

**THE BATTLE FOR UKRAINIAN**  
**A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE**

edited by

**MICHAEL S. FLIER and ANDREA GRAZIOSI**



Distributed by Harvard University Press  
for the Ukrainian Research Institute  
Harvard University

The Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute was established in 1973 as an integral part of Harvard University. It supports research associates and visiting scholars who are engaged in projects concerned with all aspects of Ukrainian studies. The Institute also works in close cooperation with the Committee on Ukrainian Studies, which supervises and coordinates the teaching of Ukrainian history, language, and literature at Harvard University.

Publication of this book has been made possible in part by the Dr. Ivan Kindrat and Family Fund in Ukrainian Studies.

© 2017 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College

All rights reserved

Printed in the U.S. on acid-free paper

Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available from the Library of Congress

*Cover design:* Wilcox Design

*Front cover:* Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition*, 1916. Collection Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. Used with permission.

# Language Policy as a Political Linguistics: The Implicit Model of Linguistics in the Discussion of the Norms of Ukrainian and Belarusian in the 1930s\*

PATRICK SÉRIOT

FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC, languages exist as a given, and the job of linguists is to describe them. For most linguists who follow the Neogrammarian or even the Saussurean model, there is nothing else that can be done.

Nonetheless, the language situation in Eastern Europe challenges this overall simplistic view. In this region of the world linguistics, politics, ideology and collective identity are so intertwined that a study of the discussions on language can cast a new light both on local politics and on the local theory and practice of the linguistic science. This relation is little known in the so-called Western world.

I shall focus in the present article on the discussions about the norms of Ukrainian and Belarusian in the interwar period to illustrate my thesis.



Thanks to the works of George (Yuri) Shevelov<sup>1</sup> and others,<sup>2</sup> the history of the repression of the Ukrainian and Belarusian languages is well known. In the Soviet part of Ukraine and Belarus during the 1930s in particular, the norms of the language were changed in order to erase

\* This paper was written as part of a project funded by the Russian Science Foundation (grant 16-18-02042) and carried out at St. Petersburg State University.

“bourgeois influences”—that is to say, either Polish or too specifically local non-Russian words, expressions, grammatical constructions, and so on. This rather puzzling question has been thoroughly studied by specialists in history and political science. Linguists themselves have carefully described all those changes and their consequences for the speakers and for the prestige of Ukrainian and Belarusian.<sup>3</sup>

My present aim is different. I propose to analyze the implicit model of what a language must be in order to be changed out of political considerations. All linguists have learned in Saussure’s *Cours*<sup>4</sup> that the mass of speakers is but “passive” before their language and that it is impossible to change it by simple decision. Nonetheless, the language situation in Ukraine and Belarus seems to prove exactly the contrary: a decision from outside *can* change a language. But what are the linguistic arguments for the move from nativization (*korenizacija*) in the 1920s to Russification in the 1930s, at a time when linguists were arrested and accused of “sabotage” (*vreditel’stvo*) for having invented norms “alien to those of the Russian proletariat”?

This paper deals with the discourse on language in Ukraine and Belarus in the interwar period,<sup>5</sup> which is no less important than the *questione della lingua* in Italy for the construction of the state. I want to show that language policy is not only political linguistics in that it raises the problem of defining what a language is or ought to be. Doing so will help us understand why so many linguists were arrested, tortured, and condemned to death in the Soviet Union in Stalin’s time because of their definition of language, which further led to the great disaster of the physical elimination of the scientific cadres in social sciences and humanities in the Soviet Union during the interwar period.

### An Anti-Saussurian Model: Language Can Be Altered

What a language *is* seems so obvious that everyday discourse very often takes for granted that there is a natural link between a language and the “people” (*peuple, Volk, narod*) speaking it: the Senegalese speak Senegalese, and that is all. As a matter of fact, nothing is more ambiguous than the word “language.”

How is it possible to draw a dividing line between two languages, or to figure out if language A is different from or similar to language B, or



even to know where language A ends and language B begins? The problem is that languages are not given objects, like plant or animal species in nature. Let's take two examples of statements based on self-assurance and a total lack of argument, hypothesis, or means of checking:

- (1) Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian are *different*:  
 "The difference between the Russian and Ukrainian languages is significant and can be compared to the difference between Swedish and Danish."<sup>6</sup>
- (2) Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian are so *similar* that there is a perfect mutual intelligibility among them:  
 "In terms of immediate mutual intelligibility, the East Slavic zone is a single language."<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, no one provides the criteria for such categorical statements. The problem is that if it is impossible to know how many languages (and especially Slavic languages) there are on earth, it is because languages are not countable objects. Language reality is a *heterogeneous continuity*, whereas the political discourse on language deals with *homogeneous discontinuity*. Its object is the "national language," at times confused with the "literary language," and presented as "the people's language." It is therefore necessary to clarify this muddled terminology if we want to understand the meaning of the dispute on two intertwined ontological questions:

- (1) Do Ukrainian and Belarusian *exist*?
- (2) Are Ukrainian and Belarusian *parts* (dialects) of Russian or independent languages?

