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## Putting The Social Back Into Language: Marx, Vološinov and Vygotsky reexamined<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*Language as autonomous system, cut free of the social world, is seeing a revival through the popularity of genetic explanations about the origins of language. It is therefore timely to reassess the input of society into language. This article seeks to do this through a reexamination of the writings of Marx on the subject of language and consciousness. Within this framework, it then examines the contribution of the Russian linguist, Vološinov who took Marx's initial insights further and developed a rounded social theory of language which included the interplay between language and ideology and the making of language through social relations. Finally, the article briefly examines the contribution of another early twentieth century Russian Marxist, Vygotsky, who identified linguistic signs as the social tools of communication. The article makes the claim that these interpretations of the social nature of language are necessary to account for the dynamic and unpredictable nature of language.*

### Introduction

“People know how to talk in more or less the sense that spiders know how to spin webs.” Stephen Pinker’s observation in his 1990’s bestseller on language restates a commonly-held view of language: language is a stand-alone system. Its uniqueness and complexity reinforce its position as an independent structure whose origins and constituent parts are not socially derived. The founder of linguistics, Saussure, focused on the synchronic aspects of language and therefore characterized language as contained and self-referential, and also, effectively, a system frozen in time. He likened language to a piece of paper with thought on the front and sound on the back; one side cannot be cut without at the same time cutting the back (Saussure 1971: 157). Language was a relationship between *signifié* and *signifiant*, but the paper floated free of the world. The structuralists and post-structuralists took language as an autonomous system to extremes and famously declared that there was nothing outside text. Such radical relativism has receded but it has been replaced by a new version of language as a self-standing entity, whose points of reference are less representational than biological.

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For those like Pinker, the autonomy of language arises from its physiological roots in “a distinct piece of the biological make-up of our brains”; language has its own spontaneous impulses (Pinker 1995: 18). Humans are genetically hardwired to produce language; linguistic capacity is an “instinct”, embedded in the brain that becomes manifest more or less independently of social or cultural factors. Pinker bases his work on Chomsky who, from the 1950’s, proposed that language depended on an innate “grammar module” in the mind. Chomsky’s position now would seem to be less clear-cut regarding the degree to which pre-existing brain mechanisms can fully explain language production. He refers to “extra-organic entities” that have co-evolved with language (Chomsky 2002). However, today increased interest in genetic make-up has continued to foreground biological and purely cognitive perspectives in linguistics (for example, Jackendoff 2002, Fromkin 2000). Some even go as far as to describe language as having its own specific biological organ (see Everett 2005). Such developments would seem to be connected to the present vogue of evolutionary psychology in which genes are called on to explain all aspects of human behaviour. Evolutionary psycholinguistics, it too with any social dimension almost entirely absent, may well be becoming the new biological determinism (Rose and Rose 2001).

This article seeks to redress the balance in favour of the social nature of language. One might expect that a social view of language would run counter to the autonomous view of language, an assumption that Newmeyer makes (1986, 1991). However, things are not quite so straightforward. Some social interpretations of language stress that language plays a decisive social role and argue that language is not just part of society but *constitutive* of it. In this way of thinking, the direction is from language to the social and manages to give language reality-creating powers quite as formidable as those to be found in claims that language is society-free. For example, Foucault, maintained that ‘discursive practices’ were all-encompassing. For him, discourse itself constituted and reproduced power relations in society. Foucault’s view of language has remained influential in studies of language and power. The discipline of Critical Discourse Analysis owes much to Foucault, as Fairclough confirms (Fairclough 1995). His views have also left their mark in the writings on the role of English in the post-colonial world (as in, for example, Pennycook 1994, Ashcroft et al. 1995: 283-4). Some of these views give language the weight of social power, as if language produced comparable effects to wars, plunder or disease. More generally, Foucault’s *discourse* has come to be used interchangeably with *ideology*. Foucault, in point of fact, carefully chose not to use the term *ideology* which he saw as being too directly connected with the economic infrastructure, and too Marxist (Foucault 1979:36). But, followers of Foucault have been less precise and seen discourse as much the same as ideology (Wodak 1996, Fairclough 2002). This blurring of distinctions, as Blommaert notes, can lead to a

“terminological muddle” (Blommaert 2005). One such theoretical muddle is the question of causality; if language itself is all powerful, how did it come to be, in the mouths of who and how can we get outside it to question it? These conundrums, often present in the more radical interpretations of the social power of language, highlight the need for a theory of the relationship between language and society which avoids the circularity of language determinism.

This article is an attempt to reinstate language in its social setting. It also aims to redraw the theoretical boundaries between language and ideology, showing where there is both overlap and divergence. Marx was one of the first to write systematically about ideology, and I will first look at what Marx and Engels had to say in this area, including their brief remarks about language. Many commentators on the social nature of language refer to Marxism, indirectly, obliquely, or critically; a re-examination of what they actually wrote, therefore, might be useful. Secondly, I will re-examine the contribution of Vološinov to our understanding of the social nature of language and of the manifestations of ideology in language. His work, in the view of one, “is remarkable because what [he] wrote appears to anticipate some of the directions of contemporary thought” and because it suggests some innovative ways of approaching the social nature of language (Dentith 1995). For others, Vološinov was a lone, pioneering figure who stood out against the trend of a historical formalism in linguistics (Jameson 1974, Crowley 1996). Despite this, his work has been sidelined more recently, something that this article also seeks to remedy. Further, we will briefly examine some aspects of the view of language put forward by Vygotsky, a contemporary of Vološinov, whose theory regarding the social formation of language is strikingly relevant today, particularly the interrelationship of language and thought, the evolution of language and the role of social context.

### **The origins of language and consciousness**

Direct references to language in the writings of Marx, are fragmentary. Most of occur in the *Economic and Philosophical Writings of 1844*, and in *The German Ideology*. One of the few linguists to have commented on Marx, the American structuralist Leonard Bloomfield, claimed to be much influenced by Marx’s *Capital*, and was particularly struck by the similarity between Marx’s approach to social behaviour and that of linguistics. Another, Frederick Newmeyer writes that Marx’s remarks on language are contradictory and that the subject was of little concern to him (Newmeyer 1986). I will argue that, even from the fragments left by Marx, a coherent view of the nature of language emerges. Taken in the broader contexts of consciousness, ideology and superstructure, of which Marx saw language as a constituent part, it is difficult to see how the assertion that Marx had little interest in language can be

sustained. Marx's theory of dialectical materialism, centrally involves questions of language (see Jones 1991: 5). Even in the ostensibly more economic texts, like *Capital*, Marx refers to ideological questions which have a bearing on language. Perhaps the fact that philosophers and political scientists have devoted more energy to reviewing Marx's view of these matters than have linguists, itself reveals the sometimes narrow purview of linguistics.

