

Language is not a thing: it is a practice! A conversation with Patrick Sériot

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Abstract. This interview with Patrick Sériot, a scholar of the history and epistemology of linguistic theories, presents some small aspects of his engagement with linguistics in his early years, and thereafter discusses the problem of the interrelationships between culture and language sciences by tackling the question to which extent culture shapes the idea of language and, correspondingly, to which extent such an idea of language shapes linguistic research. The conversation then moves on to the issues of meaning, translation, and the ways of determining the context of a given work, mainly discussing examples of Sériot's own works. In its final part, the interview deals with the problem of the social commitments of linguistics, and how we, as linguists, may contribute to the solving of social problems.

Preamble

Professor Patrick Sériot is an expert in the history of Slavic linguistics and East European structuralism. His book *Structure and the Whole* (Sériot 2014), a vibrant monograph on the history of ideas, stands out as one of the best reference works for understanding the “climate of opinion” that shaped the fate of what would become the linguistic structuralism of Nikolai Trubetzkoy and Roman Jakobson. In a way, by studying the history of a discipline Sériot has contributed not only to the history of ideas, but also to the understanding of the relations between culture and science. Perhaps no other field than the history of linguistics (and neighbouring fields such as semiotics) can show these relations so well.

In early December of 2023, Patrick Sériot visited Olomouc on an invitation from the Department of General Linguistics of Palacký University to participate in a series of conferences on the history of semiotics and linguistics² and to give

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² The series of conferences in the history of linguistics and semiotics, entitled *Unde venis et quo tendis?*, was organized by Ludmila Bennett, Tyler J. Bennett and myself as part of the Semiosalong series, which takes place every semester with the aid of the Department of General Linguistics and the International Semiotics Institute, both of the Faculty of Arts of Palacký University.

an additional lecture on the same topic. He stayed in Olomouc for three days. On Wednesday, 6 December, he gave a lecture on the differences between the semiotic approaches of Roland Barthes and Juri Lotman, tackling the topic from the point of view of the question: “Where does the West end and the East begin?” – a framework Sériot has been developing during all his years of research. On Thursday, 7 December, he gave another lecture on the (negative) reception of Saussure in the Soviet Union to the students at Palacký University and an international audience that was present virtually via Zoom and included scholars such as Claire Forel, John Joseph, Sémir Badir and Kalevi Kull. On the morning of 8 December, we met to conduct a small interview. The aim was to talk about linguistics, semiotics, their history, and the relevance that linguistic research might have for our society. For the purposes of the interview, we switched to speaking English, but after we stopped recording, we returned to speaking French, and then to our own mode of communication in which *chacun parle sa langue* – he continued in French while I went back to Spanish. The trilingual character of our conversations is not as trivial a matter as it might seem: as readers will see, the problems, and solutions, entailed by multilingualism constituted a topic discussed with great passion and enthusiasm during our conversation, and I can only hope they will enjoy reading these lines as much as I enjoyed talking to Patrick Sériot.

The conversation with Patrick Sériot

Israel Chávez (I.C.). I have many questions for you³...

Patrick Sériot (P.S.). I’m ready!

I.C. First of all, I wanted to ask you... why study Slavic languages? Why was it important for you, and why does it remain important for you to study Slavic languages?

³ I intended to transcribe the interview reflecting, as much as I could, the normal affections of spoken language. The reader will find some repetitions, some inconsistencies in the use of contractions, some hesitations, some formulations and re-formulations of sentences that, had this been a written exchange, probably would not have occurred. However, since this was a conversation, some affections that can be regarded as “mistakes” in writing are indeed present. In some cases, the transcription had to distance itself from the actual speech that had been recorded, but I tried to remain as close to it as I could. I hope that by leaving those affections intact, the reader might reconstruct the conversation more vividly. Additionally, a list of references including most of the linguistic and semiotic literature mentioned in this interview has been added at the end of the text so the reader, if interested, can find the works more easily. Also, in some cases, footnotes indicating the full names of linguists being referred to were added to avoid ambiguities. – I.C.

