LITUANUS

THE LITHUANIAN QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES
VOLUME 58:2, Summer 2012

Gintaras Karosas's sculpture LNK INFOTREE at Europos parkas. Photograph by Gintaras Karosas.

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The research for the linguistic articles in this issue was completed as part of the project "*Lietuvių kalba: idealai, ideologijos ir tapatybės lūžiai, 2010-2013* (Lithuanian language: ideals, ideologies and identity shifts)," carried out by the Lithuanian Language Institute and funded by a grant from the Resarch Council of Lithuania, No. VAT-14/2010.

Five Decades of Television: from Language Homophony to Polyphony

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> *It struck him that the truly characteristic thing about modern life was not its cruelty and insecurity, but simply its bareness, its dinginess, its listlessness. Life, if you looked about you, bore no resemblance not only to the lies that streamed out of the telescreens, but even to the ideals that the Party was trying to achieve.*
>
> *George Orwell,* 1984

Introduction

Linguistic studies traditionally relate the establishment of standard language to its use in education and mass media. In this respect, the Soviet period is viewed rather paradoxically in Lithuania. On the one hand, it is maintained that this period was one of the most detrimental to the Lithuanian language, due to government-led Russification; on the other hand, it is acknowledged that the universal educational system implemented in the Soviet period and media, which spread standard language norms, actually raised the first generation of Lithuanians whose mother tongue was the standard language. It should be noted that, in a prescriptive approach, the point of reference for the (rather) negative assessment of today's television language

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is precisely the more correct and generally better language of the public space during the Soviet period.[1] Unfortunately, research-based arguments are needed to support this claim: analysis of public spoken discourse from the second period of independence is gradually gaining momentum, but there is practically no research being conducted on the television language of the Soviet period.

The aim of this article is to perform a comparative analysis of television language, the most typical representative of public discourse, from three different periods. Eleven documentaries, talk shows, and television journal programs were examined, representing spontaneous television language spanning various themes and levels of (in)formality. Four Soviet period (1961–1987), three transition period (1988–1992) and four commercial period (1993–2011) programs, encompassing speaker types of both genders and various ages, were examined: hosts, announcers, heroes, celebrities, experts, and vox populi – people on the street.[2] The total duration of the programs is around ten hours.

The Soviet period (1961–1987)

In Lithuania, as in other communist-bloc countries, television carried out the mission ordained by the Party for forming the new Homo sovieticus.[3] Spreading communist ideology in the Soviet media was associated with requirements for the use of "a proper, living, and correct" language.[4] A way of speaking appropriately for a public audience was expected not only of professionals (announcers and the like), but also of everyone going on the air.[5] The status of television language as a benchmark was confirmed by the Lithuanian Language Commission in 1987, stating that "the proper [...] language of many

1 Cf. Miliūnaitė, *Dabartinės lietuvių kalbos vartosenos variantai*, 62.
2 Material relevant for this research was selected from texts used in the project corpus of TV and radio language from 1961–2011. For more on the corpus, see Nevinskaitės's article in this journal, "On the public sphere and its actors," 44.
3 Štikelis, "Televizijos raida," 175–176.
4 Pupkis, *Kalbos kultūros pagrindai*, 83–84.
5 Ulvydas, "Daugiau dėmesio šnekamajai kalbai," 9.

television programs helps spread and establish codified lexical, word composition, and syntactic norms."[6]

It is paradoxical, but research on Soviet discourse has revealed the opposite trend – media in communist countries mostly used a dead language far removed from everyday use, something more akin to George Orwell's Newspeak. Its proximity to written language and a bookish speaking style was characteristic of many Western countries in the early period of television's evolution; however, only Soviet media language stood out for its particular servitude to ideology. French Sovietologist Françoise Thom described Soviet discourse as a wooden language *(langue de bois)*, combining several different types of jargon typical in various areas of a modern society. The inclination to replace verbs and verb constructions with nouns was adopted from the academic style; the use of impersonal passive forms was taken from the administrative style; while the leaning towards comparativism was related to pedagogical and journalistic social and political texts. All of this was combined with imperatives and the militant lexis typical of propagandistic agitation. When describing the uniqueness of the new Soviet language, Thom stresses that no other jargon of modern society incorporates all these linguistic characteristics, and that nowhere else "do we find such an oscillation between scientific objectivity and the peremptory barking of slogans."[7] In his study of the press in the Soviet Union, Thom revealed another feature of the wooden, Communist Newspeak language – it was used with several different forms of intensity. The editorials on the front pages of newspapers represented the most impersonal, essentially dead, language, while a somewhat revived language was used in the hierarchically less important news articles, in commentary by dairymaids and factory line workers. Soviet Newspeak came closest to normal, living language in articles on the enemies of the socialist state. The only recognizable characteristic of Newspeak in these texts, which were most easily grasped by the lay reader, was "its naked will

