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From technicians to classics: on the rationalization of the Russian language in the USSR (1917–1953)

От технологов к классикам: о рационализации русского языка в СССР (1917–1953)

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Abstract In the 1920s, *rationalization* is a very fashionable word in the Soviet Union. Under the influence of the ‘movement for the scientific organization of labour’, industry tries to obtain a maximum of productivity and profitability with a minimum expenditure of means. During these years, this rationalizing process was applied to the Russian language as well: several texts in the 1920s suggested rationalizing the Russian language. The purpose was to remove from the language all useless and needless words, to gain clarity and efficiency. But such texts seem to disappear in the 1930s, in spite of this being a period of great industrial rationalization in the USSR. This article aims at proposing an explanation for this paradox, pointing out the evolution of the conception of language and state between the 1920s and 1930s.

Аннотация В 1920-е годы *рационализация* становится очень популярным словом в СССР. Под воздействием движения НОТ (Научная Организация Труда), в промышленности наблюдается установка на достижение максимальной эффективности человеческого труда при условии минимальных затрат. В то же время, в СССР идет речь и о рационализации языка. Во многих текстах того периода предлагается рационализировать русский язык с целью отказаться от всего лишнего в языке и, следовательно, изменить русский язык. Однако пропагандирование подобных идей прекращается в 1930-е годы, несмотря на продолжающуюся рационализаторскую линию в промышленности. Основная задача этой статьи—предложить объяснение этому противоречию, опираясь на развитие концепций языка и государства в Советском Союзе между двадцатыми и тридцатыми годами двадцатого века.

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Призрак бродит по всему миру,—призрак *рационализации* [...]

(Ermanskij 1990[1929], 244)

Слово рационализация «несомненно является одним из самых модных» слов, какие мы сейчас встречаем на страницах всех газет и журналов. Мы слышим его и с трибуны парламента, и в предприятиях, слышим его и на рабочих собраниях. Слово «рационализация» в большой моде сейчас и в странах Запада, и у нас в СССР.

(Burdjanskij 1990[1929], 281)

In the 1920s ‘a spectre is haunting the whole world’ (Ermanskij 1990[1929], 244), the spectre of rationalization. This 1929 quotation by the Soviet scientist O. A. Ermanskij (1866–1941) was inspired by the opening sentence of the *Communist Manifesto* and maintaining that rationalization became the slogan of the time (Ermanskij 1990[1929], 245). The surrounding rationalization originated, as we will see, with the process of industrialization that ran, from the end of the 19th century onwards, all over Europe, the United States, and, later, the Soviet Union, and with the application of methods intended to improve the efficiency and the profitability of industry (methods known as the ‘scientific organization of labour’). The purpose of this article will be the study of rationalization in the Soviet context, focusing mainly on the attempts of rationalizing the Russian language that dawned in the 1920s, but disappeared at the beginning of the 1930s.

1 Introduction

The wish to rationalize languages is not new. We can find mention of it from the 17th century in the works of Descartes and Leibniz (Janton 1994, 5–7). But the first part of the 20th century saw an important rationalizing activity too—especially in the USSR (cf. Slodzian 2006). There, at that time, the rationalization of the Russian language became an important (Vinokur 1923b, 104), sharp and apposite (Drezen 1926a, 28) question that was the topic of a quite large set of articles. The search for a rationalized Russian language runs from the very beginning of the Soviet State and throughout the 1920s, and the spelling reform of 1917 can be considered the first attempt. The linguist E. D. Polivanov (1891–1938) noted that this reform was made according to a principle of “maximal rationalization” (Polivanov 1974[1937], 240). After that, we can mention Trotsky (1879–1940) and the Productionists (cf. Clark 2004), G. O. Vinokur (1896–1947) who wrote about the rational organization of language (Vinokur 1923a, 106), or some other less known authors: among them, the Soviet Esperantist A. P. Andreev (1864–?) who in 1926 proposed a rationalization of the Russian speech (Andreev 1926). All these texts were published during the 1920s, but from the beginning of the 1930s texts calling for the rationalization of the Russian language became rare¹ if they did not disappear completely.

One of the purposes of this article is to propose an explanation of the following fact: why were there no more attempts to rationalize the Russian language from the 1930s onwards? To answer this question, I will analyze the conception of language: what was language

¹In 1930, Iakubinskij and Ivanov called for a rational language policy (Brandist 2003, 224).

for scientists during the period when there were texts calling for the rationalization of the Russian language, and what was language when these texts disappeared. Doing so, I will identify a transition, an evolution of the conception of language, which seems to be parallel with the evolution of the conceptions of state and society. I have called this transition ‘from technicians to classics’. Before that, I will present the context in which the rationalizing movement took place, and analyze the main leanings of the rationalization of the Russian language in the USSR.

