

BULGARIAN POLEMICS ON AMERICAN GENERATIVISM (1950s-1970s): A PEEK THROUGH THE IRON CURTAIN

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Abstract

The paper discusses the attitude of Bulgarian linguistic circles towards American generative grammar at its birth and establishment in the period from the 1950s to the 1970s. Bulgarian treatment of generativism is analysed by following the two opposing lines in it: the hegemonic ideologically-biased rejection and its polemic support. An attempt is made to disregard the heat of discussions and rather focus on the underlying grounds of the criticism. The philosophical-ideological motivation of the polemics is considered, as well as the key topics of generative grammar, upheld by its proponents. In general, the analysis tends to the study of the processes of intellectual and cultural transfer in modern linguistics.

Key words: generativism, Bulgarian generativism, Marxist criticism of generative grammar, linguistic historiography, first Bulgarian generativists

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The ways in which American generativism has been commented in Bulgaria shows essential attitudes of Bulgarian linguistic tradition and development. Especially interesting is the interpretation of generativism at its birth and establishment (1950s - 1970s) in the USA and Western Europe, because in that period Bulgarian linguistics was isolated from the research in those countries due to ideological and geopolitical reasons. One of the tangible dimensions of the Iron Curtain metaphor, dividing the East and the West at that time, was the information blackout on the linguistic research achievements beyond it. Yet, there seemed to be cracks in the curtain enabling the penetration of new ideas, reverberating in Bulgarian linguistics in the form of in-depth, though not numerous, analyses. Despite the watchful ideological eye, Bulgarian linguistic criticism found ways to interpret the basic principles of American generativism and thus to facilitate an environment for its development in Bulgaria.

American generativism as a subject of polemics

Generally speaking, American generativism is a collective term for various grammar models, based on a general theoretical framework and on the representation of language information by means of logic and mathematics, such as rules, graphs, matrices, sets, etc. Generativism is also known for raising important issues, such as the nature of language, the relationship between language and cognition, the process of language acquisition, and the implementation of grammar models in computer systems. Most of all, generativism is associated with Noam Chomsky and his model of Transformational-generative Grammar in its various versions, as given in the early works of (Chomsky, 1957, 1965, 1975). Also, the term refers to a rich tradition of many of his supporters and opponents, working in this field. Although Bulgarian linguistic criticism of that period relates generativism mainly to the works of Chomsky, other authors, such as C. Fillmore and E. Bach, are cited, too.

The study is focused on the comments of the original American models in Bulgaria. Only those Bulgarian polemical critical studies have been considered that evaluate and discuss the basic principles of generativism. Though comments on generativism can be found also in some particular Bulgarian generative works of that time, they are not taken into consideration here because of their dependence on particular theses and research tasks. The aim is to find critical assessment, generalizations and historiographical, philosophical and methodological interpretations

of generativism as a theory. No claim to comprehensiveness is made as this is rather an attempt to outline the basic topics, factors and the general atmosphere in the criticism on early American generativism in the period from the 1950s to the 1970s as influenced by the shadow of the Iron Curtain.

It should be mentioned that generative criticism went hand in hand with research from the very beginning which is evidenced by the fact that the Bulgarian linguists, whose criticism is considered here, were also researchers. However, it is only their reviews of American generative ideas that are to be addressed in this paper. Thus, Bulgarian generativism, which is the methodological application of the American model to the Bulgarian language, is not considered here. It occurred in early 1960s through the pioneering syntactic research of Jordan Penčev and the computational applications of the models by Alexander Ljudskanov, Elena Paskaleva, Miroslav Yanakiev, Korneilia Ilieva, etc. Generative research on Bulgarian was also held in the USA in the 1970s by Robert Ewen and Rayna Moneva-Dolapčieva as reported by (Rudin, 2013, pp. 15-16). Later, generativism was further developed by numerous Bulgarian researchers and in the decades that followed a notable Bulgarian generative school was formed.

