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# Joseph Stalin's statements on language and linguistics as verbal acts of autocracy

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### Summary

The aim of the paper is to present, from the metalinguistic perspective, Stalin's views on language and linguistics, treated here as an integral part of an officially controlled system of propaganda in the Soviet Union of the 1950s.

A presentation of the historical and social context which enabled Stalin to express his critical evaluation of Nikolay Marr's linguistic theory is followed by a discussion of the main aspects of the latter, which in turn constitutes the background for a brief analysis of Stalin's linguistic views and their role in constructing the discourse of propaganda.

The authors conclude that Stalin's statements concerning language and linguistics serve as manifestation of his authority over the Soviet empire, ideology and language.

## 1. Introduction

June 2000 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Joseph Stalin's famous articles on language and linguistics. Although the anniversary need not be the subject of any major concern on the part of linguists, it has been commemorated in Poland in a peculiar way: a London-based publishing house Puls brought out again, with a clear ironic intention, Stalin's views on language, this time with a commentary by Leszek Kołakowski (Stalin 2000). It is worthwhile, however, to devote some metalinguistic reflection to Stalin's ideas relating to language and the aims of linguistics as an illustrative example of linguistics being involved, contrary to its nature and real aims, in a system of organized propaganda. It would seem, naively, that in the mid-twentieth century, having learned the lessons of neogrammatism and structuralism, linguistics was a science immune to attempts to channel it into a system of political indoctrination. It is, however, far from true. We will try to de-

monstrate in what way linguistic views became a part of official state ideology and under what circumstances it was possible to utilize the linguistic science for strictly political purposes.

## 2. Basic facts

Stalin presented his full views on language and linguistics in June 1950 in three articles, originally printed in *Pravda*: 'On Marxism in linguistics', 'A contribution to some issues in linguistics', and 'An answer to comrades'. They were a final stage of a debate, which had lasted for several years, between the advocates and the opponents of Marrism. The articles were translated into the languages of all socialist countries, published in party magazines and in the form of separate leaflets, whose range of circulation spanned practically the whole societies in the respective countries. One may safely assume, then, that they functioned as an element of centralized socialist propaganda on the territory of all countries under the political supremacy of the Soviet Union.

There is some indication, too, that Stalin's works on language and linguistics were *de facto* written by a famous Russian linguist Victor Vinogradov (1895–1969) and Stalin himself only gave them a stylistic finish (Boriev 1989: 152).

## 3. Historical and social context

In Soviet linguistics, the only ideologically and institutionally approved method of academic description of language prior to the publication of Stalin's articles was the theory of Nikolay Marr (1865–1934), regarded as the official exegesis of Marxism in linguistics. Specific historical, political and social circumstances in the Soviet Union at the end of the 1930s enabled Stalin to refute Marr's ideas and establish a new *status quo* in Russian linguistics, which stemmed from the contemporary situation of the country governed by an autocratic ruler.

For at that time, as a result of purges he had carried out in the party apparatus and the intellectual circles, Stalin became a real autocrat in the Soviet Union. In an attempt to harness science to an ideological struggle, he was able, from his hegemonic position and with no intellectual opposition, to coin new facts in social sciences, including linguistics, without any concern about their verification. Simultaneously, the constitution proclaimed in 1936 introduced Stalin's definition of a nation from 1913:

[A nation is] a historically developed stable community of people which has emerged on the foundation of a community based on language, culture, economic life and psychological structure manifested in the community of culture<sup>1</sup>. (Dutka 1994)

<sup>1</sup> All translations by the authors.

According to that definition, then, a nation is understood not only as a specific ethnic group, but above all as a community united by economic, political and social links. This enabled Stalin to pursue his attempts to conceive of the Soviet 'nation', with Russian as its native language. Dutka (1994) notices that an additional factor contributing to the fulfillment of Stalin's ideas and to the unity of the Soviet 'nation' at that time were external dangers. As a result of introducing the 1936 constitution, a completely new linguistic situation emerged in the non-Russian republics of the Soviet Union. From 1938 the language used in schools on a compulsory basis throughout the country was Russian, although in fact non-Russian republics remained bilingual. In languages whose writing systems were based on the Latin alphabet, it was replaced by Cyrillic (Dutka 1994).