2 Rationalization in context

In the 1920s, ‘rationalization’ referred to the methods used by industrialists and manufacturers to improve their profitability and to raise the productivity of labour (Moutet 1997, 7). These methods had been in the air since the end of the 19th century and developed in the wake of the industrial revolution, but they became widespread mainly following the important industrial needs of World War I (Moutet 1997, 16f.). The instigator of what was called ‘scientific organization of labour’ or ‘Taylorism’ was the American inventor and engineer F. W. Taylor (1856–1915). In 1903, in his book *Shop Management*, he proposed an organization of labour which tended to a maximum of productivity and profitability. According to him, “production efficiency in a shop or factory could be greatly enhanced by close observation of the individual worker and elimination of waste time and motion in his operation”.² In other words, rationalization, scientific management, aimed at an economy of means and at a maximal efficiency, and so it was in the Soviet Union:

НОТ [Научная организация труда] имеет своей задачей добиться максимального эффекта от труда человека при условии минимальных затрат как человеческой энергии, так и материальных средств. Этот принцип (условно мы могли бы назвать его “принципом экономии”) является одной из типичных особенностей научной организации труда. (Keržencev 1990[1925], 114)

Научная организация труда, или рационализация, имеет своей задачей дать возможно большую и лучшую продукцию при возможно меньших затратах рабочей силы, энергии, материальных средств и времени, расходуемых на изготовление одной единицы продукции. (Drezen 1929, 3)³

In the Soviet context, this rationalization related to the industrial and technological development was of great importance too, especially in a time of great (re)construction of the kind the Soviet Union was facing:

Вопросы организации и рационализации промышленности и управления ею—представляют большое значение для Советского Союза, занятого в настоящий момент самым решительным социалистическим переустройством своего хозяйства, своего производства. Проводить эту реконструкцию, (переустройство), возможно только, зная определенные положения рационализации, зная те законы, которые дают возможность строить производство, и хозяйство наиболее экономным, наиболее выгодным и наиболее целесообразным образом. В дело

²Quoted from: ‘Taylor, Frederick W.’ In *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. <http://search.eb.com/eb/article-9071464>. Accessed 17 March 2010.

³This book has no date, but, according to S. N. Kuznetsov, the biographer of Drezen, it was published in 1929 (Kuznetsov 1991, 450).

нашего строительства вовлечены и вовлекаются огромные массы трудящихся. Нужно дать этим массам трудящихся возможность познакомиться с основными, руководящими принципами разумной организации труда и рациональной организации производства. (Drezen 1929, 1)

Indeed, one of the most immediate tasks of the new Soviet power was to create a state that would be viable and that could rival the other European countries and even overtake them. In these conditions, the new Bolshevik government considered development of science and technology as well as industrialization as one of the main parts for giving the country an interesting and leading future (Lewis 1979, 6). As Lenin said in 1918, in every socialist revolution, after the proletariat has solved the problem of capturing power, appears the fundamental task of creating a social system superior to capitalism, namely, raising the productivity of labour, and in this connection (and for this purpose) securing better organisation of labour (Lénine 1961[1918], 266). Of course, all these intentions became impossible with the beginning of the civil war in 1920 (Keržencev 1990[1925], 112). But, after this war “the rate of recovery”, in the fields of technology and industrialization, “was far more rapid than anyone had anticipated” (Davies 1994, 135). This development of technology keeps running during the NEP and the five-year-plans and “[b]etween 1928 and 1940 capital goods industries advanced far more rapidly in the Soviet Union than in the capitalist world” (Davies 1994, 132).

Thus, at the beginning of its history, the new Soviet State couldn't omit such a process of technological development and industrialization and in order to give it the most efficiency, it was driven according to the precepts of science (Korickij 1990, 10) and of rationalization which were in the air of the time. To summarize, the rationalizing methods were essential and sounded as the slogan of the whole transitional period (Keržencev 1990[1925], 151) toward socialism:

Нам же рационализация необходима для того, чтобы экономить средства и с'экономленные средства бросить в дело социалистического строительства, в дело устройства новых заводов, новых фабрик, необходимых для нашей страны, чтобы в нашем социалистическом строительстве обогнать рост капиталистического хозяйства, с одной стороны и увеличить материально-культурное благосостояние рабочих,—с другой стороны. (Drezen 1929, 3)

It must be added that the foreign and capitalist origins of the methods used were not hidden by the men involved in this process, but claimed for a radically different purpose. If the rationalization in the USSR aimed at improvement of the country and of the ‘well-being’ (Drezen 1929, 3) of the workers, in the capitalist world it was a part of the exploitation of the toiling masses: “Капиталистическая рационализация стремится в первую очередь получить возможно больше от рабочих, заставить их выработать возможно больше изделий, и возможно меньше им заплатить” (Drezen 1929, 14).