Only then shall we be able to understand why these questions, at first glance pertaining to linguistics, are in fact purely and only political. It seems obvious to many that the difference between languages is enough to draw a political border—this was the main principle of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919—but, in fact, reality is much more complex.

I think the two ways of thinking (Saussure's theory and language planning) are not as incompatible as they seem. The problem is that their object of knowledge is not the same. For Saussure, language is a construct inside a theory and not an empirical object, whereas for the

political language reformers in Ukraine and Belarus what is at stake is another object, whose name is *ridna mova* (Ukr.), *ródnaja mova* (Bel.), and *rodnoj jazyk* (Rus.). These terms are so strange for Western scholars that they are almost untranslatable. They do not mean “mother tongue,” because *ridna mova* is a matter of education: some school teachers in Ukraine ask their pupils to teach the language to their parents. In English *ridna mova* is often translated as “native language.” I once had a Ukrainian PhD student who told me “my native language is Ukrainian, but I don’t speak it, I speak Russian at home”; for her *ridna mova* was the language of her nation, not of her mother. Again, a Belarusian PhD student told me that on the population census forms she answers “Belarusian” to the question about her “native language,” even though she has not mastered it. The problem is made worse by the fact that at times what is at stake is *literaturna mova/literaturnyj jazyk*; that is, not the language of *belles lettres*, but the normative language that has been elaborated by linguists on the basis of texts provided by the writers of a specific region and a specific period. In this case it can be a synonym for *national language*, or *official language*, though it is not certain that anybody follows all its rules in everyday conversation. In any event, a literary language is *not* a standard language, and the latter term is very seldom used in Eastern Europe because of the pejorative overtone of “standard” as “standardized.”<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, this difference between language as it exists (the fact that there *is* a Ukrainian language) and language as it should be (the project of standardization of Ukrainian along such-and-such principles or political orientations) is not always recognized or taken into account, let alone with people being aware of it.

Let’s opt to translate *ridna mova* as “native language,” taking into account that *rid* can have the meaning of Greek *genos* or Latin *gens*: a collective, inherited identity.<sup>9</sup> *Ridna mova* is therefore the language of the lineage, understood as a huge family. But the problem is not solved yet: who speaks the *ridna mova*? Is it a *narodna mova* (people’s language)? In this discussion, what *is* is often mistaken for what *ought to be*.

Romantic linguists (Herder, Fichte) took as a point of departure that the world is divided into *peoples* (*Völker*), and that each of these peoples has a distinct language.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the German nation existed independently of a future German state because it had a language, *therefore* a culture. The idea of nation was entirely different for the French Jacobins,

who, on the contrary, held that a nation is the result of state-building, and not its source.<sup>11</sup> A typical obstacle to mutual understanding in the East-West intellectual relationship in Europe is the word *nationality*, which is a synonym of *citizenship* in Britain and France, whereas on the other side of the Bug River one can be a Russian by citizenship (*rossijanin*) and a Russian (*russskij*) or Ukrainian by nationality (= ethnicity).

The interwar period in the Soviet Union was marked by intensive language planning, or, more precisely, “language building” (*jazykovoje stroitel'stvo*). All the peoples of the Union were to have or receive a “literary language,” that is to say, a normative standard for education, media, literature, law, and science. But if a people is defined by a native language, what does it mean to *build* its literary language? In fact, though many attempts at purifying, or correcting a language, are well known (e.g., Cicero's conscious attempt to correct Latin, or Ronsard's and Du Bellay's efforts to enrich the French language with new words based on classical Latin), in the Soviet Union the language policy relied on a contradictory discourse: every people *already* existed because it had its own language (the identification of a people with its language is the basis of Romantic ideology), but at the same time the geographical and social continuum had to be divided into future homogeneous blocks (the case of the continuum of the Turkic languages of Central Asia is a typical example of this situation). In other words, the people's language was both a source and a project of language building. So what exactly needed to be “built”?

A peculiarity of Eastern Europe is an “intelligentsia” deeply cut off from the simple people (*narod*). A major stumbling block is that in this mixture of Romantic and Marxist arguments typical of the interwar period in the Soviet Union the language planners must “learn from the people” (*učit'sja u naroda*) (the people's language is the *source*), but at the same time they must “enrich” its language (the people's language is the *target*).

The people's language is never defined. There is hardly any mention of it being made of a dialect continuum. So the language builders in Ukraine had to decide to invent neologisms. They were divided on the question of loan words from Galicia (a territory that was in Poland in the interwar period and had benefited from a much more liberal attitude toward the language of the local population [*die Ruthenen*] under Austrian rule before the First World War). And above all, a burn-

ing question imposed itself: will the “people” (*narod*) understand this very (literary) language that they were supposed to be the source of? Very often the intelligentsia (that is to say, neither the peasantry nor the working class) strove to create lexical, terminological, orthographic, morphological, and even syntactic norms *for* the people, understood as the whole nation, but not *from* its colloquial vernaculars.

