

“No, it is not true!”: Stalin and the Question of Materialist Science of Language

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Abstract:

The paper returns to some of the general epistemic problems related to Stalin's attempt to tackle the relation between Marxism and linguistic: What are the features of a materialist science of language? Stalin's attempt at establishing the link in question evidently failed, and the reason for this lies in his displacement in the conception of dialectical materialism, which, in addition, influenced some of the wildest developments in Soviet science that were later on dismissed as anti-Marxist. The text then focuses on Stalin's rejection of such an epistemic deviation in linguistics: Marrism. Stalin's intervention, which was at the time welcomed notably by the representatives of structuralism, nevertheless contains a regression to something that we can describe as premodern theory of language. The discussion concludes with Lacan's theory of language, for which Lacan at some point claimed it was logically implied by Marxism. This implication, however, is not without wide-reaching critical consequences for orthodox Marxism.

Keywords:

Language, Knowledge, Materialism, Epistemology, Stalin, Lacan

Stalin, the “scientist”

Scientific production during Stalin's regime was at times taking bizarre directions and making extravagant developments, which could be most accurately described with the term *wild science*. Of course, deviations like Lysenko in biology or Marr in linguistics were not wild in the sense that they would present a science in its natal state or process of formation, but more in terms of speculative exaggeration, inevitably accompanied with a specific understanding of scientificity – always, however, in strict accordance with the directives formulated in Stalin's interpretation of dialectical materialism. Consequently, it would be all too simple to declare the attempts to construct a “proletarian science” (Lysenko) or “proletarian linguistics” (Marr) as private deliriums of their protagonists. Instead, one should treat the entire process of constituting and practicing such science as something that “has little to do with the presumed paranoia of Lysenko or with simple caprices of Stalin. The process itself is delirious”¹. Simple psychologization of these scientific scandals thus leads nowhere. It is important to interrogate the clinics of knowledge as such, for in that case we obtain insight into the epistemological error that has marked the history of dialectical materialism, which is so closely linked with Stalin's name and oeuvre. As Althusser has put it, the wild developments of Stalinist epistemology amounted to an “error without truth,” and constructed sciences that were pure “deviation

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Lecourt 1976, p. 97.

without norm.”² In fact, Stalinist epistemology gave rise to sciences that were founded on a radical amnesia, and even foreclosure, of the critical truth revealed by Marx’s materialist dialectic. Thereby, it also imposed a permanent loss of precisely the materialist orientation in thinking (which Althusser calls “norm”), which were consistent with Stalin’s vision of continuity between the revolutionary character of modern natural sciences and the no less revolutionary achievements of Marx’s method. According to Lecourt, the heart of the problem lies in Stalin’s extension of the shared *epistemological* horizon of modern sciences and dialectical materialism to the field of *ontological* inquiries. Put differently, rather than inscribing the critical lessons of dialectical materialism into the general epistemological framework of modern forms of knowledge, Stalin assumed a direct ontological continuity between the natural scientific objects and human objects. In doing so, he provided the conditions for “epistemological voluntarism”,³ which consequently gave rise to wild scientific practice, no longer capable of differentiating between the “movement of being” and the “movement of history”; or, otherwise stated, between the instabilities that traverse natural processes and the contradictions that concern a social mode of production. It is no surprise, then, that history, too, was no longer conceived as history of class struggles but as a History of Class Struggle. According to Marx and Engels, conversely, the multiplicity of class struggles inevitably leads to conclusion that there are historical ruptures, which are first and foremost transformative for class struggle. This means that Class Struggle, strictly speaking, does not exist and that the concrete struggles of class do not point towards some invariable, which would traverse history from the beginning to the end. History knows no *telos* precisely because it is traversed by class struggles, and consequently, it is radically decentralised, without any transhistoric One whatsoever, which would support its positive existence and continuous evolution. For Stalin, on the other hand, such a transhistoric One exists, and consequently, the laws of History are, in the last instance, ontologically equivalent to the laws of physics and biology.

It is no surprise, then, that this ontological orientation of dialectical materialism manifests itself in technicism and in a rather peculiar kind of positivism, outlined in Stalin’s well-known doctrinal text *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, which will be discussed further below. For now we can mention that the Lacanian notion of the university discourse most fittingly captures the problematic nature of Stalin’s theoretical ponderings, and that Lacan’s notorious comparison of Stalinism with capitalism implicitly states that neoliberal capitalism could be

2 Althusser, in Lecourt 1976, p. 12.

3 Lecourt 1976, p. 147.

interpreted as a perpetuation of Stalinist epistemology with other means.⁴ What links the two is the absolutisation of apparently neutral knowledge in the constitution and reproduction of power relations, a knowledge, which claims to have privileged insight into the laws of the real, precisely because it supposedly assumes the status of a knowledge *in* the real (rather than knowledge *of* the real). Of course, knowledge in the real is pure fiction, it is an equivalent of what would be Divine knowledge, and signals the self-fetishisation of the discourse that claims to be in its possession. It is not at all astonishing that such self-fetishisation ceases to perpetuate the revolutionary features that mark the modern scientific discourse – which comes, again according to Lacan, closer to the structure of hysteric’s discourse – and instead produces a distorted version of what Thomas Kuhn called “normal science”: science which apparently manages to master and overcome its internal instabilities, uncertainties and moments of crisis that inevitably accompany every revolution in knowledge. Here we could – in passing – ask ourselves whether such normal science actually exists? Does not scientific modernity – at least according to certain *critical* epistemologies – consist precisely in the abolition of any closure that would amount to the constitution of “normal” science (science without epistemic instabilities)? Instead, it would be more appropriate to speak of *normalised* science – i.e. of science, which is successfully integrated in the predominant social mode of production, and thereby effectively transformed into the means of its reproduction. Stalinism and capitalism both achieve this normalisation by reducing the subversive potential of concrete sciences down to a technicist and positivist conception of scientificity. This move is equivalent to the *injection of ideology into science*.