The history of the rationalizing movement in USSR began in 1918 with Lenin's appeal to the application of the precepts of rationalization: “Il faut [...] appliquer les nombreux éléments scientifiques et progressifs que comporte le système de Taylor [...]. Il faut organiser en Russie l'étude et l'enseignement du système Taylor, son expérimentation et son adaptation systématiques” (Lénine 1961[1918], 268).

After that, this movement promoting the rationalizing methods of the scientific organization of labour continued to be officially sustained. In 1923, in one of his last texts, Lenin called for the application of rationalization standards to the state apparatus (Lénine 1963[1923]). The same year, the 12th Congress of the Russian Communist Party (bolsheviks), “коснувшись проблемы реорганизации госаппарата [...] выдвинул вопрос о

научной организации труда и поставил его в порядок очередных партийных работ” (Keržencev 1990[1925], 139). And in March 1927, the “Central Committee of the Communist Party [...] approved a resolution on the ‘rationalisation [*sic*] of production’ which spoke of the importance of the country’s scientific and technical establishments” (Lewis 1979, 8).

Parallel with these official events, a movement promoting rationalizing methods in labour arose at the beginning of 1921. This movement was called NOT (*Naučnaja Organizacija Truda*), the Russian translation for ‘scientific organization of labour’. Its participants were, among others, A. K. Gastev (1882–1941), I. M. Burdianskij (1895–1937), N. A. Vitke (?—?), O. A. Ermanskij (1866–1941), and P. M. Kerzhentsev (1881–1940). From 1921 onwards, these men were involved in the spreading the scientific organization of labour throughout the Soviet State: they wrote books and articles, called for conferences, created institutes. This NOT-movement did not run quietly and without problems; its history is marked by internal quarrels. We can mention the opposition between the Taylorists and the Anti-Taylorists who thought impossible the introduction of Taylor’s methods in a socialist context; or the opposition between a theoretical approach of the scientific management and a more practical one. At the end of the 1920s, the NOT-movement and its instigators were swept away by the new centralizing bureaucracy and administration (Korickij 1990, 9–15). But, nevertheless, the rationalizing activity remained topical, as we can see in this quotation from the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* of 1946: “Следуя указаниям Ленина, в социалистическом хозяйстве СССР применяют научные, прогрессивные стороны Т. [тейлоризма] для наиболее рационального использования рабочей силы, экономии человеческого труда, подъёма производительных сил страны” (‘Teilorizm.’ In *Bol’saja Soveckaja Ėnciklopedija*, 1946, p. 744).

In these conditions, the lack of a rationalizing activity on the Russian language from the 1930s onwards is more striking when we notice that the movement for rationalization continued in the fields of industrialization and technological development.

This official support motivated by practical needs of great importance for the country and this intellectual activity led to *rationalization* being a very fashionable word in Soviet Russia in the 1920s (Burdjanskij 1990[1929], 281). Consequently, publications related to the scientific organization of labour abounded,⁴ and institutes⁵ grew like mushrooms after a bracing rain (Korickij 1990, 4). In this context, things or elements affected by the rationalization were multiple: industry, machines, trade, state apparatus and administration (cf. Andreev 1926; Lewis 1979, 10f.). But according to some texts, this rationalization was also to concern the Russian language. Indeed, if we do everything “с максимальной производительностью, возможно более рационально”, why should it be different “в отношении языка” (Vinokur 1923a, 105)?

3 Rationalizing the Russian language

As it was noted in 1926, the rationalization of a language is not a well defined process:

Под выражение рациональный или «разумный» язык—подходит целая шкала (лестница) понятий. Эта шкала начинается от так называемых «философских»

⁴At the end of 1924, 400 books or booklets concerned the scientific management, without mentioning the articles (Devinat 1927, 10).

⁵See the list of the main institutes in Korickij (1990, 4).

