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OFFICIALESE AND STRAIGHT TALK IN SOCIALIST EUROPE OF THE 80'S

Can linguistics help to study those countries, which, in Europe, were "socialist", and to explain their differences?

Of the various possible approaches, one has been little explored, it is the way language is considered in these countries. The issue of the language of political power, or "officialese" (in French : "langue de bois"), is indeed a hackneyed subject and it won't be dealt with here. The object I propose to investigate has been rarely studied as such. It is the alternative discourse to officialese, the claim to speak a language which is not stiff, nor dull nor false, but true and alive, in other words, "straight talk". So I'll try to build a typology of different Eastern countries based on the various works done on officialese, according to the standard image of the anti-officialese which can be drawn from these works.

This approach should cast a new light on former socialist countries, given one sees in the attitude towards the relationship between language and political power a reflection of political thought in the different countries.

The texts I shall talk about have been produced in different conditions, by various authors: linguists, sociologists, journalists, their topics also varies: it can be the language of the bourgeois opponent, the language of propaganda of the communist power, the language of bureaucracy or one's own language.

But all the texts have exactly the same object: they all deal with the difference between the wrong language and the right one, they draw a boundary between the other's language and one's own language.

This study will be about the image of the right language, or straight talk, as it appears in European socialist countries, and aims at estimating the distance between the authors and their object, thus following an approach inspired by M. Bakhtin.

I/ The other's language is another language

At one end of the scale we can find a maximum distance between the observed object and the observer. The object, though, is not considered from a neuter point of view, since it is defined as the language of the adversary, it is an anti-model and the authors' language is supposed to have absolutely nothing in common with it. That is what can be found in the book "Jazyk i stil' buržuaznoj propangandy" (Language and the style of bourgeois propaganda), published in Moscow not so long ago, in 1988. It is a collection of papers written for a readership of journalists by linguists and psycholinguists of Moscow University. This book does not really fit with the image of perestroika generally accepted in the West; unless this analysis of political discourse in the USA (the war in Vietnam, Nicaragua) and in Great Britain (the Falkland War) is interpreted as an example of "Esopian language", as Chernyshevsky would say, that's to say a diverted way of avoiding censorship in order to speak, in fact, of soviet officialese.

The book explicitly stands "in the spirit of new thought" (p. 5) and refers to Gorbachev's speech at the XXVIIth Congress of the CPSU in 1986. At the same time it shows an international situation of "intensified ideological struggle" (p. 9, 33). According to the authors, linguists have an outstanding role to play in order to "reveal the rules of the linguistic apparatus of bourgeois propaganda" (p. 3). They work within the frame of "marxist linguistics", which is defined as "a global approach to language, taking into account the indissoluble ties between language and thought, and the definition of language as a social phenomenon" (p. 9). The domain of linguistics dealt with here is "marxist pragmatics", which is supposed to unmask the "methods" used by propagandists in order to efficiently influence their audience's consciousness (p. 14). Pragmatics is here likened to a rhetorics and the language of politics to a language of persuasion (ubeždajuščij jazyk, p. 12).

An important consequence of a pragmatical approach is that every text of propaganda has a subject-author: the bourgeois propagandist (p. 72) and a specific addressee: the "audience", object of political exploitation (p. 67). All this problematics is extremely different from French theories of discourse, in which the "author" is disregarded as being an irrelevant category.

All the papers of this book rely on an opposition between "subjectivity and objectivity", which is supposed to be obvious, and focus their attention on the expression of subjectivity (which is defined as taking into account the speaker's interests and intention) in syntactic

structures of the texts of bourgeois propaganda. They note formal features such as the use of passive voice, subjunctive, impersonal constructions, modal verbs, imperative, presupposition, verbs of propositional attitude (underhand commentary), performatives (p. 25). It must be said that most of these features were already noted in the West about soviet or polish officialese. But neither in western studies nor in this Soviet book is the possible link between "subjectivisation" and impersonal constructions fully explicated.

Whereas to these Soviet authors modal statements denote the "instability of meaning", it seems to me that the alternative model of language, the ideal language of politics is the simple declarative final sentence in the indicative mode, that's to say aristotelian judgement... Subjectivity is thus considered as a "supplement" to this model statement (p. 30), and the speaker is but an "extra-linguistic parameter" (p. 26). All this is very far from Voloshinov and Bakhtin, for whom the "appreciative accent" is not a marginal element of meaning, but, on the contrary, an essential component.

