

## “SOCIAL ENGINEERING OF THE FUTURE”: EVGENIY POLIVANOV ON THE PRINCIPLES OF EARLY SOVIET LANGUAGE BUILDING

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The article analyzes the project of scientific justification of language Reforms, realized by the Soviet regime in 20s and 30s, elaborated by Russian and Soviet linguist Evgenij Polivanov (1891-1938). Polivanov claims that a Soviet linguist should not limit his interests to the “general linguistics” and become an active “language builder” and “language politician”. The reforms should be carefully planned by the experts in language sciences who master as well the methodology of dialectical materialism. In the polemics against Nikolai Marr’s Japhetidology Polivanov argued that linguistics is a strict science and its deductions are not contradictory to Marxism, as the latter is primarily a materialist philosophy. His minimal program consisted in explaining his views on the evolution of language in the Marxist terms. The evolution of language is explained by the influence of internal and external factors. The socio-economical factors are not influencing the language in a direct manner, but their analysis allows to change the channel of language evolution. According to Polivanov, the introduction of Marxism into linguistics will make possible to explain the relationship between intralinguistic and extralinguistic factors and will transform the sciences of language into “social engineering of the future”.

**Keywords:** Evgeniy Polivanov, language policy, marxism in linguistics, Soviet language building, japhetidology

## «СОЦИАЛЬНАЯ ИНЖЕНЕРИЯ БУДУЩЕГО»: ЕВГЕНИЙ ПОЛИВАНОВ О ПРИНЦИПАХ РАННЕСОВЕТСКОГО ЯЗЫКОВОГО СТРОИТЕЛЬСТВА

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В статье анализируется разработанный русским и советским лингвистом Евгением Поливановым проект научного обоснования языковых реформ, проведенных после установления советской власти в двадцатые и тридцатые годы. Поливанов утверждал, что советский лингвист не должен ограничивать свои интересы проблемами общего языкознания и стать активным «языковым строителем» и «языковым политиком». Реформы должны быть тщательно подготовлены компетентными лингвистами, освоившими методологию диалектического материализма. Полемизируя с яфетидологией Николая Марра, Поливанов доказывал, что лингвистика является строгой наукой и ее выводы не могут противоречить марксизму, так как марксизм это в первую очередь материалистическая философия. Его программа-минимум состояла в том, чтобы объяснить эволюцию языка в марксистских терминах. Эволюция языка объясняется влиянием внутренних и внешних факторов. Социо-экономические факторы не влияют на язык непосредственно, но их анализ позволяет изменить ход язы-



ковой эволюции. Согласно Поливанову, применение марксистских методов в лингвистике позволит объяснить соотношение интра- и экстралингвистических факторов и сделает науки о языке разновидностью «социальной инженерии будущего».

**Ключевые слова:** Евгений Поливанов, языковая политика, марксизм в лингвистике, советское языковое планирование, яфетидология

## Linguistic Builders of Communism: How is Policy of Language Possible?

The grammarian-philosophers of the eighteenth century believed that language was a human invention, and, to borrow Rousseau's words, a "primary social institution" [Rousseau, 1995, p. 375]. Just like any other social institution, it could be consciously changed, and the mission of patriotic grammarians was to create a language that would be worthy of republican institutions<sup>1</sup>. However, the development of language sciences in the nineteenth century followed a different path; studies of the regularities of grammar (and later of sound change) brought it closer to the natural sciences in questioning the very possibility of human influence on language. As Evgenij Polivanov stated in 1928, the actual consensus was based on the convention that language is simultaneously a "physical, psychic and social phenomenon" [Polivanov, 1974, p. 174] although in the first revolutionary decade one could ascertain "the transfer of the center of gravity to the sociological side of the study of language" [Polivanov, 1974, p. 58].