языков, т.-е. искусственных языков, которые создавались независимо от всевозможных форм различных существовавших до сих пор языков. Кончается же эта шкала любым языком, грамматика которого сведена в возможно стройную систему, удовлетворяющую требованиям общепонятной практической разумности. (Evstifeev 1926, 128)

The people who in the 1920s wrote on the rationalization of the Russian language all had a personal approach to it. But, nevertheless, all these men had in common the general idea that lies behind the term of rationalization of language and that can be summarized by two words: such a process aimed to solve the problem of *упрощения* ‘simplification’ (Andreev 1926, 20) and of the ‘improvement’, i.e. *совершенствования* (Drezen 1926a, 28) or *улучшения* (Lêjton 1926, 55) of a language in order to reach a maximum of preciseness, clearness or efficiency. From an ideal point of view, the rationalization of a language, carried to the extremes, should give birth to a kind of a perfect language which would possess all the following qualities: “Нам нужен богатый, точный, гибкий, краткий, правильный, современный, максимально приспособленный к сегодняшней действительности, одинаково всем доступный и понятный язык” (Lêjton 1926, 57).

In this chapter, I propose to summarize the main leanings of the rationalization of the Russian language that can be found in some texts of the 1920s.

In an article of 1923, the Soviet linguist G. O. Vinokur proposed a sort of theorization of the rationalizing process in the field of language. According to him, the ‘rational organization of a language’ consists of the “непосредственное воздействие на самую структуру языка”. The purpose is to “разбирать и составлять вновь” the language “сменив [его] оказавшиеся негодными части” (Vinokur 1923a, 106). To sum up, this transformation aims at the elimination of the unnecessary elements: “Организирующие принципы речевого процесса должны быть тщательно элиминированы от окружающих, *приходящих* моментов, их удельный, так сказать, системный вес должен быть взвешен с *максимальной* степенью точности” (Vinokur 1923a, 110; my emphasis).

Having outlined the main aspects of the theory, I propose to analyze some more practical examples taken from texts of the 1920s.

Let us begin with the little-known Soviet Esperantist A. P. Andreev.⁶ According to him, the Russian language is not appropriate for the working class and, in his opinion, a rationalizing process should provide an easier language. The Russian language of the time, because it was created and formed during the capitalist period (Andreev 1926, 13), possesses a lot of difficulties and inconsistencies which can be mastered only by the well-educated superior classes. In his 1926 article, Andreev mentions the following problems of the Russian language:

вычурности, надуманности, книжности, [...] хаотичность и путанность грамматических форм, какое безобразное обилие их, делающее столь трудным полное усвоение их для человека не только низшей, но даже и средней культуры [...] [с]трашное обилие в русском языке иностранных слов—не тех, конечно,

⁶According to the *Enciklopedio de Esperanto* (1933), Andrei Petrovich Andreev was born in 1864 in Ukraine. He studied apparently law, but wrote a set of books and articles on Esperanto and related linguistic problems. He is essentially known for having written in Esperanto and Russian an introduction to the Marrist theory on language aimed at the Esperantist community (*Revolucio en la lingvoscienco*, Leipzig 1929; *Revolucija jazykoznanija*, Moskva 1929). By now I could not find the year of his death, but it seems clear that he should have disappeared with some other Soviet Esperantists in the great purges of the late 1930s.

которые давно уже стали частью русского языка (вроде слов: доктор, фабрика, театр, инспектор и т.д.), а новых, или редко употребительных [...], ряды синонимов и омонимов, нередко затемняющих и путающих речь; неумение пользоваться своим удивительным богатством префиксов и суффиксов, обусловливающее переполнение словаря такими словами, которые легко могли бы быть созданы простыми словообразовательными приемами; не малое количество совершенно ненужных слов, при отсутствии слов совершенно необходимых [...]

(Andreev 1926, 17f.)

The consequence is that in the Soviet Union there are two Russian languages: the one of the bourgeoisie, which is a written sophisticated language, and the one of the proletariat, which is a simple oral one. In these conditions, the workers remained illiterate because the Russian language is too difficult for them. From 1917 onwards, this illiteracy is no longer thinkable. Henceforth the power is in the hands of the working class and it is not enough if the workers can distinguish between A and B; they need to be able to read and write (Andreev 1926, 13). In Andreev's mind, the rationalization of the Russian language aims at the fusion of the two Russian languages that exist in the Soviet Union, following the way of a grammatical simplification:

Первой-же ступенью вышеуказанной работы может служить проект реконструкции нынешнего литературного языка в смысле грамматического упрощения, дающего языку грамматическую прозрачность, которая сделает легким его изучение даже одним только школьным порядком. Эта грамматика занимает только какой-нибудь десяток страниц и ее не надо зубрить, как нынешнюю, в течение долгих лет: ее надо только понять, ибо она основана на точных законах и правилах словоизменения. Это и может быть первым шагом на пути сказанного слияния обоих наших языков и рационализации русской речи вообще. (Andreev 1926, 20)

This simplification of the Russian language has to be made according to the principles of rationalization, which aims, as mentioned above, at an economy of means, and the new language, the “общий язык зарождающегося социалистического общества” (Andreev 1926, 16), will thus be rational: “Все необходимое и ничего лишнего с логической стороны, экономия мышления, экономия времени, экономия труда как при изучении речи, так и при практическом ее применении с точки зрения строительства будущего коммунистического общества!” (Andreev 1926, 19; my emphasis).

