71; Marr 1933–1937 [1929c], p. 425; 1933–1937 [1931b], p. 110). For instance, in Abkhaz, Armenian and in Georgian the word ‘boot’ literally meant ‘a child of the foot’ (Marr 1933–1937 [1928c], p. 69);
 - (5) ‘father’ (or ‘man’ in general) took the name of ‘mother’ (‘woman’), as he had obtained the “social” functions of *mother* “in the human consciousness” after the social transition from matriarchy to patriarchy (Marr 1933–1937 [1925a], p. 188; 1933–1937 [1926h], p. 194; 1933–1937 [1929b], p. 192; 1933–1937 [1930b], p. 273; 1933–1937 [1930g], p. 175; 1933–1937 [1930i], p. 180; 1933–1937 [1931c], pp. 487, 511–512). To “prove” this fact, Marr claimed that, for instance, the word that referred to the leader of a social group in Basque literally meant ‘woman’ (*an-der-e*), while in Greek “the same word” was derived from the noun meaning ‘man’ (*an-er* ← *an-der*) (Marr 1933–1937 [1930g], p. 172);
 - (6) the ‘sun’ gave its name to ‘fire’ (Marr 1933–1937 [1928a], p. 31; see also Marr 1933–1937 [1928c], p. 63; 1933–1937 [1929a], p. 66; 1933–1937 [1930a], pp. 219–220; 1933–1937 [1930c], p. 231; 1933–1937 [1930d], p. 266; 1933–1937 [1931c], p. 479; 1933–1937 [1931e], p. 335): in particular, this was the case of Georgian (Marr 1933–1937 [1931e], p. 327), Berber (Marr 1933–1937 [1930c], p. 224) and some other languages;
 - (7) at the same time, the ‘sun’ has given its name to ‘salt’, i.e. to the product which permitted the preservation of foodstuffs (before it had been possible

- only thanks to the heat of the sun, see for instance the process of drying meat and fish in the sun) (Marr 1933–1937 [1931c], pp. 477, 479; see also Gitlic 1939, p. 9);
- (8) ‘house’⁶ obtained its name in accordance with its function to serve as a cover: the corresponding lexemes have been derived from the words meaning ‘sky’, ‘top’, ‘lid’, ‘cover’, ‘protection’, etc. (Marr 1933–1937 [1924a], p. 32; 1933–1937 [1926b], p. 351; 1933–1937 [1927a], p. 122; 1933–1937 [1927b], pp. 322, 324; 1933–1937 [1928a], pp. 41, 44; 1933–1937 [1928c], p. 76; 1933–1937 [1929b], p. 178; 1933–1937 [1930a], pp. 216, 222; 1933–1937 [1936], p. 132). The law of functional transposition also permitted to explain the semantic change ‘sky’ → ‘clothes’ (Marr 1933–1937 [1930k], p. 88: in particular, it was so in Egyptian) or/and ‘sky’ → ‘hat(s)’ (Marr 1933–1937 [1931e], p. 340: Marr referred to the German and Georgian words which seemed to confirm this tendency);
- (9) as to the ‘week’ and ‘month’, the corresponding words must have been derived from the ‘moon’, for, as Marr wrote, the moon phases had once helped people to measure time (Marr 1933–1937 [1931c], p. 493);
- (10) finally, a great number of words (as Marr claimed, almost all words in all languages [Marr 1933–1937 (1927f), p. 242]) have obtained their names from that of the ‘hand’, which, he argued, had been the first means of production in human society. In particular, from the word meaning ‘hand’ have been derived such nouns as
- ‘language’ (as, for Marr, the first language was manual [Marr 1933–1937 (1926g), p. 209; 1933–1937 (1930e), p. 360, etc.]): it was, in particular, the case of Udmurt (Marr 1933–1937 [1931c], p. 494); for the same reason, ‘mouth’ and ‘lips’ also derived from ‘hand’ (Marr 1933–1937 [1930e], p. 360). ‘Word’ has also derived from ‘hand’—as, in particular, in Udmurt (Marr 1933–1937 [1931c], p. 499). On the other hand, as before becoming “audible” (sound language) the speech had been, according to Marr, “visible” (manual language), ‘ear’ obtained the name of ‘eye’ (Marr 1933–1937 [1931b], p. 102; 1933–1937 [1931d], pp. 262–264: for example, it was so in Georgian [Marr 1933–1937 (1930e), p. 362]). As the hand had once been the main tool not only of physical work, but also of any intellectual activity, the noun meaning ‘hand’ was transposed to ‘head’ (Marr 1933–1937 [1927d], p. 231), to ‘thought’, ‘brain’ and ‘intelligence’ (Marr 1933–1937 [1931d], p. 278), to ‘mind’ and ‘soul’ (Marr 1933–1937 [1927b], p. 324; 1933–1937 [1927c], p. 293; 1933–1937 [1927h], p. 238; 1933–1937 [1930k], p. 85; 1933–1937 [1931a], p. 307, etc.);
 - since hand had once been a “production tool”, various tools are now referred to correspondingly (*all* tools, said Marr [1933–1937 (1931e), p. 332; see also Marr 1933–1937 (1927b), p. 317; 1933–1937 (1931a),

