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## The Role of ‘Sociology’ in Lev Shcherba’s Conception of Language

### 1. Introduction

The so-called ‘Bolshevisation’ of sciences in the Soviet Union in the 1920-30s amounted to a vigorous attempt to replace earlier ‘bourgeois’ theories with new ‘Marxist’ theories. Accordingly, many Soviet linguists – like scholars in various disciplines – were discussing the theoretical and methodological implications of Marxism for the study of language. By the end of the 1920s, Nikolai Marr’s (1864–1934) notorious ‘New Theory of Language’, which assumed that the linguistic features of a particular language derive from the socio-economic characteristics of a society, had become the dominant trend in Soviet linguistics. However, there were linguists whose understanding of the social nature of language was much more elaborate and nuanced than Marr’s mechanistic views and there were different, competing views on what constitutes a Marxist linguistics and what kind of sociology linguistics should be based on. An interesting figure among them was Lev Shcherba (1880–1944), who had studied under the supervision of Jan Baudouin de Courtenay (1845–1929) together with two other important linguists, Ievgenii Polivanov (1891–1938) and Lev Iakubinskii (1892–1945).

Shcherba was a central figure in the scientific life of St. Petersburg<sup>1</sup>. He was appointed a Professor at the University of St. Petersburg before the Revolution in 1916 and continued to work there till 1941. Shcherba also took part in the activities of Opoiiaz (The Society for the Study of Poetic Language) and worked as a researcher at Marr’s Institute of Japhetidological Research in 1921 until his resignation in 1928 due to his disagreement with Marr’s linguistic views. This was exactly the time when the overt Marxist terminology began to dominate Marr’s writings, in which he emphasised the causal relation between linguistic structures and the socio-economic forma-

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<sup>1</sup> For a biographical sketch, see Zinder & Matusevich (2004).

tions of a society. Another important aspect of Shcherba's institutional context was that in 1921 he became affiliated to ILIaZV (The Institute for the Comparative History of the Literatures and Languages of the West and East), where he worked as Head of Phonetics and from 1926 as Chair of the Section of Indo-European Linguistics. He was also affiliated to other institutes, including the *Institut zhivogo slova*, and was elected – with the support of Marr – a corresponding member (*chlen-korrespondent*) of the Academy of Sciences in 1924.

## 2. Psychologism of the early texts

A characteristic feature of Shcherba's early works was psychologism (Zinder & Maslov 1982, 11). In his view, linguistic phenomena were psychological in their nature, which also had important methodological implications. He did not deny the existence of the 'social aspect' of language as such, but it rather remained in the background of his approach. Shcherba clearly inherited his psychologistic position from his teacher Baudouin de Courtenay, for whom the object of study was the language of an individual, while he saw *a* language, such as Russian or English, as an abstraction or generalised construction based on multiplicity of individual languages. Shcherba thought that the study of a native speaker's consciousness allows the linguist to reveal the real essence of a language and its structure, that is, the underlying invariant linguistic units which are manifested in the form of variants in actual speech. In this respect, the study of a language or dialect amounted to an investigation of the linguistic system located in the consciousness of an individual speaker and to a psychological description of the object.

In the late 1920s, when the development of a Marxist sociological approach to the study of language became topical in Soviet linguistics, theories in which language was seen as a property of the individual psyche were heavily criticised. Shcherba's views were attacked by Marr, who launched a campaign against Shcherba in 1930 by publishing a critical article in *Izvestiia*. Before this, Shcherba had been on good terms with Marr and published his article 'On the conception of language mixing' (Shcherba 2004a) in the collection *Iafeticheskii sbornik* edited by Marr in 1925. Here Shcherba positively referred to Marr's notion of 'diffuse sounds'. However, later on, Shcherba rejected Marr's pseudoscientific views, as a consequence of which Marr argued that Scherba's works, which had appeared after the October Revolution, 'reveal the complete scientific sterility to which all representatives of idealistic science are doomed in the new conditions of socialist construction' (see Bernshtein 2002, 56–57). Marr, who was the Vice-President

of the Soviet Academy of Sciences at the time, effectively debarred Scherba's election as an Academician in 1930<sup>2</sup>.

Another critical attack against Shcherba's 'subjective' and 'idealistic' views on language can be found in Ian Loia's 1929 article 'Against Subjective Idealism in Linguistics', the main target of which was Shcherba's teacher Baudouin de Courtenay. Loia was a member of *Iazykfront* (Language Front), which challenged Marrism in the early 1930s. The article, which is characterised by its adoption of the bellicose nature typical of the time, appeared in 1929 in the collection *Iazykovedenie i materializm* edited by Marr, but the presentation which the article is based on was delivered already in May, 1926 at ILIaZV at a meeting of the Section of General Linguistics. According to Loia (1929, 131), Baudouin 'gave a subjective-idealistic definition of important linguistic facts and of language itself', and only managed to avoid 'vividly expressed subjectivism' in his early works, in which language is seen as a social category. Shcherba, in turn, was mentioned as a follower of Baudouin de Courtenay's subjective-idealistic views.

