



Campbell-Thomson, O. (2021) L. V. Ščerba's conception of language. *Historiographia Linguistica*, (doi: [10.1075/hl.00074.cam](https://doi.org/10.1075/hl.00074.cam)).

This is the author's final accepted version.

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/221083/>

Deposited on: 27 April 2021

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow
<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

L. V. Ščerba's Conception of Language

Olga Campbell-Thomson

"My interests: theory of language in general"

Ščerba, autobiography¹

1. *Introduction*

Lev Vladimirovich Ščerba (1880–1944) established a scholarly reputation beyond Russia for his work in the field of phonetics, his development of the theory of the phoneme, his foundational work in lexicography, and his compilation of bilingual dictionaries. Within Russia itself he is also known for his pioneering work in the linguistic analysis of literary texts, for propagating language studies and philological education as part of school curricula, for his work on the normative grammar of the Russian language, and his dialectological research.

At the centre of all these endeavours across a wide range of fields was Ščerba as a theoretical linguist. Summarising Ščerba's general linguistic outlook, his student Vinogradov (1951: 34) emphasised his professor's relentless focus on the interdependence of all elements of linguistic structure. Vinogradov assigned Ščerba to the category of linguists for whom the *general* problems of linguistics are always of primary concern:

no matter how deep they penetrate the concrete study of a given language, or even a single linguistic fact, they approach everything from the viewpoint of general linguistic theory. For them linguistics is also a laboratory where their world-outlook is forged, tested and verified. (Vinogradov 1951: 31)

Ščerba's 1931 essay *The Threefold Aspect of Linguistic Phenomena and Experiment in Linguistics* (hereafter referred to as *The Threefold Aspect*) encapsulated his linguistic "world-outlook", which had been "forged, tested and verified" (Vinogradov 1951: 31) over the course of more than thirty years of linguistic research. In this work Ščerba wove together theoretical generalisations drawn from his own linguistic analyses, and from various hypotheses on the social nature of language, into a single cohesive conception of language. In doing so, Ščerba (1974 [1931]: 39) claimed "to theorise for the first time what has been apparently put into practice by a number of people". The text was a critical station

¹ Personal file of a corresponding member of the Academy of Sciences L. V. Ščerba, p. 5; quoted in Vinogradov (1951: 31).

within a temporal and intellectual network. The influence of the ideas that informed Ščerba's theorising, as well as the conclusions he drew, go a long way towards explaining the contemporary knowledge and interests of language sciences.

This introduction to Ščerba's essay aims to provide the backstory behind his conception of language as a way of helping the reader understand the interconnectedness of various strands of linguistic research. The intersection of characters, ideas, schools and places is complex, though it is possible to discern a number of pivotal points that bear direct relevance to the theorising presented in *The Threefold Aspect*.

I begin by tracing Ščerba's intellectual journey from his scholarly upbringing as part of the St. Petersburg School of Linguistics and his adoption of a sociological research agenda in European linguistics at the start of the twentieth century. A brief outline of the social and intellectual environment of Soviet Russia in the 1920s is included to help readers understand the process of Ščerba's linguistic thinking within its immediate historical context. I then outline some key perspectives on language available to Ščerba at the time he was formulating his concept of language. Ščerba's inspection of their explanatory potential for general linguistic problems sets the context for presenting his conception of language as a threefold unity of linguistic phenomena.

Ščerba's achievements lay in formulating a cohesive account of the interconnectedness of language phenomena, identifying the linguistic means with which to understand the social nature of language, and providing a theoretical basis for addressing practical tasks of linguistics.

2. *Baudouin de Courtenay and the St. Petersburg School of Linguistics*

The entry of Jan (Ivan Aleksandrovič) Baudouin de Courtenay (1845–1929) into Ščerba's life can serve as a logical starting point for narrating Ščerba's development as a language scholar and, above all, a theoretical linguist. At the time of this encounter, Ščerba was a third-year student at the Faculty of History and Philology of St. Petersburg University. He had already received substantial training in languages, psychology and general philology but the opportunity to study under Baudouin would lead to a number of important directions in Ščerba's intellectual development. It was also the start of a life-long, mutually beneficial, personal and scholarly relationship.

Ščerba (1974 [1930]: 384) outlined the reasons for Baudouin's appeal in a commemorative article published after his teacher's death. Originality and independence of thought were the main attractions of Baudouin the scholar. His reluctance to follow prevailing doctrines fascinated searching minds like Ščerba's. Baudouin's controversial ardour went together with tolerance for opposing views. Finally, Baudouin's willingness to share time and ideas with everyone who drew near him made Baudouin popular among students.

It is easy to see why Ščerba was drawn into Baudouin's 'school', which was frequently referred to as the St. Petersburg School of Linguistics on the basis of its geographical and

institutional location. The association of this school of linguistics with Baudouin's name historically covers the period between Baudouin's return from Europe to St. Petersburg University in 1900, where he held the Chair in Comparative Linguistics and Sanskrit, and his departure for Poland in 1918.

