Is language a system of signs?
Lenin, Saussure and the theory of hieroglyphics

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Abstract. This paper strives to pursue two goals at the same time: how can one get to know in depth the intellectual life of the USSR in the 1930s–1950s; and, what can the virulent anti-Saussurean criticism in Russia at that time tell us about the specificity of the Marxist-Leninist theory of signs?

We propose the following angle of attack: the recurring theme of this criticism, namely that Saussure's *Cours* presents a "theory of hieroglyphics", therefore a type of "bourgeois idealist" theory that Lenin assailed in his 1909 book *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* about Ernst Mach. Yet thinking about hieroglyphics is based on much older controversies, dating back to the 17th century and concerning the deciphering of Egyptian writing. The issue which arises here is semiotic in nature: it is the scalar opposition between transparency and opacity of the sign that is at stake. Does the sign hide or reveal? The Soviet discourse on language and signs in the 1930s–1950s seems to be based on an interrogation of the sign/referent, language/thought, form/content relationship. A part of the history of semiotics can thus be discovered from the critique of the "hieroglyphic theory", a little-known episode in a debate on the interpretation of Saussurism.

Keywords: epistemology; hieroglyphics; Vladimir Lenin; Soviet linguistics; Marxism; ontology; Ferdinand de Saussure; theory of knowledge

In the so-called "western" world, the idea that language is a system of signs is presented as fundamentally evident. All university textbooks and curricula, whatever their orientation, are based on this starting point. Ferdinand de Saussure, who included linguistics in 'semiology', is thus the founder of this almost unanimous approach.

There was, however, a time and a place where this assumption – or this evidence – was aggressively challenged: the Soviet Union in the 1930s–1950s.[2] Soviet

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[2]   Before the "Great Break" (*Velikij perelom*) of 1929 the discussions on language and sign were more diverse, more open, less entangled in ideological concerns.

linguistics of these years makes a serious charge against the thesis that language is a system of signs, a bourgeois and idealistic thesis, called the 'theory of hieroglyphics'.

Saussure was presented as a promoter of the "theory of hieroglyphics in linguistics", an extremely poorly known topic in linguistic literature in the "West". In my opinion, his charge raises an epistemological problem of primary importance, which needs to be clarified.

What does the theory of hieroglyphics mean in linguistics? We should first trace back the terminological and conceptual stages of the discussion on the interpretation of Egyptian hieroglyphs, then explore the ideological and philosophical context of the metaphorical use of the term in Soviet Marxism, and finally examine the arguments of the Soviet criticism of the theory of signs through the notion of 'the hieroglyph'. We thereby hope to advance in the knowledge of both Saussure and the Soviet intellectual context which made such a reading possible. This very context deserves the greatest attention because of its encounter between semiotics and the theory of knowledge. It is a significant part of the history of semiotics that is thus revealed in the criticism of the "theory of hieroglyphics", whose fundamental importance in the USSR is only matched by the total ignorance of it in the West.

Saussure's unprecedented association with hieroglyphics is a witness to the Soviet cultural and intellectual, as well as political-ideological, milieu of the 1930s–1950s. The more general theme of *reflection on language and signs in Russia* raises in turn a comparison in space and time: is intellectual life in Russia part of the so-called "Western tradition"?[3] If so, why is this question so often excluded from this tradition? If not, what is its specificity? And, on the other hand, there are so many parallels with another era that wondered about the nature and origin of language, namely the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe, that a comparison is in order.

We shall only address a tiny fraction of these numerous questions, i.e. the interpretation of Saussurian linguistics as a "theory of hieroglyphics" in the USSR until the gradual fading away of the Stalinist era in the mid-1950s.

1. Sign of thing, sign of idea or sign of word?

What is at stake here is not defining what a hieroglyph *is* (innumerable textbooks answer this question perfectly – see, for example, Collier, Manley 1998), but of reconstituting the argumentative use of this question throughout the history of controversies over the sign in European culture, in its incessant metaphorical

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3   And, incidentally: is Estonia in the East or in the West? Did Lotman and Uspenskij's work on the semiotics of culture raise this question?

shifts. Within the extreme polysemy of the word 'hieroglyph', the multiplicity of interpretations then revolves around the transparency or opacity of the sign.

The orientations of speculations on Egyptian hieroglyphics after the key to their reading was lost around the 4th century AD can be grouped into a few themes. A hieroglyph refers to:

(1) what is difficult to understand but one can hope to decipher one day;
(2) what has a hidden meaning reserved for those initiated, though therefore decipherable;
(3) what makes no sense (it is useless to waste time trying to figure it out somehow);
(4) that which deliberately deceives;
(5) what, in its apparent extreme obscurity, allows access to a higher meaning, inexpressible in a human language.

Basically, the sign either *hides* or *reveals*.

1.1. The world of silence

Whatever the nuances of this vast theoretical speculation, before Jean-François Champollion's discovery in 1824, the general attitude is that hieroglyphs do not represent the words of a natural language, but *things* or *ideas*. In the classic word/concept/thing triangle, the first of these terms is deleted. Hieroglyphic writing is thus seen as a pasigraphy, a universal system of notation, totally disconnected from a particular language. This pasigraphy can be drawn towards the notion of pictogram (representation of the concrete thing by a simplified schematic drawing) or of ideogram (symbol representing an abstract idea).

