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- 1 Contents
3 Editor's Note (Nicola McLelland)

ARTICLES

- 5 Henry Fowler and his eighteenth-century predecessors (Ingrid Tiekens-Boon van Ostade)
25 The Oxford Quarto Dictionary (Charlotte Brewer)
41 'To observe things as they are without regard to their origin': Henry Sweet's general writings on language in the 1870s (Mark Atherton)
59 Abstracts from the Henry Sweet Society Colloquium, March 31st, 2008

REVIEW

- 61 Ekaterina Velmezova: *Les lois du sens: la sémantique marriste* (Bern, etc., Peter Lang, 2007). Reviewed by Andries van Helden

PUBLICATIONS RECEIVED

- 65 Books & Pamphlets / Journals / Articles & Reviews (ed. David Cram)

NEWS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

- 67 Minutes of the Henry Sweet Society Annual General Meeting (March 31st, 2008)

- 69 Conference report: ICHOLS XI, University of Potsdam (Toon van Hal)
- 72 Members' News
- 74 "His Manner of Discourse". Professor Werner Hüllen (John L. Flood)
- 77 Call for Papers: *The Annual Colloquium of the Henry Sweet Society for the History of Linguistic Ideas* (14–17 September, 2009, Jesus College, Oxford)
- 78 Conference announcement: *Linguistic prescriptivism and patriotism: from nationalism to globalization* (August 17–19, 2009, New College, University of Toronto, Canada)
- 80 Call for Papers: *International Conference on Language and History, Linguistics and Historiography* (April 1–4, 2009, University of Bristol)
- 81 Call for Papers: *Good usage and sociolinguistic variation. Diachronic perspectives and national traditions* (16–18 July 2009, Murray Edwards College, University of Cambridge)
- 84 The ISLE Richard M. Hogg Prize 2009
- 85 The Vivien Law Prize in the History of Linguistic Ideas (deadline September 30, 2009)
- 87 Style Sheet for the *Bulletin of the Henry Sweet Society for the History of Linguistic Ideas*
- 90 Subscription information

NOTES AND REVIEWS

Ekaterina Velmezova

Les lois du sens: la sémantique marriste (Slavica Helvetica, Vol. 77)

Bern, etc., Peter Lang, 2007, 392 pp.

Reviewed by: Andries van Helden, Leiden University

Ekaterina Velmezova's new monograph on the Georgian linguist Nikolaj Jakovlevič Marr (1864 or 1865–1934) consists of three parts besides a lengthy introduction. Part I describes the state of linguistics when Marr developed his *Japhetic Theory* a.k.a. the *New Teaching on Language*. Part II, the *pièce de résistance* of the book, discusses six of Marr's *semantic laws* and explores their intellectual origins. Part III deals with the reception of Marrism.

Marr's life, times and views have been dealt with before in dozens of articles and book chapters as well as a handful of monographs.¹ The natural question to ask is what distinguishes the book under review.

Velmezova intends to put Marr into a different perspective. She largely refrains from analyzing Marrism as a contextual phenomenon, to be accounted for in psychological, political or sociological terms, and concentrates on its intellectual and scholarly aspects. Obeying Sylvain Auroux' imperative of *epistemological neutrality* (55), Velmezova approaches the New Teaching as an autonomous intellectual construct, to be understood in terms of its internal logic and its coordinates in a virtual universe of intellectual intercourse instead of evaluating it by the standards imposed by the state of the art of the discipline or by its empirical performance.

Velmezova's endeavour is based on a thorough study of the primary sources. Besides consulting contributions written by Marr's closest collaborators and students, she has systematically worked her way through the five bulky volumes of Marr's selected works as well as hundreds of documents found in his archive, including previously unpublished articles.

The resulting analysis of Marr's theories deviates in two respects from the ones given in most of the earlier accounts. Whereas the New Teaching is usually presented as a brand of linguistics, Velmezova treats it as the application to language of a unified approach to the human sciences that deals with the history of mankind as an integral evolutionary process governed by universal laws. Also, whereas most analysts explicate Marr's conception of language by comparing it with the paradigm that Marr rejected, viz. comparative linguistics, Velmezova applies a Saussurean semiotic framework to expound its basic principles.

It turns out that, in spite of the vehement and abstruse discourse in which Marr expressed his theories, and even though he regularly changed his mind on what most linguists would regard as essential tenets, the New Teaching constitutes a rather

¹ Viz. Mixankova 1948³, Thomas 1957, Bjørnflaten 1982, L'Hermitte 1987 and Alpatov 2004², which is the most exhaustive analysis of the Marr phenomenon to date.

coherent and consistent intellectual construct. Marr was concerned with Saussurean *langage* rather than with individual *langues*. In Velmezova's rendition of Marr's views, the semantic side of the linguistic sign is where it all happens in the history of mankind. *Signifiés* make up the categories in which the members of a community think. The goal of linguistics, according to Marr, is to explore the semantic laws governing the evolution of these categories as conditioned by the economic and social progress of society. The linguistic interest of *signifiants* is mainly heuristic: as human thought progresses more rapidly than the forms in which it is expressed, *signifiants* contain relics that betray earlier stages of human thought.