Baudouin's tendency towards generalisations and his interest in identifying underlying patterns rather than recording isolated linguistic facts nurtured in his students the habit of making connections between language structure as a whole and detailed analyses of particular linguistic phenomena. Just as for Baudouin the analysis of empirical facts served as "a springboard for broad theoretical generalizations" (Stankiewicz 1972: 43), so too it served as such for Ščerba, who made it his quest to develop an overarching theoretical framework capable of capturing the interplay of the entire range of linguistic phenomena. Baudouin's influence was frequently acknowledged by Ščerba in his own writings. In 1904, for example, Ščerba stated the following:

A great deal of ideas that appear in my paper are borrowed intentionally or unintentionally from the lectures and discussions of Professor I. A. Baudouin de Courtenay; I have the privilege to be one of his students and it is to him that I owe my entire interest in linguistic matters. (Ščerba 1957 [1904]: 11)

Although a number of Ščerba's projects took their initial impetus from Baudouin's ideas, it was Ščerba who brought some of these ideas to fruition. Thus, with reference to the development of the concept of phoneme, Jakobson (1971: 420) noted that "the vital core of [Baudouin's] linguistic achievements still lay buried in his works and courses" and that Ščerba was one of those who "managed to extract this core from the superfluous chaff and to find an empirical application for their teacher's phonological inklings". Reflecting on Baudouin's work in more general terms, Jakobson (1971: 415) noted that Baudouin "never succeeded [...] in realizing the systematic structural studies of particular languages and of language in general". This observation is reiterated by Stankiewicz (1972: 11) who stated that Baudouin's "important work in general linguistics found almost no echo outside the circle of his immediate students and followers".

As Baudouin's student and follower, Ščerba fully recognized the impact of his teacher's work on the development of general linguistics. Two texts by Ščerba written *in memoriam* soon after Baudouin's death in 1929 provided accounts of Baudouin's scholarship. These texts, published in 1929 and 1930, aimed to establish Baudouin's rightful place in the development of linguistic science (see Ščerba 1957 [1929]; 1974 [1930]). Furthermore, Ščerba's 1931 essay *The Threefold Aspect* was dedicated to Baudouin and acknowledged Baudouin's place in Ščerba's own intellectual journey towards the milestone this essay represents, i.e. the articulation of a theoretical conception of language. This dedication was also reflective of Baudouin's influence in that the essay weaved strands from his teacher's scholarship into the conception. In this sense the essay can be viewed as a good measure of Baudouin's theoretical contribution to general linguistics.

3. *Dialectological Studies and European Linguistics*

Baudouin's tuition positioned Ščerba at the centre of the main currents of contemporary European linguistic thought. This tuition was interlaced with direct exposure to emergent ideas and practices in European schools of linguistics through the direct contacts that Ščerba established and sustained.

Having passed master's examinations in 1906, Ščerba was sent to Europe on a three-year internship, where he met Karl Brugmann (1849–1919), August Leskien (1840–1916), Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920), Antoine Meillet (1866–1936), Jean-Pierre Rousselot (1846–1924), Paul Passy (1859–1940) and Joseph Vendryès (1875–1960) (See Jakobson 1971 and Ščerba 1974 [1966]). Touring Europe also gave Ščerba the opportunity to polish up his knowledge of European languages (e.g. French and German) and to engage in field studies of various regional dialects.

In 1906, after a short stay in Leipzig, Ščerba went to Northern Italy to study rural dialects in Tuscany. On Baudouin's advice, he then spent his autumn vacations in 1907 and 1908 in Prussia learning the East Lusatian spoken dialect in the region of Muzhakow (Muskau) located by the River Neisse. This was a Sorbian dialect from a Western Slavic group that displayed influences from both German and Lusatian. Ščerba's dialectological fieldwork study in Prussia would be developed into his doctoral dissertation, *Vostočno-lužickoe narečie* [*East-Lusatian Dialect*], which he defended and published in 1915. It also provided plentiful material for Ščerba's master's thesis and would supply him with observations to underpin his later theoretical conclusions.

It can be argued that his sociological awareness was fostered during the period of his European studies of 1906-1909. According to Konrad Koerner (1991: 60), a "sociological component" was already "slowly infiltrating linguistic geography" by the last decade of the nineteenth century. Dialectology was very much in the focus of Russian linguists too, including Izmail Sreznevskij (1812–1880), Baudouin, and Filipp Fortunatov (1848–1914). Baudouin specifically reflected on dialectal studies and developed his ideas about the mixed character of all languages and social differentiations in language in his monographs *Opyt fonetiki rez'janskix govorov* [Phonetic individualities of Resian sub-dialects] (1875) and *O smešannom xaraktere vsech jazykov* [On the mixed character of all languages] (1901) (see Ščerba 1974 [1930]: 386). However, it was the dialect geography advanced by Swiss linguist Jules Gilliéron (1854–1926) in France that came to be viewed as providing the most systematic account of the social and regional aspects of linguistic variability and change. Gilliéron pioneered the production of linguistic atlases aimed at providing a complete picture of the linguistic reality in a given country. In his *L'Atlas linguistique de la France*, published between 1902 and 1910, Gilliéron sought to test assumptions about the allegedly sharp demarcation between *langue d'oïl* and *langue d'oc* (including Provençal), as well as such changes as the reduction of the use of homonyms (Gilliéron 1902–10). This work was thoroughly sociological in orientation and Ščerba referred to the

findings of Gilliéron and ‘his school’ in *The Threefold Aspect* in support of his own assertions regarding the social factors impacting linguistic behaviour (Ščerba 1974 [1931]). It is possible that Antoine Meillet acted as the chief conduit to Gilliéron’s work for Ščerba, who attended Meillet’s lectures at the Collège de France in the period 1906-1908. Meillet expressed a great interest in dialectology and in Gilliéron’s work in particular (Muller 1937), finding it provided a basis for a better understanding of linguistic changes in immediate social and local contexts.