The Cratylian *physei*/*thesei* debate, previously thought to have been closed by Aristotle in favour of arbitrariness, is displaced, and dissolves into ideography, beyond oral languages. Several reasons can be given for the shift in this issue around the 16th century.

With the discovery of extra-European cultures, the loss of the hegemony of Latin as a universal language of communication, the rise of nationalisms, the impact of the *questione della lingua* in connection with Dante, and with the Protestant Reformation on a reflection around language and tongues contradictorily provoked both euphoria and mistrust of words, which are held responsible for the faults of philosophy and theology. Some scholars cling to the idea that truth can only be expressed by emblems, mottos, symbols, and seals (see Foucault 1970; Dubois 1970; Eco 1995; Demonet 1992; Albright 2000; Millet 2012).

The 15th-century neo-Platonic renaissance as it emerges in the work of Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) is fascinated by the hermetic vision of a sacred scripture in

the Egypt of the pharaohs, capable of expressing the unfathomable nature of the divine world. The obscurity of the hieroglyphics attracted those who considered non-discursive thought to be superior to human language, as a wordless thought, made up of silent images, the transmission of a reality superior to what is directly accessible to the senses. This ideal of language without words has been a tenacious myth in speculations on language until today, and even in Marrist linguistics in the USSR (see below, and Sériot 2020).

The fascination with and misinterpretation of hieroglyphics in the 16th–18th centuries can only be understood in the context of the central concern of that time: the crisis of the interpretation of the divine Word, or loss of confidence in the power of words to represent things. The ideal of direct vision then comes to the aid of this anxiety: drawing follows a shorter path than phonographic writing, but at the same time it is more open to interpretation, because anything can represent anything else: *everything is a sign*.

An allegorical semiotic conception is thus developed: in the 16th century the world created by God is presented as a set of signs to be interpreted: the referents (i.e. the things) are themselves signs. Everything is a sign awaiting deciphering, it is the doctrine of *God's signatures*. But this mistrust of words is coupled with a steadfast confidence in the possibility of attaining a higher truth, unattainable with the words of human tongues. Here, the language of images is not a direct representation of things, but a set of symbols of the unutterable. And it is precisely because obscurity opens the way to multiple interpretations that it allows this access to a world inaccessible to the words of language: *the sign says more than the thing itself* (the referent).

Francis Bacon (1561–1626) had equated hieroglyphics with gestures: like them, signs directly designate things because they have a *similarity* to them. Somehow, they replace them (Bacon 1605). This is the ideal of motivated language, which does not have the abstract character of a system of conventional signs.

So, a double, contradictory and paradoxical approach of hieroglyphics, appears. It is a system of transparent signs, which directly denote their referent, but at the same time it is their very opacity that allows us to glimpse a higher reality, inaccessible to words in human languages.

The purely iconic, pictographic interpretation of hieroglyphs (a sign strictly denoting the object to which it corresponds) seems extremely marginal in the Renaissance. There is in fact a paradoxical equation, at first sight an oxymoron, between iconicity and the sacred. For Athanasius Kircher (1602–1680), the hieroglyph takes all its allegorical and metaphorical force because of its role as revealer of occult knowledge: by drawing a scarab, the scribes did not see the insect, but the Sun, and not the material sun which illuminates the sensible world,

but the Sun, archetype of the intelligible world (Kircher 1650; see Eco 1995). From a motivational relationship between the drawing and the thing we move to an allegorical interpretive relationship between the sign and the idea.

However, the very same distrust of words can conversely interpret hieroglyphics in a transparent way while remaining ideographic. Thus, the article "[H]ieroglyphs" in the *Encyclopédie* by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert (published between 1751 and 1780) offers an immediate and unambiguous translation of a series of hieroglyphs in natural language (French):

> […] la fameuse inscription du temple de Minerve à Saïs, dont il est tant parlé dans l'antiquité. Un enfant, un vieillard, un faucon, un poisson, un cheval marin, servoient à exprimer cette sentence morale: "Vous tous qui entrez dans le monde & qui en sortez, sachez que les dieux haïssent l'impudence". Ce hiéroglyphe étoit dans le vestibule d'un temple public; tout le monde le lisoit, & l'entendoit à merveille. (Diderot, D'Alembert 1751)[4]

1.2. "imperfect, because they are many…"[5]

Yet the distrust of the words of human languages, parallel to the suffering of Babel's punishment (*confusio linguarum*), has an immediate consequence: the idea that a notation of ideas, or non-verbal communication, can redeem the punishment. It is the project of a *universal language of ideas*, an ideography independent of the necessary imperfection of multiple languages.

