

REFLECTIONS OF A LINGUIST ON UKRAINIAN HISTORY

I could give this talk a little longer title. I could call it "Reflections of a Linguist on Ukrainian History or Why I Am Not an Historian." I know that the majority here are historians and I am afraid that I could suffer the same fate as the hero of a play by Tennessee Williams, in which the young man, who happens to be in the company of girls, is torn into pieces and eaten up by them. But I count on the laws of hospitality since you are in the majority and I, a linguist, am perhaps in an absolute minority or nearly so. I hope that you will accept an outsider as a speaker. Being in this position, I would like to begin with a brief characterization of myself, which, peculiarly, I find was written by Teofan Prokopovych in 1725. I don't mean to say that I am 250 years old (or young, to use the term suggested by Professor Rudnytsky), but I think the characterization applies to me. I quote it first in the original, then in translation:

И особы ученые не так дерзновенно разлагольствовать обыкли, яко же слѣпый невѣжи многи. Они охотники, когда ничего не вѣдают, о всем и говорить и писать и препираться. Дивная вещь: откуда бы им так безумная охота?

Learned persons are not used to expounding as impudently as many blind ignoramuses are. The latter are eager to speak, to write, and to squabble about everything, although they know nothing. It is a peculiar thing: where do they get such a mad inclination?

I think this portrays myself speaking about problems of history. So much for the preface, and now on to the introduction (because, after all, we do have to be a little scholarly, don't we?).

The same Prokopovych, writing about how sermons should be composed (and I consider this speech to be quite close to a sermon), recommends beginning with a quotation (which I did!) and then proceeding to a well-known fact of everyday life. The fact of everyday life I have chosen to discuss is the requirement of most universities that all instructors must publish.

"Publish or perish" is a well-known rule. I do not judge this requirement from a practical point of view, but rather philosophically and juridically. Philosophically, I think it implies that pub-

This is a revised text of the banquet speech delivered at the Ukrainian Historical Conference at the University of Western Ontario on May 31, 1978 in London, Ontario.

lishing should never end. In other words, research will never be completed and we will never know everything. It is a declaration of the insufficiency, the perennial insufficiency, if I may say so, of our knowledge. Now, if you remember, when you appear in court as a witness, you are required to tell the truth, the *whole* truth, and nothing but the truth. It is easy to conclude that philosophically this requirement of the courts contradicts the requirements of university administrations. Because, to believe the latter, one can never tell, let alone discover, the whole truth. Applying this specifically to history, I think we can state immediately that complete knowledge of history is impossible. Does this mean that historical research should be discontinued? I will quote another of my countrymen, an eighteenth-century philosopher, Iakiv Kozelsky. In 1768 he wrote (again I quote first in the original and then in translation):

Я рассуждая по наукам, в которых мне упражняться доводилось, нахожу, что большая часть из них доведены до такой степени, что уж в рассуждении нужд человеческих и в рассуждении сил человеческого разума не много что важного изобретать можно; а хотя что и есть, то изобретается по большей части от коммерции разных наук; а от одной науки изобретаются по большей части одне маловажные дела, которые причиняют читателям скуку и отвращают их от упражнения и в полезных знаниях.

Judging by those sciences that I have had an opportunity to practice, I find that most of them have been developed to such a degree that, in relation to human needs and faculties, little of importance can still be invented by them. And even if there is something, it is invented mostly through the collaboration of various branches of science, while in one particular branch mostly things of little importance are invented, which bore the readers and even divert them from exercising useful kinds of knowledge.

This statement was made 210 years ago. If we go on and compare things that were said here previously with what Kozelsky stated, we must recognize that history, as knowledge of the past, has important things to say only in collaboration with other branches of science, that whatever it says is limited to the selection of facts, and that this selection is motivated by the historian's goal. However, if we subscribe to this, would we not have to justify all the uses and abuses in history, whether they are perpetrated to promote the cause of the Russian Empire, or of independent Ukraine, or of "Communism"? This, again, is not a new problem. It was confronted by people interested in history at least as early as the seventeenth century. I quote again from a Ukrainian author, Tarasii Zemka, who wrote in 1625: „Истории бо истинна от иуду паче нежели от писателя происходит.” (The truth in

history emanates more from elsewhere than from the historian.) But, wisely, he does not say that the truth in history emanates only from elsewhere. He admits that it emanates *also* from the historian. To what extent? When I speak about these things, I do not mean historical falsification, such as certain facts being suppressed or quotations being manipulated or twisted. These are not problems of the philosophy of history, but rather history's criminal aspects. It is true that we do not have police and jails in historical research. (They actually should exist.) My problem is not that; I am interested not in the criminal aspects of historical research, but rather in its philosophical aspects. We are dealing here with the problem of selection of facts. Since we have established that all facts are not recoverable, that they cannot be placed, and, of course, should not all be placed in history, then we are always and inevitably faced with the problem of selection. And precisely because there exists this extremely thorny problem of selection of facts for presentation in history, I am not an historian. And yet, I am keenly interested in history and, in a sense, I am an historian, but in a very special sense indeed. My refuge, my small blissful paradise, is a special kind of history. Fenced from all sides and sheltered from all winds, it is historical phonology.

