

## V. N. VOLOSINOV MARXISM AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE (1929)

### PART I: PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR MARXISM

Where in part II, the focus is on philosophy of language, the emphasis here is on philosophy of mind, the self and subjectivity (overlapping terms). Here, Volosinov considers the implications of the Saussurean critique of traditional models of signification for conventional Marxist models of ideology and, thus, consciousness and, in turn, critiques the Structuralist philosophy of language from a Marxist vantage-point. In other words, what Volosinov is trying to do is to offer, in true Marxist fashion, a dialectical synthesis of two opposing points of view.

#### **"The Study of Ideologies and Philosophy of Language"**

Here, Volosinov makes use of Saussure's Structuralist philosophy of language to critique flawed Marxist conceptions, especially of ideology. This critique is necessary for the simple reason that any "ideological product" (9) (i.e. any socially inspired idea) is a reflection or, more accurately, a refraction or interpretation of reality. As such, it "possesses *meaning*: it represents, depicts, or stands for something lying outside itself. In other words, it is a *sign*. *Without signs, there is no ideology*" (9). Indeed, any "artistic-symbolic image to which a particular physical object [e.g. a body, a tool, a shirt, a consumer good] gives rise is already an ideological product" (9). In other words, any object can become a sign by acquiring a "meaning that goes beyond its given particularity – it reflects and refracts another reality" (10). As such, it may "distort that reality or be true to it, or may perceive it from a special point of view" (10). For this reason, every sign is "subject to the criteria of ideological evaluation (i.e. whether it is true, false, correct, fair, good, etc.). The domain of ideology coincides with the domain of signs. They equate with one another" (10). Although each ideological sphere (e.g. ideas about religion, the law or the nature of society) has its "own kind of orientation toward reality and each refracts reality in its own way" (10), "*it is their semiotic character that places all ideological phenomena under the same general definition*" (11). In short, having failed to grasp the semiotic nature of ideology, Marxist philosophers of the mind have made the mistake of equating ideology (which means, essentially, a false idea or a collection of such ideas) with consciousness (the repository in humans of ideas acquired from without).

By the same token, Volosinov critiques Saussure's model of the sign from a Marxist perspective. He argues that every "ideological sign" (11) is itself a "material segment of that very reality" (11) in that it has "some kind of material embodiment, whether in sound, physical mass, colour" (11), etc. It is as such a "phenomenon of the external world" (11), existing and having effects in the real world. This has crucial implications for idealist philosophies of culture which "locate ideology in the consciousness" (11) of humans and which assume that the "external body of the sign is merely a coating, merely a technical means for the realisation of the inner effect, which is understanding" (11). This view overlooks the fact that understanding itself can come about only by means of some kind of semiotic material and that consciousness becomes a "viable fact only in the material embodiment of signs" (11). Comprehension is, Volosinov stresses, an "act of reference between the sign apprehended and another, . . . a response to a sign with signs" (11). Nowhere, he says, "is there a break in the chain, nowhere does the chain plunge into inner being, nonmaterial in nature and unembodied in signs" (11). Individual consciousness is "filled with signs" (11) derived from "interaction between one individual consciousness and another" (11). That is, consciousness becomes consciousness "only once it has been filled

with ideological (semiotic) content, consequently, only in the process of social interaction" (11).

Idealist philosophers (e.g. Hegel) have sought to define consciousness in transcendental terms ("its locus is somewhere above existence" [12]) while scientific positivists (e.g. the behaviourist Skinner) argue that consciousness "amounts to nothing: it is just a fortuitous, psychophysiological reactions which, by some miracle, results in meaningful and unified ideological creativity" (12). However, the ideological cannot be explained "in terms of either of these superhuman or subhuman, animalian, roots. Its real place in existence is in the special, social material of signs created by man. Its specificity consists precisely in its being located between organised individuals, in its being the medium of their communication" (12). Signs, he concludes, "can arise only on *interindividual territory*" (12). Such territory is not natural but social because the two or more individuals involved are "organised socially" (12) in that they "compose a group (a social unit)" (12). Only then, he argues, "can the medium of signs take shape between them" (12). As a result, *individual* consciousness cannot be used to explain the nature of consciousness in general because it is itself "in need of explanation from the vantage point of the social, ideological medium" (12).