This normalising gesture traverses Stalin’s short treaty on dialectical and historical materialism, wherein his theoretical escapades have not only inscribed dialectical materialism into the field of positive sciences but have also contaminated positive sciences with the contents and contexts of dialectical materialism. To privilege the materialist and dialectical character of modern science is clearly indispensable for a rigorous rejection of positivist and technicist ideology, as an entire series of critical epistemologies (from Bachelard via Koyré and Canguilhem to Foucault and beyond) have repeatedly shown. Against the predominance of logical positivism and technicism, which end up bringing science down to vulgar empiricism, critical epistemologies strove to strengthen the speculative kernel of scientific modernity,⁵ as well as point out that

4 Or at least without certain means, for instance gulag, though one could as well argue that Lacan’s thesis on the homology between Stalinism and capitalism allows a peculiar infinite judgment: *The free market is a gulag*.

5 Koyré formulated this speculative kernel in the best possible way when claiming that

what makes a science materialistic – in the modern epistemic regime – is precisely the move by which procedures, orientations and objects violate the restrictive frameworks of human cognition. For all major critical epistemologies in question, scientific modernity is no longer centred on cognition, but bypasses the cognising subject (consciousness): it no longer evolves around the apparently neutral position of human observer and, in fact, operates even better without man as its ultimate reference. In other words, it does not need a psychological subject that supports the consistency of knowledge and function as the silent background linking knowledge with truth. If in the 1960's, when critical epistemologies attained their widest echo, it made sense to speak of the “death of man” (Foucault), then the assassin should be sought precisely in the epistemic foundations of scientific modernity. It was the modern regime of knowledge that opened up the perspective that man is a mere imaginary effect and that behind the façade of the human face there is a complex and impersonal realm – most explicitly addressed by psychoanalysis’ notion of the unconscious. The dispersion of the human face, described so dramatically in the closing lines of Foucault’s *The Order of Things*, stands for the modern insight into the decentralised character of thinking. Put differently, modern science demonstrates that thinking knows no central instance and that it takes place “outside”. To paraphrase Lacan, science thinks with its object, rather than with man’s consciousness; its procedures are conditioned by formal languages and technological apparatuses, rather than by some cognising thinking “substance”.⁶

We can recall that the materialist kernel of modern scientific procedures consists in the fact that they ground knowledge on the cut between reality and the real, that is, between the way the real appears to the human observer (reality) and the way the real “appears” to the scientific discourse. What unites Marx with Freud, or Marxism with psychoanalysis more generally, is the effort to repeat this epistemic move in the field of human objects and thereby bring about a “Copernican” revolution in the field of human sciences.⁷ When Lacan argued that it was Marx who invented the notion of the symptom in the psychoanalytical

modern science was an experimental verification of Platonism. Of course, this speculative feature has hardly anything in common with the more recent uses of the term “speculation” by the so-called speculative realists.

⁶ Yet before we slide here into an epistemological fetishism, similar to speculative realists, it should be recalled that to associate thinking with object does not abolish the notion of the subject. Lacan repeatedly insisted on the existence of what he called the subject of modern science: precisely the form of subjectivity that preoccupied Freud and Marx. However, the subject is here not understood in terms of thinking substance, but rather designates a desubstantialised real of thinking. In Lacan’s own formulation: “... what concerns the analytic discourse is the subject, which, as an effect of signification, is a response of the real”. Lacan 2001, p. 459.

⁷ Which was in fact Galilean, for the obvious reason that Copernicus remained a Ptolomeian, while Galileo was the first proper Copernican. For the extension of epistemic revolution discussed above, see Milner 2008, p. 277.

sense of the term, he added that this move produced a discontinuity in the history of truth, since the symptom does not reflect the way things appear to the human observer (this would still be the level of truth as *adaequatio*) but the contradiction between appearance and structure: this would be the doctrine of truth as *inadequatio*, non-relation, not simply between words and things, but within words as well as within things. With this critical move, Marx introduced an idea of politics that one could indeed call a “politics of truth” – surely a conflictual truth, since the truth addressed by the symptom and revealed by means of dialectical-materialist method resists and undermines the consistency of (social or subjective) appearances. The invention of the symptom reveals a dimension of truth that is irreducible, both to the old doctrine of adequate relation between words and things, reason and reality, the symbolic and the real, and to the pragmatic idea of convention or useful fiction.

Now, to finally come to the historical signification of Stalin: his name stands for a systematic normalisation of Marx’s revolutionary method, and, consequently, for a renewal of the “politics of cognition”, the refoundation of politics on historical teleology, and the supposition of the progress of consciousness and growth of knowledge. We could ask: are not even the notorious Stalinist purges, the imperative of self-criticism, and, finally, the paranoid witch-hunt for the enemies of the revolution, all logical consequences of this orientation? The Stalinist version of *gnothi seauton* (know thyself), the ethical imperative professed by the Oracle of Delphi, would be something like: “Discover the traitor of the Communist Cause that you always-already carry in thyself”. The fallout of which is that the more you examine yourself, the guiltier you become in the eyes of History.⁸ Stalin’s politics of cognition reaches its doctrinal peak in the already mentioned ontologisation of the laws of dialectics, and, more generally, of the epistemic conditions of possibility for thinking to “shake the appearances”, be they natural, social or subjective. In *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* we thus read the following outline: the point of departure of materialist dialectics is nature, which is conceived as a connected and determined totality, rather than a contingent and unlinked accumulation of things. This is, according to Stalin, the main difference between the dialectical-materialist and metaphysical orientation:

Contrary to metaphysics, dialectics does not regard nature as an accidental agglomeration of things, of phenomena, unconnected with, isolated from, and independent of, each other, but as a connected and integral whole, in which things, phenomena are organically connected

⁸ This perversion obtained a specific expression in Stalin’s ambiguous relation to the Russian poets, who strived to change the national language in accordance with the Communist Revolution. See Milner 1995, p. 112, note 6.

with, dependent on, and determined by, each other.⁹

This is rather surprising, since the *organic* connection is a type of ontological link that one would more likely expect from an Aristotelian rather than a Marxist. If there is a difference between metaphysical and materialist conception of nature, then this difference concerns the type of link postulated in nature. Epistemic modernity achieved a radical desubstantialization of nature, shifting from the primacy of essences to the primacy of relations. These relations, however, are not considered necessary, or differently, they have no stable ontological ground. They are, one could say, essentially a form of instability. Stalin acknowledges this, when he continues his ontological excursion in the following way:

The dialectical method therefore holds that no phenomenon in nature can be understood if taken by itself, isolated from surrounding phenomena, inasmuch as any phenomenon in any realm of nature may become meaningless to us if it is not considered in connection with the surrounding conditions, but divorced from them; and that, vice versa, any phenomenon can be understood and explained if considered in its inseparable connection with surrounding phenomena, as one conditioned by surrounding phenomena.

As a consequence, nature appears in its dynamic aspect, as a “state of continuous motion and change”. Dialectical materialism here indeed reinvents the old Heraclitian (materialist) insight. Yet, Heraclitus – as is well known – did not simply preach eternal mobility, but moreover insisted in the role of *logos* in this movement. *Logos*, however, introduces a conflictual element, which leads to thoroughly different consequences than the focus on *meaning* that Stalin associates with the inseparable connection between natural phenomena. Both materialism and dialectics are here at a crossroads: one direction leading to *logos without meaning*, and the other to *meaning with telos*. Stalin did not overlook the teleological context, in which the “organic whole” and the “meaningful link” inevitably stand:

The dialectical method regards as important primarily not that which at the given moment seems to be durable and yet is already beginning to die away, but that which is arising and developing, even though at the given moment it may appear to be not durable, for the dialectical method considers invincible only that which is arising and developing.

Stalin’s conception of materialist dialectics thus contains a significant teleological regression, which can be detected precisely in his accent on development. Defined as organic whole in movement, nature is embedded in the process of evolution, in which “development (...) passes from insignificant and imperceptible quantitative changes to open

⁹ All quotes from Stalin’s *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* are taken from the online version available at marxists.org. Last accessed: 30. 09. 2015.

fundamental changes.” The fact that this development and the qualitative changes it produced are said to occur abruptly – “taking the form of a leap from one state to another” – does not in any way reduce the teleological metaphysics of Stalin’s description of the dialectic of nature. These changes are said to “occur not accidentally but as the natural result of an accumulation of imperceptible and gradual quantitative changes”, and finally:

The dialectical method therefore holds that the process of development should be understood not as movement in a circle, not as a simple repetition of what has already occurred, but as an onward and upward movement, as a transition from an old qualitative state to a new qualitative state, as a development from the simple to the complex, from the lower to the higher.

Stalin’s description is problematic because it takes the presumed development in nature as *the model* of social development. History is naturalised, it adopts the features of nature – or was it nature that adopted the features of history? One cannot decide, since the epistemic objects of dialectical materialism and of natural sciences are fused together into one ontological conglomerate. It is no surprise that natural sciences would become the most important player in Stalin’s political agenda. We can recall again the affair Lysenko, for which Lecourt showed that it was less a contamination of the Soviet scientific community with a pseudo-scientific delirium, so much as a well calculated response to Stalin’s demand for positive scientific foundations of materialist dialectics. Unlike in Marx, where materialist dialectics draws its scientificity from the *logical* sources that stand in direct connection with various modern sciences – with those features that differentiate the modern epistemic regime from the premodern – Stalin posits these foundations as qualitative and substantial. But as already stated, if this means that Stalin contaminates dialectical materialism with scientific positivism, the opposite is no less true: the insights of dialectical materialism regarding the antagonistic features of social structures are projected onto the natural-scientific real. Consequently, one of the central epistemological claims of dialectical materialism is the immanence of contradictions in nature, which leads directly to a positive ontologisation of struggle:

Contrary to metaphysics, dialectics holds that internal contradictions are inherent in all things and phenomena of nature, for they all have their negative and positive sides, a past and a future, something dying away and something developing; and that the struggle between these opposites, the struggle between the old and the new, between that which is dying away and that which is being born, between that which is disappearing and that which is developing, constitutes the internal content of the process of development, the internal content of the transformation of quantitative changes into qualitative changes.

The dialectical method therefore holds that the process of development from the lower to the higher takes place not as a harmonious unfolding of phenomena, but as a disclosure of the contradictions inherent in things and phenomena, as a "struggle" of opposite tendencies which operate on the basis of these contradictions.

