

N.S. Trubetzkoy's Concepts of *Language Unions* and *Cultural Zones*

1. Nikolay Sergeevich Trubetzkoy (1890-1938), a leading theoretician of the Prague Linguistic Circle, has been universally recognized as a pioneer of Post-Saussurian linguistics and the methodological architect of modern phonology. The recent Russian version of his *Selected Philological Studies* (*Izbrannye trudy po filologii*), published in Moscow in 1987, is supplied with an extensive Afterword (*Posleslovie*) by T.V. Gamkrelidze, V.V. Ivanov and N.I. Tolstoy, the most prominent linguists in the Soviet Union today. They are certainly correct in pointing out that Trubetzkoy was not only a brilliant linguist but also a resourceful folklorist, musicologist, semiotician, and student of poetics. It should be added, however, that young Trubetzkoy considered all his scholarly endeavors as merely individual branches of his all-encompassing interest in culture.

Trubetzkoy's culturological approach was dominated methodologically by his concepts of *language union* (*jazykovoj sojuz*) and *cultural zone* (*kul'turnaja zona*), both of which Trubetzkoy viewed as natural products of prolonged contact among ethnically diverse tribes or nations. According to Trubetzkoy, such contacts often become a source for new cultural values that can invigorate the potential to advance the ethnocentric cultures of individual nations or tribes. In Trubetzkoy's view, such prolonged contact can also explain certain common denominators of languages that are markedly distinct from one another in terms of their history and structure.

To use one of Trubetzkoy's examples, only long, continuous contact can account for a set of common features strikingly characteristic of several distinct languages in the Balkans, specifically Bulgarian, Romanian, Albanian, and Modern Greek. Although each belongs to a different branch of the Indo-European family, they form a language community that Trubetzkoy proposed calling a *language union* (*jazykovoj sojuz*).

His study "The Tower of Babel and the Confusion of Tongues", published in 1923 in Berlin by the Eurasian Publishing House, argues that a Language Union can also evolve among languages which are genetically unrelated. Prolonged contact can even link entire language families with distinct genetic roots. In this way, according to Trubetzkoy, we can explain

the linguistic liaison among the Finno-Ugric Samojed family and the Turkic, Mongolic and Manžurian families. All of them can be regarded as members of a single *Uralo-Altaic language union*, although they are unrelated genetically.¹

Similarly, according to Trubetskoy, the use of nominal gender and the impact of the root on the morphological shaping of words link the Indo-European family with the Semitic, Hemitic, and North-Caucasian families in a single *Mediterranean language union*.² In Trubetskoy's view, such Language Unions of genetically unrelated languages or languages with distinct historical roots can be observed everywhere in the world. Moreover, some languages belonging to one Language Union on the basis of certain features are linked to another Language Union by other features, and can therefore be regarded as a transitional dialect between two Language Unions.

Trubetskoy's concept of Unions of genetically unrelated languages was necessarily in opposition to the concept of the *language family tree* (Stammbaum) of genetically related languages. Although this concept was coined by August Schleicher, it in fact characterized the majority of the historically oriented Indo-European studies in the nineteenth century. However, Trubetskoy with his penchant for Hegelian dialectics did not regard the Language Tree and the Language Union as two mutually exclusive concepts, but as two complementary approaches with the potential to provide a more accurate classification of languages in the world.

2. In Trubetskoy's view, protracted contacts among ethnically diverse tribes or nations affect not only their languages but also their national cultures. Consequently, in addition to Language Unions, there exist *cultural unions*, or to use Trubetskoy's own term, *cultural zones*.

