

The Linguistics of the Lower Depths

Vladislava REZNIK
Varsovie

Abstract :

William Labov's 1960s research into urban dialects of New York's black ghetto was an important factor in ensuring a more democratic and inclusive approach to education in American schools. It did not only give rise to modern sociolinguistics but was also instrumental for policy makers and educational psychologists who admitted the language of the streets into American primary education curriculum. It has been argued, however, that similar research into social and, specifically, urban dialects was successfully carried out by Soviet linguists in the 1920s and early 30s, with direct relevance to literacy campaign and the development of universal schooling. Sometimes referred to as sociolinguistics *avant la lettre*, Soviet investigations into argot, professional, social dialects and jargons were conducted in a post-revolutionary atmosphere of upward social mobility and social inclusion. For the first time in the history of Russian linguistics, the official scholarship embraced a variety of substandard variants of the Russian language and gave a voice to the country's underprivileged classes. This article looks at the examples of sociolinguistic research by Soviet scholars, with particular reference to the educational policies and a broader programme of social legitimisation.

Key words : Sociolinguistics, social dialectology, language reforms, social dialects, argot, social inclusion.

INTRODUCTION

A hapless urban dialectologist in contemporary Russia may come under attack from different sides. Indeed, studying social dialects – including slang, jargon, argot, koine, taboo vocabulary and other sub-standard forms of language communication – can irk grammar Nazis and language purists, but can also fall on the wrong side of the law. In April, president Putin signed into law a Duma proposal to fight against obscene language [*'mat'*] in mass media. The use of *necenzurnaja bran'* [*'profane language'*] in print, on stage, cinema screen, television or online editions (even if only in users' comments) may now result in administrative offence charges and hefty fines. A still more treacherous research ground would be anything dealing with LGBT slang (a respectable subject of academic research elsewhere) – Russia's ambiguous gay propaganda law proscribes, *inter alia*, encouraging an interest in homosexual relations and publicising such information, which could potentially see Paul Baker, the author of *Polari – the Lost Language of Gay Men*, fined up to 100 thousand roubles, arrested and deported.

It does not require a Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (who commented on the obscene language law) to understand that language questions in today's Russia are as politically relevant as ever or, perhaps, even more so, as they do not only essentialise the country's cultural and social wars, but provide a comment on the general state of its democracy. The symbolic power of language makes it a useful tool in formulating the official policy on social inclusion/exclusion.

1. GIVE ME A VOICE : THE DEMOCRATIC ETHOS OF EARLY SOVIET SOCIOLINGUISTICS

William Labov's 1960s groundbreaking research into educational problems of children in urban ghetto schools attacked the educational psychologists' notion of verbal deprivation of children brought up in lower-class households, and criticised the institutionalised racism of American inner schools :

We came to the conclusion that there were big differences between black and white speech patterns, but that the main cause of reading failure was the symbolic devaluation of African American Vernacular English that was a part of the institutionalized racism of our society, and predicted educational failure for those who used it. (Labov, 1997)

With the help of empirical observation, interviewing and quantitative methods, Labov and his colleagues demonstrated that the seemingly

considered a taboo in the Russian empire, a blemish on the literary language, which could make little way into literary works, let alone become an object of systematic scientific research. An explanation is, perhaps, required here. Brilliant lexicographic work was done by Vladimir Dal' in his famous *Dictionary of the Living Great Russian Language*, published between 1864 and 1868. It thoroughly reflected the lexical wealth of Russian social dialects and outlined the enormous field of language facts that constituted non-standard Russian varieties. They were also recorded by writers in literary works. Thus, for example, slang and prison argot started to appear in Russian literature from as early as the second half of the 17th century and was collected in a number of scholarly publications in the 19th century, such as Putilin's *Conventional language of St. Petersburg crooks* (1904) or Popov's *Dictionary of thieves' and prisoners' language* (1912).

A culmination of this trend came in the form of a 1908 dictionary of argot by Vasilij Traxtenberg (?-1940) which collated examples of criminal slang from various prisons in the Empire. Edited and prefaced by Jan Baudouin de Courtenay, the dictionary received a lot of publicity and set a model for all future publications of the kind. It was not, however, a mainstream scholarly work, what with its author known as a crook and *aferist*, who served a prison term for swindling and had a personal expertise of the language he described. Even Baudouin, in spite of his fame and authority, remained to a certain extent a marginalised figure, with his Polish origins and liberal political views, an interest in Esperanto or support for national minority languages. In fact, Baudouin's editions of Dal's *Dictionary* which added to the classic work the afore-absent vulgarisms and obscene language, were strongly criticised. In other words, what little description or research of non-standard social varieties of Russian was done before the Revolution was carried out either in broadly theoretical terms (F. Fortunatov's theory of the external and internal history of language or Baudouin's conception of the vertical and horizontal stratification of language) or on the fringes of official linguistic research, by writers, amateurs or maverick individuals, and by no means represented societal acceptance or legitimisation of social groups who spoke them. In broader terms, the ownership of language before the Revolution was largely confined to the educated and prosperous classes, with the censorship apparatus and imperial academic institutions geared towards the maintenance of social and, indeed, linguistic order and propriety.