Meillet had been a student of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) in linguistics and of Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) in sociology, and Ščerba reported that Meillet himself had credited Durkheim with providing the foundations for his sociology (Ščerba 1974 [1966]). Ščerba also noted that Meillet had very pointedly referred to linguistics as a *social science* in his introductory lecture to a course on comparative grammar in 1906. According to Ščerba (1974 [1966]), Meillet outlined one of the goals of linguistics as being that of establishing correspondences between social and linguistic stratification and the impact of changes in the societal structure on changes in linguistic structure (Ščerba 1974 [1966]: 406-407). Although Ščerba did not consider Meillet to be a pioneer in this social conception of language, he did emphasise Meillet’s crucial role in outlining specific goals of linguistic research with a focus on the interrelationship between linguistic and social factors (Ščerba 1974 [1966]: 407).

Intellectual affinity between Ščerba and his European peers is evident in the fact that Ščerba continuously drew on their scholarship in his discussions of various linguistic issues. References to Meillet, Gilliéron, Rousselot, Hugo Schuchardt (1842–1927) and Otto Jespersen (1860–1943) recurred in Ščerba’s texts throughout his life. Ščerba thus had a thorough knowledge of all the most important historical and recent developments in European linguistics, being proficient in a number of European languages, including French, German and English. Indeed, Ščerba himself wrote his works in Russian, French and German.

Ščerba maintained regular scholarly contacts with European linguists, including Meillet, Vendryès, and Lucien Tesnière (1893–1954), and was honoured by a number of European societies. He was an elected member of the International Phonetic Association, for example, as well as the Paris Institute for the Study of Slavic Languages, the Paris Linguistic Society, and the Paris Association of Teachers of Modern Languages. It is possible to state with some confidence, therefore, that Ščerba was himself a European linguist. His scholarly development, both directly and through the genealogical links between his teachers, had included an interweaving of numerous strands of European linguistic thought that can be traced back to the time when linguistics was first asserting itself as an independent field of studies. Ščerba’s practical and theoretical contributions to general linguistics should thus be viewed as an integral part of the same continuous process of the field’s development. In light of these observations, the publication of *The Threefold*

Aspect in 1931 in Russia can be seen as an outcome of an intellectual discussion that had been ongoing among European linguists for several decades.

4. *Ontological paradigms in linguistic research at the time of Ščerba's writing*

In 1931, when Ščerba's essay was published, the radically new political, economic and social order brought about by the socialist revolution of 1917 was well-established in Russia. Incidentally, this post-revolutionary period in Russian linguistics has been viewed as witnessing "the rise of an incipient but theoretically sophisticated form of sociolinguistics" (Brandist 2006: 261). There was certainly a well-pronounced political agenda that required the application of Marxism and a need to find sociological underpinnings in practically any area of research. Although sporadic references to "Marxist linguistics" are present in Ščerba's texts, his work does not convey the impression of following a prescribed research orientation. The following citation from Ščerba's writing is an illustration of such references, and even here there is an attempt to draw a line between "vulgar sociologism" and a genuine linguistic agenda:

general linguistics will make big gains if, examining the language of a given collective at a given point in time as an interdependent system (thought being included in this system), it will examine the interrelationship between single elements of this system. Without this, we will never craft Marxist linguistics and will not be able to rise above the level of the most vulgar sociologism. (Ščerba 1974 [1966]: 412)²

Ščerba's texts offer no indication of interest in any theoretical propositions on the nature of language found in Soviet linguistics at the time. Regarding the highly politicized movement that dominated official Soviet linguistics in the 1920s and well into the 1930s, called *Marrism* after Nikolaj Marr (1864–1934), it is barely possible to detect any impact of this movement on Ščerba. Marr first proposed his theory of the Japhetic unity of languages (e.g. Georgian, Syriac, Hebrew and Arabic) in around 1908 (Matthews 1948). He reformulated his ideas on linguistic similarities after the Socialist Revolution of 1917, creating a fusion of Japhetic theory with Hegelian-Marxist dialectic. This became the standpoint of the Leningrad Japhetic Institute founded by Marr in 1921 with the approval of the Academy of Sciences. Marr's discussion of sociological change and the general norms of linguistic change from the pre-phonetic to the flexional stage of language were based on isolated instances from different stages in the development of languages (See Matthews 1948 for a detailed review of the stages of development of Marr's theory). When acknowledging merits of diachronic linguistic investigation, Ščerba emphasised that