Silence as a general critical background

On the whole, Bulgarian criticism maintained considerable reserve towards American generativism until political reforms took place in 1989, in contrast to the intense discussion going on in the USA and Western Europe at that time.

In the ideal case, a base for the assessment of Chomsky's ideas in Bulgaria would have been the free access to his original works and to their published Bulgarian translations. If there had been freedom of speech, supportive criticism would have involved the presentation of the leading principles of the theory, while dismissive ones would have commented on the drawbacks. In either case, criticism would have been based mainly on linguistic, logical, philosophical, methodological, etc. argumentation.

As is well known, however, this was not the situation in Bulgaria after 1944. Silence on Western linguistic developments was imposed by complex political mechanisms. Restrictive administrative policies are documented by historians, such as (Živkova, 2006), analysed in regard to the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and other Bulgarian academic institutions. Especially strong was the philosophical focus on the

conformity of the new theories against “dialectical materialism”. Thus, the official enforcement of “the Marrism” – a doctrine of the Soviet scholar Nicholas Marr - was one of the earliest examples of ideologization of Bulgarian linguistic research, as noted in (Rusinov, 2000).

Principally, the Soviet example of tacit censorship was followed – the works of the linguists doing generative research were not cited and were at most mentioned only in passing and in a negative aspect, and longer studies following generative methodology were not considered promising for MA or PhD level research. Moreover, the publishing houses were only state-owned, limited in number and there were political censors in them. But the practice in Bulgaria surpassed Soviet censorship by not translating Chomsky’s works into Bulgarian¹, while they were published in Russian in the early 1960s and 1970s, a few years after the originals, and, what is more, accompanied by comments.

Polemic representation

In conditions of ideological censorship, the only way to express non-conforming opinion was the technique of polemics representation, occurring “in the course of social conflict and taking an opposing view to the hegemonic representation” (Augoustinos, Walker, & Donaghue, 2014, p. 45). Such polemics on generativism took place mainly in the form of censorship-approved critical comments or in responses to them. Moreover, polemics had to be framed by the hegemonic social paradigm of “dialectical materialism” and its axiomatic indispensable connection with linguistic theory (as well as with all humanitarian research). However unusual at first sight, polemic representation was tolerated, though within strict limits, by the totalitarian regime, as a means “to know the enemy” by sieving some Western ideas and representing them in particular ideological perspective.

Marxist considerations: Todor Pavlov and Dobrin Spasov

In view of Bulgarian Marxist philosophy, an ideologized approach to linguistics can be seen in the works of Todor Pavlov, a leading philosopher of that time in Bulgaria, a long-standing chairman of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (1947-1962) and director of the Philosophy Institute of the Academy (1949-1952 and 1960-1977). One of

¹ Some of Chomsky’s linguistic and cognitive studies have only recently been translated into Bulgarian, see Chomsky, 2012.

the clichés for the assessment of Western linguistics as “idealistic reactionary philosophy²” is found in a paper preceding the flourish of generativism in the West (Pavlov, 1953). It was no accident that this paper was reissued in the anniversary collection (Pavlov, 1961), since it hinted at the “proper” attitude towards generativism, which had intermittently occurred and gained popularity in the West. Moreover, the collection was reviewed, even before it was printed, in the leading linguistic journal *Bălgarski ezik* [Bulgarian Language] by L. Andreičin, the Director of the Institute of Bulgarian Language (Andreičin, 1960).

Some of Pavlov’s papers in the collection were direct instructions for the ideologization of linguistic studies, such as *On the Relationship between Marxism and Linguistics* and *Subject and Tasks of Linguistics in General and Bulgarian Linguistics in particular*. His critical analyses tend to denounce mainly the theoretical works from the West for contradicting the philosophical principles of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Vladimir Lenin. Such politicized acceptance of the Marxist and Soviet sources over the others is established as a tendency for interpreting also the research of Noam Chomsky and his followers.

