

The “Ancient Indian Language” in the 1950 Linguistic Discussion in the USSR: The Significance of a “Missed Encounter”

Abstract. During the linguistic discussion officially organised in the USSR in 1950, Nikolaj Jakovlevič Marr’s “New Theory of Language”, which had dominated Soviet linguistics since the end of the 1920s, was overthrown. This made possible a return to the “paradigm” of historical and comparative linguistics. However, despite all the importance of “ancient Indian” linguistic material for the formation of historical and comparative linguistics, in the very discussion of 1950 the “ancient Indian language”, contrary to all expectations, is scarcely mentioned. Among the possible explanations for this, this chapter highlights both the course of the development of historical and comparative linguistics and the political and ideological nature of the 1950 Soviet linguistic discussion.

Keywords. “Ancient Indian language”, historical and comparative linguistics, “New Theory of Language”, linguistic discussion of 1950 in the USSR, linguistics and ideology

In 1950 in the Soviet Union a discussion on linguistics was organised and carried out in the pages of *Pravda*, the central Soviet communist newspaper. The written dialogue that took place would radically change the face of the Soviet humanities.¹ During the discussion, the “New Theory of Language” developed by Nikolaj Jakovlevič Marr (1864/65–1934) was overthrown by Stalin, who appeared at the time to intervene in the discussion as a participant but who had in fact organised and initiated it.² Dominant in the USSR since the end of the 1920s, the “New

1 In 2020, on the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of this discussion, Lausanne Slavists published a collection of articles in which scholars from different countries analyse the historical context of the 1950 discussion, its ideological grounds, and its implications and significance for Soviet linguistics (Vel’mezova 2020b).

2 As the contemporary historian Boris Semenovič Ilizarov established upon carrying out research on Stalin’s archives, contrary to popular belief Stalin himself authored his contributing article on linguistics with the help of consultations with a number of Soviet linguists (Ilizarov 2012: 254, 259).

Theory of Language” was elaborated over the course of 1923 and 1924. This hegemonic theory replaced, in the Soviet context, the so-called “traditional”, historical and comparative linguistics with its classical postulate about the existence of language families and ancestor languages, from which, through divergence, modern languages were supposedly formed. Marr, on the contrary, turned the classical scheme of historical and comparative linguistics “upside down”, declaring that families of languages, in the sense in which they were understood by linguists of the nineteenth century, did not exist. Human languages, according to Marr, developed not by divergence but by convergence. What were “traditionally” considered to be linguistic families were, Marr argued, the results of linguistic hybridisation. This hypothesis was “supported” by Marr’s thesis that the corresponding languages belonged to peoples situated at the same level (or stage) of socio-economic development, an element of the idea on “the unity of the glottogonic process”; that is, the unity of the development of all languages.³ The concept of a linguistic family was thus replaced by the concept of the stage of language development.

During the period in which the “New Theory of Language”, or Marrism, remained dominant in the Soviet Union (after the death of Marr in 1934, the dominance of this theory continued until 1950), historical and comparative linguistics suffered a great deal. Not only were Marr’s supporters the first to obtain leading academic posts, but adherence to traditional historical and comparative studies could cost scientists not only their career—including the ability to lecture and publish their works—but also their lives.⁴ The overthrow of Marrism by Stalin

3 In his various works, Marr would emphasise in this regard either linguistic hybridisation or the same level of socio-economic development of peoples as the basis of linguistic convergence. Over time, the latter factor (the same level of socio-economic development) began to occupy an increasingly dominant place in his works. Among other central theses of Marrism, his insistence on the importance of studying the origin of language and the need to work on linguistic semantics is worth mentioning here. On the whole, Soviet Marrism was often opposed to “traditional” or “bourgeois” Western science. Even having conceded its dominant position in linguistics to other currents (first “dissidents of Indo-Europeanism”, then structuralism with its interest in synchrony, etc.) at the beginning and in the first half of the twentieth century, historical and comparative linguistics still continued to occupy a significant place in the language sciences. Semantics, so beloved by Marr, was indeed one of the weakest points of “Western” linguistics at the beginning of the last century. As for the studies of linguistic “prehistory”, another central point of the “New Theory of Language”, they were “banned” by the Linguistic Society of Paris immediately following the formation of the society in 1866. All of this allowed Marr to oppose his theories to “bourgeois linguistics” and, from the point of view of the ideological conjuncture of opposition between the USSR and the “West”, between socialism and capitalism, contributed to the establishment of the dominance of Marr’s theories in the USSR at the end of the 1920s. From monographic studies and collections of articles published in recent decades on Marr and Marrism see e.g. Alpatov 1991; Sériot 2005; Velmezova 2007).

