

Original paper UDC 1:81(045)

doi: [10.21464/sp32114](https://doi.org/10.21464/sp32114)

Received: February 7th, 2016

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Towards a Critique of the Dominant Philosophies of Language from a Historical-Materialist Standpoint

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to offer a critique of some of the main authors of modern linguistics or other approaches to language in general: Ferdinand de Saussure, the “founder” of modern linguistics, Noam Chomsky, one of the most prominent representatives of modern linguistics, and Jürgen Habermas, whose philosophy of language was an important part of his communication project. Critique here offered is based on an approach to language which considers its social character as equally as essential to it as its strictly linguistic or biological traits. It is argued that the dominant philosophies of language, analysed through the work of the three aforementioned authors, abstracted from this social characteristics of language in order to create a “science of language”, whereby language has become a static, synchronous structure with almost no connection to language as it exists in social reality. It is because language is inextricably connected to social, ideological, and political phenomena that Jürgen Habermas also criticised them for idealizing language and considering “speech acts” only those utterances whose goal is cooperation, but not those whose character is conflictual, as is so often the case in various forms of social dialogue.

Keywords

language, linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure, Noam Chomsky, Jürgen Habermas, historical materialism

Introduction

When one reads Aristotle’s *Politics*, one finds it hard to believe that Aristotle’s claim, made over two millennia ago, that the human ability to speak is inextricably interwoven with the fact that man is a *political animal* (Aristotle 1998, 1253a8–18) is so often completely ignored by modern scholars, be they linguists or the philosophers of language. Of course, hardly anyone will deny that language has a lot to do with living in a community, with social life, but when it comes to theoretically trying to understand language, this fact is mostly put aside. Language has been abstracted from society and petrified in an ahistorical structure, or made into an “inherent ability” to all humans merely “triggered” in childhood; it has been made static and void of any meaning or ideology; it has been stripped of all power relations implicit in any statement, even of the importance of the social and historical context within which it appears; it has been proclaimed rational and thus idealized, making irrationality and internal contradiction absent from it, etc.

Of course, these theses come from various currents of thought, and although some of the aforementioned claims do come together in some of them, they are mostly typical for one author or group. In that sense, I shall be following

the path of Jean-Jacques Lecercle in his book *A Marxist Philosophy of Language* (Lecercle 2009) where he begins from the critique of various interpretations of language in order to arrive to a proposal of a historical-materialist philosophy of language.

What is common to all the theories of language discussed below is either a *methodological individualism* or an *abstraction*, in differing degrees, *of language from society*. The former is an approach which sees the individual as being the correct theoretical starting point for understanding language, which then results in neglecting or outright denying that language has anything to do with society. It is typical in general for theories which claim to be “scientific” and put much emphasis on that claim, such as psychologism or biologism,¹ and in particular to Chomsky (with whom we will deal in more detail later). What is interesting is that even certain Marxists have succumbed to this notion: Perry Anderson, in his book *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, claims that

“... the subject of speech is axiomatically *individual* – ‘don’t speak all together’ being the customary way of saying that plural speech is non-speech, that which cannot be heard. By contrast, the relevant subjects in the domain of economic, cultural, political or military structures are first and foremost *collective*: nations, classes, castes, groups, generations.” (Anderson 1983, pp. 44–45)

In attempting to criticise poststructuralist approaches to language, Anderson ended up defending the naive notion, typical of all positivist approaches to language resting on methodological individualism, that since it is the individual who speaks, language is by definition an individual phenomenon, which has nothing to do with what Anderson terms “collective subjects”. But this is to remain completely blind to the fact that that particular individual learned the language within a particular society, social group or class, and that she speaks in accordance to those events in her life. It means to neglect that, by speaking, one is uttering the words of former generations, and is evoking an entire history of meanings and social processes.

The second characteristic of the approaches to language I shall criticise below is an *abstraction of language from society*. This is obviously connected to the first characteristic, since it ends up in the same theoretical blind alley, from the historical-materialist standpoint, as does methodological individualism. The difference is that these approaches do not necessarily start from the individual. An example would be Saussurean linguistics, whose object of research is language as structure, independent of any acts of speech or the history of language. It is the well-known notion of synchrony that is in the centre of this conception of language, while diachrony is proclaimed irrelevant for linguistics proper.

Both of these characteristics are quite similar, and entail what is in essence the *fetishisation of language*. In both cases, language is isolated from its social aspects and fixed into an immobile concept or thing. It is abstracted from society and reduced either to the faculties of the individual organism or to a scientific system – thus neglecting the fact that language is a social practice – which results in the impossibility of discussing concrete social phenomena in relation to language. This reflects a common trait or tendency of positivist sciences to “fix” objects of their research into a conglomerate of facts, systems, and static concepts, even when these objects are essentially indivisible from society, and thus all but “fixable”, since they are historical, dynamic, and full of contradictions.

Therefore, we must embark on a path of “defetishizing” language in order to be able to discuss language as a social practice and try to offer a historical-materialist interpretation of it in the end. In what follows I do not offer an extensive overview of the authors and theories I discuss, but more of a focused critique from a historical-materialist standpoint.

1. The Linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure

1.1. “The science of language”

Few will probably object to the claim that Ferdinand de Saussure’s book, *Course in General Linguistics* (*Cours de linguistique générale*), was the most influential book of the 20th century in the field of linguistics. It has influenced not only modern linguistics, but also authors like Noam Chomsky or groups like the French (post)structuralists. Critique of Saussure thus seems the most logical first step in building a historical-materialist conception of language which is, as will be shown, significantly opposed to the main presuppositions of Saussure and the remaining authors discussed in this chapter.

In his *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure divided language into *langue*, an abstract system internalized by a speech community, and *parole*, the individual acts of speech of the members of that speech community. The former is the sole object of linguistics, according to Saussure, while the latter is described as a potential research object for other sciences, but not for “the science of language” which should exclude speech from its research (Saussure 1959, p. 15):

“... the activity of the speaker should be studied in a number of disciplines which have no place in linguistics except through their relation to language.” (Ibid., p. 18)

Thus, language as *langue* is an abstract, “homogeneous” system, separated from the concrete social phenomena related to speech. The exclusion of these phenomena is necessary because including speech would only cause confusion in the linguist’s construction of a static research object:

“... my definition of language presupposes the exclusion of everything that is outside its organism or system – in a word, of everything known as ‘external linguistics’.” (Ibid., p. 20)

Granted, Saussure never *denies* the existence of social aspects of language: he explicitly acknowledges the role ethnological phenomena, history, politics, and social institutions play in the formation of a language (Ibid., pp. 20–21) which comprise the aforementioned “external linguistics”. But by making this distinction, and proclaiming that these phenomena should have nothing to do with the object of “the science of language”, he marginalizes what is in fact essential, and claims instead a constructed abstraction to be essential. This is what Jean-Jacques Lecercle criticizes as the “principle of immanence”, by which the study of *langue* is governed:

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I do not intend to go into detail on these two currents of thought, which today are quite similar and tend to intersect more often than not. The general tendency of both is to ascribe language to human being’s biological faculties, specifically those within the brain as the mere function of its nervous stimuli (hence the similarity). Psychologism will then talk about

the psyche which rests upon these functions of the brain, while biologism will rather go in the direction of neuroscience. One of the best critics of these approaches is the evolutionist Stephen Jay Gould, whose general similarities with a historical-materialist methodology are notable (cf. Clark and York 2011).