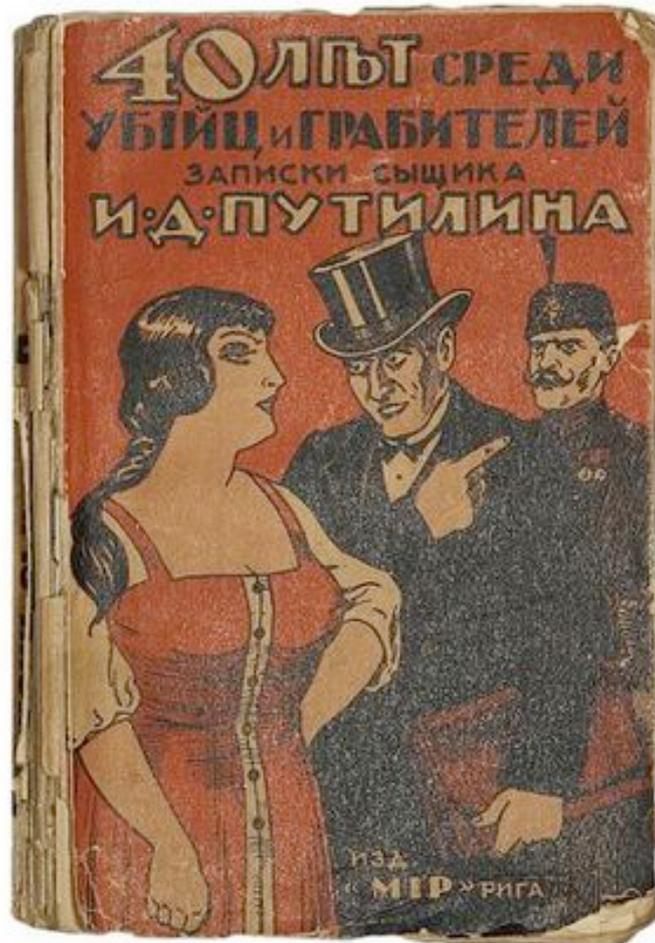


Image 2. Putilin's book *40 years among thieves and murders*³.

³ <http://gornovosti.ru/tema/history/sredi-grabiteley-i-vorov45198.htm>

For young Soviet social dialectology, shifting the focus of interest from rural dialects and the standard literary language towards city dialects became as much an ideological as linguistic task, with direct impact on policy-making (not unlike Labov's work). In the first half of the 1920s, as if in a response to Majakovskij's adamant complaint «ulica korčitsja bez''jazykaja» ['the street is writhing tongue-less'], the language of the street was admitted to education, immersing the «ivory tower» of the Russian literary norm in high tides of linguistic reality. The formal approach of the Moscow school to teaching language and, specifically, grammar became the leading method in Soviet schools and the tool of revolutionizing Soviet language education. In 1921 the formalists requested that the Ministry of Enlightenment (Narkompros) authorize their policy of teaching grammar and pronunciation in the local dialect of the pupils. Social dialects were also amnestied and entered the classroom from the street. Teachers were encouraged to use slang, proverbs, sayings and songs from popular speech in their lessons, remembering at the same time to point out its «aesthetically crude and primitive» character as compared to the beauty and richness of standard literary Russian (Smith, 1998, p. 113). Education was to be made more accessible, starting from the lower orbits of language and culture and only later moving to the higher ground of the remote literary language.