Mistrust of words will extend to mistrust of all existing graphic notations, including alphabets. John Wilkins in his *Essay Toward a Real Character* (1668) tries to combat "the cheat of words" in their conventional relation to things. His project consists of reconstructing language *ex nihilo*, from a system of non-alphabetic signs: "a *Real universal Character* that should not signify *words*, but *things* and *notions*, and consequently might be legible by any Nation in their own Tongue; which is the principal design of this Treatise" (cited by Clauss 1982: 536).

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4   "[…] The famous inscription of the temple of Minerva in Sais, about which so much is said in Antiquity. A child, an old man, a hawk, a fish, a sea horse, served to express this moral sentence: 'All of you who enter and leave the world, know that the gods hate impudence'. This hieroglyph was in the vestibule of a public temple; everyone read it and understood it perfectly". (Diderot, D'Alembert 1751 is available at https://books.google.ch/books/about/ Encyclopédie_Ou_Dictionnaire_Raisonné.html?id=z1SfZIAop_QC&printsec=frontcover&s ource=kp_read_button&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false]; translations from French and Russian are by the author of the article, unless indicated otherwise.)

5   "*imparfaites en cela que plusieurs*" (Mallarmé 1897: § 242).

The 18th century thus saw an extreme tension in the controversy over the trust that should be placed in the words of natural languages in order to gain knowledge of things. The greatest satirical refutation can be found in Jonathan Swift (1667–1745). Gulliver visits the Lagado Academy and meets learned philosophers who have found the most expeditious way to get rid of the barrier of words: *to speak with things without using words*.

> […] a Scheme for entirely abolishing all Words whatsoever; […] An Expedient was therefore offered, that since Words are only Names for Things, it would be more convenient for all Men to carry about them, such Things as were necessary to express the particular Business they are to discourse on. […] Another great Advantage proposed by this Invention, was that it would serve as a Universal Language to be understood in all civilized Nations, whose Goods and Utensils are generally of the same kind, or nearly resembling, so that their Uses might easily be comprehended. (Swift 1726: 3.5.21–3.5.23)

When Champollion published his key to deciphering hieroglyphs (*Précis du système hiéroglyphique*, 1824), a whole universe of mythical intellectual constructions collapsed with the abandonment of the ideographic interpretation: Egyptian hieroglyphs are a *lexigraphy*, or *logography*, signs not of things or of ideas but of words, noted by means of a rather inconvenient system of rebus based on consonants or groups of consonants, and determinatives indicating to which semantic category the word belongs in a homophonic series. Egyptian hieroglyphics do not denote a referent (the drawing of the sun for the sun) but refer to the signifier of a signified (the sign 'sun', a point in the middle of a circle, is the first syllable of any word beginning by '*râ*' or '*rê*').

Similarly, in 1838 Du Ponceau put down the idea that Chinese characters would be a universal philosophical language: "[…] an ideographic system of writing is a creature of the imagination, and it cannot possibly exist" (Du Ponceau 1838: xxiv, cited in O'Neil 2016: 16).

One last metaphorical use, still marginal, of the term 'hieroglyph' remains to be evoked – that of absolute, definitive opacity: an incomprehensible writing, scribbles or chicken scratch. Here the hieroglyph is no longer a sign of something, but a pure obstacle, a dead end, the opacity has nothing more to reveal.

> *Cette […] lettre a un défaut que j'ai eu bien de la peine à corriger; c'est une écriture difficile à déchiffrer […] ce n'est plus de l'écriture […] ce sont des hiéroglyphes.* (De Sévigné, 12 June, 1689, cited in the *Dictionnaire Robert* 1985: *s.p.*)[6]

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6   "This letter has a flaw that I had a hard time correcting; it is a writing that is difficult to decipher […] it is no longer writing […] it is hieroglyphics."

Yet it is this marginal use that will henceforth underpin the renewal of the hieroglyph metaphor.

2. Sign or mirror?

Once out of the world of the marvellous to enter that of disenchantment, the hieroglyph metaphor will find itself drawn, in the second half of the 19th century, into the whirlwind of another controversy, which involves the theory of knowledge in that of revolutionary action.

2.1. Hieroglyph and fetishism

The basic text for the new use of the word 'hieroglyph' is Book I of *Das Kapital* by Karl Marx (1867), which deals with the fetishism of the commodity, denounces its illusion and proposes to *reveal* its secret: in the capitalist market the social exchange of different works is *concealed* by the purchase of commodities by means of money.

> Value, therefore, does not stalk about with a label describing what it is. It is value, rather, that converts every product into a *social hieroglyphic*. Later on do we try to decipher the *hieroglyphic*, to get behind the secret of our own social products; for stamping an object of utility as a value is just as much a social product as language. (Marx 1887[1867])[7]

In this foundational text, commodity is an abstraction, an opaque sign, a simple form without content: use value is reduced to an exchange value. But the important thing here is that the term 'hieroglyph' is used in the sense of 'nothing but a pure sign', deprived of reality, a pure dead end, an obstacle blocking access to reality: the sign is reified, it takes the place of the real. Formerly a gateway, it has now become a barrier.