We can observe here the injection of (class) struggle into nature, but an injection, which, in difference to Darwin, who spoke of the struggle of biological species for existence, abolishes the main feature of Darwinian epistemic revolution, namely the link between struggle and adaptation.¹⁰ In order to establish the continuity between the natural being and the social being, social contradictions give meaning to natural struggles: class struggle is merely the ontologically most developed form of other struggles taking place in nature. Consequently, social development suddenly becomes the model of natural development, or at least the point that retroactively produces the meaning of ontological development leading from the struggle between different biological species to the struggle between different social classes. It only makes sense that under these theoretical settings, Stalin concludes that the natural and the social real share the same ontological law:

If the connection between the phenomena of nature and their interdependence are laws of the development of nature, it follows, too, that the connection and interdependence of the phenomena of social life are laws of the development of society, and not something accidental. Hence, social life, the history of society, ceases to be an agglomeration of "accidents", for the history of society becomes a development of society according to regular laws, and the study of the history of society becomes a science. Further, if the world is knowable and our knowledge of the laws of development of nature is authentic knowledge, having the validity of objective truth, it follows that social life, the development of society, is also knowable, and that the data of science regarding the laws of development of society are authentic data having the validity of objective truths. Hence, the science of the history of society, despite all the complexity of the phenomena of social life, can become as precise a science as, let us say, biology, and capable of making use of the laws of development of society for practical purposes.

This is the point where Stalin's epistemological position – the contamination of dialectical materialism with positivism, and vice versa – is most striking. The consequence of which is that the real loses the three major features unveiled by scientific modernity, and which for a materialist thinker like Lacan, provide us with a truly materialist notion of the real: 1) "the real is without law", namely without an invariable and substantial, necessary law that would be valid in *all* areas of nature; 2) "the real forecloses meaning", it is precisely not an imaginary unity, the

10 See Lecourt 1976, p. 122.

one that Stalin strives to envisage in its organic totality; 3) "there are only pieces of the real", which means, again, that the real does not constitute an enclosed totality, which would be endowed with ontological univocity and stability. The real is dynamic, not because it would form an organism but because it is "ontologically incomplete" (Žižek); and consequently, because the real is traversed with cuts and instabilities, there cannot be any unifying dialectical movement that would depart from the laws of physical materiality, traverse the laws of biological materiality and finally amount to the laws of discursive materiality. This is why, to close the circle, Lacan insisted that the real is without law, while also dismissing the question, whether he was an anarchist. Rejecting a unifying Law-of-the-Real is still far from affirming ontological anarchy.¹¹

Stalin formulates his ontological hypostasis of the laws of dialectics in yet another way, whereby a Lacanian would immediately become suspicious that the hypothesis of the big Other's positive existence is lurking in the background:

Further, if nature, being, the material world, is primary, and consciousness, thought, is secondary, derivative; if the material world represents objective reality existing independently of the consciousness of men, while consciousness is a reflection of this objective reality, it follows that the material life of society, its being, is also primary, and its spiritual life secondary, derivative, and that the material life of society is an objective reality existing independently of the will of men, while the spiritual life of society is a reflection of this objective reality, a reflection of being.

The key formulation here is "reflection of being", since, under the apparent homology between natural objective reality and the material life of society (the economic base), it strengthens the dependency of the social real on the natural real, while also assigning to historical developments in the social context the same absolute necessity that is presumed for the developments of nature. In the social context, there is no place for the political subject, since politics is made by the Other directly. The true historic agents are the Laws of History, which reflect the natural being in the social being. Again we come across the crucial move that distinguishes Stalin's interpretation of dialectical materialism from Lenin and Marx: Stalin abolishes the inscription of the materialist science of social and subjective phenomena into the general epistemic regime of modernity in order to accentuate the homogeneity of the ontological regime that would make social being depend on natural being. In this process, the actions of men play no significant role. One could even think that, in this context, Stalin unveils the political signification of the

11 For the three negative features of the real, see Lacan 2005, chapters VIII and IX.

unconscious, notably when he describes what he calls the “third feature of production”:

The *third feature* of production is that the rise of new productive forces and of the relations of production corresponding to them does not take place separately from the old system, after the disappearance of the old system, but within the old system; it takes place not as a result of the deliberate and conscious activity of man, but spontaneously, unconsciously, independently of the will of man. It takes place spontaneously and independently of the will of man for two reasons.

Firstly, because men are not free to choose one mode of production or another, because as every new generation enters life it finds productive forces and relations of production already existing as the result of the work of former generations, owing to which it is obliged at first to accept and adapt itself to everything it finds ready-made in the sphere of production in order to be able to produce material values.

Secondly, because, when improving one instrument of production or another, one element of the productive forces or another, men do not realize, do not understand or stop to reflect what social results these improvements will lead to, but only think of their everyday interests, of lightening their labor and of securing some direct and tangible advantage for themselves.

Here, an ontologisation of the unconscious seems to be at work. It displays a regression in relation to the Freudian notion, since Stalin thinks the unconscious in terms of simple absence of consciousness, where no subject is implemented and where the ontologically postulated necessity of laws obtains its full expression. This is the clearest manifestation of Stalin's hypothesis of the big Other's positive existence. The subject is considered a superficial imaginary effect, a consciousness entirely determined by its unconscious base. Development in nature is a process without a subject, and Stalin extends this thesis onto the social context, thereby abolishing the main critical foundation of dialectical materialism, the already mentioned Marxian notion of truth, which recognises in the subject a social symptom. For instance, labour-power is both a commodity among others and a commodity-producing commodity, an exception that cannot be entirely integrated in the universe of commodities. But labour-power is not simply a free-floating abstraction – it knows concrete historical social personifications that Marx names the proletariat.¹² The subject is the critical point of the

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12 In 19th century capitalism such personification is the industrial worker, around which the political organisation must take place, in order to bring about the structural transformation of the capitalist mode of production. But this requires precisely the opposite from what Stalin is claiming: there is no ontological law whatsoever that would trigger the organisation of masses against capitalism and direct the movement of history toward communism.

system, where the predominant mode of production encounters its point of instability. It is needless to repeat that for Marx, as well as for Freud and Lacan, the subject is always a problematic negativity. The proletariat and the neurotic are far from passive imaginary effects. As products of the system, they provide insight into the real contradictions of the predominant social mode of production, and precisely here the dimension of the unconscious enters the picture.