Velmezova documents the similarities and relationships between Marr's views (at least those underlying his semantic laws) and those of some dozens of late 19th- and early 20th-century scholars. She extensively works out the links, which had been signalled by Thomas (1957: 78–81), between some of Marr's laws and the theories of the anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939) on language and thought in primitive and modern society. The most interesting result of Velmezova's book is possibly the account on the relationship, first signalled by Desnickaja (1951: 48ff.), between Marr's major semantic laws and the two universal principles by which the social Darwinist Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) proposed to account for the evolution of inorganic and organic matter as well as social progress, including that of language, folklore, art and literature. According to Spencer, a homogeneous (diffuse, inarticulate, indistinct, fuzzy) aggregate loses its homogeneity in a non-homogeneous environment as its different parts are exposed to different ambient forces, producing its decomposition into more discrete (distinct) phenomena. Discrete phenomena may subsequently be combined to make up compound (hybrid, articulate) phenomena (Spencer 1867²: 329–330, 347–359). The former principle is suspected to have inspired Marr's *law of semantic differentiation*, which accounts for the differentiation of broad, vague, general meanings into specific meanings (e.g. 'sun' as a specific meaning emancipating itself from a more fuzzy concept 'sky') that accompanies the increasing sophistication of human thought.² The latter principle may be linked with Marr's *law of semantic hybridization*, which covers the merger or crossing of distinct meanings into compound, hybrid meanings (as in 'eye' + 'water' yielding 'tear').

Velmezova's account compels the conclusion that few elements of the New Teaching are original.³ Most of them are extensions of principles that were *en vogue* in the adjacent disciplines, including anthropology, ethnology, archaeology, history, biology and geology. Marr was aware of what Velmezova calls the *air du temps*, i.e.

² It may also underlie Marr's *principle of vocal differentiation*, which governs the "humanization" of animal sounds through gradual differentiation into the articulate *phonemes* of modern human languages, an idea that Jan Baudouin de Courtenay (1845–1929) had worked out in the 1890s.

³ Marr's ideas may have been even less original than Velmezova shows. The book provides no precedents for his most idiosyncratic viewpoints, viz. his anti-Babelic view on the genesis of language (language mushroomed wherever a community reached a certain stage of development), his universal proto-*signifié* (vocal language started out everywhere with a single, specific, meaning, conventionally labelled 'sky') and his universal proto-*signifiants* (Marr postulated four specific proto-roots, which were at the origin of all *signifiants* of all existing languages). These ideas can be traced back to Lazarus Geiger (1829–1870) and Ludwig Noiré (1829–1889), who had discussed the genesis of language in detail (e.g. in Noiré 1877). Marr (1974: 234) himself mentioned that such prominent Soviet Marxists as G.V. Plexanov, A.A. Bogdanov and N.I. Buxarin subscribed to Noiré's vision on the origin of language.

the pool of dominant ideas, images and metaphors that flit about in the intellectual discourse of a given time and place.

The *air du temps* is also invoked to explain why the intellectual community of Marr's days embraced his theories. On the one hand, Velmezova points out, comparative linguistics was perceived to experience a crisis, producing a need for novel approaches; on the other hand, Marr's ideas resembled current opinions on semantics (including those of Baxtin and Vološinov and the *Imjaslavcy*) and were in keeping with the general intellectual climate of the 1920s, which favoured *holistic* approaches, by which identical analytical principles were applied across disciplines and levels of analysis.

As far as the present reviewer is concerned, Velmezova has succeeded in filling a crucial niche in the literature on Marr and Marrism. By stripping Marr's arguments of his excessive digressions and overkill of exotic material, by her illuminative semiotic approach to the New Teaching, and by her thorough elaboration of Marr's semantic laws, she clears the way to what seems to be the epistemological quintessence of Marrism. By her analysis of Marr's position in the *air du temps*, moreover, Velmezova considerably modifies Marr's image as a scholar, styling him as an intellectual opinion leader rather than a solitary visionary or a charlatan achieving his goals by manipulating illiterate bureaucrats.

Yet the picture of Marr sketched by Velmezova is not likely to fully eclipse the existing ones. The popular hypothesis that Marr was insane is effectively discarded but certain other elements of his personality and biography that are sometimes held responsible for his epistemological choices, such as his contempt for empirical matters, his pan-Caucasian sympathies and his position as a university and science administrator, are left largely undiscussed. Possibly, Velmezova's methodological choices have kept her from taking them seriously. Substantiating this suspicion, however, requires a more in-depth discussion of such concepts as *epistemological neutrality* and *air du temps*, which falls outside the scope of the present review.

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