

Table Ronde
La ‘modélisation métaphorique’ dans la représentation des phénomènes.
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On trouvera ci-dessous un deuxième texte de Patrick Sériot, pour servir de base à son argumentation sur le thème

"Voloshinov et la philosophie de l'enthymème"

qu'il développera en séance.

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Split or whole? The status of subject and society in Vološinov's work

I would like to highlight some key features in the history of a great misunderstanding: the reception of V. Vološinov's texts by left-wing Western European intellectuals in the 1970s, mainly in France. By doing so, I think it will be possible to show, *by contrast*, the specificity of Vološinov's work. Indeed, for French readers, familiar with M. Foucault's idea of «the death of the subject», reading Vološinov meant at the same time recognizing well-known topics (*e.g.* a theory of «ideology») and discovering a totally unknown universe. This discrepancy was enhanced by problems of translation, with different translators offering their readers a terminology which could make sense for them at this very period of intellectual discussions in Western Europe¹. The most striking example is probably the notion of «social psychology», which was immediately interpreted through the filter of L. Althusser's notion of ideology as *false consciousness*, where the main stress was on the *unconscious* aspect of everything ideological, therefore uncontrollable.

The core of the matter is the status of the subject and the very definition of society: in both cases, the question is whether those objects are homogeneous or heterogeneous, harmonious or chaotic, if they are subjected to laws and regularity (*zakonomernost'*) or if they develop at random; in other words: what is society made of? what is a subject? (or is it the same as an individual?). And, finally, are they compact wholes or divided entities, *full* or *split*?

By opening this discussion, I do not mean to say that *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (from now on *MPL*) has no connection with Marxism at all, but that it has very little to do with Marxism in the *sense* it had in Western Europe in the 1970s and 1980s.

¹ The confusing effects of translation are even more obvious when new words like «discourse», which have no equivalent in Vološinov's texts, are used. For instance, for «problema vyskazyvanija i dialoga», the French translation of *MPL* gives «le problème de l'énonciation et du discours» (1977, p. 40) instead of «de l'énoncé et du dialogue», Houdebine speaks of «l'implication des sujets parlants dans un milieu social-idéologique-discursif toujours-déjà-là» (1977, p. 166), and Lepschy speaks of «polidiscorsività» in his study of *MPL* (1992, p. 140). The German «Rede» is less misleading, because of its neutrality.

I/ Undivided subject : the «integral man»²

The fact that an author can be interpreted in many different ways reveals his strength as well as his weakness. But it is also the result of neglecting to understand him in his own context.

MPL was translated into French in 1977, at a time when the dominant atmosphere among West European intellectuals was a sort of Freud-Marxism, or, more generally, the idea that the division of society was as inescapable as the division of the subject. The key words were division, flaw and heterogeneity.

It is therefore not surprising that Vološinov's *MPL* was seen through the filter of Lacan's «ça parle (en moi)» («it speaks (in me)»), instead of «I speak while taking the others into account because we live in society».

MPL was also considered as a sort of marxization of linguistics, for instance by Bernard Gardin, who considered this book as a «new epistemological breaking», with Vološinov superseding Saussure, to become the basic reference from now on (Gardin, 1978, p. 88).

Left-wing intellectuals in Western Europe seldom asked the following question : why did Vološinov make such a determined stand against psychoanalysis? A great misunderstanding results from researchers like J. Kristeva trying to adapt Bakhtin-Vološinov's ideas to the mainstream of Western scholarship at the end of the 20th Century, thus giving the retrospective illusion that Vološinov is to be read through a psychoanalytical filter.

If we leave aside Vološinov's indignation in front of the «monstrous overestimation of the role of sexuality in culture» (1925, p. 192), what is at stake is mainly his refusal of «dualism», in the name of «monism» (*ib.*, p. 203).

