

LANGUAGE, INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY¹

DUNJA JUTRONIĆ - TIHOMIROVIĆ

UDK 800:301

Ideas of some Marxist-oriented scholars concerning the problem and relationship of language, individual and society are discussed in this paper. The paper begins with a short introduction to Marx's view of the role of society in giving shape to consciousness, language and individual in the real life situation. We proceed to Vygotsky's approach to the problem of the intellectual development in children. A. Luria's experiment in which social changes are followed by the changes in the cognitive development of an individual on a wider cultural level. The discussion ends with Vološinov's view of these matters on the philosophical level in the attempt to throw light on how an individual is integrated into society by means of language.

Human essence is no abstraction
inherent in each single individual.

6th thesis on Feuerbach

All social life is essentially practical.

7th thesis on Feuerbach

In his book *Man, Language and Society* Samir K. Gosh says that »the Marxian view of language has (also) received very little attention, especially among the western scholars«. ² He mentions the recent book of Maurice Cornforth, *Marxism and the Linguistic Philosophy* (London, 1967) which is more concerned with philosophy than with language sociology.

What we propose to do in this paper is to look at the ideas of some Marxist oriented scholars concerning the problem and relationship of language, individual and society. We shall begin with a short introduction to Marx's view of the role of society in giving shape to consciousness, language and individual in the real life situation. Then we shall proceed to Vygotsky's approach to the problem of the intellectual development in children, Alexander Luria's experiment in which social changes are followed by the changes in the cognitive

¹ This article in its oral presentation was delivered in the Linguistic Department at the Universität für Bildungswissenschaften Klagenfurt, December 1978.

² Samir K. Gosh, *Man, Language and Society*, The Hague 1972, p. 254.

development of an individual on a wider cultural level. We shall end with Vološinov's discussion of these matters on the philosophical level in the attempt to throw light on how an individual is integrated into society by means of language.³

In Marx's philosophical writings we find very little said about language since that was his secondary concern. Marx includes it in the superstructure since it does not belong to the social life conceived essentially as practical activity. There is more reference to the concept of consciousness, especially in *German Ideology*.⁴ Men distinguish themselves from animals by consciousness and that happens as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence. Conceiving, thinking, the mental processes in men, appear at this stage in direct connection with their material behaviour. Marx is saying that we set out from real active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we show the development of the ideological superstructure. Thus »life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life«. Language is as old as consciousness, language is practical consciousness that exists also for other men, and for that reason alone it really exists for me personally as well. Language, like consciousness, only arises from the need of interrelationship with other men. Consciousness is therefore from the very beginning a social product, and remains so as long as men live. At first, it is merely consciousness concerning immediate sensuous environment, it is consciousness of nature which first appears to men as a completely alien force. It is purely animal consciousness of nature, Man's need of associating with the individuals around him, his need to live in society is the beginning of his consciousness. It is, at that stage, as animal as social life itself. It is some kind of herd-consciousness which takes place of instincts. Then it is further developed through increased productivity and the division of labour which primarily causes the division of material and mental labour. From this moment on, consciousness is really something other than consciousness of existing practice. From that moment on consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the real world and to proceed to the formation of »pure« theory, philosophy, ethics, etc.

Individual consciousness is thus a social product. Language »as practical consciousness« first exists for other men and for that reason alone it really exists for each person too.

³ Dubravko Škiljan writes on the theme of linguistics and marxism in his book *Dinamika jezičnih struktura*, Zagreb, Školska knjiga 1976, and also in his most recent book *Govor i realnost jezika*, Školska knjiga, Zagreb, 1978.

⁴ Karl Marx, *Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan, Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 167—169.

From these basic positions that we find in Marx, let us proceed to a theory of individual intellectual development expounded by Lev Semenovitch Vygotsky⁵ in an attempt to see how an individual is integrated into society by means of language.

Lev Semenovitch Vygotsky was born in 1896. He was a student at the University of Moskow and most of his work was in psychology. He died of tuberculosis at the age of thirty-eight. His co-workers were such able students as Alexander Luria.

