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Marxism and Language

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market - in the first place. Just as communist alternatives to capitalism eventually collapsed, leading to an embracing of liberal economics and free-market principles, so linguistic communism cannot work since it runs counter to the *raison d'être* of the linguistic market, which, in terms of substantive cause and effect, is social differentiation. However, this should not be seen as a form of poststructuralist nihilism; rather, Bourdieu is offering a *metanoia*, a "new gaze" or way of looking at the world through his epistemological thinking tool (see Grenfell 2004, Chapter 7).

- Michael Grenfell

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MARXISM AND LANGUAGE

The aim of Marxism is to understand history and society according to the precepts first outlined in the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, later developed by other thinkers in this tradition, in order to effect revolutionary social change. Given the fact that Marxism is in part a description of the determinants of everyday life as a way of explaining the social order, it is somewhat surprising, therefore, to note that the Marxist contribution to thinking about language has been limited. This omission has been unfortunate both for Marxism and for those nonformalist accounts of language that stress its historicity in a general sense and its specific and variable links to particular social formations.

In *The German Ideology*, as part of their attack on philosophical idealism, Marx and Engels provide a sketch of their materialist conception of history. With regard to the nature and function of language, they assert:

From the start the "spirit" [mind] is afflicted with the curse of being "burdened" with matter, which here makes its appearance in the form of agitated layers of air, sounds, in short, of language. Language is as old as consciousness, language is practical consciousness that exists also for other men, and for that reason alone it really exists for me personally as well; language,

like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, or intercourse with other men (Marx and Engels 1964, 42).

The stress on language as central to human activity, or *praxis*, indicates the important role that Marx and Engels gave it in their account of the distinctiveness of human life. Language forms an essential part of the evolving process by which human beings in social relationships create historical reality through the negotiation of material needs and the requirement for self-reproduction. It is important to note, however, that language was not viewed as either primary or derivative; it was not the faculty that enabled human beings to become social in the first place, nor was it the means by which they could express themselves once they had been socialized. Instead, it was an aspect of the social, material activity - labor in its general, technical sense - by which human beings were constituted qua human beings and by which they acted upon nature and other human beings in order to create history.

Within the Marxist tradition, the stress on the constitutive aspect of language as a form of labor - material practice - was almost lost, as the term *labor* itself became narrowly conceived simply to mean certain types of work. As a result, more attention was paid to other statements by Marx and less to his original focus on language as social activity. These comments included his reference to the existence of a bourgeois form of language (Marx and Engels 1964, 249), his assertion that "ideas do not exist separately from language" (1973, 163), and his declaration that "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas" (1964, 60). Marx's remarks, which amount essentially to the observations that the language in use is affected by the class relations that hold in a given social formation and that ideology is disseminated in language, were again rather narrowly interpreted within orthodox Marxism.

In the Soviet Union, in particular, a whole set of somewhat fruitless debates ensued as to whether language belonged to the "base" or "superstructure" of society. For N. S. Marr, for example, languages were stratified in such a way that between communities employing distinct languages, the speech of the same class would be closer than the speech of different classes using the same language. In this account, language belongs to the social superstructure of society, which is simply determined by class; the idea that the unity of a group not based on class (such as the nation) could be explained by the idea of a common language was dismissed. Marr's influence, which was widespread in the 1930s and 1940s, was ended by Stalin's equally dogmatic declaration in "Marxism and the problems of linguistics" [1950] (1974) that languages did not have a "class character" but rather a "national character" and were thus not part of the superstructure. Despite the title of Stalin's piece, and though it was an important correction to the misleading effect of Marr's theories, it did not represent any sort of breakthrough in the Marxist treatment of language.

In fact, precisely such an advance had been heralded in the writings of a number of linguists in the Soviet Union - primarily in Vitebsk and Leningrad - which, in effect, amounted to a school of Marxist linguistics. Because of the terror exercised by Stalinism, the exact membership of this group is unknown and the names used for publishing may or may not be those of the authors of

the works. Nevertheless, the principal texts are recognized as V. N. Voloshinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, published in 1929 and translated in 1973; Mikhail Bakhtin's *Problems in Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, published first in 1929 and translated from the second (1964) edition in 1984; and P. N. Medvedev's *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*, published in 1928 and translated in 1978. Despite the fact that the work of Bakhtin is the best known to readers in the West, the most significant contribution to a strictly Marxist treatment of language was provided by Voloshinov's pioneering text.