In determining the nature of language and its role in society, the question of how human language emerged must surely be an essential one. Marx identified the origins of language as being inextricably linked with the emergence of consciousness. In the 1844 Manuscripts, he saw language as 'the vital element', of consciousness (Marx 1975: 356). In *The German Ideology*, written in 1846, he sketches a fuller picture of the materialist basis of historical development and how human relations are determined both by their own needs and by the mode of production. Marx describes, first, the emergence of consciousness and the emergence of language as sound, in its material sense:

From the start, the 'spirit' is afflicted with the curse of being 'burdened' with matter, which here makes its appearance in the form of agitated layers of air, in short, of language. (Marx and Engels 1974: 50—51)

From these beginnings, language develops among humans in response to problems posed by their material life and is essentially, not just contingently, social:

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, the necessity, of intercourse with other men. Where there exists a relationship, it exists for me: the animal does not enter into 'relations' with anything, it does not enter into any relation at all. For the animal its relation to others does not exist as a relation. Consciousness is, therefore, from the very beginning a social product, and remains so as long as men exist at all. (Marx and Engels 1974: 51, original emphasis)

In so far as both language and consciousness involve the ability to generalize beyond the particular and the present and to process abstract thought, they overlap and are interconnected. Language is the mode of being of thoughts, 'practical consciousness', as Marx puts it. For Marx the practical nature of language is self-evident; for example, he refers to social relations as 'the language of life' (Marx and Engels 1974: 47). Language and consciousness share an inherently social dimension, which originates in the social nature of human activity. Newmeyer claims that Marx's running together of language and

consciousness as social entities is over-simplistic. "Consciousness is a social product; language is practical consciousness; therefore language is a social product. The syllogism could not be more straightforward", is how Newmeyer dismisses the identification (1986: 105). But Marx does not proceed in this way: consciousness and language are intertwined because of the social basis of the origins of both. Language and consciousness are not two essential faculties running along their own tracks, but specifically human attributes which came into being and evolved together within a particular material and historical context.

The development of language and consciousness were linked because both were aspects of the process of modern humans coping collectively with the material world around them. This decisive social dimension arises from the unique relationship that humans have with nature and that manifests itself in the form of human labour. "Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature" (Marx 1976: 283). Labour is an exclusively human characteristic which sets humans apart from animals. It allows humans to establish a relationship with nature, rather than be dominated by it. Nature then becomes something that humans, unlike animals, can change.

The process of human labour is qualitatively different even to processes in the animal that seem similar. Human labour occurs as a result not of instinct, but of reflection. Marx explains in *Capital*:

A spider conducts operations which resemble those of the weaver and a bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax. At the end of every labour process, a result emerges which had already been conceived. . . . Man not only effects a change in form in the materials of nature; he also realizes his own purpose in those materials. (Marx 1976: 284)

Marx returns to the bee analogy elsewhere in his writings. A beehive may be a highly organized place where allotted tasks take place, even where complex patterns of coded behaviour develop, but the activities have not changed for many millions of years. What a bee can do is limited in advance to a very narrow range of activities dictated by its genetic make-up. Marx's analogy with bees is particularly interesting, since bees, it has been widely claimed, also use a kind of language. Research into the 'dance language' communication of bees has questioned the degree to which bees can be said to 'communicate' at all. Odour and wind direction seem to play a more significant part in the successful location of nectar-

bearing flowers (Wenner et al. 1991). Another study explains why the dance language hypothesis is unconvincing and the authors seriously question the reasons why scientific researchers have so adamantly maintained the dance—language case (Wenner and Wells 1990). Despite this, bees' language is still often referred to as such, with the inference that human language, too, is genetically driven (see Wilson 1991). Pinker clearly believes that human language is on the end of an instinct continuum that likens it to animal behaviour. "The ability to use natural language belongs more to the study of human biology than human culture, it is a topic like echolocation in bats or stereopsis in monkeys<sup>2</sup>" - species and task specific, a biological ability (Pinker and Bloom 1990: 451).

Such interpretations are over-reductive – both for language and human behaviour in general. Labour and language in humans, unlike bees and spiders, are not programmed but inventive, and both are creatively adapted to different and unpredictable situations. Animal and insect instincts do not have these infinite outcomes and their behaviour is uniform and in reaction to a limited range of circumstances. Human labour has to change constantly to meet new needs and this is only possible because humans are able to stand back from the task and reflect, looking back and forward in time, on what they do. Human language makes this process possible. This uniquely human ability to represent events removed in time and place— *displacement* - allows experience to carry its full weight in human existence. The result of this ability is that humans can change the conditions of their existence and make their own history; in this process, furthermore, they also change themselves (Marx 1976: 283). Beakin describes the same development with language: "As we learn to speak we enter the world of consciousness, a world created by others before us, to which our own consciousness can contribute" (Beakin 1996:26). This pivotal role of language encapsulates the larger two-way process of historical materialism. Language *arises* from the social demands and needs of the material world and also, through human cooperation and activity, *contributes* to the transformation of that world. It is then itself transformed as human society changes. The dialectical relationship between language and society was Marx's original contribution to our understanding of consciousness and one which subtly incorporates both change and unpredictability into all relations between humans, including those involving language (see Woolfson 1982 for an excellent account of this process).

Marx makes it clear that the development of consciousness constituted an unfolding progression. Consciousness did not just emerge in one biological quantum leap, one evolutionary saltation, all at once. Consciousness evolves continuously over time. He distinguishes between a lower and higher level of consciousness, with the latter involving abstract thought (Marx and Engels 1974:51). At first, human consciousness is merely an

immediate awareness of the physical environment, a mere 'herd-consciousness', distinguished only from animals in so far as humans are aware of themselves, 'conscious beings' (Marx 1975:328). This barely distinctive human characteristic then develops alongside the ability to enter into relations with other humans, a process which, Marx implies, involves the use of sounds at this early stage. The later development of productivity, the increase in needs and a growing population then begin to transform primitive consciousness through increasing collective cooperation. At a further stage, alongside an increased division of labour, the distinction between 'material' and 'mental' labour appears. Thus abstract thought, "consciousness emancipated from the world", capable of transforming material life, not just experiencing it, emerges alongside social production. From these developments in human society, the formation of 'pure' theory, theology, philosophy, ethics etc." becomes possible (Marx and Engels 1974:52). The transformation of language and consciousness parallels the development of human society itself.