Two reasons are given for this depreciation of subjectivity. On the one hand there is a loss of the referential function: "When getting through the filter of bourgeois ideology, the objective content of a judgement is distorted, subjectivised and often transformed into its opposite" (p. 19). On the other hand this loss is explained by the fact that subjective meaning is not "supra-individual" (p. 65, this is an expression of A.N. Leont'ev).

Both a non objective language and a "means of control" (p. 6), the language of bourgeois propaganda as studied in this book is said to have an efficiency which rests on its irrationality: it produces "a deafening effect (effekt oglušenija): man loses his ability to think logically, to rationally interpret facts, as everything is done to give rise to an emotional reaction, everything appeals to one's feelings, and reason is, in a way, disconnected" (p. 93). The efficiency of this language is also the result of a conscious and deliberate use of implicitation processes (implicit nomination, hints and understatements, p. 18) and stereotyped phrases (the evaluation of events is given "ready made", p. 89). Linguistic stereotypes succeed in influencing thought, because "words last longer than the meaning they express" (p. 22).

The book insists on the idea of manipulation: in bourgeois propaganda language does not function to tell the truth, but to make believe, and thus to make behave. Let's take for instance the use of metaphors, which are called here "false naming": after the Falkland war British propaganda strives to convince its audience that "strike is a war against the nation",

thus turning the strikers into an at home enemy (p. 194). Propaganda aims at forcing the listeners to react according to the interests of the propagandist, at shaping opinions and attitudes towards political events" (p. 5) and above all at making sure that this acceptance won't be felt as an external pressure, but as the listener's own choice" (p. 73).

I think that this way of considering the language of propaganda as a manipulation technique is based on the idea that the language is perfectly mastered by its users, who make conscious and wilful choices, to such an extent that they can "change the language" (p. 197), essentially by "semantic glides in the meaning of words, substitution of concepts" (p. 15), which are meant to introduce into communication the "ideologic semes" of bourgeois propaganda. The propagandist, as a cartesian subject, is supposed to fully know that he is lying and deliberately manipulating the language, which is a typical example of "double thought" (dvulicnoe myslenie). It is interesting to note in this connection that precisely G. Orwell is taken as a reference, and W. Smith, the hero of 1984, is considered as a model of a language falsifying propagandist (p. 61).

To see the language of politics as a deliberate lie, a false naming (for instance: he who calls the Contras "fighters for freedom in the Nicaragua" "perfectly knows what hides behind those words, in reality" (p. 68), all that shows a moral attitude towards double talk : it's enough to tell the truth, which reminds of the moral claim of another Russian: A. Solzhenitsyn. This attitude towards the language is based on the idea that a direct access to reality is possible, that one can give a nomination of reality in such a way that it can immediately be classified according to one criterium: true / false, or adequacy / inadequacy of words and things. The book gives many examples of false naming of reality by bourgeois propaganda, being then translated back into "true naming". Ex: "Soviet military threat" (=false) = measures of defence combined to peace initiatives" (true). This "linguistic distortion of reality" (slovesnoe iskaženie dejstvitel'nosti) is possible when language is used to convince and to impose false representations on true facts (p. 75, 168, 180).

It should be noted that, unlike "nowomowa" in Poland, the other's language considered here is not a language which is totally cut off from "natural language", but a dishonest use of natural language. So great confidence is being put into linguistics, which appears as a hermeneutic, meant to "unveil the speaker's ideological position in spite of his efforts to hide it" (p. 13), and the Soviet linguists have a role to play in "analysing the reflection of bourgeois ideology in the language" (p. 32), thus making possible a work of

"counter-propaganda" (p. 72).

Finally, the explicit claim of referential transparency (*prozračnost' značenja*, p. 37) allows us to sketch the essential characteristics of the alternative language proposed in the book: the "natural language" (p. 13), "language of the whole people" (*obščenarodnyj jazyk*, p. 31), is an objective language without a subject, made of simple declarative sentences in the indicative mood, and of nouns referring directly.

But the reasons for the efficiency of the language of politics are not really studied, in particular it is not considered whether the "listener" can, somehow, participate or cleave to a political discourse.

II/ The other's language is a bad language

There are many cases in Eastern Europe where researchers, in a more or less underhand way according to existing censorships, study the language of politics in their own language. It seems that, the more openly critical is their attitude, the less they admit the possibility of mixing the language of the power with their own language: their own language is not affected, it is a free space to be extended through struggle.

