PROBLEM OF LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY IN WORKS OF LINGUISTS AND PHILOSOPHERS OF EARLY 20TH CENTURY

Ecaterina Alexeeva, and Natalia Tynikova
PhD, Saratov State Sovinov Conservatoire , PhD, Saratov State Sovinov Conservatoire

Abstract:The article studies the problem of the diversity of languages. The problem of multiliguism that was widely discussed by Russian and European philosophers and linguists of the early twentieth century who proved that the problem is not purely linguistic, but epistemological and cognitive as well. The authors of the article focus on the ideas of Sergey Bulgakov who believed that the difference between languages is purely formal while inner content is the same. Such understanding is determined by S. Bulgakov's Christian perception of the language as a divine gift.

Keywords:Language, multilinguism, Sergey Bulgakov, Russian religious philosophers, Tower of Babel

The problem of the diversity of languages attracted attention of many European philosophers and linguists of the early twentieth century. Among its main aspects that interested scientists were the origin of a language as means of communication and reasons that caused the proliferation and transformation of languages.

In the early twentieth century, many intellectuals affirmed the importance of international unification and sought to remove communication barriers between peoples. One of these obstacles was the multiplicity of languages. According to a French linguist Antoine Meillet (1866-1936) the linguistic situation in Europe at that time was paradoxical and problematic. He wrote: "The language situation in Europe today is paradoxical […]. The languages that serve as organs to this civilization are very diverse, and they constantly grow in number. Knowledge of German, English, Spanish, French, and Italian is not enough to anyone who wants to keep abreast of all modern civilization. "(Meillet 1918, pp. 9-10) Two French authors L. Couturat and L. Leau in the book *Histoire de la langue universelle* (History of the Universal Language) (1903) developed the idea of the necessity of an auxiliary international language that imposes itself with increasing urgency and evidence, as relationships of any kind between nations develop.

It is not a surprise that at the turn of the century there were many attempts to create a universal language that would provide communication in the multicultural and multilinguistic world. One of the best-known and the most successful of them was *Esperanto* (1887), an international language that was intended to help facilitate communication between people of all backgrounds and cultures. But artificial manmade languages could not substitute natural languages and did not last long. Many scientists viewed it as a proof of a Divine nature of a human language.

Problem of a Divine nature of human language interested Russians philosophers S. Bulgakov (1871-1944), P. Florensky (1882-1937), A. Losev (1893-1988)more than any others thinkers. In their works they proved that the problem is not purely linguistic, but epistemological and cognitive as well. Let us focus on the ideas of S. Bulgakov.

BDD-A28606 © 2018 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 21:59:56 UTC)

The philosophical framework of this article is the beginning of the twentieth century, a key moment when different movements of ideas about language and the sign were manifested in Russian culture. After a long period of positivism, Darwinism and social issues, the interest of the intellectual elite shifted on history, philosophy and literature, giving rise to numerous texts and articles of very different genres and styles.

One of the specificities of early twentieth-century Russian philosophy is the particular appeal of the thinkers for Christian themes and subjects, which imply the idea of the rebirth of man and even of all humanity through to the Christian faith. Part of the Russian philosophical thought of this period is characterized in particular by a renewal of religious mysticism, in accordance with the Eastern Christian tradition, which arose as heir to the Fathers of the Church (Denys the Areopagite, Saint Gregory of Nysse).

S. Bulgakov supported the idea of the original language sent by God and believed that all human languages are derived from it. He was especially interested in studying the period of the first universal language existence. Bulgakov's universalist approach to the language and multilinguism was reflected in his works of 1920s-1930s, the period when he was particularly interested in studying language.

In 1920 S. Bulgakov worked on his book *Filosofija imeni* (The Philosophy of the name) (1953). In this book he made clear the distinction between a language as a divine creation and a language as a historical and social phenomenon. Such understanding of double nature of language is explained by S. Bulgakov's Christian vision of the world and the Universe.

Best of all this difference is expressed in the part "Čto takoe slovo?" (What is a word?) in which he spoke out against the psychological laws and evolutionism that were very popular in contemporary language studies. He wrote: "Language is a historical and social phenomenon, with the number of clothes that it puts on or takes off according to time, circumstances, environment [...]." (Bulgakov, 1991 [1953], p. 39) "If language has its cosmic or anthropological foundation, its linguistic realization is a work of human creativity [...], of art, psychology; in short, of history" (Bulgakov, 1991, p. 39.)

Some authors tried to explain the proliferation and transformation of languages by the legend of the Tower of Babel. One example we find in the article "The Tower of Babel and the confusion of tongues" [1923] of Russian linguist and philosopher Nikolaj Troubetzkoy (1890-1938)

According to The Book of Genesis first God gave people a single language understood by everyone, but they sinned by pride. As punishment God separated them by different languages. S. Bulgakov carefully studied the history of a linguistic disaster at Babel. Paradoxically, the scientist insisted on the existence of a single language that was expressed by means of several languages. He wrote that a careful reading of the story on the Tower of Babel clearly suggested that there was a unique common natural language, that God veiled by a multitude of different languages. The Bible reads: "the whole earth used the same language and the same words." (Gen. XI, 1). Thus for S. Bulgakov as a Christian such unity is paramount and it forms the basic nature of a language.