The cultural interaction among ethnically diverse nations and families of nations challenged Trubetskoy from the very beginning of his scholarly activities. His bibliography begins as early as 1905, when the fifteen-year-old student published in the prestigious *Étnografičeskoe obozrenie* (Ethnographic Review) a paper on the Finnish song "Kulto neito", explicating it as a relic of paganism. During the following years, Trubetskoy completed several studies of Finno-Ugric, Aralo-Altaic, and Caucasian folklore and

mythology. Only later his preoccupation with folklore and mythology was substantially expanded by his interest in historical linguistics and, subsequently, in synchronic phonology, as well. Clearly, for young Trubetzkoy linguistics was not an autonomous discipline, but merely an auxiliary tool for dealing with non-Russian cultural material from the vast area of the Russian Empire which incorporated Finno-Ugric languages and cultures in the West and North, Siberian languages and cultures in the East, and Caucasian languages and cultures in the South. The primary focus of young Trubetzkoy's interest was the spiritual link between Slavs and non-Slavs within the Russian Empire. An ardent patriot, he wanted to illuminate the Eurasian roots of Russian culture and to define his intellectual position *vis-à-vis* Europe on the one hand and Asia on the other. In this endeavor he was more a culturologist than a linguist, although knowledge of non-Indo-European languages was essential to his quest. Only later did he come to understand that the rigor of linguistic scholarship could provide a solid methodological foundation for his culturological studies.

In 1921, the year he published in Paris in the *Revue des études slaves* his important linguistic paper "La valeur primitive des intonations de slave commun", he published in Sofia his insightful culturological observations about the ethnic foundation of Russian culture, "Verchi i nizy russkoj kul'tury" (The Upper and Lower Strata of Russian Culture). This study comprises Trubetzkoy's earliest draft of his concepts of *language union* and *cultural zone* supplemented with his comments about the Family Tree of the Indoeuropean languages. According to Trubetzkoy:

Unquestionably, the Slavic elements is the main component of Russian nationality. However, only on the basis of linguistic data can we get some idea of the nature of the earliest Slavic ancestors of the Russians. As is known, the "Common Proto-Slavic language" from which all the Slavic languages derived is one of the descendants of the "Common Proto-Indo-European language" scholarly reconstructed by means of a comparative study of all its descendants. ... After the era of common Slavic unity, the Slavs subdivided into smaller groups - Western, Southern, and Eastern, - each of which represents, as it were, its own "orientation".³

In the same paper, Trubetzkoy outlines his cherished cultural dichotomy between Russia and the West:

The Western Slavs joined the Romano-Germanic world, ... assimilated the Romano-Germanic culture quite organically and participated as far as possible in its development. The intellectual revolution, which marked the beginning of the so-called "new history" of the Romano-Germanic world, was furthered by the activities of the Western Slavs - Jan Hus, a Czech, and Nicolas Copernicus, a Pole.⁴

However, the Eastern Slavs, according to Trubetskoy's interpretation, lacked direct contacts with the centers of Indo-European culture and could choose freely between the Romano-Germanic West and Byzantium in the East - and Russia chose in favor of Byzantium. In Trubetskoy's view, everything that came from Byzantium was assimilated in Russia organically and served as a model for indigenous creativity, with all its elements adapted to the national psychology, particularly in the realm of spiritual culture, in art and religious life. On the other hand, everything received from the West was not organically assimilated and did not inspire indigenous creativity in Russia. In this respect, he understood the Eastern Slavs to be the descendants of their prehistoric ancestors - the bearers of the Proto-Slavic dialect of the Proto-Indo-European language; as comparative lexical study shows, they felt no spiritual affinity to the Western Indo-Europeans and were spiritually oriented towards the East. While this psychological trait was suppressed in the Western Slavs by long-term contacts with the Germans, the Eastern Slavs had reinforced it through anthropological intermingling with the Finno-Ugric tribes and the Turks. Consequently, in Trubetskoy's view, Russian culture became a completely separate entity:

In sum, this culture itself forms a special cultural zone which, besides the Russians, includes certain Finno-Ugric "foreigners" together with the Turkish people of the Volga basin. In a virtually imperceptible transition to the East and Southeast this culture adjoins the culture of the "steppe" (Turko-Mongol) and is thereby linked with the other cultures of Asia. ... Russian national culture is connected with the East in a multiplicity of ways so that at times the boundary between "East" and "West" appears precisely between the Russians and the Western Slavs.⁵