This is what can be found in a book by a Yugoslav sociologist, Slobodan Inic : "Govorite li politički?" (Do you speak officialese?, Belgrade, 1984). He proposes a "struggle for the language" (*borba za jezik*), founded on the analysis of the processes of "political talk" (*politički govor*), totally opposed to the "people's talk", every day language supposed to be directly meaningful and non ambiguous. Here too, the language of the power is made of "semantic glides", of "misuses" aimed at "hiding the truth" (p. 22). The most commonly used process is, again, false naming, when "black" is called "white", and inversely (p. 90). And although the language of politics is not called here "newspeak" (novogovor in serbo-croatian), the model shown in this book basically corresponds to G. Orwell's newspeak in most details.

The language of power in Yugoslavia is said to be a ciphered language, made of revolutionary formulas taken from speeches of the past, it is a "verbal magic" (p. 115), without any link to present reality. It is opposed to the the workers' "genuine talk", for instance, who live a situation of perfect diglossia, as they know the rules of "both antagonist linguistic systems" (p. 116).

In this book the alternative language is not described in details, but it is also said to be the language of the people, a true language, sheltered from contamination by the "fixed", "set" and past-oriented language of power. Neither here can be considered the possibility of conformism, of tacit complicity of the population with the discourse of the authorities.

A much more moderate approach is to be found in the text of a round table organized by TUMULT, a non-official journal of Cracow University (1988, n° 1), in which linguists, semiologists, journalists, historians and literary critics took part, whose title is: "Czy koniec nowomowy?" (Is it the end of officialese?). The discussion was on whether the language used by the present political authorities in Poland (język współczesnej propagandy) was now different.

This round table was interesting insofar as it showed that the researchers who took part in it were far from agreeing not only on the answer to that question, but also on the concept itself of officialese (in Polish : nowomowa, or newspeak).

Let's consider the role of linguists. Assessing the research which has been done in Poland in the last years, the linguist J. Rokoszowa considers that the strictly linguistic approach to officialese did not bring the expected results. She thinks this approach was a methodological mistake (p. 17) and that there is no specific feature of the language of political power which would radically distinguish it from the different types of speech acts used to influence an addressee.

C. Michalski, a "philologist", takes a similar stand point: Orwell's model must only be considered as a metaphor, because it has never been realised in practice: even in the worst times of stalinism, there never was an absolute control of private life which would show itself in language.

However it appears even in the text of this round table that nowomowa exists and can be described. For instance research done on the problem of co-occurrences found in the newspapers articles published in the 80s gave unexpected results. The word "ideology", for instance, appears only in negative contexts: "ideology" is always alien and hostile. It is the same for "the people" (ludzie): they "got it wrong", they "flare up with their emotions": J. Rokoszowa concludes there is a total "ideological vacuum" in official newspapers. The difference with former times is that now (that's to say in 1988) the language of political power is less "impersonal": the men in power (Rakowski, Urban) speak in their own name.

In this case too there is an alternative language: it is the "ordinary language" (język potoczny), which cannot even be reached by the language of propaganda. If words of the language of propaganda are used in everyday language, it can be only with an ironical distance, it is a fact of the "metalanguage" (p. 21).

A last example of criticism of the other's language can be found in a book called "The post-totalitarian spirit", published in Paris in 1986, written under the pseudonym of Petr Fidelius, by a Czech linguist forced to do a manual job after 1968.

The author proposes a thorough "philological" study of political propaganda in Czechoslovakia which consists in taking propaganda speech literally as far as its words go, and burst logical paradoxes. He reproches political opponents and intellectuals of his country with despising propaganda. He believes propaganda has to be taken seriously, and that it is not true that propaganda lies. According to Fidelius, "When the party official press says that "the party is the core of power" or that the task of trade-unions, as organisations exterior to the party, consists in carrying out the programme of the party, it is hardly possible to question the truth of this statement. Or when the newspaper Rude Pravo writes that the results of the party's policy "are everywhere tangibly visible", the impropriety of the style may shock us, but one has to admit that the author tells the truth" (p. 84).

For Fidelius only this close and careful reading of the words of propaganda can allow to get out of passive resistance. The main part of the book is dedicated to studying three key-words: people, democracy, socialism. For instance Fidelius analyses the "disconcerting polysemy" of the word "people" in propaganda (p. 275), very far from the "traditional meaning" of this term (p. 268). The expression "the majority position of the people" does not belong to arithmetic but to ontology: according to the case, the intellectuals are or are not a part of the people (p. 279). Similarly the links between the whole and the part are unclear : the whole can be reduced to the nucleus without the essence being modified. One thing remains clear for Fidelius: the Party is the master of words, as he is the only one who determines the extension of the concept of "people" (p. 269). Fidelius's struggle is a moral and philological resistance against "semantic about-turns", it is a struggle for a "correct usage" of the words, a struggle for "denotation" (p. 268), in other words, a struggle for straight talk.

III/ The dictionary of the language of truth: one's own language is a right language

In her article "Anti-totalitarian language in Poland: some mechanisms of linguistic self-defence" (1990), the Polish linguist Anna Wierzbicka proposes a detailed semantic analysis of the "anti-language" "spontaneously" worked out by the Poles to protect themselves against the totalitarian language of the authorities.

According to a view which seems to be common in Poland, she distinguishes between two "spheres" which never meet, these two spheres are "we" and "they" (in which "we" is the major part of the population, and "they" is the people who hold the power. For A. Wierzbicka this situation is more specific to Poland than for other socialist countries.

Here is her argumentation : manipulating the language in a totalitarian state produces an official totalitarian language, which itself entails an "anti-totalitarian language". It is the everyday, ordinary, or "popular" language. There is a total antinomy between the norms of the language of the State (the official sphere) and those of "spontaneous communication", in the individual, or private sphere. That is a typical situation of diglossia: totalitarian language versus anti-totalitarian language (as a form of "linguistic selfdefence"). Anti-totalitarian language is made of underground words and expressions, which "provide a captive population with a feeling of relief and liberation". These underground ways of speaking can be shared by everybody, they are therefore a social link. The underground language is a "national selfdefense against propaganda brainwashing", it helps to overcome fear, it saves national identity and inner freedom. For A. Wierzbicka an anti-society has formed in Poland as a conscious alternative to the type of society which was imposed to the population. This anti-society produces an anti-language, which is said to be "the mother tongue of the great majority of the population", even if the dictionaries don't take it into account. This underground language, which "expresses the values of society", is used to criticize the nomenklatura, which is by itself a sort of anti-society.

The anti-language, for A. Wierzbicka, does not concern only lexicon and terminology, but appears also in grammatical agreement and flexion: some undeclinable abbreviations are declined in the anti-language, others take a new grammatical gender. One can also observe a satirical use of russified Polish words. For instance the Polish word humanizm becomes mockingly "gumanizm", pronounced with a Russian phonetics, in the expression "socjalistyczny gumanizm", in order to show that it is only a parody of humanism. The

Russian word "načal'stvo" (the chiefs, the leaders) is used in the anti-language in its polonised form naczelstwo to refer to the management of a firm, with a strong connotation of despotism. The "purists" point out the risk of invasion of russisms into the Polish language, but for A. Wierzbicka this risk does not exist: on the contrary, russisms are an "antidote" against russification and sovietisation encouraged by the communist regime, it is an efficient mechanism of self-defense.

Another way of asserting the purity of one's own language is to be found in a most official book published in Prag in 1987 "Přestavba hospodařského mechanismu" (Restructuring economical mechanism). This book is a dictionary of the basic notions of socialist economy as they were developed at that time in Czechoslovakia. Presented in alphabetical order, it gives the correct interpretation of the words of one's own language, giving the exact limits in which a word has to be understood and used. This keen attention given to the semantical rightness of the words leaves us to understand that there could be another way of interpreting these notions, and consequently that a translation into the right language is so necessary. In this dictionary most headwords belong to the domain of economy: for instance one can find the word "chozrasčot", a phonetical transcription for the Russian word "xozrasčët", which refers to self-balancing accounting of the firms, or the word "vědeckotechnická revoluce" (scientific and technical revolution), which is a calque from the Russian. But other entries belong to a more general context, for instance: "information of the workers : an integrant part of the democratic style of management", "standard of living : the meaning of this concept is now relatively stabilized", "dogmatism : see revisionism", "information : a correct subjective image of the objective world". ...

IV/ Officialese is our language.