² This article "Pamjati A. Meje" [In memory of A. Meillet] was written by Ščerba soon after Meillet's death in 1936 and was intended for *Izvestiya Akademii Nauk SSSR* [Proceedings of the USSR Academy of Sciences]. It was first published in 1966 in *Voprosy Jazykoznanija* [Linguistic Matters] from Ščerba's manuscript. The manuscript does not show a specific date. (See Notes on p. 424 in Ščerba, Lev V. 1974. *Jazykovaja sistema i rečevaja dejatel'nost'* ed. by Zinder, Lev R. & Margarita I. Matusevič: Izd. "Nauka".)

historical linguistic facts could only be studied within the context of the overall linguistic system of a given historical period. For this reason, among others, he could not give serious consideration to the speculations of Marr and his followers. The point here is that Ščerba's sociological view of language as articulated in *The Threefold Aspect* should be judged on its own merits and as an outcome of an evolving research programme rather than a response to the ideological dictates of the times.

Ščerba's life and experience itself provided him with abundant material to inform the development of his thinking on the social character of linguistic processes. As a keen observer, Ščerba must have extensively recorded the changes in language induced by the manifold new interactions taking place among different social groups. These observations would provide him with strong grounds for stating in *The Threefold Aspect* that "the history of every given language is a history of cataclysmic changes caused by the mixing of social groups" (Ščerba 1974 [1931]: 37).

Ščerba kept abreast of his social, political and intellectual surroundings. In addition to his university lecturing and ongoing research, he organized and taught language courses at various institutions, he collaborated with his academic colleagues on the orthographic reform of the Russian language, dialectological studies, and the creation of writing systems for the many oral languages of the Soviet Union. In all these respects, Ščerba's theorising, and specifically his conception of language formulated in *The Threefold Aspect*, can clearly not be detached from the spatio-temporal context in which it emerged.

In terms of any specific paradigmatic alignment, however, Ščerba's view of language does not fall easily into any existing schematizations. A number of the perspectives on language that he drew into his discussion in *The Threefold Aspect* provided observations on the social character of language. These can be viewed as theoretical anticipations of Ščerba's formulation of his own conception of language, although none of them offered a satisfactory explanatory scheme capable of reconciling social and individual factors in a unified theoretical framework; nor were these perspectives able to explain the laws underlying the interdependence of the elements of linguistic structure.

Völkerpsychologie, a broad programme of psychology in its social aspects, was one theoretical framework that gained currency in Russia in the mid-19th century. The project of *Völkerpsychologie* sought to address the issue of individual-community relations, and it was the conceptualization of the relationship between individual and social psychology elaborated in the work of Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920) that entered the linguistic discourse of the time. As Nerlich and Clarke (1998: 187–188) have noted, however, Wundt approached linguistics as subordinate to psychology. Language in this view is considered as the cultural product of a social group, and as such is instrumental to understanding how individuals' cognition is shaped by social and collective patterns of thinking.

In his master's thesis, Ščerba (1912) noted that Wundt's analysis of the processes of perception had been Wundt's main service to linguistics. Ščerba reiterated his view of the limited influence of Wundt's work on linguistics in *The Threefold Aspect*, in which he

noted that Wundt's *Völkerpsychologie* was nothing more than common psychology; and as such it could not satisfy the aim of linguistics to capture aspects of language in an overarching way.

The German psychologist, sociologist and philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) is another reference included in *The Threefold Aspect*. Ščerba (1974 [1931]: 27) uses the term “middle man” to reflect on Dilthey's conception of human beings as the objects of socio-historical sciences and as being conditioned by biological facts (See Dilthey 2010). Language as a mode of expression comes into play when Dilthey addresses the issue of understanding between human beings. How these external expressions could be formulated using linguistic means, however, was beyond Dilthey's scope.

Although this reference to Dilthey is of little significance in itself, what is of interest is that Ščerba thereby relegated Baudouin de Courtenay's notion of the ‘collective-individual’ to something “reminiscent of Dilthey's ‘middle man’” (Ščerba 1974 [1931]: 27). As early as in the 1870s, Baudouin had talked about the need to distinguish between two interrelated aspects of language: the first of these aspects, *jazyk* (language), Baudouin viewed as consisting of a complex of categories and constituents existing only in potential, while the second aspect, *reč* (speech), comprised continually repeatable instances of language. Baudouin emphasized that he did not see *jazyk* and *reč* in terms of a binary opposition of *social product* versus *individual activity*; rather he argued that speech activity itself was a social product and that the creative potential of the act of speaking was based on the choices provided by language. In Baudouin's article “*O “prawach” głosowych*”,³ cited by Ščerba (1974 [1931]: 27), Baudouin adopted the concept of *collective individuality* as a solution to overcoming the separation between the collective and the individual. According to Ščerba (1974 [1931]: 27), Baudouin's concept of *jazyk* (language) was nevertheless an abstract, idealised system.