Loia's criticism was inspired by Marr and Sergei Dobrogaev, to whom he expressed his gratitude for the support and advice (Loia 1929, 133). It is somewhat surprising that also Iakubinskii was mentioned together with the two prominent Marrists, although he, like Shcherba and Polivanov, was one of Baudouin's most talented students. According to Leont'ev (1961, 118), Iakubinskii's views, which were expressed in his writings of the early 1920s, were actually really close to Baudouin's thinking, in which language was presented as the arena for the battle between psychic and social factors that are equally important but differ in their nature. However, in the mid-1920s Iakubinskii became interested in Marr's ideas, which he soon rejected, and by the late 1920s a strong emphasis on the social nature of language is evident in Iakubinskii's writings (see, for instance, Iakubinskii 1931).

According to Loia (1929, 138), Shcherba's idealistic stance is explicit, for instance, in his characterisation of language as 'a product of the activity of our psychic organisation', and in his statement that 'language is a psychic phenomenon and, therefore, observations of language amount to observations of the objects of inner experience'. For Loia (1929, 143–144), another example of Shcherba's psychologism is his definition of the phoneme as the psychic equivalent of a speech sound, which implies that 'phonetic units cannot be regarded as physiological or physical phenomena but, rather, as the result of our psychic activity'. At the methodological level this meant that 'the subjective method is the only phonetic method, because we always have to turn to the consciousness of an individual, who speaks a particular

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<sup>2</sup> Shcherba was elected a member of the Academy in 1943.

language, in order to find out which phonetic distinctions he uses' (Loia 1929, 145).

Loia's attack can be seen as part of the more general campaign against 'bourgeois' linguistics, and individualistic theories of language in particular, which was launched in the late 1920s. It may also explain Shcherba's subsequent attempts to revise his earlier psychologicistic views. This is supported by the fact that Loia (1929, 138) actually gave the manuscript of the article to Shcherba for his comments before it was published. In 1927, Shcherba delivered the paper 'On the tripartite aspect of linguistic phenomena' at ILI-aZV which was subsequently published as an article, in 1931. In this important article, Shcherba critically discussed his earlier individualistic approach and formulated an understanding of the social nature of language by introducing his now famous distinction between three aspects of linguistic phenomena.

### **3. Speech activity, language system and linguistic material**

Shcherba (2004b, 24) made a threefold distinction between *speech activity* (*rechevaia deiatel'nost'*), *language system* (*iazykovaia sistema*) and *linguistic material* (*iazykovoï material*), which represent three aspects common to all linguistic phenomena and, consequently, three methodological points of view from which language can be studied. He emphasised the conventional nature of the distinction and insisted that the three aspects are not ontologically distinct. Speech activity refers to 'processes of speaking and understanding', that is, psycho-physiological acts of speaking and understanding. Although these acts can be seen as individual, because acts of speaking and understanding clearly presuppose individual activity, Shcherba argued that both speech activity and the speech organisation of an individual which the former is based on are social phenomena.

The second aspect of linguistic phenomena is the 'language system', which, according to Shcherba (2004b, 26), has mistakenly been identified with 'the system of potential linguistic representations' belonging to the psycho-physiological organisation of an individual. For him, the language system represented 'a certain social value which is unified, commonly obligatory for all members of a social group and objectively given in the conditions of the life of the group' (Shcherba 2004b, 27). In Shcherba's (2004b, 25) view, the social language system comprises a grammar and lexicon, by which he refers to an actual grammar and lexicon constructed by a linguist. Thus, it seems that he did not make a clear distinction between the object of description and the description itself, for he identified 'language system' with a combination of grammar and lexicon that are based on rational inferences from the totality of acts of speaking and understanding.

In Shcherba's view, grammar and lexicon, if correctly constructed, exhaust the meaning of a particular language.

According to Shcherba (2004b, 27), both Wundt's *Völkerpsychologie* and Baudouin's attempt to explain the social aspect of language in terms of the idea of 'collective individual' failed to account for the social nature of the language system. He also rejected the idea that the language system is something supra-individual as an idealistic notion of language, as well as the 'purely nominalistic' view that assumes the language system to be merely a scientific abstraction created by the linguist. At first sight, it seems that Shcherba's critique of nominalism contradicts his own characterisation of the language system as consisting of a grammar and lexicon constructed by a linguist from actual linguistic material through induction. However, he insisted that although the language system is not given to our immediate experience, and can be arrived at through reflection and inductive inference, it nevertheless finds its objective existence in linguistic material (Shcherba 2004b, 28).

The social language system is manifested in the 'individual speech systems' of the members of a linguistic community, who construct or crystallise their individual systems on the basis of 'linguistic material' available to them. The 'psycho-physiological speech organisations' of different individuals are idiosyncratic irrespective of the fact that they are manifestations of the same social language system (Shcherba 2004b, 27). Thus, for Shcherba, the language system is given in the material manifestations of a language and waits to be discovered by a native speaker or a linguist. It is important that in Shcherba's terminology 'language' cannot refer to an idiolect or private language, for it presupposes that the system of linguistic signs must be shared by the members of a particular grouping of people.

