The New Paradigm in Linguistic Science

By the middle of the 1920s, a root-and-branch rethink of the nature and tasks of the science of language had taken place when compared with the understanding prevalent at the turn of the century. This movement was not confined to Russia, and the paradigm shift completed by Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* [Course in General Linguistics, hereafter *CLG*] was clearly a crucial part of the transformation. Though a published translation of *CLG* appeared only in the 1930s, an incomplete translation was circulating among Russian scholars at the beginning of the 1920s.¹ However, as Vladimir Alpatov correctly argues, it was the fact that this shift coincided with the political and social changes inaugurated by the revolutions of 1917 that gave the development of Soviet linguistics its particular character.² The synchronic focus characteristic of the new paradigm clashed with the linguistic research of the late nineteenth century, which often focused on the ancient past, pursued the reconstruction of proto-languages or studied the dialects that diverged from the standard ‘literary’ language as relict forms. The generation that pursued such work was quickly replaced by a new generation that took the contemporary language as its object, but these scholars now found themselves in an institutional environment quite different to their predecessors. As Lev Zinder and Tat’iana Stroeva wrote about their time at one Leningrad institute:

A characteristic feature of the time was an urge to derive something of directly practical usefulness from all research. And the field activity in this sense was vast: in the first place, the majority of languages were essentially unstudied and had no written form, the national language policy of the fledgling Soviet state introduced the study of a native language and in a native language; there was the spread of the literary language among the labouring masses: worker correspondents, peasant correspondents, agitators and propagandists; a method of teaching foreign European languages widely took root among the masses, a method that had to be decisively distinguished from the method of the

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² Alpatov 2010.
‘governess’ (L.V. Shcherba). New types of grant were created in connection with all these tasks.3

The provision of resources for new types of research was fundamental, and clearly accelerated the development of applied linguistics. As I have argued elsewhere, this led directly to the development of a version of sociolinguistics decades before the rise of such a discipline in the West.4 In this chapter, we focus in on the new perspectives on language that emerged in the 1920s and how they related to the linguistic dimensions of hegemony discussed above.

The relationship of Soviet scholars to the new synchronic paradigm is a significant topic in itself. While this is generally associated with CLG, Polivanov could write in 1929 that ‘with regard to the famed posthumous book by de Saussure, one can assert with certainty that there are no new premises in it which would not already have been known to us from the teaching of Baudouin de Courtenay’.5 With regard to many of Saussure’s individual premises, one can have considerable sympathy for the view that it is difficult to find any that are completely original, although the way in which the CLG systematised the premises into a whole new definition of the object domain of linguistics, as opposed to general philology and psychology, was undoubtedly unprecedented. As Olga Amsterdamska has noted, while ‘the distinction between synchrony and diachrony existed in nuce’ in the works of Baudouin and Kruszewski, they regarded the adoption of synchronic and diachronic analyses as ‘an entirely natural and unproblematic procedure’ and thus did not fundamentally challenge the notion of language as a ‘psycho-physical entity’ that had been inherited from the neo-grammarians.6 Saussure, on the other hand, regarded such a notion as but one possible way of conceiving language, contending that linguistic facts were not ‘objective entities independent of the scientific mode of investigation’ but creations of the particular perspective chosen by the observer.7 Saussure makes this point directly:

The object is not given in advance of the viewpoint: far from it. Rather, one might say that it is the viewpoint adopted which creates the object.

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3 Zinder and Stroeva 1999, p. 207.
5 Polivanov 1974 [1929], p. 176.