Polivanov, often considered one of the greatest Russian linguists of the twentieth century, was (in contrast to many of his colleagues) by no means a route companion of the Bolshevik Revolution<sup>2</sup>. He personified the language building movement of the 1920s and 1930s in the same manner that Henri Gregoire personified the radical language policy of the French Jacobins, according to the estimation of Ferdinand Brunot<sup>3</sup>. Gregoire, who held the title of abbot under the old regime, was part of a progressive clergy that became an important actor during the revolution. He's primarily known for his famous "Gregoire questionnaire," which can be considered the first attempt at a sociologic study of the functions of language. He's also known for his famous invective against *patois* or local languages, pronounced in 1794 in the National Assembly where he insisted upon the "annihilation" of patois *ad majorem gloriam* of the Republic and its national idiom, one and indivisible<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> See the classical work of Jacques Guilhaumou [Guilhaumou, 1989].

<sup>2</sup> For the history of the reception of Polivanov's work, see [Alpatov, 2003].

<sup>3</sup> See [Brunot, 1967, p.13].

<sup>4</sup> About Henri Gregoire and the revolutionary policy of language, see: [De Certeau et al., 2002; Bell, 2001; Blinov, 2013, 2015].



The Russian Revolution under Bolshevik leadership took a completely different stance: it pretended to create a multi-national state. Polivanov had two absolutely indispensable qualities appreciated by the new regime: honest devotion to Soviet power and outstanding knowledge of oriental languages<sup>5</sup>. A child of modest and impoverished nobility, Polivanov studied at Petersburg University under professors I. Baudouin de Courtenay and L. Scherba, the latter of whom referred to him as “my genial student” [Leontiev, 1983, p. 8]. His teachers at Petersburg University gave direction to his research in theoretical linguistics and focused him on phonology, language evolution, and the sociology of language. Polivanov’s first published articles dealt with questions of Japanese accentology; he travelled to Japan three times between 1914 and 1916 to collect material on the phonology of various Japanese dialects, becoming a pioneer in this domain<sup>6</sup>. In 1917, he presented his own system of transcription of Japanese words in Russian, that is known as the “Polivanov system” and is still in use today despite some criticism [Polivanov, 1974, p. 245–265]. By 1919, he was the editor of the first paper for the Red Chinese workers of Petrograd and, according to some sources, a commissar. From 1921, the year of his first mission to Tashkent (this time as a Comintern agent, as was discovered later) until the end of his life, he was an active language builder as well as an advocate and important theorist and practitioner of language reforms, especially for the Turkish languages (Uzbek and Kirghiz)<sup>7</sup>. As he proclaimed in the already quoted manifesto, “Specific Features of the Last Decade 1917–1927 in the History of Our Linguistic Thought” (1928) under the Soviets “linguists have been given not only the opportunity but also the obligation to participate in the construction of national language cultures” [Polivanov, 1974, p. 59].

As we shall see, this obligation didn’t signify to Polivanov that he was required to compromise his scientific interests or lower his professional standards. The theoretical topic that interested him the most was the evolution of language, and he was one of the first world-class linguists to attempt to fuse the already well-advanced theory of language evolution with Marxist premises. His interest was anything but trivial at the time; the social study of language had just begun, and the task of combining already

<sup>5</sup> The number of languages he mastered is still a matter of debate: according to his biographer it was “at least 35 languages” [Lartsev, 1988, p. 12]. During his lifetime he published articles on various aspects of different “oriental” languages, including Japanese, Ainu, Chinese, Korean, Turkish, Tatar, Uzbek, Kazakh, Kirgiz, Dungan [Leontiev, 1983, p. 14–16].

<sup>6</sup> According to Vladimir Alpatov, who analyzed his works on Japanology, he is the only Russian linguist to be recognized in Japan, where references to western scholars of Japanese are very rare [Alpatov 2003, p. 216–218]. His known works on Japanese were translated and published in a single volume [Poriwaanofu, 1976].