Engels in his *Introduction to Dialectics of Nature* written in 1875—6 makes the same substantial point although he defines, in more detail, human development, and the development of language, as a number of interrelated stages (Engels 1968). Although his work echoes Darwin whose *Origin of Species* was published some sixteen years before and whose *Descent of Man* only four years before, Engels makes some significant changes to the stages described by Darwin, as Harman (1994) points out. Darwin while stressing the continuum between some animals' use of tools and sounds, held that it was higher mental powers, 'improvement of our reason', which enabled humans to develop elaborate tool use and articulate language (1930: 92—106). Darwin's reluctance to concede the role of human labour in the development of the human brain may reveal his own attachment to a more reverent view of the human mind which suited Victorian England (Gerratana 1973). Engels, by contrast, stresses the significance of upright gait and the freeing of hands for human labour in the development of speech. "When after thousands of years of struggle, the differentiation of hand from foot and erect gait were finally established, man became distinct from the ape and the basis was laid for the development of articulate speech and the mighty development of the brain that has since made the gulf between man and ape unbridgeable" (Marx and Engels 1970: 52). Engels locates the development of mental abilities in the emergence of social cooperation through tool use, not in the development of the brain *per se*. Like Marx, Engels saw language as part and parcel of the development of consciousness, and resulting from the dialectical process of the interaction of human labour on nature. Engels, too, sees this transformation as marking the beginning of human history. The ability now of humans to impress their stamp on nature means that "with man, we enter history. . . . [T]he more they make their history themselves, the less becomes the influence of

unforeseen events and uncontrolled forces on this history, and the more accurately does the historical result correspond to the aim laid down in advance” (1970: 53). In a memorable passage in “The part played by labour in the transition from ape to man”, Engels shows the interdependence of labour and language:

the development of labour necessarily helped to bring the members of society closer together by increasing cases of mutual support and joint activity and by making clear the advantage of this joint activity to each individual. In short, man in the making arrived at the point where *they had something to say* to each other. (1970: 68—69; emphasis in original)

Engels notes here the unity of material social activity and language. The genesis of language is in human labour — “the point at which humans have something to say to each other”. Communication is not therefore just one of the functions of language; on the contrary, language presupposes both logically and *de facto* interaction between people. Language only arises from the need to communicate with other humans. It is quintessentially social.

This dimension is left out in accounts of the emergence of language as “revamping of primate brain circuits” through genetic adaptation (Pinker 1995) or the over-simplified view that sees natural language as a simple product of Darwinian natural selection (Pinker and Bloom 1995). Barbara Heinstein Smith in her perceptive critique of computer-models of the human mind, points out for those socially-embedded verbal creatures like ourselves, language is more than a super problem-solving machine that has allowed humans to dwarf other creatures on the evolutionary ladder. Language exchange is part of overall social process, involving complex verbal recognition and manipulation, within which nothing is given nor simply resolved (Heinstein Smith 2001). Social organization, learning and socialization, as well as the small matter of historical contingency, all preclude the proposition that language production can be reduced to individual brain mechanisms or sets of context-free mental manipulations. Marx and Engels’ accounts of the emergence of language and human consciousness points to some of the complexity of the social processes involved.

### **Language and ideology**

In their description of the evolution of language from social production, both Marx and Engels are aware of the qualitative change that the appearance of this language-consciousness represents. “We ascend from earth to heaven,” Marx sardonically puts it (Marx and Engels 1974: 47). The sheer power that consciousness confers produces another

effect - that ideas seem cut loose of reality, as if free-floating, above the constraints of the material world. Human mind over matter is a powerfully seductive idea. Instead of history being seen as part of a dialectical process *between* humans and the material world, mind comes to be seen as the prime mover of historical change. With the development of society, the growing complexity of human endeavour, the specialization of labour, social organization became codified into law and politics, the human mind came to be seen as the supreme organizer of these things. "Men became accustomed to explain their actions as arising out of their thoughts instead of their needs" (Marx and Engels 1970:72). Today, the process that they describe has reached proportions of specialization, technical advance and scope that they could hardly have imagined and therefore their critique of the "power" of the realm of ideas is of particular interest.

Marx's comments on this aspect of language were made with a particular school of philosophy in mind - the Young Hegelians. Their philosophical and political stance was that the world of ideas *was* the world. Marx makes an unapologetic attack on 'pure' philosophy:

For philosophers, one of the most difficult tasks is to descend from the world of thought to the actual world. *Language* is the immediate actuality of thought. Just as philosophers have given thought an independent existence, so they had to make language into an independent realm. This is the secret of philosophical language, in which thoughts in the form of words have their own content. The problem of descending from the world of thoughts to the actual world is turned into the problem of descending from language to life. (Marx and Engels 1974:118; emphasis in original)

Marx, like Engels, sees how language becomes the means by which abstract thought seems to take on a life of its own, with all links with the material world broken. This constitutes the idealistic world outlook that Marx is referring to in the passage above. This enthronement of language and abstract thought is seen by Marx as an ideological act — a theme we shall return to with Vološinov. Marx does not specifically mention the still influential German linguist, Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767— 1835), although perhaps he had him in mind. Again and again, Marx returns to the theme that "neither thoughts nor language in themselves form a realm of their own", but "that they are only manifestations of actual life". Obscuring this fact only reveals the extent to which language thus becomes "the distorted language of the actual world" (Marx and Engels 1974: 118).

At this point it is useful to make a few brief points about Marx's overall view of ideology, society and power, and what aspects of it are relevant to language. Marx wrote quite substantially about the relationship between the economic base and the ideological or

political superstructure. Despite many claims to the contrary, he described the interaction between the two as being complex and subtle. The relations of production constitute the economic structure of society, “the real foundation on which rises the legal and political superstructure” and to this ‘correspond’ or ‘condition’ definite forms of social consciousness and intellectual life” (Marx and Engels 1969: 503). The fact of the economic base providing the conditions of intellectual activity does not mean that this is predictable or mechanically determined, as Engels was at pains to point out (in a letter to Bloch, written soon after Marx’s death). The economic base of society, Engels stressed, is *ultimately* determining element in history but the various elements of the superstructure — political forms of the class struggle and its results - “also exercise their influence upon the course of their historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their form” (Marx and Engels 1970: 487). In other words, while the social relations of production set limits to developments in the superstructure, there is an interaction of all elements.

