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Gramsci and Saussure: Similarities and Possible Links

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Abstract

Few books from the first half of the twentieth century have exerted the same long-lasting, interdisciplinary influence as Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* and Ferdinand De Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*. The former is the work of a political leader and philosopher who is now widely appreciated by scholars in the humanities and social sciences, including several scholars in language studies; while the latter is the work of a linguist who, at least as the initiator of linguistic structuralism, has been regarded as a fundamental author and source of inspiration by many anthropologists, sociologists, social theorists, and political philosophers. Both the *Course* and the *Notebooks* were published after the authors' deaths. The first edition of the *Course in General Linguistics* was published in 1916. Are there any links between the ideas expressed in this book and those of Gramsci, who wrote his *Prison Notebooks* between 1929 and 1935? Although no documentary evidence exists confirming that Gramsci read the *Course*, some passages from his writings bear striking resemblances to the contents of Saussure's posthumous work. I shall argue that events in Gramsci's life can be held responsible for these resemblances. Between 1911 and 1926, he studied linguistics at Turin University and came into contact with early Soviet cultural life, residing in Russia twice in the early 1920s. Soviet linguists were then discussing the ideas contained in the *Course*, and post-revolutionary cultural life was, on the whole, quite receptive towards these ideas. Therefore, it is likely that they became part of the cultural milieu which influenced the development of Gramsci's thought.

Two productive trends in recent research on Gramsci

Researchers into the life and work of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) are still assimilating the great variety of debates which took place in 2007, the seventieth anniversary of Gramsci's death. During this year, numerous events were held in many different countries, including some important international conferences. Themes that have, traditionally, been more frequently investigated continue to attract wide interest – in such fields as history, philosophy, and political theory. But there are also innovative studies, which reflect new perspectives and a focus on previously less analysed subjects. As emerged during the events of 2007, one line of study which currently appears to be particularly productive, and is likely to witness further expansion in the future, concerns the analysis of Gramsci's sources¹. I shall contribute to this research trend by adopting a non-reductive, culturalist approach. In tracing the origins of Gramsci's reflections and concepts, I will not so much try to produce evidence, based solely on the bibliographical references which can be found in Gramsci's writings, of the direct influence which a particular author exerted on him. Rather, I will try to place Gramsci within some of the cultural networks of his historical period. However, this does not mean that a phylogenetic relationship can be established based on merely impressionistic, or altogether arbitrary observations. Often, a sufficient number of "clues" makes it possible to infer that Gramsci's cultural experiences resulted in his being influenced by a particular author, or group of authors. Only when this is the case will such influence be discussed, regardless of how direct or conscious it might have been.

In the present article, I shall combine this trend with another field of study which also seems open to new contributions and to be potentially capable of boosting Gramscian studies considerably. This field of study consists of research with a specific focus on language, and was initially conducted by Luigi Rosiello and few other scholars, until the publication, in 1979, of *Lingua, intellettuali, egemonia in Gramsci*, by Franco Lo Piparo – a groundbreaking book which cast light on the role that linguistics played in the formation of Gramsci's thought, and especially on his innovative conception of *hegemony*. Even though Lo Piparo's work was followed by

articles and book chapters by Tullio De Mauro, Leonardo Salamini, Niels Helsloot, Klaus Bochmann, and others, this research has not reached an adequately wide public, even amongst Gramscian scholars, nor does it seem to have explored all the aspects which emerged from the work of those scholars and, in more recent years, from that of Peter Ives and Derek Boothman. However, all the authors mentioned so far have indeed succeeded in establishing two specular interpretative trends. One trend aims at giving language-related reflections the right place in Gramsci's thought, while the other wants «to give Gramsci his due place in the history of linguistic thought»².

My contribution to the research outlined in the previous paragraphs focuses on some of the ideas which the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), the founder of linguistic Structuralism, expressed in his hugely influential *Course in General Linguistics*³. The ideas contained in this book have not only influenced language studies; in the course of the twentieth century, they have also attracted the attention of scholars interested in redefining the epistemological foundations of research in the humanities, and in the social and political sciences.

Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, written between 1929 and 1935, have enjoyed a similarly wide, multidisciplinary reception. The first affinity which comes to the fore, when discussing these two books, is of a rather extrinsic nature: they were both published after the authors' deaths (in a form which had not been worked out for publication by either Saussure or Gramsci), and are largely based on fragmentary notes whose correct understanding editors and interpreters have long been discussing. In a sense, this explains their influence in different historical periods and disciplinary fields. The fact that they are not organic, fully revised works would seem to have enhanced their adaptability to different interpretations and appropriations. My article, however, is aimed at showing that there might be some intrinsic connections between the two works; or, more precisely, that Gramsci's reflections on language might owe something to the influence of Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*.

I will begin by briefly reconstructing the role of language studies in Gramsci's intellectual biography. A discussion will follow of some significant passages from his writings, which are particularly reminiscent of Saussure's approach. Later, after a methodological section on the different ways in which the links between Gramsci and Saussure can be studied, I shall discuss the channels through which the former may

have been influenced by the *Course in General Linguistics*. I shall conclude my article by tentatively making some general comments on the relationship between Saussure's Structuralism and Gramsci's Marxism, and on the outstanding influence which the latter continues to exert.

Gramsci's training in linguistics and language-related subjects

Gramsci was born in the village of Ales, in central Sardinia. This was a rural, backward, poverty-stricken, and culturally marginal area. However, local intellectual production was not insignificant in Ghilarza, a small town near Ales where Gramsci spent most of his childhood. Here he came into contact with a priest, Michele Licheri, who was interested in linguistics and in the study of dialects and folkloric culture⁴. After moving to Turin (in 1911) to study at the local university, Gramsci did not forget Father Licheri, and when needing information about Sardinian dialects, he wrote to his sister Teresina and asked her to consult him as a reliable, qualified source⁵.

In Cagliari, while still a high-school student, Gramsci caught the attention of one of his teachers, Raffa Garzia. Garzia was the editor of the daily newspaper *L'Unione Sarda* (still published today) and also a fine connoisseur of the history and language of Sardinia⁶. It was thanks to this teacher that Gramsci had the opportunity to write his first newspaper report, in 1910⁷. In 1919, in an article written as part of the successful campaign that the Turinese socialists conducted among the Sardinian troops, Gramsci referred to a popular Sardinian anthem against the feudal lords⁸, on which Garzia had published a study in 1897⁹.

The main influence on the young Gramsci in the field of historical linguistics and dialectology came, however, from Matteo Bartoli – Gramsci's professor of glottology at Turin University. Bartoli (1873-1946) had begun to teach there in 1907, after studying and conducting research in different Italian and European universities, including Vienna, Florence, Strasburg, and Paris¹⁰. He soon became aware of the qualities of his Sardinian student and, in the academic year 1912-13, asked Gramsci to transcribe and edit the lecture notes of his course¹¹. Bartoli expected Gramsci to become an academic linguist, yet these expectations were to remain unrealised. Though continuing to work

on what should have been his thesis «on the history of language»¹² for a few more years, Gramsci eventually abandoned his university studies without graduating.