Volosinov insists that the "only possible objective definition of consciousness is a sociological one" (13). It is not derived from nature, as biologicistic approaches to psychology maintain. Rather, consciousness

takes shape and being in the material of signs created by an organised group in the process of its social intercourse. The individual consciousness is nurtured on signs; it derives its growth from them; it reflects their logic and laws. The logic of consciousness is the logic of ideological communication, of the semiotic interaction of a social group. If we deprive consciousness of its semiotic, ideological content, it would have absolutely nothing left. Consciousness can harbor only in the image, the word. . . . Outside such material, there remains the sheer physiological act, unilluminated by consciousness, i.e. without having light shed on it, without having meaning given to it, by signs. (13)

Consciousness is, therefore, "verbally constituted" (15), the sign being the "semiotic material of inner life – of consciousness" (14). Consciousness, then, is synonymous with what Volosinov terms "inner speech" (14). For this reason, the study of ideology may not be reduced to psychology. This is because the "reality of ideological phenomena is the objective reality of social signs. The laws of this reality are the laws of semiotic communication" (13). Because "ideological reality is the immediate superstructure over the economic basis" (13), individual consciousness "is not the architect of the ideological superstructure, but only a tenant lodging in the social edifice of ideological signs" (13).

### **"Concerning the Relationship of the Basis and Superstructures"**

Having defined the nature of consciousness in the previous chapter, Volosinov turns his attention to concerns that are more epistemological in nature, that is, a preoccupation with the nature of the relationship between our ideas and the reality which they ostensibly depict. Given that consciousness always implies consciousness *of something*, it is almost impossible to separate consciousness from cognition, that is, attempts to define the nature of mind from the quest to understand the nature of and the extent to which knowledge is possible. Given the ideological nature of signs, to understand the degree to which a sign can correspond to reality really boils down to a grasp of the "problem of the *relationship of [economic] basis and [ideological] superstructures*" (17), two "interacting" (18) but

"qualitatively different domains, each with its own specific set of laws and its own set of characteristics" (18); one, the plane of material existence, tangible in nature, the other, the plane of ideas, allegedly intangible.

Volosinov denies, firstly, that there is a relationship of "mechanical causality" (17) between base and superstructure whereby particular ideologies are determined by specific elements in the economic base: "no cognitive value whatever adheres to the establishment of a connection between the basis and some isolated fact torn from the unity and integrity of its ideological context" (17-18). To think in this way is to ignore and simplify the "specific nature of the semiotic-ideological material" (18). Rather, every "domain of ideology is a unified whole which reacts with its entire constitution to a change in the basis" (18).

Volosinov contends, secondly, that light is shed on the precise nature of the relationship between base and superstructure by a close examination of the nature of the sign, especially its properties as an ideological sign. What is important in this regard is less its "purity than its social ubiquity" (19), the fact, that is, its implication in all contacts which occur between people. As such, the "countless ideological threads running through all areas of social intercourse register effect in the word" (19) as a result of which the sign is the "most sensitive *index of social changes*, and . . . of changes still in the process of growth, still without definitive shape and not as yet accommodated into already regularised and fully defined ideological systems" (19). The word registers in this way the "transitory, delicate momentary phases of social change" (19). What has come to be termed 'social psychology' (Volosinov's shorthand not just for a field of study but for the view of human consciousness as socially inscribed) and which is viewed as the "transitional link between the sociopolitical order and ideology" (19) is nothing less than "verbal interaction" (19). As a result, social psychology is "not located anywhere within (in the 'souls' of communicating subjects) but entirely and completely *without* – in the word, the gesture, the act. There is nothing left unexpressed in it, nothing 'inner' about it – it is wholly on the outside, wholly brought out in exchanges" (19). The forms and content of these verbal exchanges, what Volosinov terms "speech performances" (19), are necessarily determined by the social relations of production.

Volosinov contends that social psychology "exists primarily in a wide variety of forms of the 'utterance,' of little *speech genres*" (20), that is, "forms of speech interchange" (20) operating in "extremely close connection with the conditions of the social situation in which they occur. And it is in the inner workings of this verbally materialised social psychology, that the barely noticeable shifts and changes that will later find expression in fully fledged ideological products accumulate" (20). For this reason, Volosinov argues, social psychology must be studied not only from the viewpoint of content (the "themes pertinent to this or that moment in time" [20]) but the "from the viewpoints of the forms and types of verbal communication in which the themes in question are implemented" (20). In other words, the emphasis has been on the objects of consciousness (consciousness must always be consciousness of something) but rarely, if ever, on the precise semiotic forms which consciousness inevitably takes. A "*typology of these forms* is one of the urgent asks of Marxism" (20), he stresses. Each period and group has its own "repertoire of speech forms" (20), each "set of cognate forms, i.e., each behavioural speech genre" (20) having its own corresponding set of themes" (20) and an "interlocking organic unity" (20) joining the "form of the utterance" (21) (the signifier) to its "theme" (21) (the signified).