The radical thrust of Voloshinov's work came in his opposition to two key tendencies that he identified in thinking about language: "Individualistic subjectivism" and "abstract objectivism." The first, traced by Voloshinov to the German idealist tradition and articulated most clearly in the work of Wilhelm von Humboldt, takes the individual human psyche as the most important site of linguistic production and focuses on the individual creative act of speech. Regarding speech as a type of aesthetic CREATIVITY, this approach rejects "language," understood as a fixed system, as simply the product of the abstract methods of linguistics. The second tendency, "abstract objectivism," is the binary opposite of the first and is typified in the model proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure and developed by STRUCTURALISM. In this approach, the static and apparently immutable linguistic system is divorced from history, is distinguished rigorously from individual instances of language use, and is considered to be composed of nothing other than the normatively identical forms of lexis, grammar, and PHONETICS. If the first focuses on the unceasing process (*energeia*) of individual linguistic creativity, then the second treats language as a finished product (*ergon*), open to the objective gaze of the science of linguistics.

For Voloshinov, the concentration on individual CONSCIOUSNESS as the basis of an explanation of linguistic signification is a mistake. The individual consciousness cannot serve as the foundation of linguistic analysis because it is itself in need of explication from a social point of view: "[C]onsciousness takes shape and being in the material of signs created by an organized group in the process of its social intercourse... nurtured on signs, it derives its growth from them; it reflects their logic and laws" (Voloshinov [1929] 1973, 13). This does not, however, mean that the individual consciousness is formed by and in the normatively identical signs of the abstract objectivist system. On the contrary, Voloshinov's point is that signs themselves, as dynamic complexes of form and meaning, are not simply presented as given, fixed elements of a system but are open products of the activity - the material practice - of language making between socially organized individuals. Language, in this sense, is not the middle term that unites the individual and the social, nor is it a medium that reflects a preexistent reality. Instead, it is an aspect of the constitutive social activity - labor, in Marx's original sense - that allows for the very possibility of the "individual," the "social," and "reality" itself.

Despite the importance of semantic indeterminacy to post-structuralist literary theory, and the stress on context in linguistic pragmatics, the radical challenge of Voloshinov's work has not been taken up widely in twentieth-century thinking on language. Even in the tradition of Western Marxism, few of the major

theorists concerned themselves directly with language, and when they did, as in the case of Walter Benjamin or Jean-Paul Sartre, it is difficult to see how the work qualifies as Marxist in any recognizable sense. Yet a number of Marxist theorists, such as Ferruccio Rossi-Landi (1983), Terry Eagleton (1982), and Jean-Jacques Lecercle (2006), have produced interesting work based on Voloshinov's text. More significantly, it was the inspiration for much of the later work of Raymond Williams, the major British socialist critic of the twentieth century.

Williams's chapter on language in *Marxism and Literature* (1977) stressed the importance of Voloshinov's theory of signification, both in general and for his own original work on historical SEMIOTICS in *Keywords* (1976). Beginning with Voloshinov's argument that signs are neither expressive nor systematic in any simple sense but, rather, communicative media deployed in the social process of making history, Williams stressed that signs are shaped by past use but are engaged at the same time in the creative making of the present (and are thus of necessity open to the future). This idea of the historical variability of signs, which Voloshinov calls their "multivalence," formed the basis of Williams's investigation of the vocabulary of a number of discursive fields, centrally those that involved discussion of culture and society. In essence, what he provides in *Keywords* and *Marxism and Literature* is a retrospective theoretical account of his work in *Culture and Society* (1958), a text that effectively began the debates that led to the appearance of cultural studies as an academic discipline. Though rarely acknowledged as such, it was an historical materialist approach to language that lay at the base of this important intellectual development.

Marx's comments on the existence of bourgeois language and Voloshinov's assertion that the "sign becomes an arena of the class struggle" ([1929] 1973, 23) point to another field of research in which Marxist thought has been significant: the politics of language, with particular regard to the historical construction of NATIONAL LANGUAGES, the class-based hierarchy of language within education, and the role of language in imperialism and COLONIALISM. Important work in this area was conducted by Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Communist Party intellectual and leader, who drew attention to the class perspective in his discussion of the merits and demerits of the use of DIALECT versus a national form of language in political struggles in Italy. Other examples include Renée Balibar's historical research on the emergence of a "standard" language in France in *Les français flechés* (1974) and *L'institution du français* (1985), and Tony Crowley's related work in the British context in *The Politics of Discourse* (1989). Writing from the post-colonial conjuncture, the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o used a Marxist approach to denounce the colonial linguistic legacy in his *Decolonising the Mind* (1986). And in educational debates, Basil Bernstein's theory of "restricted" and "elaborated" codes attempted to explain the differential academic achievement of children from different social classes. In *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, written with Jean-Claude Passeron (1977), and *Language and Symbolic Power* (1992), Pierre Bourdieu used a neo-Marxist framework to account for the same phenomenon.