

From semantics to semiotics: A page of early Soviet intellectual history

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Abstract. The paper focuses on a particular episode in the (pre)history of semiotics in the USSR in the 1920s–1930s. At that time, an attempt to create an “integral” science was made by linguists, among whom N. Ja. Marr was one of the best-known. Several semantic laws formulated by Marr could be either reformulated in order to be applied to other disciplines (literary studies, anthropology, archeology, biology) or “proved” by the facts or discoveries drawn from them. Another “proof” that these linguistic theories were correct consisted in the possibility of transferring the corresponding models and schemes from one field of knowledge to another: at that epoch the refusal to make a clear methodological separation between disciplines which were primarily concerned with “matter” and those that were more “spiritual” was an important tendency for scholars both in the Soviet Union and in other countries.

In modern discourses, the word *semiotics* may be polysemic, referring for instance not only to a discipline concerned with signs and symbols, but also to a synthesis or a dialogue of various branches of knowledge which is therefore close to philosophy¹. In this latter incarnation semiotics has a long history. In particular, representatives of various disciplines (including linguists) aspired to create such a “global science”² during the first decades of the 20th century.

¹ On the “possibility to define semiotics in multiple ways” see in particular Kull, Salupere, Torop 2005.

² Compare with the recently introduced notion of *integral science* (Velmezova

1. N. Ja. Marr: An *enfant terrible* of Soviet linguistics³

In this respect, the linguistic theories of Nikolaj Jakovlevich Marr (1864–1934) are significant⁴. Marr’s intellectual heritage is “traditionally” divided into three periods: already at the very beginning of his career, he became known for his works in the field of archeology and philology in the traditional sense of the word, that is, for studying, commenting on and publishing Georgian and Armenian manuscripts (for the most part, the relevant works had been written before the Revolution of 1917). Another period of his research activities could be described as linguistic: at that time, Marr postulated the existence of the so-called Japhetic family of languages which initially was formed by Georgian and Semitic languages and to which, with every passing year, Marr added more and more languages. (Marr composed the majority of corresponding works in the late 1910s and early 1920s, though his first article on “Japhetic languages” was published in 1888.) Finally, during the last period of his career (that of the *New Theory of Language*) which begins in 1923–1924, Marr completely abandoned

2003). On the early stages in the evolution of semiotics in the USSR, see Ivanov 1976.

³ Without trying to “rehabilitate” Marr’s theories from a linguistic point of view, I study his intellectual heritage in the general context of history of linguistic ideas, being guided by the principle of “epistemological neutrality” enunciated by S. Auroux: *every theory, even the most erroneous and incorrect one, is worthy of attentive study and analysis* (Auroux 1989: 16). For this reason, in this article I am not going to comment upon Marr’s statements from a purely linguistic point of view, avoiding — unlike many other historians of linguistics who analyzed Marr’s theories (Thomas 1957; L’Hermitte 1987; Alpatov 1991, etc. [see Velmezova 2007a: 24–41]) — the problem of their “correctness”, but shall concentrate on their epistemological value.

⁴ The study of Marrist theories as they are reflected in Russian semiotics (including modern researches) merits a particular investigation. One possible direction could involve analysis of works composed by scholars from the Moscow semiotic school, taking up the so-called “semantic reconstruction” (for example, that of “initial myths”). The question remains open as to whether Marr’s theories directly influenced Moscow semioticians or, on the contrary, whether it was more a general intellectual background peculiar to the Russian humanities which becomes apparent in both cases.

(at least, in words) the notion of *family of languages*, replacing it by that of *stage of language evolution*⁵. From the analysis of particular languages Marr passed to the study of human language in general *par excellence*, explaining the change of stages in its evolution by the development of thought which, in its turn, depended for him directly on social and economic reasons (Marr 1933–1937[1929], III: 70; see also 1933–1937[1922b], I: 131). It was precisely Marr’s interest in the evolution of thought that explained his concern about semantics which, he felt, had not been studied well enough in the so-called “traditional” linguistics, especially in the theories of young grammarians (Marr 1933–1937[1931], III: 103).

In the 1910s and 1920s, Marr was certainly not the only linguist to be interested in linguistic semantics in connection with the problems of social and economic development and its reflection in thought: there were, for example, A. Meillet (see, for instance Meillet 1926[1905–1906]) and O. Jespersen who, in 1925, declared the existence of universal laws of human thought which were supposedly reflected in the linguistic laws of semantic changes, that is, in diachronic semantics (Jespersen 1925: 212). For Marr, the laws of social and economic evolution were the same for all peoples, which explained the universal character of the development of thought, including the laws of diachronic semantics. This approach also allowed him to “disengage” himself from the study of particular languages and to begin with formulating semantic universals; only afterwards did he look for their corroborations and examples in concrete languages. At the same time, since Marr considered phonetics as inferior to semantics, when he established semantic links between the words that happened to resemble each other phonetically, he apparently did not accept the famous Saussurean principle of language sign arbitrariness⁶.

