

## BAKHTINIAN PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

### V. N. Volosinov Marxism and the Philosophy of Language

#### Part II: Toward a Marxist Philosophy of Language

Given the semiotic nature of consciousness posited in Part I, a consideration of the nature of signification is almost inevitable here. Volosinov accordingly begins this section by wondering what exactly is the subject matter (45) of the philosophy of language. Arguing that the study of the properties of language cannot be reduced to the physical sphere (sound being an acoustic phenomenon), the physiological process of sound production or reception (hearing), or the psychological (the inner experience of speaker or listener), Volosinov's basic thesis is that language must be studied in relation to the wider social context in which it is used. This is because both speaker and listener belong to the same language community--to a society organised along certain lines (46).

#### Two Trends of Thought in the Philosophy of Language

Here, Volosinov offers an overview of recent developments in Linguistics. He contends that there are two recent trends that have predominated in the philosophy of language: individualistic subjectivism (48) (post-Herderian expressivist models of signification) and abstract objectivism (48) (post-Saussurean Structuralist models of signification). The former, exemplified by Herder, Humboldt, Vossler and Croce, among others, and associated with Empiricism (in some of its forms), German Idealism ((in others), and Romanticism, considers the basis of language . . . to be the creative act of speech. The source of language is the individual psyche. The laws of language creativity . . . are the laws of individual psychology (48) which are what the linguist and the philosopher of language are supposed to study. The creation of meaning in language is a creative act analogous to that which occurs in the aesthetic act (at least, in the Romantic view of art). The basic reality of language is not language as a ready-made system, in the sense of a body of inherited, immediately usable forms--phonic, grammatical, and other--but the *individual creative* act. . . . [T]he vital feature of every speech act does not consist in the grammatical forms, which are shared, stable, and immediately usable in all other utterances of a given language, but in stylistic concretisation and modification of these abstract forms, which individualise and uniquely characterise any given utterance. (51)

For the neo-Romantics, linguistics is synonymous with aesthetics and taste, style and fidelity to personal experience the principle criteria of linguistic usage. Moreover, for this group, the very essence of language is revealed precisely in its history; the logic of language is not at all a matter of reproducing a normatively identical form but of continuous renovation and individualisation of that form via the stylistically unreproducible utterance. *The reality of language is, in fact, its generation* (56). In other words, the creative refraction and variation of linguistic forms (57), that is, its historical variation constitute, the very essence of language.

For the Structuralists, epitomised by Leibniz and Saussure and associated with rationalism and Neoclassicism, the organising centre of all linguistic phenomena (52) is not the idiosyncratic, creative use to which the individual puts pre-existing linguistic forms but the linguistic system, to be precise, the factors--phonetic, grammatical, and lexical factors that are *identical* and therefore *normative* for all utterances--that insure the unity of a given language and its comprehension by all the members of a given community (52). This linguistic system is completely independent of individual creative acts, intentions, or motives (53) because language stands before the individual as an inviolable, incontestable norm which the individual . . . can only accept . . . from his speech-community completely ready-made (53). From this perspective, the individual act of articulating sounds becomes a linguistic act only by measure of its compliance with the fixed (at any given moment in time) and incontestable (for the individual) system of language (53). Given this linguistic systematicity (54), there is only one linguistic criterion: correct versus incorrect, wherein *linguistically correct* is understood to mean only the correspondence of a given form to the normative system of language (54). From this perspective, there

is no question of linguistic taste or linguistic truth (54) as a result of which between the phonetic design of a word and its meaning, there is neither a natural connection nor an artistic correspondence (54).

For the Structuralists, what is important 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 authorised (58). There is, as such, an inner logic (58) to the system of signs that transcends the capacity of the speaker as the subject expressing his own inner life (58). Little attention is paid, Volosinov claims, to the problem of expression nor, consequently, to the problem of the verbal generation of thought and the subjective psyche (58). For the Structuralists, such as Saussure in particular, the *parole* favoured by the Romantics is subordinate to *langue*, that is, language as a system of normatively identical forms must be taken as the point of departure and that all manifestations of speech must be illuminated from the angle of these stable and autonomous forms (60). What constitutes the meaning of any given utterance is the normative system from which it derives its signification.

