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Semiotics of Apartheid: The Struggle for the Sign

Summary:
This paper examines the work of the Soviet language theorist, Vološinov, in relation to Saussure’s semiology. The value of Vološinov’s historical materialist approach is illustrated through application of his theory to the political mobilization of language and ideas in the South African struggle occurring between the ruling apartheid government and the Mass Democratic Movement. The struggle for the sign between the two competing forces is shown to be a fundamental element of the conflict as each constituency struggles for legitimacy. Vološinov’s theory is argued to be a valuable addition to a reconstructed historical materialism, one which can accommodate the idea of the masses as active co-creators of meaning.

Zusammenfassung:
Originally, semiotics emerged as part of the phenomenological paradigm which located understanding purely within the mind or subjective realm. A second interpretation was stimulated by Vološinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1973) (first published in Russian in 1929). Vološinov's ideas were adopted by Stuart Hall (1980) and his colleagues at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham during the 1970s. They appropriated Vološinov in the study of communication encoding and decoding, and ideology. Drawing on cultural studies, we attempt to show why Vološinov's ideas are important for semiotics, even though he does not himself use the word.

Following the work of Louis Althusser (1971a; 1971b) on Marxism, ideology and consciousness, it might now appear self-evident that an understanding of ideology also requires an analysis of language. Yet before Vološinov, the “subjective” phenomenon of language had been excluded from materialist analyses of ideology. In stating that he viewed the base-superstructure problematic as a fundamental issue, Vološinov (1973: 17) placed the “subjective” squarely on the Soviet-Marxist academic agenda. More significantly, he was the first to deal with language and semiotics from an historical materialist perspective. This gives him a significance beyond Soviet-Marxism.

Vološinov's study of language emphasizes dialectical “totality” (Korsch 1970). In other words, he does not separate out the economic base from the ideological superstructure, or foreground the one over the other. Although Vološinov's concern is with language and the subjective, he never allows this to become a “subjectivism” in which the “material” is forgotten, as was the case with Althusser. This integration of the material with the subjective separates Vološinov from all other semiology and semiotics. The latter theories remain in the realm of ideas (or the superstructural). Concern with language from the position of reified, synchronic and de-contextualized (subjective) structures (e.g. Saussure 1974) refuses questions of context and productive forces. Likewise, a materialist (economicist) structuralist approach to communication (e.g. De la Haye 1980), is just as problematic to a reconstructed historical materialism (i.e. an historical materialist method to deal with the subjective/superstructures) (Habermas 1979).

“Totality” theories question methodologies claiming the existence of purely autonomous (“free floating”) “subjectivities” (e.g. as found in some forms of phenomenology, hermeneutics and post-structuralism). For example, racism is not merely a “superstructural” phenomenon. It can, and has been used by business and governments at different times as a means of class oppression. Idealistic interpretations are facilitated by the “apparently” subjective and “fluid” appearance of language and consciousness. From a totality perspective, both the pure subjective (“free” consciousness) and pure objective (orthodox materialist) interpretations are incomplete, which is why the totality approach has difficulty accepting both economic materialism and those phenomenologists, hermeneuticians and semioticians who ignore the material. Vološinov transcends both materialism and subjectivism. His study of language (semiotics) thus operates within a totality perspective: language (specifically signs) is seen as the site where subject and object meet (Vološinov 1973: 39-41). So the sign is where the social world and the psyche (consciousness/subjective) intersect. Further, Vološinov's interpretation of the social world is an historical materialist one – i.e. Marxist contextualization is central to Vološinov's method. Hence, for Vološinov, the sign is subjective (1973: 25-26), but it is also objective (Vološinov 1973: 26): the sign is where the objective and subjective interpenetrate each other. Hence semiotics becomes a site at which one can study the subjective from a materialist perspective. Through studying the sign it becomes possible to initiate a materialist study of ideology.