A literary language is thus the result of conscious hard work by language planners relying on the works of writers and poets. But very often the “literary language” is taken as a synonym for *official language*, which is a political, and not a linguistic term. Thus, nowadays, the Rusyn language (*rusyns'ka mova*) is officially recognized as different from Ukrainian by the Slovak government, but not in Ukraine, where it is considered a local variant of the Ukrainian language. No linguist can solve this dilemma, which belongs to the political field.<sup>12</sup>

This dispute can be summarized as follows:

- (1) A language has or does not have the right to exist as an officially recognized language (which implies that Ukrainian already exists as such, but it needs an administrative status);
- (2) A nation has or does not have the right to possess a literary language (which implies that Ukrainian as a literary language does not yet exist).

The ontological debate is a dead end as long as the terms are not thoroughly defined.

But the notion of “people” (*narod*) itself is not clear at all. Not only are its limits with neighboring peoples blurred, but its very definition is manifold. It can be considered as a national whole, comprising all the layers of the population (the Romantic definition) or as the lower class, as opposed to the bourgeoisie and aristocracy (the socialist definition). But in this case, especially in the period after the October revolution, the people in the socialist sense could have links of cultural and even linguistic solidarity with other peoples of the Soviet Union who spoke different “national languages.”

The Romantic approach, on the contrary, holds an essentialist view of the people, which is built on a series of postulates: that a people (*narod*, *Volk*) exists from times immemorial; and that all peoples exist thanks to their specific languages, different from the languages of their neighbors.

In the essentialist discourse, however, cause and consequence are often conflated: the Poles, the Ukrainians, the Belarusians, the Russians are different peoples, *because / therefore* their languages are different.

After this terminological clarification, we can now try to present a typology of how the language problem was handled in Ukraine and Belarus in the 1920s–1930s.

## Ukrainian and Belarusian: Parts or Whole?

### *Purism: The Ukrainian and Belarusian “People’s Languages” Are Autonomous Languages*

In the 1920s in Ukraine as in Belarus, the respective institutes of linguistics played an essential role in coining new words and regulating grammar on a purist principle: the people’s language had to be “enriched” by the intelligentsia on the basis of vernacular words in order to become an official literary national language.

In Ukraine the “ethnographic school” was the most engaged of the “national-democrat” movements (*natsdem*). The *natsdem* discourse on language presents an image of the nation as an entirely homogeneous spiritual totality in which there are neither rich nor poor, neither exploiters nor exploited, but only a chain of equations: one language equals one collective soul, which equals one nation, which then demands the right to exist as a state. This state is imagined as being without particular and contradictory interests.

We will focus for a moment on Olena Kurylo (1890–1946?), whose work offers an example of the huge terminological and grammatical “construction” of a language in the 1920s by the Terminological Commission of the Ukrainian Scientific Society. She wrote,

The People in its development can walk with a firm step only when its base is the living, native language which for centuries folk psychology has raised for itself. And the more the Ukrainian intelligentsia wants to be useful to the people, to deliver it from darkness, to raise its cultural level, the more it must use the Ukrainian folk speech; it should learn from the people to express scientific truths through its thoughts, its psychology. This is the only normal way by which the development of the Ukrainian literary language can proceed.<sup>13</sup>

In the Institute of Linguistics of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences Kurylo worked intensively on the normalization of Ukrainian literary, or written, language (scientific and technical terminology). This is a very classical example of language planning. But her normalizing enterprise also touched the very basis of the language itself; for instance, the relationship between syntax and stylistics. For some reason a very harsh discussion started about the problem of impersonal sentences in *-no, -to*. In the first edition of her *Uvahy do sučasnoji ukrajinskoji literaturnoji movy* (1920) she recommends avoiding such impersonal constructions if the agent is animate:

Such personal passive constructions as *Holovnu uvahu bulo zvernuto mnoju* [Primary attention was paid by me] or *Ce vže podano nym do vidoma* [It is already submitted to them for their attention] (i.e., such that they have an active person), which are abundant in the Russian literary language, are unnatural for the Ukrainian language; [...] the Ukrainian language is very fond of passive turns of speech, but only if they are impersonal, so that they do not have an agent.<sup>14</sup>

If the sentence has an active protagonist, Kurylo advised “to use an active construction”: instead of *Holovnu uvahu bulo zvernuto mnoju*, one should say: *Holovnu uvahu ja zvernuv* [I paid primary attention],<sup>15</sup> but if there is no animate agent in the sentence, “it is better to use impersonal constructions: *Knyžka napysana dosyt čystoju movoju* [The book is written in a rather clean language] ought to be replaced by *Knyžku napysano dosyt čystoju movoju* [the book (acc.) written (past neut. participle) in a rather clean language].”<sup>16</sup>

However, Kurylo does not explain *why* an impersonal syntactic structure should be used only when no animate subject is involved, or why the passive structure with an animate agent is “unnatural” and therefore should be avoided.

