

Yevgeny Polivanov: Beyond Formalism?

Original study

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Received: February 2023, Accepted: March 2023

Abstract: The article examines the multifaceted activity of Evgeny Polivanov, whose contribution to the formation of new linguistics and the formal method continues to provoke debate. The specificity of Polivanov's main ideas and principles, in comparison with the mainstream formalists (Shklovsky, Tynianov) consisted in the reliance on the heritage of positivism (Baudouin, historian Kareev), supplemented by a kind of sociological and cultural "relationalism".

Keywords: formalism, positivism, psychologism, linguistics, linguistic building..

Of the OPOYAZ figures, the biography of Yevgeny Polivanov (1891–1938) seems to be the most spectacular and "literary", filled with abrupt changes of roles and forms of activity—along with Shklovsky (for example, in Kaverin's novel *"Troublemaker , or Evenings on Vasilevsky Island"*, 1928, Polivanov was prototype of young, enigmatic and talented Professor Dragomanov). So Shklovsky himself in the novel became the prototype of the rebellious Nekrylov, a commander without an army. (Toddes, Chudakova 1981; Depretto 2009; Vel'mezova 2014). The Orientalist and polyglot Polivanov replaced his predominantly Japanese studies and trips to the "country of the language that learned" with political activity on the left, in Gorky's newspaper *Novaya Zhizn*, and then in the first People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs (Alpatov 2002). There he was briefly, at the turn of 1917 and 1918, directly subordinate to Trotsky (with whom he soon came into conflict), as a Communist Party member active in the Chinese divisions of the Comintern and editing one of the first Chinese Communist newspapers. After 1921-1922 he switched for a few years from Far Eastern subjects to Central Asia (and taught in Samarkand and Tashkent), and the peak

of his formal career came during his years in Moscow in 1926–1929, where he worked in the structures of the Russian Association of Scientific Research Institutes of the Social Sciences (RANION) (Lartsev 1988¹). But after an open polemic with the followers of "Japhetidology" at the Communist Academy, Polivanov was forced at the very end of the 1920s to leave again, first for Uzbekistan and then for Kyrgyzstan, although he continued to publish in Moscow and Leningrad (his collected articles "For Marxist Linguistics", 1931), though infrequently and with many obstacles.

Many of the writings of his last period (when both his addiction to drugs and his ideological isolation were clearly increasing) have survived only partially; several pieces have been published abroad thanks to the efforts of Roman Jakobson (Andronov 2018). The arrest and tragic death of Polivanov in 1937–1938 seem almost inevitable in the deadly industry of Stalinist terror (it is significant that of the early member of the OPOYAZ, Shklovsky's older brother Vladimir, who was closely connected to Orthodox circles, also died at that time) (Alpatov, Ashnin 1997).

1 Alexander Vasilievich Balyasnikov, a linguist from Samarkand, played an important role in preparing this single biographical book about Polivanov.

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He wrote poems and articles about Mayakovsky and Oriental poetry, was a regular in opium dens, was a consistent opponent of Marr in the late 1920s, and translated the Kyrgyz epic *Manas* (Polivanov 1999). Later, Semyon Lipkin, the main translator of *Manas* into Russian, recalled Polivanov's detailed and serious consultations (Shapovalov 1998, 74) A one-armed teacher who climbed easily through a drainpipe into a classroom, an ascetic and at times highly asocial character—these garish details migrate from one biography to another (Alpatov 2012, 51–75). For a vivid memoir about Polivanov—including in connection with Nikolai Gumilev, see the emigrant Nikolai Otsup (1894–1958), who knew the scholar from the revolutionary years (Otsup 1961, 78–85). As the prominent linguist Pyotr Kuznetsov, who knew him from the 1920s, recalled:

He was an unusual man (everyone seems to know this). He had two wives with whom he took turns living, a Chinese servant and a dog. Periods of raggedness and neatness E.D. I observed for myself. He was also a junkie. [...] Moral principles and shame had no meaning for E.D., but he was a kind and sympathetic man. R. O. Shor once described him as follows: "He will take your shirt off and, when necessary, will take it off for you. When he had no money, it cost him nothing to stand on a street corner and ask for alms (Kuznetsov 2003, 194).