To return to Stalin. His rejection of the materialist theory of the subject abolishes precisely the element that prevents the closure of the gap separating natural sciences, such as physics and biology, from critical sciences, such as psychoanalysis and historical materialism. The subject is also the gap that distinguishes the natural and the biological real from the discursive real. It is that bone in the throat, which makes the simple ontological continuity between the object of biology and the object of dialectical materialism impossible. In order to equate them Stalin needed to foreclose the subject, thereby transforming the materialist politics of truth into a technicist politics of knowledge, and falsely promoting positivism under dialectical materialism. It is no surprise, then, that Lacan saw in Stalinism the perfect logical correspond to capitalism, both being concretisations of the university discourse: a discourse, for which it is characteristic that it abolishes the subject in the regime of knowledge, which now assumes the position of the agent.¹³ This is precisely the main feature of the politics of cognition: the apparently neutral knowledge assumes the position of the master, while the master is “repressed” to the position of truth, from which it exercises its power. Stalin, the scientist, is the generic name for a radical historical transformation of the master, the decentralisation of the master and its reduction to the empty imperative of knowledge.

Stalin, the “linguist”

Stalin's notorious intervention in Soviet linguistic debates provides the best example of the general logic of the university discourse. The short text dedicated to the relation between Marxism and linguistics, and destined to condemn the linguistic school gathered around the Georgian philologist Nicholas Marr, come as a surprise – it was Stalin's first public intervention after five years of uninterrupted public silence. This move becomes all the more extravagant, if we contrast it with the global political reality of the time: practically at the same time (25 June 1950) the Korean War broke out, pushing the world to the edge of nuclear conflict. Stalin's text was published in the newspaper *Pravda* only five days before this political event. But his preoccupations with linguistic matters did not stop there. Several replies followed on 4 July (dated 29 June) and

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13 For the deduction and formalisation of university discourse, see Lacan 2006.

2 August (dated 11, 22 and 28 July). At the moment there was a global threat, on the one hand, and a seemingly scholastic linguistic debate, on the other. During this political storm Stalin retreats to the privacy of his office, in order to answer questions concerning the nature of language and outline the right way to practice Marxism in linguistics. The situation could hardly appear more absurd. And then there is a further surprize related to Stalin's linguistic position itself: against the spirit of communist politics, Stalin accentuates the value of national languages, a move, which follows the Stalinist line that progressively exchanged internationalism for Soviet imperialism, in the context of which the great-Russian ideas returned to the political agenda.

The text itself is rather dry and one could argue that its theoretical contribution to the science of language barely reaches beyond zero. Its most important element is probably the master's gesture, the "No, it is not true" that introduces Stalin's answers and thereby cuts the polemical knot that has been suffocating the progress of linguistics in Soviet Union since the epidemic of Marrism. However, as soon as the Master's "No" is contextualised, supported, and supplied with meaning, it becomes clear that Stalin's linguistic views were anything but revolutionary, and far from the structural linguistics for which Marr and his followers accused of idealism and abstract formalism. According to Marrists, structuralism enforced the anti-social and anti-historical tendencies in linguistics. To this stance one could immediately object that this is hardly the case, since already for Saussure language is a social phenomenon, and his theory considers it to essentially be a social link: on the abstract level surely it is a link of differences, brought together in the notion of signifying chain, but also as a link that brings history and dialectics into the picture. One cannot think the diachronic axis, and hence the historical changes in language, without its social character. Indeed, the major portion of Stalin's replies circulate around the historical development of languages, the problem of diachronicity, albeit while rejecting both the thesis that revolutionary developments and other major social earthquakes could in any way alter, improve or substitute the language actually spoken in the given moment of history. The potentially Saussurean tone of the text gave rise to speculations that Stalin was not its actual author and that the text was ghost-written.¹⁴ In any case, the debates about the authenticity of the text miss the point, since what matters, and what stands beyond doubt, is Stalin's signed approval of the outlined positions – even if he did not write anything else, the "No, it is not true" definitely bears the mark of his contribution. This is also where the question of the university discourse most openly displays its mechanisms. The Master's "No" supports a normative and normalising regime of knowledge, which brings us back to Stalin's technicism, which

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14 For a detailed account of Marr's theories and their subsequent fate, see L'Hermitte 1987.

reflects his conservative, and, epistemologically speaking, Aristotelian position in matters of language.

What was, then, the original sin of Marrism, which required nothing less than the intervention of the political leader? Stalin lines up the following points: "language is superstructure", first non-Marxist formulation, which implies that every substantial change in the base should amount to a substantial linguistic change in society that experienced the change. The case of the Soviet Union clearly falsifies this thesis. Persisting in Marrism would thus entail a dangerous conclusion: the revolution has failed, and this failure manifests, among others, in the fact that no transformation of existing language took place. The old relations of dominations continue to lurk in the persistence of old language within the new social order. Stalin declares this an absurdity, and rightly so, not simply because it threatens his entire apparatus of power, but above all because the association of language with the superstructure continues to understand language as mere fiction – surely a pragmatic, useful fiction, but nevertheless a fiction, which can be arbitrarily and consciously altered. Marr's "japhetic theory" of the emergence of new languages through a semantic crossing of two already existing languages pursues this all too simplistic line, with the additional aberration that in some distant prehistoric past there was an Ur-Language, from which all other languages had emerged. And, moreover, that in some unforeseen future, when communism will be victorious on the global scale, a global language will emerge, which will abolish the existing linguistic Babylon. Consequently, it would reverse the human alienation that is the inevitable effect of this multiplicity of languages. Humanity would, according to this wild linguistic speculation, unite in one revolutionary, i.e., communist, Language, which would grow directly from the communist mode of production, the new social base. Clearly, this speculation was all too wild for the Master in Kremlin.

