Language policy, language practice and language attitudes in the early Soviet Union

by JEFF HEMMER

This essay is essentially divided into three parts. The first part is going to focus on early Soviet attitudes towards the Russian language itself, followed by a discussion of the early Soviet policies regarding non-Russian languages in the second part. The gradual shift away from the liberal language policies of the 1920s towards the new policies emerging in the late 1930s, overtly imposing Russification upon the non-Russian populations, will lead us to the third and final part of this essay, in which the author is trying to identify a number of possible explanations for this development.

The Bolshevik coup d'état in October 1917 marked the beginning of what is nowadays often referred to as ‘the Soviet experiment’¹, the first ever attempt at putting Marxist theories into practice on a large scale. The swift and multiple transmission of revolutionary thought was of key importance in the process of building the new socialist order. In a country marked by widespread illiteracy, with rates approaching 100% in some regions², the task faced by the self-proclaimed vanguard of the international revolutionary proletariat was immense. The codification of revolutionary doctrine into unambiguous and powerful symbols, used in visual propaganda such as posters, art and political cartoons, was certainly of help in this undertaking; however, the function of language as the most powerful vehicle of propaganda and the ineffaceable link between literacy and the process of state and citizen building remained unquestioned. The Commissariat of Enlightenment was soon to start organizing literacy campaigns, participation in which was made compulsory for all illiterate inhabitants of the Republic between the ages of eight and fifty by a decree issued by the Central Committee in December 1919.³

Language was, however, not reduced to merely serving as a vehicle for political agitation and education. In any given society, language also functions as a means of reflecting and

¹ For instance, the expression became the title of Ronald Grigor Suny’s history of Russia, the USSR and the successor states, published by Oxford University Press, 1998.
shaping local/national culture and values, and the Soviet Union was in no way an exception to this principle. The language of the Soviet proletariat was to reflect the radical departure from bourgeois traditions and foster closer ties between the citizen and the state.\(^4\) Language was to become an important aspect of a new, expressly proletarian culture; however, agreeing upon form and content of this new culture and language proved harder than expected.

The discourse of revolution had brought a vast range of neologisms, acronyms and stump-compounds into the Russian language. The meanings of a number of Russian words had changed and foreign borrowings were frequently used. Substandard slang expressions co-existed with high Marxist rhetoric and bureaucratic terminology in a somewhat unusual stylistic mixture.\(^5\) This development turned out to be detrimental to the relationship between the party and the masses as many citizens found it hard to fully grasp the language used by the party organs and began to express mistrust toward the perceived “language of power” which seemed too remote from their own.\(^6\)

Many Bolsheviks believed that the solution to this problem was to be found in the creativity of the liberated toiling masses, a recurring theme in Bolshevik writings from the period, and advocated the creation of a new, proletarian intelligentsia which would express the views of the state in the “language of the factory and the farm”;\(^7\) As both villagers and urban-dwellers had strong peasant roots, it was believed that this form of social engineering, as part of a larger scheme called smychka (union, linking), could improve the link between the state and the countryside and would allow the “dark masses” of the peasantry, led by the informed urban proletariat, to participate in the construction of the state.\(^8\) One of the more productive attempts at this was the movement of worker- and rural-correspondents (rabset’ korovskoe dvizhenie), spearheaded by Lenin’s sister and Bukharin in 1918. Workers and peasants were encouraged to send letters describing their everyday life to newspapers, bringing the voice of the people to the state press. Throughout the 1920s, thousands of workers and peasants followed this call.\(^9\)

The worker- and rural-correspondents quickly came to be seen as the potential new breed of proletarian writers. They were urged to keep their language ‘fresh’ and ‘simple’ and