Echoes of Saussure's ideas

1. The first element that needs to be taken into account, when discussing Gramsci's ideas against the background of Saussurean linguistics, is the distinction between the *synchronic* and the *diachronic* study of language. In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci writes about «historical grammar»¹³, that is, the diachronic description of a language; but he also points to the possibility of a synchronic description. Indeed, he makes a clear distinction between the two viewpoints which Saussure (1959, 79 ff.) terms «static and evolutionary linguistics» – the latter being occasionally referred to, by Saussure too, as «historical grammar».¹⁴

According to Saussure, it is «the intervention of the factor of time» that forces linguists to choose between these two «divergent paths»¹⁵. He compares the difference between static and evolutionary linguistics to that between «political history» and «the science of political institutions», yet he finds a more appropriate equivalence in the clear duality that separates «political economy and economic history»¹⁶. On the one hand, linguistic signs form part of a system, in that the value of each sign is defined by its relationship with the other signs belonging to the same language. Yet, on the other hand, linguistic signs are not merely conventional – they are social and historical products. The use that people make of a language through time contributes to redefining the systematic relationships amongst its signs, as well as the way in which the signs of that particular language indicate thoughts, purports, material objects and other extra-linguistic entities.

The *Course* contains clear statements regarding the duality between «the system of values per se and the same values as they relate to time»¹⁷. This duality between synchrony and diachrony is not only an epistemological device adopted by linguists for the sake of a more accurate understanding of their subject matter; in actual fact, it is inherent in the object of linguistics. Static phenomena, for instance, exist in the minds of speakers, and are essentially the only ones that matter to them in their use of language¹⁸.

Similarly, Gramsci writes that the «the distinction and the identification of words and concepts», when considered in relation to the «historical movement of the entire language», turn out to change «through time», and to be «developing and not only static»¹⁹.

Referring to the synchronic description of a language Gramsci compares grammar and photography, arguing that grammar «is the “photograph” of a given phase of a national (collective) language that has been formed historically and is continuously developing, or the fundamental traits of a photograph»²⁰. Gramsci reiterates the comparison with photography to indicate the synchronic description of the grammar of a language. This description, which can be used for didactic and normative purposes, presents the means of expression used by a linguistic community in «a given time and place»²¹, photographed «in one abstract moment»²². Traditionally – as Saussure also acknowledges²³ – synchronic descriptions have indeed been used as «normative grammars»²⁴, in which case they differ from «historical grammar» in the same way «politics» differs from «history»²⁵.

A similar comparison of grammar and photography can also be found in Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics*²⁶. Moreover, the idea of the synchronic description of a *language-state*, from which «the intervention of time is excluded»²⁷, as an operation of abstraction from the real, constantly changing existence of a language is a landmark of Saussurean linguistics²⁸.

Finally, Gramsci also explains that, of course, grammarians cannot ignore the history of the language they intend to describe; however, their work needs to be based on the description of an ideally stable phase in the history of the language. Their work is essentially one of synchronic description²⁹. This is consistent with Saussure’s statement that «the linguist can neither describe [a language] nor draw up standards of usage except by concentrating on one state» of the language³⁰.

2. I shall now move on to Gramsci’s views on the role of metaphors in language. Through his remarks on this topic, Gramsci comes essentially to share three of the general principles which are specific to Saussure’s views, as expressed in the *Course in General Linguistics*: a) that linguistic conventions are arbitrary, and thus different from other social institutions which are to some degree based on the «natural relations of

things»³¹; b) that, instead of being fixed once and for all by the completely free decision of an individual or a restricted group³², linguistic conventions are the «product of social forces»³³; and c) that linguistic conventions are «the heritage of the preceding period», since «social forces are linked with time»³⁴. Famously, the *Course* deals with both the *immutability* and the *mutability* of linguistic signs (or, more precisely, of both the systematic relationships amongst signs, and the internal relationship between the two elements that constitute each sign – the *signifier* and the *signified*). The following remarks are particularly worth quoting:

the sign is exposed to alteration because it perpetuates itself. What predominates in all change is the persistence of the old substance; disregard for the past is only relative. That is why the principle of change is based on the principle of continuity. Change in time takes many forms [...]. One might think that it deals especially with phonetic changes undergone by the signifier, or perhaps changes in meaning which affect the signified concept. That view would be inadequate. Regardless of what the forces of change are, whether in isolation or in combination, they always result in *a shift in the relationship between the signified and the signifier*.³⁵

To a certain extent, Gramsci and Saussure were both influenced by the French linguist Michel Bréal (1832-1915), who had been the initiator of modern semantics and whose university courses Saussure had attended while in Paris. Gramsci mentions Bréal in the following passage:

All language is metaphor, and it is metaphorical in two senses: it is a metaphor of the «thing» or «material and sensible object» referred to, and it is a metaphor of the ideological meanings attached to words in the preceding periods of civilization. (A treatise on semantics – for ex. Michel Bréal's – can provide a catalog of the semantic mutations of different words).³⁶

From these general assertions Gramsci derives two points which are in line with Saussure's views: a rejection of what Gramsci calls «the utopia of fixed and universal languages»³⁷ – I shall return to this point later on – and a restriction of the explanatory value of etymological analyses. For instance, in the *Course* one can read that all definitions made with respect to a single word «are made in vain»³⁸, and that etymology is «the explaining of words through the historical study of their relations with other words. To explain means to relate to known terms, and in linguistics, to explain a word

is to relate it to other words»³⁹. Similarly, in one of his prison letters, Gramsci observes that «life formulas [...] expressed in words» can easily lead to misleading interpretations of the relationship between language and thought:

[...] Italians say: «a happy night» and not «a tranquil night» like the Germans, etc. It is quite possible that the Germans, Russians, and also the French do not think of «happy nights», but the Italians also speak of a «happy journey» and of «a happily concluded business deal» that diminishes the symptomatic value of «happy»; on the other hand, the Neapolitans say about a beautiful woman that she is *buona* «good», certainly without malice, because beautiful (*bella*) is in fact a more ancient *bonula*.⁴⁰

Other instances of Gramsci's elaboration on the notion of metaphor can be found in his prison notes. In Notebook 11, he specifies that «no new historical situation, however radical the change that has brought it about, completely transforms language, at least in its external formal aspect»⁴¹; and that

[...] when a new conception of the world replaces the previous one, the previous language continues to be used but is, precisely, used metaphorically. The whole of language is a continuous process of metaphor, and the history of semantics is an aspect of the history of culture; language is at the same time a living thing and a museum of fossils of life and civilisations. When I use the word «disaster» no one can accuse me of believing in astrology, and when I say «by Jove!» no one can assume that I am a worshipper of pagan divinities.⁴²

3. The third and last element which I would like to highlight is the caution concerning language planning and artificial languages expressed, in similar terms, both in the *Course in General Linguistics* and in the *Prison Notebooks*⁴³. Gramsci's sceptical evaluation of artificial languages is consistent with Saussure's views on the aspiration to create «a fixed language that posterity would have to accept for what it is»⁴⁴. In the *Course*, this scepticism applies to Esperanto, and to any attempt at intervening in the verbal communication patterns of a society. Saussure explains that languages, working as systems, are complex mechanisms. One can legitimately expect to be able to modify a linguistic system through the organised intervention of «specialists, grammarians, logicians»⁴⁵; but experience shows us that such attempts have never produced major results.

