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Lev Petrovich Yakubinsky

ON DIALOGIC SPEECH

*Translated from the Russian, edited and
with a Foreword by Michael Eskin*

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TRANSLATOR'S FOREWORD

Published in 1923, *On Dialogic Speech* is the first study devoted entirely to the forms of speech in their concrete, social and intersubjective manifestations. It is also the first study addressing the linguistic, psycho-physiological, pragmatic, semantic and socio-political aspects of dialogue and dialogic interaction – both oral and written – which the author implicitly aligns with the weakening of authority and power (as opposed to the natural “alliance that monologue has with authority”).* Thus, *On Dialogic Speech* anticipates

*“O Dialogicheskoy Rechi” was first published in *Russkaya Rech: Sborniki Statey*, edited by L. V. Schcherba (Petrograd, 1923), 96-194. All notes are Yakubinsky’s, except for the translator’s notes in brackets. Throughout this essay, all translations are the translator’s unless otherwise indicated.

the Bakhtin circle's influential writings on the transformative power of dialogue, as well as such contemporary disciplines and areas of 'academic activism' as socio- and cognitive linguistics, pragmatics, cognitive science, and cultural and postcolonial studies, insofar as the latter appropriate and strategically implement the concept and potential of dialogue as a liberating force. Moreover, Yakubinsky can also be said to describe and theorize, *avant la lettre*, our contemporary culture of texting, tweeting, messaging and emailing – the twenty-first-century equivalents of "passing notes" (in class, meetings and so on), which the author singles out as a unique hybrid "between mediated (written) and unmediated (properly dialogic) communication."

Given the topical and historical significance of *On Dialogic Speech* and given that Yakubinsky's pivotal role in the development of modern thought and linguistics has been widely acknowledged, it is all the more surprising that he has remained virtually unknown outside his native Russia – an intellectual-historical lacuna

that the present English edition of *On Dialogic Speech* seeks to fill.*

*

Russian linguist L. P. Yakubinsky (1892-1945) attended the University of Petersburg from 1909-1915, during a period of academic renewal and challenge in Russian linguistics, which had hitherto been dominated by the neogrammarian study of language.† The neogrammarians' positivist and historicist approach was contested by a range of young scholars con-

* Among others, such eminent critics as B. Eikhenbaum, V. Erlich, A. Leontyev, K. Pomorska and M. Holquist have pointed out Yakubinsky's significance.

† The neogrammarian school in linguistics originated in Leipzig, Germany, in the 1870s, and subsequently made its way to Russia. Advocating a positivist approach to language, it postulated the existence of *a priori* phonological laws and held that the description of the historical transformations of language(s) should take precedence over considering living speech in its generative aspects. Eduard Sievers (1850-1932) and August Leskien (1840-1916) were two of the school's major representatives in Germany. F. F. Fortunatov (1848-1914), professor at Moscow University, was the school's most prominent proponent in Russia.

cerned with the functional and social diversity of language as an individual and collective activity.

In this heated atmosphere of reevaluation and transition, Yakubinsky, together with some of his fellow students and colleagues, such as Osip Brik and Viktor Shklovsky, founded, in 1916, the *Society for the Study of Poetic Language*, thus initiating the movement that would subsequently go down in history under the moniker ‘Russian Formalism’ (without which in turn such schools of thought and criticism as structuralism, post-structuralism and deconstruction would be unthinkable).^{*} In fact, the functional distinction between “poetic” and “practical” language that Yakubinsky worked out in the same year in his groundbreaking essay “On the Sounds of Poetic Language” became the very cornerstone of Russian Formalism – the “the basic principle,” as fellow Formalist B. Eikhenbaum noted, for

^{*} The society adopted the acronym OPOYAZ (Obshchestvo po Izucheniyu Poeticheskogo Yazyka).

its approach to the “fundamental problems of poetics.”*

*

Yakubinsky soon moved away from the Formalists’ preoccupation with poetry and literature, however, and devoted himself to exploring the social dimension of the functions and forms of language in their “phenomenal immediacy.” This move can be interpreted in at least three ways: (i) as a continuation of the work of his university teachers Jan A. Baudouin de Courtenay (1845-1929) and Lev V. Shcherba (1880-1944), both of whom insisted on the necessity to study language in its functional multiplicity and as a manifestation and expression of social interaction; (ii) as a result of political developments during the early years of the Soviet Union and Yakubinsky’s joining the Communist Party, which opposed Formalism’s lack of interest in the ideological and political significance of literature and

* Thus Eikhenbaum in his 1926 essay “The Theory of the Formal Method.”

art (– ironically, in coming down on the side of dialogue as opposed to monologue, *On Dialogic Speech* undermines its author’s ostensibly ‘pro-totalitarian’ ideological beliefs); (iii) finally, as a consequence of Yakubinsky’s theoretically and politically motivated opposition to Ferdinand de Saussure’s (1857-1913) hugely influential work in linguistics, which had been gaining popularity among Russian scholars since the posthumous publication of his *Course in General Linguistics* in 1915.