In these conditions, the workers will be able to master their new rationalized language without “всех героических усилий и затрате массы средств” (Andreev 1926, 13) which are necessary now for the workers to master the actual Russian language.

Another example will be taken from L. Trotsky's book of 1923, *Problems of Life (Problema byta)*. In this book, Trotsky desires “a rational reconstruction of life” (Trotsky 1973[1923], 31) and devotes several pages to the problem of the Russian language (chapters 6 and 7). The rationalization proposed for the language consists of two stages. First of all Trotsky calls for a fight against “[a]busive language and swearing”, which are “the result of despair, embitterment and, above all, of slavery without hope, without escape” (Trotsky 1973[1923], 78f.). In other words, bad language is a legacy of the tsarist time that must be swept away as was the ancient order. After that, Trotsky proposes to go on working on the Russian language in order to make it more efficient. According to him, it is necessary to “[cast] out of our speech all *useless* words and expressions” (Trotsky 1973[1923], 85; my emphasis), to fight “against the intrusion of *needless*, corrupt and sometimes hideous new words and expressions” and “of mispronounced foreign words” (Trotsky 1973[1923],

86; my emphasis). This “struggle for the purity, clearness and beauty of Russian speech” (Trotsky 1973[1923], 84) is essential for the new ruling working-class that needs, from 1917 on, to think by itself. For language and thought are, in Trotsky’s mind, related, “[p]recision and correctness of speech is an indispensable condition of correct and precise thinking” (Trotsky 1973[1923], 85f.). It follows that the “working-class needs a healthy language not less but rather more than the other classes: for the first time in history it begins to think independently about nature, about life and its foundations—and to do the thinking it needs the instrument of a clear incisive language” (Trotsky 1973[1923], 87).

In his book, Trotsky never uses the word ‘rationalization’ in relation to his transformation of the Russian language; for him it is a hygienic process (Trotsky 1973[1923], 80, 87). But, nevertheless, the wish to reach preciseness and clearness in language by eliminating all useless and needless elements refers to a rationalizing process.

On the basis of the above mentioned examples, it is now possible to summarize the main leanings of the rationalization of the Russian language in the USSR of the 1920s. All these attempts to change the Russian language in a rational way took place in a very special moment of Soviet history, the construction of a socialist world. In this context, the rationalization of the Russian language has to be seen as the “непременный постулат нашего начинающегося социалистического строительства”, which must be considered with an absolute necessity (Andreev 1926, 12). Indeed, the matter was to adapt the Russian language to the needs of the time (Evstifeev 1926, 140; Vinokur 1923a, 111), or, in other words, to revolutionize the Russian language (Vinokur 1923b, 106) in order to make it socialist. This linguistic transformation had two stages. The first one was to eliminate from the language all elements elaborated in the ancient time, in the pre-revolutionary period, a kind of *tabula rasa* of all the “устаревших и ненужных слов” (Ејхенвал’д 1926, 87). The second one is the result of the previous: rationalizing the Russian language meant to adapt it to the new time, to make it socialist; in other words, to improve and simplify it in order to make it an accessible tool for all workers. This period is thus characterized by the conviction that the new order needed a new language, far removed from the ancient, bourgeois one. I will come back to this in my conclusion.

Generally, rational language is synonymous with Esperanto and it is thus no wonder that some Soviet Esperantists interfered in the debate on a rational language. For them, the necessity for a more rational language is evident (Drezen 1926a, 28), but one should not waste time trying to construct one, for Esperanto exists and is a rational and efficient language:

Рост распространения эсперанто среди трудящихся в СССР и за границей, рост практического его использования на международных конгрессах и в международном рабкорстве показывают, что мы подошли вплотную к практическому разрешению данного вопроса [the question of a rational language, S. M.] и что нам уже незачем ограничивать себя мало действительными и мало результативными попытками частичного улучшения существующих национальных языков. (Drezen 1926a, 32)

The same idea can be found in other articles (Evstifeev 1926, 141). Another Esperantist, a certain G. Filippov (?—?), goes further and relies on thrifty and rational arguments, definitely in the spirit of the time, to promote Esperanto. According to him, the multitude of languages in the world generates huge costs of translation and thus time wasted. In these conditions, the introduction of Esperanto on a worldwide scale will provide an important economy of money, time and energy (Filippov 1925).