Volosinov points out that the putative system of language which is an immutable unity at any given point in time, i.e., synchronically, does change, does evolve in the process of the historical evolution of the speech community (54). In other words, language does have its history (54). Structuralists assume, however, that there is a *discontinuity between the history of language and the system of language* (i.e. language in its a-historical, synchronic dimension) (54), between the logic governing the system of linguistic forms at any given moment in time and the logic (or rather a-logic) of the historical change of these forms (54). The latter is a-logical in the sense that it represents a sheer violation of the logic (54) imputed to the former. The logic of the synchronic, derived from the systematicity of mutually complementary elements (*langue*), is different from the logic of the diachronic, predicated on the individual errors or deviations (56) by which change in language (e.g. in the meaning of particular words) occurs historically and closely linked to the idiosyncratic randomness of the individual utterance (*parole*). For this reason, the Structuralists are of the view that the *present state of a language and the history of a language do not enter into and are incapable of entering into mutual comprehensibility* (56).

### Language, Speech, and Utterance

Here, Volosinov mounts a critique of Saussure's philosophy of language. He first seeks, contra Saussure, to privilege *parole* over *langue*. He is of the view that the existence of the language system as an objective fact external to and independent of any individual consciousness (65) is a theoretical abstraction and, as such, not ascertainable in practice. When language is looked at objectively, he argues, one glimpses no inert system of self-identical norms (66) but, rather, the ceaseless generation of language forms (66), a ceaseless flow of becoming (66) rather than immutable Being. The synchronic system *does not correspond to any real moment in the historical process of becoming* (66). Ironically, then, the synchronic system may be said to exist only from the point of view of the subjective consciousness of an individual speaker belonging to some particular language group at some particular moment of historical time (66).

The question arises: does language really exist for the speaker's subjective consciousness as an objective system of incontestable, normatively identical forms (67)? No, Volosinov asserts, because such a system is an abstraction (67), the product of deliberation on language . . . by no means carried out by the consciousness of the native speaker himself and by no means carried out for the immediate purposes of speaking (67) and to which the speaker has no direct access (71). The linguistic system is composed of elements extracted in an abstract way from the real units that make up the stream of speech--from utterances (71). Volosinov asserts that such abstraction is always justified by some theoretical and practical goal (71), this being in the case of Structuralist linguistics a focus on defunct, alien languages preserved in written monuments (71) that is one of the most important, if unacknowledged, legacies of the philological movement which has predominated in European linguistics and which has made European linguistic thought concerned with the cadavers of the written languages (71) rather than mastering living speech as actually and continuously generated (71). (All such views of monuments as an allegedly *isolated, finished, monologic utterance* [73] are themselves abstractions

which ignore the precise social context in response to which they emerged and as a result of which each monument is engaged in a polemical, dialogical struggle with its predecessors.) Even if the speaker is seeking to apply normative forms in some concrete context, the centre of gravity lies not in the identity of the form but in that new and concrete meaning it acquires in the particular context (67-68), that is, not that aspect of language which is invariable in all instances of its uses (*langue*) but that aspect because of which it can figure in the given, concrete context, because of which it can figure in the given, concrete situation (68). In other words, what is important for the speaker is not those aspects of language which are stable and immutable (*langue*) but those which are changeable and adaptable (*parole*).

Moreover, the speaker must also take into consideration the point of view of the listener and understander (68). Again, Volosinov argues, *parole* is more important than *langue* in this respect. This is because understanding an utterance is not equivalent to recognising the form used, but rather to understanding it in a particular, concrete context, to understanding its meaning in a particular utterance, i.e., it amounts to understanding its novelty and not to recognising its identity (68). Drawing a distinction between sign and signal, understanding and recognising, Volosinov argues (perhaps mistakenly) that one recognises a sign (e.g. a stop sign) but one understands a sign (e.g. a word).

Volosinov proceeds to argue that the verbal consciousness of speakers (70) has little to do with linguistic form *per se*. Because the linguistic form exists for the speaker only in the context of specific utterances, it exists only in a specific ideological context. As a result, we never say or hear *words*, we say and hear what is true or false, good or bad, important or unimportant, pleasant or unpleasant, and so on. *Words are always filled with content and meaning drawn from behaviour and ideology. . . .* The criterion of linguistic correctness is submerged by a purely ideological criterion; and utterances correctness is eclipsed by its truthfulness or falsity (70). When we reify linguistic form divorced from ideological impletion . . . we end up dealing with a signal and not with a sign of language-speech (71).