Social consciousness itself is complex and sometimes distorting. It is historical, like the relations of production from which it emerges and imbued with capitalist social relations which are unequal. As a result, those with power in society have the means to dominate intellectual and cultural life. “The class which is the ruling *material* force of society is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force – their rule is not only in terms of social and economic power but also in terms of their disproportionate weight in the production and distribution of ideas” (Marx and Engels 1974: 64). Ideology for Marx, as Thompson has aptly observed, is meaning in the service of power (Thompson 1990:7).

Conversely, social consciousness for those without power in society suffers from the distortions of powerlessness.

Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence.... If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of the objects on the retina does from their physical life-process. (Marx and Engels 1974: 47)

This brings us to the third aspect of ideology. Marx saw that ideological forms were terrains to be contested, arenas “in which men become conscious of. . . conflict and fight it out” (Marx and Engels 1969: 504). Vološinov expanded greatly on Marx’s concept and it is to this aspect, as developed by him, that we now turn.

**'Wherever a sign is present, ideology is present, too'**

Vološinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* was first published in Russia in 1929 (and in English only in 1973). First, a word about Vološinov. There has been some dispute about the authorship of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* and another of his works *Freudianism: a Marxist Critique*. Clark and Holquist (1984) believe that it was actually Mikhail Bakhtin who wrote these texts. Vološinov and Bakhtin were both members of the same intellectual circles from 1924 to 1929. Fredric Jameson, in his review of Vološinov's book (1974), would also appear to have accepted Bakhtin's overall authorship. Because so little is known of Vološinov's life, particularly during the 1920s when these works were written, and afterwards when he disappeared sometime in 1934, during Stalin's purges, a definite answer as to the true authorship may never be known. Bruss and Titunik, editor and translator of Vološinov's book on Freud (Vološinov 1976) remain unconvinced by the evidence in support of the Bakhtin thesis. Dentith points out that the dispute has arisen exclusively from ideological motives, namely to distance Vološinov's work from Marxism (1995). The controversy points to the tumultuous times in which these authors lived.

Vološinov, who was part of the intellectual flowering of the 1917 Russian revolution, also suffered the Stalinist repression afterwards and probably died in the gulags. It has been claimed that it was Vološinov's disagreement with the linguist Marr, representative of official Soviet linguistics that first brought him under suspicion (Matejka and Titunik 1973: 173). The interconnectedness of language and ideology, stressed so much by Vološinov himself, applies poignantly to his own life.

Vološinov's starting point is the *ideological nature of all signs*, including language. He defines a sign as that which "represents, depicts or stands for something outside itself" (Vološinov 1973: 9). Signs can be highly symbolic in one context but remain simple objects in another. Bread and wine — mere objects of consumption in one setting, but invested with religious significance in another — was his example of the inherent dualism in signs.

Vološinov captured something of Marx's understanding of the complex relationship between ideas and society. He writes:

A sign does not simply exist as part of a reality — it reflects and refracts another reality. Therefore it may distort that reality or be true to it, or it may perceive it from a special point of view. . . every sign is subject to the criteria of ideological evaluation. . . The domain of ideology coincides with the domain of signs. They equate with one

another. Wherever a sign is present, ideology is present too. *Everything ideological possesses semiotic value.* (1973: 10; emphasis in original)

The quality of signs to represent, “to reflect and refract another reality”, to interpret, is what gives them their conceptual potency and makes words the very stuff of ideology. “[T]he word is the ideological phenomenon par excellence” (1973: 13). Signs are part of the material world not independent of it.

For Vološinov, this signing process is the means by which consciousness takes shape and is socially constructed. Signs emerge in the process of interaction between one individual consciousness and another; not just any two human beings but between two who are ‘organized socially’, and part of a social group (1973: 12). Consciousness, then, does not arise spontaneously from nature, nor as the external coating of some inner spirit; it materializes through signs created by humans in the process of social intercourse. It involves both constraint and creativity. Vološinov summarises the process thus: “individual consciousness is not the architect of the ideological superstructure, but only a tenant lodging in the social edifice of ideological signs” (1973: 13).

Like Marx, Vološinov stresses the connection between the relations of production and the ideological superstructure. But Vološinov expands on Marx’s insights and describes in much more detail how language plays a central role in ideological formation. For Vološinov, the crucial role of language in society makes it replete with aspects of social change, and therefore a sensitive crystallizer of the ideological process. We will return to this later; but to fully grasp the ideological dimension of language that Vološinov sets out, we must first examine his critique of contemporary linguistics and his own elaboration of the social nature of language.

### **Language made, not inherited**

Seeing language as part of human consciousness, Vološinov stresses the changing and generative nature of language. However he sharply distinguishes this view of language from the earlier Humboldtian trend in linguistics which he terms *individualistic subjectivism*. Humboldt’s view of language located linguistic creativity in individual psychology. This was then taken further by the German linguist, Vossler, and the Italian, Croce, to mean that language was primarily a question of individual style. Such a view was, according to Vološinov, untenable because it relied on the subjective concept of ‘linguistic taste’, (1973: 51).

Vološinov was one of the first to subject another school of linguistics, considerably more influential, to critical analysis, namely Saussurian linguistics. He characterized Saussure's approach as *abstract objectivism*. By prioritizing the synchronic dimension (language at a fixed point in time) over the diachronic dimension (language in a historical perspective), Saussure effectively converted language into "an inviolable, incontestable norm which the individual can only accept". This view robs language of any creative dynamism; it becomes like a 'stationary rainbow' arched over living language (1973: 52-53). Saussure's model ignored the fact that it is precisely a speaker's potential to supersede the synchronic dimension, and select a new form over a recognized one, that makes language what it is (1973: 56).

Vološinov sees the weakness of Saussurean linguistics as being twofold. First, he criticizes the arbitrariness of a methodology that sets up self-contained categories of language system (*langue*) from utterance (*parole*), and which then casts aside the latter as being too randomly individual to merit scientific study. For the fact remains (conceded by Saussure, as Vološinov notes) that utterance "returns as an essential factor in the history of language" since it is this aspect of language that is the origin of language change (1973: 61). Language looks both ways: to tradition and to innovation, to what has already been established in language and, because of the speaker's unique needs of the moment, to what can be changed. A child does not just inherit a language which she then has to learn. She uses language in a social context and thereby fashions it. Language is socially distinctive because each speaker brings his or her social experience to it. The *langue/parole* distinction artificially breaks up the linguistic whole, and fails to capture the interaction of both aspects in the actual practice of language.