- P.S.** There is a very practical explanation. My parents did not have enough money to pay for my studies. I wanted to study general linguistics in Paris, at the Sorbonne, but it was not possible for financial reasons. But, at that time, there was a possibility in France to get a very high grant if you signed a contract with the state saying that you would be a teacher, and so I chose Russian, because by becoming a teacher of Russian in school, I could get the money to finance my studies for the whole curriculum. So I learned Russian, and at the same time I learned, for my own pleasure, general linguistics with André Martinet.
- I.C.** Oh! With Martinet! That is very interesting. I didn't know you were his student. Then let me ask you a bit about this because, as you know, I have been doing research on another student of Martinet, Luis Prieto. Why weren't you more interested in functionalism, or, let's say, in Martinet's linguistics?
- P.S.** I was not interested in functionalism. I love languages for themselves. Even when I was in school, I would read grammars. I liked reading grammars for the sake of reading grammars. That's all... I am a linguist, that's sure. But, you know, when studying Russian, at the same time you studied the Soviet Union, and, therefore, you began to compare the reality of the Soviet Union with your reality in France, and you began to wonder why there were so many left-wing students who imagined the Soviet Union as a paradise when they didn't know absolutely anything about the Soviet Union nor a single word of Russian.
- I.C.** But this contact with Martinet... did it play any role in your arriving at Russian linguistics? How did you arrive at Trubetzkoy, specifically, did Martinet have something to do with that?
- P.S.** Well, Martinet knew Trubetzkoy personally, and he knew Jakobson also, of course, but it was not through Martinet that I came to Jakobson and Trubetzkoy, I arrived at them little by little. When I began... you know, in the Sorbonne, teaching was not interesting, it was extremely traditional. First of all, it was only Russian literature, and very little of linguistics, so I tried to learn it myself, and, of course, little by little I arrived at Trubetzkoy, and through Trubetzkoy at Jakobson, and with Jakobson I understood that what was at stake was not only syntactic or morphological structures, but a whole intellectual world which was rather different from what we all thought about the history of linguistics. And, little by little, I came to read what Jakobson had said in Czechoslovakia in the 1920s and 1930s, and that was extremely interesting, because nobody knew anything about that. For instance, in 1929, Jakobson wrote a very odd paper for the German University of Prague, for the *Slavische Rundschau*, the paper was "Über die heutigen Voraussetzungen

*der russischen Slavistik*⁴ and there he was the promotor of a Russian science that was supposed to be totally different from Western science, and he quoted ultraSlavophile thinkers like Nikolai Danilevsky, for instance, which came as a shock. When I explained that to my colleagues, they did not know anything about that. And then I came to translate Trubetzkoy's papers on Eurasianism, on racism, on the Jews, etc., and it was also a shock.

I.C. I can imagine... but you first read Trubetzkoy in... German? Or in French?

P.S. No, in Russian. Jakobson in German and Trubetzkoy in Russian.

I.C. But you are familiar with Cantineau's⁵ translation into French...

P.S. Yes.

I.C. And do you have any comments on it?

P.S. You mean the *Grundzüge der Phonologie*?⁶

I.C. Yes...

P.S. Yes, this translation is rather good and seriously made, and the introduction by Cantineau is interesting because he understands all the problems of translation, so I think it's a good work.

I.C. I see. So, coming back to... I know you have done a lot of research based on a critical approach to these ideas of "traditions" or "schools of thought", but I wonder if you think that these "traditions" are somehow intrinsically linked to a given culture, and if so, would you see there some kind of relativism, or determinism, or something like historical particularism?

P.S. Yes, I understand this question. It is not an easy one to answer, you see. I was brought up in the French tradition of the Enlightenment of the French revolution, in the idea that rationalism is the goal of any intellectual. Okay. So I had to understand that for my Russian friends, the Enlightenment is pure French imperialism. And what was interesting is that all those ideas of the anti-Enlightenment, they got them from German Romanticism, from Herder, Fichte, etc., and what was a discovery is that the arguments of the Russian intellectuals against the cosmopolitan Enlightenment were exactly the same as the arguments espoused by German Romanticism against French Enlightenment at the beginning of the nineteenth century, they were exactly the same type of arguments. So, you see, for the Russian Slavophiles, there is Russia on one side and the West on the other side, and that is exactly the same type of argument the Germans advocated. Germany was on one side

⁴ Jakobson 1929.

⁵ Trubetzkoy 1970[1949]. Jean Cantineau (1899–1956) was the translator of the first French edition of Trubetzkoy's *Grundzüge der Phonologie*, later editions in French were revised by Luis Jorge Prieto.

⁶ Trubetzkoy 1939.

and France was on the other side. Now, of course, the Bolshevik revolution was supposed to have a universal objective: the world revolution. But this was Trotsky, and not Stalin. It is quite striking that, little by little, the opposition between bourgeois science and proletarian science in the 1920s became the opposition between Western science and Soviet science. So, from a social explanation of the world, you come to an ethnological explanation of the world. There is a smooth transformation between socialism, or a sociocentric explanation of the world, to an ethnocentric explanation of the world. This is Stalinism.