From the Marxist ideological perspective he is celebrated as the man who recognized the historical determination of man's consciousness and intellect. His view is best seen in contrast to the view that Piaget then held in a couple of books on language and thought in children.⁶ What pleased Marxist theorists was Vygotsky's insistence on the crucial role of society and social activity in the learning process of language by children.

Piaget held that a child goes through three stages in the process of learning the language. First comes the *autistic* thought which is *subconscious*, *individualistic* and obeys a set of laws of its own. It is not adapted to external reality but creates for itself a reality of imagination or dreams. It remains strictly individual and incommunicable since it operates primarily in images. Then comes *egocentric* thought as an intermediate stage when the child talks to himself, takes no interest in others, does not try to communicate and it thinks aloud. While its main function is still the satisfaction of personal needs, it already includes some mental adaptation to the thought of adults. The egocentric thought stands midway between autism and *directed* thought which is *conscious*, *social*, influenced by laws of logic and experience. Directed thought is intelligent, it is adapted to reality and it can be communicated through language. With it the process of socialization sets in and the exchange with others too. Directed thought is social, the autistic thought is individualistic, and egocentric thought is the intermediate between the logic of autism and the logic of intelligence. Thus a person is originally and naturally autistic and changes to realistic only under long social pressure. The need for logical activity arises late, imagination is more important in the beginning and it governs the child's thought up to the age of seven. When socialized thinking begins to take shape, the egocentric features do not vanish suddenly, they remain in

⁵ L. S. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1962. In Serbo-Croatian translated as Lav Vigotski, *Mišljenje i govor*, Nolit, Beograd, 1977.

⁶ Especially in his early work as Jean Piaget, *Le langage et la pensée chez l'enfant*, Neuchâtel-Paris, Delachaux & Niestlé 1924; *La représentation du monde chez l'enfant*, Paris, F. Alcan, 1926. One of his books translated in Serbo-Croatian is *Psihologija inteligencije*, Nolit, Beograd, 1968.

the abstract area of verbal thought. Egocentric speech is similar to a monologue in a play, in socialized speech (directed thought) the child attempts an exchange with others - he begs, conveys information, asks questions.

Vygotsky's approach is exactly the reverse. Vygotsky organized the same experiments as Piaget but added a series of difficulties. A child would, for example, suddenly find, when ready to draw, that his pencil is missing. He had to face problems. In such cases the egocentric speech almost doubled and a child would try to grasp the situation in talking to himself (like »where is my pencil«) Vygotsky concluded that the egocentric speech did not remain a mere accompaniment to the child's activity. It early assumed a very definite and important role in the activity of a child. Egocentric speech is not a simple means of emotional expression, it becomes an instrument of thought in seeking and planning the solution of a problem. His very well-known example is that a child of five and a half was drawing a streetcar when the point of his pencil broke. He tried to finish the circle of a wheel, pressing down on the pencil very hard but nothing showed except a colorless line. The child muttered to himself: »It is broken«. He then took watercolors and began to draw a broken streetcar. Vygotsky concluded that the child's egocentric utterance affected his activity to such extent that we cannot think of it as a mere by-product or release of tension. Thus Vygotsky places egocentric speech as a transitional stage in the evolution from vocal to inner speech. The inner speech is the adult's »thinking for himself«, it is egocentric speech as gone »underground«. The primary function of speech in both children and adults is communication, the social contact. The earliest speech of the child is therefore essentially social.⁷ At a certain age, the social speech of the child is quite sharply divided into egocentric and communicative but both forms, communicative (social) and egocentric are social, although their function differs. Egocentric speech appears when the child transfers social forms of behaviour to the sphere of inner-personal functions. Egocentric, which is part of general social speech, leads to inner speech and thus it is a transition from vocal to inner speech. While Piaget's story is one of gradual socialization of intimate and personal stages, Vygotsky direction in the development of thinking, is not from the individual to the socialized, but from the social to the individual.

The point is, in Marxist terminology, that in the beginning was the action, the word was not in the beginning since action was there first. The word comes at the end of the development as crowning the action.

