

"Sots-Speak: Regimes of Language under Socialism": International Conference

Princeton, May 2011

Sots-Speak: Regimes of Language under Socialism
May 13-15, 2011

Princeton University
Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures

Call for Papers

The attempt to build communism in Eastern Europe was accompanied by the development of a distinctive language paradigm, first in the Soviet Union, then - by a process of cultural translation and local adaptation - in the satellite states of the Socialist Bloc. The official discourse possessed its own 'speech genres' (tied to specific communicative contexts, social roles, and political tasks), easily recognizable rhetorical patterns and lexical peculiarities. It is intuitively obvious that this discourse, which we provisionally label sots-speak, was instrumental in legitimizing and perpetuating the political system, in shaping individual psychologies and cultural expressions. However, our knowledge of its exact nature and practical existence remains sketchy, as the topic still awaits systematic research.

The aim of this conference is to bring together scholars whose work helps shed light on the politico-ideological idiom(s) of state socialism, so that we can begin to develop a sophisticated, multi-layered picture of this special universe of discourse. A deeper understanding of its constitutive linguistic features and the tendencies that define its evolution represents a major desideratum on its own; yet we see this understanding as prerequisite for engaging in questions of broader cultural significance and soliciting a range of (inter)disciplinary inquiries (sociolinguistics, social psychology, anthropology, philosophy, cultural and literary studies, political science, etc.).

The following questions merely suggest a few general ways in which to frame our investigation; each of the areas can be illuminated through analysis of specific topics:

- * What is the relation between the linguistic theories and utopias of the cultural avant-garde and the linguistic regimes of state socialism?
- * Can we isolate and analyze expressive features uniquely native to these regimes? What are the stable rhetorical patterns and lexical inventories of sots-speak? What communicative functions do they serve?
- * What was the social reception of the ideological 'tongues' of socialism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe? How can we study the dynamic between inherited mentalities and the novel linguistic paradigms?
- * What is the relationship between language and political power? What powers are invested or (assumed to reside) in language? How effective was official language in fulfilling the functions with which it was charged? How do we know? What determines this efficacy?
- * What is the relationship between signified and signifier in sots-speak, between ideological meaning and its material carrier? How does it change over time (the fading of meaning, the public desensitization toward the appeal of ideologically charged language, etc.)?

* How are social roles and identities concretely played and claimed in the use of official idiom (the performance Stephen Kotkin has called "speaking Bolshevik")?

* Does sots-speak presuppose a distinctive kind of relay between speaker/author and recipient/audience? What is the dynamic of stated and implied meaning in this discourse? How are unstated meanings coded and deciphered in specific discursive genres and situations?

* What values (representational, stylistic, semantic) does sots-speak assume when it is taken up into artistic discourse?

* What constitutes linguistic dissidence under state socialism? What are the subversive appropriations of the official idiom in everyday life, unofficial folklore, and artistic texts?

* What has been the 'posthumous' fate of sots-speak? With what new value(s) has it been invested after the end of state socialism in Russia and Eastern Europe?

We invite abstracts of no more than 300 words, accompanied by a short CV, to be submitted by **February 10, 2011** to: fried@ujc.cas.cz

Inquiries regarding the conference's topic, organization, or submission process should be directed to: ppetrov@princeton.edu

Those selected to give presentations will be contacted at the beginning of March, 2011.

All participants must submit a full version of their paper by April 15, 2011; the papers will be posted on the conference's website and remain available for the duration of the event.

We expect to be able to offer a limited number of travel subsidies to participants from abroad.

Program committee:

Petre Petrov (Princeton)

Mirjam Fried (Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague)

Eliot Borenstein (NYU)

Serguei Oushakine (Princeton)

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