

‘Social phonology’ in the USSR in the 1920s

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Abstract In the 1920s and 1930s, some of the most talented linguists of the Soviet Union, among whom one can highlight N.F. Jakovlev and E.D. Polivanov, were involved in the process of “language building”. Their role in the success of this process is examined from the point of view of the phonological theory that they developed for creating scripts for the numerous peoples of the Soviet Union, Turkic and Caucasian above all. Jakovlev’s phonology, that Polivanov termed “social phonology”, was very different from the one that N. Trubetskoj proposed some 10 years later. We will try to explain their ambitious script projects, which remain difficult to understand from the point of view of the modern phonology.

Keywords Phonology · Soviet linguistics · Jakovlev · Alphabet · Sociolinguistics · Caucasus

Introduction

In recent years, interest in the work of Soviet linguists in the period following the October Revolution has been rising. Several studies have analysed, in some detail, the aims and the results of so-called ‘language building’ (*jazykovoe stroitel'stvo*),¹ as part of a broader plan for transformation of the USSR elaborated by the Bolshevik government (see Fierman, 1991, Smith, 1993, 1998). Among the linguistic initiatives of that epoch, attention has focused on the discussions about the alphabet changes for Turkic languages (the passage from Arabic script to Latin

¹ On the use of the term ‘language building’ in relation to the USSR, see Fierman, 1991, pp. 1–11.

script). What is less known is the enormous amount of work carried out by professional linguists such as N.F. Jakovlev (1892–1974), E.D. Polivanov (1891–1938), A.M. Sukhotin (1888–1942), and L.V. Ščerba (1880–1944) to create alphabets for some 150 languages. Their work in this area began in the early 1920s, and their very first studies concerned the phonologic structure of Caucasian languages, which are rich in phonemes (some have 63 phonemes), but remained relatively unstudied and with no written forms. In this paper I will focus on the phonological theory that underlay this work.

In the first section of this article I present a general overview of Jakovlev's development as a linguist and his role in the language building of his day. The second section deals with some more specific aspects of Jakovlev's phonology, which combines a 'purely linguistic' approach to language with a sociological approach. In the third section I discuss Jakovlev's position in history of phonology, and in the conclusion, I make some remarks about the significance of Jakovlev's 'social phonology' today.

The context

The linguists that Polivanov called 'language builders' (*jazykovye stroiteli*) (Polivanov 1933, p. 39): Jakovlev, Polivanov, L.I. Žirkov (1885–1963), Sukhotin and A.N. Genko (1896–1941) were members of a young, brilliant generation that worked in the interwar period. For some, this work dominated their best years. Some were repressed (Polivanov) and others died later on the battlefields of the Second World War (Genko) or in evacuation (Ščerba).

When Jakovlev and his colleagues began their research, methods of linguistic investigation were far from fully elaborated and one of the most important difficulties they faced concerned the collection of linguistic data. The Caucasus mountains posed physical problems for researchers, who had to travel on foot or by donkey. This made the fragile instruments used by phoneticians impossible to transport, and then attention had to turn to the interpretation of the data in order to build alphabets for so many languages. Jakovlev published his early reflections on this topic in 1923 in his pamphlet *Tables of Kabardian phonetics (Tablicy fonetiki kabardinskogo jazyka)*, and one needs to pay close attention to his texts if one hopes to understand his method. However, such texts, and the phonological theory therein need to be seen in their scientific context, particularly in the discussions about the social basis of linguistics that concerned many scholars in the USSR in the 1920s.

Linguists working for the All-Union Central Committee of the New Turkic Alphabet (*Vsesojuzny Central'ny Komitet Novogo Tjurkskogo Alfavita, VCKNTA*), Jakovlev, Polivanov, Žirkov and Sukhotin, adopted an innovative approach to linguistic study. At the Second Plenum of VCKNTA, which was held in Tashkent in 1928, Jakovlev proclaimed a radical break with pre-revolutionary linguistics and used various names to describe the new trend he and his colleagues were developing: 'social linguistics' (*social'naja lingvistika*), 'applied linguistics' (*prikladnaja lingvistika*) and 'synchronic linguistics' (*sinkhronnaja lingvistika*).