Yakubinsky objected to several of Saussure’s basic postulates: to his insistence on the “impossibility of a revolution” in language and, hence, the impossibility of political action in and through language; to his presupposition that the “law of fate” rules linguistic evolution and change, which cannot be voluntarily and consciously effected by (individual) speakers; to his abstract notion of a “social mass of speakers” and his disregard for the concrete interaction between speakers; finally, to his fundamental claim as to the “arbitrariness of the sign” and his concomitant contention that linguistic and lexe-

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matic preferences lack motivation. And although Yakubinsky did not explicitly publicize these objections until the appearance of his essay “F. de Saussure on the Impossibility of a Politics of Language” in 1931, in which he condemns Saussure’s overall “abstract formal-logical approach” and his blindness toward the “concrete reality and intricateness” of individual and collective linguistic activity, *On Dialogic Speech* can already be read as a blueprint for a non-Saussurean approach to language and society.

*

Last but not least, *On Dialogic Speech* can also be viewed as articulating a counterposition to the so-called ‘linguistic turn’ in the humanities at the beginning of the twentieth century. While thinkers such as Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein were elaborating the all-encompassing role of language in our relation to reality, the world and ourselves, Yakubinsky emphasized the importance of attending to the extra-linguistic – external and internal – conditions determining our use of language. In

other words, if Wittgenstein famously contended that “the boundaries of our language are the boundaries of our world,” then Yakubinsky can be taken to suggest that the boundaries of our psycho-physiological, material existence are the boundaries of our language.

*

The present translation of *On Dialogic Speech* is an abridged version of Yakubinsky’s original essay. For the contemporary English reader’s convenience, those passages have been omitted or shortened that reiterate, repeat or provide additional illustrations for points already made with sufficient clarity (such as Yakubinsky’s partial retelling of Guy de Maupassant’s novella “Family Life” in part 7); extensively engage with untranslated scholarly works by Yakubinsky’s Russian contemporaries for purposes of scholarly method and additional evidentiary corroboration; recap or polemicize against others’ research and arguments that are merely tangential to Yakubinsky’s own (such as an extensive

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summary, in part 1, of Aristotle's discussion of poetry and metaphor in *Poetics*).

ON DIALOGIC SPEECH

I

THE FUNCTIONAL DIVERSITY OF SPEECH

Human speech assumes a variety of forms. Its diversity manifests itself not only in the existence of innumerable languages, dialects and idioms – including the jargons of different social groups and individuals – but also within any given language, idiom or dialect (even within the idiolect of a single individual), and it is functionally determined by a complex network of factors that must be taken into account in any attempt to study language in its phenomenal immediacy, and to explain its genesis and history.

*

Language is coextensive with the diversity of human behavior, which is a psychological or bi-

ological fact if viewed as an expression of the human organism, and a sociological fact if viewed in light of its rootedness in the social, interactive life of human organisms. Thus, the factors determining speech will belong either to the psychological or the sociological order.

*

The psychological rootedness of speech enjoins us to distinguish between the following basic modalities: speech as a function of normal, pathological and irregular physiological states, respectively, and speech as a function of mind and emotion. Although all of these modalities (possibly with the exception of irregular physiological states) have been widely noted in contemporary linguistics, there is hardly any concrete research on the diverse manifestations of speech and its dependence on one or the other of its determinant factors and states. Linguistics and speech pathology do not share their findings. Speech as a function of emotion has not been studied at all – even the basic data have not yet been collected (with the exception of data

concerning the use of words, but even here the results are far from satisfactory). The impact of emotion on pronunciation, too, has hardly been explored. Linguistics is especially ill prepared to deal with speech as a function of irregular physiological states, such as the state of poetic inspiration, a better understanding of which would allow us to isolate those aspects of lyric poetry that are the products of physiology rather than art.

*

The sociological determinants of speech can be broadly and preliminarily categorized as follows: (i) the conditions of interaction, in both familiar and unfamiliar environments; (ii) the forms of interaction (mediated/unmediated, one-/two-sided); (iii) the concrete goals of interaction (practical/artistic, neutral/hortatory).

*

The study of language in its dependence on the conditions of interaction constitutes the foundation of contemporary linguistics. The complex diversity of speech (languages, dialects, idioms