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Type or descent?

The Philosophical, Romantic, and Biological Sources of Typology in Soviet Linguistics of the 1920s-1940s.

Soviet linguistics of the 1920s-1940s has often been considered in the West either as a model of Marxism in science or as a victim of a totalitarian, oppressive regime. In the Soviet Union itself, on the other hand, linguists often insisted on the uniqueness, or total originality of their science, in frontal opposition to Western, «bourgeois» linguistics.

Is it possible to provide a more dispassionate overview of what Soviet linguists in fact discussed in that period? Was there then a mainstream?

A close reading of the countless papers and books prior to 1950 (Stalin's «intervention» in linguistics) surprisingly reveals emphasis on the problems of typology, unequalled in Western Europe or North America at that time. The concept of *type* raised the problem of *similarity* between unrelated languages, at odds with the genealogical explanation in classical Indo-European linguistics (explanation by descent from a common ancestor, or *proto-language*).

Russian culture has often received foreign currents of thought with a time lag, which results in interesting shortcuts or new hints in the history of linguistics ideas. One of these sources of inspiration can be traced to the famous discussion held in Paris in July 1830 between the zoologists G. Cuvier and E. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire. For the former all living species can be divided into four general types, which are totally closed and mutually impermeable, whereas for the latter they consisted in modifications of a general body plan (*plan d'organisation*). E. Cassirer (in his last paper, 1945) draw attention to the fact that many tenets of Structuralism in linguistics can be traced back to Cuvier's principle of «correlation of the parts».

I will develop the thesis that, as far as Soviet linguistics of the 1920-1940s is concerned, the clue has to be sought more in Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire than in Cuvier, around the theme of *idealistic morphology*.

Goethe was enthusiastic about this controversy and took side with Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire. Goethe was widely read in the Soviet Union in the beginning of the 20th Century. His attitude towards the concept of type and «metamorphosis» was discussed by the biologist I. Kanaev (who is *not* Bakhtin) and, directly or not, deeply inspired the discussions about the similarity of unrelated languages among Soviet linguists (and émigrés linguists such as R. Jakobson). The background of these controversies was Goethe's «idealistic morphology», reinterpreted and modified by such Soviet scholars as V. Voloshinov or V. Propp. In the Soviet linguistics of this period, the rebuttal of the arbitrariness of the sign, of

randomness in language evolution, the idea that everything is linked with everything (*uvjazka*), can be explained by the significance of Goethe's philosophy of knowledge for the Russian intelligentsia, as well as its local Marxist reinterpretation.

An extremely important — and poorly known — school of Leningrad Germanists, all pupils of N. Marr (S. Kacnel'son, M. Guxmann, A. Desnickaja) and literary scholars (I. Frank-Kameneckij, O. Frejdenberg) developed ideas inherent from Goethe and German Romanticism, always for the sake of Marxist linguistics.

I will try to show how Romantic idealism and Marxist materialism paradoxically combine and merge in the harsh discussions about linguistic typology in the Soviet Union of the 1920s-1940s.