“... nothing external to the system of *langue* is relevant to its description.” (Lecerclé 2009, p. 10)

The effect of such separation of language into *langue* and *parole* is that

“... *parole* is nothing but individual variation on the norm represented by *langue*, with the result that the ensemble evolves according to its own tendencies and the system consequently ignores human history – that of the community of its speakers.” (Ibid., pp. 112–113)

What such an abstraction of *langue* from social reality neglects completely is that language is not just a system of symbols and internal rules, but primarily something representing social relations in general, and the relations of power between speakers in a concrete speech context in particular, which can be discerned from the specific style of speech a speaker utilises.

“To speak is to appropriate one or other of the expressive styles already constituted in and through usage and objectively marked by their position in the hierarchy of styles which express the hierarchy of corresponding social groups.” (Bourdieu 2012, p. 54)

By ignoring such problems and focusing its study on the internal relations of words, Saussurean linguistics only succeeds in creating a theoretical construct which does not exist in reality. As Bourdieu notes:

“The all-purpose word in the dictionary, a product of the neutralization of the practical relations within which it functions, has no social existence: in practice, it is always immersed in situations, to such an extent that the core meaning which remains relatively invariant through the diversity of [linguistic] markets may pass unnoticed.” (Ibid., p. 39)

What Saussure ignores, consciously or unconsciously, is the fact that every language is subject to certain conditions of its social production, which is what Bourdieu’s work is very good at showing in detail.

Finally, according to Saussure, *langue* should be studied from the point of view of *synchrony*, while the phenomena that are related to *diachrony* are, again, a potential object of research for other sciences, but irrelevant for linguistics proper. This is significant because that means that language as *langue*, for Saussure, is static, immobile and fixable, which brings us to another significant point of critique:

“... the Saussurean system has another major characteristic, encapsulated in the concept of ‘synchrony’: it is stable – that is, temporally immobile. It is not denied that languages [...] have a history, but study of it is relegated to the margins of science under the agreeable rubric of ‘diachrony’. But this ‘point in time’, as arrested as Zeno’s arrow and recalling the Hegelian ‘essential section’ criticised by Althusser, ignores, in favour of the system whose construction it makes possible, the complex temporality of real languages (a differential temporality, which is not the same for the vocabulary, the syntax, or the phonemes); and the fact that languages are never immobile but constantly subject to historical change, rendering synchronic description somewhat arbitrary.” (Lecerclé 2009, pp. 10–11)

This is an important point to note, because, in reality, language is crossed with multiple non-contemporaneous temporalities, be it the mere “double temporality” of every meaning of a word, which simultaneously summons the history of its previous meanings, and gives specific meaning to the current social context it was used in, be it the different temporalities for different parts of language, as Lecerclé notes, such as its semantics, its syntax, etc.² Thus, synchrony actually seems to be quite a misleading concept for the study of language.

1.2. “Linguistic value”: The word–money analogy

Since Saussure detaches language from living discourse, i.e. the social practice of speech, he is forced to find an internal logic within the “system of

language” itself. The strictly linguistic laws of language as system (grammar, phonetics, etc.) could not present a sufficient explanation for the reason why in speech some words and sentences are selected over others, whereby all of them confine equally to the same laws. In short, Saussure’s system as is would not be able to account for *linguistic variety*, the various words and expressions signifying essentially the same, and for the logic behind choosing one of them over the other during speech. Since locating this logic in politics or social relations was, for Saussure, out of the question (simply because the entire theoretical building of “language as system” would then crumble), he had to explain linguistic variety by another law internal to *langue*: linguistic value.

Linguistic value is founded on the fact that the elements of every language stand in a relation and are interconnected. A word always stands in a comparative relation with other similar words, and the value of each of those words springs from that relation:

“Language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others.” (Saussure 1959, p. 114)

Specific linguistic values are thus characteristic for each existing language, and differ accordingly from other languages. These values are the sole reason why some words are used over other, equally logical and meaningful words. Furthermore, linguistic value has nothing to do with any potential content of the words themselves, but springs purely from the relation with other words. After he offers several examples, Saussure quite clearly states that

“... we find in all the foregoing examples values *emanating from the system*. [emphasis mine] When they are said to correspond to concepts, it is understood that the concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not.” (Ibid., p. 117)

The reason why Saussure comes to such an untenable conclusion – value emanating from the system itself on the basis of the difference of elements of the system standing in relation to each other – which he terms a “paradoxical principle”, is because he conceptualizes *langue* like a capitalist market, where words are analogous to money.

“... even outside language all values are apparently governed by the same paradoxical principle. They are always composed: (1) of a dissimilar thing that can be exchanged for the thing of which the value is to be determined; and (2) of similar things that can be compared with the thing of which the value is to be determined.” (Ibid., p. 115)

Saussure then proceeds to give an example of five francs that can be exchanged for an amount of bread of the same value, as well as that “it can be compared with a similar value of the same system, e.g. a one-franc piece, or with coins of another system (a dollar, etc.)” (Ibid.). Words, he continues, are exchanged in fundamentally the same manner.

Even taken by itself, this analogy is quite problematic, but when one takes into account Saussure’s fundamental misunderstanding of the economy, the analogy and the concept of linguistic value itself lose all plausibility. Saussure sees money as a universal form characteristic of all economies, and, further-

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The concept of universal linear time is something Saussurean linguistics shares with most of positivist sciences within capitalism, which

is a result of capitalism itself (Cf. Bensaïd 2009, Part I and III).

more, he does not understand that money is only the universal expression of value created by *labour* – which was already a theoretical advance of the classical political economy of Ricardo and his labour theory of value (McNally 2001, p. 52). His inability to see the social roots of value expressed in money as its universal form is therefore ironically analogous to his inability to see the social roots of language. For him, both the value of money, as well as the linguistic value of words emanate from the economic, that is, linguistic systems themselves, respectively.

“By taking money as a universal feature of all economies, Saussure cannot derive it from a specific social form of labor. And the same thing is true for his analysis of language. The pure form of language – the language system – floats detached from speech and discourse, just as the pure form of exchange – money – remains disconnected from the rudimentary elements of economic life. As a result, he is reduced to empty propositions of the sort that characterize vulgar economics: ‘language is speech less speaking’; ‘language is a system of pure values’; ‘in language there are only differences’; ‘language is a form and not a substance’ (CGL, 77, 80, 120, 122). These are textbook examples of abstraction of the formal features of a system from the concrete social relations that animate them.” (Ibid.)

Saussure reproduces the fetishism of capitalist society in general, and of classic economics in particular, in his linguistics and the theory of language as system. Both find laws which emanate from within the system itself and do not notice the fundamental roots of economic and linguistic realities in society, and in various forms of social practice.

“Saussure’s notion of linguistic value is imbued with the formalist abstractions of the capitalist economy, indeed with some of its most fetishized appearances. Saussure’s claim that ‘language is a form and not a substance’ mirrors a central feature of the capitalist economy: that things have value not because of their concrete, useful characteristics, but because of their exchangeability with other units of abstract human labor.” (Ibid., p. 54)

As McNally notes, this “inverted logic” is Marx’s primary focus in *Capital* (Ibid, p. 52).