This Vološinovian method is, however, of more than theoretical interest. In terms of the South African conflict, his (semiotic-based) reconstruction of historical materialism provides an excellent tool for the analysis of apartheid as both an ideological and a material phenomenon. Apartheid was never an irrational subjective imposition by whites on blacks, as liberal analysis contends. It has a material and subjective “totality”, in which the rhetoric, first of racism, and later, cultural difference, served deeper material interests. Apartheid as ideology was a subjective process “inhabiting” the realm of ideas: it was, and for many South Africans, remains a racist belief and language system which is processed and reproduced in superstructural institutions like schools, universities, the courts and media. As a language (system of signs), apartheid was always dialectically intertwined with an objective economic dynamic. In other words, apartheid was never simply “pure” subjectivity or belief. It had a material base. Many whites, for example, perceive their economic interests to be threatened by a one-person-one-vote system. They fear that this would result in a material redistribution of wealth to the black majority, hence impoverishing whites relatively. This subjective perception has historical material roots: in 1949 apartheid ideology (as subjectivity) served the (material) interests of the emergent (white)
Afrikaner petit bourgeoisie, the Afrikaner working class and rural landowners (O’Meara 1983).

In the late 1980s apartheid ideology (now linguistically “reformed” into the notion of “separate group identities”, “cultural difference”, “minority rights” and the “defence of law and order”), served the material interests of white state bureaucrats and the white suburban petit bourgeoisie. The sign-system of the “reforming apartheid” discourse contemporaneous with the late 1980s was tied to the material interests of a patronage system through which Afrikaner nationalism retained its hegemony by co-opting both whites and blacks into a well paid apartheid bureaucracy. If the internal resistance (known as the Mass Democratic Movement – MDM) was to be successful in contesting the ruling National Party (NP) hegemony, especially when the conflict reached the “negotiation-phase” as it did in early 1990, it had to take heed of both rhetoric and the deeper material interests of apartheid. Only in this way could maximal advantage be won over from the NP. In a post-apartheid situation, the reconstructive planners will need a semiotic programme for altering in (Vološinov) tandem both the material and ideological (linguistic) “components” of apartheid. Material structures such as the economy, urban structures and work practices are best changed in tandem with ideological shifts. Nationalisation of a country’s assets, for example, without dealing with the ideological heritage of the past will not produce “liberation”. The residual discourse will clash with the material changes as the East Europeans discovered in the glasnost era.

Vološinov’s semiotics, in other words, does not locate ideology purely in consciousness (the subjective). Rather, “ideology” is interpreted as the way in which “society” enters the “mind” through signs (Vološinov 1973: 11 & 39). In South Africa during the 1950s, for example, the material interests of the Afrikaner petit bourgeoisie, workers and land-owners alliance required that the political economy be re-ordered in accordance with their (overlapping) economic interests. This took the form of “concretes” change such as the forced re-settlement of blacks and racial group areas; job segregation and protection; and the transfer of wealth from the English-speaking capitalist sector to the Afrikaner-dominated state/bureaucratic sector. This material re-ordering was accompanied by a “subjective” re-ordering of:

a) an ideological-rhetorical rationalization for this materialist exploitation; plus
b) the “perceptual” changes occurring as a matter of course due to the

new material re-ordering (e.g. the perception of living in a “white” world where blacks only “entered” as servants and labourers).

Apartheid as a social order hence entered into the minds of South Africans and the West as a (subjective) sign system. This racist discourse was legitimised to whites initially on the basis of racial superiority; then in the 1980s on the basis of “the same but different” (Tomaselli et al. 1986), and in the late 1980s in terms of “cultural difference”. The object of this semantic engineering facilitated by Afrikaner language planners working in conjunction with the state broadcasting corporation (Tomaselli et al. 1989), education departments and political meetings, excluded overt racism and masked it under Western liberal discursive terms like “protection of minorities”, “multiculturalism”, “own affairs” and so on. But in South Africa, these terms always had a racial/ethnic content. “Minority rights”, for example, simply meant the retention of “white” political control, especially over which “group” (i.e. race) may live and work where (bantustans, “white” South Africa etc. Thus, if signs have a “material” basis (Vološinov 1973: 11) and are produced within an historical material context (Vološinov 1973: 21), then apartheid was more than just racism. It was a racism which legitimised particular economic, political and social arrangements. It therefore was, and will remain, a “racial capitalism” (Saul/Gelb 1980) until a liberation government is able to reorder not only the present political economy, but apartheid discourse itself which has naturalised whole categories of words in terms of a submerged racial content.