In 1923 an influential formalist, Aleksej Peškovskij, published his article «Ob''jektivnaja i normativnaja točki zrenija na jazyk» ['Objective and Normative Points of View on Language'] in the mouthpiece of Russian primary and secondary education, the journal *Russkij jazyk v škole*. Peškovskij, whose best known work is his treatise on Russian syntax, argued that the norm of the literary language is a consciously perceived linguistic ideal, recorded in normative vocabularies and grammars. Real verbal communication is by no means confined to the literary norm and, from an objective point of view, individual and dialectal deviations are perfectly justified and for the linguist present even a greater interest than the norm itself, just as a meadow is more attractive for the botanist than a greenhouse⁴. For this reason Peškovskij sincerely supported tolerance of dialects in schools, particularly at the earliest stages of education. Peškovskij's *Naš jazyk* ['Our language'] was an especially influential teacher's aid publication. Interestingly, and in the light of my previous remarks, the tolerant attitude extended even to criminal jargon which plagued Russian primary and secondary schools during the 1920s. Until recently a taboo, street language was suddenly everywhere, in Zoščenko's popular stories and proletarian theatre plays, in heated debates at workers' meetings, in children's street fights and daily newspapers.

This formalist and somewhat populist approach to Russian language teaching did not appeal to many linguists, and certainly not to all of Fortunatov's students. Peterson, Ušakov and Vinokur, in particular,

⁴ Peškovskij, cf. Alpatov, 1999, p. 231.

feared the contamination of standard Russian by dialectisms and defended the language of the nineteenth-century classics as the highest level of language culture, to which the learning masses must be elevated. Seliščev's treatise on the Russian language of the revolutionary epoch, published in 1928, remains an example of a particularly scathing critique. For Seliščev, an eminent Slavist, the socio-political circumstances in Russia in the period between 1917 and 1926 had had a largely degrading effect on the standard literary language, whose norms were dangerously neglected by huge numbers of speakers. It is important to emphasize, however, that the author saw his work as a result of the observations on language activity (*jazykovaja dejatel'nost'* or *reč'* to use Seliščev's terminology), or in other words, language usage in its three main functions – communicative, emotive-expressive and nominative – which serve to convey the oratory ethos of the revolutionary epoch, and its new socio-cultural linguistic practice. This aspect of Seliščev's work was overlooked by Vinokur and Larin, who criticized it from strictly linguistic positions for empiricism, heavy reliance on literary sources, failure to clearly differentiate between standard Russian and its dialects, and a lack of field-work data⁵. However, one may agree with Romanenko (2002) that Seliščev's work was not strictly linguistic, but rather philological in essence, as it was not so much a description of the Russian language, as a snapshot of the emerging language culture, its sources, messengers, norms, conditions and rules of mass communication. From this standpoint the book occupies a unique place in Soviet scholarship and is overdue for a positive reassessment.

To combat the language anarchy in the country, Vinokur sought to formulate the guiding principles of stylistic organization of speech in his 1925 book *Kul'tura jazyka*, which were to be followed by published media in the first place, setting a standard for mass language usage. On a practical level, this 'dream' of teaching the literary Russian language in its pure form was hardly realistic, due to the increasing social mobility in the country, which allowed students of all social backgrounds easier access to schooling and higher education. A reconciliatory approach was adopted, which recognized that a patient and tolerant attitude towards the local or social dialect should assist in teaching the standard Russian language, and that the correct usage of the language should be achieved through conscious comparison of the literary norm with a deviating variant (Smith, 1998, p. 114). As a draft version of Labov's appeal to change the ways of American education, Soviet educators argued on the basis of their empiric observations and scientific evidence that rural children and street orphans were no less capable than their more fortunate peers to learn the literary language. Teachers and the system in general were expected to meet those students halfway, to adapt the teaching of the higher standards to their native patterns and abilities.

⁵ Vinokur, 1928, p. 182-83; Larin, 1977a, p. 187.

2. GENERAL DIRECTIONS OF RESEARCH

Thus, a general emphasis on enquiry into social variants of the Russian language and the related proliferation of research institutions (especially under the auspices of RANION) was a direct result of the democratic changes in Soviet society and its upward mobility, on one hand, and on the other, by their practical exigencies such as mass literacy campaigns, drive for education and wider social inclusion. When Polivanov formulated his task for Soviet social dialectology as the study of the new emerging standard of the literary language and its social varieties, he knew only too well that such investigations had already begun in earnest. A characteristically distinct theoretical contribution to the issue is Rosalia Šor's 1926 work *Jazyk i obščestvo* ['Language and Society']. In another article of 1926 «Krizis sovremennoj lingvistiki» ['Crisis of Contemporary Linguistics'], Šor, one of the most persistent propagandists of sociological linguistics, maintains that the social variability of language arises from its expressive function (Šor, 1926 [2001], p. 64). Šor asserts that variability of language is conditioned by «social differentiation, and that language variants are determined by economic, cultural and social causes in the same way as variations in religions, traditions, customs and arts in different peoples». Furthermore, if a society is subdivided into distinct classes and groups, the language of this society splits into social dialects (Šor, 1926, pp. 34, 100). According to Šor, every group of people united by the same interests of production, develops its unique psychology and its own social dialect, whose professional jargon is often unintelligible to outsiders. She thus attempts to establish a concrete correlation between social and linguistic processes, and asserts that relationships between different social groups find their realization in the following linguistic processes: linguistic purism, euphemization of language as opposed to its democratization, and linguistic unification. While the purism and euphemization of language are relatively clear issues, the problem of language unification draws the author's special attention. Šor believes that the unification of language is only possible if there exist close ties between various socio-economic groups, and amongst them a certain dominant group emerges with a social aim of standardizing the language of the whole society. In this case, united social groups can consciously oppose the project and seek to retain their distinct dialects, even transforming them into «secret» or «conventional» languages, characteristic of criminals or various *déclassé* groups⁶.