The prescriptions of codes, religious rites, nautical signals, etc., involve only a certain number of individuals simultaneously and then only during a limited period of time; in language, on the contrary, everyone participates at all times, and that is why it is constantly being influenced by all. This capital fact suffices to show the impossibility of revolution. Of all social institutions, language is least amenable to initiative. It blends with the life of society, and the latter, inert by nature, is a prime conservative force.⁴⁶

Gramsci had already come close to these positions in an article of April 1916. He had realised that the more a semiotic system becomes used by the masses, the less possible it is for it to be revolutionised. Its signs and their denotative and connotative meanings, as well as the senses that these meanings have in different contexts and to different speakers, tend to escape the control of our will. Gramsci's reflections on this point were inspired by the history of playing cards. In «times of upheaval», and of «bestial hatred» against the past, revolutionaries tried to replace kings and queens with bourgeois icons, such as republican fasces and the symbolic figures of Freedom and Equality⁴⁷. While this bourgeois revolutionary spirit eventually came to an end, «the old cards stayed», rooted as they are in the «mental habits» of their users. Hence Gramsci concludes:

The old playing cards – which draw on medieval illuminations portraying Longobard kings – have a language of their own, and nothing poses so many obstacles to innovations as language does. So much so, that after many years Esperantists are still in the state of a cocoon from which a butterfly is yet to emerge, despite the number of those who have taken up their cause, from Leibniz to Dr Zamenhof.⁴⁸

Attempts at creating a «perfect language»⁴⁹ must have been familiar to Gramsci since his early years at the University of Turin. Certainly, he studied there in the same years as the renowned mathematician and logician Giuseppe Peano (1858-1932) was teaching at this university. Peano wrote about the necessity of an international auxiliary language, and created a simplified version of Latin to be used as «a written lingua franca for international scientific communication»⁵⁰. Called *latino sine flexione*, this universal language was meant to lessen what Peano considered to be the inherent ambiguity, mutability and formal redundancy of natural historical languages⁵¹. The historian Angelo d'Orsi, an expert on Gramsci's years in Turin, does not exclude the possibility that Gramsci may have occasionally attended Peano's lectures, and also points to the fact that his prison notes contain a number of references to Peano's work⁵².

Later, in 1918, Gramsci disagreed with other Italian socialists about the desirability of the promotion by the Italian Socialist Party of the study and use of Esperanto. In one of the articles he wrote as part of this controversy, he backs his confutation of the desirability of learning artificial languages with the following motivations: languages

are very complex and subtle organisms [...] Linguistic change is slow and only occurs as a result of the new contacts that the life of complex societies brings about. Changes are spontaneous and cannot be determined in an intellectualistic way.⁵³

In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci confirms his disapproval of the «fanatical advocates of international languages»⁵⁴, and his argument now receives further support from his views on the role of metaphors in language. He qualifies his support for language policies aimed at linguistically unifying Italy by warning, once more, about the limits of language-policy interventions. These interventions should not be regarded as decisive, nor should one assume that

the ends proposed will all be reached in detail, i.e. that one will obtain a *specific* unified language. One will obtain a *unified language*, if it is a necessity, and the organised intervention will speed up the already existing process. What this language will be, one cannot foresee or establish.⁵⁵

Methodological interlude

The similarities between Gramsci's views and those expressed in the *Course in General Linguistics*, which I pointed out in the previous sections of this article, partly coincide with – and partly need to be added to – other such similarities, as identified by Lo Piparo, Salamini, Mansfield, Helsloot, Blasco Ferrer, Boothman, and Ives⁵⁶; as well as by two experts of structural linguistics, Rosiello and De Mauro⁵⁷. Yet, no evidence has been found which proves that Gramsci read the *Course*. This leads one to ask whether, and to what extent, Gramsci knew Saussure's ideas on language.

There has been virtually no historical discussion on how much Gramsci knew about Saussure's linguistics and – irrespective of whether or not he knew about it – on the channels through which he might have come to be influenced by Saussure's ideas.

Scholars have acknowledged the similarities between the two; but very little has been put forward in terms of hypotheses that could lead to a historical reconstruction of how Gramsci (whose reflections on language are chronologically subsequent to Saussure's) might have been inspired by the contents of the *Course*. On the one hand, this situation raises a question: though presumably indirect, how did the similarities between Gramsci and Saussure come about? On the other hand, some methodological implications also arise as to whether, and how, the origins of such an indirect influence may be identified. I will briefly deal with this latter aspect in this section of my article, whereas an attempt at answering the former question will be made in the next section.

In his 1948 lecture *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*, the art historian Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968) – a classic representative of what is nowadays commonly referred to as cultural history – argued that a connection can be observed between Gothic art and Scholastic philosophy. This connection, which can be located in time and space, is «more concrete than a mere “parallelism”», and yet more general than individual influences between a certain artist and a certain philosopher by means of «direct impact»⁵⁸. The kind of connection Panofsky has in mind comes about by the dissemination of new concepts and approaches. In the case of Scholasticism and early Gothic architecture, this dissemination may be relevant – Panofsky argues – for explaining the similarities between the two. However, such forms of dissemination occur in modern societies too, despite the increased level of technical specialisation and disciplinary fragmentation. For instance, all of us, «without a thorough knowledge of biochemistry or psychoanalysis, speak with the greatest of ease of vitamin deficiencies, allergies, mother fixations, and inferiority complexes»⁵⁹.

Panofsky identifies his time- and space-located «channel of transmission» in the (mainly artistic and philosophical) debates of late twelfth- and early thirteenth-century Paris, and of its surroundings. Regarding this context, he explains that:

It is not very probable that the builders of Gothic structures read Gilbert de la Porrée or Thomas Aquinas in the original. But they were exposed to the Scholastic point of view in innumerable other ways, quite apart from the fact that their work automatically brought them into a working association with those who devised the liturgical and iconographic programs. They had gone to school; they listened to sermons; they could attend the public *disputationes de quolibet* which, dealing as they did with all imaginable questions of the

day, had developed into social events not unlike our operas, concerts, or public lectures; and they could come into profitable contact with the learned on many other occasions.⁶⁰

In the next section of my article I shall apply the method used by Panofsky to the cultural network through which the contents of the *Course in General Linguistics* may have influenced Gramsci. I will try to locate Gramsci's contacts with Saussure's thought in time and in space, in a partial attempt to track down, as it were, the wide-ranging workings of the *zeitgeist*. Arguably, not everyone will be satisfied with the methodology and results of this attempt. Nonetheless, there is at least one, undoubted element of usefulness about the descriptions of the intellectual networks operating in a certain period. Even those who do not regard these descriptions as self-sufficient results will find it hard to deny that these descriptions provide the search for new documentary evidence with detailed hypotheses, and with suggestions for further excavation.

A possible channel of transmission

Gramsci sat his last university examination early in 1915, although he continued to work more or less constantly on his thesis until 1918. Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* was first published in 1916. The text of this first edition was based on notes from the courses that Saussure taught at Geneva University in the last years of his life, which two of his students, Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, collected and edited. In Italy, one of the first scholars to review the *Course* was a young lecturer at Turin University, Benvenuto Terracini, in 1919. Terracini had seen Gramsci occasionally in library reading rooms, when the young Sardinian student was in close contact with Matteo Bartoli⁶¹. Terracini's highly informative review was published, moreover, in a Turinese academic journal, the *Bollettino di filologia classica*⁶², and might therefore have been one channel through which Gramsci gained contact with Saussure's concepts. However, by 1919 Gramsci had become absorbed by political activities and militant journalism, so it is unclear whether he still had the time to read academic periodicals that were mainly unrelated to his political commitments. Rather than in university libraries, he was now spending much of his time in the editorial

offices of the Turin socialist press, in the local sections of the Socialist Party, and in various factories.