For us then, the semiotics of apartheid is the study of the interpenetration of the psyche (subject), the material (object) and (historical material) context. In other words, the semiotics of apartheid would examine:

**Psyche (Subject)**

1) how racist discourse becomes naturalised as the way things are and should be;
2) how internalisation of this discourse by individuals, classes and groups is often translated into the discourses of “tribalism”, “cultural difference”, “ethnicity”, and racism.

**Material (Object)**

3) How was racial discourse “materialised” into political and social practices and mini-bureaucracies across South Africa? This remains evident, for example, in the bantustan education systems and the Tricameral Par-
4) How did the specific material object – racial capitalism – arise out of particular politico-economic, social and psychological conditions fashioned by colonialism, neo-colonialism and fractions of capital within the state? And in terms of these,

**Historical Material (Context)**

5) how did local capital and the international imperatives of Western monopoly capital benefit from, and give support to, racial capitalism? How did this sector legitimise its own complicity in apartheid to its owners, respective governments and their respective constituencies? In other words, why is racial capitalism not acceptable in South Africa when a class-based capitalism (often also identified in racial terms) is acceptable in Western countries?

This question is unanswerable within conventional phenomenological semiotics. The answer is to be found in Vološinov’s theory of language because it is contextualized historically and materially. In contrast, Saussure’s linguistics are reified subjective abstractions, generalized into “universals”. Ch.S. Peirce’s semiotic, however, is open to being read through Vološinov, but this would be another paper.

**The Sign as the Arena of Social Struggle**

For Vološinov, signs and meaning are inherently dialectically (dialogically) fluid. Meanings are not fixed. They are dynamic and may even be contradictory. In South Africa, for example, the meanings of specific signs are continually shifting and being shifted. Three basic processes can be identified. The first is by means of semantic engineering. By excluding, for example, the apostrophe from “people’s” (as in “peoples”), the state’s language planners encoded the idea of “nations”, “races”, and “genetic units” connected to hereditary “homelands”. Thus, when state officials talk about “people’s”, they intend foreigners to understand this use in conventional terms. This is necessary to convince the world that “apartheid is dead”.

But the racist sub-text is understood, intuitively and sometimes explicitly, by all South Africans.

Willing co-option of counter-hegemonic terms that have become troublesome to the existing order occurs. Prime examples include the government/capital alliance’s attempts to use for their own purposes MDM terms like “non-racial” and “community”. The Movement encoded into “non-racial” a content that assumed a transformed society, not one just without racism. In contrast, the government meant, until early 1990, a class-based multi-racialism where “groups” (i.e. “races”) were permitted to integrate in the workplace, in leisure and some living spaces, but not in state schools, white living spaces, state health facilities, and so on. The racially integrated areas and activities were administered by “general affairs” bureaucrats, while the segregated areas and activities came under the “own affairs” administration of the “white”, “coloured” and “Indian” houses within the Tricameral Parliament and the bantustans. This political structure remained in place even after the government had announced the desegregation of these facilities in mid-1990. “Own affairs” and “general affairs” were terms engineered to deflect attention away from the previous racist terminologies of earlier white governments, e.g. Department of Bantu Affairs, and the earlier Native Affairs. In terms of the discursive logic popularised by the NP government after February 1990, the shift in discourse will have to be complimented with the dismantling of “own” and “general” affairs departments within the state. By September 1990, however, this bureaucratic manifestation had yet to bow to the change in ideological discourse.

“Community” was another word for “apartheid” as the state’s definition statistically aggregated “communities” in terms of “race”, language and ethnicity, irrespective of geographical, cultural or class differences. So, for example, we have in state discourse the “black”, “Indian”, “coloured” and “white” communities, each corresponding with specific and separate political structures. Advertising discourse thus targets markets based on these categories, ignoring class and income disparities and therefore potential sales of the products advertised.