Two other perspectives on the nature of language considered in Ščerba's essay are those of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) and Edward Sapir (1884–1939). Saussure's linguistic conception was organized around a set of binaries that included social/individual and *langue/parole*. In his *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, posthumously collated and published in 1916 by Saussure's colleagues Albert Sechehaye and Charles Bally, *langue* was presented as a system of purely formal conventions in opposition to *parole*, viewed as particular executions of these conventions. To elaborate on the process of such executions, Saussure charted the speech circuit (‘le circuit de parole’) which basically involved physical events. This circular process started with the arising of a concept/idea in one speaker's mind, it then was converted into an acoustic image and physically transmitted through the hearing apparatus of the receiver, the receiver then accessed a corresponding concept and converted it into a sound image (See Saussure 1956 [1916]). Saussure's schema of speech event did not seem to account for the necessity of socially shared content

³ An English translation and commentary on Baudouin's article of 1910 “*O “prawach” głosowych*” can be found in Stankiewicz (1972). The title of the article in Stankiewicz's translation is “Phonetic Laws”.

base, or intentionality, in this process of transmission, i.e. it did not stipulate that the speech event had to be about something and had to pursue the goal of comprehension. Ščerba's specific observation was that Saussure positioned his notion of *langue* "as a psychological value in the human brain" (Ščerba 1974 [1931]: 27). Ščerba also noted that Saussure's notion of *parole* did not coincide with his notion of "speech activity" (ibid.) and explained what he considered as attributes of speech activity:

On one side we have a unified linguistic system grounded in the social foundations of the past, objectively embedded in the linguistic raw material of a given social group and realised in individual speech systems. On the other side there is the content made up of the lived experiences of a given social group. (Ščerba 1974 [1931]: 28)

To Ščerba, by separating *langue* from *parole*, Saussure separated what was social and collective from what was individual, or what was essential from what was accidental.

Edward Sapir's book *Language*, published in 1921, presented his understanding of language as "the function and form of the arbitrary systems of symbolism" (Sapir 1921: 10). To Sapir, language was an abstraction in which he nevertheless identified essential grammatical categories.

Ščerba (1974 [1931]: 27) states categorically in *The Threefold Aspect* that he "instinctively reject[s] everything extrasensory" and "cannot accept the idealists' approach, i.e. to recognise the existence of a linguistic system as a super-individual substance, some 'live objective idea', something 'ideal-real'". This is why Ščerba did not see either Baudouin's or Saussure's dualistic conceptions of language as providing the means of capturing the interdependence of speech and language as a whole. Likewise, he could not "accept pure nominalism, which considers a linguistic system, i.e. the lexis and grammar of a given language, to be merely a scientific abstraction", which he felt was "the impression produced by Sapir in the first chapter of his marvellous book *Language*" (Ščerba 1974 [1931]: 27).

5. *Interlude*

The overview given above of contemporary standpoints on the nature of language is a useful passage to the following presentation of Ščerba's conception of language. The lack of a satisfactory explanation of the relationship between the speech organisation of individuals and the linguistic system remained an unresolved issue, and Ščerba stated explicitly that "the positions of most linguists, including Saussure, who came closer than others to this matter, [were] not clear" (Ščerba 1974 [1931]: 27). What required rethinking was this fissure between language seen as an idealised system of representations and the capacity of language-users to engage in a meaning-making process within the boundaries of language's possibilities. How Ščerba's conception of language addressed these issues and what this added to perspectives on language in common circulation at the time of his writing is the focus of the following section.

6. Ščerba's conception of language

Ščerba conceived of language as an interlinked unity of three aspects: *speech activity*, *linguistic system*, and *linguistic raw material*. Although this division is artificial, it is nevertheless essential to any understanding of language as a dynamic process. Ščerba specified that linguistic system and linguistic raw material are different facets of speech activity and that the social nature of language processes is revealed in the constant interplay of the aspects of this threefold unity.

Before elaborating on the meaning of each aspect and their interplay, it is important to understand how Ščerba approached the 'individual' factor embodied in the processes of speech activity that comprise both speaking and comprehension. Ščerba asserted that there is no individual speech organization as such; rather, he argued, the individual's psycho-physiological speech organisation and the speech activity this engenders is social, since "if the individual differences in the speech organization of a particular individual are substantial, this very fact removes the individual from society" (Ščerba 1974 [1931]: 27). Likewise, when discussing language change, he pointed out that "everything genuinely individual [...] perishes without a trace if it does not generate any reverberation or mere understanding" (Ščerba 1974 [1931]: 28–29).

This approach does not eliminate the agency of the interlocutor. It is obvious that the events of speaking and comprehension are enacted by individuals; but it is from the sum of these linguistic experiences that the members of a social group, and linguists, draw *linguistic raw material*. Such linguistic raw material is therefore social: "the aggregate of everything being said and comprehended in a specific context at a certain period of time within a given social group" (Ščerba 1974 [1931]: 26). "It is in linguistic raw material", Ščerba maintained, that "one should look for the sources of uniformity of language within a given social group" (Ščerba 1974 [1931]: 28). This also means that the uniformity of linguistic expression and comprehension needs to be found at the level of social groups, where 'social group', to Ščerba, means any collective of people sharing similar forms of labour or other conditions of life.