It can be assumed that Gramsci's familiarity with the works of Italian linguists, starting from his years at Turin University, entailed some indirect knowledge of Saussure's work. For instance, a very brief and generic reference to Saussure and the distinction between *diachrony* and *synchrony* can be found in Giulio Bertoni's *Principi generali*, part of Bertoni and Bartoli's *Breviario di neolinguistica*⁶³. Gramsci must have known Bertoni's contribution to this volume, given that both his prison notes and letters contain critical remarks on it. So, it might seem advisable to opt for a cautious conclusion; namely, that Bartoli's courses (including bibliographical indications) and general intellectual influence were the means by which the cultural atmosphere of the time produced the affinities discussed above (as well as those highlighted by other commentators). Apart from his university training, much must be left – if one takes this cautious position – to Gramsci's life-long interest in philology and linguistics, as well as his wide-ranging curiosity for new intellectual ideas⁶⁴.

Such a conclusion can be accepted, without further elaboration, as far as the earlier affinities are concerned (from 1916 to 1921), including young Gramsci's comments on language-policy interventions and artificial languages. However, I shall now try to describe his post-university experiences in less general terms.

The central part of Gramsci's life, during which he travelled to Russia and Austria, might be particularly helpful when trying to account for his affinities with Saussure. The mediation of Gramsci's non-Italian cultural experiences and sources may have led him to absorb the new notions introduced by the *Course* in a more specific (though still indirect) way. In contrast, the general attitude of Italian culture – including that of most Italian linguists – was not particularly receptive to Saussure's novelties and specificities. The author of the *Course* was often regarded as a relatively unoriginal exponent of the positivist, sociological approaches to the study of language that Italian intellectuals, under the influence of the Idealist philosopher Benedetto Croce (1866-1952), would typically frown upon⁶⁵.

Gramsci was more likely to learn about synchronic, structural research on language through the political and scientific discussions that were taking place in Russia, during the time he resided there; and, more generally, through his encounter

with the intense research activities that accompanied the early stages of Soviet language policy. To my knowledge, only one interpreter of Gramsci, Renate Holub, has pointed in this direction, though with no explicit reference to the possible influence of the *Course*. In the years from 1922 (when he left Turin for Russia) to 1926 (when he was imprisoned), Gramsci

had a wide range of experiences. He had been one of the major leaders of the Italian working-class movement, not only organizing political struggles but, as editor of a major journal, the *Ordine Nuovo*, functioning as an organizer of the cultural and ideological struggle as well. He [was] one of the top functionaries of the international working-class movement, which accorded him the privilege to intervene personally in strategic decisions at the centre of the international revolution: in Moscow. [...] The period 1922-4 in Moscow means the years of cultural and theoretical tension and excitement, [...] the Russian formalist school [...] and the beginnings of Russian structuralism with Roman Jakobson.⁶⁶

Let me add some details to the picture sketched out by Holub. Gramsci lived in Russia from June 1922 up until the end of November 1923, and again in March-April 1925. For quite a long time, it was generally believed that Gramsci had spent most of his first, longer stay in Russia recovering from physical and mental exhaustion. Indeed he was for a while in the Serebriani Bor sanatorium (near Moscow), where he met Eugenia Schucht and her sister, Giulia, who would later become his wife. But later research has provided new information, presenting Gramsci as being more active, more in contact with Soviet political and cultural life than was previously thought, and therefore more likely to be in touch with the debates which characterised the politics of language during the early years of the Soviet federative State. Gramsci actively participated in the activities of the Communist International. He learnt Russian, as is confirmed by the fact that at the end of 1923 he was able to undertake an Italian translation of D.B. Riazanov's commentary to *The Communist Manifesto*⁶⁷. He also travelled to a number of Russian cities and gave public speeches and lectures⁶⁸.

Gramsci's encounter with his wife's family, of which many members had been engaged, or were engaged, in language teaching and translation⁶⁹, deserves attention. He wrote at length about translation in some of his letters to his wife. His enduring interest in language studies must have continued throughout the period he frequented the Schuchts (between his arrival in Russia and his imprisonment), despite the fact that linguistic themes did not loom large in his writings at that time. These writings dealt

with predominantly political issues. However, he might have shared his interests in language with his wife and, more or less directly, with her family.

That Gramsci's linguistic interests continued, while he was closest to his wife's family, can be inferred from two letters which Tatiana Schucht wrote to her sister Giulia in August 1928. In these letters, Tatiana makes revealing comments which cast light on the importance that linguistics had in Gramsci's life between 1922 and 1926 (when he saw his wife for the last time). While he was in prison, only one of the Schucht sisters, Tatiana, lived in Italy. On 24 August 1928, Tatiana wrote to him that she would soon ask Giulia to send, from Russia, a book by the Ukrainian philosopher of language Aleksandr A. Potebnia (1835-1891). «They suggested this textbook to me» – she added – «when they learnt about your interest in language studies»⁷⁰. This sentence elusively refers to those connected to the Italian and international communist movement, who were coordinating Tatiana's assistance to the prisoner. She constantly provided Gramsci not only with practical aids, but also with cultural inputs and bibliographical updates. She knew that she was writing in a country which was ruled by a politically hostile dictatorship, and that her brother-in-law's correspondence was systematically checked by his jailers. Hence she preferred to conceal the identity of her collaborators and supervisors by using a sentence with no explicit subject⁷¹. Six days later, on 30 August 1928, she wrote to Giulia:

you [...] know how interested Antonio is in linguistics. I was told that you could have some information about important books in this field from Lunacharskii – they say he is interested in every subject, and would be very glad to give relevant advice.⁷²

Soon after the October Revolution, language-policy issues had given rise to wide and intense debates. Anatolii V. Lunacharskii, who was then at the head of Narkompros⁷³, was just one of the communist leaders to join the debates. Trotsky and Riazanov also contributed to them, as did Nadezhda K. Krupskaja – Lenin's wife. Nikolai I. Bukharin and Evgenii A. Preobrazhenskii discussed the principles of Soviet language policy in a chapter of their book *The ABC of Communism*, published in 1919⁷⁴. In 1921, Bukharin also explored linguistic themes in a section dedicated to *Language and Thought*, in *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology*⁷⁵. In this context, where specialism and disciplinary boundaries were insistently brought into question, Gramsci would not have been led to regard debates on language as futile at all.

The principles that Lenin had set out with respect to language and nationality⁷⁶ had to be transformed into policy-making decisions, not only in Russia but also in some of the most problematic contexts of non-Russian Soviet peripheries⁷⁷. The range of topics discussed was extremely wide: non-Russian and minority languages; purist reactions to language contacts and innovations; the language of the press; spelling reforms; verbal impoverishment; and illiteracy. These debates, as illustrated by Gorham⁷⁸, became particularly intense in the first half of the 1920s.

By 1923 serious efforts had been made to recruit the needed ethnographers, linguists and statisticians to work on this effort; then in 1924, when the existence of the [Soviet] Union itself was officially ratified, the task of defining and identifying nationalities began in earnest.⁷⁹

Linguists made their contribution to this work of spatial organisation and ordering by providing accurate accounts of the relevant demarcations between languages. Experiments in language teaching and public communication also absorbed their energies. New approaches were devised, drawing first on insights from the two dominant figures of pre-revolutionary Russian linguistics, Jan Ignacy Baudouin de Courtenay (1845-1929)⁸⁰ and Filipp F. Fortunatov (1848-1914), founders, respectively, of the St. Petersburg and Moscow schools of linguistics. Structural methods began to circulate, always in direct connection with glottopolitical issues, as forays into applied linguistics and language reform. Inspired by «F.F. Fortunatov's empirical studies of synchronic language forms, and by Jan Baudouin de Courtenay's insights into structural phonology», Soviet Russia's linguists came to see themselves «as new scientists of the human word»⁸¹.