“Natural mutations” occur as material conditions change. “Nationalist”, for instance, is moving from meaning white Afrikaner-inclusiveness to a white-inclusive phenomenon (including English speakers who on the whole vote for the liberal opposition).
The Sign as an Arena of Strategy

Resistance movements which pay systematic attention to shifts in signification, as well as both official and popular discourses occurring in all the sectors of the population, usually develop much more sensitive and effective strategies than those that simply dismiss media and language as superstructural. The Afrikaner Nationalist struggle against British imperialism during the first two-thirds of this century was effectively boosted by a mobilisation of media and language. By the mid-1980s, Afrikaners had captured not only support from most whites, but also fractions of the Indian and coloured middle classes as well as black tribal-nationalists. This alliance included elements of the homeland bourgeoisie, the black middle classes and parts of the urban black working class.

Successful resistance movements like the Afrikaner Nationalists of the first half of the 20th Century benefited from explicitly utilizing language and media analysis, for this facilitated a sensitivity to nuances and subtle shifts in hegemonic positions. Vološinovian semiotics is a modern route to class contestation. For example, black working class rhetoric alienates even sympathetic white middle class activists. Thus, a knowledge of discourse and discourse-change is: (a) a valuable source of intelligence concerning moves within the repressive ruling alliances; and (b) can identify signals indicating when the opposition movements should advance, withdraw, or even seek to co-opt and possibly assimilate former sectors of the ruling bloc. This is a cue for semiotics which occurs intuitively amongst left-wing South Africa politicians, but remained undertheorised until the unbanning of the African National congress in February 1990, which shifted the context of struggle from insurgent and worker militancy to the need to build ideological alliances across classes and races.

What is more, when Vološinov speaks of the sign as "an arena of class struggle" (Vološinov 1973: 23), he is clearly not talking in terms of a materialist (economicistic) reductionism in which language (sign systems) is reduced to a one-on-one relationship with "class". For example, apartheid was never an exclusively economic-class phenomenon; it also contained a (subjective) racist "belief", which may have had its origins in economics, but which eventually took on a "life of its own". Material interests then take on subjective properties inside the mind.

Vološinov explicitly states that class struggle takes place "within one and the same sign community" (Vološinov 1973: 23). South Africa, for example, forms one such sign community, even though the apartheid regime believed that it consisted of a number of different, even incompatible, sign communities. Declaring that “apartheid is dead” as the government had done since 1979 did not eliminate the conflict. The apartheid sign communities, however, bore no relationship to the South African sign community. Pronouncements of the end of apartheid made no impact within the South African sign community. The struggle continued despite its premature obituary so enthusiastically announced and re-announced by NP spokesmen after 1979.

A materialist (class) struggle is also a subjective (semitic or communication) struggle. In this regard, social contradictions can manifest themselves in sign systems as surely as they manifest themselves in the economic system. In South Africa, the sign “apartheid” itself became such a contradiction for its inventors, the National Party, because it was made to mobilize considerable (internal and external) opposition to the prevailing order. As a result the NP tried to kill this sign, while its anti-apartheid opponents tried to retain and use the term for anti-apartheid mobilization (see Tomaselli et al. 1990).

Unlike Saussurian semiology, Vološinov’s semiotics is a dialectical and materialist structuralism: there can be no generalized “given” sign - rather, each sign is (historically and materially) fluid, and actively “struggled” over within the totality of its social context. Whole sign systems can also be struggled over. An example was moves during the late 1980s and early 1990s towards “claiming” Afrikaans as a language not of white Afrikaner-Nationalist oppressors, but a sign-system derived from the “kitchen-Dutch” of the Cape (so-called coloured) slaves (Willems 1987; Roberge 1990). This would enable Afrikaans to be “re-claimed” as a language of the struggle against apartheid. Central, then, to Vološinovian semiotics is that the study of the sign (dialectically) "connects" the (fluid) “interface” (i.e., “totality”) of subject and object; the individual psyche; and the social context (and class struggle). Ideology is seen to be “born” within this dialectical totality of subject and object, although Vološinov recognizes that the “dominant ideology” will try to “stabilize” itself (Vološinov 1973:24). This ties up with the Gramscian notion of the work done by “traditional” intellectuals who will attempt to stabilize the ideology that underpins the ruling hegemony. In South Africa, the work of conservative academics and journalists trying to create and popularise a reformed apartheid discourse, falls into this category (see, e.g., Ecoquid Novi 1989).