Second, Vološinov sees Saussure's abstract objectivism as an ideological stance. "What interests the mathematically minded rationalist is not the relationship of the sign to the actual reality it reflects, nor to the individual who is its originator, but the relationship of sign to sign within a closed system already accepted and authorized" (1973: 57—58). Abstract objectivism places language on a pedestal removed from its users. It displaces actual speakers, specific situations, the contexts of language, relegating these to insignificance outside the perfect linguistic system. It makes the subjects of language into their objects and writes history out of language. History is seen as an intrusive, untidy, irrational force upsetting the logical purity of the language system. Abstract objectivism leads to a focus on dead languages and an "over concern with the cadavers of written languages" (1973: 71). As Barker notes regarding the Saussurean view, "the system always comes first" (Barker 1994: 256).

### **Language as verbal interaction**

A fundamental element of Vološinov's critique of abstract objectivism is his view of language as being able to generate new meanings that it is in a constant state of becoming. "What is important for the speaker about a linguistic form is not that it is a stable and always self-equivalent signal, but that it is an always changeable and adaptable sign" (1973: 68). This generative quality arises from the fact that language is inseparable from its context and its users. The actual context for any particular word is not just the situation itself, but, via the social experience of the speakers, overlaps with other contexts. "Contexts do not stand side by side in a row, as if unaware of one another, but are in a state of constant tension or incessant interaction and conflict" (1973: 80). The meanings and different connotations for a word or a piece of language are constructed by the speakers, who give each utterance their particular *evaluative accent*.

The importance of this observation that language changes and that users shape language has been borne out by later developments in discourse studies and pragmatics. Let us take an example. *I'm hungry* conjures up a general concept. Different contexts of use substantially change this original meaning and give quite different evaluative accents. A child saying this to her mother might be indirectly a request for the mother to get her something to eat, or a statement that she just feels like something to eat. One adult saying it to another might mean that it is time for lunch and be a suggestion that they go somewhere to eat. A homeless person on the side of the street bearing a piece of card with this written on it would signify a desperate request for money. An advertisement in a newspaper depicting a victim of famine, with *I'm hungry* as a caption, might constitute a gruelling appeal for donations. This possibility of an infinite amount of different meanings for the same words, Vološinov calls the 'multiaccentuality' of language. He captures in this concept the powerful creative and elusive quality of language which purely formalistic accounts of language cannot fully explain.

In an essay called "Discourse in life and discourse in art", Vološinov gives an example that shows how even the significance of the simplest word is embedded in its social context. "Two people are sitting in a room. They are both silent. Then one of them says "Well!" The other does not respond." To outsiders the word is meaningless; to the two speech participants, it made perfect sense (Vološinov 1976: 99). They were looking through the window as it began to snow, although it was May, and late in the year for snow. Both, as it happens, were sick and tired of spring not arriving and so were bitterly disappointed to see the snowflakes fall. Intonation and extra-verbal context gave it meaning. Vološinov finds the sense of this "Well!" lies not within the word or within one person's mind but *between* the

speakers, in what is common to them. This common ground he lists as (1) the physical space, (2) the common knowledge and understanding of the situation and (3) their common evaluation or assessment of the situation. Language does not simply reflect reality; rather, meaning occurs at the point where the 'real conditions of life' and the 'social evaluation' of them come together.

His account throws into sharp relief the social nature of language, how it is linked inextricably to social relations. Vološinov's view of language and its different elements — the ideological, the social, the unstable and the creative aspects — gains theoretical unity through his concept of *verbal interaction*. This goes to the heart of the social nature of language which, for Vološinov, is not just one dimension of language, but its *sine qua non*. Language is made for an addressee. (a listener or a reader); there is no such thing as language into a vacuum. Even when we think we are speaking to 'the world at large', as for example in some written texts, in fact our imagined reader is historically and socially quite precisely identifiable. A word is a two-sided act and a product of the relationship between speaker and listener:

I give myself verbal shape from another's point of view, ultimately from the point of view of the community to which I belong. A word is 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 territory shared by both addresser and addressee, by the speaker and his interlocutor. (Vološinov 1973: 86)

Language is shared territory. Its meaning takes shape on the uncertain ground between people and is moulded by the specific time and place of the language participants<sub>1</sub> but also by a broader aggregate of conditions surrounding the speakers. These elements make language a living thing which historically evolves (1973: 95). Vološinov later identifies this uniqueness of meaning of utterances as *theme* — which he defines as the overall indivisible significance of the whole utterance in a specific context. He recognizes that smaller elements of language — what he terms *meaning* — are constituent parts of the whole theme and are reproducible. But he makes a qualitative distinction between these elements and the whole. 'Theme' is not merely a combination of smaller 'meaning' units but something which is more than the sum of its parts formed in verbal interaction and in a social and historical context. Theme is an instance of the generative process of language. It is verbal interaction in operation.

Vološinov's theme concept throws light on how ideological meanings within language take shape but are also contested. Themes are meanings which have come to be accepted but they can also be called into question in different social circumstances. This notion along with

*evaluative accent* would seem to have a particular resonance today. A “war of words” exists in the actual warring world of today as Silberstein, among many, have pointed out (Silberstein 2004). Perhaps, in time of war ideological accents are particularly shrill, both collectively and individually, because the stakes are so high. It was certainly the case the nineteenth century when imperial rivalry gave birth to intense ideological representation in language. Today too, almost anywhere where English is spoken (and where it is not) this particular ideological contest is played out with intensity, often in response to the daily official war-speak of “axis of evil”, “coalition of the willing” “precision bombing” “islamo-fascists” and so on. The gulf between “terrorist” and “martyr”, and who says which, constitutes the verbal enactment of a life and death political battle.

These clashes are what Vološinov means when he writes that meanings are not given or fixed; they are ‘an arena of class struggle’. As Barker points out, this arises because languages do not coincide with classes and people from different social classes and different viewpoints have to be able to communicate. “But sharing a language does not mean agreeing on its uses” (Barker 1994: 260). In this, language, while being potentially ideological, is not predictable or fixed and its dynamic - both social and individual – and in this respect different to the more defined contours of ideology.