<sup>7</sup> The more or less complete bibliography of his Turcological and Altaic works contains 110 titles, including the lost ones [Dybo, 2013].



well-developed comparative methods in linguistics with a study of society (from the Marxist point of view or not) was a relevant one. According to Polivanov, after all the achievements of comparative linguistics there was no way back to the “sociologists of language (of the eighteenth and first half of nineteenth century)” who naïvely tried to explain the composition of language using mere “extralinguistic data” [Polivanov, 1974, p. 173]. However, by studying the “language facts” and deducing the principles of language evolution, one could decide its relation to the collective or, in Polivanov’s own terms, to the “social substratum of language.” In his important article on the subject, “Historical Linguistics and Language Policy” (1931), Polivanov put forward a code of linguistic builder of communism that was supposed to set new priorities for linguistics as a discipline:

Thus, the linguist is composed of: (1) an actual builder of (and an expert in constructing) modern linguistic (and graphical) cultures, for which are required the study of contemporary language reality, a self-contained interest in it and – I would also say – a love for it; (2) a language politician, wielding (even though in limited amounts, perhaps) prognosis of the linguistic future, again in the interest of language construction (one of the varieties of the “social engineering” of the future); (3) a “general linguist,” and in particular a linguistic historiologist (here, in “general linguistics”, there lies also the philosophical significance of our science); (4) a historian of culture and of concrete language cultures [Polivanov, 1974, p. 342].

Such a radical change of priorities was far from being universally acclaimed. Among the specialists actively participating in Soviet language building, what constituted a true Marxist language policy was highly disputable, while for his more conservative colleagues this kind of engagement was rather abusive. Polivanov’s claim that he was both a language builder and a theoretician at once gave his political enemies an opportunity to portray him in a grotesque manner. Nikolai Poppe, his old colleague at Petersburg University and eminent researcher of Mongolian languages, who held him in high esteem as linguist but viewed his political activities with distain, compared this bifurcation to that of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. (It is important to note that Polivanov, in the spirit of the time, was an eccentric personality who both fascinated and repulsed his contemporaries [Alpatov, 2003, p. 218]). Developing this hardly pleasing comparison, we could say that Polivanov as Dr. Jekyll wanted to study how social factors could influence language while Polivanov as Commissar Hyde wanted to study how a society could be changed by linguistic means. This duality, or, more precisely, the possibility of overcoming it in the revolutionary praxis explains high originality of Polivanov works and its historical importance for contemporary social and political linguistics.



Saussure, whose ideas were widely debated by Soviet linguists in the 1920s and 1930s, famously proclaimed that “among the social institutions language was least amenable to initiative” [Saussure, 1994, p. 74]. Though Polivanov himself was rather indifferent to Saussure, claiming that his work was nothing new to the students of Baudouin de Courtenay [Polivanov, 1974, p. 176], he, like many of his contemporaries, believed this statement to be wrong<sup>8</sup>. He accepted the challenge by answering a crucial question in post-revolutionary linguistic thought: how is the policy of language possible?

## The Debate About Marxism in Linguistics

The most valuable hints to the answer to this question are found in Polivanov’s seminal work, *In Favor of Marxist Linguistics* (*Za marksistskoe yazykoznanie*), published in 1931<sup>9</sup>. While it bore the subtitle *A Collection of Popular Linguistic Articles*, its contents were anything but a set of commonplaces. It was a sharply polemical work dealing with some of the most controversial questions surrounding Soviet language policy. By 1931, Polivanov’s battle against Nikolai Marr’s school of linguistics, which was rapidly becoming an official doctrine of the Communist party in the domain of language sciences, was already lost. The outcome of Polivanov’s discussion that took place in February 1929 at the Communist Academy was his retirement from the leading post in the language section of RANION (Russian Association of Scientific and Research Institutions on Social Sciences) where he had been working since 1926. Polivanov was forced to leave Moscow and, until his death (he was shot in 1938 as a “Japanese spy”)<sup>10</sup> worked in Central Asian republics. *In Favor of Marxist Linguistics* was his last major book to be published in Moscow; in the 1930s his work was issued either in national republics or in the foreign scientific reviews (normally with the help of Roman Jakobson, who was, despite some methodological disagreements, the main propagator of his ideas in the West)<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> It was another student of Baudouin de Courtenay and a member of OPOJAZ (Society for the Study of Poetic Language) Lev Yakubinskiy, who wrote a direct answer to Saussure in 1931. See: [Yakubinskiy, 1986].