Jakovlev and his colleagues shared a strong orientation towards the social foundations of language, in opposition to the traditional Indo-European view which, as Sukhotin argued, was 'unable to help in building new language cultures' (Sukhotin, 1932, p. 96). On this point, their declarations fit in very well into the intellectual context of the 1920s USSR which saw many transformations in Soviet linguistics. Most notorious are the claims for a new linguistics oriented into the future instead of the historical orientation of Indo-European linguistics of N.Ia. Marr (1864/1865–1934). The linguists with whom we are concerned here shared certain theoretical principles:

- 1) A common claim for a linguistics based on the study of 'living languages' (*živye jazyki*). Ščerba's work *The Eastern Sorbian dialect (Vostočnolužickoe narečie, 1915)* was held up as a model for describing a living dialect (Polivanov, 1927, p. 55).
- 2) After a century dominated by historical linguistics, Jakovlev and Polivanov defended a synchronic point of view. Jakovlev maintained that while 'representatives of Indo-European trend founded their theory on the historical and comparative study of language, the new linguistics has to become 'static' (*statičeskaja*) or 'synchronic' (*sinkhronnaja*) (Jakovlev, 1928, p. 148).
- 3) Particularly important is a common orientation on 'social linguistics' (*social'naja lingvistika*). In one public speech, Polivanov reproached Indo-European linguists for not paying attention to the *social dimension* in the study of sounds: 'I must say that it is false, from the methodological point of view, to study speech (*reč*) in a purely physical way; one should not consider it as a physiological and acoustic process—speech is a social fact' (*Stenografičeskii otčet četvertogo plenuma, 1931, p. 81*). Jakovlev similarly insisted that 'language only exists as a social phenomenon (*javlenie social'noe*), and the science of language needs study its object exclusively in this way'. Both linguists hold that the main mistake of all earlier linguistic schools was their non-sociological approach to language, as Polivanov put it: 'To be adequate to its object, it [linguistics] must be a social science' (Polivanov, 1929, p. 182).

This reorientation among phonologists is at least partially a reflection of the general development of Soviet linguistics when they were working (see Brandist, 2003).

- 4) They strive for the creation of an 'applied linguistics'. As Polivanov argued: 'Before the Revolution, an interest in languages and cultures that have an ancient script predominated [...]. In the new situation in which we find ourselves, when we have to widen our work to study living languages with no written form, ideas about the bases of the science had to change. Science had to respond by building a new discipline... called "applied linguistics". (*Stenografičeskii otčet vtorogo plenuma, 1929, p. 105–106*)

Polivanov replaced a detached, theoretical study of the social dimension of language with the utilisation of knowledge in the interests of language building. In the name of 'Marxist linguistics', Polivanov demanded VCKNTA applied the knowledge that had been accumulated. This 'social, 'applied', 'synchronic' linguistics constitutes the context within which Jakovlev's phonologic theory emerged.

Jakovlev as precursor of phonology: the *Tables of Kabardian phonetics*

Jakovlev's first important work was his phonological study—*Tables of Kabardian phonetics*, which was published in 1923. This book was the result of his dialectological expedition to the Kabarda region (actually part of the Kabardino-Balkaria Autonomous Republic of the Russian Federation). This work did not achieve the recognition it deserved for a number of reasons. Firstly, it was handwritten and printed only in 300 copies (the typical print run for linguistic books). Second, its title was too specific, even for linguists, and the material discussed was largely unknown. It did, however, receive positive attention abroad from the main specialists in Caucasian languages. Prince Nikolai Trubetskoj reviewed the work positively in *Bulletin de la Société de Linguistique de Paris* (Troubeztkoj 1925; Dumézil 1934). Archival documents suggest Jakovlev was planning to use this book as the basis of a future book called *Principles of phonemology* (*Osnovy fonemologii*, see Ashnin and Alpatov 1994). This book never appeared, but we are able to reconstruct some of its main features from the pamphlet dedicated to Kabardian.