Linguistic raw material is a linguistic archive: it stores instances of speaking and comprehension that have taken place. However, new events of speech activity are more than merely the repetition of stored material. People do not just have the capacity to reproduce and identify earlier pronouncements; they engage in the infinite production of new meanings by deploying finite linguistic means. Ščerba's explanation is that linguistic raw material must be systematized to enable meaning-making. Ščerba calls this organization of linguistic raw material *a linguistic system* and includes grammar and lexis in this system. Grammar and lexis have to be viewed broadly. Compiled written grammars and dictionaries reflecting the linguistic system of a specific language reflect the structure of the so-called "common language" which is "always studied as a foreign language, with greater or lesser success, depending on various circumstances" by its native speakers

(Ščerba 1974 [1931]: 31). Ščerba (1974 [1931]: 31) notes that it is possible to talk about different ‘linguistic systems’ of different ‘social groups’ for the native speakers of the same language. Thus, language, in Ščerba’s conception, is a system of systems. He specifies:

... it should be borne in mind that the languages we mainly deal with are not the languages of rudimentary social units but the languages of very complex structures corresponding to and serving the complex structure of society... (Ščerba 1974 [1931]: 28)

From this it becomes clear how all three aspects of linguistic phenomena are interlinked. Ščerba (1974 [1931]: 26) notes that linguistic raw material, the source of language unity, “would be void without processes of comprehension, and that comprehension itself is impossible without linguistic raw material that is in some way organised (i.e. within a linguistic system)”. All three aspects are inherently social. Moreover, a linguistic system, which can be equated with language, “holds some sort of social value which is common and obligatory for all members of a given social group and which is objectively drawn from the conditions of this group’s experience” (Ščerba 1974 [1931]: 27). Language is thus the processed, systematized linguistic experience of a given social group (Ščerba 1974 [1947]: 71).

Ščerba’s conception of language as a threefold unity overcomes the dichotomy between the collective and the individual that was pronounced in Baudouin’s and Saussure’s perspectives on language. The concept of *collective individuality* adopted by Baudouin, like Saussure’s conceptual set of *langue/parole*, both treated language as an idealised entity somehow detached from individual language use. In Ščerba’s conception, language comprises the processed and systematized linguistic experience of a given social group and is thus immanently positioned in this very experience. A linguistic system, i.e. grammar and lexis, constitutes a depository of concrete tangible mechanisms grounded in the processes of speaking and comprehension. These linguistic mechanisms sustain both the creativity and uniformity of the language of a given social group that are essential for meaning-making. This means that language users do not randomly ‘draw’ from a bank of linguistic resources given to them; rather, language users are the co-creators of these resources and there is a constant process of negotiation at the level of the social group as to the possibilities and impossibilities within a certain linguistic system (i.e. language).

Drawing a distinction between his own and Saussure’s conceptions of language in his later writing, Ščerba (1974 [1947]: 69) specified that Saussure’s *parole* did not include the processes of comprehension essential to meaning-making. He further argued that Saussure had not considered raw linguistic material, i.e. the unsystematized linguistic experiences retained in the memory of individual speakers. This elaboration on the points made by Ščerba in *The Threefold Aspect* helps us to understand what his conception of language added to the theory developed by Saussure, who in Ščerba’s (1974 [1931]: 27) own words “came closer than others” to a possible explanation of the relationship between language as a system and speaking as individualized manifestations of that system. The inclusion of linguistic raw material (the third aspect of linguistic phenomena in Ščerba’s threefold

unity), as the source of the uniformity of language within a given social group, provided the missing link by which to understand the interconnectedness of the processes of language production and comprehension. Ščerba's conception of language as a system of systems also offers a more cohesive account of language as a dynamic process and of the interplay of various linguistic phenomena within this process.

Ščerba's conception of language avoids what he sees as the nominalism entailed in Sapir's view of language. In his "inquiry into the function and form of the arbitrary systems of symbolism that we term languages", Sapir (1921: 10) considers "the absolutely essential concepts in speech" (Sapir 1921:98) and the requirement of subject and predicate for the intelligibility of sentences, i.e. propositions (ibid.). The practice of imposing arbitrary taxonomies on linguistic phenomena, i.e. a nominalist approach to linguistics, is also obvious in Sapir's discussion of the types of linguistic structure in Chapter VI of his book *Language* (see Sapir 1921).

In Ščerba's account of language he emphasises that the linguistic data found in dictionaries and grammars are concepts "and as such are not available to our *immediate* experience (either psychological or physiological)" (Ščerba 1974 [1931]: 26). Ščerba refrains from ascribing any pre-conceived categories as being essential to linguistic structure and language intelligibility. Moreover, the importance of experiments in linguistics that Ščerba emphasizes and advocates in *The Threefold Aspect* can be viewed as a guarantee against prescriptiveness in describing and explaining linguistic systems. Experimentation in linguistics acknowledges the ongoing process of systematization of linguistic raw material. The social character of this process is emphasised by the requirement to verify linguistic data using 'living language' material, i.e. comprehensible and incomprehensible texts produced by language speakers:

when compiling an abstract system on the basis of the facts of the given material, it is important to test this system on the new language facts, i.e. to check whether the facts drawn from this abstracted system correlate with practice. (Ščerba 1974 [1931]: 31)

Instances of unsuitable utterances, called by Ščerba (1974 [1931]: 33) "negative linguistic raw material", and their corrections by competent language speakers, are essential for determining the linguistic system in the process of experimentation. Such experimentation, according to Ščerba (1974 [1931]: 32), is essential for the production of adequate grammars and glossaries of living languages. Ščerba's (1974 [1931]: 35) discussion of experiments in linguistics reiterates the point that "individual differentiations of individual speech systems" are always within the range of acceptability "inside the primary social group, since the differentiations leading to mutual misunderstandings inevitably have to disappear in the process of social communication".