The forms of verbal communication are "entirely determined by production relations and the sociopolitical order" (21). This is because every sign is exchanged between socially organised persons in the process of their interaction. Therefore, the

forms of signs are conditioned above all by the social organisation of the participants involved and also by the immediate conditions of their interaction. . . . Only so approached can the *problem of the relationship between sign and existence* find its concrete expression; only then will the process of the causal shaping of the sign by existence stand out. (21)

Simply put, "ideology may not be divorced from the material of the sign" (21), the "sign may not be divorced from the concrete forms of social intercourse" (21) in which it is used, and, accordingly, "communication and the forms of communication may not be divorced from the material basis" (21) of the society in question.

For this reason, each sign, both its form (signifier) and content (signified), especially the "evaluative accentuation that accompanies all content" (21) is "defined by the social purview of the given time period and the given social group" (21). Form and content are "inextricably bound together" (22), he stresses, and determined by the same material forces. In terms of content, Volosinov argues that each period in the development of a society has its own focus, a "restricted circle of items to which the society gives its attention and thereby "endowed with evaluative accentuation by that attention" (22). For any item to enter the purview of the group and elicit such a reaction, "it must be associated with the vital socioeconomic prerequisites of the particular group's existence; it must somehow, even if only obliquely, make contact with the bases of the group's material life" (22). For this reason, all ideological accents, even though voiced by individuals, are "social accents" (22). Volosinov calls the ideological accentuation of the sign its "theme" (22). The "source of these is not the individual consciousness. Accent is, as such, interindividual" (22). Of course, the "economic conditions that inaugurate a new element of reality into the social purview . . . are exactly the same conditions that create the forms of ideological conditions . . . which in turn shape the forms of semiotic expression" (23). Form and content "emerge from the same matrix and are in essence two sides of the same thing" (23).

The "process of incorporation into ideology" (23) can be best viewed in the "material of the word" (23). Existence (the economic 'basis') is "not merely reflected but *refracted*" (23) in the sign, a process determined by an "intersecting of differently oriented social interests within one and the same sign community, i.e., *by the class struggle*" (23). The language community in question, the "totality of users of the same set of signs" (23), is fractured because "different classes will use one and the same language" (23) as a result of which "differently oriented accents intersect in every ideological sign. Sign becomes an arena of the class struggle" (23). "Social *multiaccentuality*" (23) is, therefore, the key characteristic of the sign and precisely that which makes it a "refracting and distorting medium" (23). Even though the ruling class may strive to make the sign "uniaccentual" (23) and thus to "extinguish . . . the struggle between social value judgments" (23), the fact is that every sign "has two faces, like Janus" (23), what Volosinov describes as its "inner dialectic quality" (23). For this reason, Volosinov stresses, "any current truth must inevitably sound to many other people as the greatest lie" (23). The "contradiction embedded in every ideological sign" (23) is repressed by the dominant ideology which tries to "stabilise the preceding factor in the dialectical flux of the social generative process, so accentuating yesterday's truth as to make it appear today's" (24).

### **"Philosophy of Language and Objective Psychology"**

Here, Volosinov returns to the key questions: "How does psyche function, and what is the nature of its existence" (30). His answer? The nature of the psyche must be understood

"on *sociological*, not physiological or biological, principles" (25). This is because the conscious psyche is a "socioideological fact" (25) and not reducible to "processes occurring within the confines of the natural, animalian organism" (25). It is, as such, an "object for . . . socioideological interpretation" (25). Psychic phenomena are comprehensible "solely in terms of the social factors that shape the concrete life of the individual in the conditions of his social environment" (26). This is tantamount to the problem of "defining 'inner experience 'objectively'" (26).

Volosinov argues, accordingly, that the "reality which pertains to the psyche is the same reality as that of the sign" (26):

Outside the material of signs there is no psyche; there are physiological processes . . . but no subjective psyche as a special existential quality fundamentally distinct from both the physiological processes occurring within the organism and the reality encompassing the organism from outside, to which the psyche reacts and which one way or another it reflects. [T]he subjective psyche is to be localised somewhere between the organism and the outside world, on the *borderline* separating these two spheres of reality. It is here that an encounter between the organism and the outside world takes place, but the encounter is not a physical one: *the organism and the outside world meet here in the sign*. Psychic experience is the semiotic expression of the contact between the organism and the outside environment. That is why *the inner psyche is not analysable as a thing but can only be understood and interpreted as a sign*. (26)

Volosinov admits that he is saying nothing new in this regard, citing the example of Wilhelm Dilthey whose hermeneutical approach to psychology basically suggested much the same thing. However, Dilthey lacks a proper understanding of the process of signification, one of Saussure's most important legacies, believing merely that the sign "serves as the means of expression for inner life" (27), a distinctly Romantic model of the sign.