⁶ According to Marr, one may include ‘tent’ (Marr 1933–1937 [1923], p. 215; 1933–1937 [1926b], p. 342; 1933–1937 [1926c], p. 319), ‘palace’, ‘fortress’ and ‘(place of) residence’ (*žiliščje*) in general (Marr 1933–1937 [1930h], p. 466): in particular, it was the case of Sumerian (Marr 1933–1937 [1924b], p. 153).

- p. 307; 1933–1937 (1936), p. 133] and in *all* languages [Marr 1933–1937 (1928b), p. 240]. In particular, it was the case of the ‘stick’ (as in Abkhaz [Marr 1933–1937 (1928c), p. 80]) and of the ‘stone’ (Marr 1933–1937 [1930j], pp. 415, 419; 1933–1937 [1931c], p. 500), as in Chuvash (Marr 1933–1937 [1930j], p. 415). Besides, Marr often referred to the semantic chain ‘hand’ → ‘stone’ (‘tool’) → ‘metals’ (Marr 1933–1937 [1926f], p. 48; 1933–1937 [1930j], p. 415; 1933–1937 [1931e], p. 336) or simply ‘hand’ → ‘metals’ (Marr 1933–1937 [1936], p. 133). The name meaning ‘hand’ has also been transposed to the ‘axe’ (Marr 1933–1937 [1926d], p. 83; 1933–1937 [1928c], p. 73; 1933–1937 [1929c], p. 418; 1933–1937 [1930j], p. 415, etc.), as it was in Abkhaz (Marr 1933–1937 [1928c], p. 74);
- the word meaning ‘art’ has also been derived from the ‘hand’, for originally every art had been manual (Marr 1933–1937 [1929b], p. 191). For instance, from ‘hand’ derived the German word *Kunst* ‘art’ (Marr 1933–1937 [1931e], p. 339) and the corresponding Latin word (Marr 1933–1937 [1929b], p. 191), etc.;
 - men had once fought with their hands. That is why, Marr concluded, the noun meaning ‘struggle’ and nouns which referred to various kinds of arms and weapons (for instance, ‘knife’, ‘sword’, ‘dagger’, etc.) had been derived from the ‘hand’ (Marr 1933–1937 [1927b], pp. 320, 325; 1933–1937 [1927g], p. 154; 1933–1937 [1929b], pp. 187–188; 1933–1937 [1929c], p. 419; 1933–1937 [1930c], p. 267; 1933–1937 [1930f], pp. 233, 235; 1933–1937 [1931b], p. 102; 1933–1937 [1931c], p. 497; 1933–1937 [1931d], p. 282): in particular, claimed Marr, in Arabic the word meaning ‘hilt’ had been derived from ‘hand’ (Marr 1933–1937 [1930f], p. 241). At the same time, evident progress in the production of weapons contributed to the fact that designations of more primitive arms have been transposed to more sophisticated ones. Thus, for instance, the word meaning ‘arrow’ has been transposed to ‘bullet’ (as, said Marr, in Svan [Marr 1933–1937 (1926a), p. 348]).

If we now return to the example of Bašindžagian referred to by Pokrovskij, when a chain bridge in the town of Kutaisi was replaced with a wooden one, and, later on, with a brick one, it still kept its designation of a *chain bridge*, according to the same semantic law of functional transposition.

As V. M. Alpatov notes, Marr had often claimed the discovery of facts known already before him:

Such phenomena had been known already before Marr. Already before the Revolution they had been analyzed in the textbooks of introduction to linguistics (see for instance Poržezinskij 1916, p. 144) and sometimes they had been considered as laws (see Minaev 1883–1884, pp. 55–57), even if everybody but Marr was aware of their limited domain of application (Alpatov 1991, p. 46).

Even if Marr particularly insisted on the *social* character of the semantic law of functional transposition (which could seem a novelty in his approach, in comparison

with previous works on semantic changes), many of his examples show that indeed no radical *social* changes were necessary for such a transposition of the designation of one object to another.