Under such circumstances Marr's conception, based on understanding nations and their languages in continuous terms, was far removed from Stalin's aim to gradually replace the indigenous languages of the Soviet Union with Russian and unite the citizens of the country by means of the allegedly universal Russian culture. This, in turn, was to lead to the identification of the Russian language with the Soviet language. To achieve that aim Stalin decided to launch a radical critique of Marr's views.

#### 4. Marr's linguistic theory

Marr, whose aim was to give linguistics a Marxist character, developed his theory in the 1920s. His method of linguistic description was founded on the so-called paleontological analysis of speech based on two major elements: (1) a four-element analysis and (2) semantic paleontology.

Four-element analysis. Marr constructed his theory on the basis of the monogenesis hypothesis of language origin: he maintained that the lexis of all languages can be derived from four hypothetical semantic elements: *sal*, *ber*, *jon* and *roš*. Although the elements are absent from the surface sound form of individual words of every language, they constitute their necessary basis. Each sound complex can be derived from one of the four elements on the basis of Marr's arbitrary table of phonetic transformations. It is on these formal assumptions that Marr based his hypotheses of crisscrossing of languages and language change. A more developed language would emerge through crisscrossing of various features in two primitive languages. Marr analyzed such formal transformations to speculate about the changes of social, cultural and civilizational relationships (Zvegintsev 1962).

Semantic paleontology constitutes a complementation of the four-element analysis. It describes the content processes in languages and links them to social phenomena. Marr used the Marxist conception of language as a 'direct reality of thought' to place semantics at the centre of his theory, relegating other aspects, such as grammar or phonetics, to marginal positions. He viewed semantics as dealing

with 'pure' thought, even without language or physical sound form. The identification of thinking with semantics led Marr to the conception of a stage-by-stage development of all world languages. According to this conception, thought was first expressed in the form of a pantomime; Marr calls this kinetic speech. The next stage was a language of gestures, i.e. the so-called linear speech. Sound language came into being only when the society reached a very high level of sophistication, and

the language of the future is thinking, which will be developing in technology freed from natural matter. No language, even language based on sound, which is still dependent on the laws of nature, will stand its pressure. (after Zvegintsev 1962: 74)

Marr is primarily interested in the development of forms of thinking which he attributes, to satisfy the dogmas of Marxism, to the influence of economic bases. In his glottogenic conception, he subjects the degree of development of individual language groups to the transformations of the economic base. This results in a peculiar valuation of these groups: the lowest stage of social development, i.e. the kinship community, is characterized by isolating languages (Japhetic languages: Caucasian, Basque, Etruscan and others); at a higher stage, i.e. nomadic communities, agglutinating languages are used, and the highest stage, at the level of class society, is characterized by Indo-European languages, in which the inflectional type is dominant (Heinz 1983: 328). The very existence of language groups Marr considers to be temporary: the victory of the proletariat is also the victory of thought, so that the worldwide classless society which will ensue as a result will be using one new language, 'the evidence of the triumph of thought over language.' This, in turn, obviates the existence of language groups. According to Marr, language is a class-related rather than a national phenomenon and belongs to the ideological superstructure of the society. In each language he distinguishes two other 'languages': one of them is used by the class of owners of the means of production, the other one by the exploited class. He treats languages solely as a reflection of class and social relationships and therefore ignores their structure, national and historical peculiarities and even the fundamental communicative function of language.

Marr's idea of linguistic reality as a continuum could not be applied in practice and was not relevant to the problems of a multinational country, which Stalin attempted to unite around the Russian culture and language since the 1930s (Dutka 1994).