### *Ukrainian Differs from Russian, but the Ukrainian Literary Language Should Not Exist*

At first glance, the French linguist and specialist on Slavic languages Antoine Meillet (1866–1936) seems to have an incoherent approach toward Ukrainian. On the one hand, he underscores the very precise differences between Russian and Ukrainian: “Little Russian, also called

Ruthenian and Ukrainian, is a separate language among the Slavic languages, such as Polish, Czech and Serbo-Croatian. [...] Nobody contests that.”<sup>17</sup>

He recalls that in 1905 the Russian Language and Literature Department of the Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg, under the direction of Aleksej Šaxmatov, “proclaimed the current autonomy of Little Russian.”<sup>18</sup> He relies mainly on phonetic differences to stress that although Little Russian and Great Russian belong to the same “Russian group of Slavic languages,” there are clear-cut oppositions. For instance in declension, he states that “in Great Russian the dative singular is in *-u*: *zúbu*, *sýnu*, and in Little Russian the dative is in *-ovi*: *zubovi*, *synovi*”; and “Great Russian generalized *k*, *g* of the type *pekú*, *pomogú*, so *pekí*, *pomogí*, and Little Russian *č*, *ž* of the type *pečěš*, *pomóžeš*, so *pečý*, *pomožý*.” Meillet also writes that “the Great Russian *věk* has a totally different aspect from the corresponding Little Russian *v’ik*,” without giving any criteria to prove whether the two elements are “totally different” or not (pp. 405–6).

He also refers to cultural orientations:

Civilization influences, since the 12th century, are not the same on Great Russian and Little Russian. Linked to Lithuania and Poland, Little Russian territory is partly oriented towards the West; Little Russian borrowed many Polish words; Great Russian on the contrary, lived, during the Middle Ages, on its own resources and from what the Eastern Slavs had received from Byzantium. (pp. 407–8)

Although he never questions the principles he relies on, Meillet at times is conscious of the relativity of such terms as “different” and “similar”: How is it possible to state scientifically whether Ukrainian and Russian are “different” or not?

In a relatively conservative linguistic group whose component elements have so far diverged relatively little, Great Russian and Little Russian can be called different languages. But they differ among themselves much less than a French dialect from another French dialect, much less than Normand from Lorrain or Picard, for example, much less than High German from Low German, or Venetian from Tuscan. (p. 408)

But then he moves on to another plan, and starts discussing a very different issue; that is, the problem of a “language of civilization,” equivalent to the idea of “literary language”: “However, is it necessary to develop among Little Russians the use of a common language, a language of civilization as distinct from the Russian literary language, which is pure Great Russian?” The answer is clear: “It is unfortunate [fâcheux] to multiply the languages of civilization” (pp. 409–10).

The differences exist, but they are not an obstacle to mutual comprehension; therefore, “by accepting Great Russian, the Little Russians would not put themselves at a disadvantage” (p. 410).

And eventually comes the tight relationship between the *choice* of a “literary language” and (geo)politics:

The Slavic world is suffering serious harm because of the variety of its literary languages. The differences between the dialects and historical circumstances have imposed the existence of Russian, Polish, Czech, Serbo-Croatian, Bulgarian, thus making the relations between the Slavic populations difficult. It would be awkward to increase this evil unnecessarily. It is easy to see what the German bureaucracy in Austria wins in dividing its enemies, in facing an unimportant Slovenian language and a divided Serbo-Croatian language rather than a large South Slavic nation. But for the Slavs it is suicidal to dissipate their efforts. (p. 410)

It is impossible to suspect that Meillet had the slightest sympathy for the Soviet regime,<sup>19</sup> and yet he is even more radical than the Russifiers of the 1930s.

The Slavic languages of civilization are already too diverse; it is appropriate to divide them more only in the case where the local dialects themselves came to differentiate completely between each other. Such is not the case with the Great Russian and Little Russian. [...] Making Little Russian the common language, as seems to have been decided by the Ukrainian government of the Rada, is to impose on the urban population an idiom based on the speech of the peasants.<sup>20</sup>

The conclusion follows necessarily: “The Little Russian dialects differ too little from Great Russian to prevent Little Russians to take



their share of the benefits of the common language based on Great Russian"; and additionally, "to adopt as a language of civilization a special Little Russian language means wanting to isolate oneself from the world." Finally, perhaps the most important consideration appears at the end of his chapter on the western provinces of Russia, concerning the role of languages spoken by a large population for geopolitics, Meillet states, "Only Russian can constitute a mass imposing enough to balance the importance of German."<sup>21</sup>

Here Meillet writes in absolute opposition to his teacher Saussure, as the choice is between "adopting" or not "adopting" a literary language.

### *Ukrainian is a Part of Russian*

The repression of the Ukrainian language in the 1930s is not only a matter of Stalinist politics: some Great Russian émigré linguists like Roman Jakobson and Nicholas Trubetzkoy had extremely disparaging comments on the mere existence of Ukrainian as a separate language from Russian.