The concept of linguistic value and the analogy of capitalist market = language as system, as well as words = money is untenable because of the fundamentally misguided presuppositions they imply. They succumb to an evident form of fetishism, whereby the social roots of phenomena, that are the object of research, are completely abstracted from, and no version of a theory of language which would rest upon such an analogy can be free of those flaws, be it the poststructuralist version of Jacques Derrida,³ or the Marxist version of Ferruccio Rossi-Landi.⁴

1.3. *Historicizing Saussure*

One might claim that this critique is too harsh on Saussure. After all, he was a linguist, and what he was trying to do with the main theses in the *Course* was in part influenced by the historical context of theoretical knowledge of his time. As Peter Ives notes, “much of European linguistics at the time of Saussure’s death focused on tracing the history of word forms and attempting to determine the patterns in these changes” (Ives 2004, p. 17), which was called “diachronic change”. Saussure’s *Course* is actually a rebellious reaction against this tradition which was preventing linguistics from becoming a science by making it impossible – within the theoretical confines of this old tradition – to delineate a “fixed” object of study (which seems to be the ultimate criteria of “scientificity” of theories up to this day). In short, “Saussure argued that such an approach could never be truly scientific because it could never isolate language as a decisive object of study” (Ibid.).

That is the reason why the following had happened:

“[Saussure] argued that for linguistics to separate itself from other sciences such as psychology, anthropology and philology, it must take the systemic element of language as its primary focus.” (Ibid.)

It is by “systematizing” language, fixing it, and removing all irrelevant phenomena out of it (history, change, “how language is used in practice”), that linguistics will obtain an “object of study” and finally become “scientific” (Ibid.). If that was what was necessary to finally enable linguistics to “scientifically” research the relations of signifiers and signifieds within the newly born “structure” of language, we might say: fair enough. But the criticism I elaborated above is still applicable; if nothing else, there remains a fundamental contradiction within such a linguistics, as Saussure explicitly acknowledges the effects society, history, politics, etc. have on language, but at the same time, he marginalizes these factors, and these phenomena to the “un-scientific” parts of “external” linguistics and proclaims them irrelevant for the “science of language”.

It is not a coincidence that Saussure’s theory gave birth to structuralism, and later on, poststructuralism, which epitomise this tendency of “scientific abstraction” of their object of study from the real world.⁵

“Post-structuralists have had little quarrel with [Saussure’s] initial methodological moves. In their search for structures, discourses, texts and codes independent of human actors, they have retained Saussure’s formalist abstractionism.” (McNally 2001, p. 47)

Pierre Bourdieu beautifully describes this theoretical heritage of Saussure’s linguistics:

“The entire destiny of modern linguistics is in fact determined by Saussure’s inaugural act through which he separates the ‘external’ elements of linguistics from the ‘internal’ elements, and, by reserving the title of linguistics for the latter, excludes from it all the investigations which establish a relationship between language and anthropology, the political history of those who speak it, or even the geography of the domain where it is spoken, because all of these things add nothing to a knowledge of language taken in itself. Given that it sprang from the autonomy attributed to language in relation to its social conditions of production, reproduction and use, structural linguistics could not become the dominant social science without exercising an ideological effect, by bestowing the appearance of scientificity on the naturalization of the products of history, that is, on symbolic objects.” (Bourdieu 2012, p. 33)

Likewise, it is an irony of theoretical history, as Ives notes, “that linguistic structuralism based on this demarcation of ‘objects of study’ was incorporated into anthropology and the other social sciences whose domains are not lan-

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Derrida sees not only language as analogous to economy, but also the relations between subjects analogous to economic relations. “The economy of the subject is an economy of calculation, of balance sheets, of credits and debts, of what one owes and is owed in turn. It follows, then, that subjects are capitalists, calculators intent upon being paid back with interest. And since subjects are constituted in and through language for Derrida, language too must be a system of calculation, a capitalist system.” (McNally 2001, p. 61)

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Although Rossi-Landi, unlike Saussure, founds linguistic value on the basis of language be-

ing “linguistic work”, so that linguistic value does not emerge from the linguistic system itself, his theory still “models language on the capitalist market – and thereby commits the same error that plagues Saussure” (McNally 2001, p. 55). For Rossi-Landi’s work, see: Rossi-Landi 1983, particularly chapter 2.

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For a succinct critique of structuralism and poststructuralism, see the already mentioned book of Perry Anderson 1983. Also cf. Jameson 1974.

guage” (Ives 2004, p. 17). which was directly opposite of Saussure’s intention of separating linguistics from other sciences.

Thus, what Saussure’s theory offers is a conception of language which searches for the key for understanding language in its abstraction from reality, from all the phenomena which – from a historical-materialist standpoint – are fundamental for language, and without which language is not the living social process of everyday life, which participates in the creation of concepts and ideas, in class conflict, in culture, etc.

“Saussure’s structuralism contained the idea that underneath the actual manifestation of phenomena was a ‘hidden’ structure. Because Saussure saw individual utterances as secondary to, and generated by, the system of language (which was not obviously apparent), the actions of individuals came to be seen as mere superficial occurrences, whereas real understanding came from uncovering the underlying structures.” (Ibid., p. 21)

Given his aforementioned theoretical intention of finally founding linguistics scientifically, perhaps Saussure’s omission is “reasonable” (Ibid., p.19) (although even that is questionable). But the fact remains that Saussure offers a picture of a dead language, while we are interested solely in a living one. We can say, with David McNally, that for Saussure

“... language is speech dematerialized and dehistoricized, speech stripped of its entanglement in the bodies and lives of real historical actors.” (McNally 2001, p. 47)

1.4. Voloshinov and Bakhtin on Saussurean linguistics

When discussing Saussurean linguistics, especially in regard to a historical-materialist approach to language, we should not forget about Valentin Voloshinov’s critique of Saussure, probably one of the first from the Marxist current of thought. In his book *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*,⁶ Voloshinov situates the linguistic theory of Saussure within what he terms “abstract objectivism”. His critique can be summarized as follows:

“... language is not a stable system of self-identical forms, but a system of signs adaptable to ever-new contexts. Utterances are not individual acts complete in themselves, but links in a chain of discursive communication that is in the process of becoming. Language is a historically developing phenomenon rather than an arrested static system. The Saussurean approach ignores the compositional forms of the whole utterance in favour of an abstract understanding of the elements of language. The meaning of a word derives entirely from its (verbal and extraverbal) context and it maintains an evaluative accent in use, something that is ignored by Saussure. Language is not a ready-made product that is handed down but an enduring part of the stream of verbal communication. The system of language and its historical evolution are incapable of being reconciled by a Saussurean approach.

In addition, Voloshinov holds that Saussure’s approach, which values a synchronic national-linguistic unity (langue), easily coalesces with oppressive political power. It derives from the tradition of Indo-European linguistics that prized a scholastic study of ‘dead languages’ over a more egalitarian study of vital and interactive living discourse.” (Brandist 2002, pp. 80–81)

The points Voloshinov makes summarize everything that was pointed out in this part of the paper as the faults of the Saussurean language-system. To this we can add Bakhtin’s critique:

“Linguistics, stylistics and the philosophy of language (...) have sought first and foremost for *unity* in diversity. This exclusive ‘orientation toward unity’ in the present and past life of languages has concentrated the attention of philosophical and linguistic thought on the firmest, most stable, least changeable and most mono-semantic aspects of discourse – on the phonetic aspects first of all – that are furthest removed from the changing socio-semantic spheres of discourse.” (Bakhtin 2008, p. 274)

Both of these quotes, especially the one from Bakhtin, point to what I consider one of the primary arguments for the sociality of language. Language is social because it manifests and unfolds *in dialogue*; because through dialogue, language is a social process. That is why saying with Saussure that language is social merely because it is a social product is not at all enough (and misses the point), although that as well is important.