---

\(^4\) Ibid., p. 414.  
\(^5\) Ibid., p. 413. The adoption of foreign loanwords is not surprising at all considering the Western origins of Marxism and the amount of time some leading Russian revolutionaries had been forced to spend in exile in Switzerland and other Western-European countries. 
\(^6\) Ibid., 414. 
\(^7\) Ibid., p. 414. 
\(^8\) Ibid., p. 422. 
\(^9\) Ibid., p. 415.
were discouraged from using the register of the newspapers, which was perceived as too ‘intellectual’ and unnatural.\(^\text{10}\) However, the task of the new writers proved an ambiguous one as they were expected to be politically active representatives of the state, acting as an extended arm of central authority, whilst retaining their colloquial language, thus expressing the views of the common people.\(^\text{11}\) From this ensued a conflict for many writers over the position to be taken with regard to the state and the people and over the choice of register, often resulting in a combination of the two registers, in the worst case lacking lexical and syntactic cohesion.\(^\text{12}\)

Similar developments can be observed in the fiction of the fellow travellers of the early 1920s. These authors mostly highlighted the struggles of the peasant population to comprehend the language of the state, depicting for example the unfortunate use of the state language by a population which has recognised the power inherent in this language but is unable to use it in proper context.\(^\text{13}\) Some fellow travellers attempted to represent peasant dialects in their novels.\(^\text{14}\) This provoked a debate about when such *muzhikovshchina* (‘peasantification’) was appropriate. It was feared that, rather than promoting *smychka*, representations of peasant speech could create a gulf between the peasantry and the proletariat, causing urban-rural class conflicts.\(^\text{15}\)

Such concerns were echoed by Soviet sociolinguists by the end of the 1920s and the early 1930s. In a series of articles published at the time, lakubinskii put forward the notion that the language of the proletariat is defined by its “discursive method”, i.e. the mode of usage and the treatment of the material of the common-national language as well as the selection and evaluation of and attitude towards “facts necessary for concrete purposes”.\(^\text{16}\) This implies an understanding of the revolutionary terminology by the urban proletariat not shared by the peasantry, whose folklore was described by Zhirmunskii as “living antiquity”.\(^\text{17}\) In 1931 lakubinskii went on to argue that the plurality of dialects of the peasantry was contradicting the objective interests of the working class and had to be “liquidated” in the formation of an independent proletarian language.\(^\text{18}\)

\(^{10}\) Ibid., pp. 416-417.
\(^{11}\) Ibid., pp. 418, 420.
\(^{12}\) Ibid., pp. 420-421.
\(^{13}\) Ibid., p. 422.
\(^{17}\) Ibid., p. 218.
\(^{18}\) Ibid., p. 218.
The voice of the Russian peasantry also fell victim to attacks by language purists such as Maksim Gor’kii. In an essay titled ‘On the Russian Peasantry’, published in 1922, Gor’kii described the peasants as “terrifying”, “half-wild, stupid, slow-witted” people in desperate need of cultural enlightenment.\textsuperscript{19} As for the inclusion of regional lexicons in works of fiction, he found this practice “most depressing” and considered it “a bourgeois aesthetic at work”, led by “the desire to decorate an icon with foil, paper flowers, and ‘grapes’”.\textsuperscript{20} Gor’kii lamented the apparent “glorification” of the “strength of the muzhik” (peasant), which he considered a “socially unhealthy force”, pointing out again in an article published in 1934 that this peasant strength was precisely what the “consistent cultural and political work of the party of Lenin and Stalin” was attempting to wipe out. Gor’kii could not understand how the “heroism and romanticism of the reality created in the Union of Socialist Soviets” could be expressed using an “idiotic language”. Gor’kii linked style, i.e. authority in language, to politics, i.e. the authority of the state, and believed that there was a direct link between literacy in language and ideological literacy.\textsuperscript{21}

Gor’kii’s views were shared by many participants in the debate. It was generally accepted that the “language of the old village” was gradually becoming a thing of the past and that the contrast between the city and the countryside was vanishing. Thus, there was no justification any longer for representing regional speech in fictional writing, and persisting to include regional dialects came to be regarded as a form of “petty populism”, isolating the peasantry from the proletariat.\textsuperscript{22}

As the 1920s came to an end, attempts at ‘purifying’ the Russian language became more and more pronounced and successful. The initial linguistic levelling towards the colloquialisms of the language of poorly educated workers, which had come about before and during the revolution as a result of popular disdain for bourgeois speech and had subsequently found its way into modernist literature, was gradually reversed, even though constant campaigning against swearing on the grounds that it was disgraceful and a sign of bourgeois decadence were unsuccessful.\textsuperscript{23} The idea of the spoken language of the people developing into the language of power started taking a backseat as party officials shifted their focus towards the