Now, how is this linked to the work on linguistics? I was always stricken by the fact that typology is a topic that is quite more important in Russian linguistics than in Western linguistics... why? And here comes an important topic: there is a tradition, or a way of thinking, in Western linguistics that considers that the similarities between languages are explained by a common ancestor. This is genealogical filiation, or kinship. Now, in Russia, both for Trubetzkoy and Jakobson on one side and Nikolai Marr on the other side, this is not true at all. The similarities between languages are not made by genealogical filiation. No. For Trubetzkoy those similarities are the result of contact, it is exactly like for Sandfeld⁷ for the Balkan language union. Languages look like each other because they stay on the same territory with each other. For Jakobson this is different. He explains that you have the territory of Eurasia which has two phonological common features, the opposition between soft and hard consonants and the absence of polytony. On both sides, in the Northwest there is the Baltic language union with polytony and on the other side, twelve thousand kilometers towards the Southeast, you have a zone with Vietnamese, Burmese, Chinese, etc. also with polytony. So, he says this is not by chance, you see, “this is not by chance” (*это не случайно* – ‘*eto nye sluchayno*’). And what does that mean? It means that, for Jakobson, symmetry is an explanation of the geography of languages, so geometry is hidden behind geography: geometry is the explanation of geography.

Now, those were exactly the ideas of a typical German Romantic geographer, Karl Ritter, at the beginning of the nineteenth century. He had a geometrical explanation of the shapes of different continents on the surface of the Earth. This history of ideas is really interesting because it does not fit in the general attitude towards the history of structuralism, and this is what I spoke about yesterday. I think that the beginning of structuralism in Czechoslovakia with those emigrees from Russia had deep Platonic foundations. It is totally

⁷ Jens Kristian Sandfeld Jensen (1873–1942).

opposed to the idea of Ferdinand de Saussure that the point of view creates the object, that the elements have only negative definitions in relation to each other. Here, it's the opposite, the object creates the point of view.

- I.C.** And what do you think about present-day linguistics in Europe? I am asking because I have the impression that there is a kind of divide within “Western linguistics”, as if there were “European linguistics” on the one hand, and “linguistics in the United States” on the other hand. There are some differences there. But nowadays, in Europe, there are schools of generative grammar and sometimes these schools are precisely opposed to typology-oriented schools...
- P.S.** I don't understand generative linguistics very well. What strikes me is that for Chomsky, we have a mental organ in our heads where the noun or verb phrase structures exist already when babies are born. Okay, this is a hypothesis, well... why not? But I think that this hypothesis does not explain the fantastic diversity of languages in the world, and it does not explain how languages develop and change. So, I'm not very interested in these North American linguists whom I don't understand very well. I think that some questions which exist in Eastern Europe which are unfortunately based on cultural suffering, are nonetheless interesting, precisely because they try to understand the problem of language diversity. Certainly, typology can be understood in a very aggressive, nationalistic, xenophobic way, but, also, it is interesting to try to explain why there are similarities between languages which are not genetically related.
- I.C.** Yes... and I would like to go deeper here. If we consider these two ways of doing linguistics, it's quite interesting to compare the history of linguistics in Europe, and the history of linguistics in the United States, because the main figures there were either European linguists like Boas,⁸ or they had been trained by European linguists: for instance, Bloomfield⁹ studied under Brugmann¹⁰ (alongside Trubetzkoy), and from Bloomfield to Harris¹¹ there is in fact a direct line leading to Chomsky. So, do you think that maybe in this case there is an analogous situation to what you mentioned yesterday about Catholicism and Orthodoxy being different instantiations of one religion?
- P.S.** That is an interesting question, but I cannot answer it. You see, Franz Boas came from Germany, and Sapir¹² was his pupil, so they sort of imported to the United States a very deep German Romantic tradition, and their studies

⁸ Franz Boas (1858–1942).

⁹ Leonard Bloomfield (1887–1949).

¹⁰ Karl Brugmann (1849–1919).

¹¹ Zellig S. Harris (1909–1992).

¹² Edward Sapir (1884–1939).

of the Amerindian languages of North America are very different from generativism, I don't see any link between North American Indian linguistics and Chomsky, so... I don't know. I understand your question, you would like to know if there is something like a cultural determinism in the way people work in their science, but... I don't know...

I.C. Yes, or rather to which extent culture determines the way we think about language, and thus the way we carry out research on language. Because, as you know, Chomsky and the whole generative movement, they were against some forms of Bloomfield-oriented approaches to language, and they do uphold Sapir, which might appear strange at first sight...

P.S. But, you see... Great Britain is nearer to the United States than to France even if there are thirty kilometers between Dover and Calais. Let's take, for instance, analytic philosophy. It is more or less the same in Britain as it is in the United States, but it is totally different from what they call Continental Philosophy, so is there a cultural explanation for that? I don't know. But there is a real difference in philosophy between analytic and continental philosophy. Can we explain it through cultural determinism? I don't know. What is important is that "cultures" are not enumerable entities, like biological species, they are unstable, heterogeneous, contradictory, and they overlap with each other.

I.C. Maybe some biologists would have something to say about that, but, in any case, for our conversation, maybe what is at play is some kind of cultural dynamics...

P.S. Or, for instance, can we imagine that the Anglican Church has influenced the idea of pragmatism? As far as Orthodoxy is concerned, the refusal of iconoclasm and the cult of icons has an influence on the history of semiotics in Russia.