There is one point I wish to focus on a bit more, and offer some additional input into what Voloshinov considers the reason of such an approach to language within linguistics: the “scholastic study of ‘dead languages’”. Voloshinov evokes this thesis when he writes about the “abstract objectivist” mode of linguistic thought (which is the Saussurean one):

“... at the basis of the modes of linguistic thought that lead to the postulation of language as a system of normatively identical forms lies a *practical and theoretical focus of attention on the study of defunct, alien languages preserved in written monuments.*” (Voloshinov 1986, p. 71)

I think Voloshinov slightly overemphasizes the “dead languages” issue, mostly as an effect of the historical context of Soviet linguistics in the 1920s.⁷ The old linguistic paradigms were still very much alive and the new ones were trying to claim new ground and theoretical legitimacy. In order to do that, of course, one had to theoretically de-legitimise the old theories, and since their biggest characteristic was the study of ancient languages and the attempts at reconstructing proto-languages (like ancient Slavic), this was the most obvious “root” of the problems of those old approaches one could focus on. This is not to say that Voloshinov was completely wrong in pointing this out, but only that, in my view, a significant part of the explanation for linguistics’ general inability to grasp the *living* language is, as I already mentioned above, the tendency of sciences in capitalism in general to fetishize their object of study by attempting to claim it for their specific scientific discipline and solidify it, turning a social phenomenon into an abstract concept or thing. This was precisely what Saussure was trying to do, finally establishing linguistics as an objective science with its own object of research, clearly demarcated from other sciences, which rendered his theoretical project somewhat susceptible to some of the most common traits of scientific positivism.

1.5. Final remarks

The linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, as outlined in the *Course in General Linguistics*, is an attempt to construct an objective “science of language” by abstracting it from all the social phenomena related to it and turning it into an abstract and immobile object of study. Those phenomena that are abstracted from are relegated into speech, and its research is condemned to the margins of science, or, in any case, to those sciences which have nothing to do with “linguistics proper”. This object of study is a system, instead of a process, whereby the activity of speaking is presented only as a manifestation of the system,

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I am aware of the discussion about the authorship of this book and that some ascribe it not to Voloshinov, but to Mikhail Bakhtin. However, I believe enough proof to the contrary has been given in Brandist 2002 (the large number of references Voloshinov used, which Bakhtin seldom does in his works; the difference of style; the differing approaches to certain problems; the explicit Marxism of Vo-

loshinov, etc.). On the problem of authorship within the Bakhtin Circle, see also Brandist, Shepherd, and Tihanov (eds.) 2004.

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See Brandist and Chown (eds.) 2011, particularly the first text, by Vladimir Alpatov, “Soviet Linguistics of the 1920s and 1930s and the Scholarly Heritage”, pp. 17–34.

completely irrelevant for it. The depth of the various non-contemporaneous temporalities of language is substituted with a cross section of language frozen in synchrony. In short, it is a fetishizing procedure, in that it isolates language from the social facts that determine it and fixes it into an abstract system.

Perhaps such a theoretical procedure was necessary for the formation of linguistics. We might add: “all the worse for linguistics”. In any case, Saussure’s approach to language is opposed to any theory of language which would be based on historical-materialist premises, and which would, therefore, be interested *precisely* in those phenomena in language which Saussure wants to leave untouched: the social, the historical, the ideological, the political, the economic, etc. Thus, in order to discuss those phenomena, we have to abolish the distinction between *langue* and *parole*, as well as the one between *synchrony* and *diachrony*. In order to discuss those phenomena, we have to reject Saussurean linguistics the way it rejected them.

2. Methodological individualism of Noam Chomsky

2.1. Consequences of Chomsky’s “biolinguistics”

Noam Chomsky is, like Saussure, one of the most prominent figures of 20th century linguistics. Chomsky shares some of the characteristics of Saussure’s approach to language, although, unlike Saussure, he does not acknowledge the – at least partially – social character of language at all. For Chomsky, language is not even a social product, like it was for Saussure. Thus, Chomsky goes even further in fetishizing language. What is extremely fascinating with Chomsky, however, is that his approach to language is diametrically opposed to his political activism. Not only in his political books, but also in his interviews and comments, he shows a remarkable sensitivity to the relations of power, and the effects of ideology within society. However, when it comes to language, it is as if Chomsky becomes a completely different person, oblivious to those processes and social relations which he so fervently criticises in his political activism. I will not go into detail, but will focus instead on the core arguments of Chomsky’s linguistics.

Already in his early works, Chomsky adopts the Saussurean procedure of demarcating the linguistic object of study from all the phenomena external to language:

“Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance.” (Chomsky 1965, p. 3)

As is obvious, the focus of studying language is situated in the individual, who is “an ideal speaker-listener”, pulled out of the context of concrete speech. It is already a concept of language free of society or time, or even individual speech disorders.

“Here, we are faced with a completely decontextualised, detemporalized and disembodied concept of language.” (Linell 2004, p. 123)

However, in his later works,⁸ Chomsky goes even further in the same direction, and links linguistics with psychology and, later on, neuroscience:

“Chomsky (...) declared that linguistics was to be understood as part of cognitive psychology. Cognition has, in mainstream (particularly American) psychology, been concerned with mental

processes within the individual. At the same time, a generative grammar, based on abstract formal rules of syntax, was assumed to be the adequate model of the language. Such a strongly transformed version of *la langue*, now termed *competence*, was now assumed to be internalized by the language user.” (Linell 2004, p. 123)

This way, Chomsky got closer to those approaches which I criticised in note three, namely, psychologism and biologism. It is not a coincidence that Chomsky’s theory is sometimes described as “psycholinguistics” (Ibid.) or “biolinguistics” (Chomsky 2005, p. vii), whether by others, or by Chomsky himself. I shall try to summarize what is at stake with this trait of Chomsky’s approach to language.

Firstly, the analogy between Saussure’s *langue* and Chomsky’s *competence* that Linell noted is definitely an analogy which points to a trait we already got familiar with earlier in Saussure. As Bourdieu writes,

“Chomskyan ‘competence’ is simply another name for Saussure’s *langue*. Corresponding to language as ‘universal treasure’, as the collective property of the whole group, there is linguistic competence as the ‘deposit’ of this ‘treasure’ in each individual or as the participation of each member of the ‘linguistic community’ in this public good. The shift in vocabulary conceals the *fiction juris* through which Chomsky, converting the immanent laws of legitimate discourse into universal norms or correct linguistic practice, sidesteps the question of the economic and social conditions of the acquisition of the legitimate competence and of the constitution of the [linguistic] market in which this definition of the legitimate and the illegitimate is established and imposed.” (Bourdieu 2012, p. 44)

What linguistics, be it Saussurean or Chomskyan, treats as an “universal language” or as “universal linguistic practice” by looking at official national language, is in fact a discourse which has imposed itself as the dominant discourse by the means of certain social practices (such as class struggle). The entire history of the constitution of such discourses, the result of which are national languages, is something Chomskyan linguistics remains both uninterested in and ignorant to. Likewise, the social consequences of such processes also remain hidden: by not being able to speak the dominant discourse, i.e. the national language, fluently, certain people – whose number ends up to be quite significant – are not able to participate in the social institutions where adequate knowledge of this discourse is obligatory. If such people (the subaltern classes) attempt to say something publicly, they will often, as Bourdieu notes, not be listened to:

“The competence adequate to produce sentences that are likely to be understood may be quite inadequate to produce sentences that are likely to be *listened to*, likely to be recognized as *acceptable* in all the situations in which there is occasion to speak. Here again, social acceptability is not reducible to mere grammaticality.” (Bourdieu 2012, p. 55)

Thus, the concept of linguistic “competence”, analogous to Saussure’s *langue*, remains completely blind to such social processes and relations of power related to language.