Finally, the third aspect of linguistic phenomena is 'linguistic material', which Shcherba (2004b, 26) defined as 'the totality of what is spoken and understood in a specific concrete environment in this or that epoch of the life of a social group'. Thus, it can be seen as the outcome of the processes of speaking and understanding, that is, speech activity in the history of a particular language. Shcherba thinks that social stratification within the society is reflected in the linguistic material and that the degree of the unity of linguistic material within a group of people depends on the degree of unity of the group itself as well as on the degree of identity of their conditions of existence and activity (2004b, 28–29). However, Shcherba pointed out that linguistic unity manifests itself differently in lexicon and grammar. While even the smallest groupings of people often use group-specific lexical items which distinguish them from other groupings, grammatical differences between even socially distant groups are usually less significant.

As regards language change, in Shcherba's view there are two factors which need to be taken into consideration: the language system and the life-

content of a particular social group. Shcherba (2004b, 28) argued that there is a reciprocal relationship between the various factors, so that the way in which members of a social group react verbally to the content of their life is determined by the language system, while changes in their content of life cause changes in the language system. In principle, the unity of the content of life guarantees the unity of the language system, and the unity of the language system guarantees the unity of members' (of what? A social group?) verbal reactions to the content of their life. Changes in life conditions cause changes in speech activity and, consequently, in linguistic material, and these eventually produce changes in the language system. This means that social differentiation within a society threatens its linguistic unity, an argument that is akin to Iakubinskii's (1931) views regarding the development of a unified language in a capitalist society. According to Shcherba (2004b, 30), changes in speech activity become evident in a conflict between two social groups, which often involves the mixing of language, in which members of one social group strive to imitate the language of another group, producing a distorted version of that language. Mixing can take place between different languages or sociolects, and it is not rare for linguistic units to acquire a new semantic or stylistic content after they have been adopted by members of another group. According to Leont'ev (1968, 119), the emphasis Shcherba gives to the role of the contact of social groups distinguishes him from Polivanov (1968), who saw the change of generations as a crucial factor in linguistic evolution.

That language and society are interrelated was also taken for granted by those linguists who subscribed to the idea of class-languages, which in its crudest form assumed that different social classes actually speak different languages. Shcherba did not use the term 'class-language' and his view differed significantly from the deterministic position of those who subscribed to the idea of the class-character of language. Shcherba held that different groups of a population may belong simultaneously to several social groups and, therefore, may bear a relation to several linguistic systems (2004b, 30–31). Thus, he realised that the identity of a member of a society is always multilayered and, therefore, it is wrong to assume that there would be one-to-one correlation between a social class and a language form. Members of a society can be seen as 'multilingual' in the sense that they possess several functionally and socially differentiated language forms, while a common language, such as the literary language or standard language, is learned as a second language. In Shcherba's view, the linguistic repertoire of an individual consists of several language forms instead of a single class-language, which clearly set him apart from the then dominant Marxist position, which identified the social nature of language with its class-character.

Despite the fact that Shcherba sociologised his earlier psychologicistic formulations, he thought that his experimental methodology – which he

earlier called a 'psychological' or 'subjective' method – had not lost its validity. In his view, the psychological element of his method had to do with the intuitive feeling of the correctness or incorrectness of this or that speech utterance (2004b, 33). However, Shcherba emphasised that our linguistic intuitions have a social basis and are a function of the language system. From this it follows that it is perfectly legitimate to investigate the social language system by studying individual intuitions. Although the object of introspection is an 'individual speech system', it can still be seen as an objective method for the study of the social language system, because the individual speech system is a concrete manifestation of the social language system. For Shcherba, the objectivity of his approach is guaranteed by experimental methods which are used to test individual intuitions treated as hypotheses about the language system.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The extent to which Shcherba actually revised his earlier psychologicistic views in the 1931 article, in which he introduced the threefold distinction between different aspects of language, as opposed to Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole*, is open to question. It seems that rather than rejecting his earlier views, he aimed to give a sociological justification for his already-formed linguistic conception, by arguing that the 'individual speech organisation' which remained his object of study had a social basis. This is supported by the fact that Shcherba's theoretical revisions had no impact on his methodology.

Shcherba's understanding of the interrelation of language and society was different from the dominant 'vulgar sociology' that assumed that linguistic structures derive from socioeconomic structures. In this respect, he came close to Polivanov who had presented the most sober and sustained critique of Marr's mechanistic views during the notorious 'Polivanov discussion' at the Communist Academy in 1929 (see Polivanov 1991). Shcherba's experimental methodology, which included the testing of hypotheses based on individual intuitions, could have attracted hostile criticism – as in the case of Polivanov. Although Shcherba was accused of holding idealistic linguistic views during the dominance of Marrism, he, unlike many other contemporary linguists, was able to continue to work under more or less normal conditions. This may, at least in part, be explained by the fact that he was considered by his contemporaries an experimental phonetician and not as a potential rival in the quest for Marxist linguistics.

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