### Verbal Interaction

Here, Volosinov critiques the neo-Romantics philosophy of mind and language. He stresses that the point of departure for the Neo-Romantics is the monologic utterance, something understood from the viewpoint of the person speaking and expressing himself (84). From this perspective, the utterance is a purely individual act, the expression of an individual consciousness, its ambitions, intentions, creative impulses, tastes, and so on (84). All speech-acts are subsumed under the category of expression. He defines expression as something which, having in some way taken shape and definition in the psyche of an individual, is outwardly objectified for others with the help of external signs of some kind (84). There are two elements to expression, he points out, that inner something which is *expressible*, and its *outward objectification* for others (or possibly for oneself) (84). The expressible is viewed as something that can somehow take shape and exist apart from expression; that . . . exists first in one form and then switches to another form (84). Operating largely from idealistic and spiritualistic grounds (84), the model of expression presupposes a certain dualism between the inner and outer elements and the explicit primacy of the former, since each act of objectification goes from inside out. Its sources are within. . . . Everything of real importance lies within; the outer element can take on real importance only by becoming a vessel for the inner, by becoming expression of spirit (84). All the creative and organising forces of expression are within. Everything outer is merely passive material for manipulation by the inner element. Expression is formed basically within and then merely shifts to the outside (85). For this reason, understanding, interpretation, and explanation . . . must also be directed inward; it must traverse a route the reverse of that for expression. Starting from outward expression, the explanation must work down into its inner, organising bases (85). However, given Saussure's model of the sign, consciousness does not precede and exist in a different form from the vehicle of its outer expression because there is no such thing as experience outside embodiment in signs (85). Moreover, the location of the organising and formative centre is not within. . . . It is not experience that organises expression, but the other way around—expression organises experience (85).

The Romantic model of language can be critiqued from another perspective. Volosinov turns his attention back to the immediate social situation (85) in which utterances occur. Utterances, oral or written, necessarily occur between two socially organised persons (85), an addresser and an addressee, real or presumed. Each sign delivered in this way is oriented towards an addressee (85) and

presupposes a certain typical and stabilised *social purview* toward which the ideological creativity of our own social group and time is oriented (85). From this point of view, each word is a *two-sided act*. It is determined equally by *whose* word it is and *for whom* it is meant (86). The word is the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee. Each and every word expresses the one in relation to the other. I give myself verbal shape from another's point of view, ultimately, from the point of view of the community to which I belong. (86)

From this perspective, the personality of the speaker, taken from within, . . . turns out to be wholly a product of social interrelations (90). Consequently, the whole route between inner experience (the expressible) and its outward objectification (the utterance) lies entirely across social territory (90). From this perspective also, then, the *individualistic* theory of expression upon which neo-Romantic models of signification are predicated is false for another reason: the *organising centre of any utterance is not within but outside--in the social milieu surrounding the individual being* (93). The Romantics are right to emphasise that individual utterances are what constitute the actual concrete reality of language (93), but they are wrong when they ignore the social nature (93) of the utterance and in attempting to derive the utterance from the speaker's inner world as an expression of that inner world (93). The structure of the utterance and the experience being expressed is a *social structure* (93).

Volosinov's point in his critique of both the Structuralists and the Romantics is that the actual reality of language-speech is not the abstract system of linguistic forms . . . but the social event of verbal interaction implemented in an utterance (94). For this reason, verbal interaction is the basic reality of language (94). Whether oral or written, all utterances imply a response and are, thus, dialogic in nature. Each book, a verbal performance in print (95), anticipates, explicitly or implicitly, a response of some kind as much as it is itself always oriented with respect to previous performances in the same sphere, both those by the same author and those by other authors (95). The printed verbal performance engages, as it were, in ideological colloquy of large scale: it responds to something, objects to something, affirms something, anticipates possible responses and objections, seeks support, and so on (95). Any utterance is only a moment in the continuous process of verbal communication (95).

This raises the issue of the connection between concrete verbal interaction and the extraverbal situation (95). Simply put, verbal interaction can never be considered apart from this link because language *acquires life and historically evolves precisely here, in concrete verbal communication, and not in the abstract linguistic system of language forms, nor in the individual psyche of speakers* (95). But what is the precise nature of this link? Volosinov identifies the precise order which the actual generation of language follows (96):

*social intercourse is generated (stemming from the basis); in its verbal communication and interaction are generated; and in the latter, forms of speech performance are generated; finally, this generative process is reflected in the change of language forms.*  
(96)

This raises, in turn, the problem of the forms of an utterance *as a whole* (96). Because contemporary linguistics goes no further than the elements that constitute an utterance (97), it lacks any approach to the utterance itself (97). However, utterances are the real units that make up the stream of language-speech. What is necessary in order to study the forms of this real unit is precisely that it not be isolated from the historical stream of utterances (96).