Jakovlev named his approach 'phonemological phonetics' (*fonemologičeskaja fonetika*). This term clearly indicates his perspective: at the time the term 'phonology' (fr. '*phonologie*' as in Saussure) designated studies in general phonetics, while Jakovlev wanted to concentrate his attention on phonemes. Jakovlev was working out an alphabet for the Kabardian language, and this required the elaboration of a systematic representation of its phonemes. This particular object of study had a decisive influence on Jakovlev's phonological thought, for in confronting two radically different phonological systems (Kabardian and Russian) he was required to differentiate between those phonological features which are of primary significance in that they assume a meaning-differentiating function and are decisive for communication, and those which are of secondary significance.

Scholars such as Popov (1999, p. 20) and Vilkou-Pustovaia (2003, p. 46) argue, correctly in my view, that the phonological doctrine that Jakovlev developed as the basis for 'language building', was founded on the influential approach developed by the school of Baudouin de Courtenay (1845–1929) and by Ščerba in particular. Like many Soviet phoneticians and phonologists, Jakovlev regarded the merit of the work of Baudouin's school to be its clear distinction between 'phoneme as a sociological value (*veličina*), and a sound as an acoustic and physiological value' (Strelkov, 1929, p. 223). 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' (Ščerba 1912, p. 134; cited in Strelkov, 1929, p. 227) continued to be cited by linguists throughout the 1920s, even though the author had by that time changed his position. Consequently Ščerba's ideas were often called 'psychological' even though, in the 1920s, he was 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 1920s, the dialectologist P.G. Strelkov considered Ščerba as his greatest teacher because of the 'sociological' approach he had developed in

his book *An Upper Sorbian dialect* (1915). Strelkov held this book to constitute an exemplary sociolinguistic approach to dialectological phonetics, for while defending a psycho-phonetical point of view on language, Ščerba had revealed some interesting aspects of the social usage (*social'noe ispol'zovanie*) of subtle sound nuances, phonemes which differentiate words (Strelkov, 1929, p. 234). According to Strelkov, Ščerba described some transitory phonologic phenomena as the erasure of the opposition between “soft” and “hard” consonants and then revealed that in Sorbian, the two nuances of the phoneme [i] constitute two different phonemes. Strelkov calls Ščerba’s approach “social phonetics” which, he claimed, ‘establishes the supra-individual (*nad-individual'naja*) system of sounds of a language’ (Strelkov, 1929, p. 228).

Jakovlev similarly claimed to draw inspiration from Baudouin and Ščerba (and in this sense he could be considered as an adept of the Leningrad school), but he stressed that he did not accept their ‘psycho-phonetical’ point of view. Rather, Jakovlev accentuated the social dimension of language while remaining true to the approach that Ščerba developed in his book *An Eastern Sorbian dialect* (see Ščerba, 1915).

In his *Tables of Kabardian phonetics* Jakovlev formulated some basic principles for developing a systematic account of the phonemes of a language. Dozens of pages are devoted to methods of ‘distinguishing’ (*vydelenie*) phonemes, and some 40 pages are dedicated to concrete specifications of Kabardian phonemes. These specifications are particularly revealing, because they show Jakovlev’s reasoning:

- 1) Jakovlev agrees with Ščerba that while for a native speaker, some phonemes may not be distinguished (*ne vydeleny*) from any other sound nuance (*zvukovoj ottenok*), some such nuances may nevertheless be perceived very well (Jakovlev, 1923, p. 65). He concludes that phonemes should always be ‘distinguished’ (*vydeljaemy*) in relation to meaning.² He insisted that the researcher cannot trust his own feelings, and cannot refer to his mother tongue. Thus, while in Kabardian, a language very rich in consonants, the sounds [k] and [č] constitute the same phoneme, ‘native speakers do not see any difference between this two sounds’ (Jakovlev, 1923, p. 82).
- 2) While analysing Kabardian sounds, Jakovlev pays particular attention to the ‘functional differences’ (*linii funkcional'nogo značeniia*) that permit one to distinguish between phonemes. He argued that the meaning-differentiating function is not associated with whole phonemes but, rather, with their constituent parts. These are similar to the later conception of ‘distinctive features’ developed in the work of Jakobson and Trubetskoj (Jakobson 1963, p. 103–107).
- 3) All these facts lead Jakovlev to conclude that one should abstract from the individual consciousness in order to search for criteria for distinguishing phonemes. These involve consideration of the *place* and the *role* of sound elements in the sound chain (*zvukovaja cep'*) (Jakovlev, 1923, p. 66). Jakovlev calls this approach a ‘purely linguistic’ (as opposed to Ščerba’s “psycholinguistic”) approach. ‘This would permit “phonemology” to reestablish its basis