But to say that the dominant ideology (sign system) will try and stabilize itself is clearly not the same as Saussurian semiology wherein signs are assumed to be “stable” (i.e., a synchronic view of signs). Saussurian struc-
turalism in fact assumes that a reified structure exists. So whereas Vološinov’s structuralism assumes that a diachronic (and contradictory) process exists, Saussure’s ideas tend towards a deterministic interpretation of structure in which the mind is “imprisoned” in the structures of language. The Saussurian view could hence be argued to be the “subjective” equivalent of deterministic materialism.

Vološinov’s structuralism consequently represents a valuable addition to a reconstructed historical materialism based on firstly, a (dialectical) “totality” interpretation of Marxism; and secondly, one in which contradictions and praxis are foregrounded, i.e.:

a) Vološinov’s approach does not assume totality to be (reified) “truth” as in Lukács. It is for Vološinov a “method”. Neither does Vološinov assume that superstructures are all-powerful (as in the Frankfurt School and Althusser). Vološinov’s approach can accommodate the idea of the masses as active co-creators of meaning.

b) Vološinov’s semiotics is not of the same subjectivist or undialectical type as Saussure’s, but is rather explicitly oriented toward a social “struggle” which occurs simultaneously within language and material structures. Hence it is a semiotics that complements Enzensberger’s (1974) challenge to historical materialists to find the gaps in hegemonic institutions and mobilise through them.

c) Because Vološinov’s semiotics represents synthesis of subject and object, it has an in-built brake against the tendency of moving towards the sort of “subjectivism” that has developed in the semiotic-derived work of certain post-Althusserians and post-structuralists.

Vološinov consequently pioneered a theoretical route to a reconstructed historical materialism which offered a way of “penetrating” into the less “tangible” mind or “consciousness” dimension. So whereas the Frankfurt School examines the superstructures via the media or “culture industry”, and Gramsci via “intellectuals” (also a more “concrete”/material phenomena), Vološinov’s route was via language and signs themselves. This is a particularly difficult route to adopt. This “inner” dimension of ideology and its relationship to the “material” represents a means of access. In opening this dimension his work has enriched the debate about superstructures, and offered a tool for the non-reductionistic (in either its subjectivist or objectivist forms) analysis of apartheid.

However, Vološinov’s work remains purely theoretical and unconnected to practical struggle. In this respect, his work has certain similarities to the Frankfurt School. Many South African activists have therefore shunned semiotics and charged that it is, at best, irrelevant and, at worst, dangerous to “the struggle”. This is an error since theory and practice are symbiotically related (Korsch 1970) and can be made to be so, even if praxis was not on the agenda of the originating theorist. In one sense, an unconnectedness to practical struggle allows for a “specialisation of effort” which results in a theoretical sophistication. And the sort of sophistication found in Vološinov is equally valuable to “practice” for historical materialism and for “the struggle”. If Habermas’ challenge is to be met, and a reconstructed historical materialism is to be built upon a “solid foundation”, then the work of historical materialist theoreticians, as Korsch (1970) noted just as surely, also needs the work of practitioners.

Notes

1 This interpretation of Saussure could be argued to blur his fundamental opposition between langue (system, social) and parole (application of that system). However, Saussure sometimes blurred his own distinction by describing la langue as both a psychological reality as well as a social one. A less demanding reading of Saussure would hold that a fluidity of scale starting with Saussure and proceeding to Vološinov might better account for Saussure’s discussion of change and varying degrees of shift in the relationship between the signified and the signifier that occurs over time.

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