<sup>9</sup> See: [Polivanov, 1931b]. The second Russian edition of this important work was issued only in 2003 in Smolensk and constituted only a tiny number of copies [Polivanov, 2003]. It was partly translated into English as a part of his *Selected Works* [Polivanov, 1974]. In 2014, a partial French translation (in the form of a bilingual edition) was published [Polivanov, 2014].

<sup>10</sup> This conflict is no longer considered a main reason for his arrest and execution [Alpatov, 2004, p. 91].

<sup>11</sup> Before the vogue of translations in the seventies, Polivanov was primarily known for the French translation of his article “La perception des sons d’une langue étrangère” published in the collection of the Prague Linguistic Circle [Polivanov, 1931b]. For the reception of his ideas by Jakobson and Trubetzkoy, see Trubetzkoy 1976.



However, even after the discussion at the Communist Academy Polivanov continued to insist that Marr's Japhetic teaching had nothing to do with Marxist methodology or with materialism because its premises contradicted linguistic facts. In contrast to Marr, who was a member of the Imperial Academy of Sciences and took rather moderate positions in the first years of the Soviet regime, Polivanov had been engaged in Bolshevik politics since the very first days of the October Revolution. An assistant in the oriental department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the Provisional Government, he, according to his biographer, had by October 26, 1917 sent a letter to the new government offering his services as a consultant [Lartsev, 1988, p. 51]<sup>12</sup>. As it was already mentioned his Comintern engagement (which is the most probable reason for his arrest and execution during the Great Purge's repressions against Comintern activists)<sup>13</sup> and participation in the scientific committee of the VTsKNTA (Union Central Committee on New Turkish Alphabet), an important institution charged with the reform of Turkish languages<sup>14</sup>.

Polivanov's position on the so-called Japhetic theory is now considered correct from both the linguistic and Marxist point of views. The institutional rule of Marrism came to an end with Stalin's famous articles in *Pravda*, and there was no serious attempt to rehabilitate it afterwards<sup>15</sup>. Contemporary studies of Marr's work show that he wasn't acquainted with the works of Marx or Engels before 1927, and he didn't quote them a single time before 1928<sup>16</sup>. There is no evidence that Marr's work influenced the general principals of the Soviet policy on nationalities or the creation of institutions charged with language building such as VTsKNTA<sup>17</sup>. The well-publicized participation of Marrists in Soviet language building is now

<sup>12</sup> The immediate results of his cooperation with the new regime were overwhelming: by November 10, 1917 *Izvestia* and *Pravda* had published the secret agreements between the Tsarist and Provisionary governments and European countries and Japan, which Polivanov helped to find and decode. In contrast to military codes, the Russian diplomatic code was considered "unbreakable" [Lartsev, 1988, p. 50–53].

<sup>13</sup> The result of his condemnation according to the infamous 58th article was that his work was very rarely mentioned between 1938 and 1957 when V. Ivanov [Ivanov, 1957] published an article that started a reevaluation of his legacy. The exception was his works on Japanese and Chinese [Alpatov, 2003, p. 212–213].

<sup>14</sup> About VTsKNTA and Latinization movement see [Smith, 1998, p. 121–142].

<sup>15</sup> For the latest edition and commentary see [Marr, 2002, p. 451–474], [Ilizarov, 2012]. Except for some publications in Perestroika Times that presented him as Stalin's "victim" and, surprisingly, in a recent study that contains the detailed genesis of Stalin's articles in Ilizarov's book.

<sup>16</sup> [Alpatov, 2004, p.68]. Alpatov's monograph remains the most detailed account of the rise and fall of Marrism. See also [L'Hermitte, 1987] and [Brandist, 2016, p.193–220].