2.2. The hieroglyph: an obstacle or the only way of access to knowledge?

In the disarray caused by the failure of the 1905 Revolution in Russia, various "revisionist" tendencies appear among Marxists, some of whom question the opposition between materialism and idealism. In 1909 Lenin, under the

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[7] "*Es steht daher dem Werte nicht auf der Stirn geschrieben, was er ist. Der Wert verwandelt vielmehr jedes Arbeitsprodukt in eine* gesellschaftliche Hieroglyphe. *Später suchen die Menschen den Sinn der* Hieroglyphe *zu entziffern, hinter das Geheimnis ihres eignen gesellschaftlichen Produkts zu kommen, denn die Bestimmung der Gebrauchsgegenstände als Werte ist ihr gesell-schaftliches Produkt so gut wie die Sprache*" (Marx 1867: *s.p.*; my emphasis, P. S.).

pseudonym of V. Il'in, wrote *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* (henceforth ME)[8], a work on the theory of knowledge, intended to counter the arguments of the revisionists (Bogdanov, Bazarov, etc.) which are based on Mach's theories (see Kelly 1981).

His apparent opponent was the empirio-criticist theory of the Austrian physicist Ernst Mach (1838–1916), a kind of radical empiricism, according to which all knowledge, including scientific knowledge, can only come from the sensitive data of experience, that is, sensations [*Empfindung*, *oschuschenie*] (Mach 1886). The term 'sensation' should probably not be taken in a narrow, physiological sense, but the main point here is that this theory of knowledge is based on the principle of "no object without subject". In other words, there is no point in imagining what reality "in itself" might be, outside of a process of knowledge by a subject. Empirio-criticism is a conventionalist interpretation of science: the subject/object monism abolishes the opposition between the physical and the psyche. It seems that Mach does not speak of the ontological inexistence of objects in the world, but of the possibility of their knowledge only through the medium of our sensations, an idea which will later be the basis of neo-positivism.[9]

Mach, a physicist and philosopher, anticipates constructivist epistemologies: his approach to knowledge is based on the idea that our image of reality, or the notions structuring this image, are the product of the human mind in interaction with this reality, and not the exact *reflection* of reality itself. This is a phenomenalist theory, according to which the knowledge of phenomena results from a construction carried out by the subject, while the "thing-in-itself" will forever remain unknowable. Knowledge can therefore no longer be considered as the search for the iconic, imitative, specular representation of an ontological reality, pre-existing as such.

Lenin accuses the Russian partisans of Mach, Plekhanov in particular,[10] of promoting, while claiming to be Marxists, a theory according to which "the sensations and representations of man are not copies of actual things and

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[8]   Lenin 1909 is available at https://royallib.com/book/lenin_vladimir/materializm_i_empiriokrititsizm.html.

[9]   "If we were blind there would be no astronomy" (*knowledge*) is not the equivalent of "if we were blind there would be no outer space" (*existence*).

[10]   In 1892 the first Russian edition of Engels' work *Ludwig Feuerbach' and the End of German Classical Philosophy* appeared in Geneva, translated, prefaced and annotated by Georgij V. Plehanov. The latter exposes his materialist theory of knowledge: "Our sensations are kinds of hieroglyphics, which bring to our knowledge what is happening in reality. These hieroglyphs do not resemble the facts of which they inform us. But they inform us with perfect fidelity both of the facts and, this is the main thing, of the relationships that exist between them" (Plehanov 1961: 492).

processes of nature, or images [*izobrazheniya*], but conventional signs, symbols, hieroglyphics. […] Engels does not speak of symbols or hieroglyphics, but of copies, of snapshots [*snimki*], of images, of mirror reflections of things" (Lenin 1909, Part IV, Chap. 6).

This reflection theory is reminiscent of medieval scholastic discussions about the possibility of *talking about things that do not exist*, or chimeras, like the unicorn. In 1933, the article "Theory of hieroglyphs" in the first edition of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* states that

> In his critique of the theory of hieroglyphics, Lenin shows that it induces a distrust of sensitivity [*chuvstvennost'*], a distrust of knowledge, that it separates knowledge from the objective world, that it questions the existence of external objects, because symbols, or hieroglyphics, can perfectly be applied to imaginary objects. Lenin calls this theory a "hieroglyphic materialism, or symbolic, or semi-materialism", he shows that it undermines the basic principles of materialism, insofar as one does not expect from the hieroglyph any similarity with what it is the sign of […] that it is a concession to Kantianism, and that it must therefore be challenged by dialectical materialism. (*BSE* T. 27, 1933: 502–504)

Here, we can see a great opposition being set up between the sign-hieroglyph and the reflection-copy, which will underlie Saussure's reception in the USSR in the years 1930–1950. Anti-Kantianism is at the heart of the semiotic controversy: asserting the impossibility of knowing the thing-in-itself is assimilated by Lenin to agnosticism and subjectivism, symptoms of the reactionary bourgeois ideology's refusal to transform the world. For him, agnosticism is not only an admission of powerlessness to know the objective world, but also the *idealistic* assertion that the world does not exist as such, apart from a knowing subject. Note that on the contrary, in "Western" culture, agnosticism commonly means atheism (which denies the existence of God) and therefore *materialism*.