I.C. I see... but let me bring out another problem here: the notion of 'meaning' in linguistics, because it seems that this notion was precisely at the centre of the debates between Bloomfieldian approaches that were way closer to the Neogrammarians and this "new" approach of Chomsky's that grew out of Harris' distributionalism (even if Bloomfield also paid attention to distribution). My question is, first, if you think that technical debates, I mean debates over concepts in a discipline, are connected to larger debates that are going on in the culture where the discipline exists? And, second, because I want to link this question with the next question I had prepared for you: I think that nowadays, in fields like biology or philosophy of mind, there might be a debate similar to the one that was going on between behaviourists and anti-behaviourists in United States' linguistics around the fifties. So, how do you

see all this debate around the notion of meaning? I know you know the works of Kalevi Kull, who is doing biosemiotics, and there might also be a Romantic component hidden somewhere in one of the sides of that debate...

P.S. Yes... The first half of the nineteenth century was Romantic, the second half of the nineteenth century was positivist, more or less. The positivists were not interested in meaning at all. For them there were facts and only facts, and it was prohibited to make general conclusions about those facts. Soviet linguists reproached the positivists for having ignored meaning, and they reintroduced this notion of meaning, but they thought that meaning is to be found in the language itself, before the act of speaking, so whenever you speak a language, the meaning imposes itself on you, because, well... you just have to look into a dictionary, and you get the meaning of the word. For instance, yesterday I mentioned Lenin's book *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, he thinks that reality is totally objective, that's OK, I agree, but he thinks that little by little you will know it more and more, and that the words are more and more adapted to this reality. I think this is total ignoring of the dimension of discourse, because in the same language you can have very different types of discourses with very different types of meanings for the same words. So, this dimension of discourse was, I think, the great invention of the French school of Michael Pêcheux, of course of Michael Foucault also, and of people like that in the 1960s. This idea that society is divided between different so-called discursive formations is an interesting way of moving towards meaning.

Now, for most of my Soviet linguists, language also has a meaning in itself, in its dictionary, so they think that a language is a *huge* text, a text consisting in everything that has been written or said in a language, and they think that the structures of our grammar impose themselves on the ideas that we have. Just an interesting example: Ana Wierzbicka, who works in Australia, is very well known in Russia because she has said that, for instance, when an English speaker says "I am cold", they see themselves as a subject, and about this subject they say that they are cold, whereas the Russians don't say that, they say '*мне холодно*' ('*мне холодно*'), which is 'to me is cold', so they don't see themselves as a subject, but on the contrary, they participate in the cold. First, you have the cold, and then you enter this cold. Okay. This is typical Neo-Humboldtianism, this is quite near to Sapir and Whorf's hypothesis, but... Sapir and Whorf had a general idea of the European way of speaking, whereas Wierzbicka thinks that each language has its own semantic universe of which you cannot get out.

Thanks to the idea of discourse, we can get rid of this ultra-deterministic way of conceiving languages and meaning, and also of the idea that semantics

belongs to the dictionary and not to pragmatics. For instance, in all languages there are words which have two meanings, two absolutely opposed meanings. Let's take French. In French there is '*louer*', which means 'to rent (a flat)' and 'to let (a flat)', this is totally opposed, but everybody knows that in a real sentence, you know perfectly well if you rent a flat or if you let a flat, it is sure, there is no problem about that. So, context and discourse are totally ignored if you think that semantics belongs to the lexicon, or to the dictionary.

I.C. Regarding this... in the past days we have briefly talked about translation, and I asked you about Meschonnic. So just to give some context to my question, in the introduction to his book, *Poétique du traduire*, Meschonnic talks about Europe as being born out of translation,¹³ as a culture that received all its foundational texts via translation, and, of course, the problem of *what* is translated and *how* it is translated becomes very relevant. This is crucial to the problem of meaning and discourse, I believe. I know you like to translate, and you have made many translations, but what is it that we translate when we are translating? In your opinion, how does this problem of what is translated relate to the problems of meaning and discourse?

P.S. First of all, translation is the invention of the Protestants in the sixteenth century. Before that, the only language in Europe was Latin. The only possible written language was Latin, but thanks to Luther and the Protestants, they began to translate as much as possible, because the idea was that you could speak to God with the language of your heart. That is extremely interesting from a semiotic point of view. What was important for religion was: how is it possible to translate God's words into another language? Not only into Greek, Hebrew and Latin, but into all languages... yesterday at dinner we talked about Cyril and Methodius, they tried to translate from Greek to Old Slavic, and the result was not bad. Especially because they had to invent a lot of new words. Now, when I teach, or when I taught, translation to my students, I said that, okay, it is impossible to have a word-for-word translation, it is impossible to have an exact translation, but this difficulty does not mean that we shall not translate. We come as near as possible, it is a work which has to be done and redone all the time. Little by little, we try to approximate the original text. In poetry it is extremely difficult, but in prose it is more or less possible. I think that the translator must explain certain difficulties he has, he has to give footnotes where he explains that... well, for instance, I translate 'ideology', well, '*ideologiya*' ('*идеология*') in Russian, into French. It is only possible to translate it by the French word '*idéologie*', but you have to explain that it has