6 Language Commission, "Dėl radijo ir televizijos," 16.
7 Thom, *Newspeak*, 22–26.

to defend ideology at any cost," revealed by the article's content.[8] It was here, according to Thom, that language enlivened by illustrative descriptions, expressive dialogues, and even anecdotes was, in an ideological sense, the most aggressive. On the other hand, the language in these articles best met the requirements for proper and stylish language demanded by the norm-setters. Although Thom reached these conclusions based on his research of printed media language, considering the simulated nature of the Soviet period's "spontaneous" spoken discourse (the content of spoken discourse was checked with government bodies in advance and often a prepared written text was simply read aloud),[9] it may be assumed that language must have been similarly manipulated in television as well. Upon a first hearing, the language from some of the television programs selected for this research reveals similar patterns.

The traditional genre of Soviet television was the documentary. Its main focus was publicizing the successful implementation of Communist Party decrees and the resultant continual improvement in the lives of the people. The most important, and thus dead, features of the language of the Party's leading stories presented in these programs were heard in the main documentary texts read by announcers. This is evidenced by the complex written syntax of the text, the use of nominal syntagms ("the acceleration of assimilation"; "to lay the foundations for the industrialization of manufacturing"), and clichés presented in an imperative and militant tone ("the rural culture must be lifted"; "we must fight for a productive hectare," etc.).

Despite many collocutors being allowed to speak on Soviet television, much like in the Soviet press, they were all basically deindividualized, and simply repeated the main ideological idea expounded in the announcer's text:

> Worker: *Aš džiaugiuosi aaa kad CK nutarimu dėl darbo drausmės ir aaa alkoholizmo, prieš alkoholizmą aaa labai dabar iš karto žymu, kad jau gamykloje daug mažiau yra stikliuko mėgėjų, mažiau darbo drausmės pažei... pažeidėjų, tuo pačiu galima pasakyti, kad ir pagerėjo koky... produkcijos kokybė aaa taip pat CK aaa nutarimas yra dėl kūrybinės min... minties skatinimo darbininkų tarpe. Būtų gerai, kad darbininkai aktyviau įsijungtų į šį judėjimą.*
>
> (I am glad, ah, that the CC [Central Committee] decree on discipline in the workplace and, ah, alcoholism, against alcoholism, ah now, it is very obvious that already in the factory there are far fewer workers who enjoy a shot, far fewer workplace discipline offend... offenders, at the same time you could say that, that quali... production quality has improved, ah, as well as the CC, ah, decree for the encouragement of creative thou... thought encouragement amongst the workers. It would be good if workers became more active in this movement.)

The fact that the program's participants used language from Party decrees, or at least tried to make it sound as if that was how they spoke, was their way of showing their loyalty and commitment to the government. As in many similar episodes on Soviet television, the spontaneity of speech had been stage-managed. In the report, we can see that the worker pauses before each mandatory wooden formula and glances at his paper with the correct written text.

In terms of genre, propaganda programs, in which the enemies of socialism were unmasked, are also considered documentaries. On the level of language form, Thom calls this expression of Newspeak "pseudo-natural language."[10] The language of these programs is distinguished by the synonymy and phraseology of fictional literature and simulated emotions:

> Announcer: *Užsivilkęs fašistinę uniformą su parabeliu prie šono, bataliono kapelionas Zenonas Ignatavičius kartu praėjo visą jų kruviną kelią. Nesudrebėjo jo ranka laimindama budelius nekaltų žmonių žudynėms, nesuvirpėjo širdis žvelgiant į jų darbus. Priešingai.*
>
> (Wearing a fascist uniform with an automatic pistol at his side, the battalion's chaplain, Zenonas Ignatavičius, was part of the entire bloody journey. His hand did not shake when blessing executioners for murdering innocent people, nor did his heart quiver when observing their work. Quite the opposite.)

Cumbersome wooden language constructions have not

[8] Ibid., 68–73.

[9] Juozapavičius, "Valstybinio radijo virtimas visuomeniniu," 192; Aleknonis, *Lietuvos radijas*, 94.