Another error and non-Marxist formulation committed by Marr and his followers concerns the thesis that each language is marked by class-character. Oddly enough, this and the "superstructure-thesis" could pass as Marxist formulations – even if they are formulations one could expect only from an extremely vulgarised Marxism. It is surprising that Stalin, this all-knowing brain and all-seeing eye of power, waited for two decades before he decided to intervene, which is to say twenty years after Marr's followers have already established their hegemony within the Soviet academic institutions and carried out their own institutional "cleansing" (similarly to Lysenko and his followers – the difference being that in this case it was Stalin's death in 1953, which ended the predominance of Lysenkism in Soviet biology). There have been many speculations about why Stalin interfered in this scholastic matter. René L'Hermitte summarised them in the following way:

Many personal factors could finally enter the game. The “act of prince”, for instance. In order to underline their omnipotence, absolute monarchs like to irrupt within domains, for which one could think that they are foreign to them, in particular the domains of art and science. They like to profess “the law” and distinguish between the “good” and the “bad”. Could one not see in this intervention also an expression of black humour (...) ? And in the last instance, why would this not be simply a reaction of sound reason? Annoyed by the fantastic, delirious constructions of Marr, could Stalin not have simply decided – and he was then the only one who could do so – saying “That’s enough!”?¹⁵

Beyond all guesses and speculations, the last remark by L’Hermitte already provides a sufficient reason for, and the most plausible explanation of, Stalin’s interventions, namely the cut, which is supposed to bring about a normalisation of a scientific field – in this case linguistics – and end wild speculations about the nature and the historical development of languages. Stalin’s intervention is, indeed, an intervention of sound reason, which enables a renewal of the conditions of scientificity in linguistics. A problem, however, remains: we know that sound reason speaks Aristotelian, which consequently means that Stalin does more than merely normalise linguistics – while pulling it from the Marrist delirium, it also deprives it of its revolutionary character.

One can mention two main reasons why Stalin is Aristotelian in epistemological and linguistic matters. Firstly, because he conceives language exclusively as a tool of communication, that is, in relation to its abstract human user. In doing so, he reverts the revolutionary insights of Saussurean linguistics, which detached language from man and strove to constitute linguistics (or more generally, semiology, the science of signs) as a Galilean science. Beyond the debate, whether this endeavour is fruitful or doomed to fail, we need to at least acknowledge that Saussure isolated a concept and a linguistic entity, the signifier, which triggered an epistemic revolution in human sciences. Saussure was indeed the linguistic Galileo. Or to put it as Lacan did: with Saussure and the Linguistic circle of Prague, the signifier was isolated in its absolute autonomy, which consequently means that language was thought independently from its human users. Stalin, on the other hand, reintroduces man (and nation) into the science of language. He thereby reverts the anti-humanist revolution initiated by structural linguistics and, so to speak, re-injects “humanism” (and even nationalism) into the science of language.

Secondly, Stalin is Aristotelian because for him language cannot and should not be thought of in terms of production. To say that language is a human convention and an *organon* of communication is the same as

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15 L’Hermitte 1987, p. 75

saying that language does not produce anything, or to again speak like Lacan, it does not have any consequences in the real. This is something that goes against the spirit of structuralism, which explored language first and foremost from the viewpoint of its immanent forms of instability – diachrony and historical dynamic in Saussure, child language and aphasia in Jakobson, the unconscious in Lacan – and, finally, it was Lacan who in the end associated this structuralist engagement with dialectical materialism. Consequently, a materialist science of language should conceptualise language as a space of production, a factory, rather than an organ. But let us hear what Stalin has to say about production in language:

The point is that the similarity between language and instruments of production ends with the analogy I have just mentioned. But, on the other hand, there is a radical difference between language and instruments of production. This difference lies in the fact that whereas instruments of production produce material wealth, language produces nothing or “produces” words only. To put it more plainly, people possessing instruments of production can produce material wealth, but those very same people, if they possess a language but not instruments of production, cannot produce material wealth. It is not difficult to see that were language capable of producing material wealth, wind-bags would be the richest men on earth.¹⁶

A good Marxist would think twice before concluding that the use of language plays no role whatsoever in the production of value. In any case, the highest Aristotelian moment in Stalin is not so much tied to the notion of instrument, but much more to the normative discourse that prohibits the productive deviations of language, and which thereby represses its autonomy. To produce words is to produce nothing – Aristotle says something similar about sophists: they speak for the pleasure of speaking, and while this is considered a perversion of language, it does not have any dramatic real consequences. All this changes with psychoanalysis, where production of words is embedded in a broader libidinal economy, which, in the current historical moment, displays the same logical mechanisms as the capitalist mode of production.¹⁷ This conclusion follows directly from the fact that language is neither part of the base nor of the superstructure. For Stalin this is not the case: we encounter language on both ends, it is free of the economic conditions that determine the base, as well as of

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16 All quotes from Stalin’s *Marxism and the Problems of Linguistics* are taken from the online version available at marxists.org. Last accessed: 30. 09. 2015.