¹³ See Meschonnic 1999: 32.

a totally different meaning: ‘идеология’ does not mean ‘false consciousness’ as in Marx’s *German Ideology*, but a very explicit set of “ideas”. That’s all, and in this way, by translating we enrich our own language. And we have to know the language quite well because I have read translated novels, especially from American English, and it’s obvious that it is a bad translation, because you feel American English language in this bad translation... so... it is not possible to have an absolutely correct translation, but we can try, and this is possible, you know... it is not like two and two are four, we are not mathematicians.

I.C. Well... but that is interesting because then we really are facing this question of the *meaning* or, rather, the *sense* of a text... but, now: how to prevent that from being turned into a sort of... you know, I think it’s easy, in this situation of translation, to treat the sense *as if* it would be something existing independently of the text, as a sort of essence, and thus, *as if* this getting close to the sense would be getting close to some ideal entity... so, maybe it’s important also in translation to locate the text in its context...

P.S. Yes. For instance, I translated *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* by Voloshinov.¹⁴ It had been translated twenty-five years before. So, there was this first translation,¹⁵ but I thought it was so bad that I made another one, totally different. It is funny because the first translator made many mistakes. For instance, the word ‘dialogue’ was translated as ‘discourse’, which is incredible! The word ‘fiction’ as ‘function’! There was even a foreword by the translator where it is claimed that “this book is Marxist from the beginning to the end”, not even explaining what that means, to be a Marxist book... so, I translated it to explain that instead of thinking in the terms of Paris in 1970, like Kristeva does, we have to think about, we have to explain what those people like Bakhtin, Voloshinov, Medvedev wrote in Leningrad in 1924, we have to explain what they actually knew. They did not read Althusser, of course, they did not read Lacan, but they read Karl Vossler, so what does that mean for them? And so, by trying to explain the intellectual atmosphere of the Leningrad intellectuals of the 1920s, I try to know what they knew, what they thought, what they read, and from that I begin to translate.

So, for instance, once I was giving a lecture in France, and I explained that Bakhtin never spoke of the ‘genres of discourse’, never. And one colleague said, “You’re talking rubbish, it’s not true, look! It’s written here: Bakhtin, *Les genres du discours*, you see? He spoke of the genres of discourse.” And I said, “No, no, because Bakhtin, he never wrote in French, he wrote in Russian, and

¹⁴ Voloshinov 2010.

¹⁵ Bakhtin 1977. See also Sériot 2011.

in Russian he said *'rechevye zhanry'* (*'речевые жанры'*).” Now, why do you want it to be translated as ‘genres of discourse’? I think it should be translated as *'les registres de la parole'*, and then, if you translate it like that, the whole system becomes totally different. That is the responsibility of the translator. You see, of course, we have to invent reception. I cannot say that my translation is the unique one, but I think it's better than ‘genres of discourse’.

Another example: I said Bakhtin never said *'énonciation'*; the colleague said, “It's not true, you talk rubbish, it says here *'énonciation'*...”, because *'vyskazyvanie'* (*'высказывание'*) had been translated as *'énonciation'*. But *'énonciation'* has a meaning for Benveniste, where he opposed *le sujet de l'énoncé* and *le sujet de l'énonciation*, which means that in the same sentence you can have two different subjects. It is obvious, for instance, in irony. But for Bakhtin, or for Voloshinov, there is no divided subject, there is a full subject, they were totally opposed to psychoanalysis. So, once again, in translation you have to make decisions, you have to choose what you are going to do and, of course, your translation will be one of the several possibilities of translating. I don't pretend my translation is the only one, but I have arguments to explain why I chose to translate *'речевые жанры'* not as *'les genres du discours'* but as *'les registres de la parole'* and therefore I have arguments for translating it like that.

I.C. This is really nice. I myself have encountered this problem in my research, and not only with translation, but rather when doing history of linguistics... to work with the history of a discipline implies the reconstruction of a given milieu, and at some point it becomes really complicated because one arrives at a moment when one doesn't know where the reconstruction ends: where does the context end for a given text or a given author? So, in this respect, who do you think is doing good history of linguistics? Or do you think there's a good methodology for carrying out research on the history of linguistics? For instance, I think, Koerner,¹⁶ he kind of, in between the lines, proposed something akin to general methodological principles, but... what do you think? Is it even possible to create a method for doing history of linguistics, based on this problem of contextualization?

P.S. I have no ready-made solution to give... I think that, for instance, when you translate a text of linguistics, you have to know in what context it was done. An example: with a Russian colleague we translated Potebnja's *Language and Thought* [*Мысль и язык (Mysl' i yazyk)*]¹⁷ into French. Now, the intellectual

¹⁶ E. F. Konrad Koerner (1939–2022).