Among the Esperantist involvements in the debate, the contribution of A. P. Andreev mentioned above is surprising. It is difficult to understand why an Esperantist advocates the

rationalization of the Russian language instead of promoting Esperanto. At the moment, I cannot explain this fact and will merely refer to a text of 1927 written in response to Andreev's rationalization of the Russian language (Danelija 1927). According to the author of this text, the rationalizing process Andreev intended to subject the Russian language to was a kind of 'esperantization' (Danelija 1927, 2).

In the 1920s, the rationalization of the Russian language was of great concern in the USSR—other texts could be provided to prove it—and some people glimpsed at the future:

В области рационализации языка перед нами стоят такие общественно-важные задачи, как упорядочение словаря, упрощение грамматики, воспитание мысли. Для того, чтобы работа была успешной, нужен серьезный и обдуманый подход и соответствующие знания. При наличии этих данных рационализация языка окажется и уместною и успешною. (Léjton 1926, 58)

But the way to the rationalization of the Russian language did not follow the wishes. From the beginning of the 1930s onwards, this linguistic rationalization was no longer on the agenda, and in the next chapter I will try to explain why.

4 What is language? Evolution of a conception

What I intend to do in this article is to explain the following: why did the rationalization, or the wish to act on the Russian language, stop in the 1930s, even if *rationalization* was still a fashionable word? To answer this question, I propose to analyze the conception of language: what was language for the advocates of this conception during the period in which the rationalization of the Russian language was possible and licit; and what was language when this rationalization was no longer possible?

All the texts calling for a rationalization, or a transformation, of the Russian language shared the same conception of language. For their authors, language was nothing other than a tool, a machine. For Trotsky, language is an 'instrument' (Trotsky 1973[1923], 85). In one of Vinokur's articles, language is regarded as a 'machine' (Vinokur 1923a, 106f.). And Andreev proposed a more precise definition: "Язык есть чистейший продукт наших коллективных трудовых взаимоотношений, созданный в процессе этих взаимоотношений и вечно меняющийся под их влиянием. Это такое же *орудие* нашего труда, как *какая-нибудь машина или топор* [...]" (Andreev 1926, 16; my emphasis).

Such a conception can be found, too, at the very beginning of a book published in 1926 by the State publishing house (Drezen 1926c), which suggests a kind of official support for this idea: "[я]зык является орудием" (Drezen 1926b, 5). It is the same in some other articles where language is a "комбинация звуков и звуковых сочетаний" (Drezen 1926b, 5) or a "техническое приспособление" (Drezen 1926a, 29). Vinokur goes further and gives some precisions about the internal composition of this "языковая машина": the language is made of "бесчисленные винтики и гайки" (Vinokur 1923a, 106). The corollary of such a conception of language is to consider it essentially as a code, an "инструмент связи и взаимопонимания" (Drezen 1926b, 5).

With these definitions of language considered as a tool or a machine, it is quite understandable why the rationalization of the Russian language was thought as possible. At that time, it was allowed to improve the language, as well as other tools or machines used by men.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, from the end of the 1920s, language is no more rationalizable, for it is no longer considered from a utilitarian point of view. Henceforth,

the Russian language is no longer considered a tool; it is an emblem, the sign of a nation, as we can see in 1945 at the very beginning of V. V. Vinogradov's (1894–1969) *Great Russian Language*: “Язык один из существенных признаков нации. [...] Язык—[...] очень активная и выразительная форма национального творчества, национального самосознания.” (Vinogradov 1945, 3).

V. N. Iartseva (1906–1999) gives the same definition in her brochure of 1949 (Jarceva 1949, 4). In other words, language appears, in Vinogradov's or Iartseva's views, as a flag of the nation; language bears the identity of a nation and we are here very close to the conception of Humboldt on the national character of languages. Indeed, the Russian language “создавался *гением народа* в течение тысячелетий” and “врос в *глубочайшую сущность* этого народа и стал его природой” (Danelija 1927, 10; my emphasis). This quotation from 1927 seems to be one of the first to affirm the transition from a language considered only as a system of signs to a language as a flag, and testifies to the fact that such a conception of language is related not only with the patriotic agitation and stirrings after the victory in World War II (as the years of publication of Iartseva's and Vinogradov's books could lead to suppose), but is rooted earlier, in the late 1920s, in the context of the evolution of the ideological inclinations of the Soviet regime.