S. Bulgakov put forward an original idea that even before the accident of Babel there existed languages belonging to three branches of Peoples (Japhethites, Semites and Hamites), but despite all the phonetic and grammatical differences people could understand each other because they possessed the gift of common language. We believe that S. Bulgakov meant the common ability of people (before Babel) to perceive and convey meaning and divine ideas.

BDD-A28606 © 2018 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 21:59:56 UTC)

He spoke about the divine quality that people lost after the catastrophe of Babel. After Babel, according to S. Bulgakov, there was no question of creating new languages but there was a problem of misunderstanding the idioms of the same language[1].

"Taking into account that this event took place when the three branches of peoples had already established, those of Japhethites, Semites and Hamites, and that came from whole nations, "which have spread on earth "(X, 32), it was not a surprise that they ceased to understand, but it is surprising that before language was common and that they were fully understood. Suddenly the veil of verbal multiplicity fell. The language was born in Babel."

But what was the language before the fall of Babel? What became of its verbal qualities and properties after? Why does S. Bulgakov emphasize the idea that everyone spoke the same language? In our opinion, S. Bulgakov gives the answers to these questions stating that language should be studied not only from the theological, but from semiotics and linguistics points of view as well. The philosopher studied the enigma of the first single *internal* language that existed before the disaster at Babel at the beginning of his book *Philosophy of the name* (1953).

S. Bulgakov looked for the first language that would represent the unity of form and content, and serve to express the Truth. This can explain Bulgakov's high interest to the hypothesis of a single primary language. This language is not arbitrary; it represents the unity of form and content, despite the difference in phonetic form.

The Babel event is estimated by S. Bulgakov as "the phenomenon of the proliferation of a single reality, as the decomposition of white light by the spectrum" because "the word has always been and it is one." He developed this idea by showing how, after the Babel confusion, there were formed various dialects and languages.

After the mixture of languages at Babel, the inner meaning of words became dark and the men could no longer understand each other simultaneously as they did before. S. Bulgakov made the assumption of the existence of an internal language common to all men which remained intact.

S. Bulgakov wrote: "Verbal diversity did not mask the internal language. But its windows suddenly became completely opaque. Special efforts were now needed to understand the meaning, once obvious. The language was certainly still intact in its foundation, but its inner meaning, once clear, had become obscure."(Bulgakov, 1991, p. 37-38).

The legend of Babel helped S. Bulgakov to explain the universal nature of human language. According to the scientist, even after Babel internal speech continued and still potentially continues to contain all possible languages.

Facing the diversity of languages, S. Bulgakov sees the difference between them on a purely formal level (voice organs of people, difference in the words, roots and word structure), and focuses the attention on the idea of *universal inner* content of languages. He believes that the catastrophe of Babel did not touch the element-sense (*universal ideas*) of the word; otherwise it would have destroyed the highest creation of God - Man. Such understanding of the language by S. Bulgakov is determined by his Christian perception of the world as a Divine manifestation.

According to S.Bulgakov universal ideas are manifested in all languages. They allow people to communicate and translate from one language to another. The quest for a unique language among all peoples represents, for him, the overcoming of the Babylonian curse and redemption. With his thesis on the existence of universal ideas, Bulgakov appears as one of

[1]U. Eco relying on the text of the Bible in his book *In Search for the Perfect Language* (1995) expresses the same idea. He draws our attention to the fact that the text of the Bible clearly points to the existence of several languages before Babel.

BDD-A28606 © 2018 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 21:59:56 UTC)

the heirs of the ideas of Plato (neo-Platonists, Fathers of the Church and V. Soloviev (1853-1900)).

S. Bulgakov views this human capacity to understand each other as one of the proofs of the existence of a common *inner language* that can be manifested in various forms: written, oral and gestural. The Russian philosopher approaches the culminating and contradictory point of his conception of language: the common ideas are embodied in different words and these are used to transmit them. Although they are realized in particular languages, these ideas are the same for all speakers. They represent the *logos* or the *inner language* that is innate in humans.

To sum up we would like to emphasize that, unlike many of his contemporaries exploring similar linguistic problems, S. Bulgakov transposes the framework of his study into the field of religious philosophy. He creates his own conception by trying to link linguistics and the Orthodox religion.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the theme of the multiplicity of languages and that of the search for the first and universal language that had been forgotten after the events of Babel, are redeveloped. For Russian intellectuals, this question becomes preponderant and we have seen the emergence of a number of works devoted to this subject.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. BULGAKOV Serge, 1991[1953]: *La philosophie du nom et du verbe*. Lausanne: l'Age d'Homme.
2. COUTURAT Louis, LEAU Léopold, 1903: *Histoire de la langue universelle.* Paris: Hachette.
3. ECO Umberto, 1995: *In Search for the Perfect Language*. Blackwell in Oxford, UK, Cambridge, Mass., USA
4. MEILLET Antoine, 1918: *Langues dans l'Europe nouvelle*, Paris: éd. Payot.
5. TROUBETZKOY N. S., 1999: *«*The Tower of Babel and the confusion of tongues" [1923]*» in Nasledie Čengisxana. Moskva*

BDD-A28606 © 2018 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 21:59:56 UTC)