² We can say that here Jakovlev develops Ščerba’s thesis about the distinctive or the meaning-differentiating function of phonemes (*smyslorazličitel'naja funkcija*).

in the field of pure linguistics using psycholinguistic observations only as auxiliary' (Jakovlev, 1923, p. 67–68).

- 4) Jakovlev's sociological approach to phonetic facts is reflected in his original definition of the phoneme as 'sound, socially distinguished in language' (*social'no vydeljaemy v jazyke zvuk*) (Jakovlev, 1928, p. 51). In other words it is only the 'language collective' (*jazykovej kollektiv*) that determines what should be considered as a phoneme, rather than the phonetician. In order to develop a script in practice, Jakovlev suggests one needs to 'discover theoretically all the maximal richness of its sound inventory (phonemes and their nuances)³ of a language, enabling one to choose the inventory of letters that are practically necessary' (Jakovlev, 1931, p. 51). The phonologist must try to limit his or her attention to the distinguishing properties of elements, for phonetic variation has no place in an alphabet.

These are several elements in Jakovlev's work that strongly suggest it is a precursor of phonology. In his later publications, as *A mathematical formula for elaborating alphabets* (*Matematičeskaja formula dlja postroenija alfavita*) (1928), his central aim is to apply this method of elaborating an alphabet to languages of different language families. Here he remains true to the perspective he developed in *Tables*. Here he calls his approach 'socio-linguistic' (*sotsial'no-lingvističeskii*) (Jakovlev, 1928b, p. 130), preserving the definition of the phoneme as 'socially distinguished sound' (*social'no vydejjaemy zvuk*).

Jakovlev's phonological doctrine as the basis for 'language building'

Jakovlev's phonological doctrine is not mentioned at all in such important works on phonology as Anderson's *Phonology in the Twentieth century*, where he is only mentioned as 'a specialist in Caucasian languages' (p. 84), and Phillips's *Language Theories of the Early Soviet Period* (1986), even though it was the basis of the alphabets that were developed in the Soviet Union in the 1920s. Indeed, Jakovlev's was probably the only phonological conception that was developed in order to resolve practical tasks. He had to elaborate scripts corresponding to the inventory of phonemes of a language, abstracting from every kind of non-phonologic variation (geographic, individual, social). This clearly shows why the dialectology of the beginning of the twentieth century, which searched for minimal nuances of living dialects, was less helpful in the practical elaboration of scripts. This is how Jakovlev's colleague M.V. Beljaev (1885–1948), a specialist in Caucasian languages, explains the main difference between the two approaches:

From the point of view of materialist linguistics and materialist theory, the most simple element in a language is not the sound, as a value of individual pronunciation (*veličina individual'no-proiznositel'naja*), but the phoneme, as a type of sound, which can vary within the limits of individual pronunciation, but, being socially established, has a functional rather than just a dialectological

³ Note Jakovlev's use of the terminology of the Leningrad School here.

value. In other words, which type of sound has importance in the differentiation of words and of forms of words (Beljaev, 1930, p. 65).

Here we also have an illustration of the influence of VCKNTA's 'social', 'applied' linguistics on the practical work.