Secondly, for Chomsky, “language is a mental organ: a ‘biological endowment’ that is species-specific and innate. Chomsky clearly establishes an analogy between language – a mental organ – and the heart or eye – physical organs” (Lecerle 2009, p. 19). The “innateness” of language is contained in the fact that, “according to Chomsky, we no more learn to speak than we learn to grow arms or reach puberty” (Ibid.). In the life of an individual of the

human species, language is not socially inherited, learned or socially adopted in any way; it is merely “triggered”, as a genetic programme already present within the individual, by experience. This process of triggering is the same, irrelevant to the forms of society, its development or any other such “external” characteristics. The only important thing is that it has to happen, which is why “experience plays a necessary but limited role in language development” (Ibid., p. 20).

Furthermore, language, as this “genetic programme”, is completely independent from any cultural differences, which means that “each member of the human species is identical as regards the faculty of language, because language is inscribed in his or her brain” and that “[l]anguage must therefore be studied in the individual” and “has nothing to do with social existence” (Ibid., p. 21). This is why Chomsky’s linguistics is similar to positivist sciences, since “the logical consequence of Chomskyan naturalism is methodological individualism, which is characteristic of liberal thinking in economics and politics” (Ibid.). What derives from language thus conceived is that it has no history – since it is completely separated from society, since for Chomsky even Saussure’s claim about language being a social product would be too un-scientific – other than “the quasi-frozen history of the evolution of the species over the very long term and by leaps”. (Ibid.)

There is no such thing as the social history of language: its change has been dictated exclusively by internal biological laws, i.e. the laws of evolution. Unlike Saussure, Chomsky does not merely marginalize diachrony – he completely ignores it.

Finally, there is the distinction Chomsky makes between internal language (I-language) and external language (E-language), in a way similar to Saussure, but more radical:

“The object of linguistic science is obviously (...) not language such as we use it, but an abstract construct, which Chomsky calls I-language. The letter I is the initial of the three adjectives that characterize language thus conceived: it is internal (there is at least one element that Chomsky takes over from structuralism – the principle of immanence); individual (language is not a social or cultural object); and intensional (...) by which Chomsky means that the language object he constructs is a generative grammar – that is, a limited number of principles capable of generating an infinity of utterances (...). The rest (...) is consigned to ‘common sense’, as the object of what Chomsky calls ‘folk-linguistics’ in all the senses of the term.” (Ibid., p. 22)

Thus, we have again, as in Saussure, the principle of immanence, i.e. the approach according to which nothing external to language has any importance. However, as we saw above, Chomsky does define language differently in comparison with Saussure. Language now becomes a “biological endowment”, sealing the deal with methodological individualism.

2.2. Final remarks

Chomskyan linguistics is incompatible with a Marxist theory of language for several reasons.⁹ Firstly, it is based on *methodological individualism*, which means it considers language *a priori* from an a-social and a-historical viewpoint. I-language, the object of linguistics as Chomsky had defined it, excludes precisely those phenomena which we are interested in. Chomsky thus repeats what Saussure does, but in a much more radical and theoretically pernicious way – which brings us to the second point: Chomsky’s *naturalism*. For Chomsky, language is an all-human trait inscribed in our brain. It has nothing to do with learning, but is a fixable aspect of human nature. For the

same reasons, linguistics is itself a natural science, benefiting highly from the insights of biology, psychology and neuroscience. Since Marxism had quite a lot of experience with its own type of vulgar materialism, in some aspects similar to Chomsky's naturalism, today it is quite weary of such crude reductions.

Finally, we can find in Chomsky a *refusal of history*. For Chomsky, the change that all concrete social languages have undergone up to today is irrelevant, and, in essence, presents nothing in relation to "language as such" found in our brain. What underlies all these different forms of languages, be it various forms of the same national language (dialects), or various national languages, is a pattern, a genetic programme within our brain. One enormous field of social change – that of linguistic change – is thus completely denied its existence. It is ironic that even such an isolation and abstraction of language did not help Chomsky to come to an irrefutable theory of the internal functions of this "genetic programme".¹⁰

These three points all bring us once again to *the fetishization of language*, although Chomsky went even further with it than Saussure did. Chomsky

"... reduces what is essentially a practice – human language – to a series of 'things' inscribed in the brain of the speaker or her genes." (Ibid., p. 35)

Chomsky, like Saussure, tried to "construct linguistics as a science by giving it a specific object, constructed by excluding the non-pertinent phenomena encompassed under the necessarily vague notion of language" – *langue* in Saussure, a genetic programme in Chomsky. Thus, he succumbed to the same errors of scientific positivism as Saussure did. However, Saussure at least acknowledged that language was a social product, which Chomsky vehemently denies, and thus fetishizes language even more boldly. Therefore, we might conclude with Jean-Jacques Lecercle:

"... if it is agreed that Chomsky's aim is to constitute a science, we still need to ask what his linguistics aims to be the science of – that is, what its object is. For the I-language does indeed possess all the characteristics of a scientific object: it is presented as real – that is, as having a material existence in the brain of the speaker; it is specific, constructed by purging irrelevant phenomena; and it is abstract. But it is not obvious that this object is language, construed in the broadest or narrowest sense of the term. For Chomsky, in fact, linguistics can at best only be a provisional science; and, at worst, not a science at all – or, rather, not a specific science. At worst, the I-language is an object for scientific psychology, which will itself one day be reduced to biology. At best, it is currently the object of the science of language, pending the day when the advances in biology will render superfluous indirect description of the language faculty via grammatical structures which, whatever level they are envisaged at, can only be surface phenomena, effects of the material constitution of the mind/brain." (Ibid., pp. 42–43)

3. Idealism of Habermas' communicative theory of language

The work of Jürgen Habermas brings us to a significantly different approach to language compared to that of Saussure and Chomsky. Although not a

9

I mostly build upon the summary in Lecercle 2009, pp. 35–37, where I adopt the three characteristics he describes, although not in the same order, and treating his second characteristic – fetishism – not as a characteristic, but as a process to which all the three characteristics underlie.

10

I have not referred to Lecercle's very interesting analysis on this – Lecercle being a philologist, and thus qualified for the topic – which can be found in Lecercle 2009, pp. 24–34.