It happens that the authors of official speeches have a metalinguistical consciousness of their own production, and that the political authorities sometimes question their own language practice. But in this case they aim at improving the style in order to achieve a perfect reception and efficiency of the message, and do not intend to change the "language" itself. That is what can be found in the book Povejmo naravnost ("Let's speak right! : the linguistic

reflection of bureaucratic deviations in a worker-managed society and in the language of the mass-media"), which was published in Ljubljana in 1985. It is the text of a conference organised by a working group on the language of the mass-media, under the auspices of the Union of trade-unions in Slovenia. The principal idea of the conference is that self-managed socialism is based on "a linguistic agreement". This is why "it is difficult to understand how in thirty years of efforts to develop worker-management it came to a point when the language used by the organs and representatives of self-managed society is totally confusing and is a serious obstacle to communication" (p. 7). This book does not only mean to be a "struggle against individual linguistic weaknesses", but also a "preparation to reveal and suppress the social relationships that these linguistic weaknesses produce or permit" (p. 5). The problem is not only to fight against anglicisation or serbo-croatianisation of the slovene language, but also against its "bureaucratisation". According to the authors, the "language of self-management bureaucracy" is very far from the alternative language, which is called here "everyday language" (*vsakdanji jezik*). Part of the works presented in this book aim at quantifying this distance with statistical methods, by comparing technical, scientific, bureaucratic texts and newspapers articles on political life. They carry out word counting in order to calculate the percentage of abstract nouns, of passive and impersonal constructions, the syntactic complexity of sentences, etc. For the authors of this book, one of the main characteristics of the bureaucratic language is the excess of impersonal constructions: instead of saying "I announce the sentence to the defendant" the bureaucratic language will say "to the defendant is announced the sentence" (p. 9). In the bureaucratic language the speaker "tries to neutralize his commitment, in order to put off an eventual conflict to a more abstract level" (*ib.*). Other characteristic features are noted: great number of analytical predicates (*imeti mocan vpliv* : "to have a strong influence" instead of "*mocno vplivati*" (to strongly influence), the use of euphemisms (*negativni finančni saldo* (negative financial balance) instead of "*izguba*" (loss). The book proposes a certain number of remedies to "talk straight", in particular that one should call things by their names (for instance "a worker in the socio-political field" should be simply called "a politician").

This type of research is particularly interesting compared to the preceding ones in that it studies its own language. But in this case one's language is not questioned either, it is only considered as invaded by bad elements, which can be clearly identified.

V/ The language of another ourselves?

All the texts referred to so far have a common characteristic: whether there is a conscious resistance or a conscious propaganda, in all cases there is a clear opposition between "them" and "us". This identity of people through the language they speak can be described through a linguistic analysis, based on the principle that the "language" is a reflection of the history of the society. It can be thus understood that such an important role is assigned to linguists, a role which is essentially ethical.

However in these texts, whatever they are, one can recognize an unassailable idea : there exists an alternative language, which can be called "the language of the whole people", "natural language", "popular language", "anti-totalitarian language", "ordinary language", "everyday language", "genuine language". Even when the linguists are sceptical about the possibility of describing officialese, they remain absolutely sure of one thing: there exists a "true talk", or "straight talk". All these texts, in a way or another, propose a struggle program: "to reconquer the language", as Slobodan Inic puts it.

However there exists other works, which are far from this comforting manicheism, texts where personal identity is not based on a formally describable sociolect, but is taken in a game where the limits of enunciation are interwoven. And this discovery is not to be found in linguistic studies, but in a strange type of literature: the aphorisms which are regularly published in the newspapers in Yugoslavia.

Let's take this text, which consists of a single sentence:

"Our way is really unique: no one would have the idea to follow it!".

The strength and efficiency of this aphorism, I think, comes from the fact that the speaker's identity wavers, is shifted around between several interpretations, depending on whether the pronoun "we" is inclusive or exclusive, refers to a universal or specific speaker, or whether the first part of the statement can be attributed to a producer of official speech, and in such a case this statement becomes a diverted, parodic speech, into which fits the speaker's speech. In Yugoslav political aphorisms one absorbs the adversary's speech, but in its turn the latter invades one's own language, blurring the limits between both. In that case the other's language can get no name, it is no longer at a distance, it is a part of one's own language. They are us and we are them, between us there is one and the same language... In this apparent nihilism no solution is proposed, and certainly not a quest for straight talk. Nonetheless I think one can see here a quite bright approach of the problem of where the

other's language is to be found, both inside and outside one's own language. Because there is no refuge, no ideal place and no ideal language where one could be sheltered from the other's words. Literature often has the lead over linguistics in this domain.

It is certain that, after the fall of totalitarian regimes, the quest for a straight talk will take other forms in Central and Eastern Europe, if only because officialese in these countries is quickly getting rid of marxist phraseology. It is now too early to foresee which direction the struggle for language will take. Nevertheless one must keep aware that this struggle is not finished and that analysing the relationship between language and political power is a valuable key, even if not sufficiently studied, to understanding countries on the way to rebuilding democracy.

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