During the 1920s, when the rationalization of language seems to be possible and licit, it is an internationalist ideology that reigns in the USSR. The homeland is the entire world and the nations (and the borders) are supposed to be disappearing (cf. Paperny 2002). There is, consequently, no place for the national languages as flags of identity. Language is only a tool, a code, whose utilitarian aim is one of inter-comprehension, which is necessary for the workers of the world to reach unity and victory. One may recall that at the beginning of the 1920s, Stalin spoke about the necessity of inter-comprehension for all new Soviet citizens in the initial period of the Soviet State in order to give the country a winning future (Alpatov 2000, 42). In such a time, language had only one role: a tool for relationships and inter-comprehension. In these conditions, its simplicity, clearness or accessibility for the workers were the main important things. So, if necessary, there was no objection to change language, to act on it.

The conception of language in the 1930s reflects another ideology. From the late 1920s onwards, the Soviet Union is no more turned toward an internationalist view. By banishing Trotsky, Stalin put an end to the worldwide revolution and the former internationalism turned into nationalism (Alpatov 2000, 86). The homeland is no more the entire world, but the Soviet Union. On March 19, 1935, the *Pravda* pointed out the importance of a Soviet patriotism in a time of reappearance of borders (quoted in Lanti and Ivon 1935, 36–37):

Kaj ni devas patriotisme eduki la novajn generaciojn, por ke la interesoj de la lando staru super ĉio k estu al Sovetianoj pli karaj ol ilia propra vivo. [...] La sovetia patriotismo garde staras ĉe la limoj de la lando, kie niaj malnobleĝaj malamikoj, jam mortkondamnitaj, minacas nian kvietan vivon, nian potencon, nian gloron.

‘We have to educate the new generations in a patriotic way, in order that the interests of the country supersede everything and that they become for the Soviet people more important than their own life. [...] Soviet patriotism lies at the borders of the country where our vile enemies, already sentenced to death, threaten the calm of our life, our power, our glory.’

In these conditions, this new Soviet patriotism, this new land delimited by borders that are to be protected, needs flags, and language will be one of these. The new ideology is thus marked by the return of the national language (Jarceva 1949, 3), considered as one

of the most important parts of a nation. Consequently, when language is closely related with the nation that speaks it, we cannot imagine the possibility to act on language, to touch it: changing the language would mean changing the nation (Jarceva 1949, 7). The time is thus over when it was possible to transform a language mechanically, “на подобие монтажа радиоприемника” (Gorbačenko, Sinel’nikova and Šub 1932, 134), time is over, when “они пропагандировали ‘теорию’ взрывов и революций в языке, внезапных качественных скачков в нем” (Mordinov 1950, 77). The Russian language became something untouchable.

To establish the validity of the transition, from a language/tool to a language/flag, I am going to present several arguments. First of all, I would like to point out the change that occurred in Vinokur’s mind. If, in the early 1920s, he considered language a machine, in 1945 he brought out, above all, its national and symbolic characteristic. Thus, the Russian language is the very symbol of Russia, and, more than that, its essence, for the Russian language is the way to understand Russia (Vinokur 1947[1945], 7). As has already been said, this evolution cannot be explained only by the victorious context that followed the war. Indeed, this linguistic evolution can be observed also in the transitional period during which the political and ideological tendencies of the regime changed.

In 1932, for instance, the leader of the Soviet Esperantists, E. K. Drezen (1892–1937), wrote an article about the ‘new stage’ Esperanto was facing (Drezen 1932). It is necessary to understand that this article was written in a context of persecutions against Esperanto: since the Soviet regime had lost its internationalist ideals, the Esperantists, because of their links with foreign countries, were suspected of being spies. In these conditions, the Soviet Esperantists, from the beginning of the 1930s onwards, tried to save their language, as well as their lives, by showing notably that Esperanto was not so incompatible with the new nationalist orientation of the USSR. In the quoted article, which fits into this context, Drezen tries to demonstrate that Esperanto is no longer a code, as he considered it before, but has become a real language:

Мы в свое время определили эсперанто в том виде, в каком он был представлен в первом учебнике Заменгофа, как «код», достаточный для того, чтобы переводить мысли с любого языка [...]. По определению Маркса и Энгельса в их заметках о Фейербахе, язык, «возникший из потребности людей сноситься друг с другом», является в то же время «практически существующим для других людей, а значит существующим и для меня самого реальным сознанием» [*sic*]. Таким образом, если эсперанто «код», то он «нереальное сознание», а значит и не язык. [...] Если сейчас, в 1932 г. эсперанто является в известной мере равноценным национальным языком и может квалифицироваться как язык [...], то что означает, что где-то, в промежутке между 1887 и 1932 г. произошло диалектическое превращение «кода» в язык [...]. (Drezen 1932, 78)

This transformation was made possible “благодаря усиленному использованию эсперанто” (Drezen 1932, 80):

[Д]ля того эсперанто, который сейчас используется в различнейших отраслях представителями различных наций, на котором подчас представители разных наций выражают свои мысли также свободно и четко, как на своем родном языке,—для этого современного эсперанто совершенно недостаточно определение «код». (Drezen 1932, 78)

These quotations seem to demonstrate that it is no longer suitable to consider languages as simple codes in the Soviet Union of the beginning of the 1930s.