3. With reference to his concept of Cultural Zones, Trubetskoy argues that the Eastern features of the native Russian elements are particularly evident in folk art:

A significant number of Great Russian songs (including the ancient ritual and wedding songs) are composed in the so-called "five-tone" or "Indo-Chinese" scale. This scale is predominant among the Finnic and Turkic tribes of the Volga and Kama Basins, among the Bashkirs, the Siberian "Tatars," the Russian and Chinese Turkic peoples and all Mongols. This scale must have existed at one time in China; at least the Chinese theory of music assumes its existence and the notation used in China is based on it. At present it is still predominant in Siam, Burma, Cambodia, and Indochina. In this case we have a direct line which comes from the East and stops with the Great Russians. Among the Ukrainians the five-tone scale is found only in a very rare old songs; among the remaining Slavs it appears only in isolated instances; among the Romance and Germanic people it does not exist at all.⁶

Moreover, Trubetzkoy points out, the Russian song differs fundamentally not only from the Romano-Germanic but also from its Western Slavic counterpart by the complete absence of triple-beat rhythms characteristic for the waltz or the mazurka. Major distinctions are also found in the folk dance:

The Romano-Germanic folk dance is characterized by the obligatory presence of couples of men and women dancing simultaneously and holding each other. This enables them to execute identical rhythmic movements (steps) with their legs. There is nothing comparable in Russian dances; couples are not obligatory, and even if two are dancing, they are not necessarily of the opposite sex. ... These features have been also observed among the Eastern Finns, the Turkic people, Mongols, Caucasians and many other "Asians". While the constant contact between the man and the woman in the Romano-Germanic dances introduces a distinct sexual element, Russo-Asian dances introduce instead an element of competition in physical agility and in the rhythmic discipline of the body.⁷

Furthermore, according to Trubetzkoy's culturological observations, the Great Russian verbal folk art has many elements in common with the folk art of the Turkic people and the Caucasians, while the Russian epic poetry is related to the "Turanian" East and to Byzantium. Thus, in terms of his concept of Cultural Zones, Trubetzkoy concludes that the Russian people

are not quite "Slavic" but, together with the Finno-Ugric tribes and the Volga people, form a special Cultural Zone that has links with the Turanian East. "This bond between the Russians and the Turanians," Trubetzkoy asserts, "was secured not only ethnographically, but also anthropologically, for there is no doubt that Turkic as well as Slavic and Finno-Ugric blood flows in Russian veins."⁸

He is convinced that this link with the Turanian East is reflected in the Russian national character as well:

Feelings and brotherhood and mutual understanding which are so easily established between Russians and the Asians, are based on intangible threads of racial rapport. Bold daring, a quality valued by the Russian people in their heroes, is a virtue that derives exclusively from the steppe and is close to the Turkic people, but not to the Romano-Germans and the Western Slavs.⁹

4. Trubetzkoy's observations about the ethnic foundations of Russian Culture not only document his extraordinary erudition as an ethnographer, musicologist and perceptive philosopher of culture but also his alertness to the methodological crisis of historical linguistics in general and of comparative Indo-European scholarship in particular. The failures of the nineteenth-century preoccupation with genetically related languages necessitated a new approach that would not neglect interactions among genetically unrelated languages. Such an approach was needed particularly in Russia, where the Indo-European languages were in dynamic contact with many non-Indo-European languages and cultures.