4 One of the best-known tragic examples today is the life and fate of Evgenij Dmitrievič Polivanov (1891–1938), who in 1929 dared to openly oppose the “New Theory of Lan-

in 1950 resulted primarily in the rehabilitation of traditional comparative studies in the USSR. While not a linguist by training, Stalin nevertheless managed to understand that the method of historical and comparative linguistics was more “scientific” (again, in keeping with a “traditional” scientific linguistic paradigm) than Marr’s theories.

Historically, historical and comparative linguistics was based on the “discovery”, for European linguists, of Sanskrit by Sir William Jones (1746–1794) in 1786. It allowed linguists to conclude that ancient Indian, Greek, and Latin had developed from one common source, and to begin to trace the evolution of individual languages within the Indo-European family. Considering the importance of ancient Indian linguistic materials in the very first works on historical and comparative linguistics, and taking into account the fact that the 1950 discussion in the USSR was aimed at overthrowing Marr’s theories contradicting historical and comparative studies, it would be logical to expect that an important place would be assigned to the ancient Indian language in the 1950 linguistic discussion as well. As our analysis of the texts composing the discussion reveals below, however, this was not necessarily the case, and we are going to indicate several possible reasons of this situation.

The 1950 discussion was opened on 9 May with a polemical article by Arnol’d Stepanovič Čikobava (1898–1985). De facto the discussion ended with the publication of Stalin’s article on 20 June (publications continued after that, but nevertheless it was Stalin’s article that in fact ended the debate). A total of fourteen articles were published within the framework of this discussion in *Pravda* from 9 May to 20 June 1950.⁵

The “ancient Indian language”⁶ is clearly mentioned only a few times in the entirety of the discussion; the relevant contexts are quoted below.

guage”. The deliberate persecution of the scientist, which began as a consequence of his having crossed Marrism, eventually resulted in his being exiled from Moscow to Central Asia and being cut off from any possibility of working and publishing normally. In 1937 Polivanov was accused of spying for Japan and, in 1938, he was shot dead. His name was subsequently rehabilitated.

5 Within the limits of the discussion, articles were published every Tuesday from 9 May to 20 June 1950. As a rule, they could not be limited to completely unambiguous judgments: the Marrists also recognised the shortcomings of the “New Theory of Language”, and their opponents, meanwhile, did not always agree with each other on all points, while other participants tried to take a so-called “neutral” position, attempting to bridge the Marrists and their opponents. For a complete list of the articles published in *Pravda* between 9 May and 20 June 1950, see Vel’mezova 2020a: 8–9. The titles of the contributions published in *Pravda* in May and June 1950 did not contain any direct references to the problems of historical and comparative linguistics: they exclusively address Marr’s theories and the general situation of Soviet linguistics.

6 The participants of the discussion manifestly preferred the designation “ancient Indian language” to “Sanskrit”, for instance. We will keep this fact in mind by enclosing this designation in scare quotation marks.

Already in the article that opened the discussion and that was authored by a specialist in historical and comparative linguistics, Čikobava (who, therefore, was obviously also a critic of Marr), the “ancient Indian language” is mentioned in connection with the stages in language development identified by Marr:

How many language stages are there in the languages? It is not known exactly. In one of his later works academician N.Ja. Marr roughly distributes languages according to the periods of their appearance in the form of the following scheme:

I. Languages of the primary period system

1. Chinese
2. living Middle and Far African languages

II. Secondary period system languages

1. Finno-Ugric
2. Turkish
3. Mongolian

III. Tertiary period system languages

1. Survivors of Japhetic languages
2. Hamitic languages (near and far African)

IV. Quaternary period system languages

1. Semitic languages
2. Prometheid languages, or the so-called Indo-European languages (Indian, Greek, and Latin).⁷

It should be emphasised here that, even overturning the Indo-European studies and replacing the concept of the language family with the concept of the stage of language development, Marr—like the first Indo-Europeanists in their time—mentioned “Indian, Greek, and Latin” in the same breath. However, the “meaning” that this series was endowed with was of course different—in comparison with the works of representatives of historical and comparative linguistics; here (initial) ontology was replaced by (secondary) convergence.

A little later in the same article, Čikobava himself resorts to an example from the “ancient Indian language”. He does so, however, not in reference to the “stadial” classification of languages developed by Marr but rather the “traditional” genealogical classification. He thus compares the names of the number “three” in Russian, Latin, and “ancient Indian”:⁸

7 Čikobava 1950: 4. Here and below translations are by the author.