### **The social origins of inner speech**

Vološinov’s understanding of the social nature of language permeates even the innermost recesses of consciousness. It makes its appearance even in solitary situations, like silent thought. Even here, words, “the semiotic material of inner life — of consciousness (inner speech)” are still as socially charged as ordinary speech (Vološinov 1973: 14). Inner speech represents the identification of language with consciousness and the social element of both. The term reappears in Vygotsky as a component of consciousness and psychology, as we shall see. Vološinov examines the phenomenon from a linguistic standpoint. For him, words are the building blocks of thinking. Consciousness is “bathed by and suspended in, and cannot be entirely segregated or divorced from the element of speech” (1973: 15). Words are the means by which consciousness is accessed and signs are part of the inner psyche and inner speech is thinking, “the skeleton of inner life” as Vološinov terms it. (1973: 29). The piecing together and distilling of experience takes place through signs, and signs are the means of mental processing (1973: 85). The workings of this inner speech are not just social in the sense that they take the form of signs and words but they are also social in the sense that they have a social audience (1973: 86). Consciousness is not something emanating from the self. Rather, consciousness is “a social event on a small scale”, an “inner word embryo of expression” turned on the outside world, a dialogue in the making, “set toward

fully actualized outward expression, and not just an inner act on the part of the individual" (1973: 90). Only the inarticulate cry of an animal can be said to be organized from the inside because of its nature as a behavioural reflex. By contrast the organizing centre of human utterances is not within but outside — the social context. The social context is both the immediate situation of the utterance and the broader aggregate of conditions in which the speakers are living (1973: 93). Vološinov thus expands on Marx's view of social consciousness by analysing the nature of that consciousness in linguistic terms: by reference to *signs* as its constituent parts and *inner speech* as its process.

### **Grammar also subject to change**

Vološinov's criticism of traditional linguistics is that it views language as a static entity and fails to take account of the fact that language always occurs as dialogue. The dynamics of dialogue is reproduced in pure form in the process of reported speech and, for this reason, Vološinov chose to study reported speech in some detail. In recounting what another has said, the speaker simultaneously makes evaluative judgements about what and how it was said, which is then focused on a new hearer. In this way, the phenomenon of reported speech pinpoints the dynamism between speaker and situation and brings out the process of reception and interpretation of another's speech. It is "speech about speech", "utterance about utterance", "words reacting on words" (1973: 115). No two accounts of what someone has said are ever quite the same. It is this multilayered and multiaccental aspect to reported speech, which represents, in microcosm, the dynamism of language as a whole, that makes it of special interest to Vološinov.

Vološinov is interested in reported speech forms for another reason: for what they can reveal about grammatical forms and how they vary and change. Grammatical terms associated with indirect speech are as paradigmatic as they are different across languages. In Latin, strict concordance applies; in Russian it is less rigid. Reviewing these, Vološinov describes how reported speech has historically changed from strict syntactic enclosing of reported speech to a more fluid approach where the boundaries of the message are weakened and where reporter and reported overlap. Grammarians have pointed out that Russian forms for indirect speech are underdeveloped because they do not incorporate tense agreement. But this view, Vološinov claims, fails to appreciate the more flexible Russian forms which allow for a more vivid, pictorial rendering of the original discourse and which can bring new interpretations to bear.

The slipping from indirect to direct, commonly used in the novel form, allows a flow of meaning from the context into the thoughts of the speaker. Quasi-direct discourse forms,

which escape rigorous grammatical description, reveal how overlapping contexts are brought in and out of focus. Such features also bring into relief the context of literature and the expansive narrative effect.

Through the examination of the development of one grammatical form, Vološinov reveals a fundamentally important aspect of the process of language itself - grammatical forms are in a constant state of adaptation and change. Vološinov picks the weakest axis of this change since his examples are in literary texts which are less susceptible to change than are spoken texts. But his literary examples allow him to reveal the difficulties of categorizing style and grammar as separate entities, thus revealing at the same time the shifting sands of grammar itself. A demarcation between grammar and style for Vološinov is spurious since “[t]he borderline is fluid because of the very mode of existence of language, in which, simultaneously, some forms are undergoing grammaticization while others are undergoing degrammaticization” (1973: 126). Elsewhere Vološinov notes that style and grammar overlap. In the case of highly elaborate categories of address in Japanese, for example, compared to relatively few in English, he makes the claim that “we might say that what is still a matter of grammar for the Japanese has already become for us a matter of style” (Vološinov 1976: 110). In other words, regarding grammar in general, Vološinov is saying that it is not given, but evolving. This is not just a secondary question regarding the social nature of language. If language arises from and is infused with social activity, then it follows that the workings of language — grammar and syntax — are also subject to social change.

This is a premise not accepted by those who hold that language follows its own logic, and is an innate product of the human mind separate from social formations. Evolutionary psychologists stress that grammar has not changed since language first developed. Pinker claims specifically that the grammars of industrial societies are no more complex than the grammars of hunter gathers (Pinker and Bloom 1990:451). Yet work by contemporary linguists stresses that the spoken language is constantly contributing new grammatical structures (Carter and McCarthy 2006, Carter and McCarthy 1995). It is difficult to see how the argument that grammar is frozen in time can be sustained, particularly when we are aware, even as we use diverse forms of communication, how much these new types of interaction are impacting on the structure of language (Crystal 2001). Indeed, speakers feel themselves to be particularly sensitive, frequently negatively, to these changes, and are more than ready to comment on it wherever they can (Cameron 1995). Vološinov highlighted this arena of debate. His inclusion of grammatical change in his overall view of language places speakers, not systems, at the centre of language. Speakers do not merely enact grammatical form. The proposition that language, including grammar, is inherently unstable

is a logical outcome of to the social nature of language and contributes to the theoretical unity of his analysis.

### **Vygotsky and the social roots of thought and language**

Lev Semenovich Vygotsky was a contemporary of Vološinov and part of the flowering of scientific, literary and linguistic innovation that so characterized post-revolutionary Russia. Vygotsky did not begin his systematic work in psychology until 1924 and only ten years later he died of tuberculosis at the age of thirty-eight. In that period in collaboration with Leontiev and Luria, who oversaw later translations of his work, he launched a series of investigations into developmental psychology whose approach and conclusions earned him the reputation of a revolutionary scientist (Wertsch 1985, Newman and Holzman 1993.) Vygotsky's *Thought and Language*, suppressed in 1936, two years after its appearance, did not reappear until 1956. Luria points out that the 'battle for consciousness' during the late 1920s and 1930s consisted of breaking free from both vulgar behaviourism, as promoted by official Russian ideology, and the introspective subjectivity to be found so often in academia in the West (Vygotsky 1962:iv;. Vygotsky rejected both these and, from a Marxist perspective, reaffirmed the role of history in human consciousness and intellect He avoided the fawning Marxist sycophancy which was to become the hallmark of so many under Stalin and rejected the crude over-quoting from Marx that became *de rigueur* in later Soviet texts ( see Vygotsky 1978: 8). Vygotsky's rediscovery of the dialectical relationship between social activity and language became his method. He explained it thus:

I don't want to discover the nature of mind by patching together a lot of quotations. I want to find out how science has to be built, to approach the study of mind having learnt the whole of Marx's method. (Vygotsky 1978: 8)

Vygotsky elaborated on Marx's theme of language as 'practical consciousness' and described the organic interconnections of thought and language. Contemporary debates on this subject have stressed that thought and language progress along parallel tracks (Pinker 1995) or that language as thought is essentially individual and representational (Bickerton 1995). Pinker holds that there is a processor of thought separate from language, which he calls *mentalese*. He claims that knowing a language is about translating this mentalese into a language (Pinker 1995: 55—82). This is a logical outcome to his view of human thought as given, an innate, fully formed ability. It leads him to conclude that this special endowment enables humans to learn a language rather than seeing the delayed arrival of language two or three years after birth as a sign of the presence of development, and that thought processes themselves undergo transformation and refinement. This distinction between

innate ability and developmental processes is an important one, because the first obviates the influence of social factors in both language and thought formation. Bickerton, although closely interweaving thought and language and convincingly challenging Pinker's separate thesis, excludes that language evolves and also that it is made through social needs and relations (Bickerton 1995: 41—84).

Vygotsky, however, demonstrated that language is the means by which reflection, generalization and thought processes take place and that these cognitive processes are socially formed. Vygotsky's writings describe both the highly personal and at the same time profoundly social facets of language. They cover experiments in child development and approaches to education, but he also wrote in broader more philosophical terms, as in *Thought and Language*, and these writings are a necessary complement to his overall view of the social nature of language. Vygotsky believed that in order to reveal the nature of human social and psychological processes their origins and development had to be traced. Vygotsky, like Engels before him, located the origins of human consciousness in the process of social cooperation and human labour but he singled out Engels's reference to the use of tools in the process as being particularly significant. Tool use was the mediated activity by which humans changed nature and the world around them. This was externally orientated activity that produced effects in the material world. Vygotsky saw parallels between physical tools and humans' psychological tools, or signs. Both mediated human activity, but one was orientated externally and the other internally; one was a means of managing nature, the other aimed at mastering humans' own behaviour. While qualitatively different, nevertheless the two sets of tools overlap and together produce new forms of behaviour. Tools and speech provided the means of meeting human's needs and were therefore crucial to humans' unique intervention in nature. The development of the use of signs paves the way for the development of higher mental processes and internalized abstract thought. An example of a pre-speech sign that Vygotsky gives, the gesture of pointing, shows clearly the continuum of these processes and how social relationships intervene. A child attempts to grasp an object beyond her reach; reaching towards it is one of the child's movements nothing more. Her parents' arrival on the scene transforms the meaning of her movement. Reaching for herself now becomes a gesture, a sign for others. If it achieves the desired goal of getting the object for the child, then pointing becomes internalized in the mind of the child as a meaningful sign. Meaning and function fuse in lived-out social relationships (Vygotsky 1978 52—57).

Vygotsky's mapping of this process presents an interactive and developmental approach to the development of signs in human behaviour. It inverts the rationalist formula from thought

to action and challenges the idea that the human brain by itself procures mental functions. Instead, Vygotsky details how thought processes take shape through social activity. As the Vygotskian scholar Kosulin puts it: “[d]evelopment is therefore not an unfolding or maturation of pre-existing ideas; on the contrary it is the formation of such ideas — out of what originally was not an idea — in the course of socially meaningful activity” (Kosulin 1990:114). Something fundamental for Vygotsky is that signs have both communicative and intellectual functions. Signs become the psychological tools of higher mental processes. At the same time, he avoids an over-simplistic identification of language with thought. Intellect and speech have different origins both on a wider evolutionary basis (phylogenesis) and in child development (ontogenesis). What distinguishes humans from animals is that thought and speech gradually become intertwined when thought becomes verbal and speech intellectual. Vygotsky distinguishes four stages of this development: the first where speech and intellect operate primitively and independently; the second, during which a child begins to master basic problem-solving and when speech develops syntactically but where it may not correspond to the concrete operations of the intellect; the third when problem-solving is aided by symbolic representation and what he calls egocentric speech; and the fourth stage when the child internalizes intellectually and verbally (Vygotsky 1986: 68—95). Gesture ‘in itself’ becomes gesture ‘for others’.

Vygotsky’s description runs counter to the wired-in version of language which presents cognition and language as ready-formed in the structure of the brain. By stressing the developmental role of language and thought, Vygotsky thereby accords context, not just an adjunctive role but a formative one. Thought and speech are, in this model, literally moulded from *the outside in*, as the child adapts and reacts to the society around her. Vygotsky rightly notes the epistemological importance of this fact:

*[t]he nature of the development itself changes, from biological to socio-historical. Verbal thought is not an innate, natural form of behavior, but is determined by historical-cultural process and has specific properties and laws that cannot be found in the natural forms of thought and speech. Once we acknowledge the historical character of verbal thought, we must consider it subject to all the premises of historical materialism, which are valid for any historical phenomenon in human society. (Vygotsky 1986: 94)*

Furthermore, we see here the very opposite to the view of language determining or constituting reality. Language is not the prism through which all things pass. Language and thought come together in different stages and for different functions. By separating the roots

of language and thought, Vološinov reveals both the dynamic relationship of the two and how, in the development of a child, they evolve. One interacts with the other through social activity and together in this dialectical process they constitute a qualitative leap forward in terms of consciousness.

### **Inner speech and social dialogue**

It is in his description of the features of inner speech that Vygotsky develops further the thought—language relationship. Like Vološinov, Vygotsky saw meaning in a socio-historical perspective. In an essay entitled 'Thought and word', he notes that word meaning is an instance of the unity of thought and word — one cannot be separated from the other. "The meaning of word represents such a close amalgam of thought and language that it is hard to tell whether it is a phenomenon of speech or a phenomenon of thought" (1986: 212). But central to a word meaning is that word meanings change. "They are dynamic rather than static formations" (1986: 217). This mutability springs from the very relationship back and forth between thought and word. To grasp the interconnection of thought and word, Vygotsky probes deeper than Vološinov into the workings of inner speech. Where Vološinov stressed the social signs and the dialogic element that make up inner speech, Vygotsky stresses its contextual features, again along a developmental axis.