In the first half of the 1920s, Jakobson and Grigorii O. Vinokur, another member of the Moscow Linguistic Circle, were amongst the first linguists to define the structural study of languages as the proper ground for language planning. Vinokur worked in the Soviet administration and diplomatic service as an interpreter, after having studied philology at the University of Moscow between 1916 and 1922, and before obtaining an academic position at the same university in the 1930s⁸²; and in the meantime, he also became involved in the Futurist movement. True, not everyone wished to embark on a close cooperation with the newly-established Bolshevik power. With the Revolution and

the onset of the Civil War, Russia's community of linguists was shaken by the sudden political changes that were taking place. Some preferred to leave the country:

N.S. Trubetskoi fled to Bulgaria and later Austria. Roman Jakobson eventually settled in Czechoslovakia. Baudouin de Courtenay and V.K. Porzhezinskii, a leading Moscow formalist, emigrated to Poland. For those who remained behind, life was both bleak and exhilarating. [...] They continued their novel approaches to language and their fascination with its power to organize human experience, to shape people's worlds and provoke them to action.⁸³

Although variously interpreted and valued, Ferdinand de Saussure's theories were indeed part of this extraordinarily rich and fluid intellectual environment (see Phillips 1986). As early as 1917-1919, «Moscow's discussion circles» began to learn about «the Saussurean “synchronic” method»⁸⁴ from Sergei O. Kartsevskii, who had studied under Saussure in Geneva. This «apostle of the Saussurian school», as Jakobson calls him, «during his shortlived return to Russia, fired the young generation of Moscow linguists with the *Cours de linguistique générale* and applied its precepts to the study of contemporary Russian»⁸⁵. Both Kartsevskii and Jakobson were involved in the «methodological controversy» on the separation between «synchronic and diachronic linguistics»⁸⁶ which sprang up among Russian scholars at the beginning of the 1920s.

Vinokur summarised the contents of Saussure's *Course* in articles published between 1923 and 1925⁸⁷. One of his articles – aimed at a wider readership than that of professional linguists only – offers a programmatic description of the «static» study of language as the most suitable approach for making linguistics a «socially useful» discipline⁸⁸, and contains explicit references to Saussure's notion of *synchronic linguistics*.

Vinokur's article was not an isolated case. As has been confirmed by research into the history of Soviet linguistics, 1923 was the year which marked a turning point in the history of the penetration of the *Course* into Russia. At least in St. Petersburg and Moscow, some copies of this book had become available, and mentions of it began to appear in Soviet journals⁸⁹:

References to Saussure and to his influence appear, critically filtered, in Jakobson's book on Czech versification published in 1923. The same year, references to Saussure and his Geneva school were made repeatedly in *Russkaja rěc'* [Russian Language], a compendium

of studies by several young Russian linguists mutually associated (as the editor of the volume, Lev Ščerba, suggests in his introductory note) by their common dependence on the linguistic teaching of Baudouin de Courtenay. Moreover, in 1923, the young syntactician, M.N. Peterson, published a lucid outline of Saussure's fundamental concepts in the journal *Pečat' i revoljucija* [The Press and the Revolution].⁹⁰

Finally, during 1923 – which Gramsci spent almost entirely in Russia – there were also «oral presentations and debates devoted to the *Course*, which took place in diverse scientific societies and research institutes of the time»⁹¹. Over the next two years (1923-1925), the contents of the *Course* were outlined and analysed not only in articles but also in books. The *Course* was explicitly referred to, either as a starting point for methodologically updated linguistic research, or as the object of radical philosophical objections and criticisms.

Indeed, the circulation of Saussure's ideas must soon have become fairly wide, if even a vehement critic of the *Course* – Valentin N. Voloshinov – openly recognised in 1929 that «the majority of Russian thinkers in linguistics are under the determinative influence of Saussure and his disciples, Bally and Sècheyay»⁹². Voloshinov also noted that, «puzzlingly enough», the *Course* had not yet been translated into Russian (the first published translation dates from the early 1930s). However, he could indicate prominent scholars who were followers of Saussure's approach: R.O. Shor, V.V. Vinogradov, and M.N. Peterson (for discussion, see Slusareva 1963).

By 1922 A.I. Romm, another member of the Moscow Linguistic Circle, had already translated much of the *Course* – although his translation was to remain unpublished⁹³. Shared also by other members of the Circle, an orientation towards applied linguistics emerges, interestingly enough, from the manuscript of Romm's translation. He planned to add some notes relating Saussure's examples to the current situation in the USSR, including some on the pressing issues of spelling reforms, the alteration of the Russian language in the wake of the Revolution, and the uncontrolled proliferation of acronyms and abbreviations (especially in the jargons of politics and State administration)⁹⁴.

Even though the circulation of the *Course* remained limited,⁹⁵ concepts which were more or less directly inspired by Saussure spread widely across different fields. In 1922, Kartsevskii «applied the Saussurean synchronic approach to the description of the Russian verbal system»⁹⁶. The following year, «V.V. Vinogradov [...] proposed the

application of a rigorous synchronic method to the analysis of style in verbal art»⁹⁷. Similarly, other scholars and institutions contributed to the spread of synchronic linguistics as a methodological basis for language policy and planning:

The Soviet government legitimized the role of structural principles [...] through N.F. Iakovlev's manifesto [published in 1922] in the journal *Life of the nationalities* [...]. He proudly recognized that his methods were based on the linguistic theories of two innovators, Saussure and Baudouin. [...] The «historical-genealogical point of view» was dead, he proclaimed; now superseded by the unity of theory and practice in synchronic linguistics.

Iakovlev institutionalized the Soviet project for language reform in the Moscow Linguistic Circle, where he was chair beginning in 1923; and the Scientific Research Institute for the Study of the Ethnic and National Cultures of the Peoples of the East, which he was instrumental in creating between 1923 and 1926.⁹⁸

The presence of up-to-date linguistic ideas and expertise within Soviet political institutions is proved by the Bolshevik militancy of a prominent linguist such as Evgenii D. Polivanov (1891-1938)⁹⁹, as well as by Vinokur's involvement in practical work within such institutions. Other scholars also agreed to collaborate with Narkompros, including R.O. Shor, mentioned above, and A.I. Romm, the author of the first (unpublished) Russian translation of the *Course*¹⁰⁰. In the early 1920s, also a former student of Saussure's Parisian courses, F.A. Braun¹⁰¹, was active at Narkompros. In the same period, Gramsci's future sister-in-law, Eugenia Schucht, was working at Narkompros, where she was secretary to Nadezhda Krupskaja. Gramsci's future wife, Giulia, had also spent some months working for Narkompros, in 1919, as the secretary of this institution's communist group¹⁰².

In this context it is highly probable that Gramsci's curiosity was struck by the ongoing debates, and that the most innovative theories circulated through to him. Even if he did not learn much about either Saussure or his *Course in General Linguistics*, Gramsci's thoughts on language could have been affected by ideas and debates that had been inspired, more or less directly, by this book. In conclusion, if the question is whether Gramsci read the *Course in General Linguistics*, existing evidence only allows for a negative answer. It is not proved, nor does it seem likely, that Gramsci read the *Course*¹⁰³. On the contrary, if what is asked is whether certain similarities between Gramsci's ideas on language and the contents of the *Course* can be explained in terms

of an indirect influence, then I believe the answer to be a positive one. Indeed, we have enough evidence to deem an indirect influence of the *Course* on Gramsci highly probable.

