

Linguistic discourse of Stalinism: Environment and heredity

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The battlefield of linguistic policy in the 1920s to 1950s Soviet Union centred around two authoritarian figures: in Saint Petersburg the orientalist and active member of the Academy of Sciences Nikolai Marr, and in Moscow the dictator of the workers' empire Joseph Stalin, an honorary member of the Academy of Sciences since 1939. Both spoke Georgian as their mother-tongue.

Marr's "new theory of language," which was at times reminiscent of Medieval kabbalism (the descent of all languages from four original words, etc.), aspired to the status of the official linguistic doctrine of the Soviet Union between 1928 and 1950. Stalin initially gave it his endorsement. Marr explained the similarities between languages not through genetic relationships (language families), but by socioeconomic contact resulting in the intermingling or crossing of ethnic languages ("hybridization"), which gave rise to an explosion of new languages. The common features of languages derived also from the level of social development during which they emerged (the theory of stadialism).

In Estonia, Marrism had an influence on linguistics in 1940–1941 (Marr's disciple Kristjan Kure played an important role in this) and particularly during the heyday of the Marrist campaign in 1948–1950. Professor Paul Ariste of the University of Tartu suffered the most: he was forced to publicly promote Marrism in 1949 and then denounce it in 1950. Secondary school textbooks discussed Marrism above all in the context of the historical evolution of the meaning of words.

The second stage of the linguistic discourse of Stalinism began in 1950, when Stalin personally disproved Marrism, essentially re-establishing the tenets of historical-comparative linguistics. Unlike Marr, Stalin did not conceive of language as a property of the ruling class, but as a tool common to all the social strata within a nationality – a tool immune to rapid changes in the social order. Although everyone was now required to cite Stalin's "brilliant linguistic ideas," a more or less normal work climate had thus been restored in linguistics – unlike in literature and the arts.

The historical metanarrative behind this debate was the antagonism between heredity and the environment. Both Marrism and the "agrobiological" theory of Trofim Lysenko that had come to dominate agricultural science since 1948 challenged the emphasis on the genetic component in the cultivation of plants and livestock as well as human culture, regarding it as a racist and colonial mysticism of heredity. Lysenko drew on Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck's theory of evolution, which posited that the characteristics acquired by an organism during its lifetime and through the environment can be passed on to its offspring. This originally bourgeois notion was meant to contest the hereditary privilege of the nobility.

The rejection of heredity carried over to the socialist ideology, which contrasted racial uniformity with proletarian solidarity resulting from the social division of labour. Both Marrism and Lysenkoism wanted to liberate the society from "the

bondage of genes,” believing that physical and mental development can be guided by changing the environmental conditions. The fact that Stalin decided at one point to defend the hereditary traits of language instead can be explained in a number of ways, for example with the desire of an autocrat to remain unpredictable.

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