In the same year (1932) a book was published, the intention of which was to expose the bourgeois side of the *Языкфронт* movement. In this book entitled *Против буржуазной контрабанды в языкознании*, we find an article against some Esperantist members of the *Языкфронт* and whose authors reproached to the Esperantists for their unilateral conception of language: “Авторами-эсперантистами язык понимается крайне односторонне. Освещается только одна из двух функций языка—общение, всеобщая форма связи. Язык, как способ коммуникации [...]” (Gorbačenko, Sinel’nikova and Šub 1932, 130; emphasis in the original).

For the authors of these lines, it is not possible to consider language only as a code, as a means of communication. Language has a content, too, accumulated during the centuries of its formation which is very important and cannot be omitted. This content is the identity and the history of the nation that speaks this language.

All these examples seem to confirm that in the 1930s in the Soviet Union there occurred a transformation in the conception of language. By now, language cannot be considered only from a utilitarian and mechanical point of view: language is no longer a simple means of communication, a conception which does not fit with the new orientation of the Soviet regime, but has become a kind of flag, and the expression of a nation.

5 Conclusion: from technicians to classics

These rationalizing attempts on the Russian language were part of the “verbal experimentation” (Gorham 2003, 175) that the Soviet Union went through in the 1920s. During these years, language is, as I have said, considered as a tool. In these conditions, science in charge with languages, linguistics, has a mechanical aspect. According to Vinokur, “языковедение получает значение *sui generis* технологии” (Vinokur 1923a, 106; emphasis in the original) and, consequently, the men in charge of the rationalization, the improvement or the simplification of the Russian language are, no wonder, called ‘technicians’. Thus, Vinokur (1923a, 106) used the expression *лингвист-технолог* ‘linguist-technician’, but he was not the only one. During the 1920s, the idea of linguistic technicians was quite widespread and appeared, among others, in the works of some Esperantists (cf. Spiridovič 1931) and Productionists.⁷

From the 1930s onwards, language is no longer a tool, and, therefore, linguistics has lost its mechanical approach to language: linguistics is no longer a “пассивно-формально[e] изучени[e] языковых явлений вне учета содержания” (Gorbačenko, Sinel’nikova and Šub 1932, 130); therefore, linguists-technicians became useless. In their place, some other characters acquire greater importance: the classics, these writers of the past who mastered perfectly the Russian language. As proof I can cite that from the beginning of the 1930s Gorky promoted the example of the classics (Gorham 2003, 108–111): *Учиться у классиков!* ‘Learn from the classics!’, or that in Vinogradov’s already mentioned book on the *Great Russian Language* (1945), the preeminence of the classics is evident: according to V. M. Alpatov, almost all the references quoted in the book are from the classics of the pre-revolutionary period (Alpatov 2000, 97). In a time when the Russian language bears, as we have seen, the identity of the Soviet nation, “the preservation of the authority of the Russian language, which in turn meant the restoration of the classics of prerevolutionary Russian realism” was considered as “a means of ensuring the survival of the Soviet state as a legitimate and respected power” (Gorham 2003, 108).

⁷Clark (2004, 40) mentions the ‘linguistic engineering’ of B. I. Arvatov.

This ‘transition from technicians to classics’ is one of the results of the global ideological change that occurred in the Soviet Union from the end of the 1920s. As has already been said, it reflects the shift from an internationalist society to a closed national (Soviet) entity. But this transition reflects another change. The 1920s were characterized by the conviction that the new socialist state needed a new particular language, a socialist language. In these conditions, the rationalizing attempts on the Russian language were part of this search for a socialist language. In June 1930, in his speech to the Sixteenth Congress of the CPSU(b), Stalin made another conception official, related to the reappearance of the nations in the Soviet ideological context: a socialist content and a national form. According to him, under the dictatorship of the proletariat, a culture is “[с]оциалистическая по своему содержанию и национальная по форме” (Stalin 1949[1930], 367; Stalin’s emphasis). In the field of language, it means the following: it matters little that the Russian language was formed and developed in a bourgeois context (it is part of its national form), if it is used in a socialist way, to express a socialist content. Thus, the 1930s witnessed the end, for political and ideological reasons, of two closely linked ideas: the idea of the rationalization of the Russian language and the idea of “создания нового, ‘социалистического’ языка, коренным образом отличающегося от языка предыдущих эпох” (Mordinov 1950, 77).

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