Instrumental to his investigation into inner speech is how the latter develops in children from *egocentric* speech (or speech to oneself). Vygotsky discovered that this transitory stage enabled the child to mentally orientate herself to regulate her behaviour towards overcoming difficulties. Egocentric speech was not a mere accompaniment to the child's activity with no apparent function, as Piaget held; rather it occurred with the assumption that it was understood by others. It was a way of developing thought processes out loud. Egocentric speech was not something that withered away as the child became more socially adept. It was instead a crucial transitory stage from speech for others to speech for oneself, with egocentric speech becoming internalized in the form of inner speech. This distinction was important because it showed at every developmental stage that speech had a social function and a social audience. Furthermore Vygotsky argued the regulative function of egocentric speech was carried over into inner speech. Vygotsky touched on a key insight that inner speech was not simply speech addressed to oneself but was part of decision-making and concept-formation. Inner speech, Vygotsky concluded, was not just a kind of speech without sound but had an entirely separate speech function (1986:224—235).

Vygotsky shows thus how context is indivisibly part of language. He makes the distinction, similar to that made by Vološinov, between 'meaning' in a general term (in Russian,

*znachenie*) and ‘sense’ in a more restrictive way (*smysl*). The senses of a word are both more and less than its general meaning and more fluid because of their dependence on a particular context. For Vygotsky, the structure of inner speech was highly context-dependent, ‘sense’ orientated rather than ‘meaning’ orientated. To explain this, he showed that what appeared the peculiar syntax of inner speech — its disconnectedness and incompleteness — was in fact to be found in various forms of external speech. Pure predication (the omission of the subject) occurs very frequently in spoken speech; the subject is tacitly understood by the participant and the shared context rules out confusion. Equally, in cases where the thoughts and experience of speakers coincide, verbalization is reduced to a minimum. The persuasive example that Vygotsky gives is from Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*. Kitty and Levin share so much that they need only say the first letter of a word for the other to know exactly which word they mean (1986: 237—238). Another aspect of this semantic condensing, referred to by Vygotsky, is when names — Hamlet or Don Quixote — become overlaid with symbolic meaning, beyond their reference to a specific character. These ways of abbreviation reach a height in inner speech so that a kind of internalized idiom develops that is a distinct plane of verbal thought. What is striking about Vygotsky’s explanation of inner speech is how context gives it shape because it provides the missing links of its abbreviated forms. What in external speech allows participants to reduce verbalization to a minimum, in inner speech becomes the connecting thread. Although inner speech appears superficially as a monologue, in Vygotsky’s perspective, it has the same dialogic ground rules as spoken speech. Inner speech, is not context-free but on the contrary intensely contextualized, and progresses as if a dialogue. “When we converse with ourselves we need even fewer words. . . . Inner speech is speech almost without words.” With this seeming paradox Vygotsky lays bare the fundamental formative role of context in both thought and language. Interestingly, more recent studies on the grammar of speech identify similar features to Vygotsky’s. Brazil (1995) not only starts from some similar premises — purposeful activity, interactive speech, meaning a shared understanding between speaker and listener — but also indicates similar instances of abbreviation.

Kosulin notes how Vygostky has significantly contributed to what has become one of the central concerns of modern philosophy, the relationship between thought and language, and how his concept of inner speech is fundamental to the social nature of language (Kosulin 1990: 268). What is distinctive about Vygotsky is his refusal to reduce either language or thought to a mechanical category. Rather, he retains the dynamic notion of language as practical consciousness, first articulated by Marx, which he sums up thus:

Consciousness is reflected in a word as the sun in a drop of water. A word relates to consciousness as a living cell relates to an organism, as an atom relates to the universe. A word is the microcosm of human consciousness. (1986: 256)

## **Conclusion**

This examination of the social nature of language through the perspectives of Marx, of Vološinov and Vygotsky, would seem to point in number of directions.

The first concerns the *origins of language*. In various ways, linguists have attempted to capture the essence of language by concentrating on its formal properties or more recently, by claiming that language is a product of our genes. These views share the starting point of isolating language from human society and tend to see language as functioning from its own impulses. Marx and Engels' writings on the emergence of language in early human society show that language arises from a complex, two-way process in which, through social labour and interaction, humans gradually increase their mastery of the environment.

What Marx noted for human consciousness in general, Vygotsky reformulates at the level of the individual. The development of child language carries the same social components that are present in the development of language at the beginning of human society. Questions of exactly how language arose, the role of gestures, the development of the vocal cords, the beginning of signification and concept formation are still not fully answered. The social view of language outlined here is one that sees form as closely related to social content: the curve of an early tool, the shape of a cave drawing, or the structure of language, bears the imprint of the human social activity from which it emerged. The historical dimension of language, its link to a mode of production and specific social relations contributes to how language works. This observation would seem to be essential to understanding the role that language plays in the world and how it is being transformed by it, in the past and today.

Second, and as a consequence of this social rootedness, language overlaps with ideology. The generalizing potential of signs, from which language is built, the way that signs, in Vološinov's terms, *refract and reflect* reality, makes them a critical aspect of the ideological process. But, while the weight of the dominant class in society can skew ideological significance, including language, towards their world view, there is nothing predetermined about the outcome of these ideological accents. They are constantly contested by speakers. Even in today's world where dominant ideologies appear to have such a hold, the manufacture of consent can only go so far (Holborow 2006). Ideologies make the claim for themselves that they are watertight, a world view that is total and totalizing. However in

language every sign is subject to ideological evaluation. Vološinov's unique contribution was to describe in detail the slippery terrain of this process.

Third, Vološinov's pioneering study of an aspect of *grammatical change* sheds light on the unstable nature of language. He overturned assumptions about the hard-and-fast rules of grammar. I have referred to the now widely held, determinist view that language structure is something outside historical constraints. A true comparison of different forms of speech centuries apart is almost impossible, due to lack of evidence. But what we can say is that, even over relatively recent periods, significant linguistic changes are observable. Language is in a constant process of transformation, as well established research into linguistic variation on a social and mode basis (for example the internet, Crystal 2001) and also the analysis of expanding corpora of spoken language would seem to bear out.

But the evolution of grammar has wider implications. It is evidence of a different interpretation of language. Over-biological and over-ideological approaches ignore the central dynamic of language: that it is made by speakers in unpredictable ways. Vološinov grasped that the generative nature of language emanated not just from individual creativity but from the shifts and alterations in society. "In the vicissitudes of the word are the vicissitudes of the society of word-users" (Vološinov 1973: 157). It is this crucially social nature of language that explains why language is such a political question.

### Notes

1. This is a considerably revised version of Chapter 2 of my book *The Politics of English* (Sage, 1999)
2. Echolocation is the biological detection system consisting of echo soundings used by several mammals such as bats, dolphins and whales. Stereopsis is a process in visual perception that allows the perception of the depth or distance of objects.

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