A similar stance was maintained in the works of the philosopher Dobrin Spasov, (1961), who claims that “the philosophers and linguists of the Marxist school, having deep theoretical grounds, sceptically view the bourgeois linguistic theories”. A more detailed Marxist criticism of the generative transformational grammar is found in (Spasov, 1977) where he characterizes Chomsky as a philosopher “burdened by modern logical formalism” and describes the analysis of oppositions in linguistics as contradicting “the guideline of Hegel and Lenin that language contains only the general” (Spasov, 1977, p. 117). Essentially, his criticism could be considered as defending functionalism in linguistics, were it not for his strong ideologization and Marxist-Leninist argumentation, obscuring the linguistic discussion.

As a whole, for decades the attitude toward Western linguistic models was based on ideological clichés such as, “formalistic deviations”, “(reactionary) formalism”, “bourgeois deviations”, “bourgeois influences”, “mechanistic transfer of foreign language models”, “subjectivity”, “etc. Similar qualifications, such as “extreme logicism” and “extreme formalism and psychologism”, are found in the official Grammar of

² All translations into English are my own.

Modern Bulgarian Standard Language, published by the Academy of Sciences (GMBSL, 1984, vol. 3, p. 9). The derogative phrase “bourgeois small-ware shop” (буржоазна кинкалерия) is mentioned in (Krapova, 2013, p. 6) as used in Penčev’s research.

It may be noted that the hegemonic critical thought might contain some consistent non-ideological arguments, which however remain somewhat hidden in the pathos of the dominant ideology. Instances of this are the not unreasonable arguments of Spasov about the philosophical eclecticism of the early Chomskyan generativism. Spasov shows a contradiction between Chomsky’s claim for rehabilitation of the philosophical rationalism in its Cartesian and Kantian form, on the one hand, and, on the other - his innateness hypothesis of language acquisition. The latter is considered by Spasov as innativism, rooted in the subjective idealism and the doctrine that the mind is born with ideas. However, Spasov’s opinion about such contradiction is debatable, as far as Cartesian philosophy is concerned. In Spasov’s opinion, generativism has “certain philosophical ambiguity, which allows Chomsky to present himself as a Cartesian, Leibnizian, Kantian, as well as mechanistic materialist of the modern physicalist type” (Spasov, 1978, p. 437). Certain eclecticism in Chomsky’s philosophy has also been noted in the research abroad, where ways of overcoming it have been sought along with preserving some of Chomsky’s logical and linguistic hypotheses, such as in (Pollard and Sag, 1987).

Direct responses to Spasov’s positions can be found in some polemic papers or book sections written by Miroslav Yanakiev and Jordan Penčev, which contain well argued presentations of the main postulates of generativism, related to the nature of language signs, language-speech and competence-performance dichotomies, the relationship between language and thought, and others. What can be noted about them, however, is that they lack comments on particular generative interpretations of language phenomena, which would have conferred a stronger beneficial effect on the reception of generativism.

Miroslav Yanakiev versus Dobrin Spasov

In the first place, we are going to discuss two texts by Yanakiev, in which he provides in-depth comments of some aspects of generativism in the form of polemics against Spasov’s statements. One of them is the paper *On the subject of linguistics and on some of its basic concepts* (Yanakiev, 1961), which is a direct response to Dobrin

Spasov's critical paper of *Some principal problems of the study of sign (semiotics) and linguistics* (Spasov, 1961). The discussion was hosted by *Ezik i literatura* [Language and Literature] journal. The other one is Yanakiev's book *Stylistics and Language Teaching*, where he starts a non-explicit discussion with Spasov's ideas from the book *Unity and diversity: Towards the Criticism of Modern Philosophical Pluralism* (Spasov, 1977), published in the same year.

Leaving aside the heat of the polemics, we are going to focus below on some particular aspects of generativism, commented by M. Yanakiev in these two texts.