## 5. Stalin versus Marr

Compared with Marr's views, Stalin's considerations on language can be treated as a defense of common sense. His articles are reductionist in tone: all conceptions of Marr Stalin reduces *ad absurdum*, referring either to Marxist or to commonsensical definitions. First of all, he evokes classic Marxist definitions of the base and superstructure, after which he argues that neither Russian nor any other language can

belong to the latter, as it would in that case to the same degree serve the bourgeois society and the proletariat:

Language [...] is a product of a series of many epochs, during which it is shaped, enriched, developed and polished, [...] it lives much much longer than any base or any superstructure. [...] The emergence and disappearance of not only one base and its superstructure, but several bases and all corresponding superstructures does not lead to the disappearance of a given language and its structure or to the emergence of a new language with new vocabulary and grammar. [...] Contemporary Russian is not very different in its structure from the Russian of Pushkin. (Stalin 1950b)

By treating language as the main means of communication of social masses in the process of production, Stalin also underlines its communicative aspect:

Language [...] is directly linked with the process of production but also with all other human activities in all spheres of work, from production to the base, from the base to the superstructure. Therefore, it reflects changes in production instantly and directly, before they take place in the base. Thus, the realm of linguistic activity, which encompasses all spheres of human activity, is much wider and more diverse than the realm of the activity of the superstructure. [...] Language, or, to be more precise, its vocabulary, is almost constantly changing. Continuous development of industry and agriculture, commerce and transportation, technology and science makes it necessary for new words and expressions, indispensable in further work, to enter the lexicon. By directly reflecting these needs, a language complements its lexicon with new words and perfects its grammar. (Stalin 1950b)

In Stalin's view, then, the role of language is similar to that of a tool: it enables an exchange of thoughts in the society and by the same token makes it more efficient in transforming nature. Social production is impossible without language since a society without language disintegrates and ceases to exist as a society.

In his article Stalin frequently emphasizes the very nature of language as a social phenomenon which serves human communication, i.e. its dual structure: the lexicon directly represents alterations in the social structure of the society and changes faster than grammar, which, as a set of abstract rules, changes slowly and is not linked with the structure of the society it serves. Due to the abstract nature of grammar, human thought can be given a specific material form. The basic vocabulary of any language has been emerging through centuries as a result of efforts of the whole nation and, being preserved in the language with everything which is important, it constitutes the basis of its lexicon.

Apart from his linguistic views, Stalin focuses mainly on ideological issues. He launches a devastating critique of Marr's theory, which he considers opposed to Marxism:

[Marr's advocates] hold that the theory of a stage-by-stage development of language is a Marxist theory because it is based on necessary sudden explosions as a condition for language to progress from an older value to a new value. Naturally, it is wrong, for what is Marxist in this theory? [...] Marxism holds that the progression of language from an older value to a new value does not happen as a result of an explosion, not through the destruction of the existing language and creation of a new one, but through gradual accumulation of elements of a new value and gradual decay of elements of an older value. (Stalin 1950b)

Stalin refutes the conception of crisscrossing of languages and presents, as a Marxist theory, a conception of linguistic struggle in which one language wins. He supports this view with Russian ‘which in the course of historical development has undergone intersection with languages of other nations and which has always been victorious’ (Stalin 1950b). The main aim of linguistics, then, is the investigation of internal laws of language development. Stalin also blames Marr for ‘wading in the quagmire of idealism’ (Stalin 1950b), vulgarizing, simplifying and distorting Marxism, as well as for

an immodest, boastful, haughty tone which leads to groundless and thoughtless negation of everything which existed in linguistics before Marr. (Stalin 1950b)

## 6. The position of Stalin’s articles in discourse space

Stalin’s articles on language and linguistics can hardly be considered today as scientific in nature. The author uses only basic linguistic terms, such as *word* or *grammar*. The ideas which he classifies as Marxist are, from the point of view of scientific linguistics, rather obvious: the dual nature of the linguistic system, the social nature of language, relatively quick lexical changes compared to grammatical ones are unquestionable linguistic axioms. Stalin’s aim was not to pursue scientific truth but to initiate an ideological discourse in which he occupies the position of the highest authority. Adequately organized discourse was to enable Stalin to achieve unlimited authority not only over the country but also over language and ideology.

His linguistic contribution was a manifestation of his authority over the empire: the views which he presented were to facilitate autocratic practices within the realm of linguistic policy in a multinational country. Such was the result of the return to understanding the ideas of language and nation in discrete terms. This enabled one to argue for the domination of Russian in the USSR, which, as the lexically and stylistically richest language, prevails over other national languages. It is in such terms, as it seems, that the following exemplary quote from Stalin can be interpreted:

Language as a means of communication has always been and still remains one for a society and common for all its members. The existence of dialects and jargons does not negate but confirms the existence of one language for the whole nation. They are subordinate branches of the one national language. (Stalin 1950b)

It is a natural and inevitable process which linguists should support (Dutka 1994).