For Vološinov, psychoanalysis is a typical symptom of decadence of bourgeois philosophy, as it aims at showing that everything in man is bestial (*ib.*, p. 186), while reducing man to an «abstract biological organism» (*ib.*), which means «separated from the concrete social milieu». In fact, for him, only the socio-historical existence of man is *real*, everything else is «abstract», or «fictional», whereas for Freud only psychism is supposed to be «real». Freudism is a bourgeois ideology because it conceals man's social reality and explains all his actions by unconscious sexual urges.

Vološinov is deeply shocked by the idea that «ideological creativity» could be determined by bio-psychic elements (*ib.* p. 199), and thinks that Freudian psychoanalysis has not invented anything new, that it is just a new presentation of the old subjective psychology (*ib.*, p. 201). As an alternative, he proposes an «objective psychology», where only observable behavioural facts are to be taken into account (*ib.*, p. 210). In Vološinov's subject we can find no gap, no narcissic wound, nothing is missing. He has neither fantasy nor unconscious desire, he is never alienated, because he necessarily belongs to a «social milieu» by which he is «totally determined» (*vsecelo opredeljaetsja*); if he falls out of his social milieu, he becomes marginalized (*deklasirovannyj*) and «falls into madness or idiocy» (1930, p. 71). But at the same time, and contradictorily enough, he adapts himself to his listeners's expectations and particularities, like Čičikov in Gogol's novel *The Dead Souls*, who knows how to address the different characters among the bureaucrats and landlords (Vološinov, 1930, p. 84). This is an extremely classical device in *rhetoric* : if you want your

² In Russian : «cel'nyj čelovek», cf. Vološinov, 1925, p. 187, or «celyj čelovek», *ib.*, p. 214.

message to be successful, you have to adapt it to your interlocutor. It is difficult to detect any marxist or psychoanalytical problematics here.

The question «*quis loquitur?*» is an extremely complex one in Bakhtin's work. But in the texts signed by Vološinov³ this question has no place : by adapting his speech to the listeners, by anticipating their reactions, the speaking subject demonstrates a total *mastery* of his own words. This, in its turn, raises the problem of the otherness of the other : for Vološinov, the other (*drugoj, čužoj*) is not imaginary, it is an alter ego, an actual other being of the same «milieu», defined in extremely broad terms.

In Vološinov's texts there is nothing like the difference between a speaker and a *subject of enunciation*. True, the speaker at times is torn between different «voices», he «hesitates» (1930, p. 70). But he is always the final master, for the very simple reason that he has *no unconscious*. And if Vološinov despises so much the idea of the unconscious, it is because he thinks that the unconscious is a sort of bag with a heap of infantile, childish «everything allowed», that is, something not serious (*ib.*, p. 195, 211) a bag full of everything that consciousness does not want. He is not aware of the materiality of the signifier in the unconscious⁴, although he constantly writes that «ideology is made of signs». For him, the unconscious is a sort of «foreign body in the psychism», *i.e.* a destructive element of consciousness (*ib.*, p. 190). If the unconscious has no place in Vološinov's philosophy of consciousness, it is because consciousness is entirely made of signs, and signs are necessarily exterior to the individual consciousness.

In Vološinov's work one cannot find the idea that the subject is an effect of language, as in Lacan, there is not even a «linguistic turn» : one can find no reflection on the specificity of personal pronouns as a linguistic foundation of subjectivity (as for Benveniste, «*La nature des pronoms*», 1966, p. 251-257), neither on the peculiarity of the utterances containing a pronoun of the first person singular or on the peculiar forms of deixis (the «here and now»).

Finally, an interesting comparison can be made with the personalistic philosophers of his time. Many elements in Emmanuel Mounier (1905-1950) echo Vološinov's thinking.

«The primordial experience of the person is the experience of the second person. *You* [le *tu*], and in it *we*, precedes *I*» (1949 [1965, p. 38]). Mounier's philosophy is totally opposed to individualism : for him it is not true that the persons, simple juridical subjects, exist first separately and then create links with one another. On the contrary, he thinks that the relation of one person to other persons is paramount, and he fights the individual's isolation in the bourgeois world. Like Vološinov, he considers the notion of individual as being totally *abstract*, hence *unreal*. Only the person exists, because it is totally immersed in the life of a community. We shall see, nonetheless, that a substantial difference separates them as far as *action* is concerned. For personalism, the person builds itself on the background of impersonality, which is incompatible with Vološinov's hyper-determinism.