⁵ As a matter of fact, in the 1920s–1930s Marr still used the “traditional” terminology of comparative and historical linguistics, providing at the same time already existing terms with new meanings (Velmezova 2007b).

⁶ For more details concerning this tendency, see Velmezova 2007a: 263–286.

2. Semantic vs. semiotic laws⁷

In his works, Marr formulated six semantic laws, the majority of which either could be easily reformulated, in one way or another, in order to be applied to other fields of knowledge or could be “proved” by the facts or discoveries drawn from other disciplines — as the following examples show⁸.

Marr’s law of the “thought common to all mankind” [*zakon obshchechelovecheskogo myshlenija*] supposes that all languages and, first of all, their semantics, pass through the same stages while evolving (Marr 1933–1937[1926], III: 37). If Marr had not aspired to “prove” the existence of various stages of language evolution precisely in the semantics of concrete languages, this law could be qualified as an anthropological one: it is not insignificant that while trying to formulate it, Marr was inspired by the works of L. Lévy-Bruhl (Velmezova 2007a: 113–158). However, Marr never managed to show how successive stages of language evolution were reflected in semantics. The only exception to this failure was a semantic law which Marr formulated for the most ancient period of language evolution: at this stage, all words in the language had been supposedly enantiosemic, combining opposite meanings in their semantics, as, for instance, ‘white’ and ‘black’, ‘day’ and ‘night’ (Marr 1933–1937[1929], III: 71, etc.). This semantic particularity of the proto-language was described by the “law of opposites”. Marr looked for its demonstrations in numerous languages which, in his opinion, still kept such relics. In this way, he followed the medieval linguistic

⁷ The word *semejotika* (literally ‘semiotics’) meant sometimes ‘semantics’ in the Russian philological discourses dating from the period which was characterized by a lack of standardized linguistic terminology. For instance, as early as 1884, V. I. Sherts’l’ qualified enantiosemism as “one of the most remarkable and striking phenomena in the domain of semiotics [*semejotika*]” (Sherts’l’ 1977[1884]: 242). The correspondence between the Russian words *semantika* ‘semantics’ and *semejotika* ‘semiotics’ in synchrony and diachrony still needs to be addressed.

⁸ The limited volume of this article makes impossible to analyze here, using the present approach, *all* semantic laws formulated by Marr; it also explains a “thesis” nature of this work. A detailed analysis of all Marr’s semantic laws is proposed in the book Velmezova 2007a: 111–295.

tradition which, in the modern times, echoed one of the principal theses of G. W. F. Hegel's philosophy: that of the unity of opposites considered as the origin of any development.

The "law of opposites" was a particular manifestation of the law of "diffuse semantics", which postulated that all words in the proto-language were semantically diffuse, that is, polysemic to a high degree — so that there existed no simple words, but "semantic nests" or "bundles" [*semanticheskie gnezda / puchki*] of meanings (most frequently, Marr referred to the "bundles" 'head — mountain — sky' and 'water — woman — hand'). Two factors seem significant here in the light of correlation between semantics and semiotics. To begin with, discussing this law, Marr transferred to linguistics the law of "differentiation" of physical (biological, first of all) matter which had been formulated by H. Spencer⁹: considering this law universal, Spencer tried to apply it to various disciplines, such as the history of human society, the history of religion and psychology etc. Besides, speaking about this law, Marr did not confine himself to linguistics, but instead found parallels in the evolution of literature. He was probably influenced in this by A. N. Veselovskij, who had written about the primitive "diffuse syncretism" of folklore, which, while evolving split up into particular genres (Veselovskij 2004[1899]). Another discipline in which Marr tried to find convincing demonstrations of this law was archeology.

Precisely in archeology Marr looked for testimonies for another semantic law — that of "functional transfer" which is still mentioned in some books and articles on general semiotics or linguistics (see, for instance, Stepanov 1971: 139; 1990a: 439; 1990b: 441¹⁰). According to this law, the name of one thing is transferred to another object on the condition that the latter object "performs the same duties" in society at a new stage of its development. For instance, according to

⁹ Marr recognized the profound influence of Spencer's doctrine on his own theories (Velmezova 2007a: 208–209).

¹⁰ In the latter text, the principle of "functional semantics" is mentioned without any reference to Marr.