Jakovlev's phonological theory was not the only one in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, but his approach is the one that can justifiably be called, using Strelkov's term, 'social phonology'. Elsewhere I have compared, in some detail, the views of Jakovlev and Trubetskoj in the 1920s on the basis of their respective texts of 1923 (Simonato 2005), but suffice it to say here that Trubetskoj made use of definitions of the phoneme that rested on a psychological foundation throughout the 1920s and up to 1933 (Trubetskoi, 1933, p. 236). For Jakovlev, however, it is the speech collective that differentiates phonemes from sound nuances. Space precludes discussion of the relationship between Jakovlev's approach and Saussure's *Cours* here, although such a discussion would be instructive. As other scholars have shown, Soviet 'phonologists' compared their theses with that of Saussure in order to apply them in language building.⁴ After a detailed analysis of Saussure's book, Sukhotin criticized his approach for following reasons: (1) They find it unacceptable to divide phonology from linguistics; (2) They find it unacceptable to mix a theory of speech sounds (*zvuki reči*) with that of phonemes, which are language sounds (*zvuki jazyka*) (Ashnin and Alpatov 1994, p.141).

Sukhotin concluded that 'Saussure was very close to phonological theory, but he does not define the phoneme in a clear way and does not draw all the necessary conclusions' (see Ashnin and Alpatov 1994, p. 143). Jakovlev reproaches Saussure for passing over the meaning-differentiating function of phonemes in silence.

Concluding remarks

For a variety of reasons, Jakovlev remains known to most historians of linguistics only as a specialist in Caucasian languages. This is because many of his works remained in manuscript or even in draft, and were written in Russian. The second reason is that his linguistic data concerned little-known languages of the Caucasus. The final reason appears to be the general decline of language building and the policy of nativization or 'korenizacija' of which it was part in the USSR after 1937.

My analysis suggests that Jakovlev's phonology, which may be considered as one of the sources of Prague phonology, is an intermediate conception between that of Baudouin de Courtenay and Trubetskoj, and one that was 'informed by new structural methods' (Smith, 1993, p. 168). Jakovlev and his colleagues not only offered well-developed empirical studies of linguistic sounds, they also developed their own theory. Smith's remark, that 'Jakovlev's linguistic work followed in the spirit of Jakobson and Trubetskoj' (Smith, 1993, p. 169), should therefore be

⁴ For more details concerning the reception of Saussure's ideas in the USSR, see Chudakova and Toddes, (1982).

reformulated. Troubetzkoi's *Letters and notes*, for instance, shows us that he knew and read Jakoblev's works systematically.⁵

We have seen that the intellectual sources of Jakoblev's sociological approach to language appear to lie in Ščerba's works and, his phonology was developed from the Petersburg-Leningrad approach associated with Baudouin. Ščerba's role in the theorisation of the work on scripts and also in the elaboration of "literary languages" was enormous. His views contributed to shape of Soviet linguistics in the 1920s. The same reasoning was adopted by D.V. Bubrikh (1890–1949), another member of Petersburg school, while elaborating a script for the Karelian language. Ščerba's phonological doctrine appears to be the principal link between pre-revolutionary Russian phonetics and Jakoblev's "social phonology".

Yet, while there is clearly some continuity with the pre-revolutionary Russian linguistics, Jakoblev was a child of his time. His work was oriented on language in the context of a speech collective. His claim for more or less 'pure' linguistics is developed in opposition to the psychological approach. The social phoneme was directly related to the formal and socially based conception of language and linguistics promoted by the Petersburg school.

Most importantly, the involvement of professional linguists in 'language building' is a subject worthy of more research, and Jakoblev's 'social phonology' is a particularly valuable as concrete illustration of the relationship between the practical work conducted by linguists of VCKNTA and their social theories of language.

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⁵ Troubetzkoi reviewed them the *Bulletin de la Société de Linguistique de Paris* (Meillet, 1929; Troubetzkoi, 1925), where he noted the importance of Jakoblev's researches on Northeast Caucasian languages several times (Troubetzkoi, 1925, p. 286; Troubetzkoi, 1937 (2000), pp. 52, 144, 173, 257, 295; Dumézil 1934, p. 32).

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