Psychologism. Yanakiev (1961/2007, p. 87³) refers to the strong linguistic psychologism of the earliest generative model of (Chomsky, 1957), where linguistic theory claims to model the way sentences are generated in the brain. In Yanakiev's words, the theory "also reveals the way in which the human brain functions".

Distinction between generative and transformational models. It is remarkable that as early as 1977, Yanakiev drew a clear distinction between generative and transformational grammars. The common attitude in the West at that time was to consider them as 'generative-transformational grammar'. It was in the late 1980s and 1990s that this distinction was focused in American lexicon grammars and is still the subject of discussion (Borsley and Börjars, 2011, p. 1). Yanakiev touches on the essence of generative models and describes them as "generative because they are descriptions of mechanisms with output but no explicit input" (Yanakiev 1977, p. 67) – an aspect not related to transformational rules. It should be noted that this book dares to cite Chomsky directly, though following a transliteration of his name /naum homski/ (Наум Хомски) which was established in the Russian tradition by the translations of the 1960s and 1970s⁴ (Yanakiev 1977, p. 66). Chomsky is qualified as "the linguist whose works have been most widely discussed in linguistic circles recently" (Yanakiev 1977, p. 66).

Predecessors of generativism. Connections with earlier tradition have been explored by pointing out the similarity of generativism concepts with Wilhelm Wundt's theoretical views on sentence formation as "image segmentation" and "psychophysical parallelism" (Yanakiev, 1977, p. 67). This is an important observation since the school of Chomsky rarely seeks the roots of its ideas in earlier works.

³ Page numbers are given based on the 2007 edition.

⁴ Modern Russian Cyrillic transliterations tend to prefer /noam/ to /naum/, though some authors still use the former version.

Intuitive versus empirical grammar models. Yanakiev expresses disagreement with “self-observation in language modelling” as one of the basic principles of generativism and points out the advantages of empiricism. He claims that the lack of empirical data makes the criterion of “grammaticality”, which is leading in the Chomskyan generative model, very obscure. In Yanakiev’s words, Chomsky “completely gave up looking for the glottometric grounds of the language practice analysis” (Yanakiev, 1977, p. 103).

Jordan Penčev versus Dobrin Spasov

The other participant in the long-lasting dispute with Dobrin Spasov was Jordan Penčev, the pioneer of generative syntactic research in Bulgaria. Two of his papers, namely *On a philosophical critique of structural linguistics* (Penčev, 1978a) and *On some misunderstandings* (Penčev, 1978b), are considered here. They are in direct polemics with the above-mentioned book written by Spasov: *Unity and diversity: Towards the Criticism of Modern Philosophical Pluralism* (Spasov, 1977). Again, the discussion took place in the *Bulgarian language* journal, and Spasov wrote his response (Spasov, 1978) there, too. Some essential comments on generative topics are outlined below.

Semantics and generativism. Basically, Penčev opposes the criticism that Chomsky does not include semantics in his research. Penčev (1978a) interprets the Chomskyan understanding of meaning as inherent in the very notion of linguistic sign. He believes that the “interruption of connections between linguistic signs and mental phenomena” ascribed by Spasov to generativism, is incorrect and “cannot be claimed even by the most outspoken structuralist” (Penčev, p. 45). Penčev points out that one of the main issues of interest for Chomsky is ‘how sound and thought (meaning) are mapped’ and that “the very recognition of the existence of signs in language presupposes the connection with thought, i.e. the connection with thought is performed within the sign itself, and that is the reason why it is called sign” (Penčev, p. 45). In addition, Penčev disagrees that Chomsky limits semantics to lexical meaning and argues that he is rather diminishing “the sharp opposition between lexical and grammatical meaning” by defining them in “dictionary (or lexicon) as a definite set of various semantic features” (Penčev, p. 47)

Oppositions in the language system. In the same paper, Jordan Penčev clarifies the principal notion of “opposite relation” in structural and generative linguistics, tracing the first occurrence of the notion in Saussure and its further development by Chomsky. He points out that “linguistic categories – phonemes, grammar morphemes etc. – exist only in opposite relations, based on significant characteristics, a fact, accepted even by the staunchest opponents of structural linguistics” (Penčev, 1978a, p. 45).