From the post-Saussurean perspective, Volosinov stresses, it is inevitable that the psyche is semiotic in nature. The psyche is synonymous with what he calls "inner speech" (29). The word "constitutes the foundation, the skeleton of inner life" (29):

experience [our apprehension of the world and our place in it] could hardly come about other than in the material of signs. After all, meaning can belong only to a sign; meaning outside a sign is fiction. Meaning is the expression of a semiotic relationship between a particular piece of reality and another kind of reality that it stands for, or depicts. . . . Therefore, if experience does have meaning, if it is susceptible of being understood and interpreted, then it must have its existence in the material of actual, real signs. (28)

This is why, contra the Romantics' view, "there is no leap involved between inner experience and its expression, no crossing over from one qualitative realm of reality to another" (28). Rather, the "transit from experience to its outward expression occurs within the scope of the same qualitative realm" (28). This is because, in Saussure's model, the signified (the 'content' of an idea) is inseparable from the signifier (its form).

For Volosinov, accordingly, consciousness takes the form of what he terms 'inner speech' (ongoing utterances which comprise the mind) which is available to introspection which amounts to a form of interpretation. The following questions arise: "What is the nature of the word in its role as inner sign? In what form is inner speech implemented? What is its relation to the external utterance? What are the procedures for uncovering, for seizing hold . . . of inner speech" (38). For Volosinov, the answers are derived from the

philosophy of language. He claims that the lexical and grammatical categories applicable to "external language" (38) are not applicable to the analysis of inner speech. This is because, he claims, inner speech is constituted of "certain *whole entities*" (38) mostly resembling the "*alternating lines of a dialogue*" (38). These "units of inner speech" (38) are, as such, self-contained entities which are linked not by grammatical connections, as signs are in a sequence. Rather, they are "joined with one another and alternate with one another not according to the laws of grammar or logic but according to the laws of *evaluative (emotive) correspondence, dialogical deployment*, etc. in close dependence on the historical conditions of the social situation and the whole pragmatic run of life" (38). To put this another way, the light is shed on the nature of inner speech by trying to grasp the "forms of dialogic speech" (38) and the "peculiar logic of their concatenation" (38) in the "stream of inner speech" (38).

In short, for Volosinov, psychic experience is "something inner that becomes outer" (39) while the ideological sign is "something outer that becomes inner" (39). From this perspective, the psyche is "extraterritorial" (39) in that it is a "social entity that penetrates inside the organism of the individual" (39). Between the psyche and ideology, there exists a "continuous dialectical interplay" (39): the "*psyche effaces itself, or is obliterated, in the process of becoming ideology; and ideology effaces itself in the process of becoming the psyche*" (39). For this reason, in each utterance, a dialectical synthesis is constantly occurring between the psyche and ideology, inner and outer:

In each speech-act, subjective experience perishes in the objective fact of the enunciated word-utterance, and the enunciated word is subjectified in the act of responsive understanding in order to generate . . . a counter-statement. Each word is . . . a little arena for the clash and criss-crossing of differently-oriented social accents. A word in the mouth of a particular individual person is a product of the living interaction of social forces. 41).

### QUESTIONS

1. What is Volosinov's goal in this part?

"The Study of Ideologies and Philosophy of Language":

2. Identify two ways in which Volosinov makes use of Saussure's model of the sign to rethink the nature of ideology.
3. How does Volosinov in turn make us of Marxist insights to rethink Saussure's model of the sign?
4. In so arguing, what two theories of the mind does Volosinov oppose?

"Concerning the Relationship of the Basis and Superstructures":

5. Why is Volosinov's concerns in this chapter more epistemological in nature?
6. To what problem does the question of the degree to which a sign can correspond to reality 'boil down' to?
7. Why does Volosinov deny a relationship of "mechanical causality" (17) between base and superstructure?
8. What link does Volosinov perceive between the base and superstructure?
9. Why does Volosinov argue that all forms of verbal communication are "entirely determined by production relations and the sociopolitical order" (21)? How exactly does the sign function as the "most sensitive *index of social changes*" (19)?

10. What does Volosinov say about the 'form' (the signifier) of the sign? What, in this regard, are "speech genres" (20)?
11. What does Volosinov say about the 'content' of the sign?
12. What are the epistemological consequences of Volosinov's view that the "totality of users of the same set of signs" (23) is fractured because "different classes will use one and the same language" (23) as a result of which "differently oriented accents intersect in every ideological sign. Sign becomes an arena of the class struggle" (23).

"Philosophy of Language and Objective Psychology":

13. To what key questions does Volosinov return here?
14. How does Volosinov define the psyche?
15. How is what Volosinov calls 'inner speech' different from "external language" (38)?
16. Why does Volosinov describe the psyche as "extraterritorial" (39)?