Marxist in the strict sense, Habermas was definitely influenced by historical materialism and takes over some of its theoretical presuppositions and concepts. His *magnum opus*, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Habermas 1984; Habermas 1987), offers a philosophy of language already well aware of and building upon most of the fundamental points we had to argue for in relation to Saussure and Chomsky: it is based on social interaction, thus avoiding methodological individualism, and it conceives of language as a social phenomenon. Thus, the critique of Habermas will be different from that of Saussure and Chomsky in the sense that it is a discussion within our own “theoretical camp”, so to say.

The main theses of Habermas’s work can be summarized as follows:

“... the very structure of language as interlocution presupposes agreement, or at least a striving for agreement. Philosophy will therefore start with an analysis of interlocution” (Lecerclé 2009, p. 46).

This is something we could be pleased with, especially in comparison with Chomsky and Saussure. However, we can also read from that thesis a slight differing from a historical-materialist standpoint on society:

“... the underlying tendency is to think the social in the mode of co-operation, not struggle. This does not mean that Habermas ignores the facts and that he is not aware of the concrete existence of class struggle, but that he theoretically reconstructs society on the basis of co-operation implicit in the very constitution of language.” (Ibid.)

One cannot thus claim that Habermas ignores class struggle, and therefore, one cannot *a priori* dismiss his attempt to “theoretically reconstruct society on the basis of co-operation” (unless one adopts an orthodox and dogmatic Marxist stance). But, as we shall see later, this will prove to be the stumbling block of Habermas’s project.

There are two key concepts of Habermas’s philosophy of language:¹¹ firstly, the concept of inter-subjective understanding, according to which the fundamental characteristic of humans as social beings is their communicative activity, and language thus becomes in a certain way “[t]he infrastructure on the basis of which the whole of society is reconstructed” (Lecerclé 2009, p. 46). But what is essential for communicative action is that it is not based on struggle, but on dialogue, i.e. a process of mutual recognition and understanding, the goal of which is an agreement about particular truth claims. Thus, “Habermas’s philosophy of language is an *ethics of discussion*” as well (Ibid., p. 47). Secondly, there is the concept of *life-world* (*Lebenswelt*), borrowed from Husserl, which Habermas describes as “formed from more or less diffuse, always unproblematic, background convictions” (Habermas, 1984, p. 70), which define the limits and potentials of a discussion or dialogue by defining the understanding and interpretation of communicative subjects involved. The purpose and goal of Habermas’s project is then to

“... establish the ‘basis of validity of discourse’, which for Habermas assumes the following structure: any speaker, simply by virtue of speaking, transmits four universal claims to validity. She must in fact (a) express herself intelligibly (intelligibility claim); (b) give it to be understood that something is the case (truth claim: we are only considering ‘serious’ locutions here – that is, those really directed at phenomena, and thus enjoined to truth, at least as a goal); (c) make herself understood by her interlocutor(s) (sincerity claim: making oneself understood in the framework of consensus is in fact to state the truth about oneself, to be sincere); and (d) agree with her interlocutor (accuracy claim, which is defined as a set of norms to which the interlocutors collectively subscribe). These four claims are the presupposed basis of inter-subjective understanding; they furnish language with its structure as interlocution; they are the basis of the agreement realised by each process of enunciation – that is, the basis of the fundamental

consensus of which language is at once the source and the medium, and on which philosophy constructs its ethics of discussion. If, in fact, these claims are not honoured (for Habermas is not unaware that the facts do not correspond to the idyllic consensus he describes), it simply means that human beings quit the domain of communicative action and embarked on a different kind of action – strategic action – which does not presuppose the same validity claims.” (Lecerle 2009, p. 48)

This is where things become problematic. What Habermas essentially does by outlining such a structure of “the basis of validity of discourse” is that he leaves the sphere of social reality, which language is a part of, in order to idealistically place language within a certain sphere of ethics. But the core of the problem lies in the fact that, for Habermas,

“... it is not a question of a moral decision, of a constraint imposed on linguistic practice from without, but of the very structure of interlocution: mutual communicative obligations have a rational basis and to refuse them (e.g. to defend a theory of linguistic exchange as *agon* – that is, as a verbal contest) involves abandoning the framework of reason.” (Ibid., p. 49)

In short, Habermas imposes an ideal vision of dialogue upon the reality of language itself, which is actually ridden with all sorts of conflicts.

This becomes particularly obvious when Habermas writes about those speech acts which are explicitly *uncooperative*, like threats, insults or orders. For him:

“Imperatives or threats that are deployed purely strategically and robbed of their normative validity claims are not illocutionary acts, or acts aimed towards reaching understanding, at all. They remain parasitic insofar as their comprehension must be derived from the employment conditions for illocutionary acts that are covered by norms.” (Habermas 1992, p. 84)

Threats are problems for Habermas because they clearly are speech acts,¹² although the content of their illocutionary force is not cooperative but agonistic. In order to preserve the universality of his structure of validity of discourse, Habermas is forced to exclude threats from the category of speech acts. Therefore, we arrive at a contradiction: on the one hand, dialogue (communicative action) is immanently cooperative, but, on the other hand, those utterances (speech acts) which are explicitly uncooperative (like threats) are not treated as speech acts.

“The argument is manifestly circular: it claims to discover in speech acts a consensual interlocutory structure, but only counts as speech acts those of them that conform to this structure.” (Ibid.)

3.1. Reading Habermas with his critics

We are again faced with an *abstraction of language from a certain aspect of social reality*, and although Habermas does not at all go as far as Saussure or Chomsky have gone, we still cannot neglect this. Whereas Saussure and Chomsky succumbed to this process in the name of constructing a linguistic science, Habermas is doing it in order to preserve the constructed ideal of communicative action as the basis of human interaction. But such an idealization of language is unacceptable, at least if one’s aim is to build a *social theory* (and not an *ethics*) of language.

¹¹
As is noted in Lecerle 2009.

¹²
“A threat has a speaker, an addressee, a propositional content, and exercises illocutionary

force over the addressee, producing a perlocutionary effect on her.” See: Lecerle 2009, p. 53.

“Even if it is purely methodological and provisional [...], *idealization* [...] has the practical effect of removing from relations of communication the power relations which are implemented within them in a transfigured form. This is confirmed by the uncritical borrowing of concepts such as ‘illocutionary force’ which tends to locate the power of words in words themselves rather than in the institutional conditions of their use.” (Bourdieu 2012, p. 44, footnote 4)

Bourdieu reminds us, again, as with Saussure and Chomsky, that language is a social process and thus determined largely by the relations of power (class relations) of the society which it is a part of. I mentioned that Habermas puts class struggle aside when constructing his theory of communicative action, and that that will prove to be its stumbling block. So why does Habermas make such a mistake?