[10] Thom, op. cit., 72.

been applied here, precisely to enhance the effect of the main story's plausibility; eyewitness accounts of the events are used instead. Despite the prediscussion of these accounts, they have at least been spontaneously produced in the language of everyday people (some of whom even speak in dialect). It is worth noting here that it was a rare privilege to be allowed to speak spontaneously on Soviet television, and apart from the abovementioned ideologically motivated cases, only deserving artists and writers were permitted to do so.

An especially formal style of address is a notable characteristic present throughout the entire period of Soviet television.[11] These forms of address were associated with the use of so-called negative politeness, communicating while maintaining one's distance. These are forms of address whose foundation is the surname, evoking the so-called polite plural *Jūs* (you). The forced supplement, "comrade," is another feature of Soviet language that defines a more formal nature of relations and is not used in any other period, e.g., "Now I would like to hear, **comrade, Comrade Stankienė**, what depends on the dairymaid wanting to get such high, now really high, milk yields as **you** [*jūs*] do, for example?" Forms of address in the Soviet period can be generalized using one single formula: (name/comrade/communist) + surname. It has been noted that it is almost exclusively program hosts and occasionally (Party) experts who address someone, rarely using direct forms of address – thus it is clear who takes the initiative in the stage-managed, simulated conversation.

Regardless of the usual formal reading or rehearsed text with selected speakers, language correctness was still not maintained (despite it being identified as an ideal to be pursued). So-called language errors (the same ones that are now claimed as evidence of the current poor media language) existed in the texts of all types of speakers. It is natural that they were more typical among nonprofessional speakers – workers and experts, such as physicians, teachers and functionaries – who generated a spoken, albeit planned, perhaps even rehearsed,

[11] Various language researchers conventionally hold such forms of address as a telling reflection of social relations.

text; e.g., *Vasarą kiek sunkiau, **vat**, aš dirbu mechanizatorium, derliaus nuėmimai, sunkiau yra kiek **biškį*** (In summer it is a bit harder; you see, I work as a machine operator; for gathering the harvest, it is a bit, somewhat, harder)."

However, language errors and deviations from the standard also occurred in the prepared, edited written texts read by announcers, e.g., "*pastatyta **visa eilė** pagalbinių pastatų, **jų tarpe** sauso pieno miltų cechas* (a whole row of secondary buildings was constructed, among them, a dehydrated milk powder manufactory)"; "*taip gimsta kolektyvas, kurio siekimus **apsprendžia** būtis, laikmetis* (this is how a collective is born, whose goals are decided by their being and the period in time)."

This does not include those rare occasions when professionals, e.g., reporters, spoke in real time on the air. Then, even in their language, we naturally see means of expression generally typical of spoken discourse: not only repetition and colloquial syntax,[12] but also verbal and nonverbal discourse markers that go beyond the standard, or are beyond the limits of correctness. This is also revealed in other examples of spontaneous speech presented elsewhere in this article.

The Soviet period can thus be described as one in which a simulated, prepared, spoken, essentially homophonic, monological discourse was typical, with barely differing varieties of permitted, looser spoken language generated live at ideologically appropriate intervals, which were nevertheless examples of wooden, dead, and sometimes even "incorrect" spoken language.

The transition period (1988–1992)

Critical assessment of television language really only commenced in the transition period, when demands were heard to stop people who did not know "correct" language from going on the air.[13] It is natural that, with a more liberal society and markets, an increase in programs – including entertainment programs, as well as unprofessional speakers and unprepared spontaneous delivery – there must have been a quantitative increase in colloquial lexis, some of which had emerged

[12] Cf. Nauckūnaitė, "Loginiai ir lingvistiniai."
[13] Masaitis, "Radijo ir televizijos kalba," 23.

during the Soviet period: barbarisms, semantics, and syntactic constructions based on written language, yet lying outside standard spoken discourse. What was new was that television discovered real, unsimulated conversation; the efforts of hosts to communicate informally became evident; there were endeavors to "avoid the old clichés"; and there were attempts to depart from the prevailing prepared wooden monologue to a spontaneous informal dia(poly)logue, which was, obviously, created according to spoken language rules, e.g.:

> Male host: *Ko jūs ginčijatės? Gera buvo laida, visą Lietuvą žavėjo, kai kam siaubą kėlė, bet kodėl paskui ‚Veidrodis' dingo? Žinot, kaip žmon... žinot, ką žmonės pradėjo galvot?*
>
> Female host: *Ką?*
>
> Male host: *Ar nesusiruošė ‚Veidrodžio' [panaikint], vadinasi, reikia iš tikrųjų kažką galvot.*
>
> Female host: *O ką siūlot? [...]*
>
> Male host 2: *Padarysim pramoginę laidą, kam ta politika? Kam? Kam knaisiotis šitose problemose?*
>
> Female host 2: *Tai mūsų vadovai ir nori pramoginės laidos, gausim technikos, pinigų, ir ko daugiau reikia? Aišku, tai kas bus tos pramogos, kaip jau jūs čia įsivaizduojat? Kaip ją padaryt? [...]*
>
> (Male host: "Why are you arguing? The show was good, it impressed all of Lithuania, maybe even frightened some, but why did 'Veidrodis' [The Mirror] later disappear? You know, how peop… you know, what people started to think?"
>
> Female host: "What?"
>
> Male host: "Aren't they looking at [cutting] 'Veidrodis,' meaning, we really do need to think of something."
>
> Female host: "And what do you suggest?" [...]
>
> Male host 2: "We'll put on an entertainment program. Why politics? Why? Why dig into these problems?"
>
> Female host 2: "But our leaders actually want an entertainment program – we'll get the technical stuff, money. What else do you really need? Of course, what exactly will that entertainment be, what do you have in mind? How should it [the program] be made?" [...])

This kind of informal speech from the transition period is in stark contrast with the relics of formal Soviet discourse that still appeared in this period; for example: "I was very moved by, eh, **comrade Jonynas making this kind of request**: to visit those places, and I understood **what the sensibilities of a real artist** were, and how things had to be done." Inclinations towards less formality were also revealed in forms of address. Even though the polite plural forms of address still dominated, informal forms based on the first name started competing with the only admissible formal style of address from the Soviet period, where the basis was the surname, especially when addressing someone directly; for example, "In brief, **Arvydas**, if I may [...] well, I'd like to ask you, is this sort of conversation beneficial to **you** [*jūs*]?" Appositions signaling a different formality and politeness strategy also started appearing: there were still cases of using "comrade," which was so typical of the Soviet period (see the earlier mentioned example), as well as the use of *gerbiamas* "the honorable," which became more widespread later on; for example: "And I wouldn't want to compliment myself, but I have a great deal of respect and sympathy for **the honorable Danutė,** and that is why I would never want to leave her." Thus, forms of address in the transition period may be generalized by two main formulae reflecting different levels of (in)formality in communication: ("the honorable" and similar honorifics) + name, and, (name/comrade and similar) + surname. In addition to other features indicating a more liberated approach to communication and language, this is one of the most telling, obvious indicators of public discourse moving towards informality and polyphony.

The commercial period (1993–2011)

In the commercial period, television further expanded its range in terms of personal space and orientation towards the everyday man and his kind of entertainment and, therefore, towards a more widespread use of the language of the home and everyday life; expressive, informal and even familiar language becoming an extension of the household.[14] There

[14] Cf. Fiske, *Populiariosios kultūros*, 94–100.

were also more cases of a critique of language representing all layers of society and all their requirements. Compared to the transitional period, the further increase in programs and unprofessional speakers, unrehearsed spontaneous speech, and an increased need to adapt to various addressees when searching for appealing, attention-grabbing means of expression in an otherwise oversaturated communication period, it is natural that there was a quantitative increase in expressive colloquial lexis and spoken syntactic constructions that did not sit within the frame of written language. Compared to the more moderate transitional period, there was an even greater occurrence of polyphony and individualism in speech, for example:

> Vox populi: *Kada aš savo vaiką galėsiu maitint normaliu maistu? Kada dešrelės rūkytos bus rūkytos, o ne pamirkytos kažkokiame mirkale? Kodėl aš savo vaikui moku trylika litų už* ***sasyskas****? Nes jam yra trys metai ir jis yra alergiškas, ir, pasirodo,* ***sasyskos*** *už penkis litus yra dar geresnės.*
>
> (When will I be able to feed my child normal food? When smoked sausages will actually have been smoked, and not soaked in some kind of solution? Why do I pay thirteen litas for sausages for my child? Because he's three years old and has allergies, and, it appears, the sausages for five litas are even better.)
>
> Celebrity: *Tai yra labai žmogiška, ir aš norėčiau pažiūrėt žmogui į akis, kuris atsisakė visų gyvenimo malonumų, vien dėl to, kad staiga nugyventų visą savo gyvenimą sveikai – tai turėtų būti žvėriškai neįdomu. [...] po velniais, žmonės, jūs patys susėdę žmonės tos srities, jūs tarpusavyje neišsiaiškinate, niekur nėra atsakyta klausimo, nuo ko miršta, kas sukelia vėžį, ir taip toliau.*
>
> (That is very human, and I would like to look that person in the eye who has denied himself all of life's pleasures only because he has suddenly decided to live the rest of his life in a more healthy way – it must be insanely boring. […] come on, people, you people here right now, from this field, you can't come to an agreement among yourselves; no one has answered the question of what people may die from, what causes cancer, and so on.)
>
> Expert intellectual: *Ir jeigu suvokiam, kad ta marga postmodernistinė tokia daugiatautė tapatybė yra frustruojanti, iškelianti tas traumas, apie kurias galbūt ir kalba Šliogeris savo pasisakyme, tai mes nukreipiam savo sąmonę į tokį grynai lietuvišką renginį, kaip, sakykim, mūsų krepšininkų sėkmės ir turim turim tą kultūros pakaitalą ar kultūros turinį.*
>
> (And if we understand that that varied, postmodern, multicultural identity is frustrating and raises the sorts of traumas that, perhaps, Šliogeris had in mind in his comment, then we turn our consciousness to a purely Lithuanian event, like, let's say, our basketball players' success, and we have, we have that cultural substitute, or cultural content.)

The obvious slide towards informality in this period is signaled by a unique, new feature – the appearance of the most informal form of address – addressing someone in the singular. Addressing someone by name has become the norm in entertainment programs and talk shows dealing with personal issues, e.g., "**Marijonas**, can **you** [*tu*] taste and tell us (what you think)?" The polite plural is still used in such programs when addressing an unfamiliar coparticipant who is of a higher status, but usually alongside the informal nominative naming of the addressee, adding an apposition indicating respect if needed, e.g., "**Almantas**, can **you** [*Jūs*] taste this? In a democratic society, the right to healthy food is the most important right. And now we don't know, for the first time in Lithuania's history, what it is we're eating. It's alright for those in their bloom, like **the honorable Marius**, if he reaches my age and will still be saying the same thing, and if I'm still alive, I'll bow to him." In formal debate programs, the polite plural and formal nominative forms of address, traditionally characteristic of public discourse, are still in place, where the basis is the surname/title. Another distinguishing feature of this period is the return of the traditional Lithuanian address *ponas* (Sir) to public discourse, usually used as a nominative apposition in addressing someone by name or surname/title, as a synonym for "the honorable." Thus, forms of address from the commercial period can also be generalized by two main formulae, albeit applying more varied appositions and reflecting a different type of (in)formal communication: (Sir / the honorable / dear) + name, and, name / Sir / the honorable + surname. Another characteristic feature of this period is the variability in addressing everyone (in a group) and even the same person: name; the honorable / Sir

+ name; Sir; Sir / the honorable + surname; title, etc. Thus, an obvious polyphony in discourse is becoming more apparent.

Summarizing comments

This exploratory research into television language from different periods reveals the displacement of discourse from the Soviet, dead, sometimes incorrect, homophonic monologue lacking in any notable variety to the contemporary, multistyled, sometimes incorrect, polyphonic speech produced live on the air. Nevertheless, it is precisely the language standard from the Soviet period, essentially supported by the wooden written language typical of the Soviet bloc, i.e., of a completely different nature and based on completely different language norms, that was and continues to be considered the exemplar of proper, living, and correct language by supporters of prescriptivism. Various means of polylogic speech produced live on the air, which reveal polyphonic linguistic variety – from the efficient and more formal means reminiscent of the Soviet period to the most expressive and informal means that started appearing in the transition period and flourished in the commercial television period, representing all layers of society and satisfying all types of requirements – have received critical assessment from the prescriptivist camp. This is an attitude that lies in opposition, not only to the opinion of supporters of descriptivism, but also to the very creators of public language themselves: the latter looking at public discourse from the position of a liberalizing society experiencing transformation and refusing the role of all-knowing teacher, creating media where there are opportunities for friendly dialogue with the addressee, and who consider a polyphonic discourse an advantage, making it possible to choose the most acceptable, communicatively effective means of speech.

Translated by Albina Strunga

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