With this in mind, Volosinov contends that the whole is defined by its boundaries (96) which run along the line of a contact between a given utterance and the extraverbal and verbal (i.e., made up of other utterances) milieu (96). The first and last words, the beginning and end points of real-life utterance--that is what . . . constitutes the problem of the whole (97). The outwardly actualised utterance is an island rising from the boundless sea of inner speech; the dimensions and forms of this island are determined by the particular *situation* of the utterance and its *audience* (96) resulting in the production of specific forms of utterance, or speech genres, which are determined by the effect of its coming up against the extraverbal milieu and against another word (i.e., the words of other people) (96). Over time, these become fixed and stabilised (96) by social custom and circumstances (97). In short, each situation, fixed and sustained by social custom, commands a particular kind of organisation of audience and, hence, a particular repertoire of little behavioural genres. The behavioural genre fits

everywhere into the channel of social intercourse assigned to it and functions as an ideological reflection of its type, structure, goal, and social composition. . . . It meshes with that milieu and is delimited and defined by it in all its internal aspects (96).

### Theme and Meaning in Language

Having emphasised the priority of parole over language, Volosinov turns his attention here to the problem of meaning (99), in terms both of its production (speech) and reception (interpretation). Langue obviously plays a role in the production of meaning but, if the meaning of an utterance (parole) is derived not solely from the linguistic principles (langue) by which it is informed, how exactly is meaning produced? He names the significance of an utterance as a whole its theme (99), equating it with the expression of the concrete, historical situation that engendered the utterance (99). For this reason, the theme would change each time it is used. The theme of an utterance is produced not only by the linguistic forms that comprise it--words, morphological and syntactic structures, sounds, and intonations--but also by extraverbal factors of the situation (100). He also posits that each utterance has a meaning, that is, all those aspects of the utterance that are not *reproducible and self-identical* in all instances of repetition. Of course, these aspects are abstract; they have no concrete, autonomous existence in an artificially isolated form, but, at the same time, they do constitute an essential and inseparable part of the utterance (100). The meaning, thus, divisible into the components which comprise it, remains the same in all historical instances of its enunciation (100).

With regard to interpretation, Volosinov posits that to understand another's utterance means to orient oneself with respect to it, to find the proper place for it in the corresponding context. For each word of the utterance that we are in the process of understanding, we . . . lay down a set of our own answering words (102). Each of the

distinguishable significative elements of an utterance and the entire utterance as a whole entity are translated in our minds into another, active and responsive, context. *Any true understanding is dialogic in nature.* Understanding is to utterance as one line of dialogue is to next. Understanding tries to match the speaker's word with a *counter word*. . . .

Therefore, there is no reason for saying that meaning belongs to a word as such. In essence, meaning belongs to a word in its position between speakers; that is, meaning is realised only in the process of active, responsive understanding. Meaning does not reside in the word or in the soul of the speaker or in the soul of the listener. Meaning is *the effect of the interaction between speaker and listener produced via the material of a particular sound complex.* Only the current of verbal intercourse endows a word with the light of meaning. (102-103)

Moreover, words possess not only theme and meaning in the referential, or content, sense of these words, but also value judgement: i.e., all referential contents produced in living speech are said or written in conjunction with a specific *evaluative accent* (103). Every utterance is above all an *evaluative utterance* (105) which the Structuralists have completely ignored because the separation of evaluation from word meaning inevitably deprives meaning of its place in the living social process (105) as a result of which it is ontologised and transformed into ideal Being divorced from the historical process of Becoming (105). The most superficial aspect of such judgements are conveyed by oral intonation, of course, but this is not the whole picture with regard to evaluation. Rather, Volosinov contends that referential meaning is moulded by evaluation . . . which determines that a particular referential meaning may enter the purview of speakers--both the immediate purview [of the individual] and the broader social purview of the particular social group [of which the individual is part] (105). Also, evaluation plays a crucial, creative role in the changes of meaning over time: a change in meaning is, essentially, always a *reevaluation*: the transposition of some particular word from one evaluative context to another (105).

Evaluation is always function of social determinants, Volosinov argues. It is impossible to separate the process of signification in language and changes in this process over time from the evaluative purview of a particular social group (106), what he defines as the totality of all those things which have meaning and importance for the particular group (106). This generation (106) of this purview is determined by the expansion of the economic basis (106). The relations between changes in the base and changes to language is dialectical in nature. For this reason, new aspects of existence .

. . do not coexist peacefully with other elements of existence previously drawn in, but engage them in a struggle, reevaluate them, and bring about a change in their position within the unity of the evaluative purview (106). By the same token, at the level of language, a new significance emanates from an old one . . . so that the new significance can enter into contradiction with the old one and restructure it (106). The outcome is a constant struggle of accents in each semantic sector of existence. There is nothing in the structure of signification which could be said to transcend the generative process, to be independent of the dialectical expansion of social purview (106). This is how meaning is subordinated to theme and changed by theme's living contradictions so as to return in the shape of a new meaning with a fixity and self-identity only for a while, just as it had before (106).