\textsuperscript{19} Gorham, ‘Mastering the Perverse’, p. 145.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., p. 133.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., p. 146.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., pp. 147-148.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., pp. 134-136, and S.A. Smith, ‘The Social Meaning of Swearing: Workers and Bad Language in Late Imperial and Early Soviet Russia’, Past and Present, 160 (August 1998), p. 160. Swearing had been deemed acceptable before the revolution under certain circumstances as long as it could be identified as directed against the bourgeoisie. In general, trade unions and party leaders rejected the use of swearwords and attempted to ban it from the public sphere after the October Revolution, using it almost exclusively when mocking religion. The article by S.A. Smith is a really interesting read, highly recommended!
political education of the masses and the consolidation of the authority of the language of the state. Just as they had done not long after the seizure of power when the first ‘bourgeois specialists’ had been introduced in the Red Army and other economic and administrative bodies, the Bolsheviks now turned towards classic, essentially bourgeois Russian literature in order to instigate a new form of Russian literature using a more prestigious and sophisticated literary language, which was to be “national in form and socialist in content.” In 1931 the movement of workers- and rural-correspondents was reformed into an organisation of “commanders of proletarian popular opinion” in charge of directing public opinion “to the aid of the party and Soviet power”. Publications deemed to make excessive or damaging use of dialectal forms or colloquialisms were censored.

When the Bolsheviks took power in October 1917, they took over a vast empire composed of a multitude of different ethnic groups. The repressive agenda of Russification of the Tsarist Regime had sparked a number of nationalist movements across the empire in the course of the late nineteenth century. Lenin cherished the Russian language and entertained the idea of keeping all of those minority groups within the union, but the Bolshevik nationalities policy which arose from these considerations was fundamentally different from that of the Tsarist Regime and the Russian supremacists. In an article published in 1914, Lenin outlined his point of view on the question of a national language. Fundamentally opposing the concept of coercion, he argued that minority groups should be forced to acquire literacy in their local language. This, he continued, would lead to the different nations willingly accepting to learn Russian as a second language, which would open up the Great Russian culture for them.

Lenin saw the widespread use of one single language in a multi-national state as a unifying and centralizing power. The natural development of economic interaction would lead, eventually, to such a development. After the October Revolution, each nation was granted the right of self-determination and allowed to rediscover its national language and traditions. The 1920s and early 1930s were a period of korenizatsii (indigenisation). Voluntary resettlements were part of Soviet policy seeking to form compact ethnic and national communities in delimited

---

Particular emphasis was given to language construction. Intensive dialectological studies took place; alphabets were created for each language and a large number of former dialects which were now declared languages in their own right. The choice of Roman script at the basis of different alphabets was motivated by several considerations. Arabic script was associated with Islam and backwardness; furthermore it was also associated with Turkish, the language of a major rival to the south of the Soviet Union. Roman script on the other hand was associated by many leading Bolsheviks with modernisation and also offered the possibility to avoid accusations of Russification, which would have been likely had the Cyrillic script been used more often. Some languages with a well-established literary tradition, like for instance Armenian and Georgian, were allowed to maintain their original script.

The Bolsheviks foresaw the coming about of a world language in the era of worldwide socialism. In a first stage, all nations were to be helped in order to reach the same level of development. Russian would serve as a lingua franca, also used to fill the gaps in the corpus of the various languages. Neighbouring dialects would gradually merge into a zonal language. The various zonal languages would then gradually merge into a world language. Stalin refuted the idea of a world language in May 1925, but later returned to the concept of a world language. He stated that it would be a new language as opposed to an already powerful language like German or Russian.

On the other hand, Russian was attributed a special position, as it was generally seen as the language of enlightenment, and declared by Soviet linguists as a zonal language with unlimited prospects of expansion. Towards the late 1930s, a radical shift in Soviet language policy occurred. The initial linguistic liberalism was replaced by a sudden emphasis on Russification and the supremacy of the Russian language. In March 1938, a decree was passed which made the study of Russian compulsory and the study of the local language was made voluntary. This elevated Russian above all other Soviet languages as the most important of all. Furthermore, towards the end of the 1930s and early 1940s, Romanised alphabets were replaced by alphabets based on Cyrillic script.