Saussure's Structuralism and Gramsci's Marxism

Gramsci and Saussure have become classic authors in the humanities and social sciences. Their legacy has affected numerous disciplines, ranging from anthropology to history, from literary criticism to philosophy, and their names are often mentioned alongside those of György Lukács, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. It is therefore hardly surprising that many comparisons and parallels have been established between the ideas of these fundamental authors, regardless of whether evidence does or does not exist to prove that direct influences took place amongst them. Similarities and linkages have indeed been investigated with respect to Gramsci and Lukács¹⁰⁴, Gramsci and Bakhtin¹⁰⁵, and Gramsci and Wittgenstein¹⁰⁶ – who influenced whom depending, obviously, on the relative chronology of their works.

In the specific case of Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, what are the benefits of studying the similarities and possible links between this book and Gramsci's work? In other words, are Gramsci's contacts with Structuralist views of language worth exploring? I believe this aspect to be relevant to the study of Gramsci's intellectual biography. Contacts with linguistic thought would seem to have helped his Marxism to acquire that language-sensitive complexity, largely unaffected by dogmatism or economicist determinism, which interpreters have increasingly been identifying in his *Prison Notebooks*¹⁰⁷. In this article, I have confined my discussion to Gramsci's ideas on language. Further research would be necessary to ascertain whether the influence of early linguistic Structuralism contributed to shaping also other Gramscian concepts. Should this be the case, we would be much more able to explain why his ideas remained relevant throughout the second half of the twentieth century, when essentialist (or reductionist) versions of Marxism, which presented the hard facts of economic production as the determinant factors in shaping conflicting worldviews and in activating historical processes, appeared to lose much of their philosophical and

political value¹⁰⁸. Especially during the last three decades of the century, the epistemological foundations of various disciplines, including political theory, were indeed greatly influenced by general linguistics and language philosophy, in what has come to be known (mostly in the wake of Rorty 1967) as the «linguistic turn».

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- Vinokur, G.O., 1923, “Kul’tura iazyka (Zadachi sovremennogo iazykoznaniiia)”, *Pechat’ i revoliutsiia* 5, pp. 100-111.
- Vološinov, V.N., 1986, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. L. Matejka and I.R. Titunik, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press (first Russian edition 1929).
- Zubov, A., 1994, “Minoranze nazionali e nazionalità dominate nello Stato sovietico (1918-1939)”, in *Le minoranze tra le due guerre*, ed. U. Corsini and D. Zaffi, pp. 59-80, Bologna, Il Mulino.
- Zucaro, D., 1957, “Antonio Gramsci all’Università di Torino 1911-1915”, *Società* 13, no. 6, pp. 1091-1111.

Notes

¹ E.g. Boothman 2008a, 2008b.

² Helsloot (2005, 235). Helsloot also states that the existing «literature is still limited and demands expansion. Any relevant publication on Gramsci's theory of language would be a welcome addition».

³ I shall not consider other works by Saussure, as none of them enjoyed the same influence, or produced a similar wave of theoretical innovation. His work on Indo-European historical linguistics was influential mostly amongst linguists specialising in this field, whereas his writings on general linguistics (most of which have been published for the first time only in recent years) have not had the same impact as the *Course*. See De Mauro's introductions and commentaries to Saussure (2005a; 2005b); see also Lepschy (1982), Harris (2003), and Sanders (2004).

⁴ See Deias 1997, 60.

⁵ See Gramsci 1992, 71.

⁶ See Podda 1999, 183. Also appreciated as a writer and philologist, Raffa Garzia would later teach Sardinian linguistics at the University of Cagliari between 1927 and 1930 (see Angioni 1987, 23; Romagnino 2005; see also Podda 1977).

⁷ See Bergami 1993, 137 ff.; Fiori 1966, 68-9.

⁸ For a modern edition of this anti-feudal anthem see Mannu 2002; and for an early English translation, Tyndale 1849, III, 281-92.

⁹ See Caprioglio 1982; Romagnino 2005, 150-52.

¹⁰ On Bartoli, see De Mauro (1964; 1996), Devoto (1947; 1973), Terracini (1948), and Vidossi (1948).

¹¹ See De Felice 1964.

¹² Gramsci 1982, 613. When quotations are taken (as in this case) from untranslated works, I have provided my own translation. In all other cases, I have used published English translations (see list of references).

¹³ See especially Notebook 29.

¹⁴ This, in spite of the fact that Saussure (1959, 134) explicitly condemns «historical grammar» as a contradictory definition, stating that «the discipline so labeled is really only diachronic linguistics». At least in one case, Gramsci, too, seems to have had reservations as to the use of «historical grammar» – when he incidentally notes that «the history of language» may be a better definition (Gramsci 1985, 185).

¹⁵ Saussure 1959, 79.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ivi*, 80.

¹⁸ See *ivi*, 81, 90, 100, and 183-4.

¹⁹ Gramsci 1971, 38. Rather misleadingly, the word «only» does not appear in Hoare and Nowell Smith's translation. I restored it in order to reflect Gramsci's reasoning, as expressed in the Italian original (Gramsci 1975, 1544-45), more accurately.

²⁰ Gramsci 1985, 179-80.

²¹ *Ivi*, 120.

²² Gramsci 1971, 39.

²³ Cf. Saussure 1959, 1 and 82-3.

²⁴ Gramsci 1985, 185.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ See Saussure 1959, 212 ff.

²⁷ *Ivi*, 80.

²⁸ «An absolute state is defined by the absence of changes, and since language changes somewhat in spite of everything, studying a language-state means in practice disregarding changes of little importance, just as mathematicians disregard infinitesimal quantities in certain calculations, such as logarithms. [...] Besides, delimitation in time is not the only difficulty that we encounter in defining a language-state: space presents the same problem. In short, a concept of a language-state can be only approximate. In static linguistics, as in most sciences, no course of reasoning is possible without the usual simplification of data» (Saussure 1959, 101-102).

²⁹ See Gramsci 1985, 179-81.

³⁰ Saussure 1959, 81-82.

³¹ *Ivi*, 75-6 and 80.

³² *Ivi*, 71-2 and 78.

³³ *Ivi*, 74.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Saussure 1959, 74-5. Emphasis in the original.

³⁶ Gramsci 2007, 886. Gramsci refers to the *Essai de sémantique* (Bréal 1897).

³⁷ Gramsci 1971, 451.

³⁸ Saussure 1959, 14.

³⁹ *Ivi*, 189.

⁴⁰ Gramsci 1994, II, 34. It is interesting to note the chronological proximity between this letter, written on 18 May 1931, and the first draft of the previous passage on language and metaphors, which Gramscian scholars have dated to the Spring of 1931 (see Francioni 1984; 1992).

⁴¹ Gramsci 1971, 453.