In 1934 Jakobson totally approved the new pro-Russian orientation of the literary languages in Ukraine and Belarus, stating that those languages are so close to Russian that it would make no sense to separate them: "A series of nonsensical spelling tricks were eliminated, whose only goal was the achievement of an artificial estrangement [Entfremdung] between the Belarusian and Russian spellings."<sup>22</sup>

The Russian linguist Nikolaj Durnovo, who was arrested after a few years spent in Czechoslovakia, stated in his deposition to a special commission of the OGPU:

For me, as a Russian, it was painful to see how the creators of the Ukrainian and Belarusian languages often cared less about the fact that they should be really Ukrainian and Belarusian than not being similar to Russian, and flooded them with Polonisms, Bohemisms, and even Germanisms unknown to the living language.<sup>23</sup>

The same Durnovo had already stated in 1924 that "the Russian language in the broadest sense now means the totality of dialects spoken by the entire Russian people or the Russian nation: the Great Russians, the Little Russians, and the Belarusians."<sup>24</sup> In the introductory course on

the history of the Russian language he gave in Brno in 1926–27, Durnovo speaks of “the modern literary languages of the Russian people, namely, the proper language and Russian languages, Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Carpatho-Russian.”<sup>25</sup>

*The 1930s: Moving Ukrainian and Belarusian Closer to Russian*

The anti-purist attitude of the Stalinist era has, with reason, been considered as based on the principle of Russification, but many scholars viewed this policy against the background of a torturer-victim relationship. From a sociopolitical point of view all of that is certain. But from a semiotic point of view, a more original feature of Stalinist discourse on language has seldom been noticed: a “fundamentalist,” bookish worshipping of the signs. It is this fundamentalist faith in a literal meaning of the words that allows one to understand the deep sense of Kurylo’s deposition during her questioning by the OGPU in 1939:

I see myself as guilty of having led an anti-Soviet nationalist line during the years 1917 to 1927, which consisted in the fact that the rules of the Ukrainian literary language were established in my academic work not towards a rapprochement with the Russian literary language, but towards distancing them. [...] In addition, in the terminological dictionaries of the Institute of Linguistics that I edited, the same kind of nationalist deviations were committed.<sup>26</sup>

In Belarus the situation was even more complex because of a stronger Polish influence through Catholicism. The controversy touched the question of the alphabet, which was not at stake in Ukraine, where the Greek-Catholic (Uniate) Church always used the Cyrillic alphabet.

During the six years of its existence (1922–28), the *Inbelkul't* (Instytut belaruskaj kul'tury) engaged in an intense activity of language planning, relying on the grammar of Branislaŭ Taraškevič (1918). The focus of this activity was the Conference on the Reform of Belarusian Orthography of 1926, in which Ukrainian linguists like Kurylo participated. Here, as in Ukraine, what was at stake was both a populist and a geopolitical orientation. In Belarus in the 1920s the problem of the alphabet had not yet been resolved. What will interest us here is the argument of its critics, formulated as early as 1929, the year of the “Great Turning Point” (*god velikogo pereloma*).

A resolution of the Minsk District Control Commission of the Communist Party (Bolshevik) of Belarus on 29 November 1929 states:

During the academic conference [...] he<sup>27</sup> issued, together with other individuals known to be national-chauvinist elements, a statement that demanded the introduction of the Latin alphabet into the Belarusian language. This statement, as a political act, an act of the orientation towards Poland, was directed against cultural relations between the working masses of the Belarusian SSR and the peoples of the Soviet Union. (From the decision of the Minsk District Control Commission of the Communist Party [Bolshevik] of Belarus on 29 November 1929)<sup>28</sup>

A more detailed picture appears during the interrogations of the Belarusian linguist I. Matiukevič in 1933, later sentenced in 1934 to a forced-labor camp and subsequently shot. According to the minutes of the interrogation, his efforts were aimed at the following objectives: (1) separation of Belarusian language vocabulary and terminology from the language of the working masses of Belarus; (2) very subtle introduction of Polonisms into the Belarusian language not to destroy but, on the contrary, strengthen in every possible way the barrier which in their time the counterrevolutionary *natsdemy* created between the Belarusian and Russian languages; and (3) if possible, and inconspicuously, to save archaisms in dictionaries and terminology, and also to insert provincialisms.<sup>29</sup>

Here the problems of loanwords mingle with the “indissoluble link” between form and content: a Russian term cannot be translated into another language of the Soviet Union, because it would lose the precise meaning attached to this specific word. As in the literalist traditions (Judaism, Islam, and partly Catholicism in deep opposition to the Protestant insistence that God’s revealed Word *can* be translated into all human languages), the key words of the Russian language based on Marxism-Leninism seem to lose their content if they are translated:

Ukrainian and Belarusian chauvinists, under the banner of cleansing language from foreign words, required the replacement of social terms, most of which are internationalized elements, by home-grown words, in which their social essence was etched or perverted. For

example, it was suggested to replace the word *bourgeois* by the word *vyrobnyk* (from *robyty* ‘produce, work’), which would make it possible to transform parasites into workers.<sup>30</sup>

This conception is based on a constant confusion of the terms “system” and “production,” which form a bipolar opposition: the promoters of the discourse on language, whether the pro-Russians or the pro-Ukrainians, do not distinguish between what is said in the language and the language that allows one to say it.