17 This was another famous thesis by Lacan: between psychoanalysis and critique of political economy there is a strict homology. See Lacan 2006b, p. 16ff.

the dependency on economic conditions that shape the superstructure (ideology). Language is transcendent, and because it is transcendent, it is unproductive. Stalin's text displays the *taming of language*, it reduces the epistemological and ontological scandals that are so familiar to structuralism and psychoanalysis. Indeed, one such scandal is recognised by Stalin himself, since it concerns the most basic orientation of dialectical materialism:

It is said that thoughts arise in the mind of man prior to their being expressed in speech, that they arise without linguistic material, without linguistic integument, in, so to say, a naked form. But that is absolutely wrong. Whatever thoughts arise in the human mind and at whatever moment, they can arise and exist only on the basis of the linguistic material, on the basis of language terms and phrases. Bare thoughts, free of the linguistic material, free of the "natural matter" of language, do not exist. "Language is the immediate reality of thought" (Marx). The reality of thought is manifested in language. Only idealists can speak of thinking not being connected with "the natural matter" of language, of thinking without language.

Let us consider closely what Stalin claims here (while citing Marx). He writes that, according to materialism, language should be recognised as endowed with the power of causality, in the first instance the power to cause thoughts. Detaching thoughts from language would immediately lead one into the sphere of "pure ghosts", spiritualism and consequently idealism. Conversely, it is only by making thoughts depend on language that one can practice materialism. This, however, means that language *is* productive, and, more generally, that economic production rests on a set of symbolic mechanisms – precisely on what Marx called the "mode of production," and what Lacan translated with the notion of discourse. Furthermore, to think the history of these modes of production requires, first and foremost, thinking history in a discontinuous way and thus rejecting the openly anti-materialist teleological model that Stalin's interpretation of dialectical materialism so evidently reintroduced into Marxism. We can recall here Lacan's claim from *Seminar XVII*, according to which there is only one affect, and that is precisely thinking; or as Adrian Johnston has put it, "affects are signifiers".¹⁸ However, *because* language causes thinking, it cannot be reduced to a mere tool – at least not without recurring to the old Aristotelian hypothesis of *psyché*, of the soul, which uses language as its communicative *organon*, or to the modern, apparently rationalised version of the soul-hypothesis, consciousness. Psychoanalysis, but also Marx's critique of political economy, departs from the materialist thesis of the causality of the

18 See Lacan 2006, p. 150, and Johnston 2013, p. 185ff.

signifier, but this means that it conceives thinking as constitutively alienated (decentralised) and language as a form of constitutive alienation. In this respect, Marx and Freud were both heirs of Hegel, who was the first one to think language *qua* constitutive alienation, and who was, at least in this respect, the founder of a dialectical-materialist orientation in the science of language.

The link of psychoanalysis with dialectical materialism was hinted at by Lacan a number of times, for instance in the following passage from the early 1970's, where we can find a retrospective implicit characterisation of Stalin as a nominalist, rather than a dialectical materialist:

If I am anything, it is clear that I am not a nominalist. I mean that I do not depart from the idea that a name is something that is placed, just like that, on the real. And one has to choose. If one is nominalist, one has to completely renounce dialectical materialism, so that, in short, the nominalist tradition, which is strictly speaking the only danger of idealism that can be produced in a discourse like mine is quite evidently avoided.¹⁹

According to Jean-Claude Milner, Lacan already went beyond Stalin's theorem "Language is not a superstructure", when he rejected the notion of History. For Stalin, language is immune to revolutions, but already for Saussure, language is a *permanent revolution* – which means precisely that it is *not* an *evolution*, as is the case for Stalin. For this reason, the materialist notion of history needs to be again correctly situated: "Lacan does not believe in History, despite admitting major cuts",²⁰ while Stalin believes in History precisely because he integrates major cuts in the teleological-evolutionist model. Indeed, it is a strange "Stalinism", in which historical cuts and discontinuities demonstrate the inexistence of History and the decentralisation of historic movement, rather than the positive existence of Historical Necessity. But maybe Lacan's positioning in relation to Stalin is not so difficult to understand, since he simply adopts the subversive position of Marx's critique of political economy, and thereby abolishes the mistake in Stalin's interpretation of dialectical materialism.

Lacan then specifies that he is not talking about nominalism, as we know it from the medieval debates, namely a nominalism that professes the realism of universals. One could say that the old nominalism was much more materialist because it argued – albeit in a mystified form – for the real status of signifiers, the inclusion or inscription of the signifier into the real. In addition, the old nominalism did not comprise

19 Lacan 2007, p. 28. For further significance of this passage, see Zupančič 2014, p. 26.

20 Milner 1995, p. 89.

the materialist kernel that Lacan reserves for his own contribution to the theorisation of language: the link between language and production, not only of production of phenomena that remain within the symbolic register (signification, sense, meaning, performativity etc.) but the production of real effects, which reach beyond the symbolic and, indeed, inscribe it into the real, albeit not in the way the nominalists thought it did. Jouissance, drive, the unconscious – all of these are real discursive effects, which push the causality of the signifier, the main discovery of psychoanalysis, into the foreground, a discovery, which is also the privileged meeting point of psychoanalysis and critique of political economy.

Moving on along the line of Lacan's remark, one could easily detect who he reserves the description "nominalism" for, who are for him contemporary nominalists, namely logical positivists who reproduce the old doctrine of *adaequatio* and thereby prolongs Aristotelianism into the present. Nominalism is *the* obstacle for the constitution of a materialist linguistics, and moreover, an obstacle for the constitution of a thoroughly modern science of language. One has to choose: either Saussure or Aristotle. The path initiated by Saussure opens up the way toward a materialist science of language, while Aristotle (or "modern" nominalism) introduces a regression back to the premodern theories of language, namely, the recentralisation of language to the communicative model, which abolishes the revolutionary implications of Marx's, Freud's and Saussure's insights into the nature of labour, thought and speech. Stalin's text on Marxism and linguistics seems to show that he was rejecting Marr's delirious or mythical "linguistics" only in order to bring about another regression into Aristotelianism.