Ščerba, who sought an overarching theoretical explanation of the interdependence of all elements of linguistic structure, found this explanation in his own conception of language. He applied this framework profitably in a number of projects, including his work on lexicography and the compilation of dictionaries. Ščerba's formulation of the

conception of language as a threefold unity also afforded him the means to validate his approaches to teaching foreign languages. A two-volume manuscript he started writing in the early 1940s was specifically intended as a systematization of his outlooks on foreign language education in accordance with his conception of language as a threefold unity (See Ščerba 1974 [1947]).

The examples outlined so far do not exhaust the possibilities of the practical applications of Ščerba's conception of language. His mapping of concrete linguistic means to the study of language as practice rather than a 'thing' offers a productive theoretical basis for approaching novel linguistic tasks. In this respect, Ščerba's conception of language represents an important contribution to general linguistics.

Ščerba's theoretical outlook was not to the exclusion of other outlooks. While it is possible to see a number of intersecting points in Ščerba's conception of language and common perspectives on language that had acknowledged the social nature of language before him, it was Ščerba who found the way to weave elements from a number of linguistic hypotheses into a single fabric. The conceptual distinction between the three aspects - speech activity, linguistic raw material and the linguistic system - is instrumental in describing, understanding and explaining the interdependence of various linguistic processes. This delineation allows us to locate the sources of language uniformity underpinning the processes of language production and comprehension, i.e. the linguistic raw material that is organized within the linguistic system, and provides an explanation of the uniformity of language change. The tangibility of these linguistic means in the view of language as a threefold unity, and the constant interplay of these different aspects of language, help to explain why individual acts of speaking and comprehension are inherently social. Overall, Ščerba's conception of language provides the means for understanding the creative nature of language and the possibility of the production and comprehension of an infinite number of new meanings through the deployment of finite linguistic resources.

7. *Concluding remarks*

This critical introduction to Ščerba's essay *The Threefold Aspect of Linguistic Phenomena and Experiment in Linguistics* has sought to provide readers of the English-language translation with a sense of the place and importance of the text.

Ščerba's conception of language as articulated in *The Threefold Aspect* is a contribution to the theory of general linguistics and must be viewed as an integral part of the continuous process of the development of this field. This paper has shown how the publication of *The Threefold Aspect* in 1931 in Soviet Russia was the outcome of an intellectual discussion that had been sustained among Russian and European linguists for several decades, thereby demonstrating that a number of threads of linguistic thought were interwoven in Ščerba's conception of language. The emphasis on the connectedness of Ščerba's theorising is a useful reminder that linguistic research is a vibrant network created by the interaction of

many strands of thought and sites. This interconnectedness prompts the need for rethinking conceptual trends and theoretical formulations in linguistics – both those currently in use and those that seem remote in time. This is because advancing language science, or any science for that matter, is not about adding to what is known and static; rather one needs to synthesize ideas and rethink available knowledge in order to move ahead. Ščerba's theorizing presented in *The Threefold Aspect* offers sufficient material for further synthesis of ideas as a way of achieving advancement of linguistic research.

Notes to the Text

The first publication of *The Threefold Aspect* appeared in 1931 in the journal *Izvestiya Akademii Nauk SSSR* [Proceedings of the USSR Academy of Sciences]. The text was reprinted in the 1974 volume of Ščerba's writings *Jazykovaja sistema i rečevaja dejatel'nost'* [Language System and Speech Activity] compiled and edited by Lev R. Zinder and Margarita I. Matusevič (Ščerba 1974 [1931]). The editors provide useful annotations and bibliographic data to the reprinted text, though the essay itself remains intact. The English-language translation of Ščerba's essay is based on this reprinted version and the pagination marked in the translation corresponds to the page numbers of the 1974 edition. Citations from Ščerba's original work written in Russian appear in this text in my English translations.

In translating the essay I have tried to preserve the style of Ščerba's writing. Russian sentences tend to be longer and more complex in structure than English sentences, and rendering these involved occasional compromises between the conciseness of English syntax and retaining fidelity to Ščerba's expression and his occasional verbosity. Apart from these challenges that are inevitable in translation, my engagement with Ščerba's writing has been an enriching experience. The intertextual information included in this critical introduction reflects only a portion of the disciplinary, cultural and historical knowledge that Ščerba condenses in his essay. It is hoped that providing access to an English-language translation will enable the English-language audience to engage in their own critical reading of Ščerba's text and its further contextualization.