The whole world now is listening to the Russian word [*russskoe slovo*] because in the twentieth century it is in Russian that for the first time the best words expressing the dearest expectations and hopes of humanity have been pronounced, illuminating words on the happiness of all the workers of the Earth.<sup>31</sup>

This form-and-content obsession is one of the most peculiar bases of the discourse on language in Eastern Europe in the interwar period, and we will now see that the most extreme “revolutionary” system of linguistics, Marrism, fits perfectly within this framework of thought.

### A Third Way

Marrism was a quasi-official theory in linguistics in the Soviet Union in the interwar period. It stated, among other things, that there exist no national languages, that each social class has its own language, and that the meaning of the words of each language is determined by the socio-economic situation of the society in which it is spoken. In principle, this school of linguistics should have been at the heart of language planning in Ukraine and Belarus. But no such thing happened. Marrism never was a language policy, but a philosophy of language based on resentment against Western European supremacy in linguistics. It was very seldom cited in the Ukrainian-Russian debate. Nonetheless, it was an important issue in the USSR during the 1920s and 1930s. What did the Marrists have to say about the Ukrainian and Belarusian languages?

For the Marrists, there was no question of normalizing the Ukrainian language, since for them that language existed as an entirely homo-

geneous entity (they do not question its geographical or even social variants), but it has internal rules:

The history of the Ukrainian language is one of the most important areas of Ukrainian linguistics. Without historical foundation one cannot understand in depth and explain the internal rules [*zakonomirnosti*] that operate in the modern Ukrainian language.<sup>32</sup>

Marrism did not fit in the debate between purism and antipurism, because it focused on a different frame of thought: by refusing genetic kinship between languages, it allowed no room for any.

For Marr, Ukrainian and Russian are not sibling languages; they do not stem from the same proto-language (they do not have a common ancestor).

The proximity of the Russian and Ukrainian languages he explained as a historical phenomenon which has arisen not as the result of the disintegration of Proto-Slavic language dialects, but as the result of common social conditions and the economic structure of production of human groups that were the precondition for the creation of the Slavic peoples when there was no Russian or Ukrainian, or even Slavic, peoples.<sup>33</sup> Thus the Ukrainian language was said to be “hybridized” with Japhetic Caucasian languages.<sup>34</sup>

Ultimately the Marrists did not have any impact on language planning in Ukraine and Belarus. Nonetheless, Shevelov admitted that “Marr in his main positions had never been a Russificator and a supporter of oppression and centralism,”<sup>35</sup> but that his internationalism has been used “in the interests of Russia.”<sup>36</sup> He stated, “Marr was not our enemy. But his weird views rose on a soil totally alien to ours and we did not have and could not have any use for them.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, the Ukrainian-Belarusian language problem leads us into the dead end of defining a “Marxist-Leninist” linguistics.

## Conclusion

In spite of all the obvious differences we have brought to light, and despite the aggressive accusations that the others distorted their views, the adversaries share the same implicit principles: a language is not only

a means of communication, it is a collective identity. For all of them, the symbolic function is more important than the communicative function. Even for the Marrists, language not only *has* content, but above all it *is* content. All of them rely more or less, consciously or not, on the Romantic view that the words of our language are the content of our thought.

The linguists discussed in this paper do not all have the same object of discourse. Some speak of the language of the “simple people,” others have in mind an ahistorical expression of the “spirit of the nation.” Some, like the Marrists, on the contrary, deny any fixity in languages, even refusing the idea of a national language, but the Marrists very often speak of “the Ukrainian people.” Some, like Meillet, split their object of discourse into two radically different entities: the existing vernacular of the people (*peuple, Volk*) and the “language of civilization” to be constructed. But all act and speak as *experts*: they work “in the name of” the people they are speaking about, because they are supposed to know better. None seems to have thought of first *asking* the people themselves what their language is. Perhaps they did not want to receive the answer that was given to my group of doctoral students when we visited the Carpathian Mountains in Galicia in 2011: “*rozmovljajemo po-našomu*”—that is, “we speak our way”— or in other words, “your question makes no sense to us.”

Linguistics was a dangerous activity in the Stalinist USSR: one could be shot for one’s definition of “language.” But it can still be dangerous now, in the post-Soviet period, also for political reasons: the victim is democracy.

In this subtle mixture of Positivism and Romanticism, geopolitics is dissimulated under ethnolinguistics, sociology is replaced by ethnography, democracy by ethnocracy. In other words, linguistics acts as a fig leaf for politics.

I conclude this paper with some remarks about the role of linguistics. Democracy is too high an ideal to be dependent on linguistic determinism. People speaking different languages should be able to live together while being loyal to one state. *One* country, even one with a very strong collective identity, can have *several* languages (Switzerland represents but one example of this situation). Therefore, there is no necessary link between state borders and dialect isophones, because isophones do not overlap. Literary languages are political concepts, created on the basis of the idea of a state, but they are not the expression of the “soul of the

people.” National languages are not actually given, but are themselves *constructed* as part of the ideological work of nation-building.