³ We will not get into the discussion on authorship, arguing that no serious evidence has ever been given that Vološinov was not the author of the texts he signed.

⁴ He even writes that «there is neither contradiction nor negation in the unconscious», (1925, p. 189), which reveals a very superficial knowledge of Freud's texts. His presentation of psychic activity in Freud as being «put into movement by external and internal irritations of the organism» (*ib.*, 192) is but a caricature.

In Vološinov's work, the subject is not *divided*, it is *linked* to his «social milieu», the consciousness of which is a «second birth» (1925, p. 187). This subject is an individual-in-context; when he speaks, he becomes a speaker, and not a «subject of enunciation», unlike for Benveniste, for whom «it is in and by language that the individual constitutes himself as a subject» (1966, p. 259). That is why «teorija vyskazyvanija» is a theory of the utterance, and not a theory of enunciation. Vološinov holds a monadistic conception of the person, involved in a permanent interaction (including verbal interaction among others) with other persons, which is hard to make coincide with the idea of total determinism by sociality.

In *MPL* it is clearly said that the speaker is «a subject expressing his own inner life» (p. 60, English translation p. 58). It is also clear that the other's speech (*čužaja reč'*) is regarded by the speaker as the utterance of an other subject (*MPL*, p. 114) (the English translation gives «as an utterance belonging to someone else» (p. 116), thus leaving aside the question of subjectivity). Thus, the subject is an undivided whole. Unlike the Cartesian subject, he does belong to a concrete socio-historical milieu, but this milieu is homogeneous⁵. The subject fully coincides with his milieu, he never revolts against it.

II / Society as an ecological *milieu*

True, for Vološinov, society *is* split. He often repeats that class struggle is the engine of history. There are civil wars (30b), strikes, bloody confrontations between workers and the police, but as soon as the notion of *utterance* is at stake, consensus comes back. In fact, what interests Vološinov is not so much society as sociality. There, two key words appear : «social groups» (*obščestvennye gruppy*) and «social milieu» (*obščestvennaja sreda*). The relationship between those terms is not very clear. One thing, however, should be emphasized : society is split, but the group is a whole.

Vološinov has no theory of the subject, but constantly speaks of subjects as individuals living in a determined «social situation» or «social milieu», which can at times be also «everyday life» (*bytie*). For him, the subjects are individuals (*ljudi*), and yet they are immersed in a «milieu», which is always «social», or «socially organized». It seems that the opposite of a «socially organized milieu» would be a purely «organic» or «biological» definition of life, which, for Vološinov, makes no sense at all : «life» is nothing but social.

Once again, the status of ideology can help us figuring out what sociality is. The main difference with Western European marxists is that for Vološinov, even if he never gives any precise definition, ideology has nothing to do with the unconscious.

It is worthwhile noting the gap between Vološinov's declarations and his concrete examples. Despite his declarations, there is no class struggle in language or speech, because there is no struggle, but mutual comprehension.

For Vološinov, when people speak, they understand each other without needing everything to be made explicit, because they share a «common horizon» (*obščij krugozor, edinyj krugozor*), which is a «value horizon» (*cennostnyj krugozor*). This word appears quite often in Vološinov's texts. It means a common knowledge which at times is synonym of «ideology». Each group, be it called «social group» or «human group» (*čelovečeskaja gruppirovka*, see Vološinov, 1930a, p. 56) has a

⁵ In Vološinov's texts, a most negative key-word is «division» (e.g. 1925, p. 195), its positive counterpart is «link».

«common horizon», which can be at the same time an «ideological horizon» (Vološinov, 1930b, p. 43), or a «social horizon» (*ib.*, p. 47). This «horizon» is totally shared, without anything left out, and it is made of everything which is implied by a knowledge the speakers have in common (*podrazumevaemyj, t.e. prostranstvennyj i smyslovoj krugozor govorjaščix*, Vološinov, 1926, p. 252). In other words, it is useless to speak to people who do not share your «horizon»; at least Vološinov never speaks of what happens when people with different «horizons» speak together. It seems this situation never happens : people actually communicate only when they belong to the same «milieu».