8 It is a well-known fact that the names of numerals from one to ten were a favourite material for comparison already in the works of early comparative linguists.

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Unlike the stadial classification of academician N.Ja. Marr, a genealogical classification developed on the basis of the historical and comparative analysis understood in a Marxist way, groups languages by origin, by genealogical principle, assuming different source sound material for different language groups [after which are quoted the examples, given in Cyrillic, from Russian, Latin, and Sanskrit, correspondingly: *tri, tres, trajas*]. Russian, Latin, ancient Indian, in this case, have a common source material, a common root.⁹

Čikobava further cites the name of the number “three” in Georgian and Turkish, saying that they cannot be directly compared to one another: “They cannot be compared: Georgian is not related either to Indo-European languages or to Turkish.”¹⁰ An example from “ancient Indian” in this case turns out to be necessary to Čikobava’s criticism of Marr’s thesis regarding the possibility of comparing all languages with all languages, regardless of whether they constitute one family or a genetic group or not. He writes that

academician N.Ja. Marr speaks of the kinship of languages by convergence: but convergence cannot explain the presence of common roots in Latin, Russian, and ancient Indian. On the other hand, the convergence of Basque with ancient Latin and with new Romance languages for at least two thousand years did not make Basque related to Spanish or French.¹¹

From a scientific point of view, the historical and comparative method in linguistics at the time did not need additional justifications and proofs of its very right to exist. However, Čikobava understood very well that in the Soviet Union the scientific situation in the humanities depended on ideology. Thus, to prove his final correctness as an adamant supporter of the historical and comparative method, he—again, referring to the “ancient Indian language”—appealed to the authority of Friedrich Engels: “Historical and comparative analysis is applied by Engels in his works; for example, in the work ‘The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State’, where he compares the words denoting ‘kin’ in related languages: Latin, Greek, ancient Indian, Gothic, etc.”¹²

Another ardent opponent of Marrism, Boris Alexandrovič Serebrennikov (1915–1989), cited an example from the “ancient Indian language” to criticise Marr’s method of comparing words of different languages (and sometimes of the

9 Čikobava 1950: 4.

10 Čikobava 1950: 4.

11 Čikobava 1950: 4.

12 Čikobava 1950: 5. We shall leave aside here the complex problem of Engels’ attitude to historical and comparative linguistics, only noting that, during the Soviet epoch, the question of “Engels and linguistics” in general was of great interest to Soviet linguists (see e.g. Jarceva 1972).

same language) with each other on the basis of their formal similarity,¹³ based on the material of modern languages and neglecting the historical development of words:

What this neglect of the history of the word leads to can be seen in the following examples. In the article “Language” N.Ja. Marr finds a common element *bor* in the Russian word *bor* [‘forest’] and in the Latin *arbor*—tree. But N.Ja. Marr, unsubstantiatedly considering the established history of words as a continuous fiction of Indo-Europeanists, obviously did not consider that the Latin *arbor* once sounded like *arbos*, which is clearly evidenced by the character of the stem on *s*, which, under the influence of the rhotacism of the intervocal *s* in indirect cases, received in the nominative case the ending *r*. Hence, there is already an element of *bos*, and not *bor*, here. The established exact sound correspondences make it possible to associate *arbor* with the stem of the ancient Indian verb *ardxami*¹⁴ with the meaning *to grow, to prosper*, based on the correspondence *dx – b* (cf. Latin *verbum – word*, Lithuanian *vardas – name* or German *Wort – word*). Thus, the compared element *bor* receives the more ancient form of *dhos*.¹⁵

Oddly enough, despite the importance of arguments in favour of a return to historical and comparative linguistics, there are no other evident examples from the “ancient Indian language” mentioned in the linguistic discussion of 1950. In the texts of its participants, there is mention of the “Indian languages”,¹⁶ the “Indo-European languages” (very often),¹⁷ and “Indo-European studies”¹⁸ (“Indo-Euro-

13 This formal similarity was associated with semantics of the corresponding words, for which Marr insisted on the importance of particular “semantic laws” (see Velmezova 2007).

14 Like Čikobava, Serebrennikov gave examples in Cyrillic.—*E. V.*

15 Serebrennikov 1950: 3.

16 It was the question, in particular, of their relationship with the Slavic, Baltic, Germanic, Romance, Iranian, “and some other linguistic groups that make up the Indo-European system (in the outdated terminology, ‘family’) of languages” (Filin 1950): according to Fedot Petrovič Filin (1908–1982), Marr never denied the proximity of these languages to each other, explaining it, however, differently than specialists in historical and comparative linguistics.