Marr, the name of acorn was transferred to bread after bread took the place of acorns as principal food of men, which corresponded to the transition from gathering to agriculture (Marr 1933–1937[1927], I: 240; 1933–1937[1930], I: 263); the name of the dog was transferred to horse after dogs were replaced by horses as basic transport facilities at a particular moment of history (Marr 1933–1937[1927], I: 240), etc. In the 1930s–1940s, Soviet archeologists repeatedly wrote about finds that seemed to corroborate Marr’s theories and this law in particular, for instance, when they excavated the remains of buried horses which wore the masks of dogs (see, for example, Chakvetadze 1933: 44; Kiparisov 1933: 21; Miller 1933).

The last semantic law which I shall touch upon in this article is that of hybridization. According to this law, when two languages come into contact, their words having the same meaning “stick together”, so that the new word-hybrids have the same semantics as that of initial words: for instance, Marr said that the Komi word *muzem* (‘earth’) was a hybrid unit, derived from *mu-* (which initially meant ‘earth’ in Komi) joined with *zem-* (having the same meaning in Russian, compare *zemlja*) owing to contacts between the Komi and the Russians (Marr 1933–1937[1936], II: 131), etc. This law and the notion of hybridization in linguistics in general had parallels first of all in the biological discourses of that epoch — when, in particular, L. S. Berg “turned upside-down” Darwin’s scheme of the evolution of species (Berg 1922). According to Berg, species converge rather than diverge, evolving from initial multitude to a hypothetical unity. Similar models were also created at that time in other disciplines — for example, in the study of literature (for example, O. M. Frejdenberg¹¹).

Now, Marr, who had never approved the metaphor “language is a living organism” (in his opinion, it was very popular in the “traditional” linguistics, to which he was opposed), could hardly *borrow* the model of evolution by convergence from biology to linguistics (compare Marr 1933–1937[1920], I: 92)¹². Besides, in the early 1920s, Marr

¹¹ About Berg’s influence on Frejdenberg, see Braginskaja 1998: 751–752.

¹² Even if Marr took no great interest in biology, some of his works provide evidence that he used to meditate on the problems of biological evolution — for

and Berg seem to have come to their conclusions and models independently from each other, approximately at the same time.

Neither Marrist theories nor Frejdenberg's conceptions concerning the study of literature could have been proved "scientifically", in a positivist sense of the word. At the same time, one of the indirect proofs of all such theories probably consisted in the possibility of transferring the corresponding models of evolution from one discipline to another; this tendency did not concern only humanities or social sciences. For instance, to illustrate a number of theses in his theory of biological nomogenesis, Berg referred to linguistic facts, namely the convergence of languages (Berg 1922: 178)¹³. Berg also worked on the theory of convergence in ethnography, finding numerous folklore plots transferred from one people to another (see Velmezova 2007a: 312).

Today such linguistic and ethnolinguistic remarks in the works of a biologist could seem misplaced, but in the 1920s–1930s, interdisciplinary dilettantism of this kind did not shock many scholars. The possibility of transferring models from one discipline to another had particular methodological foundations within the framework of what was to become semiotics, a discipline which, according to Frejdenberg, still had no name at that epoch (Frejdenberg 1997[1936]: 11). The opinion of Berg (a scholar of high authority at that time) on these problems seems particularly interesting. Berg and Marr were closely acquainted; in the early 1930s Berg gave several talks at the Japhetic institute in Leningrad, where the majority of Marrists worked. Besides, some unpublished rough copies of Marr's works show that he used certain linguistic facts reported by Berg (in particular, the names of fishes¹⁴) to corroborate his theories; Marr and Berg also discussed linguistic problems in their correspondence in the late 1920s (see Velmezova 2007a:

example, criticizing implicitly Darwinism and expressing his doubts about the general conclusions of Darwin's theory of the origin of species (Marr 1933–1937[1922a], I: 160).

¹³ Not only Berg's book of 1922 on nomogenesis contained particular reflections about linguistics, but also a number of his articles written later, in the 1940s (Berg 1947 and 1948).

¹⁴ Berg was a recognized ichthyologist.

311–313). Moreover, even after Stalin’s criticism of Marrism in 1950, Berg was one of very few researchers who was not afraid to object to the Soviet dictator and insist that the Marrist doctrine was extremely important for the development of other disciplines, such as geography, ethnography and the study of folklore, while acknowledging Marr’s mistakes in the description of particular languages. In the early 1950s, for a Soviet scholar to argue with Stalin, he had to be not only very courageous, but also absolutely convinced of his opinions¹⁵.