---

31 Kirkwood, Glasnost, p. 67-68.
33 Ibid., pp. 86-87.
34 Ibid., pp. 97-98.
35 Kirkwood, pp. 63-64.
36 Ibid., p. 63.
As Kirkwood states, the motivations behind the sudden shift in Soviet language policy in the 1930s have not been satisfactorily explained to this day.\footnote{Kirkwood, ‘Glasnost’, p. 63.} It is certainly impossible to determine exactly why this development occurred; however, there are a number of possible internal and external factors coming into play which seem worth looking at.

In 1936 the \textit{Proclamation of the Stalin Constitution} proclaimed that the cause of socialism had prevailed in Russia. The forced collectivization of the early 1930s marked the subjugation of the “petty bourgeois” peasantry, the last internal class enemy left after the eradication of the nobility and the bourgeoisie. Within the party itself, the purging of political opponents which had taken place throughout the 1920s reached its climax in the 1930s. As Weitz points out, internal repression now shifted towards “saboteurs” and “wreckers” (Trotskyites, fascists, etc.) and nations which were considered to be “anti-Soviet.”\footnote{Weitz, ‘Racial Politics’, pp. 11-12.} In the first part of this essay it was pointed out that the use of Russian language became increasingly regulated as the written use of dialectal forms and colloquialisms was discouraged towards the start of the 1930s, and that there was a perceived need to consolidate central power through the strengthening of the language of the state. Weitz notes that the strife for political and social uniformity within the Soviet Union was complicated by the multinational character of the federation and that the ideological belief in the malleability of human beings was undermined by the existence of popular groups which were perceived to be resistant to this process.\footnote{Ibid., p. 15.} Ever since it had become clear that the Soviet Union was going to remain the only socialist federation in the world for an unknown period of time in the future, Bolshevik policies were motivated by the desire to build up a strong state and to consolidate the cohesion of the Union. If one chooses to accept the general message of the \textit{Proclamation of the Stalin Constitution}, socialism had been achieved in the Soviet Union, which entails that politically, socially and economically, the federation had been homogenised. Hence, it may be understood that the only noticeable differences within the federation were of a cultural or linguistic nature. Considering the various factors enumerated above, it does not seem far-fetched to wonder whether, possibly, Russification of the non-Russian populations was the last stage in an attempt to construct a homogeneous nation. Note that, in the case of the Russian language itself, the initial period of linguistic liberalism had also been followed by a quasi return to Tsarist language policy, an elitist approach marked by a thirst for linguistic purism.
It is also very likely that external factors came to play a significant role in the sudden changes in Soviet language policy. The inter-war period was marked by the rise of nationalism in Western Europe. The League of Nations failed to play a leading role in world politics and it is apparent from the foreign policies of the European nation states that, in the 1930s, it was generally felt that it was best to retreat and not to get involved too much in dangerous undertakings in foreign policy, as demonstrated e.g. in the cases of the Spanish Civil War and Hitler’s decision to occupy the Sudetenland, when the great European democracies chose not to intervene. The Soviet Union remained the only socialist regime on the European continent and pursued an agenda aimed at protecting its homeland (note for instance the non-aggression pact with Finland signed in 1932 and renewed for a period of ten years in 1934, as well as the Nazi-Soviet pact signed in August 1939 and the winter war with Finland in 1940, apparently motivated by fears of a German attack on the Soviet homeland via Finland). It seems plausible that the sudden change in the treatment of Soviet minorities was driven by an urgent desire for inner homogenisation in order to fight as a united nation in the event of an attack.

Whatever the motivations underlying the policy shift of the late 1930s were, it goes without saying that the two first decades of Bolshevik rule over the Soviet Union were a period marked by fascinating language experiments which, as shocking as some aspects of them may be, are well worth being studied.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Print sources:


Online sources:


Works consulted: