

VOLOSINOV ON THE IDEOLOGY OF INVERSION

Before the appearance of Barthes' S/Z, or again before the wider circulation of the ideas of Derrida, Kristeva, and Lacan, it was commonplace in Anglo-American circles to refer to simple dichotomies between continental and Anglo-American thought, idealist speculation and empiricism, signifier and signified. Now only naive popularisers would use such simple notions. It was never desirable and is no longer possible to label French critical theory as 'idealist speculation'; the original classification has itself broken down as a result of the contradictions it contains. Since the appearance of texts by Derrida, Kristeva, and Lacan, it has become problematic to speak of "structuralism" except historically, and then only as a category in a process of decomposition.

In this context, the work of V.N. Volosinov is particularly significant. Two books recently translated into English - Freudianism (1976) and Marxism and the Philosophy of Language (1973) - reveal his affinity with the subsequent work of Derrida and Lacan. They contain critical commentary on Saussure which, in examining and exposing the epistemology of structuralism in its classical guise in linguistics and anthropology, parallels current reformulations being made by Bourdieu (1977) in France and by Coward and Ellis (1977) in this country. None of these, however, make reference to the pioneering work of this extraordinary Russian thinker who, having been deemed a heretic, disappeared in the Stalinist purges of the 1930's.

Volosinov proposed the analysis of language at a time when other Marxists advocated only crude mechanistic models to understand the relation between individual and society, ideology and economic substructure. His books are centred around a polemical attack on two approaches to 'the problem of the identification and the delimitation of language as a specific object of study' (1973: 48): 'individualistic subjectivism', represented by Humboldt, Wundt and Vossler and 'abstract objectivism', most notably represented by Saussure. This critical evaluation led to the formulation of a social psychology committed to the study of signs seen as constructing the subject, and as circumscribed by their constantly shifting ideological character. The emphasis is placed on the generation of signs, the restless shifting of signifier under the signified, the production and multivalence of meaning in verbal communication, the circumstances of which are seen as fundamental in deducing the peculiar relations between base and superstructure in historically defined social formations. While it is possible to see Volosinov's texts as countering the epistemological foundations of anthropological structuralism, his point of departure is in fact similar to Barthes' in Systemes de la mode and S/Z: that is, the problems presented by the 'nouveau roman' concerning the relationship between connotative and denotative language, between the arbitrary and the mechanistic relation of signifier to signified. In the last resort, these problems demand a 'political theory of language' capable of revealing the process of the appropriation of language and the 'ownership of the means of enunciation'.

Volosinov's Freudianism, a necessary overture to his later work on language, is a polemical attack on the premises of psychoanalysis and its claim to scientific status; in it he combines a critique from the viewpoint of an emphatically social psychology with an attempt to subsume the object of psychoanalysis under semiology. Disputing contemporary assertions that psychoanalysis showed a certain methodological similarity to Marxism, Volosinov declares it to be an ideological formation with specific socio-historical roots; he claims that it works to deny the effectivity of human action in favour of a crude biological trinity of birth, death and procreation. Such an ideology, Volosinov asserts, always appears in those periods of history in which a society is threatened with acute crises and upheavals in the relations of production. Freud's concern with censorship and

his general obsession with sexuality are seen as contradictions characteristic of the petit bourgeois: the inflation of the sexual is intimately related to the disintegration of the structure of the bourgeois family. As man is stripped of his dignity and relegated to the condition of bestiality, so in theories such as Freud's he loses his privileged position as a social and historical being. History is denied; the present is considered regulated by the rationality of nature.

The essence of Freudianism, the source of its false interpretation of individual psychology, is a misdirected discourse concerning language and the means of translation between 'inner' and 'outward' speech. Unfortunately, where we require a sophisticated exegesis of this fundamental relation, Volosinov is at his most unimaginative, reducing a complex problem to a simple deterministic relation.

The verbal component of behaviour is determined in all the fundamentals and essentials of its content by objective social factors.

The social environment is what has given a person words and what has joined words with specific meanings and value judgements: the same environment continues ceaselessly to determine and control a person's verbal reactions throughout his entire life.

Therefore, nothing verbal in human behaviour (inward and outward speech equally) can under any circumstances be reckoned to the account of the individual subject in isolation; the verbal is not his property, but the property of the social group (his social milieu) (1976: 86).

For Freud, as Volosinov interprets him, the mind structures events according to particular laws, producing sign networks which can be decoded and translated into language through the verbal interaction between psychiatrist and patient. Freud views these sign systems as given by nature through the individual psyche, but Volosinov violently resists any such claim, arguing that 'The reality of the inner psyche is the same reality as that of the sign. Outside the material of the sign there is no psyche' (1973:26). By employing the full radical potential in Saussure and extending the importance of parole in relation to langue, Volosinov is able to assert that signs can emerge only through the interaction of individual consciousnesses, through the medium of speech. The individual only possesses consciousness structured according to certain ideological patterns inherited from society. Psychoanalysis reads the imprints of ideology as it is internalised and fixed in the human subject, but, not recognizing those imprints as ideological, it claims such internalised language to be prior and given, abstracted from any determining social milieu.