¹⁷ Potebnja 2022[1862].

Russian language at that time was very strongly influenced by German and they had very long sentences going on for one page or so. So, what do we do? Do we translate the whole sentence on a whole page, or should we split it apart? Well, we had to make a compromise, because he wrote like that, and the readers in 1862 were accustomed to those endless sentences. A French reader now will not accept that, they would say it's intolerable. So, you have to make a compromise. You have to cut it apart, not too much, but a little bit. Now, on the other hand, terminology is even more difficult. You see, in Russian there are, and I mentioned it yesterday, 'yazyk' ('язык'), 'rech' ('речь'), 'slovo' ('слово'), and they turn and turn endlessly, because at times it is 'language', at times it is 'speech', at times it is 'discourse', at times it is 'text'... well... every time you have to make a choice. This is not the only possible choice but... it is what we call 'bricolage' in French... When I speak about my job to friends who are specialists in mathematics or physics, they think that we are... poets! That we are not serious, because for them, there's two and two and that's four, and that's all. Perfect. But for us, no... we have to do what we can and that's all, we have to approximate translations... [we were both laughing].

I.C. But luckily there are also some mathematicians who are interested in semiotics...

P.S. But semiotics and linguistics are not the same...

I.C. You are right... but now, let us move on to a seemingly different topic. I wanted to ask you if you think linguistics can contribute to solving social issues, do you think there's a political dimension to the study of languages, and if so, do you think this dimension could have a social impact?

P.S. I think that learning grammatical structures has absolutely nothing to do with solving social problems. Nothing. But studying the discourse on language has a very important political impact, of course. Let's take the problem of languages in Ukraine. On the internet you can find a lot of maps, ethnolinguistic maps of Ukraine, where, on the one side of a line, people speak Ukrainian and on the other side people speak Russian. This is nonsense, it's not like that at all. First of all, because human beings can travel. Second, because in Ukraine most people are bilingual, and they speak both Ukrainian and Russian. Another important argument is that there is a third language in Ukraine, which is called Surzhyk, and Surzhyk is a sort of mixture between Ukrainian and Russian, those languages are very close to each other. So, when sociolinguists try to make statistics: how many people speak Russian and how many people speak Ukrainian in Kyiv for instance; well, they write that in Kyiv, 65.72 percent of the people speak Ukrainian and the other percentage speaks Russian. This has no meaning at all, because when you go to the market, you

can begin a sentence in one language and according to the way the seller answers to you, you can change language, and that is normal for most people.

Now, there is the linguistic political ideology which thinks that your mother tongue is supposed to be your ethnicity. So, Putin thinks that all the people who speak Russian are Russians. I have friends who have told me that in Crimea there's a Russian population, this is not true at all, they are Ukrainian citizens who speak Russian, but they are Ukrainian citizens, they're not Russians. Now, my Russian friends think that French-speaking Swiss citizens are French, but they're not French! It is ridiculous! And when I told that to my Swiss colleagues, they just laughed. They speak French, but they are not French. Now, for Putin, everybody who speaks Russian is a Russian, so if you have Russian in Donetsk, then this is Russia and that's all. Now, you have to understand that when Hitler thought that the German-speaking Czechoslovakian citizens in Sudetenland were Germans before being Czechoslovaks, he of course invaded Sudetenland because he thought it was Germany. It is exactly the same kind of reasoning. So, you see, of course, linguistics has a lot to do with political issues, maybe not grammar structures, but the way people think about language does.

Now, another problem which is important for the linguist is that 'mother tongue', 'official language', 'literary language', 'dialects', all those terms are very unclear, they have to be explained. For instance, in Russian or in Ukrainian, or in Belarusian, there is the idea of '*родной язык*' ('*родной язык*'). What is '*родной язык*'? In Ukrainian '*рідна мова*' ('*рідна мова*'), in Belarusian '*родная мова*' ('*родная мова*'). What does that mean? In general, it is translated as 'mother tongue', but once I had a Belarusian PhD student and she told me, in French, "My mother tongue is Belarusian, but I don't speak it." This is fantastic! "I don't speak my mother tongue" [both of us chuckled], so '*родная мова*' is not 'mother tongue', it's a sort of 'ethnic tongue'. She wanted to say that she feels herself as a Belarusian, but at home, with her family, they speak Russian, you see? And all that is totally unknown in the West. And, once again, why linguists in the West should study those linguistic ideologies is to understand the difference between citizenship and nationality. We already spoke about that, but it is important that people understand that the word 'nationality' in the West is translated as 'citizenship' in the East. For instance, once I participated in a small colloquium in Saint Petersburg, with English and French colleagues, in sociolinguistics, and there was an Estonian linguist who explained that before the Second World War in Estonia there was a special status for the Jews, the Swedes and the Germans, and my French colleague was shocked, he said, "You are a racist! Because I understand that

for the Swedes and the Germans who are foreigners, there's a special status, but why for the Jews?" And our Estonian colleague said, "No, no, they were all Estonians." So my friend replied, "But they were not Estonians because they were Germans." So he had to explain that they were Estonian citizens of German ethnicity, or nationality, as were the Jews. There was a total misunderstanding because those French colleagues could not understand the difference between 'nationality' and 'citizenship', you see? So, our responsibility as linguists is also to explain that the word 'language' does not have the same meaning here and there.