As one of the first pro-Bolshevik scholars and humanitarians, as an active worker of the Chinese section of the Comintern of the early 1920s (which played a fatal role in his fate), and finally, as an enthusiastic creator of "national linguistic and literary cultures"—during his short life Polivanov managed to leave a mark in the history of the young Soviet Republic.

But behind the exoticism and paradoxes, it is easy to miss his work's main and perhaps unchangeable first impulses. The common reference in (mostly Russian) literature to Polivanov as a "linguistic genius" may seem like a routine and exaggerated compliment... Then where did the Polivanov circle come from in France in the 1970s? What remains of its scholarly merits, apart from its colorful biographical circumstances?

First of all, he was a rather atypical Orientalist scholar. A native of Smolensk, the son of Ekaterina Yakovlevna Polivanova (1849–1913), a translator and children's writer closely associated with the pedagogical milieu (Koroleva 2011), he was a graduate of the Faculty of History and Philology and received an atypical specialization in Oriental languages at the Practical Oriental Academy, which trained translators and diplomats, but not scholars. Not only did Polivanov study local dialects during his trips to Japan (and later published his first works on them), but—as recent documents show—he also carried out some tasks clearly related to intelligence (Shulatov 2010). The fact that on the eve of 1917, he was taken on the teaching staff of the Oriental Faculty was a rare exception in a very closed corporate environment (previously it was almost exclusively staffed by graduates of that faculty), and the initiative of the then dean, Nikolai Marr (Dmitriev 2016). His teacher at Petersburg

University was Ivan Alexandrovich Baudouin de Courtenay, a scholar who was less concerned with the creation of the school and the careers of his students but was extremely productive as a generator of ideas and an inspiration for the younger generations of linguists, among whom Lev Scherba and Lev Yakubinsky, collaborators of Polivanov, stood out. From Baudouin, Polivanov perceived not only the idea of the phoneme as the key point of a new understanding of linguistic evolution, but also a kind of "perpendicularity" to general currents, the ability to easily violate established disciplinary proprieties and borders, a specifically scientific "nihilists-like" and proximity to the experimental spirit of the 1860–1880s, finally a tendency toward psychophysical explanations and large evolutionary pictures (including not accidental, but "accumulated" mutations and leaps). Baudouin, who in 1914 was imprisoned in the Petropavlovskaya fortress for his old autonomist speeches and criticisms of the supreme power, had even earlier been invited by the then troublemaker and futurist Shklovsky to a debate at the Tenishev School on the nature and nature of the word, especially in connection with the new art. Although Baudouin himself at the time rejected Shklovsky's postulates, his students found his ideas of the special study of artistic means of expression through linguistics very close. Together with Yakubinsky, Polivanov became acquainted with the stubborn and irascible Shklovsky and attended meetings of the OPOYAZ, as well as a guest at the Brick apartment, where Mayakovsky and the very young Roman Jakobson were their interlocutors.

Polivanov's early article on sound gestures is often mentioned but rarely read in the context of the early OPOYAZ; even the fundamental monograph by Aage Hansen-Loeve or Catherine Depretto's informative works about Polivanov as a member of this group mentions it in passing). His contribution, however, also raises interest against the backdrop of the formalists' general aspirations to discover the specificity of art, first and foremost in the phenomena of materially given, perceptible or "gelled" (Shklovsky). Later, the idea of the "semantic gesture" was developed already in the Czech structuralism of the 1930s by Jan Mukaržovský (Mercks 1986). Polivanov departs from Wundt's general ideas of psychology and moves on to more specific linguistic means of "coloring" words, along with melody or physical gestures. This is a question of language as such (and, moreover, of an alien, Eastern language—although the author constantly refers to Russian and European examples), not specifically the language of literature. He mainly focuses on sound imitations and onomatopoeia, repetitions (reduplication) in which this or that phenomenon of the outer world is reproduced by almost childish means. There is indeed much here of Andrei Bely and the poetic tradition of Rimbaud's *Vowels*. However, what attracts attention is the important emphasis on the expressive components of speech itself, not only on its isolated, artistic field. Polivanov leaves aside the opposition between practical and poetic language, which was very important for early