At this point we might take one step back before proceeding to discuss Volosinov's reworking of linguistics and its relations to dialectical materialism, to appreciate his criticism of Saussure and of the subjectivist school, and his deployment of the radical potentiality inherent in Saussurean linguistics.

For Humboldt, Wundt and Vossler, verbal expression was formed within the individual psyche and then directed outwards. The creation and continuous generation of language is a creative act of the individual and governed by the laws of psychology. Language as a stable system comprised of lexicon, grammar and phonetics, is conceived as a linguistic abstraction, as a heuristic device desirable only in the practical teaching of the heart of linguistic creativity. By reducing linguistic phenomena purely to parole, to the individual, discontinuous and abstracted creativity of speech acts, Humboldt imputed an absolute freedom to the generative process, which allows for the constant, unlimited transformation of language.

Without a referent, without a full-stop drawn somewhere to limit the freedom of the word, the outcome is a logical absurdity: the fragmentation and decomposition of a language into accents, which themselves drift even further apart, finally leading to incomprehension and the isolation of the individual in a web of speech exclusively created by himself and known only to himself. The abstraction of language as individual speech acts leads to the death of man, as a social being, exiling him forever to the labyrinth of solitude.

Of more interest to Volosinov were the linguistic teachings of Ferdinand de Saussure, which were increasingly influential in Russia, particularly among the formalist school and among certain young Marxist scholars. If Humboldt and his later followers had been unduly influenced by German Romanticism, particularly the writings of Herder, then Saussure, tracing his intellectual genealogy from Descartes and the seventeenth and eighteenth century rationalists, was to fall victim to an opposite error. Following the principle of Cartesian dualism, Saussure's insistence on separating langue from parole caused much dissent among Russian linguists. Volosinov embarked on his programme of reforming Saussure's insights just as they began to be employed and developed by the formalists.

Volosinov's disagreement with Saussure concerned the abstract structural foundation - langue - which denies the individual any means of violating, changing, or transcending it. Langue is given primacy over all other linguistic phenomena: speech is under the tyrannical distatorship of the grammatical, lexical and phonetic forms of language structure. For Saussure, this complex and conservative substratum is the basis of all linguistic forms and ensures mutual comprehension in a speech community. Individual speech acts are conceived as refractions and variations generated by the possibilities contained in the underlying structure of the language. Given the existence of this 'immutable system of normatively, identical linguistic forms which the individual consciousness finds ready made' (1973:57), it becomes credible to postulate specifically linguistic laws, concerned with the relation between signs within a given, closed linguistic circle. These laws specify purely linguistic relations, principles objectified in the structure of the language itself and in no way defined by ideological values inherent in the society. Thus the structural architecture of any language is divorced from verbal expression considered as an instance of communication. This view denies both innovation and change at the deeper level of language and allows no reciprocal relationship between language and speech. It is the ghost in the machine which makes articulation possible; language is a timeless presence, the spiritual essence underlying the words' very possibility of being. Of course, the same premises inform the theoretical practices of anthropological structuralism, hence the relevance of Volosinov's texts.

Volosinov puts forward three principal objections to this view of language.

1) Language, for Saussure, is an ideal abstraction from reality, denying change and innovation. But since it exists only for the subjective consciousness of a member of a speech community and only as an ideal referent by which verbal expression is monitored, a synchronic system can have no objective existence in itself. Despite claims to the contrary, it is limited in space and time: '... what is important for the speaker about a linguistic form is ... that it is always a changeable and adaptable sign' (1973:68). This opens up new possibilities in the study of strategy and innovation in language, allows the emergence of a truly generative approach to linguistics, and thus facilitates an exploration of its relations with ideology. In the later part of Marxism and the Philosophy of Language, Volosinov tentatively constructs a history of forms of utterance, embedding them in the specificity of historical social formations.

2) For Saussure signs are inert; they are dead (or rather beyond death, but always haunting the living), without passion, value, or orientation. They are

things of existence but beyond existence, things from which springs an indifferent life. In the social world it is not the sign-system itself which is important, but actual words in combination with other words. These denote a variety of meanings, enabling people to speak while masking, to pursue a tortuous route of verbal evasion, to demand response while constantly shifting individual position. The verbal consciousness of speakers has little to do with static linguistic forms. Since linguistic forms exist for the speaker only through specific utterances, and consequently in specific ideological contexts, 'we never say or hear words, we see and hear what is true or false, good or bad, important or unimportant, pleasant, unpleasant, and soon. Words are always filled with content and meaning drawn from behaviour or ideology' (1973:70).