⁷ Vygotsky is discussed in some details in Ivan D. Ivić, *Čovek kao animal symbolicum*, Nolit, Beograd, 1978.

A. R. Luria in his book *Cognitive Development, its cultural and social foundations*⁸ is concerned with the individual's mental development in a somewhat different sense. Luria entered the Kazan medical school in 1921. In 1932, he accepted a position at the Institute of Psychology at Moscow University where he met Vygotsky. The author accepted Levi-Bruhl's formulation that social changes were accompanied by fundamental changes in thought processes. In search for support for this theory Luria set out for central Asia with the general purpose to show that sociohistorical roots are the basis for cognitive processes in the individual. His hypothesis was that many mental processes are social and historical in origin and that the individual is shaped by the basic practices of human activity. Like Vygotsky he believed that the social origin of higher mental processes has greatly been ignored and that human beings should be treated as products of social history. As early as the beginning of the present century, Durkheim assumed that the basic processes of mind are not manifestations of the spirit's inner life or the results of natural selection, but that they rather originated in society. The research reported by Luria confirms the view that higher cognitive activities remain sociohistorical in nature and that the structure of individual mental activity changes in the course of historical development.

The people of Uzbekistan where Luria conducted his research lived in a backward economy before the revolution. After the socialist revolution Uzbekistan became a republic with collective agricultural production. Radical changes in social class structure were accompanied by new cultural changes. Short-term courses were introduced and the influence of Islam began to disappear. As it was a feudal society, people were illiterate and lived in villages. The subjects comprised several groups: 1. Ichkari women living in distant villages, illiterate; 2. Peasants somewhat involved in social labor; 3. Women who attended short-term course; 4. Collective farm workers and young people taking courses; 5. Women students admitted to a teacher's school. Luria's assumption was the first two groups would display forms of cognition which are closely connected with graphic-functional practices while, other subjects would be more advanced in their thinking. Through the comparison of these groups one could then observe the changes caused by cultural and socio-economic realignment. Luria hoped to reject the Cartesian notion of the primacy of self-consciousness over the perception of the external world and of other people. He assumed the reverse: the perception of an individual results from the clear perception of the others and the processes of self-perception are formed through

⁸ A. R. Luria, *Cognitive Development, its Cultural and Social Foundations*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1976.

social activity, collaboration with others. The final aim of the investigation was to study how an individual is shaped in the course of human activity.

One of the experiments was self-analysis, that is self-evaluation with the assumption that self-evolution is shaped by the conditions of social existence. Human beings first make judgements of others and perceive judgements of others about themselves and then, under the influence of these judgements, are able to formulate judgements about themselves. Facts pointing to the decisive role of collective activities in the development of self-awareness were particularly noticed. To give a concrete example, one of the questions posed to subjects was the following: »What shortcomings are you aware of in yourself and what would you like to change about them«? One of the answers from the first group of subjects was: »As for me, I have only one dress and two robes and those are all my shortcomings«. The word »shortcoming« is here understood as things that are lacking.

In most of such cases questions concerning an analysis of personal qualities were either not understood or were related to external material situations or everyday life. The next, transitional group of subjects, usually characterized themselves much more completely, like: »I have a big shortcoming, I borrowed 125 rubles and cannot pay them back«. (here the material shortages are indicated). Transition group is similar to the first group since the description of their living situation continues to predominate. The final group with their involvement in the common collective life began to put together notions related to their behaviour. They come to form an image of the »ideal me« which begins to play a decisive part in the further development of their consciousness, gradually leading to an analysis of internal properties of personality.

This kind of experiment traced the changes in the structure of mental processes associated with cognitive activity at different stages of the historical development. It also indicated the major shifts in individual development under the influence of a social and cultural revolution. The facts show that the structure of cognitive activity does not remain static during different stages of historical development and that it varies as the conditions of social life change and the knowledge is mastered. When new stages of historical and social practice are reached, changes occur in human mental activity. In this particular experiment with elementary graphic-functional motives we see the creation of new motives that take shape in the process of collectivized labor, planned activities and basic schooling. Interests go beyond immediate impression, future planning is involved, literacy and theoretical knowledge are present. All of this is accompanied by dramatic shifts in the nature of cognitive activity and the structure of mental processes. Theoretical »categorical« thought

begins to function in addition to practical »situational« thinking. Gradually we see the »translation from the sensory to the rational« which modern materialistic philosophy tends to regard as one of the most important aspects of the development of consciousness.