<sup>17</sup> About the general principles of the Soviet Policy of nationalities, see [Martin, 2001; Hirsh, 2005]. About Soviet language policy, see [Smith, 1998; Gorham, 2003; Brandist, 2016].



also generally refuted, while Marr’s own attempt to introduce an Abkhaz analytical alphabet was a notable failure, despite heavy administrative pressure on the local authorities<sup>18</sup>.

In the late 1920s, Marr violently attacked what he called “bourgeois science” (by which he meant comparative linguistics) for its supposed focus on Indo-European or “aristocratic” languages, ignoring so-called Japhetic or plebian languages<sup>19</sup>. Initially, Japhetic family included some Caucasian languages (including Marr’s native Georgian), but then Marr proclaimed that it was rather a group of languages spoken by “oppressed minorities,” although not in the usual sense of a social dialect but by its origin. Afterwards, Marr discovered that what would today be considered a same language could contain a Japhetic substrate. For example, in Armenian he found two different idioms: the plebian language with some loanwords from Georgian that was of a Japhetic nature, and the “language of aristocrats.” He refused to believe that a protolanguage could divide into several languages, insisting that all languages were formed as the result of crossing or of a “social explosion” that could radically transform the language. This idea led him to believe that German was a transformed version of the Svan (a Kartvelian language spoken in Western Georgia), some “striations” of Russian made it closer to Georgian than to other Slavic languages, and French was more ancient than Latin. No less fantastic were his ideas about what Polivanov called “prognosis of the linguistic future”. Marr believed that in the future, humanity would speak a common language that would not resemble any existing idiom. In a sense, it was a consistent conclusion; if in Marr’s system, “everything could become everything”, then his ideas about the origin of language (“glottogonic system”) could be easily reorganized into utopia of linguistically unified humanity.

The questions that arose were what did this fancy “glottogony” have to do with Marxism and how it could be used in the class struggle? In the late twenties, it was a good idea to begin a book on linguistics with the statement that a Marxist philosophy of language had not been created yet and the author of the study was going to present the very first system that met the requirements of dialectical materialism<sup>20</sup>. However, even given that Marr was shaping a totally new field of research, and notwithstanding the honesty of the authors about their Marxist creed, Marr’s writings were openly against the grain of the sociological trend mentioned by Polivanov<sup>21</sup>. Retrospectively, Marrism is usually compared to Lysenkovism

<sup>18</sup> [Alpatov, 2004, p. 51–52].

<sup>19</sup> Marr’s own writings are considered very obscure, and it is usually recommended to refer to the work of his most linguistically competent interpreter, I. Meschchaninov [Meschchaninov, 1929]. For a brief account in English, see [Meschchaninov, 2010]. However, an anthology of Marr’s work was recently reissued [Marr, 2002].

<sup>20</sup> It can be also found in Polivanov’s book [Polivanov, 1931, p. 4] or the well-known works V. Voloshinov [Voloshinov, 2010, p. 116].

<sup>21</sup> About the development of sociological approach see [Lähteenmäki, 2010].



in biology as an example of pseudoscience, but this parallel is far from being exact because the attacks against genetics (associated with racial teachings) could at least be presented as a conflict between nativism and radical environmentalism deduced from Marxist doctrine. The Marrist idea that linguistic paleontology could replace bourgeois Indo-European linguistics doesn't seem to fit the Marxist premises aiming the study of the social history of language or the urgent needs of Soviet language building (Marr refuted not only language families but even the existence of a national language as such). One possible explanation is that Marr's linguistic "proteiformism" ("everything could become everything") helped to establish the idea that language belongs to the realm of ideology (or in Marxist terms, to the superstructure) and thus directly depends on economic (or extra-linguistic) factors<sup>22</sup>. For Marr, this was the only explanation that allowed him to get out from the impasse of his improbable "glottogonic" theories, which were ridiculed by professional linguists. At the same time, it was the manner of the early Soviet ideology-makers to justify the party's "positive discrimination" policy (Japhetic languages initially were those of oppressed minorities) and the proof of the possibility of radical language reforms (or simply of the shaping of superstructure). As Alpatov study shows, the fact that in the 1930s and 1940s Marr's teaching were somewhat parallel to methodology of linguistic sciences and cannot be practiced *à la lettre* was beneficial: with the few references to "Marr's genial teaching" one could do whatever he wanted, using it as "shield" against the possible accusations of non-Marxism<sup>23</sup>.