⁶ A seeming contradiction between Šor's belief in social variability of language and the process of language unification, conducted by a dominant social group, is resolved in terms of the centrifugal and centripetal forces at work in linguistic conflict. In an antagonistic society social relations between its various groups and classes are governed by the opposing tendencies of national, social, class self-determination and of all-national, state unification. These processes are correspondingly reflected in a language.

It is necessary to point out here that in her otherwise insightful and informative analysis of the social stratification of language, Šor succumbs to a common methodological misconception of the time, regarding conventional argots and professional jargons as social dialects proper. In his 1928 article on urban dialects, Larin, relying on Marcel Cohen's views, attempted to draw a line between city argots and «special professional languages», which for Larin should not be considered as languages or dialects at all, being no more than «special professional terminology» and existing within the standard language or within a dialect of it. However, Larin admitted that it was not possible to make a clear-cut distinction between argots and professional terminologies because of their close interconnection in the urban linguistic environment (Larin, 1977b, p. 186). Žirmunskij later developed this thesis and consistently demonstrated that jargons and argots should be viewed as a sociolinguistic problem distinct from the problem of social dialects. He argued that they represent linguistic phenomena of a peculiar type, which develop within the national language or its dialects, possess special lexicon and phraseology and are used by the members of this or that social group, on whose social dialect proper a jargon evolves like a parasite (Žirmunskij, 1936, pp. 105-167). Hence, it is not possible to observe any phenomena of bilingualism, which was established by Larin as a distinctive argot feature. It is worth repeating, however, that in the late 1920s and early 1930s this distinction was not yet recognized (even when it was, as in Larin's case, it was considered to be of rather abstract relevance), and research into argots and jargons, understood as social dialects in the strict sense of this word, flourished.

Many of these works were characterized by a measure of determinism in their interpretations, akin to Šor's, when each socio-economic group was believed to have its own dialect, determined by common economic interests and the relations of production within the group. Unsurprisingly, in this period the focus of the linguists' attention was on the language of the masses, with particular emphasis given to the lexical system, where the peculiarities of the dialect were the easiest to observe. Specific linguistic inquiries were carried out in order to describe the language of the workers (Suvorovskij, 1926; Danilov, 1929), the language of proletarian teenagers (Dobromyslov, 1932), school students (Kaporskij, 1927), the language spoken by Red Army soldiers (Špil'rejn, Rejtnynbarg, 1928) and the argots of various sorts of criminals (Straten, 1929; Tonkov, 1930; Larin, 1931; Lixačev, 1935 and others). It is in relation to the thieves' cant that Larin and his colleagues on the urban dialectology project at GIRK conducted the most extensive research. Together with Larin's contribution to the seventh volume of *Jazyk i literatura* ['Language and literature'], which dealt with Western European borrowings in Russian thieves' argot, other scholars of the project submitted articles on Jewish, Turkish and Gypsy elements of the cant. Two more investigations into Greek and Romanian borrowings, as well as Larin's announced treatise on the jargon of Ukrainian travelling bards and

beggars were never published (Von Timroth, 1986, p. 22). An intriguing connection can be established between Larin's programmatic theoretical articles on urban dialectology published in 1928, and his work on the thieves' argot in the early 1930s. His views seem to have undergone a remarkable and to an extent unaccountable transformation, from establishing urban dialects as a third type of linguistic phenomena and asserting the social bilingualism of urban speakers with the primacy of the argot, to arguing, on the contrary, that urban argots were in fact derived from the standard language and constituted «secondary linguistic systems», superimposed on the standard literary language. One of the possible reasons for such an unexpected change of colours might have been the growing political influence of Marr's teaching, which declared an imminent merging of all languages into a single language of a communist, classless society. Whilst in his works of 1928 Larin rejected such an idea as impossible in a cosmopolitan, essentially multilingual society with many strong social groups, three years later, and at the peak of the Cultural Revolution, he may simply have become more cautious about openly refuting the new dogma (Von Timroth, 1986, p. 23).

Another possible explanation refers us back to the end of the previous section, where I have suggested that the country's new cultural and educational policy for maintaining and enhancing the purity of the standard Russian language, which was becoming increasingly important from the late 1920s, had already introduced certain reservations in Larin's articles of 1928 and would certainly influence the content of his later works. In 1931 it was no longer politically correct to promote and welcome social bilingualism of argot speakers, let alone to assert the primacy of the argot over the standard language, which was now a matter of the state's protection and a sure sign of the encroaching cultural conservatism of the 1930s. It was not long before the Seventeenth Party Conference of 1932 appealed to the Soviet government to begin the struggle against thieves' cant, street language, «hooliganism in language», «lispng language» [*‘sjušjukanie’*] and «narrow-mindedness» [*‘deljačestvo’*] in speech⁷. The level of linguistic degeneration of the country by the end of the 1920s was such that leading party intellectuals, including Gorky went out publicly to defend the classic Russian language. To educate a new generation of Russian writers, Gorky started publishing a programmatic journal *Literaturnaja učeba*. The fight for cultured speech was not exclusively an initiative from above, however. Mass literacy campaigns of the 1920s made Soviet workers and peasants aware of the social privilege of being literate. Semiliteracy, slang, low jargons were becoming increasingly unpopular and a target of ridicule for those large numbers of people who had successfully climbed the social ladder of Soviet society to urban jobs and the higher culture of city life. They respected the norms of the standard Russian and admired the work of the linguists who assisted them in

⁷ Cf. Smith, 1998, p. 148.

improving their lives (Stone, 1972). Smith also mentions the crucial role played by the advent of mass radio in the 1930s, which allowed the country's huge population to hear the dialects of Vologda and Smolensk, Pskov and the Don, Siberia and the Volga⁸ and to recognize the necessity of re-establishing and observing the inviolable standards of the Russian language. A great admirer of 'classical' Russian, Dmitrij Ušakov, who throughout the 1920s had pitied the decline of literary Russian, could now rejoice at the official return of his beloved linguistic conservatism. From 1932 Ušakov served on the All-Union Radio Committee, consulting with announcers and giving special seminars and training sessions to correct their pronunciation errors and other language mistakes, in accordance with the Moscow dialect, which had always been Ušakov's vision of the standard. In 1935 Ušakov completed another long-time language project, his *Dictionary of the Russian Language*, which together with the 1937 commemorative activities on the centennial of Pushkin's death, marked the final rehabilitation of the standard literary Russian language and put an end to the period of cultural and linguistic cosmopolitanism and street democracy.

3. THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA

Looking back at the current lingua-political situation in Russia, one may be forgiven for seeing a mirror image – or, in terms of the iPhone generation, a screenshot of what was happening in the 1920s. On one hand, the Russian language is living through a period of dynamic changes, adaptations and mobility, when the use of the Internet and the rise of social media inspire uncontrolled and uncontrollable linguistic creativity. Almost everyone today is chatting, tweeting, trolling, blogging, commenting and status updating in Russian, making use of its purely colloquial genres for written forms of communication. In 2013 Russian overtook German as the second most widely-used language of the internet after English (by the number of existing sites). The number of neologisms (*mimimiški*, *kreakly*, *poravalitiki*) is growing, as is the opposition to the pollution of the Russian language expressed by many public figures, linguists and otherwise. Similarly, one may observe an increasing pressure on the part of the state to formulate a dominant discourse on language and to establish a measure of control over language matters. The de-legitimisation policies covertly encoded in recently-adopted laws would not be so obvious if they did not chime with the tightening of the so-called *duxovnye skoby* ['spiritual braces'] and a general turn towards cultural conservatism and social exclusion rhetoric. Indeed, the scandal around the text for the Total Dictation 2013, written by the fine writer Dina Rubina, serves as a sobering example. The dictation text was criticised or even completely rejected as such in at least one Russian region. Among the explicit and implicit

⁸ Bernštejn, cf. Smith, 1998, p. 150.

accusations at the author was her Israeli citizenship, her insufficient Russianness, as indeed her predisposition for vulgarisms and obscene language.

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Image 3. Caricature representing a «Stalin's pipe», smoking *nepmans* and *kulaks*⁹.

⁹<http://gornovosti.ru/tema/history/sredi-grabiteley-i-vorov45198.htm>, accessed on 07.02.2014.