The basic categories of human mental life are thus understood as products of social history, that is, they are not fixed forms of spiritual life but they are subject to change when the basic forms of social practice are altered and it shows that they are social in nature.

In contrast to this view, idealistic philosophers maintain that self-awareness is a primary and irreducible property of mental life with no history. Also rationalists and phenomenologists share one basic assumption, namely, that the subjective world is primary while the reflection of the external world is derivative and secondary. Evidence shows, according to Luria, that self-awareness is a product of sociohistorical development and that reflection to external, natural and social reality arises first. Marx said at a point that at first man looked at himself as if in a mirror except that it is another person. Only by relating to Paul as to one like himself, can Peter begin to relate to himself as a person. This kind of approach maintains that consciousness is the highest form of reflection of reality and it is not given in advance, unchanging and passive, but it is shaped by activity and used by human beings to orient themselves to their environment. Mental processes depend on active life forms in an appropriate environment. Social forms of human life determine human development. From birth on, children live in a world of things social labor has created. Language, with words as its basic units, carries not only meaning but also fundamental units of consciousness reflecting the external world. With the help of language human person is a product of social history and his mental processes cannot develop apart from the appropriate forms of social life. Psychology viewed in this way comes to mean the sociohistorical shaping of mental activity which depends utterly on the basic forms of social practice and the major stages in the historical development of society. With this the basic theses of Marxism regarding the historical nature of human mental life and the role of society in shaping individuals are thus revealed in their concrete forms.

Further belief in the role of society in giving shape to the acquisition of language and the formation of individuals is affirmed by Valentin Nikolaevič Vološinov.

Vološinov was born around 1896 and later disappeared in the Stalinist purges of the thirties. He was a close associate of M. M. Baxtin⁹ in Leningrad in the late twenties and early thirties. His main

⁹ The opinion is that V. N. Vološinov is not the author of this work and that the book was written by M. Bahtin with whom he worked. Since there is

work is the book *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. No other information is known about his early life, education or about the charges leveled against him.

Vološinov believed that language, that is verbal sign, is the purest and most sensitive medium of social intercourse and so the study of signs should be the primary task of linguistic investigation. He discusses the concept of ideology with its curious meaning as semiotic, that is, ideology as the ability of human beings to possess together with the natural world, another world, the world of signs. Language is the most important of all the ideological signs so finally the study of ideology is the study of language, the philosophy of language. Vološinov is very critical of the two trends in linguistics that he labels *individualistic subjectivism* and *abstract objectivism*. A common tendency for idealism (subjectivism) is to remove all sense from the material world and to locate it in a-temporal, a-spatial spirit. Thus individual subjectivism looks at language as a continuous process of creation realized in individual speech acts. Language is an ever-flowing stream of speech acts in which nothing remains fixed and identical in itself and language creativity is analogous to art creativity. Benedetto Croce, Vosler and Leo Spitzer represent this trend. For abstract objectivism language is stable, immutable system of normatively identical linguistic forms which the individual finds ready made. Individual acts of speaking are only variations or plain and simple distortions of identical and normative forms. The roots of this trend go back to Cartesian grounds and Leibniz's conception of language. History here is an irrational force distorting the logical purity of the language system, and abstract systematization is more important than historical actuality. For Vološinov neither approach is true. He sees the ideological chain stretching from one individual to another and connecting them. Signs, that is language, can emerge only in the process of interaction between one person and another. The individual consciousness is filled with signs, and it becomes consciousness only in the process of social interaction. Signs arise in inter-individual territory but they do not arise between any two members. It is essential that the two individuals are organized society since signs are created by an organized group in the process of interaction. Signs are not located anywhere within the souls of communicating