In presenting his views on language, Stalin offers the official exegesis of Marxism in general, also outside linguistics. It may be treated as a symbolic act on his part of proclaiming his hegemony over ideology. In this way Stalin proves and confirms his self-attributed position of one of the greatest ideologists of Marxism. By presenting the proper understanding of the notions of base and superstructure, he

incorporates these terms into the idiom of propaganda as their only disposer. In this way he can further modify their sense and function in manipulating the society. It is for this purpose that he needs Marxism, which, in addition to the Russian language, is to be a major force uniting the Soviet 'nation'. Therefore, his choice of linguistics as the sphere where he declared his power over Marxism is not accidental. After the publication of Stalin's views, his theses became the subject of a heated 'debate' between specialists from various fields. The main aim of this 'debate', apart from panegyrics praising Stalin's genius, was to apply his definitions of base and super-structure in other disciplines, such as musicology, biology, history, philosophy, etc.

Stalin's final aim was to declare his power over language. He knew that language is the key to human spirituality, for it links thinking of, experiencing and understanding the world. Therefore, he proposed a conception of language as a tool, added a political dimension to knowledge about language and assigned to linguists the role of investigators of the laws of development of language structure. His aim was to render difficult or even completely thwart reflection on semantic and communicative processes because such reflection could reveal changes in the Russian language after the October Revolution. It could also disturb the monolith of the nation ruled by an autocratic despot (Thom 1990: 73). Aleksander Wat describes this situation as follows:

Stalinism consists in a systematic instrumentalization of everything: the world of humans and the world of things, all human economic, social and spiritual activity; an instrumentalization of people themselves, their consciousness, thoughts and words, and finally of the doctrine itself. (1991: 162)

According to Stalin's apologists (e.g. Travniček 1953), he even opened a new 'epoch' in linguistics by refuting the whole of previous (pre-Stalinist) linguistic tradition, which primarily included Indo-European historical-comparative linguistics and the European structuralism of the first half of the 20th century (the Geneva, Prague and Copenhagen schools). Travniček rejects these methodological approaches as 'incorrect' mainly because of their idealistic roots and their abstractness (emphasis on language structure, no real attention to the communicative aspect of language and the question of language origin). Stalin's linguistic views, on the other hand, are in this light elevated to the rank of the only 'true', objective and 'correct' methodology, capable of explaining the problem of language origin, revealing true links between language and the social world and presenting the communicative function of language as dependent on social transformation of nature.

Travniček was, of course, not the only advocate of such views, as similar opinions were being published at that time on a large scale. His commentary is merely an example of an interpretation of Stalin's works imposed from above. By introducing a political dimension to the knowledge about language, the hegemonic ruler restricts the range of interpretation of linguistic processes to views concordant with the linguistic orthodoxy he has defined. In this way he also indirectly secures for himself control over language.

The role of Stalin's articles on language in the discourse space of the Soviet Union of the 1950s is to, as one may assume, strengthen the validity of Stalinism, as well as to constitute the basis for the control and repression of the country's citizens in all their activities: actions, thoughts and the use of language.

## Stalin's works

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## Wypowiedzi Józefa Stalina na temat języka i językoznawstwa jako werbalne przejawy autokracji

### Streszczenie

Celem pracy jest przedstawienie z perspektywy metajęzykowej poglądów Stalina na język i językoznawstwo traktowanych tutaj jako integralna część kontrolowanego przez państwo systemu propagandy w Związku Radzieckim w latach 50. XX w.

Prezentacja historycznego i społecznego kontekstu, który umożliwił Stalinowi krytyczną analizę teorii językoznawczej Nikołaja Marra, poprzedza omówienie głównych aspektów tej teorii, co z kolei stanowi tło krótkiej analizy poglądów językoznawczych Stalina i ich roli w konstruowaniu propagandowego dyskursu.

Zdaniem autorów wypowiedzi Stalina dotyczące języka i językoznawstwa są przejawami jego władzy nad imperium sowieckim, jego ideologią i językiem.

**Słowa kluczowe:** metalingwistyka, Stalin, propaganda, ideologia i język.