3. An interdisciplinary dialogue: In search of an “integral science”

Therefore, the refusal to make a clear methodological distinction between the study of matter and that of the spirit was important for Soviet specialists in various fields of knowledge in the 1920s–1940s. By the end of 1930s, Russian thinker Ja. E. Golosovker maintained that, at a time of tumultuous cultural changes, the word *duh* (‘spirit’) had become incomprehensible: researchers had to remember that nature and culture were not two different principles, but one and the same, a unit that it was possible to study and comprehend (Golosovker, cited in Frumkina 1988: 61). On the other hand, according to the modern scholar N. V. Braginskaja who commented on Frejdenberg’s works, one should conceive of this as being analogous to a researcher who makes no distinction between the symmetry discovered in living organisms, in crystals and in the works of art, because his interest is in symmetry as a general and universal phenomenon¹⁶. This was the approach taken by Frejdenberg (Braginskaja 1998: 751), Berg and Marr. Continuing

¹⁵ About Berg’s “polemics” with Stalin which followed the severe criticism of Marr by the Soviet dictator in 1950, see Velmezova 2007a: 313.

¹⁶ Compare with a similar passage from Ju. S. Stepanov’s book entitled *Semiotika*: “Semioticians must be able to observe everywhere [they are], either among primitive tribes or in modern industrial cities, being patient explorers of nature and, in particular, of the human nature” (Stepanov 1971: 5).

this reasoning, one could affirm that the same approach was characteristic of many scholars at that time, both in the Soviet Union and abroad. This constituted an important factor behind the wide popularity of Marr's theories among many Soviet intellectuals in the 1920s and afterwards.

Concluding remarks

The epoch of 1920s–1930s could be considered as that of “holistic”, “global” disciplines not only in the USSR (where, among other attempts to create such “integral” sciences, there was the school of *imjaslavie* [‘glorifiers of the name’] and V. I. Vernadskij’s theory of noosphere). Another such example was the work of Eurasians who had emigrated from Russia and whose method was that of “tying” [*uvjazka*] of facts from various disciplines (see Sériot 1999: 221–230); there was also the work of scholars who had probably never heard about Marr, such as J. C. Smuts, the author of the book *Holism and evolution*, which was popular in the 1920s (Smuts 1926). Therefore the search for universal laws of evolution (in the case of Marr, analysis of semantic universals in diachrony) and, in general, the study of laws of development which could be applied to objects of various disciplines, together with the search for possibilities to transfer models and metaphors from one field of knowledge to another were important components of a scientific paradigm in the 1920s–1930s. In this sense, one can speak about the epoch of “pre-history” of semiotics in Russia: if semiotics studies, in particular, common elements in the organization and functioning of various sign systems, the “pre-semioticians” necessarily had to raise the question of what these “systems” (this word was not inevitably used at that time) had in common in general — which was only possible in an alliance of several disciplines. In the case of Marr, the origins of this “pre-semiotics” were linguistic.¹⁷

¹⁷ This text was published in Russian in the proceedings of the international conference “Sovremennaja semiotika v prilozhenii k gumanitarnym naukam”

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[*Contemporary semiotics applied to the humanities*] which was held in Moscow in August 2007 (Ivanov 2010: 376–384). I thank Professor Kalevi Kull for his valuable remarks and comments which I took into consideration working on the English version of this article.

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От семантики к семиотике: страница ранней истории советской науки

В статье рассматривается один из эпизодов становления семиотики в СССР в двадцатые-тридцатые годы прошлого века. В то время одна из попыток создания семиотики как “интегральной науки” предпринималась лингвистами, наиболее известным из которых был Н. Я. Марр. Постулируемые Марром семантические законы либо могли быть переформулированы для применения их в других областях знания (литературоведении, антропологии, археологии, биологии), либо “доказывались” при помощи заимствованных из них фактов и открытий. Другим “доказательством” подобных лингвистических теорий была возможность переноса соответствующих схем и моделей из одной дисциплины в другую: нежелание строго разграничивать материю и дух было методологически важной в те годы тенденцией в научном мире не только Советского Союза, но и других стран.

Semantikast semiootikani: üks lehekülg Nõukogude varasest intellektuaalsest ajaloost

Artikkel keskendub ühele erilisele episoodile semiootika (eel)ajaloos Nõukogude Liidus 1920ndatel–1930ndatel aastatel. Sel ajal tegid keeleteadlased, kellest kuulsamaid on N. Marr, katseid luua “tervikteadust”. Marr formuleeris mitmeid semantilisi seaduspärasusi, mida seejärel ümber sõnastati, kasutamaks neid teistes distsipliinides (kirjandusteaduses, antropoloogias, sotsioloogias), või “tõestati”, kasutades neilt erialadelt pärit fakte või avastusi. Üheks võimalikuks “tõestuseks” sellest, et nimetatud keeleteooriad on tõesed, oli justnimelt nende mudelite või skeemide ülekantavus ühest teadmiste valdkonnast teise: tollaegse Nõukogude Liidu ja teiste riikide teadlaskonda iseloomustas tendents vältida selge metodoloogilise eristuse tõmbamist “matereria” ja “vaimuga” tegelevate teadusdistsipliinide vahel.