no definite proof of such an opinion we cite Vološinov as the author of the book especially because the book has been translated in English under his name. V. N. Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, Seminar Press, New York, 1973. trs. L. Matejka & I. R. Titunik. This author is discussed in Augusto Ponzio, *Jezična proizvodnja i društvena ideologija*, Školska knjiga, Zagreb, 1978. especially p. 23. See also the review of Vološinov's book Dunja Jutronić-Tihomirović *Teka* 11. 1978, pp. 804—843 and a short article and translation »V. N. Vološinov, Marksizam i filozofija jezika,« *Domesti* 4/1977, pp. 47—59.

subjects but they are entirely and completely without, in the word, the gesture, the act. There is nothing left unexpressed in it, nothing »inner«, it is wholly on the outside, brought out in exchange, wholly taken up in the material of the word.

Concerning the relationship of the base to the superstructure the following is true: 1. Ideology may not be divorced from the material reality of the sign; 2. The sign may not be divorced from the concrete forms of social intercourse; 3. Communication may not be divorced from the material base. Only the things that have acquired social value can enter the world of ideology.

Any kind of psychology must be based on sociological and not on physiological or biological principles because conscious individual is a socioideological fact. The subjective psyche is to be localized somewhere between the organism (the body) and the outside world. It is on the borderline separating these two spheres of reality. The ideological sign is the common territory for both the individual and the ideology. The problem is how to delimit individual's reality from the reality of the signs if they are really the same. The most important statement is Vološinov is that from the standpoint of content there is no basic division between the psyche (individual) and ideology, the difference is one of degree only. Individual is purely socioideological phenomenon and the content of the individual psyche is by its very nature just as social as is ideology. Every sign, even the sign of individuality, is social. Everything ideological is extraterritorial in the socioeconomic sphere. The ideological sign whose locus is outside the organism, must enter the inner world of an individual in order to implement it with meaning.

The individual gives himself verbal shape from another's point of view, ultimately, from the point of view of the community to which he belongs. A word is conceived of as a bridge thrown between myself and another. If one end of the bridge depends on me, then the other depends on my addressee. A word is a shared territory in which the immediate social situation and the broader social milieu wholly determine the structure of the utterance.

In such an approach the I-experience effaces itself the more it loses its ideological structuredness. But the we-experience is not some nebulous herd experience. It is differentiated, firm and realible in its social orientation. The stronger, the more organized, the more differentiated the collective in which the individual orients himself, the more vivid and complex his inner world will be. Individualistic self-experience does not belong to I-experience. Self-experience is a special ideological form of the we-experience and it derives from the confident social orientation. Individualistic confidence in himself, his sense of personal value, is not drawn from within, not from the depth of his personality, but from the outside world. A purely sociological

character determines the individual. In sum, between the individual and ideology there exists a continuous dialectical interplay: the individual effaces itself in the process of becoming ideology and ideology effaces itself in the process of becoming the psyche. What is important is that both, the one and the other kind or reality are after all a refraction of one reality based in socioeconomic existence.

What is then the true center of linguistic reality? Is it the individual speech act or the system of language? Does language really exist for the speaker's subjective consciousness or is it an objective system of normatively identical forms? Perhaps the truth lies somewhere in the middle representing the compromise between the first and the second trend, subjective individualization and abstract objectivization. Vološinov believes that the truth is not to be found in the golden means and that it is not a matter compromise. What is important for the speakers about a linguistic form is not a stable and always self-equivalent signal, but that it is an always changeable and adaptable sign. Thus the important factor for the linguistic form is not at all its self-identity but its specific variability. It is not the recognition of the same thing but understanding in the proper sense of the word, i. e. orientation in the particular given context and in a given situation. Speaker in practical business of living speech is not concerned with the abstract system but with language speech in the sense of possible contexts of usage. In actuality we never say or hear words, we say and hear what is true or false, good or bad, important or unimportant. Words are always filled with meaning drawn from behaviour or ideology. Language, in the process of its practical life, is inseparable from its ideological and behaviouristic implementation. Language is a continuous generative process implemented in the social-verbal interaction of speakers. The laws the generative process of language are not at all the laws of individual psychology and they cannot be divorced from the activity of the speakers. The laws of language generation are sociological laws. Meaning does not reside in the word or in the soul of the speaker, or in the soul of the listener. Meaning is the result of interaction between speaker and listener produced via rather material and particular sound complex. Only the verbal interchange gives the word the light of meaning. Language reflects not subjective changes but stable social interrelationships among speakers. It is in this way that language lights up the inner personality and its consciousness. It is an expression of social intercourse, of the social interaction of material personality. Language is the the generative process of social communication, the factor inseparable from its material base. To repeat, language is not divorced from the material basis, from the concrete form of intercourse. Although Vološinov agreed with the followers of the Humboltian trend that the study of utterance deserved full attention of