Formalizing language rules. Furthermore, Penčev advocates the existence of language laws independently of communication “as a presupposition for establishing formal language rules”. He reminds that this is a well-known fact but what makes a difference in Chomsky’s interpretation is that the independence of language and communication motivates the existence of formal systems. Though Penčev does not explain the term “formalization” in detail, his argumentation gives us a reason to believe that he interprets it as a kind of “matematization” rather than the wide-spread inaccurate belief of it as “desemantisation” (Penčev, 1978a, p. 46).

Parts of the sentence in generativism. Penčev argues that Chomsky accepts sentence predication by “taking as universal the structure *subject + predicate* (although he defines these two notions formally)” (Penčev, 1978a, p. 46). In his opinion “generativists have not rejected subject semantics but have replaced it with another one”. The author believes that the drawbacks of the traditionally defined syntactic categories have been overcome by introducing “thematic relations”, such as agent, patient, etc.

Syntactic homonymy. The fact that generativism makes a first attempt at a systematic description of syntactic homonymy is stressed by Penčev. According to him, “syntacticians have the right and even the obligation to determine the alternative senses of syntactic homonymy” (Penčev, 1978a, p. 47).

Deep structure. The description of deep structure in Penčev (1978a) surpasses the polemics with Spasov and is in itself a very incisive analysis of this milestone concept of early transformational generativism. He develops a detailed presentation of the different interpretations of deep structure - as a syntactic or as a semantic construct. At the same time, Penčev, keeping track of the recent theory development, notes that Chomsky had already started to seek alternative solutions, such as initial phrase

markers – a term introduced to the theory not long before that in (Chomsky, 1975). In this way, the Bulgarian readers were kept informed about the newest developments of the theory, reading between the lines.

Philosophical grounds and syntactic rules. In the concluding part, (Penčev, 1978a) formulates a hypothesis that linguistic analysis is not necessarily related to conceptual ideas, peripheral to the general framework. It is precisely this idea that becomes a leading factor for the later developments of Western generativism from the late 1970s onwards. Such an approach made it possible to keep the formalization and the particular analysis of the early versions, while at the same time avoiding psychologism, embodied in the innateness hypothesis, or transformations. Penčev notes this tendency when it was just about to rise, thus predicting the development of a broader methodological view, which made possible the replacement of transformations by constraints, the analysis within a single level of representation and the formalization of lexicon in an integrated manner with combinatorial rules⁵.

Ideological context of the polemics

It is worth mentioning that both Yanakiev and Penčev in their polemics managed in general to keep away from an open ideological motivation of their theses. They focused on philosophical and linguistic argumentation, although their papers existed in an overall scientific context that was strongly ideological.

A sign of having in mind the hegemonic tendency is the use of arguments that were in line with it, though not explicitly claimed. For example, the above mentioned paper of Yanakiev (1961) concerns the materialistic character of Chomsky's generative theory. Yanakiev comments on the traditional idealistic concepts in very negative and emotional terms. Though not openly stated, it is a well-known fact that materialism rejects the Christian notion of the ideal nature of human mind and language, which underlined Latin grammar and was transferred to the European grammar tradition. Yanakiev sheds light on the materialist interpretation by referring to Friedrich Engels' concept of mechanical motion as being transferred to the understanding of the human mind as "a form of motion of matter" (Yanakiev, 1961, p. 88). In actual fact, Yanakiev is positing materialism and atheism as fundamental principles underlying American

⁵ A more detailed discussion on the variation of linguistic descriptions within a single framework is found in Venkova, 2015.