It is rather surprising that such an eccentric theory meet such weak resistance from professional linguists who were obliged not only to take it seriously but also to modify their views after it. Polivanov, although he had previously appreciated Marr's Caucasian studies (he was rather, according to the above-mentioned classification a "historian of concrete language cultures") considered the publication of Marr's work on Chuvash, *Chuvash-Japhetides on the Volga* [Marr, 1926], a breaking point. As he ironically stated, "...to demand that Chuvash or, for example, South Caucasian languages be included – for anti-imperialistic considerations – in Indo-European studies, i.e. in comparative grammar of Indo-European languages, is the same as demanding, for example, that ichthyology include in the orbit of its study some variety or another of birds" [Polivanov, 1974, p. 339]. Polivanov's argument during the debate at the Communist Academy was similar: Marr's teaching was not materialist (which is to say not Marxist) because it contradicted linguistic facts by establishing non-existent parallels between non-related languages ([Polivanov, 1991,

<sup>22</sup> The question of whether language belongs to the infrastructure or superstructure is crucial for Marxism. See; [Alpatov, 2000]; [Lecerle, 2006].

<sup>23</sup> It could be considered a sort of "ruse of reason;" Alpatov refers to the opinion of a contemporary that "he had never seen such liberty in science" [Alpatov, 2004, p. 115].



p. 508–546]; see for examples). As for the accusations of bourgeois science, Polivanov constantly referred to Lenin’s idea that in order to build the new proletarian culture, one had to “take the whole culture which capitalism left and from it build socialism” [Polivanov, 1974, p. 177]. He argued there was no such thing as “bourgeois science” for the very simple reason that all previous science was “bourgeois” [Polivanov, 1974, p. 378].

Polivanov’s discussion belongs to the political or social history of Soviet science more so than to the history of linguistics. Exhausted by what he considered to be amateurish arguments, Polivanov concluded that “Science needs no polemics against Japhetidology. The attitude of any competent linguist towards Japhetidology is quiet clear and doesn’t need any commentary” [Polivanov, 1931, p. 6]. Despite this, the Polivanov’s discussion could serve as an important marker of the paradigm switch, or more precisely, of allowed rhetorical strategy. If before 1929, or the period that I’m calling the era of New Scientific Policy (or NSP), the integrity of scientific disciplines was not put to the question and many of the researchers formed under the old regime could preserve their influence with a minimum of loyalty, on the eve of cultural revolution, the offensive against “bourgeois science” was launched. In this situation, Lenin’s warnings against “meager proletarian culture” used by Polivanov lost their efficacy. Furthermore, his appeal “not to depart from Marxism” but rather to come to it “on the base of the facts” could represent a serious risk.

## **Non-contradiction principle or Polivanov’s minimal program**

Nevertheless, Polivanov doesn’t confine himself to a simple apology of comparative methods against profanation. The strong side of the nineteenth century linguistics that evaluated into strict science was also its weakness: “...linguistics was exclusively or almost exclusively a science of natural history in the works of linguists of the preceding generation; it was forgotten that a science of language should be at the same time a social science” [Polivanov, 1974, p. 57]. In order to create Marxist linguistics, the methods of dialectic materialism should be applied to the results of “natural history”. Even though it is not yet created, in linguistics “there are no assertions opposing Marxism” as there are no such assertions in mathematics and physics.

Polivanov’s approach to the problem of introducing Marxism into linguistics is twofold: on the one hand, he proposes what I am calling here the non-contradiction principle or the minimal program, on the other hand, he acts like an active “linguistics builder” and “language politician”. In the frame of the first strategy, Polivanov, like many of his



contemporaries, is trying to adapt the Marxist vocabulary to the needs of his research in general linguistics, in the frame of the second, as an adept of the Soviet “affirmative action” policy, he is creating the principles of “pragmatic language building”. Since the authentic Marxist methodology is a materialist one, there is no contradiction.