In fact, the «milieu» is rather *ecological* than what we would call *sociological* : it is like the pond for the ducks or the torrent for the trout, or, as Vološinov himself puts it, like «air for combustion» (1928, p. 116). It has nothing to do with the use of the word «milieu» in Western European differential sociology (a disadvantaged milieu, an intellectual milieu, an urban milieu, etc.).

It is clear now that for Vološinov «ideology» is very far from false consciousness : it is made of this common social horizon, which belongs to all the speakers of a milieu, the milieu itself being defined tautologically as encompassing all the people who share a common horizon. Ideology here is very similar to the notion of *Weltanschauung* for the German Romantics. What is new is that sociality means successful communication thanks to shared knowledge of a concrete situation.

Vološinov writes that a common language is used by a split society, but *all* the examples he gives show communication in a homogeneous social milieu. A key notion is communication (*obščenie*) and interaction (*vzaimodejstvie*), with everything going well inside any «milieu». No lapsus, no failure, no misunderstanding ever happen.

Vološinov promises class struggle, but he presents us a world of communication without hindrance, between people who, by «taking into account the listeners», show their goodwill, as with Grice's maxims forty years later, for successful communication and understanding. For instance, the scheme of communication is «soulless» (*lišen duši*) if the speaker and the listener are not considered as members of a common «sphere of organized social communication», *i.e.* a community with shared values and common knowledge of a concrete situation (*MPL*, p. 47). So, even if society is actually divided into antagonistic social classes, communication always takes place in a *homogeneous* «milieu», a community of values, because of a presupposition of goodwill in the speakers, who all want to communicate successfully. There is no misunderstanding in the implied utterances, as they all belong to a common horizon, or common knowledge. And here again reading Vološinov in his time and place is more relevant than trying to make him fit in a post-Benveniste and post-Foucault universe. The theory of the milieu has a history, which is to be found for instance in Paul Lafargue's main work of 1894, a text which was well-known in Russia, even if it was translated only in 1930.

«A language cannot be isolated from its social milieu, no more than a plant can be uprooted from its meteorological milieu. As a rule, linguists ignore or scorn the action of the milieu. [...] Only if the etymological results of the orientalisists were less contradictory could we abandon for their method the theory of the milieu, which tends now to become dominant in all branches of natural and historic sciences. The theory of the milieu has been introduced in France in literary criticism by a woman of genius, Mme de Staël». (Lafargue, 1894 [1977, p. 81-82]).

Vološinov fails to solve the contradiction between the same and the other : the other is someone utterly different, whose words have to be taken into account, and who participates concretely in the act of communication, but at the same time the others as a whole constitute this «social milieu», so essential to communication.

The idea of shared knowledge is exemplified in the famous episode of late winter in *Slovo v žizni* (1926) :

«Two people are sitting in a room. They keep silent. One says ‘well !’. The other does not answer anything» (1926, p. 249). Only the common knowledge of the common situation can allow this utterance to be understood. That is how «social» is explained : the implied, or context-dependent information is necessary, it must be shared by the participants of the act of communication. There can be no misunderstanding in what is implied in the common context. A very similar example is given with the examination at university : the teacher and the student do not need any explanation for the « hmm!» ; they totally *agree* with the scale of value : the student is ashamed and the teacher is full of reproach (1930, p. 76).

Is it necessary to be a Marxist to insist on the necessity of including shared knowledge and context dependance in understanding an utterance?