⁴² *Ivi*, 450. Hoare and Nowell Smith's translation has «conception» instead of «conception of the world» – the latter being, I believe, closer to the original (cf. Gramsci 1975, 1438). In the same notebook Gramsci also writes: «Language is transformed with the transformation of the whole of civilisation, through the acquisition of culture by new classes and through the hegemony exercised by one national language over others, etc., and what it does is precisely to absorb in metaphorical form the words of previous civilisations and cultures. Nobody today thinks that the word “dis-aster” is connected with astrology or can claim to be misled about the opinions of someone who uses the word. Similarly even an atheist can speak of “dis-grace” without being thought to be a believer in predestination (etc.). The new “metaphorical” meaning spreads with the spread of the new culture, which furthermore also coins brand-new words or absorbs them from other languages as loan-words giving them a precise meaning and therefore depriving them of the extensive halo they possessed in the original language» (Gramsci 1971, 451-52). As recounted by the famous linguist Roman Jakobson (1959, 234): «In the first years of the Russian revolution there were fanatic visionaries who argued in Soviet periodicals for a radical revision of traditional language and particularly for the weeding out of such misleading expressions as “sunrise” or “sunset”. Yet we still use this Ptolemaic imagery without implying a rejection of Copernican doctrine». See also Bukharin (1926, 31): «Many oppose the conception of causality and law in nature with the argument that [...] this conception is itself the result of an erroneous assumption of a celestial lawgiver. No doubt that is the origin of the idea, but the idea has left its origin far behind. Language presents many cases of such evolution. When we say, for example, “the sun has come up”, “the sun has gone down”, of course we do not believe that the sun has actually “come”, or “gone”, as a man comes or goes, on two legs, but that was probably the original conception. Similarly, in the case of the word “law”, we may say that “a law prevails”, or “applies”, which by no means signifies that the two phenomena (cause and effect) involve any third invisible little god, lodged in the cause, reins in hand». Gramsci knew *Historical Materialism*, the book by Bukharin (first published in Russian in 1921) from which I have taken my quotation. He used Bukharin's book in 1925, when preparing the teaching materials of a correspondence school for communist militants (Gramsci 1988), and he also discussed it in his *Prison Notebooks*.

⁴³ Bréal (1901) had also been rather critical of universal, artificial languages.

⁴⁴ Saussure 1959, 76.

⁴⁵ *Ivi*, 73.

⁴⁶ *Ivi*, 73-4.

⁴⁷ Gramsci 1980, 283.

⁴⁸ *Ivi*, 284.

⁴⁹ Eco 1995.

⁵⁰ *Ivi*, 323.

⁵¹ See De Mauro 1996b; Vercillo 2004.

⁵² See d'Orsi 1999, 47-48; and d'Orsi 2002, 157. Peano had already devised his project for an international auxiliary language when Gramsci arrived in Turin. He continued to promote this project during the years when Gramsci was intensely participating in the cultural and political life of the city (i.e., from 1911 until 1922).

⁵³ Gramsci 1982, 593.

⁵⁴ Gramsci 1985, 182. Esperanto was the most famous, and successful, artificial language. For a time, it appeared to be a viable option for universal communication, enjoying, as such, a certain degree of support. Roman Jakobson «respected its elegance» (Smith 1997, 77). Stalin studied it as a young man. Some linguists (Baudouin de Courtenay, Otto Jespersen, Nikolai I. Marr, Antoine Meillet) were amongst its convinced supporters, as were some leading philosophers and scientists, notably Bertrand Russell and

Rudolph Carnap (see Eco 1995, 326). In the USSR, Esperantism would become outdated in the late 1920s, but up to then it met with mostly positive reactions, and was sometimes welcomed by fanatical, visionary enthusiasts (see Smith 1997; Gorham 2003). A special government commission, in cooperation with leading Esperantists, «called for its elective teaching in the public schools» (Smith 1997, 78). Some communists proposed the introduction of Esperanto as the working language of their party's Central Committee and in other Soviet institutions. These communists worked for the popularisation of Esperanto, and some even called for its compulsory teaching in secondary schools. Some of Soviet Russia's most fervent advocates of the use of Esperanto, as an auxiliary international language for more rational human communication, were Ernst Drezen (first, and last, president of the Soviet Esperanto Union, founded in 1921) and his collaborators. They constituted a «radical fringe of the Taylorist and Bogdanovite movement» (Smith 1997, 79). Aleksandr A. Bogdanov (1873-1928) was a Russian physician, philosopher, economist, and science fiction writer. In the first decade of the twentieth century he was also a Bolshevik leader, until his views came into conflict with those held by Lenin. Apparently, his death was the result of medical experiments that he was conducting on himself. In fact, Bogdanov accepted the successes of Esperanto quite grudgingly, remaining wary of the utopianism underlying artificial languages; however, he and those of his followers who supported Esperanto were united by a common interest in radical social engineering. To their eyes, economic and administrative modernisation could be enhanced through a more effective use of language. Gramsci was sensitive to the influence of Soviet debates on Taylorism (and on the scientific organisation of labour in general) and – according to Bermani (1995) and Sochor (1981, 60) – also to Bogdanov's views. In his discussion of grammar and national linguistic unification, in Notebook 29, Gramsci (1985, 181 and 186) incidentally referred to the «Taylor System»; yet, he did not accept either the visionary aspects, or the utopian expectations of social and communicative palingenesis, which often characterised Soviet debates. While Gramsci was writing his prison notes, in the years of the consolidation of Stalin's power, Soviet Esperantism «received a new lease on life [...] in the service of a vital national interest, the Second Five-Year Plan» (Smith 1997, 154-55). Michael Smith describes this phase in detail in his highly informative book, *Language and Power in the Creation of the USSR*, which is based on Soviet publications and archive documents dating from the years 1917-1953. The second Five-Year Plan took place from 1933 to 1937. During this period, Drezen began to work on the full unification of terms and symbols within the theoretical, technical, and applied disciplines. «He even aimed for the “fixation of terms for each mechanical component of each elemental process”. His goal, to repudiate every “figurative and allegorical style” in order to avoid the “imprecision and multiple meanings of different expressions”» (Smith 1997, 155). With respect to «language as a source of error», and the creation of a «“mathematical” language» as a viable remedy, Gramsci (1971, 452) wrote in one of his notes: «is it possible to remove from language its metaphorical and extensive meanings? It is not possible».

⁵⁵ Gramsci 1985, 183. Emphases in the original.

⁵⁶ See Lo Piparo 1979, 110 note 53, 249; Salamini 1981; Mansfield 1984; Helsloot 1989; Blasco Ferrer 1999; Boothman 2004, 33-45; Ives 2004a; 2004b.

⁵⁷ Rosiello (1969; 1976; 1986); De Mauro (1999).

⁵⁸ Panofsky 1951, 20.

⁵⁹ *Ivi*, 21.

⁶⁰ *Ivi*, 23.

⁶¹ See Zucaro 1957, 1094-5.

⁶² See Terracini 1919.

⁶³ See Bertoni and Bartoli 1928, 17.

⁶⁴ In March 1927 Gramsci wrote to his sister-in-law, Tatiana Schucht, about his intention to carry out a methodological and theoretical study of comparative linguistics. In the same letter, he also referred to his deserting a potentially successful career in language studies: «A major intellectual “remorse” of my life is the deep sorrow that I caused my good professor Bartoli at the University of Turin» (Gramsci 1994, I, 84). Shortly afterwards, in April, Amadeo Bordiga (the first secretary of the Italian Communist Party) wrote to Gramsci from the isle of Ustica, where he had been sent by the fascist regime, and where Gramsci also spent a period of political confinement (December 1926-January 1927) before being transferred to a prison in Milan. «Dearest Antonio», wrote Bordiga, «you have been receiving printed matter, including a booklet by the Geneva philological school, which that *faculté* sent you asking for your comments» (first published in Gerratana 1975, 152).

⁶⁵ This is not to say that Italian culture was impervious to Saussurean linguistics. In the late '20s and early '30s, editorial notes mentioning Saussure, and brief discussions of Saussurean distinctions between, for example, *synchronie* and *diachronie*, or *langue* and *parole*, appeared in journals that Gramsci received either regularly or occasionally while he was in prison (see Gramsci 1975, 3141-60; Gramsci 1996, 508-509, 818). Such mentions were to be found especially in the journal *La Cultura*, which published articles, reviews, and editorial notes that contained references to Saussure – including some by leading linguists such as Giacomo Devoto (1928) and Roman Jakobson (1933). The diffusion of Saussurean linguistics was probably also boosted, to an extent, by the Third International Congress of Linguists, which was held in Rome in 1933 (see Terracini 1933).