Habermas does not simply construct a social philosophy of language; there is a fundamental inversion of this included in his project, in that he conceives of society through the prism of an idealized language, which should then be the building block of a future just society. As Perry Anderson notes, language for Habermas

“... becomes, not merely the hallmark of humanity as such, but the promissory note of democracy – itself conceived as essentially the communication necessary to arrive at a consensual truth. (...) Language as such is identified with an aspiration to the good life.” (Anderson 1983, p. 63)

Habermas thinks within those frameworks even before *The Theory of Communicative Action*. In *Knowledge and Human Interests* he observed how “[o]ur first sentence expresses unequivocally the intention of universal and unconstrained consensus” and “the truth of statements is based on anticipating the realization of the good life” (Habermas 1971, p. 314). These thoughts are what runs through the entire *Theory of Communicative Action* as underlying premises. In short, in Habermas, language and democracy become intertwined:

“... democracy can be defined as the institutionalization of conditions for the practice of ideal – that is, domination-free – speech.” (Anderson 1983, p. 64)

But there is no such thing as “domination-free” speech. Such a claim can only be a consequence of the abstraction of speech or language from the reality of social relations, from the social totality which language is part of, and which thus defines it. Even if we were to give Habermas benefit of the doubt and completely ignore the social relations between speakers, the socio-historical context in which the dialogue is occurring, the specific world-views and irrational idiosyncrasies of each speaker, etc., and if we were to presuppose that all speakers are honestly and eagerly intent on a rational discussion with the goal of reaching an agreement – in short, if we were to imagine a truly *ideal* speech situation – we would see again that power enters the stage merely through the way every dialogue requires a certain level of clarity at each moment for it to continue. The higher the “stakes” in the dialogue – which are always pretty high in any wide debate on social issues – the higher is the required level of clarity which has to be maintained. At the very moment when you are asked to clarify what you said or what you mean, a relation of power emerges between you and the other speaker(s) depending on how successful you were.

“You alter your language when those you are speaking to continually ask ‘What do you mean?’ ‘Explain yourself’ [...]. In many instances, no explicit coercion is necessarily involved here. You consent to change your language. However, depending on the context, there is considerable coercion at play. If you do not make yourself understood, you are the one who suffers the consequences, not your listener. This is clearly a power relationship.” (Ives 2004, p. 123)

The mere ability or competence to maintain and successfully abide to the specific required level of clarity in a dialogue thus brings with itself the questions of the education of the speakers, their social background (i.e. class background), and also the very important question of “who, and by what criteria, sets the required level of clarity?”, etc.

Therefore, Habermas constructs an idealized intersubjectivity:

“Uprooted from the relations of production (and reproduction) and domination, this intersubjectivity is as abstract and formal as that of the Rawlsian theory of justice. Whereas the reality is one of inequality and violence (even in the communicative relation and the cruelty of words), it postulates a peaceful general reciprocity.” (Bensaïd 2009, p. 152)

There are numerous reasons why reality – even that of linguistic practice – is filled with inequality and violence. As Bourdieu showed in his works (as well as Bakhtin and Gramsci, in their own way), the way an individual speaks is defined by her class origin, but also by the “institutional conditions” of speech production mentioned above. Furthermore, language itself is part of class struggle: since no meanings are fixed forever, various social groups use the same words but inscribe different meanings to them, and since each meaning, in such a sense, represents a certain world-view, there is a struggle for the imposition of meanings, i.e. for “official” or at least “dominant” or widely accepted meanings of words.

“The field of meaning is open, and words are never reliable. The repetition of the sign on the social battle front makes meaning vacillate, rather than fixing it.” (Ibid., p. 151)

Finally, what remains completely unaccounted for is the corporeality of language – something Saussure was also oblivious to (in fact, even most social theories today likewise are). It is enough to consider how language is essentially embodied (in a literal sense) merely by the fact that non-verbal communication is a fundamental part of speech. Gestures, facial expressions, bodily sensations and emotions (from pleasure and joy to pain and torment) are all part of what language also expresses, which obviously covers a wide range of often contrary and incompatible feelings. Since Habermas “effectively identifies language with propositional speech, considering the aspiration to rational understanding (as opposed, for example, to erotic or emotional expression) as its essential feature”, he also “detaches language from the body, sensation, labor, and eros, just as he demarcates it from structures of power and domination” (McNally 2001, pp. 108–109). Since Habermas’ goal is an “emancipatory” language, he has to free it of all such expressive content and ignore its corporeality (among other things already mentioned).

“After all, by suggesting that emancipation is not possible in the realm of social labor, and by leaving us with a dehistoricized, ultra-cognitivist theory of language, Habermas so reduces the power of critique and so restricts the concept of emancipation that it is hard to see what sort of ‘utopian perspective’ remains. His ‘emancipatory politics’ involve little more than a gesture toward a noncoercive public sphere where the best argument can prevail – a classically intellectualist construction. Yet, this is the fruit of detaching language from the body, labor, eros, and history.” (Ibid, p. 109)

3.2. *Final remarks*

Prior points to the reason why Habermas’s abstraction of language from class struggle, the body and history, is the downfall of his theory: it idealizes language and projects this ideal image onto society itself, turning Marx on his head.

“To the abstract and crippled universalization of capital, to the tyrannical eruption of fragmented divinities and fetishes, communicative rationality offers a response that is immediately ensnared in ideology. With a view to establishing an organic link between socialism and democracy, Habermas thus dissolves class interests into those of humanity constituting itself as a species, in purely imaginary fashion. The production paradigm is erased in favour of the communication paradigm. Social relations become relations of communication.” (Bensaïd 2009, p. 152)

In attempting to reconstruct a certain form of historically and theoretically acceptable historical materialism, Habermas only distances himself from it completely. Of course, the problem is not the theoretical distancing by itself, but the consequences of such a process: Habermas replaces political thought with ethics.¹³ Again, that is something we are not interested in, as a historical-materialist theory of language should be interested especially in political phenomena, and in showing that language itself is a profoundly political phenomenon, in the specific sense that it is a part of class struggle, which is itself determined by the relations of production within society. That should not be read as a vulgar materialist approach, as I do not wish to argue for a one-sided and linear relation between the economic “base” and the ideological “superstructure”. Rather, what I argue should be the object of a historical-materialist theory of language is

“... the relationship between the structured systems of sociologically pertinent linguistic differences and the equally structured systems of social differences.” (Bourdieu 2012, p. 54)

This relationship, unfortunately, is not within the theoretical grasp of Habermas’s philosophy of language.

5. Totalizing language

Saussure, Chomsky and Habermas do not help us with formulating potential positive theses for a historical-materialist theory of language. However, they can help us in the negative sense: we can learn from their examples and set a framework for such a project by avoiding the mistakes they made.¹⁴ These mistakes can be summarized as follows:

- 1) Turning language into *a stable system*, abstracted from society and its utilization within it, and focusing exclusively on the internal elements of such a system, whereby everything external to it is proclaimed irrelevant (to this we can counterpose *language as social practice*, which cannot be turned into a stable object of positive science without losing touch with its roots within society, and whose end-result can only be an abstract, not a socially real concept of language);
- 2) Turning language into *a biological endowment*, whereby language becomes merely the capacity to speak inherent in the human species as a result of evolution, and its study therefore limited to the individual, thus becoming separated not only from its social context, but also from its history (to this we can counterpose *language as a socio-historical process*, as a social product which is never finished, but is simultaneously being transformed from within society, and is formative itself in relation to social groups and their members – its study is therefore necessarily linked to society and to the various forms it takes within it);
- 3) Turning language into *an ethics of rational discourse*, whereby language is idealized and freed of all its conflictual forms and relations of power, and becomes a foundation for a project of a democratic society (to this we can counterpose *language as class struggle*, whereby language represents

and is in part determined by the social relations of its time, which links it not only to dominant and dominated classes, but also to the social relations and mode of production which produces these classes – language is political and ideological, it is a form of power precisely because it is a social practice).