Linguistics is not made for drawing political borders, and the communicative function of language should prevail over the symbolic function. It is possible to be clever or stupid in any language, hence, finally, *what we say in a language is more important than the language in which we say it.*

## Notes

1. See George Y. Shevelov, *The Ukrainian Language in the First Half of the Twentieth Century (1900–1941): Its State and Status* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989); Ju. Ševelov, “Pokolinnja dvadcatykh rokiv v ukrajins’komu movoznavstvi,” *Zapysky Naukovoho Tovarystva imeny Ševčenko* (Paris-Chicago), vol. 173 (1962): 309–32.
2. See the paper by Michael G. Smith in the current volume, “An Empire of Substitutions: The Language Factor in the Russian Revolution”; Peter Mayo, “Whither Modern Byelorussian Lexis?” review article, *Journal of Belarusian Studies*, no. 7 (1984), 50–57; Paul Wexler: *Purism and Language: A Case Study in Modern Ukrainian and Belorussian Nationalism (1840–1967)* (Bloomington, Ind., 1974); Paul Wexler, “Belorussification, Russification and Polonization Trends in the Belorussian Language 1890–1982,” in *Sociolinguistic Perspectives on Soviet National Languages: Their Past, Present and Future*, ed. Isabelle Kreindler (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1985), 37–56; Paul Wexler, “The Academic Conference on the Reform of Belorussian Orthography and Alphabet (Minsk 1926): A Unique Non-Event?” in *The Earliest Stage of Language Planning: The “First Congress” Phenomenon*, ed. J. Fishman (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1993), 31–45; Valerij Vasil’ev, “Le système d’information de la GPU: la situation politique en Ukraine dans les années 1920 rapportée à Kaganovič,” *Cahiers du monde russe* 22, no. 2-3-4 (2001): 245–62.
3. See the sources cited in note 2, as well as V. K. Bondarčik, ed., *Belorusy* (Moscow: Nauka, 1998); Alexandra Goujon, “Language, Nationalism and Populism in Belarus,” *Nationalities Papers* 27, no. 4 (1999): 661–77; and Michael Kirkwood, ed., *Language Planning in the Soviet Union* (London: MacMillan, 1989).
4. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (Paris: Payot,

- 1916); Engl. trans.: Ferdinand de Saussure: *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
5. In Moldova the situation was slightly different, because the discourse was victim of a double bind: the Moldovan language had to be distinguished from Romanian, which was too “bourgeois” because of its French, Italian, and Latin loanwords, and “incomprehensible” to the people. But the strange neologisms which were created during the period of “nativization” were still less understandable and could not be accepted by the intelligentsia. Here we are confronted with a difficult dilemma of Romantic linguistics that has endured since the time of Fichte and Humboldt: the literary national language is supposed to be the reflection of the “soul of the people” (the national poets have to “learn from the people”), but the people are not supposed to speak a “popular” coarse language; thus they must be taught the new language of the intelligentsia, a language which in turn does not correspond to the usage of the people, etc. This is a vicious circle, and the Soviet language policy in the interwar period was caught in such a trap with contradictions inherited from the Romantic period.
  6. Alfred Jensen, *Slaverna och världskriget: Reseminnen och intryck från Karpaterna till Balkan 1915–16* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers, 1916), 145, quoted in Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ukrainian\\_language](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ukrainian_language).
  7. C. F. Voegelin and F. M. Voegelin, *Classification and Index of the World's Languages* (New York and Oxford: Elsevier, 1977), quoted in Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ukrainian\\_language](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ukrainian_language).
  8. “The word ‘standard’ is unacceptable, at least on Russian soil, because one of its two values is ‘devoid of originality, of uniqueness; commonplace, stereotyped.’ Meanwhile, every literary language is original and unique.” Fedot Filin, “O strukture sovremennogo literaturnogo jazyka,” *Voprosy jazykoznanija*, no. 2 (1973): 3.
  9. In Ukrainian *ridnyj brat* means “(proper) brother” while *dvojuridnyj brat* means “cousin.”
  10. The first expression of the romantic theory of the nation can be found in Fichte’s thirteenth speech to the German nation (1808): “That which speaks the same language is already, before all human art, a whole that nature has linked beforehand by multiple and invisible lines. [...] Such a whole cannot take up a people of different origins and language and want to intermingle with it.” Johan Gottlieb Fichte, *Reden an die deutsche Nation* (Berlin, 1808), 408–9.



11. See Patrick Sériot, "Language and Nation: Two Models," in *Negotiating Linguistic Identity*, ed. Virve-Anneli Vihman and Kristina Praakli (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014), 255–72.
12. Eastern and Balkan Europe are full of similar dilemmas: who can decide if Macedonian is or is not Bulgarian, or if Serbian and Croat are one and the same language or two different languages, let alone Montenegrin or Bosnian? A student of classical linguistics is at a loss when confronted with such questions.
13. Report on the activities of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences in Kyiv for 1923 (On the occasion of the five-year existence of the Academy of Sciences: 1918–1924, Kyiv, 1924).
14. Olena Kurylo, *Uvahy do sučasnoji ukrajinskoji literaturnoji movy* (Kyiv, 1920), 17.
15. *Ibid.*, 18.
16. Quoted in Natalija Karikova, "Pro vnormuvannja syntaksyčnyx konstrukcij iz dijeslivnymy formamy na *-no, -to* (porady z kul'tury movy vid 1920-x rr. i do sučasnosti)," *Zbirnyk Xarkivs'koho istoriko-filolohičnoho tovarystva* (Xarkiv, 2011), 221–42; here 222.
17. Antoine Meillet, "Le petit-russe et le grand-russe," *Le Monde slave* 1, no. 3–4 (1917): 397–411; here 397. Subsequent references to Meillet in this section will be given in-text.
18. *Ibid.*, 400. Nonetheless, the same Šaxmatov wrote: "Every member of the Russian ethnos [*plemja*], whether Great Russians, or Belarusian, or Little Russian (Ukrainian), can call his native language Russian. He is Russian by birth and therefore will always be Russian.... Before us, therefore, are now many different individual languages: as many as the individuals who speak Russian. [...] Extensive language groups, dialects, are thus divisions of the great whole which is called language (of a people, of a nation), encompassing the totality of the individual languages, interconnected by similarity; this similarity in its turn depends primarily on the unity of origin." Aleksej A. Šaxmatov, *Vvedenie v kurs istorii rus-skogo jazyka* (Petrograd, 1916), quoted without page citation in Grigori O. Vinokur, "Kul'tura jazyka (Zadači sovremennogo jazykoznanija)," *Pečat' i revoljucija*, no. 5 (1923): 102.
19. In the USSR he was presented as a "reactionary bourgeois scientist"; see for instance Fedot Filin, "Na povodu u klassovogo vraga (Slova u dela Ja. Loja)," *Protiv buržuaznoj propagandy v jazykoznanii* (Leningrad, 1932), 96.

20. Antoine Meillet, *Les langues dans l'Europe nouvelle* (Paris: Payot, 1918), 257.
21. *Ibid.*, 258–60.
22. Roman O. Jakobson, “Slavische Sprachfragen in der Sowjetunion,” *Slavische Rundschau* [6], no. 1 (1934): 324–43, here 336.
23. Quoted in M. A. Robinson and D. P. Petrovskij, “N. N. Durnovo i N. S. Trubeckoj: problema Evrazijstva v kontekste ‘dela slavistov’ (po materijalam OGPU-NKVD),” *Slavjanovedenie*, no. 4 (1992): 68–82, here 79.
24. Nikolaj Durnovo, *Očerki istorii russkogo jazyka* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1924), 69.
25. Nikolaj Durnovo, *Vvedenie v istoriju russkogo jazyka* (Brno: Filosofická fakulta, 1927; reprint Moscow: Nauka, 1969), 11.
26. Quoted in Fëdor D. Ašnin and Vladimir M. Alpatov, *Delo slavistov: 30-e gody* (Moscow: Nasledie, 1994), 146.
27. The writer and public figure Z. Žilunovich (Tiška Gartnou).
28. Genadz´ Cyxun, “Institut belorusskoj kul´tury (Inbelkul´t) i načalo belorusskoj slavistiki,” in *Histoire de la slavistique: le rôle des institutions*, Travaux publiés par l’Institut d’études slaves 44, ed. Antonia Bernard (Paris: Institut d’études slaves, 2003), 45–55, here 46.
29. R. Platonau, *Lësy: Historyka-dakumental´nyja narysy ab ljudzjax i mala-vjadomyx padzejax duxoiñaha žyccja Belarusi 20-30x hadoŭ* (Minsk, 1998), 132, quoted in Cyxun, “Institut belorusskoj kul´tury,” 47.
30. A. Ja. Rožanskij, “Aktual´nye voprosy jazykoznanija,” *Russkij jazyk v škole*, no. 6 (1947): 1–9, here 5.
31. *Pravda*, no. 334, 29 November 1972, cited in S. S. Šermukhamedov, *Russkij jazyk—velikoe i mogučee sredstvo obščeniya sovetskogo naroda* (Moscow, 1980), 24.
32. V. Babak, “Pro dejaki pytannja istoričnoho rozvytku ukrajins´koji movy,” *Visti Akademiji Nauk USSR*, no. 3 (1936): 183–96, here 183.
33. *Ibid.*, 187.
34. I. Zborovskij, “N. Ja. Marr i ukraïnskij jazyk,” *Jazyk i myšlenie* 8 (1937): 19–48.
35. Iu. Šerekh [Shevelov], “Prysmerek marrizmu,” *Novi dni*, no. 6 (1950): 8–12, here 10.
36. *Ibid.*, 9.
37. *Ibid.*