⁶⁶ Holub 1992, 17-18.

⁶⁷ See Gramsci 1988, 61-208; Gramsci 1992, 148 ff. David B. Gol'dendakh, better known as Riazanov, had joined the Socialist movement before Lenin. He supported the Bolsheviks during the revolutionary events of 1917 but soon came into conflict with the party, and denounced the brutal and arbitrary use of force that was being made. His appointment as director of the Marx-Lenin Institute was, to a large extent, a measure taken to relegate him to the margins of political life. Under Stalin, he was accused of having never really stopped being a Menshevik and, on the basis of this and other allegations, removed from his post and exiled. His commentary to *The Communist Manifesto* of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels was translated into English (see Ryzanoff 1930).

⁶⁸ See Kopalkidi and Leontiev 2001; Grigor'eva 1998; Bergami 1991. When Russian names are part of bibliographical references given in parenthesis, they are reproduced as printed in the referenced item. The original transliteration has also been left unmodified in quotations.

⁶⁹ See Cambria 1976; Gramsci Jr. 2007; 2008.

⁷⁰ Gramsci and Schucht 1997, 248.

⁷¹ I have rendered the Italian verbal phrase «mi hanno suggerito», used by Tania, with the English pronominal subject «they». This translation conveys the idea of more than one person communicating with Tania, which would not be as evident in translations such as «It was suggested to me».

⁷² Schucht 1991, 42.

⁷³ Acronym for *Narodnyi komissariat prosveshcheniia* (The People's Commissariat of Enlightenment). This was «the Bolshevik reinvention of the Ministry of Education» (Gorham 2003, 10).

⁷⁴ See Bukharin and Preobrazhensky 1969, 241-54.

⁷⁵ Bukharin 1926.

⁷⁶ See Lenin 1983; Marcellesi and Eliman 1987; Carlucci 2007.

⁷⁷ See Goldhagen 1968; Kirkwood 1989; Zubov 1994.

⁷⁸ Gorham 2003.

⁷⁹ Grenoble 2003, 39.

⁸⁰ This Polish-born linguist taught Indo-European and Slavonic comparative grammar, and later also comparative linguistics, in various universities, including Cracow and Warsaw (Tagliavini 1982, 578). From 1900 to 1918 he was a professor at the University of St. Petersburg (see Lewiki 1996a). Tagliavini indicates Baudouin's school as the «Kazan School», and so do Voloshinov (1986, 59 note 22) and Morpurgo Davies (1998, 227). This designation is based on the fact that «before moving to St. Petersburg, Baudouin de Courtenay taught from 1874 to 1883 at Kazan University» (Alpatov 2004, 74 note 6). Baudouin achieved a prominent position within European language studies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His relations with Saussure, who held him in high esteem, are highlighted in Tullio De Mauro's commentary to the Italian edition of the *Course* (see Saussure 2005a, 305-10), and help to explain why Russian academic institutions offered a particularly receptive environment for the propagation of the ideas expressed in the *Course*. But Baudouin's contribution to linguistics was neither of a purely theoretical kind, nor restricted to technical questions: «Baudouin is now widely recognised as one of the founders of modern linguistics, through both his revolutionising of phonetics and his methodological delineation of the language sciences. Baudouin's study of the formation of the Polish language and his studies of Slavonic dialects, along with his personal contacts with major European linguists such as Saussure, Hermann Paul and Graziadio Ascoli are increasingly recognized as having exerted a lasting and reciprocal influence on Slavonic and general European linguistic sciences [...] In addition to this, Baudouin, a political activist and staunch opponent of Russian imperialist policies, repeatedly stressed the need for a meeting of linguistic and social science, but he found both disciplines to be at too rudimentary a level of development to pursue this agenda himself. While teaching at St.

Petersburg University [...], Baudouin passed this concern on to his students Polivanov, Iakubinskii, Larin and Zhirmunskii, who also shared their teacher's radicalism» (Brandist 2003, 215).

⁸¹ Smith 1997, 9.

⁸² Lewiki 1996b, 975.

⁸³ Smith 1997, 59.

⁸⁴ Ivi, 60.

⁸⁵ Jakobson 1956, 10.

⁸⁶ Matejka 1986, 165.

⁸⁷ These articles were collected in Vinokur's book *Kul'tura iazyka* (Language Culture) which had two editions, in 1925 and 1929.

⁸⁸ Vinokur 1923, 104-5.

⁸⁹ See Depretto-Genty 1986, 81.

⁹⁰ Matejka 1986, 162.

⁹¹ Depretto-Genty 1986, 82; see also Ageeva 2009, 75.

⁹² Vološinov 1986, 58-9.

⁹³ See Čudakova and Toddes 1982.

⁹⁴ See Depretto-Genty 1986, 86; Čudakova and Toddes 1982, 72-3.

⁹⁵ Only a few copies of the book were available in the early '20s (see Vinokur 1923, note 2).

⁹⁶ Matejka 1986, 165.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Smith 1997, 70.

⁹⁹ Polivanov's life is tragically emblematic of the circumstances that many linguists experienced through the different phases of the Soviet regime. He graduated from St. Petersburg University in 1912. Renowned as a linguist for his specialisation in Turkic and East Asian languages, he was committed to revolutionary politics, joining the Communist Party and working as a translator for the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs and the Communist International between 1917 and 1921. His views on language were condemned in 1927, when he was the president of the linguistic section of the Russian Association of Scientific Research Institutions of the Social Sciences. This resulted in his exile to Uzbekistan. Ten years later he was arrested, and he was finally executed in January 1938 at the age of 47.

¹⁰⁰ See Čudakova and Toddes 1982, 66-7. As the New Economic Policy (1921-1928) became established and «some economic stability was achieved after the Civil War, the new approaches to language developed within institutions that were either within the orbit of Party or State control» (Brandist 2008, 280).

¹⁰¹ Braun studied at St. Petersburg University between 1880 and 1885, where he later worked as professor of German philology. After the October Revolution, Braun worked at Narkompros, where he joined committees dealing with school and university reform. In 1921 he also carried out research in Scandinavia and Germany, and in 1922 Narkompros sent him to Berlin to supervise the compilation of a bibliography of recent German scientific publications (see Lepschy 1979).

¹⁰² See Fiori 1991, 51; Lepre 1998, 43-5; Leontiev 1999; Kolpakidi and Leontiev 2001.

¹⁰³ In the early '30s, Gramsci read a review article in which the recent developments in linguistics were briefly discussed, and Saussure was mentioned by name (Coppola 1930, 623). «It appears to me that much has changed», Gramsci (1985, 177) observed, in a somewhat puzzled tone. He would not seem to have taken any notice of the reference to Saussure.

¹⁰⁴ See Holub 1992.

¹⁰⁵ See Brandist 1996a; 1996b; Ives 2004b.

¹⁰⁶ See Davis 2002; Sen 2003; 2004.

¹⁰⁷ For a particularly influential example of this interpretative trend see Hall (1991). On the originality of Gramsci's Marxism, remarkably well-balanced and insightful contributions have been made by Hobsbawm (1982), Paggi (1984), Femia (1987), and Bobbio (1990). Though concerned mostly with historical (pre-Structuralist) linguistics and dialectology, Lo Piparo's (1979) study of the influence of linguistics on Gramsci's thought remains an essential reading.

¹⁰⁸ See Callinicos 1982.