Although Trubetzkoy's solution is original and in many respects ingenious, it is not without its predecessors. Clearly, one of them was Johannes Schmidt, a pupil of August Schleicher, the very founder of the genealogical Language Family Tree (Stammbaum), conceived in terms of Darwin's biological naturalism. Schmidt, the editor of Schleicher's *Compendium der vergleichenden Grammatik der Indogermanischen Sprachen*, rejected the radical genealogical approach of his teacher and suggested a corrective concept, the wave theory (Wellentheorie), to provide for the mutual impact of languages in contact regardless of their genetic ties.¹⁰ However, Trubetzkoy was the first to give Schmidt's Wave Theory a methodological rigor and extensive documentation. He was joined by Roman Jakobson, who used Trubetzkoy's concept of the Language Union in his brilliant study "K

charakteristike evrazijskogo jazykovogo sojuza" (An Attempt to characterize the Eurasian Language Union) written in Prague in 1930.¹¹ Trubetzkoy's explicit reference to Schmidt also appeared in his famous lecture in the Prague Linguistic Circle on December 14, 1936 about the doubtful purity of the Indo-European languages. It was posthumously published in 1939 in the first volume of the *International Review of Structural Linguistics*, *Acta Linguistica*, edited by Louis Hjelmslev and Viggo Brøndal, a member of the Prague Linguistic Circle. Here we find:

J. Schmidt's Wave Theory is applicable not only to the dialects of one language but also to genetically unrelated languages in geographic contact. These languages reveal common features, the number of which increases proportionally to the duration of the contacts. The same applies to Language Families. The geographic spread of Language Families in the Old World, observed from the point of view of language structures, leads to the conclusion that Language Families constitute an uninterrupted chain. The Finno-Ugric and Samoyed languages have certain features in common with the Altaic languages which are linked with the languages of Korea and through them with the languages of Japan which, in turn, constitute a bridge to the Oceanic languages, while the Altaic languages also concur in terms of certain essential features with the Tibeto-Burmese languages. In Africa, a similar chain links the Semitic, Hamitic, Berberic and Cushitic languages via the Negro languages such as Pular and Wolof, while via the Bantu languages, the languages of the Sudan are contingent with Bantu proper.¹²

5. Interestingly enough the conceptual underpinning of Language Union was present in a lecture "Der europäische Sprachgeist" (The European Language Distinctiveness), delivered in Prague on 6 October 1926 by Henrik Becker, a visiting linguist from Leipzig which had been the German stronghold of the nineteenth-century Indo-Europeanists. Becker, a critic of the Leipzig methodological preoccupation with the genetically related languages, dealt in his lecture with the impact of the Central European cultural community on the genetically unrelated Hungarian language. He tried to demonstrate in linguistic terms that Hungarian, a member of the Finno-Ugric family, was affected by its protracted contacts with European languages and cultures and that it changed accordingly. After the lecture, the German visitor met with several young scholars in the office of Professor Vilém Mathesius

to continue the discussion. The group included two Anglicists (Vilém Mathesius and Bohumil Trnka), two Slavists (Roman Jakobson and Bohuslav Havránek) and one Orientalist (Jan Rypka). It was on that occasion that the Prague Linguistic Circle was founded.¹³

Notes

- 1 'Vavilonskaja bašnja i smešenie jazykov', *Evrazijskij vremennik* 3 (Berlin 1923), 116.
- 2 *ibid.* 117.
- 3 'Verchi i nizy ruskoj kul'tury', republished in: *K probleme russkogo samopoznanija* (Berlin 1927), 22.
- 4 *ibid.* 26.
- 5 *ibid.* 28-29.
- 6 *ibid.* 29.
- 7 *ibid.* 29-30.
- 8 *ibid.* 31.
- 9 *ibid.*
- 10 Johannes Schmidt, *Die Verwandtschaftsverhältnisse der Indogermanischen Sprachen* (Weimar 1872).
- 11 Roman Jakobson, 'K charakteristike evrazijskogo jazykovogo sojuza', in: *Selected Writings* 1 (The Hague 1971), 144-201.
- 12 N.S. Trubetzkoy, 'Gedanken über das Indogermanenproblem' (Vortrag gehalten im Cercle linguistique de Prague den 14. December 1936), *Acta Linguistica: Revue internationale de linguistique structurale* 1:2 (Copenhagen 1939), 86.
- 13 *Sound, Sign and Meaning: Quinquagenary of the Prague Linguistic Circle*, L. Matejka (ed.) (Ann Arbor 1987), ix.