I.C. This is really fascinating... you see, I studied in Mexico, in a school of anthropology, and this school has a very long tradition of descriptive linguistics, because the main aim is to describe indigenous languages of Mexico, but at the same time the school has a long tradition of... let's say, of being a strong place for Marxism in Mexican intellectual life, and they even wanted at some point to do some kind of Marxist linguistics...

P.S. I don't understand what Marxist linguistics is, not at all...

I.C. ...I'm not entirely sure either... but the thing is that from the first day we were taught that to say that some forms of speech are a *language*, more than a linguistic statement it is a political statement. So, if you want to distinguish between two languages, this is a question of politics, not really of linguistics. But this brings to my mind another situation. I once had a friend who was studying Gallo, which, as you know, is a language in Western France, and it's not Celtic, but Romance, so it was usually regarded as a poorly spoken version of French. My friend was studying the grammar of Gallo because the idea was that if there is even one grammatical rule that is different between French and Gallo, then they are two different languages. So, even if the study of grammar might seem completely detached from politics, it can have political implications...

P.S. Yes, yes, but, you know, that is an opinion, it is not a fact. You can say that Serbian and Croatian are different languages, but you can also say that they are the same language, and the linguist cannot answer this question because it is not a linguistic question, it is a purely political question. Now, you know that an "official language" is an invented norm. Nobody speaks the "norm". You will never find two speakers of the same language who speak exactly the same norm. That does not exist. So you have to build a more or less abstract image of the language. And of course, it is useful, we need an official language, but nobody speaks it, and it's not a problem. Now, Serbian and Croatian are exactly the same, but at the same time they immediately know each other through the way they speak. Let's take, as another example, French in France

and French in Switzerland. It is the same language, but at the same time... I'm French, and whenever I open my mouth, they immediately know I'm not Swiss but French. Immediately, just by the intonation, by some words... but nonetheless, if there was a war between France and Switzerland, I'm sure that nationalist politicians would imagine that Swiss French is not French. It is very easy. You see, there are twelve kilometers across the lake between Evian and Lausanne. Most names of vegetables and fruits are different, so when you go to the market on the other side of the lake, you have to translate from your language to the other language. But the differences between Northern and Southern France are more important than those between both sides of the lake... so, you see, language is a continuum, and of course you must have a normalized official language which nobody speaks at all.

I.C. Yes... the very same thing happens with Spanish...

P.S. Yes. I more or less know Spanish from Spain, but when I read *Mafalda*¹⁸ it is always surprising, because she speaks Argentinean Spanish, and so when she tells Susanita "*Sos una papafrita*" [we both laughed here], I had to understand that even the verbal morphology in Argentinean Spanish is different from Spain, yes, but nonetheless it is the same language... and American English and British English, you can imagine that they are different languages, they have different words, different spellings, but it is the same language.

I.C. But then... let's complicate things a bit... because, indeed, Mexican and Argentinean Spanish, or any other variety, to the extent that they have different second persons in the singular (and sometimes in the plural too for Iberic varieties), then they have different grammars. If we take this point of view according to which if there is even one different grammatical rule, then there are two different languages, we would have to say Mexican and Argentinean Spanish are two different languages. Now, maybe this is not so relevant for Argentinean and Mexican Spanish, but if you have a minority language where maybe there is a group of people that needs to be represented somehow and their representation depends on "demonstrating" that their language *is* a different language than the dominant one, then it might be relevant to treat these small differences carefully...

P.S. But, you know... from which point should a social group decide that they are a nation? I don't know, and Marxism has nothing to answer to this question. Look, Ukrainian is very similar to Russian, nonetheless, it is not Russian. Now, in the nineteenth century in the Russian empire, the official ideology

¹⁸ An Argentinean comic strip created by cartoonist Joaquín Salvador Lavado Tejón (Quino) and published from 1964 to 1973.

was that... it wasn't called 'Ukrainian language' but 'Little-Russian dialect', so the official thesis was that the Little-Russian dialect was a southern way of speaking Russian, so of course, Ukrainians are Russians, and that's it. The official thesis was that there were separatist national thinkers in Ukraine, who took Polish words and put them into the Little-Russian dialect to invent a language that would be as different as possible from Russian. Now, just after the revolution, there was a policy of indigenization, so the idea was that in each Soviet republic, you should ask local people to be members of the administration, this was the beginning of the 1920s, but little by little... for instance, in Ukraine, there were Ukrainian linguists who did important work on dictionaries and grammars to build a norm for Ukrainian grammar. When Stalin, after 1929, got power he prohibited that, and he asked the language to be transformed and to move closer and closer to Russian. So, the idea was that the Ukrainian proletarians should understand the Russian proletarians as well as possible.