While Pokrovskij seemed to approve of the general idea of studying the meanings of words in the context of the “external” (social and cultural) life of the corresponding society, he nevertheless reproached Bašindžagan:

About which “formal linguistics” does the author speak? In Indo-European linguistics, for instance, proper names of countries, cities and their districts, the names of public buildings and constructions, like designations of various objects having a certain importance in everyday life, are studied only in connection with life and history of the corresponding society. For we know that ancient designations become obscure and can be disfigured, once being associated, in accordance with the so-called “*Volksetymologie*” principle, with words having more or less the same sounds but quite another origin and meaning (Pokrovskij 1936, p. 94).

Pokrovskij thus expressed his disagreement with the thesis of the chronological primacy of Marr’s discoveries in the domain of semantics. Semantics already did exist in “formal linguistics,” as well as in the “socio-historical” method of the study of the meanings of words. As we have already noted, while Marr wanted to be recognized always and everywhere as a pathbreaker in linguistic study, Pokrovskij often quoted and analyzed the works of various Western linguists who were interested in the problems of semantics. Unlike Marr, Pokrovskij was also highly respected in the West by certain famous linguists, among whom was Antoine Meillet who, published a review of one of Pokrovskij’s books (Meillet 1899). Moreover, Pokrovskij was never afraid of debating with Marr directly. A person of high principles, Pokrovskij could not accept the theories of Marr that contradicted his own opinions, and he always defended the positions of so-called “traditional”, comparative linguistics. For example, in one of his letters to Boris Mikhajlovič Ljapunov (1862–1943) of 1930, another famous Russian scholar Grigorij Andreevič Il’inskij (1876–1937) wrote the following about a sharp debate at the Academy of Sciences: ‘Here in Moscow we all were very much impressed by Pokrovskij’s courageous defense of philology against the pretensions of the margarine linguistics [...], accidentally called Japhetic theory’ (Robinson 2004, p. 162). Later, in April 1931, Pokrovskij gave a speech at the Academy of Sciences in which he insisted on the necessity of introducing the study of theoretical linguistic problems which would be based not only on the Japhetic theory, but also on the achievements of Indo-European linguistics into the working plan of the Department for Social Sciences (Robinson 2004, p. 163).

Nevertheless, in addition to their recognition of the importance of studying the “social context” of semantic changes, there were other common points in the semantics of Marr and Pokrovskij. For example, both linguists considered semantics as the weakest field in linguistics of their time (even if Marr’s statements were much more radical, claiming there had been no semantics before him at all). On the other hand, in studying semantic laws, the two linguists were eager to discover semantic universals, i.e. certain regularities which one would be able to apply to all

languages, without exception. However, Marr's universals were of a very general character—such as, for instance, his law of the division of ancient words into lexemes with opposite meanings, or his law of hybridization according to which when two languages are in contact, their words having the same meaning “stick together”, so that the resulting lexeme obtains the meaning of the initial words, etc. (see our analysis in Velmezova 2007, Part 2, Chapter 2, as well as pp. 294–295). Pokrovskij's universals were narrower and much more concrete (see, for example, the “law of temporal words” formulated by Pokrovskij already in his work written in 1896 [Pokrovskij 1896a]: if one particular object is constantly associated with certain time, the name of this object will finally also signify this time). None of these universals concern the *social* aspect of semantics, and so we will not discuss them further here.

Historians of linguistics are today less interested in the study of Pokrovskij's semantic theories than in the analysis of Marr's doctrines. Unlike Marr, Pokrovskij did not influence the evolution of linguistics in the Soviet Union in the past century very much, despite the fact that such eminent philologists as Rozalija Osipovna Šor (1894–1939) and Mikhail Nikolaevič Peterson (1885–1962) were numbered among his students (Tolstoj 1944, p. 115).⁷ However Pokrovskij's work of the 1930s permits us today to dispute the image of Soviet linguistics of the time as completely closed and dogmatic. Knowing Western semantics very well and resorting, from time to time, to the explanations of linguistic phenomena which were widespread in the Soviet Union (in particular, to the explanations of a “social” character), Pokrovskij constituted an intermediate link between his own country and the European traditions in the field of semantic research.

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⁷ See also the opinion of young Mikhail Osipovič Geršenzon (1869–1925) who considered Pokrovskij as one of the most talented Russian researchers and said that a few hours of their conversation left him intellectually richer than a whole academic year of lectures (Geršenzon 1927, p. 61, see also Tolstoj 1944, pp. 118–119).

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