REFERENCES

- Brandist, Craig. 2006. "The Rise of Soviet Sociolinguistics from the Ashes of *Völkerpsychologie*". *Journal of the History of the Behavioural Sciences* 42:3. 261–277.
- Dilthey, Wilhelm. 2010. *Selected Works: Understanding the Human World* ed. by Rudolf A. Makkreel & Frithjof Rodi. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gilliéron, Jules. 1902–10. *Atlas linguistique de la France*. (Nine volumes.) Paris: Champion.
- Jakobson, Roman. 1971. "The Kazan's School of Polish Linguistics and its Place in the International Development of Phonology". *Selected Writings*, vol. II: *Word and Language*, 394–428. The Hague: Mouton.
- Koerner, Konrad. 1991. "Toward a History of Modern Sociolinguistics". *American Speech* 66:1.57–70.

- Matthews, William K. 1948. "The Japhetic Theory". *The Slavonic and East European Review* 27:68.172–192.
- Muller, Henri F. 1937. "Antoine Meillet, 1866-1936." *Romanic Review* 28:1.63–66.
- Nerlich, Brigitte & David Clarke. 1998. "The Linguistic Repudiation of Wundt." *History of Psychology* 1:3.179–206.
- Sapir, Edward. 1921. *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de. 1959. *Course in General Linguistics*. English translation by Wade Baskin. New York: Philosophical Library.
- Ščerba, Dmitrij L. 1951. "Lev Vladimirovič Ščerba". *Pamjati akademika L'va Vladimiroviča Ščerby (1880-1944): Sbornik statei* ed. by Larin, Boris A., Lev R. Zinder & Margarita I. Matusevič, 7–22. Leningrad: Leningrad State University Press.
- Ščerba, Lev V. 1957 [1904]. "O služebnom i samostojatel'nom značenii grammatiki kak učebnogo predmeta" [Ancillary and independent status of grammar as a school subject]. *Izbrannye raboty po ruskomu jazyku* ed. by Margarita I. Matusevič, 11–20. Moskva: Izd. "Učpedgiz".
- Ščerba, Lev V. 1912. "Russkie glasnye v kačestvennom i količestvennom otnošenii" [Russian vowels in qualitative and quantitative respects]. *Zapiski Istoriko-Filologičeskogo Fakul'teta Imperatorskago S. Petersburgskago Universiteta, Čast' CVII* [Notes of the Historical-Philological Faculty of the Imperial St. Petersburg University, Part 107] St. Petersburg.
- Ščerba, Lev V. 1915. "Vostočno-lužickoe narečije" [East-Lusatian Dialect]. Dissertation. Part I, Vol. CXXVIII. Petrograd: Istoriko-filologičeskij fakul'tet Petrogradskogo Universiteta 1.113–129.
- Ščerba, Lev V. 1957 [1929]. "I. A. Boduène de Kurtenè i ego značenie v nauke o jazyke" [I. A. Baudouin de Courtenay and his place in language sciences]. *Izbrannye raboty po ruskomu jazyku* ed. by Margarita Matusevič, 85–96. Moskva: Izd. "Učpedgiz".
- Ščerba, Lev. 1974 [1930]. "I. A. Boduène de Kurtenè. Nekrolog" [I. A. Baudouin de Courtenay. In memoriam]. *Jazykovaja sistema i rečevaja dejatel'nost'* ed. by Zinder, Lev R. & Margarita I. Matusevič, 381–394. Leningrad: Izd. "Nauka".
- Ščerba, Lev V. 1974 [1931]. "O trojakom aspekte jazykovyx javlenij i ob eksperimente v jazykoznanii" [The threefold aspect of linguistic phenomena and experiment in linguistics]. *Jazykovaja sistema i rečevaja dejatel'nost'* ed. by Zinder, Lev R. & Margarita I. Matusevič, 24–39. Leningrad: Izd. "Nauka".
- Ščerba, Lev V. 1974 [1947]. *Prepodavanje inostrannyx jazykov v srednej škole: Obščije voprosy metodiki* [Teaching foreign languages in secondary schools: General matters of teaching methodology] ed. by Raxmanov, Igor V. 2nd edition. Moskva: Izd. "Vysšaja Škola".
- Ščerba, Lev V. 1974 [1966]. "Pamjati A. Meje" [In memory of A. Meillet]. *Jazykovaja sistema i rečevaja dejatel'nost'* ed. by Zinder, Lev R. & Margarita I. Matusevič, 405–412. Leningrad: Izd. "Nauka".
- Stankiewicz, Edward. 1972. *A Baudouin de Courtenay Anthology: The beginnings of structural linguistics*. Bloomington (Indiana): Indiana University Press.
- Vinogradov, Viktor V. 1951. "Obščelingvističeskie i grammatičeskie vzgljady akademika L. V. Ščerby". [Views of academician L. V. Ščerba on general linguistics and grammar] in *Pamjati akademika L'va Vladimiroviča Ščerby (1880-1944): Sbornik statej* ed. by Boris A. Larin, Lev R. Zinder & Margarita I. Matusevič, 31–62. Leningrad: Leningrad State University Press.