In Belorussia [Belarus], it is even worse because Belarusian was not written before the revolution, and there was a linguist, Tarashkyevich, who, in 1921, proposed a written norm of the language. This written Belarusian was called '*Tarashkievitsa*' ('*тарашкевіца*'), but in the middle of the 1930s this Belarusian norm was prohibited, and a new norm '*Narkamaŭka*' ('*наркамаўка*') was created, which is a Russianized norm of Belarusian. And so it happens that now there are two Wikipedias in Belarusian, in *Tarashkievitsa* and in *Narkamaŭka*. And you can understand, of course, that Lukashenko would write in *Narkamaŭka*, and anti-Lukashenko would write in *Tarashkievitsa*, so you perfectly know the political opinions of the people according to the way they spell the words. You can see that this is not a linguistic problem, it is only a political problem, because a language does not exist in itself, it is not an organism, it is not a living organ, it is a practice: there are people who speak, and this is the only reality, there are individuals who speak, and who, more or less, understand each other... only more or less...

You can describe a language from different points of view, you can describe an official language, a literary language, you can rely on the great writers, or you can be a sociolinguist and try to go in the street with your microphone and try to explain how people speak. Both attitudes are interesting, both attitudes are scientific. It is a point of view that's at play. And the problem of Serbian and Croatian, or of Ukrainian, Russian and Surzhyk is a typical political problem of course... remember that there is an ideology which says, for Hitler and for Putin, that someone who speaks one language

is a representative of this nation. For instance, many of my Russian friends think that in France there are different nations: the French, the Bretons, the Corsicans, the Basques, the Alsatians, etc., consequently, the French are just one of the many nations of France, just like the Bretons...

I.C. Well, in Spain there are some similar problems...

P.S. Yes... yes, the Catalanian problem is very interesting because there are many people in Catalonia who think that they pay taxes for “those bastards in Andalusia who are just lazy and do nothing” and that, if they were independent, they would be richer, but... does that mean that they will prohibit *castellano* in Barcelona? Unfortunately, this is pure racism. It is the same problem as in Corsica. I have left-wing colleagues who think that the Corsican people are part of the French people, and that the Corsican language should be official in Corsica. Why not? But not forgetting French... so, I asked them, how do you know that someone is a Corsican, they answered “because four generations of their grandparents were Corsicans”. This is precisely the definition of a Jew for the Nazi Germany. Now, you see, what I appreciate in France is the Jacobine ideology that all the citizens are equal in their rights. That’s all. And, if you want to speak Corsican at home, please do. If you want to believe in God, please do. But this has nothing to do with your rights and your obligations towards the state. This is a Jacobine principle of the French Revolution, this is the Republic, and I appreciate it because it prevented a civil war. Unfortunately, now there are extreme-right and extreme-left factions who seem to want to end this equality of rights... but this is another problem.

I.C. Well, for a last question, because we’ve already spent an hour in this great conversation: can we as linguists do something regarding the current state of the world East of Europe and beyond?

P.S. I think we can do only very little. But there is something that we as linguists can do: to explain that a language is not a thing, it is a practice. And, please, just let the people speak the language they want, and that’s all. In Ukraine, there are extreme nationalists, who also think that a Ukrainian citizen should only speak Ukrainian. Now, there are people who say “I am Ukrainian, and my mother tongue is Russian, and this does not prevent me from being a Ukrainian.” But unfortunately, there are other people who don’t agree with that. So, I think, of course: you should explain, as a linguist, that a language is only a means of communication, and not your own ethnic essence, which does not mean anything! We are human beings, and we are citizens of a state, and the state is supposed to protect us, that’s all. We should not invade another country with the pretext that they speak the same language as we do; France does not invade Switzerland because there are people in

Switzerland who speak French. In Ukraine, Putin should not invade Ukraine because there are people who speak Russian, no. With your friend, yesterday, we spoke of Lithuania and Latvia, and he thought that Russian speakers were discriminated, but once again... the situation has to be explained, there are one hundred and sixty millions of Russians and two and a half millions of Lithuanians, you see, I understand that Lithuanians want Lithuanian to be the unique language, because if they accept that Russian is on the same level, as an official language, then they will be swallowed by Russia. So, each situation has to be explained in its own context. So, yes, I think that the linguist can do a little bit in explaining these situations, and, precisely, in explaining what a language is, from a political point of view.

I.C. That could be definitely a great way of contributing, I agree. Thank you very much for this conversation.

P.S. Thanks to you, and I hope all this can be a little bit useful.

I.C. There's no question about that.

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