3) Because linguistic forms are separated from ideology, signs are treated as signals. Volosinov sees linguistics as deriving from philology and accounts for the abstracted structural system implied in langue in these terms. Philology, always concerned with the resurrection of dead languages, themselves abstractions, encouraged linguistics to content itself with the neutral silence of the word. Thus Volosinov writes:

Linguistics makes its appearance wherever and whenever philological need has appeared. Philological need gave birth to linguistics, rocked its cradle, and left its philological flute wrapped in its swaddling clothes. That flute was supposed to be able to awaken the dead. But it lacked the range necessary for mastering living speech as actually and continuously generated (1973:71).

Philology rejected any relation between the word and ideology in favour of elucidating a pure language with a distinctive and rational structure - a pre-supposition which was accepted as an essential part of the Saussurean system.

Despite these fundamental criticisms of Saussure, Volosinov nevertheless saw the value of his work; indeed it formed the basis of his own distinctive and original contribution to linguistics and social psychology, his redefinition of these as fields of intellectual discourse. As we have seen Volosinov suspends behavioural psychology and psychoanalysis, criticizing their internalist constitutions and their relation to the external social milieu; his critique springs from a reconstituted social psychology concerned with the ideological significance of the sign and the combination of signs. For Volosinov, consciousness is not an abstract and autonomous state; rather it is formed and shaped by signs generated by an articulate group in the process of social intercourse. Constituted in ideologically tainted signs, consciousness reveals its semiotic nature; its logic is seen to be the logic of ideological communication. Deprived of this ideological content, consciousness is reduced to a physiological fact.

Idealism and psychologism alike overlook the fact that understanding itself can come about only within some kind of semiotic material (e.g. inner speech), that sign bears upon sign, that consciousness itself can arise and become a viable fact only in the material embodiment of signs. The understanding of a sign is, after all, an act of reference between the sign apprehended and other, already known signs: in other words understanding is a response to a sign with signs. And this chain of ideological creativity and understanding, moving from sign to sign and then to a new sign, is perfectly consistent and continuous; from one link of a semiotic nature (hence, also of a material nature) we proceed uninterruptedly to another link of exactly the same nature. And nowhere is there a break in the chain, nowhere does the chain plunge into inner being, non-material in nature and unembedded in signs (1973: 11).

This ideological chain, not unlike Nietzsche's idea of unending sign chains, is stretched and continuously generated between and by individual consciousnesses. Consciousness is given a sociological origin because founded in the materiality of the sign.

Every society defines and accentuates particular modes of discourse, the subjects of which command its attention. Such modes of discourse are not only socially but historically relative and bear relation to the material circumstances of specifically positioned social groups: '... only that which has acquired social value can enter the world of ideology and establish itself there' (1973: 22). Whereas at the level of the production of ideologically constituted sign chains the individual consciousness is passive, here, within the ideologically constituted web of conceptual discourse, the individual can play a creative role, exploiting the tensions and contradictions within and between discursive formations, and thus generating new systems of signification.

Volosinov conceives of discourse not only as tensed and contradictory but also as fragmentary; thus the rich generative potentiality of the word as ideological signifier manifests the 'intersecting of differently oriented social interests within one and the same sign community, i.e.: by the class struggle' (1973: 22). He goes on to write:

Class does not coincide with the sign community, i.e. with the community which is the totality of users of the same set of signs for ideological communication. Thus various different social classes will use one and the same language. As a result differently oriented accents intersect in every ideological sign. Sign becomes an arena of the class struggle (1973: 23).

This points to the study of enunciation and of the socio-economic context of utterance, as well as to the political theory of the generation and ownership of the mode of enunciation as envisioned by Barthes and others.

Volosinov's works form a starting point for a critical tradition which assumes the relevance of a critique of structuralism in linguistics and anthropology. It finds common ground with the work of those structuralist authors who have sought to decompose and suspend the generic structuralist oeuvre; and it is fundamental with Bourdieu's criticism of the theory and practice of the social sciences. These relations are hardly surprising if we remember that Volosinov, while critical of formalism, did eventually converge with that movement, most notably in the linguistic work of the Prague circle, a circle which itself greatly influenced French structuralism. With the exception, perhaps, of his mechanistic relation between speech and 'inner language', the most serious defect in his argument, one cannot deny the importance of Volosinov's thought in providing a view of social psychology which links the individual, as species-being, with his society. Given that the relation between individual and society has generally been dealt with inadequately by Marxist theorists and remains a substantial problem for dialectical materialism, the relative neglect of Volosinov's work by contemporary authors concerned with similar problems is difficult to explain (although Jacobson's study on Shifters, Verbal Categories and the Russian Verb (1957) is an exception). It would be a sad loss to scholarship if the work of one of the leading Marxist theoreticians of our century is forgotten, particularly when his concerns are so acute and pertinent to our own in the sciences of man.

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