In Lenin's equation "hieroglyph = symbol = sign",[11] the sign is always accompanied by the adjective 'conventional'. It is what is "put in place of", therefore an obstacle to the knowledge of the thing, itself held to be synonymous with "objective reality". With *Marxism and Empiriocriticism*, we move from analogy to homology.

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[11]   Mach's text uses neither the word 'sign' nor the word 'hieroglyph', but 'symbol'.

3. Real object or object of knowledge?

In May 1949 the entire Soviet people celebrated the 40th anniversary of the publication of V. I. Lenin's brilliant work: *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*. This book, a classic model of partisanship in philosophy, played an exceptional role in the ideological defeat inflicted on the opponents of Marxism, in the defense and strengthening of the theoretical foundations of the Bolshevik party. Lenin's work is still perfectly relevant today. While having immense importance in the field of philosophy, Lenin's work shows the way to a whole series of particular sciences: physics, natural sciences, history, science of literature, linguistics, and many other scientific disciplines. In our struggle against formalism and bourgeois cosmopolitanism in linguistics, we must always, constantly, refer to this remarkable work of V. I. Lenin, just as to the other works of the classics of Marxism-Leninism, and, from the standpoints of these works, not only to criticize the positions of our adversaries, but also to advance our science of language. (Budagov 1949: 509)

This investigation into the metaphorical uses of the notion of the hieroglyph was necessary to get to the heart of the matter: the rejection of Saussure's definition of language as a system of signs in Soviet linguistics from the 1930s to 1950s.

What happens when Lenin's gnoseology is applied to linguistics? Why is the theory of language as a system of signs "bourgeois, idealistic, metaphysical and reactionary"? Why devaluating the symbolic semiotic dimension? In the maze of endlessly repeated dogmatic affirmations we can identify a key idea: the theory of signs, alias hieroglyphics, *separates* form and content, in other words, the sign and the referent. In the equation "meaning = content = referent = objective reality", the sign is on the other side of the barrier: it is what replaces, what usurps. Last, sign theory is said to be idealistic, because it makes it possible to doubt the existence of material objects, and to speak of what does not exist.

3.1. If language is not a system of signs, then what is it?

It was a widespread idea among Russian linguists at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, from Alexander A. Potebnya (1835–1891) to Filipp F. Fortunatov (1848–1914), that language *is* a system of signs. Soviet linguistics of the 1930–1950 would overturn this common idea in the name of materialism.

Any social superstructure rises above a material base of production. Above the real relations of production is language, next to consciousness. As a social ideology, it reflects social consciousness and everyday life [*bytie*]. Unlike Indo-European linguistics, N. Marr asserts that language reflects social consciousness and everyday life. In language we have a reflection, and not a system of signs. The dogma of Western European linguists, uncritically taken up by some of our Soviet

linguists, that language is a system of signs has its roots in the well-known theory of hieroglyphic symbols, supported by chauvinists, and brilliantly overthrown by V. Lenin in his work *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*. (Serdyuchenko 1931: 171)

In Soviet linguistics of the 1930s–1950s the word is not a sign any longer: it becomes a mirror, a reflection, it claims to be an innovation, not only Marxist, but also anti-Western. The theory of the two sciences takes on a new aspect: from bourgeois science vs. proletarian science (Lenin or Bogdanov), it is now Western science vs. Soviet science, by a reversal of what has founded European culture since Aristotle:

> The vast majority of bourgeois philosophers, psychologists, and linguists regard the word as a sign, a symbol, a hieroglyph, and language as a system of signs or symbols. This conception dates back to Aristotle, who asserted that "words expressed by sounds are symbols of representations in the soul" (*Peri hermeneias*). (Reznikov 1948: 401)

The explicit alternative to the theory of hieroglyphic signs is the reflection theory:

> The language in Saussurean theory is presented as a system of arbitrary signs that change over time and do not reflect any objective reality [*real'naya dejstvitel'nost'*] (Danilov 1934: 3).

> In the field of linguistics, agnosticism finds its expression mainly in the theory of language as a system of signs. [...] The Marxist-Leninist reflection theory is the only scientific basis for correctly understanding all ideological phenomena, their role in social life, in the knowledge of reality. It also fully concerns language, which, according to Marx's classic definition, is nothing other than real, practical consciousness. (Reznikov 1948: 401)

> Can we say that a word is a sign of a thing or a phenomenon? No, that is impossible, because the inner content of the word is the concept, and the concept is a generalized reflection of the diversity of objects and phenomena in human consciousness. The word is not a sign, but the reflection of reality expressed in oral form. (Reznikov 1948: 402)

The reflection theory as applied to linguistics is based on the principle of the analogical link between sign and referent: if the sign is arbitrary, knowledge is impossible. It must therefore be motivated, but this motivation is not Cratylian: the sign must refer unambiguously, transparently, to the referent, which preexists as such. The word/thing/concept triangle is reduced to the last two elements: the signifier is eliminated in its autonomy.