linguistic investigation, he disagreed with the emphasis on the individual character of the utterance and with the attempts to explain the creative aspect of human language in terms of the individual psychic life of the speaker. For Vološinov the true center of linguistic reality is the meaningful speech act seen as integral part of a social structure.

In the VIth thesis on Feuerbach Marx says that human essence is no abstraction inherent in each individual and we could see that all three scholars that we discussed set out to prove that in their own way.

Vygotsky stressed the crucial role of society and social activity in the learning process of language by children. We saw that egocentric talk assumed an important role in the child's activity and that his personality was formed in the process of social interaction. The primary function of speech in both children and adults is communication and the earliest speech is essentially social. He sees the child's development from the social to the individual.

Luria's experiment tried to show that the basic process of mind originates in society. Development of an adult remains sociohistorical in nature and its structure changes in the course of historical development. Individual undergoes a major development under the influence of a social and cultural revolution. Self-awareness is a product of sociohistorical development and consciousness, that is human essence as the highest form of reflection of reality and it is not given in advance.

Vološinov insisted on the great importance of language as a generative process which was not a part of individual psychology but which is tightly knit with the activity of the other speakers.

All of the three approaches in their specific manner regard all mental processes (that is an individual) as complex formation which are built up as an outcome of concrete forms of interaction between the organism and its environment. They are concerned with the real forms of interrelation between the individual and environment. They introduce (especially Luria) the role of development into the study of the formation of individuals, at each particular stage of development, concrete forms of activity present the individual with new problems and new demands.

Marxist scholars consider consciousness as a function of the brain and that is a reflection of the objective world. It means that an individual is determined by the natural reality existing outside of, and operating on his development. Life determines consciousness, as Marx said, that is men adapt themselves to better know this world and its laws. Social being precedes social consciousness and they are brought together by means of language.

Sažetak

Cilj ovog članka je da razmotri ideje određenih marksistički orijentiranih učenjaka koji se bave problemom odnosa jezika, pojedinca i društva. Izlaganje počinje kratkim pregledom Marksovih ideja o ulozi društva koje ono ima u formiranju svijesti pojedinca u stvarnim životnim situacijama. Zatim se govori o stavovima Lava Vygotskog oko problema intelektualnog razvoja djece, a na široj kulturnoj razini o eksperimentu Aleksandra R. Lurie u kojima se dokazuje kako dolazi do kognitivnog razvoja kod pojedinaca nakon provedenih društvenih promjena. Izlaganje se završava diskusijom ideja Valentina N. Vološinova o problemu jezika, pojedinca i društva i načina na koji se pojedinac integrira u društvu pomoću jezika.

Sva tri pristupa na svoj specifičan, ali u osnovi i zajednički način, vide pojedinca kao kompleksnu formaciju koja se izgrađuje interakcijom u određenoj sredini. Sva tri autora vide svijest (tj. pojedinca) kao odraz objektivnog svijeta. Životna situacija određuje svijest i ona utječe na razvoj pojedinca koji se adaptira kako bi bolje upoznao sredinu i njene zakone. Društveno biće pretvodi društvenoj svijesti, a obe su objedinjene putem jezika.