17 For example, in the articles by Čikobava (Čikobava 1950), Ivan Ivanovič Meščaninov (1883–1967) (Meščaninov 1950), Garma Dancaranovič Sanžeev (1902–1982) (Sanžeev 1950), Filin (Filin 1950), Viktor Vladimirovič Vinogradov (1894/95–1969) (Vinogradov 1950), Leonid Arsen’evič Bulaxovskij (1888–1961) (Bulaxovskij 1950), and Pavel Jakovlevič Černyx (1896–1970) (Černyx 1950). The texts also mention (again), in connection with the theories of Marr, who was interested in linguistic prehistory) the “pre-Indo-European” (*doindoevropejskie*) languages (Čikobava 1950), languages of the “pre-Indo-European stage” (*doindoevropejskaja stadija*) (Vinogradov 1950), the “proto-Indo-European” (*praindovevropejskij*) language (Vinogradov 1950), the “proto-Indo-Europeans” (*praindovevropejcy*) (Filin 1950), etc.

18 See, for instance, Čikobava 1950; Čemodanov 1950 (cf. in his article the expression “Indo-European swagger”); Serebrennikov 1950.

pean linguistics”, “Indo-European scholars”, etc.), but as to concrete mentions concerning the “ancient Indian language”, we evidently find them only in the articles of two participants: Čikobava and Serebrennikov.¹⁹

It is interesting to note the following in this regard: both participants of the discussion who mentioned the examples from the “ancient Indian language”, Čikobava and Serebrennikov, cited them in connection with Marr’s theories (for example, speaking about the place of the “Indian language” in the Marrist stadial classification), and in connection with attempts to refute the “New Theory of Language”. However, at the same time, both scholars who mentioned the “ancient Indian language” were themselves evident opponents of Marr’s theories and supporters of the historical and comparative method in linguistics, which explains their mastery of the corresponding linguistic material: among other things, with a few exceptions, Marr’s opponents had received much better education—including in linguistics—than Marr’s adherents, as the examples from the “ancient Indian language” mentioned in their texts also demonstrate.

Therefore, as we can see, the place of the “ancient Indian language” in the Soviet discussion on linguistics in 1950 turned out to be very modest: it was mentioned by only two of its fourteen participants. There can be several explanations for this. First, unlike the situation during the first half of the nineteenth century, when historical and comparative linguistics was just being formed as an academic current based to a considerable extent on the material of Sanskrit, at the beginning of the second half of the last century the situation in linguistics was different. In general, the historical and comparative direction in linguistics already had a solid reputation, and the very reliance on Sanskrit as a “proof” of the existence of kinship between Indo-European languages was no longer necessary: it was clearly recognised by all adherents of the historical and comparative linguistic “paradigm”, and it was therefore not necessary to refer to Sanskrit. However, there is another explanation for the fact that the participants of the 1950 discussion made such scant reference to the “ancient Indian language”: it is associated with the political and ideological, rather than the purely scientific, nature of this discussion.²⁰ Stalin’s goal as a politician could hardly consist in a purely scientific justification of the historical and comparative method in linguistics. On the contrary, the return to this method and the abandonment of Marr’s theories were by no means the results of his academic goals. One goal pursued through the 1950 discussion was the political and ideological rallying of the “fraternal Slavic peoples” (and, as a conse-

19 Interestingly, in Stalin’s own article (Stalin 1950), the “ancient Indian language” is not mentioned either, and nor are Indo-European studies and Indo-European languages.

20 The reference to Sanskrit is known to have been instrumentalised in the context of Nazi Germany; a future study could be devoted to the comparison of mechanisms of this instrumentalisation with the Soviet linguistic context.

quence, the strengthening of the “socialist camp”, which was then based precisely on the “Slavic countries”), for which the thesis about their ontological relationship (directly connected with the genetic relationship of the Slavic languages) turned out to be politically very useful. This is why, for example, Slavic languages were mentioned with great frequency in the discussion.²¹ As for the “ancient Indian language”, it remained at the periphery of such a politically directed “linguistic discussion”—even if at the same time it finally returned Soviet linguistics to the historical and comparative linguistic “paradigm”, which had once been based to a great deal on the analysis of Sanskrit linguistic material.

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21 Particular attention can be paid to the “Slavic discourse” in Stalin’s article in comparison with Marr’s works (see Velmezova 2009; Vel’mezova 2014: 292–306), especially in the absence of any mention of the facts of the “ancient Indian language” by Stalin. Already this fact implicitly indicates the ideological priorities of Stalin, who was a politician and an ideologist and by no means a scientist or linguist, and who initiated the discussion.

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