As we have already noted, Polivanov’s favorite theoretical question was that of language evolution even though, for various reasons, he never realized his project to write a fundamental study on the subject<sup>24</sup>. His desperate polemics with Japhetic theory was a proof that this topic was, to use the typical expression of the period, on the leading edge of linguistic front.

Like his teacher Baudouin de Courtenay, Polivanov distinguished internal and external factors of language evolution. Among the first of them, the central role belongs to “human laziness” or to “the principle of economy of working energy”. Language is primarily a “working process” and so the general rule of language evolution subordinates to the tendency of all “possible types of productive work activity of mankind”: the economy should not impede the communication (for instance, the economy of muscle efforts necessary for the handwriting should not influence its intelligibility).

Developing Baudouin’s idea that the most important language changes took place during the transmission of language standards from one generation to the other, Polivanov emphasizes the “unconscious, involuntary character of the introduction of language innovations” [Polivanov, 1974, p. 82]. It could be attested, for instance, by fixing the difference of “phonetic images” between the representatives of two generations: when the “phonetic images” are equated, Polivanov designates it as “convergence”, when they are divided we could speak of “divergence” ” [Polivanov, 1974, p. 70]. The linguistics changes are not eventually limited to the phonetics, but the transformation of grammar or syntax usually last much longer. In general, language evolution is not one-linear and is determined by a particular “motivation”, so in order to study it one should elaborate a “methodology of concrete motivations of language changes” [Polivanov, 1974, p. 89].

Moreover, many changes have “mutational” or, in Polivanov’s terms “revolutionary” character, though it includes numerous “intermediary stages” (unlike Marr’s “explosions”) that could be precisely described. In order to illustrate this thesis, Polivanov compares it to the history of Russian liberation movement: the October Revolution was the final stage of the “dialectical development” that begins more than century ago and was everything, but “instantaneous”, as it was a “mutational change” while

<sup>24</sup> He often mentioned the idea of a big study “Theory of language evolution”. Unfortunately, this project has not been realized [Lartsev, 1988, p. 322]. About Polivanov’s theory of language evolution see [Tchougounnikov, 2013].



“the very growth of this contradiction bore, without a doubt, a prolonged character” [Polivanov, 1974, p. 110]. In another article, he states that the most important law of history of phonetic evolution is nothing else, than the dialectical law of the change of quantity into quality. For instance, the well studied on the material of different languages (including non Indo-European) change of diphthongs *au* into *o*, or *ae* into *e* is a change that “reconciles” two successive phonemes in a dialectal since, i.e. by combing their “original aspects” (*au* and *ae* didn’t simply disappear)” [Polivanov, 1974, p. 125].

All these assertions are certainly “not opposing” Marxism, but do we really need the dialectical materialism to understand the abovementioned particularities of language evolution? The idea of economy of working energy is not strictly speaking Marxist but rather positivist, while the reference to the law of change of quantity into quality in the given example doesn’t seem mandatory. However, I suggest that besides this minimal program Polivanov put forward some essential principles of language building that were closely tied to his ideas about the language evolution.

## **Changing the “channel of language evolution”: Polivanov on the principles of pragmatic language building**

The internal or “intralinguistic” factors of language evolution are primary for the simple reason that they can be scientifically described. Although the influence of extralinguistic factors could be clearly attested by the vocabulary (numerous neologisms and argotic expressions brought by Revolution), their impact on morphology or phonetics is more problematic. The socio-economical factors are influencing the mechanisms of language evolution in *indirect* manner but on the other hand they are subject to conscious intervention, or, to put in Saussure’s words to “initiative”:

It is true that socio-economic movements are not reflected directly on the internal, so to speak, technical mechanism (physiological or psychological) of every individual process (proceeding already from a certain point of departure): i.e. it cannot happen that instead of  $k \rightarrow s$ , with a change of economical situation (but with the same linguistic situation, i.e. in the same language, in the same words, etc.)... On the other hand, for socio-economical factors a much wider field of interference in linguistic life and evolution is opened up: instead of influences on the technical mechanism of individual processes, (going from a given point of departure), economic and political movements are capable of producing changes in these very points of departure (historical phonetic and other processes) and in this way changing the whole channel of language evolution at the root [Polivanov, 1974, p. 89].