In all of these cases, language was abstracted from certain aspects of its social existence. In some cases, such as that of Chomsky, this abstraction is extreme and quite obvious, while in others, such as Habermas, the abstraction is mild, but is nonetheless problematic (Saussure could perhaps be placed somewhere between the two). The three names I chose represent some of the most important currents of thought within the field of linguistics or the philosophy of language, and their specific theoretical characteristics are thus often found in other works and authors, which means that a lot of the critical remarks I made pertain to some of the most dominant trends within the study of language, which Jean-Jacques Lecercle terms “the dominant philosophy of language”.¹⁵ In relation to this procedure of abstraction common, to various extents, to all of these currents, a historical-materialist theory of language should strive to operate within the framework of *social totality*. This means that one should never lose sight of, marginalize, or put aside the various phenomena related to social, living language, i.e. the phenomena of the “language of real life” (Marx, Engels 1976, p. 36), as Marx and Engels call them in *The German Ideology*.

We can say with Bourdieu, as a programmatic and theoretical starting point, that it is

“... therefore necessary to draw out all the consequences of the fact, so powerfully repressed by linguists and their imitators, that the ‘social nature of language is one of its internal characteristics’, as the *Course in General Linguistics* asserted, and that social heterogeneity is inherent in language.¹⁶ This must be done while at the same time being aware of the risks involved in the enterprise, not the least of which is the apparent crudeness which can accompany the most rigorous analyses capable – and culpable – of contributing to the return of the repressed; in short, one must choose to pay a higher price for truth while accepting a lower profit of distinction.” (Bourdieu 2012, p. 34)

That means to do precisely the opposite of what linguistics, or “the dominant philosophy of language”, has done: it has sacrificed truth for distinction. The goal of a historical-materialist philosophy of language should be, on the contrary, to remain faithful to social truth.

¹³

Lecercle 2009, p. 60. For Lecercle’s explanation of the historical conjuncture, for which – he claims – is in part responsible for this, see *ibid.*, pp. 59–60.

¹⁴

This is precisely the path Lecercle takes, starting from several negative principles of what he calls “the dominant philosophy of language”, in order to arrive at their opposites, and thus formulate positive principles for a Marxist philosophy of language (Lecercle

2009, pp. 64–72). His list and mine do overlap, but they are not the same.

¹⁵

Lecercle 2009, p. 64. See previous note.

¹⁶

Hopefully, as I showed, Saussure only acknowledged that fact, but did not “draw out” almost any consequences of it, and thus he, too, is subject to this “repression” typical of linguists which Bourdieu criticizes.

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Alen Sućeska

Prema kritici dominantnih filozofija jezika iz pozicije historijskog materijalizma

Sažetak

Cilj je istraživanja ponuditi kritiku nekih od glavnih autora suvremene lingvistike ili drugih pristupa jeziku općenito: Ferdinanda de Saussurea, »osnivača« suvremene lingvistike; Noama Chomskog, jednog od najprominentnijih predstavnika suvremene lingvistike; te Jürgena Habermasa, čija je filozofija jezika važan dio njegova projekta komunikacije. Ovdje ponuđena kritika temelji se na pristupu jeziku koji društveni karakter tretira jednako ključnim kao i strogo lingvističke ili biološke karakteristike. Argumentira se da su dominantne filozofije jezika, analizirane kroz rad troje navedenih autora, apstrahirale od društvene karakteristike jezika kako bi stvorile »znanost jezika«, pri čemu je jezik postao statična, sinkrona struktura nepovezana s jezikom kakav postoji u zbilji. Razlog je tomu to što je jezik neodvojivo vezan za socijalne, ideološke i političke fenomene kakve je i sam Jürgen Habermas kritizirao zbog idealiziranja jezika i »govorne činove« smatrao samo one čiji je cilj kooperacija, ali ne i one čija je narav konfliktna, kako je to obično slučaj u različitim oblicima društvenog dijaloga.

Ključne riječi

jezik, lingvistika, Ferdinand de Saussure, Noam Chomsky, Jürgen Habermas, historijski materijalizam

Alen Sućeska

In Richtung Kritik der dominanten Sprachphilosophien aus der Position des historischen Materialismus

Zusammenfassung

Das Ziel dieser Forschung ist es, die Kritik einiger der Hauptautoren der zeitgenössischen Linguistik oder anderer Sprachansätze im Allgemeinen zu liefern: die Kritik Ferdinand de Saussures, des „Begründers“ der modernen Linguistik; die Kritik Noam Chomskys, eines der prominentesten Vertreter der modernen Linguistik sowie die Kritik Jürgen Habermas', dessen Sprachphilosophie ein bedeutender Teil seines Kommunikationsprojekts ist. Die hier gebotene Kritik beruht auf dem Sprachansatz, welcher den gesellschaftlichen Charakter als ebenso ausschlaggebend betrachtet wie die streng linguistischen oder biologischen Merkmale. Es wird argumentiert, die dominanten Sprachphilosophien, analysiert durch die Arbeit der drei erwähnten Autoren, hätten von dem gesellschaftlichen Merkmal der Sprache abstrahiert, um eine „Sprachwissenschaft“ zu schaffen, wobei die Sprache eine statische, synchrone und mit der in der Realität existierenden Sprache unverbundene Struktur geworden sei. Der Grund dafür ist, dass die Sprache untrennbar an die sozialen, ideologischen und politischen Phänomene gebunden ist, die Jürgen Habermas selbst für die Idealisierung der Sprache kritisierte. Als „Sprechakte“ erachtete er nur jene, die eine Kooperation zum Ziel haben, jedoch nicht auch jene, deren Natur konfliktträchtig ist, wie dies üblicherweise bei verschiedenen Formen des sozialen Dialogs der Fall ist.

Schlüsselwörter

Sprache, Linguistik, Ferdinand de Saussure, Noam Chomsky, Jürgen Habermas, historischer Materialismus

Alen Sućeska

Vers une critique des philosophies du langage dominantes à partir de la position du matérialisme historique

Résumé

Le but de cette recherche est de proposer une critique de certains des principaux auteurs de linguistique contemporaine ou, de manière générale, d'autres approches de la langue, notamment celles de : Ferdinand de Saussure, « fondateur » de la linguistique moderne ; Noam Chomsky, l'un des plus éminents représentants de la linguistique contemporaine ; Jürgen Habermas, dont la philosophie du langage constitue une partie importante de son projet sur la communication. La critique qui est ici proposée se fonde sur une approche du langage qui traite de manière essentielle, autant que rigoureuse, des caractéristiques linguistiques ou biologiques. Notre argumentation s'attache à montrer que les philosophies dominantes du langage, analysées à travers le travail des trois auteurs mentionnés, ont fait abstraction des caractéristiques sociales du langage dans le but de créer une « science du langage », où le langage est devenu statique, une structure synchronique sans lien avec la réalité telle qu'elle existe. Notre raisonnement s'appuie sur le lien inhérent du langage aux phénomènes sociaux, idéologiques et politiques, tels que les a Jürgen Habermas lui-même critiqués en raison de l'idéalisation du langage à l'oeuvre ; il estimait que les « actes de langage » étaient seulement ceux dont le but était coopératif, et non pas ceux de nature conflictuelle, ce qui est néanmoins habituellement le cas au sein des différentes formes du dialogue sociale.

Mots-clés

langage, linguistique, Ferdinand de Saussure, Noam Chomsky, Jürgen Habermas, matérialisme historique