Instead of looking for a formal motivation of the sign by etymology (so much effort expended in this direction, from Cratylus to Jean-Pierre Brisset via Antoine Court de Gébelin, was exhausted there), the dimension of the sign is drastically dismissed in favour of the idea of *reflection*, assimilated to the content, itself equivalent to the referent, which would then be the onomasiological part of the language, the only one that matters. The sign fades, it is no longer dangerous, being relegated to the superstructure, it can be controlled. However, it will reappear constantly in discussions on the meaning of words.

> [...] if the sensations are assimilated to conventional signs, to symbols, of which any analogy with things is denied, it is then clear that any possibility of correct knowledge of the world is excluded. Between things and the sensations which they cause, an insurmountable chasm has been established. It means that under sign or symbol one can put anything you want. The sensation, in fact, turns into an *x* into which you can fit any magnitude, any object, because any analogy with the object that gave rise to that sensation is denied. The sensation turns into something independent, having lost all connection with the object. From there we fall directly into Kantianism, which separates the phenomenon from the thing-in-itself. (G. 1930: 25–26)[12]

The reflection theory responds to the problem of mistrust of the sign, accused of taking the place of the referent, or of obscuring access to it.

> Since the concept constitutes the meaning, the content of the word, it must be considered as a reflection of objective reality [*predmetnoj dejstvitel'nosti*]. Idealistic philosophy and linguistics disfigure this question. For example, for Saussure, there is only the problem of the relationship between the concept and the acoustic image. He totally ignores that of the relation between the word and the world of objects. "The linguistic sign, he writes, connects not a thing and a name, but a concept and an acoustic image." From this idealistic attitude, he turns language into a system of arbitrary signs. In this way, in the spirit of the purest agnosticism, he totally refuses to consider the relation of language to reality. (Reznikov 1948: 417)

To this "idealistic" vision, Reznikov opposes his own "materialist" approach, narrowly referentialist to the point of announcing the *gradual disappearance of the screen of the words themselves*:

> […] the historical development of language, during which the "proper" sensitive content of linguistic signs is gradually relegated to the background in consciousness, it fades and ends up not being recognized [*soznavat'sya*]. It has not

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12   G., the author of this semi-anonymous text, has not been identified to date.

> disappeared, but is as if removed, it ceases to obscure from the mental gaze [*umstvennogo vzora*] the intellectual meanings of linguistic signs. (Reznikov 1948: 415–416)

> The word has an imaged character, it is a reflection generalizing objects and phenomena. As the very being [*bytie*] of the verbal sign is reduced entirely to its referential function and plays no other role, its sensitive aspect fades and disappears to the intelligent gaze of the man who understands the language.[13] From this point of view, the phonic form is less a sign than a sensitive transparent envelope of meaning, a specifically human form of reflection of reality. (Reznikov 1948: 418)

The history of the sign would thus be a progressive forgetting of the material form of the word, retaining only the intellectual content, a way of getting rid of the cumbersome thickness of the sign, that is to say, of the *autonomy of the signifier*. Here, the 'word–concept–thing' triangle is no longer reduced to the 'sign–referent' couple, but to the utopia of an evanescent, transparent sign.

3.2. Language or discourse?

The association of Saussure with hieroglyphics is a magnifying mirror of the ambiguities in the attitude towards the sign in the 1930s-1950s USSR. Just as had been the case in Western Europe in the 16th century, Soviet ideology faced the need for an unequivocal reading of the meaning of words. To do this, it had to answer a fundamental question: is there a specific order of language? Yet that meant handing linguists an impossible task: the quest for a *non-iconic mimesis*.

As long as we remain in the field of the philosophy of language, the idea of the progressive blurring of sign words remains attractive, although it is very old. Things get complicated when it comes to applying this philosophy to practical work on language. The founding text, ME, does not answer the question of the relationship between words and things; that is not its point. For Lenin, the diversity of languages is irrelevant to the reflection theory. This is why the efforts to constitute a materialist linguistics will become entangled in an inextricable web of contradictions, which the 1950 discussion will not succeed in disentangling. Indeed, the interminable diatribes against the theory of signs provide no way to move from the reflection theory to the description of vernacular languages. ME could not provide a solution to the problem that arose in the 1920s: the linguistic constitution of thought in the face of the diversity of languages spoken on Soviet territory.

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[13]   In Russian, this curious formula is expressed as follows: "*[…] ego chuvstvennyj oblik sovershenno stushevyvaetsya i ischezaet pered umstvennym vzorom ponimayuschego yazyk cheloveka*", P. S.

A question could not fail to arise: if languages are multiple and they are all reflections, then are there multiple realities? Stalin's solution is to put the "content" into the language. A well-known but rather enigmatic formula perhaps gives access to this new quest for a transparent sign, enunciated by Stalin himself at the 16th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1930:

> The flowering of cultures that are national in form and socialist in content under the dictatorship of the proletariat in one country [...].[14]

If the "form" of a culture is language, and language "owns" a content, it becomes an immense text, which makes no difference between what can be *potentially* said in a given language and what is *actually* said. What is a particular *discourse*, under particular conditions of production and interpretation, is fully assimilated to *language*. Thus, we can find language frequency dictionaries (for example, Shtejnfel'dt 1963) in the USSR of that time. From a Saussurean perspective, each word would have a frequency equal to one, but in this case the authors of those dictionaries start from a necessarily circumscribed corpus, even if it is very large, to count the most frequent words. It is easy to conclude that words like 'homeland' or 'socialism' will have a higher frequency than 'faith' or 'soul'. Yet what does the tongue itself have to do with this frequency? The discursive dimension is completely absent from the Soviet linguistics of the 1930s–1950s.