In order to comprehend the exact role of the extralinguistic factors, we should specify what Polivanov meant by the "field of interference in linguistic life" and the possible "point of departure" of linguistic evolution. Unfortunately, Polivanov did not elaborate a coherent theory of relationship between extralinguistic and intralinguistic factors but he certainly left some clues that allow us to suggest some possible ways of such interaction.

The main particularity of the complex of socio-economical factors is that the development of a given society could be accelerated (and the industrialization or collectivization are examples of such acceleration). But as their influence on the internal mechanism of language evolution is not direct we can precisely know which way it won't follow ( $k \rightarrow s$  would not become  $k \rightarrow m$  or  $k \rightarrow r$ ). Although it is possible to choose "the point of departure" of the evolution of a given language. The most obvious example is the changing of alphabets or in Polivanov's terms "graphic revolution" in the newly formed Soviet Republics, that preoccupied him since the early twenties. Among three possible principles of constructing the orthography – phonetic, historical-etymological and morphological (or simply etymological) – one should never choose the second, because it "is complicating the process of learning and writing" and was normally used by the ruling classes to restrict the access of the masses to education<sup>25</sup>. For this reason, Polivanov was an ardent advocate of Latin-based graphics for Turkish language instead of reformed Arabic alphabets. Consequently the choice of the builders of new Soviet graphic cultures should be made between "purely phonetic" (for the non-written languages or in the case of the radical change of alphabet) and "morphological" principles (for the languages with the written tradition). The effect of these "graphic revolutions" is immediate: "the results of the work of latter-day Yakut, Azerbaijani, Chechen, Ingush and other "Cyrils and Methodiuses contemporary to us will be incomparably more fruitful, for they are opening the road not to the religious culture of the 10<sup>th</sup> century but to the Soviet culture in its national forms" [Polivanov, 1974, p. 186].

Even more crucial for the change of "channel" of language evolution is what Polivanov designates as "social substratum" of language. More generally, the task of any language policy is the creation of coherent system of communication for the constantly transforming society: "with any such change in the '*human* or (social) *substratum*', the goal of the linguistic development which accompanies (the given socio-economic regrouping) is the creation of a homogenous language for its new '*social substratum*', i.e. for the new size of the collective" [Polivanov, 1974, p. 200]. The change of the social substratum signifies that a new social group is actively influencing the language vocabulary (the vocabulary of workers, sailors,

<sup>25</sup> Polivanov also claimed that both Chinese and Japan hieroglyphs should be sooner or later suspended but it "this will be done only when Japan and China have their own October Revolutions" [Polivanov, 1974, p. 240].



thieves jargon et cit.), but also phonetics (Petersburg orthoepy is not any more considered as normative) and morphology (the famous Soviet abbreviations). It could be changed horizontally (as the lower classes came to power) and vertically (as the non-Russian speakers or those who are mastering only regional dialects are moving to the urban centers). This process Polivanov indicates as “double expansion of the substratum” and it could be controlled by the Soviet government by implementing the policy of positive discrimination of oppressed minorities from both Russian popular classes and “alien peoples”. As October Revolution provides an “unusually accelerated tempo” of the social changes the linguistic mutations will not to take long to appear. Although, as Polivanov’s analysis of the mechanisms of “linguistic innovations” shows, the main changes took place during the transmission of a language standard from one generation to another. Consequently, the substantive innovations of Russian and other literary languages of USSR will be evident after the change of several generations. In this brave new world the intralinguistic and extralinguistic factors will be finally “reconciled” for the sake of a better and more predictable future.

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