For Vološinov, everybody is «entirely determined» by the ideology of one’s group. The consequence of this total determinism is the impossibility of any programme of action, of transforming anything in society. The paradox is that Vološinov’s «marxist philosophy of language» is totally devoid of political thinking and of any idea of political involvement, even of the kind of a personalist like E. Mounier. Unlike Gramsci, his contemporary, there is no notion of hegemony, no interrogation on the fact that the dominated can share the values of the dominant ideology and adhere to it (see the idea of «consent» in Gramsci). The idea of alienation is totally alien to Vološinov. Unlike Gramsci, the intellectuals have absolutely no role to play in any programme of changing society. There is no possibility of insurrection, because we are entirely (*vsecelo*) determined by our place in society, by our social existence (*bytie*), by the «ideology» of our group. Unlike Marx, there is no idea that the values of the ruling class are the dominant ideas of an entire society : each social group has its own ideology, and it is impossible to get out of this ideology, unless one becomes «mad or idiot». Thus it is clear why there is no voluntarism in Vološinov, no «philosophy of praxis» (Gramsci), but a total fatalism of absolute determinism : it is a theory of knowledge, and not a theory of action. As the fish cannot breathe outside water, man cannot communicate outside his social milieu.

Vološinov proposes no critical analysis of the existing order, no «praxis». He never uses the word «revolution» as a programme of action in order to break any *statu quo*. He never speaks of the Party. He never bothers about the education of the working class. For him there is nothing to criticise and nothing to conquer. There are only utterances to be *understood* in their concrete context. No survey, no field study⁶, no checking of hypotheses is ever made. Instead, we read constant dogmatic formulas *x is not z but y*, e.g. : consciousness is not individual, but social. The result is a surprising *social conformism*.

Conclusion

⁶ His examples are either invented or taken from literature.

In Vološinov's texts every level is one-dimensional. Neither the subject nor the group nor knowledge are divided.

Vološinov strives to overcome Saussurian antinomies (langue/parole, synchrony/diachrony), he aims at refusing an epistemological position in favor of an ontological position : what he is looking for is «the essence of language» or «the (real) nature of language».

Vološinov's aim is not a transformation of the actual social structure, but on the contrary, the necessity of mastering the codes, the «genres», in brief, all social conventions to achieve successful *communication*. Unlike Marxism, it is the «nearest social situation of a conversation which fully determines the appraisal in the word and in the intonation» (*MPL*). His work is a pragmatics of meaning in context, not even a sociology of language, not to mention class relationships.

His general line of reasoning is double, made of two incompatible parallel lines :

- 1) social existence fully determines consciousness;
- 2) the speaker has many facets, which he orientates according to his audience, or taking into account the addressee's possible answer.

We have brought to light an important ambiguity of Vološinov, torn between a personalism of the accountable act which takes the others into account, and a sociology of implacable impersonal determinism.

Thus, the main contradiction lies between mastering and not mastering the situation. In any event, what is at stake is an ideal of harmony with the relevant milieu, which is not far from social conservatism.

Vološinov's texts are neither meant nor made to be read in the Western world in the 21st Century. They need to be read in their time and space context, following his own principle of contextualization.

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Vološinov Valentin 1926. «Slovo v žizni i slovo v poèzii. K voprosam sociologicheskoi poètiki», *Zvezda*, n° 6, p. 244-267. [The word in life and the word in poetry. The question of a sociological poetics]

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Vološinov Valentin 1930a. «Čto takoe jazyk?», *Literaturnaja učeba*, 2, p. 48-66. [What is language?]

Vološinov Valentin 1930b. «Slovo i ego social'naja funkcija», *Literaturnaja učeba*, 5, p. 43-59. [The word and its social function]

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- English :

V.N. Vološinov : *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, translated by Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik, Seminar Press, 1973. 8th Edition : Harvard University Press, 2000.

- French :

Mikhail Bakhtine (V.N. Volochinov) : *Le marxisme et la philosophie du langage. Essai d'application de la méthode sociologique en linguistique*, translated by Marina Yaguello, Paris : Editions de Minuit, 1977.

- German :

Valentin N. Vološinov : *Marxismus und Sprachphilosophie. Grundlegende Probleme der soziologischen Methode in der Sprachwissenschaft*. Herausgegeben und eingeleitet von Samuel M. Weber, Frankfurt/M., Berlin, Wien: Ullstein, 1975