formalism, focusing, if you will, on the poetic potentialities of “ordinary” language norms, of verbal communication as such. And attention to children’s speech and interest in reduplication will be characteristic of Roman Jakobson, the “chief” linguist of formalism. Roman Jakobson mentioned reduplication specifically in an earlier book about Khlebnikov; and he referred to Agatangel Krymsky, a prominent Ukrainian linguist and teacher at the Lazarev Institute of Oriental Languages (Jakobson himself graduated from the gymnasium at the Institute) (Minlos 2004). In his work on the specifics of translating Tolstoy’s “Resurrection” in Japan, Polivanov will draw attention to the necessity of the translator’s willfulness to change the plot structure, so that in another culture with a fundamentally different attitude toward female “chastity” the plot with Katusha Maslova’s exit to prostitution can still be read as artistically significant and intense (in the sense of “fall”) (Polivanov 1922). Even earlier, Polivanov had talked about this at an evening of “OPOYAZ” in Petrograd in March 1921, and pointed out that in the four Japanese productions of “Resurrection,” by that time this role had been played by men.

Let us note an important moment of dialectical connection, which removes the apparent contrast between the functionalist approach and the principle of defamiliarization—they do not contradict each other, but are realized and should be understood through the postulate of the mobility, cultural or phonetic relativity of the coordinate system itself, the background for the evaluation of this or that “sound gesture” or “plot course”, common to both “practical” and “poetic” languages. It is here, in this attention to the comprehensive system of coordinates, that we will see the beginnings of the principle that Polivanov himself would later label “historiological” (referring to the positivist historian Nikolai Kareev, who was part of his mother’s circle and well-known professor in Petrograd during Polivanov’s students years) (Kareev 1915). Interestingly, unlike the modernist Belyi or even the avant-gardeist Shklovsky, who so sharply resisted the professorial habits of mind of the early twentieth century, the propriety-breaker and Bolshevik like Polivanov actually appreciated very peculiar defenders of positivist scholarships, like Baudouin or Kareev (Comtet 2013). Polivanov’s most explicit statement of the general principles of “Baudouin” linguistics is contained in his early World War I course (Polivanov 1916).

He borrowed from Kareev and Baudouin elements quite different from the then widespread and very simplified, rather Plekhanovian “Marxism,” which, in a reinterpreted form, formed the framework of his sociolinguistic reasoning and vision of linguistic evolution as a whole: psychophysical “realism” and the importance of social “relationalism” (rather than relativism or voluntarism of “conscious” construction), that is the thesis about the correlation between language and society development—based on historically changing conditions (Hirschkop 2019).

It was the relationalist approach in social philosophy and epistemology of the turn of the 1920s and 1930s

that the German and Hungarian sociologist Karl Mannheim, who proceeded from the heritage of early Lukacs, Dilthey’s hermeneutics and neo-Kantianism, built his system of ideas, which also had an influence on researchers of language and literature. In particular, Jan Mukářovský in Prague in the early 1930s, when thinking about the origins of the new structuralist system of ideas, referred to Mannheim’s principles and Ernst Troeltsch’s seminal work on historicism (Macura, Schmid 1999; Illing 2001). Polivanov, of course, thought more pragmatically and functionally than the Prague theorists; but it is important to note his awareness of historicity as an internal and fairly stable pattern of language development, only to some extent—as will be shown below—subject to human intervention and “decretization. And, of course, the convictions of the real Polivanov in the field of the rational organization of speech production were markedly different from the deliberate and deliberate “linguopolitical” recipes of Veniamin Kaverin’s hero Dragomanov, sketched from eccentric orientalist.