3.3. An ontological interpretation of epistemology

Leninist reflection theory does not present a fixed, passive, simple recording or reduplication of reality approach; it is asymptotic, tangential: it rises from sensation and perception to knowledge in a spiral or zigzag approximation, more and more exact, adequate, without ever reaching the perfect and complete coincidence which would be the map on the scale of 1:1.[15]

This optimism is appealing indeed, yet it is based on a disturbing presupposition for linguistics, a real epistemological obstacle, namely that the object to be known exists *as such* before the act of knowing. The objects of the world are therefore enumerable, countable, waiting to be discovered, studied and described. This is an ontological

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[14]   English translation on: https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1930/aug/27.htm.

[15]   Yet its reputation is by no means good among many philosophers. To provide an example: "*Materialism and Empiriocriticism* is characterized by vulgar materialist generalizations, lengthy diatribes, and excessively long quotations of opponents followed by brief, haughty ridicule. Had the Bolsheviks not succeeded in 1917, it is doubtful that Lenin's book would be read today" (Josephson 1991: 249–250).

interpretation of epistemology. The object-of-the-world is always identical to itself, we simply know more and more aspects of it. In this ideal of tangential completeness of knowledge, a frontal anti-Kantianism,[16] there is no difference between the real, empirical object and the object constructed in a theory according to a certain hypothesis.[17] Instead of the point of view creating the object, here it is the object that creates the point of view. From this perspective, the Saussurean theory can only be assimilated to a subjective idealism, which is inadmissible since it goes against the principle of the primacy of matter over consciousness:

> The holistic approach to the phenomenon involves recognizing that the object of science is not created by the point of view of the researcher, but is determined by the real content of the phenomenon studied, by its specificity. (Panfilov 1954: 250)

As a matter of fact, Saussure was no agnostic because he never considered that reality "did not exist" (ontological position); he placed himself on another ground, by distinguishing the signified from the referent, which is irrelevant for the theory. The strict opposition between idealism and materialism has no place in this philosophy of language.

Saussure does not use the notion of the *model*, yet he has laid the foundations for a constructionist epistemology. Here two interpretations of the concept of 'model' clash:

(1) ontological: an original to be copied;
(2) epistemological: a hypothetical construct to allow knowledge of what is not directly observable.

Unlike the model that the painter or the sculptor imitates, in constructionist epistemology the model is a hypothesis constructed while awaiting to be confronted with empirical reality. If the results do not meet expectations, one goes back to modify the model. Saussure's *langue* is not the description of an actually spoken idiom, with all its variations. It is a constructed object.

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[16] Here is an example in the inimitable style of this extraordinary period: "Through Humboldt, Lomtev is trying to drive Kantianism to its most reactionary version. Lomtev's slogan 'back to Humboldt!' is equivalent to the social-fascist slogan 'back to Kant!' Under the banner of Marxist phraseology, Lomtev smuggles a social-fascist contraband, without taking any account of the fact that he makes his presentation between the walls of the Communist Academy" (Filin 1932: 40).

[17] For a defense of the reflection theory in Lenin, see Truchon 2013; Lavallard 1982; Althusser 1969. It is curious that Althusser, who in 1965 had made a precise distinction between real object and object of knowledge in *Reading the Capital* (Althusser 1996[1965]: 32–33), in 1969 would repeat Lenin's reflection theory (*Lenin and Philosophy*) without comment and without mentioning the question of hieroglyphic signs.

It happens that competing and incompatible models coexist without being able to "falsify" one another. So it is with the wave or corpuscular theory of light, or the number of phonemes in Russian.[18] The phoneme is not anything observable, it is a model that is *constructed*.

The discussion on the phoneme in the USSR after 1956 (20th Congress, start of de-Stalinization) (see Velmezova 2018) is the beginning of the collapse of the reflection theory and the acceptance of the constructionist epistemology of knowledge by model, which then ceases to be a "bourgeois theory".

Sound precedes the work of phoneticians, it does not need them to exist. It is a *real object*. The phoneme only exists in the work of phonologists. It is an *object of knowledge*, or constructed object, in short, a *model*. However, the distinction between these two types of objects was incomprehensible from the strictly ontological perspective of the reflection theory.[19] It is this ontological interpretation that allows, for example, to consider synchrony as a short diachrony, "of a few years" (Budagov 1949) or to interpret Saussurean synchrony as a stable, immobile state. It was easy then to consider this immaterial identity of the objects of knowledge as idealistic, giving rise to the fear of losing the direct link with material reality, the referent, in other words, "life":

> The disintegration [*vyvetrivanie*] of all that is material in life, in language, in thought, leads to the most reactionary, the most obscurantist conclusions. (Budagov 1949: 520)

What matters for Saussure is not that reality does not exist, but that it is informal as long as it has not been singled out by the sign in its dual signifier-signified form.