generativism. This argumentation is not incidental to the hegemonic atheistic paradigm in Bulgaria at that time, expressed very clearly in the academic Grammar of Modern Bulgarian Standard Language where the following quote from Marx's *Capital* is included: "Of primary importance here are the words of Marx that 'the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought'" (GMBSL 1984, Vol.3, p. 20). This statement plays a key role in the hegemonic doctrine and is also found in the works of Vladimir Lenin, translated into Bulgarian and widely used at that time (Lenin, 1915/2008). Therefore, from an ideological perspective, such anticlerical polemics of Yanakiev can be considered an attempt to supply one more argument in favour of Chomsky's theory, since criticizing Christianity was in trend with its persecution in Bulgaria at that time. Implicitly he considered this anti-Christian tendency to be common between Marxism and generativism, which is not openly said but was clear to the audience of that time, being Marxist-educated still from primary school. Nowadays such an argument seems absurd, but it has one unexpected consequence – it reveals the religious-philosophical outlook of early generativism. This aspect is not often discussed by Western criticism, though it is fundamental for any research.

The ideological background could also be felt in Spasov's response to Penčev where he observes "worrying philosophical implications" in Penčev's paper (Spasov, 1978, p. 438). The qualification "worrying" is not explicitly clarified there but to the then readers it was clear that it indicated a lack of concord with the hegemonic dialectical materialism. This qualification was noted with a delicate irony in Penčev's response (Penčev, 1978b).

Another sign of implicitly keeping in line with the hegemonic ideology which was strongly pro-Soviet can be seen in the inclusion of four quotes by Soviet linguists on one page of the same brief response paper (Penčev, 1978b). In general, this response hints at the fact that generative ideas are also supported in the USSR, which is a purely political counter-argument.

In addition, the ideological atmosphere is found outside the linguistic text in a number of non-explicit signs. One of them is the fact that other linguists did not dare to participate in such a discussion in the 1960s and 1970s, at least not openly. It has to be noted that both authors were internationally renowned: Yanakiev was a lecturer at

Moscow State University (1969-1984) and Penčev was a lecturer at the University of Washington in Seattle (1974-1977) and invited speaker at Ohio State University and Yale University, as noted in (Ivanov, 1993, p. 6; Lakova & Koeva, 2006, p. 7). Obviously, they had a special status in the Bulgarian linguistic community, being able to travel abroad and to express non-conforming opinions. Thus, some might say, they could afford stating positions not in trend with the hegemonic ideology and linguistic methodology. However, they could have chosen to write works safely following it, which might have brought them greater dividends at that time. However, they chose the more difficult path, which caused problems in various aspects of their careers. For example, their lecture courses were limited, e.g. Penčev was only invited to teach at Plovdiv University within Bulgaria. The publication of some of their works was banned, e.g. Yanakiev's *Stylistic Notes*, widely popular in manuscript at that time, was condemned as formalistic and was published posthumously, (cf. Bayramova, 1993, p. 34). Penčev's syntactic research was not included in the academic collection *A Handbook of Bulgarian Syntax* (Popov, 1979), a fact noted also by the German linguist Klaus Steinke (Steinke, 2006, p. 298). The uneasy choice to express non-conforming opinions, however, has made their papers still relevant today.

Conclusions

This paper has attempted to outline the initial polemic reflection of early American generativism in Bulgaria in the period between the 1950s and 1970s. It occurred in the conditions of the hegemonic dialectical materialism and Marxism-Leninism, imposed as a single philosophic-methodological base in humanities. Because of this, American generativism reached Bulgarian linguistics in the form of acute polemics, mainly regarding the philosophical grounds of linguistic theory. Still, the polemics provided useful information for the then reader, eager to learn what is going on in Western philosophy and linguistics.

Paradoxically, distance, no matter its reasons, had the advantage of making some problems that were not in the focus of generativist criticism in the West more noticeable. In addition, it should be noted that even critical comments on American generative ideas made some of their important aspects popular beyond the Iron Curtain.

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