The theory of performativism is no less nominalist. The question, as posed by a materialist orientation in linguistics, would not be "how to do things with words?" but rather, and more appropriately, "how do words do things with the subject?" or differently, "How does the symbolic make a hole in the real" (as Lacan repeated throughout his later teaching). This last formulation immediately suggests that the emergence of language produces some kind of gap in the real. However, this does not mean that it makes the real in any way incomplete or inaccessible. Rather, the hole in the real stands for the way the symbolic is present in the real – it is the real of the symbolic. Far from being simply "placed onto the real", the emergence of the signifier produces a new real, which assumes the same epistemological status as the real of biology, of physics etc. – but without therefore being ontologically homogeneous to the biological, physical or any other real. Because the symbolic in the real comes down to a hole, it can grasp, manipulate, and, in the last instance, translate any other real into the symbolic, like in mathematical formalisation, genetic letterisation, etc. However, for the subject, the signifier introduces a disturbance that makes every unproblematic relation to the real impossible: it never comes to the idealist (nominalist) scenario, where

(adequate) relation of words and things, symbolic and real would be established. The symbolic is never purely symbolic, i.e., it never comes without the causality of the signifier that accompanies its communicative effects. The relation between the symbolic and the real is essentially a non-relation, and to think this non-relation is the main task of a materialist science of language.

Marr's linguistics took as its privileged object of inquiry the origin and the telos of language – two things that modern (Saussurean) linguistics rejected and revealed the fictional status of. These are the two critical points by which science turns delirious. Stalin does not reject them, he merely presents their apparently rationalised form, the standard Aristotelian version of origin and *telos*, where language is invented and used as a tool for pragmatic purposes. A consequent materialist conclusion, on the other hand, would be that with the prohibition of the origin and *telos* of language, the communication and utility of language lose their character of solid facts and turn into problematic hypotheses. To say that language knows no *telos* means that the communicative function is accidental. Language communicates by chance, words meet reality by chance, meaning is produced by chance – this is the conclusion that Lacan drew from Saussure's notion of arbitrariness, as well as from Stalin's distinction of language from superstructure. In Lacan's 1965 answers to philosophy students, we read the following reply to the question 'what kind of theory of language does Marxism imply':

Only my theory of language as structure of the unconscious can be said to be implied by Marxism, if, that is, you are not more demanding than the material implication with which our most recent logic is satisfied, that is, that my theory of language is true whatever be the adequacy of Marxism, and that it is needed by it, whatever be the defect that it leaves Marxism with. So much for the theory of language implied logically by Marxism. As for the one it has implied historically, I have barely but to offer you (...) thirty pages by Stalin that put an end to the frolics of *Marrism* (from the name of the philologist Marr, who considered language to be a „superstructure“). Statements of rudimentary common sense concerning language and specifically concerning the point that it *is not* a superstructure, whereby the Marxist, on the subject of language, situates himself far above the logical positivist. The least you can accord me concerning my theory of language is, should it interest you, that it is materialist. The signifier is matter transcending itself in language.²¹

Lacan acknowledges the gap between the logical and the historical implication. Historically, Marrism was a child of Marxism, or more precisely, a correlate to Stalin's vulgarisation of dialectical materialism. For this reason, Lacan can write in these same lines that "Marxists are

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21 Lacan 1990, p. 111-112.

Aristotelians,”²² while simultaneously arguing that Stalin’s “order,” which made an end to the hegemony of Marrism in Soviet linguistics, stands above logical positivism. Stalin’s basic insight was correct, but the consequences he drew from the dissociation of language from superstructure were false. In Žižekian parlance: he made the right step in the wrong direction: the right step being the already mentioned dissociation of language from the base-superstructure dilemma, and the wrong direction being the renewal of modern nominalism. Consequently, no real progress was made, and Stalin’s gesture turned out to be empty. To repeat, the actual materialist polemic in linguistic matters concerns the following issue: Is language a “house of Being” (Heidegger) or a factory of enjoyment? Is there a production in the field of language, a production, tied precisely to the insight that the signifier is matter transcending itself into language? This insight is dialectical-materialist because it is modelled on Marx’s critical insight that commodity is matter transcending itself into commodity language, the language of exchange values. Accordingly, the act of transcendence, which can be translated into Saussure’s idea that language is made of pure differences always-already constituting a chain and a system, is productive and has at least two real consequences: a subject that is radically heterogeneous to consciousness (or to put in Marx’s terms: labour-power is radically heterogeneous to the empirical labourer; or: the proletarian is radically heterogeneous to class-consciousness); and a surplus-object, which is equally distinct from the empirical object, supposedly referred to by the signifier (or, again in Marx’s terms: surplus-value is radically heterogeneous to the object of value, which is a particular commodity). A materialist linguistics places the entire accent on this causality, thereby turning language into an ontological problem, and even into an ontological scandal, just like mathematics and geometry already formed an ontological scandal for Plato, who had every reason to situate their objects *between* ideas and appearances: they are neither ideal (in the sense of fictional, abstract, immaterial etc.) nor empirical (in the sense of vulgar, immediate, sensual materiality). They are neither being nor non-being. This, however, means that they are neither subjective nor objective – just like language, examined from the viewpoint of its causal dimension, is neither a human invention (a subjective convention) nor a natural product of evolution (an objective result of the biological development of the human brain). In conclusion, the entire cartography of ontology needs to be redrawn, the entire ontology needs to be reinvented, without therefore falling into nominalism. Stalin’s ontology and epistemological voluntarism represses the epistemo-ontological scandal of discursive production and thereby gives rise to a massive epistemological regression. One could repeat something that should not be an unknown:

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22 *Ibid.*, p. 111.

Stalinism is idealism. There is nothing more idealist than to think that language is exclusively about communication.

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