Stalin’s “Culture Two,” as V. Paperny described it in the most general terms (Paperny 2002), hardly needed this kind of visionaries. One of Polivanov’s later documents, the Dictionary of Linguistic Terms, which he prepared in the mid-1930s, can be regarded as a working systematization of his views on the nature of language, linked both to the legacy of Baudouin and Scherba and to the more general idea of restructuring the former comparative linguistics based on phonology. The materials of the dictionary did not appear until the end of the twentieth century as part of a collection (Polivanov 1991); the editor of this edition was Koreanist Lev Kontsevich, who did much for Polivanov’s memory (Kontsevich 2001).

Vyacheslav Vs. Ivanov’s close interest (with his Orientalist studies) in Polivanov’s ideas in the late 1950s and 2010s (Ivanov 1957; Ivanov 2010) contrasts particularly with the reticence of Roman Jakobson, for whom Polivanov seems to have remained a promising original, stuck in outmoded psychophonetics, who never attained a correct understanding of phonology (Jakobson’s retrospective sympathies after the 1950s clearly favored Brick’s poetical works). Ivanov and the psychologist Alexei Leontiev, Jr. prepared, at the end of the Thaw, an important Russian edition of Polivanov’s *Selected Articles* (Polivanov 1968). Indeed, neither in the Prague nor in the Moscow version of phonology did Polivanov become a prominent figure (in Leningrad, L.R. Zinder, L.V. Bondarko and their followers also hardly referred to him). On the other hand, it is to Polivanov that the idea of syllabic languages, later developed by M. V. Gordina and in detail by V. B. Kasevich, has its roots, and this is a distinctive feature of the phonology of St. Petersburg (Iosad 2019). Polivanov’s considerations of normativity and standards also clearly influenced the vision of linguistic antinomies in the sociolinguistic works of the 1960s by Mikhail Panov, who was closely associated with Moscow phonology (Panov 1963). For connoisseurs and admirers of Soviet humanities in the West, in addition to the formalist legacy, important were the extended

references to Polivanov in the finale of Lev Vygotsky's final work, *Thinking and Speech* (1934) (Yasnitsky 2018).

In the 21st century, his native Smolensk repeatedly hosted the Polivanov Readings (until 1990 these sessions were held in Central Asia); Polivanov's works remain significant for new research on phonologicals and metrics, slapstick speech and avant-garde "gestures" (Vekshin 2006; Feshchenko 2009). And after the end of the "heroic age" of both structuralism and postmodernism, Polivanov's general and bold view of the nature of the evolution of languages of different epochs and geographical areas, comparative study of different "cultures" of expression of the West and the East, past and present. Polivanov's unpublished works in connection with Jakobson's ideas from the time of Eurasianism are waiting to be published; not all of his Turkologist works and translations have been adequately researched. In recent years, the archival legacy of Polivanov has been actively studied in St. Petersburg within the framework of the project "Linguistics Lost and Found (Lessons of Language Building in the USSR)" (Andronov 2018; Kleiner, Filatova 2018). Polivanov's legacy remains an important source of ideas for proponents of comparative Nostratic linguistics and the Moscow School of Comparative Linguistics founded by Vladislav Markovich Illich-Svitych and Sergey Starostin (Dybo 2005). The peripeteia of language policy, together with the general psychophysiological postulate of "economy of effort" as interpreted by Polivanov, will long remain a source of anxiety for those who want to understand the riddles of speech production a hundred years later.

I thank Alexei Andronov and Evgeny Blinov for their important suggestions in writing this article.

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