Soviet linguistics in the 1930s–1950s was torn between a Cratylism without mimesis and resistance to the thickness of the signifier.

Conclusion

The history of the philosophy of the sign in Russia-USSR is yet to be written. Contrary to the claim to a radical epistemological break with the "bourgeois" world which is the basis of the argument for the Soviet humanities and social sciences of the 1930s–1950s, we have proposed here a crossed history which is based on

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[18]   The opposition between the Moscow and Leningrad schools of phonology in the 1960s and 1970s is the latest echo of resistance to constructionist epistemology (see Comtet 1995).
[19]   On the ontological interpretation of dialectical materialism, see Zapata 1983: 25–26; 1988: 110.

the idea of the long term and not of cutoff. Comparison casts doubt on the self-proclamation of absolute singularity.

The discourse on language and sign in the USSR in the years 1930s–1950s, a quarrel between the mirror and the medium, is torn between linguistics and the philosophy of language. The reflection theory did not provide any practical basis for constructing grammars. As for Saussure, he had no chance of being included in this ontological interpretation of epistemology.

The criticism of the theory of hieroglyphics, beyond its philosophical problematic, reminds us of the following: the fact that there are signs between us and things is a cause of suffering, and the obsessive desire for a language without words, of a map on the scale of 1:1 seems to be the foundation of a culture which, in Eastern as well as in Western Europe, never ceases to rehash the same themes of Greek philosophy and Christianity. The Marxist-materialist linguistics promoted in the USSR in the years 1930s–1950s is not alien to this framework of thought, it does not manage to erase its sources. We have passed from the 'transparency–opacity' pair to the 'form–content' pair, but the distrust of the sign has remained the same.

Yet the map is not the territory, we cannot do without signs in order to know the real, the world of signs is our human condition.

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Является ли язык знаковой системой?
Ленин, Соссюр и теория иероглифов

Цель статьи – ответить на два следующих вопроса:
– как можно основательно изучать интеллектуальную жизнь СССР 1930–1950-х годов?
– что говорит нам о специфике марксистско-ленинской теории знака яростная критика Соссюра в России того времени?

Мы предлагаем следующую исследовательскую перспективу: обратиться к повторяющейся теме этой критики, а именно того, что *Курс общей лингвистики* Соссюра представляет собой «теорию иероглифов», то есть «буржуазно-идеалистическую» теорию, раскритикованную Лениным в книге 1909 года *Материализм и эмпириокритицизм*, где речь идет об Э. Махе. Однако размышления об иероглифах основаны на дискуссиях гораздо более ранних – восходящих к XVII веку – о расшифровке египетской письменности. Возникающая здесь проблема носит семиотический характер и касается скалярной оппозиции «прозрачности» и «непрозрачности» знака. Знак – скрывает или раскрывает? Советский дискурс о языке и знаках 1930–1950-х годов, по-видимому, основан на вопросах об отношениях знака и референта, языка и мысли, формы и содержания. Таким образом, фрагмент истории семиотики может быть изучен через исследование критики «теории иероглифов» – малоизвестного эпизода в споре об интерпретации соссюрианства.

Kas keel on märgisüsteem? Lenin, Saussure ja hieroglüüfiteooria

Käesoleva artikliga püütakse üheaegselt saavutada kaht eesmärki:
– kuidas on võimalik süvitsi tundma õppida Nõukogude Liidu vaimuelu 1930–50. aastatel?
– mida võiks Saussure'i pihta suunatud raevukas kriitika toonasel Venemaal rääkida meile marksistlik-leninistliku märgiteooria eripärast?

Sellega tegelemiseks pakume välja järgmise vaatenurga: selles kriitikas korduvalt ette tuleva teema, et Saussure'i "Kursus" esindab "hieroglüüfiteooriat", seega seesugust "kodanlik-idealistlikku" teooriat, mida Lenin ründas oma Ernst Machi käsitlevas raamatus "Materialism ja empiriokrititsism" (1909). Ent hieroglüüfikast mõtlemine lähtub tunduvalt vanematest vastuoludest, mis ulatuvad tagasi 17. sajandisse ning puudutavad egiptuse kirja dešifreerimist. Siinkohal tõstatuv küsimus on olemuselt semiootiline ning puudutab märgi läbipaistvuse ja läbipaistmatuse vahelist vastandust. Kas märk varjab või paljastab? 1930–50. aastate Nõukogude Liidu keele- ja märgidiskursus näib tuginevat märgi/referendi, keele/mõtte, sisu/vormi suhete kohta küsimuste esitamisele. Semiootika ajalugu võib seega osaliselt leida "hieroglüüfiteooria" kriitikast kui vähetuntud episoodist Saussure'i vaadete tõlgendamisele pühendatud debatis.