Here I proceed to what I warned you of in the beginning—to the brief and simplified, but still linguistic, part of my talk. I invite you now to take a look at this island of peace, this fortress of objectivity. Normally its gate opens only after one has mastered certain technicalities, which I will try to spare you as much as I can. Therefore, I will not take you inside this holy of holies. (Rather, I reserve it for myself.) Instead, I shall try to give you a glance through a kind of chink.

An average language operates with roughly thirty to fifty phonemes. This is greater than it seems, because, when they combine with each other, fifty components can produce a very high number of combinations. But not all of these combinations are actually allowed in a language, so that the number is fairly great but not so frightening. At any rate, it is an infinitely small number compared with the proliferation of facts and factors of social life faced by historians. Perhaps a similar limitation was introduced in the study of history by those to whom history was the study of reigning personalities: the number of reigning personalities in a limited period of time is more or less the same as the number of phonemes in a language. Or by those to whom history is nothing but the class struggle, because the number of classes is even smaller than the number of phonemes in a language. With such approaches history is made easy indeed. But in history these are artificial limitations, while in my field, historical phonology, the limitation in

the number of phonemes is natural; it is dictated by the actual conditions of languages. Of course, even there the isolation is not absolute; the phonemic system of a language does not work in a vacuum. Its functioning and development are complicated by geographical factors, by the influence of dialects, of other languages, and, last but not least, by social factors. But, generally speaking, what I said about these things still holds true. Now back to historical phonology and to historical changes in the phonemic system.

We are able to establish, for instance, that in the development of the Ukrainian language *y* and *i* merged into one vowel, *ÿ*; that the sound that we conventionally call *jat'* in Ukrainian became *i*; that the sound that was originally *g* became an *h*-type sound, and so on. These changes can be placed in time, but all this is, of course, only the preliminary research. What is more rewarding and more interesting are the interconnections between phonetic changes and the reasons for these changes. This is precisely the problem for historical linguistics in our time. About fifty years ago these problems were not even raised. Now they are the most essential problems in historical phonology. In other words, instead of the amorphous, atomistic treatment of historical developments in phonology, we attempt now to establish coherence, to find the logic in these phenomena. This has been done so far in a rather tentative way, but it has been done, and it provides some rather interesting insights. I would like now to take you into my ivory—I will not say tower but—laboratory. I will limit myself to one specific problem—one of the most important problems in Ukrainian history—the problem of continuity. Let us see what we can learn about this subject from the experience of historical phonology.

The history of the Ukrainian language proper in its phonological aspects begins with a deactivation of Common Slavic processes. Common Slavic was, in its late stage of development, a language of open syllables, of a limited number of allowed consonantal clusters, and of a rich inventory of vowels (each of which was long or short, the long vowels either rising or falling in pitch). A principle of intrasyllabic harmony was applied, so that palatalized consonants were used with front vowels and non-palatalized consonants with non-front vowels. If we take the proto-Ukrainian stage of language development, we see that some processes still continued along this line, for example, the development of pleophony (*zoloto*, 'gold', *molodyj*, 'young', and so on). This was within the framework of the general line of development of Common Slavic. But, at the same time we find innovations that contravened the very principles of the structure of late Common Slavic. Pitch and quantity distinction was lost in vowels. To be

more precise, quantity was associated with stress. The vowel system was curtailed. Nasal vowels were lost; the vowels that we conventionally call *jers* were lost. A new syllable structure developed; the old rule of rising sonority within a syllable was abandoned. These processes were completed more or less between 1125 and 1150 A.D. I would call this the incubative or formative period in the phonological development of the Ukrainian language.

The next period lasted roughly from the mid-twelfth to the late fifteenth century. This was a period characterized by disorder on the syntagmatic level; that is, old rules were applied along with new rules. There was apparently no consistency in the choice of the old rule or the new rule. The morphological factor intervened. There was a further reduction of vowels, the stress, as before, did not exert any influence on phonological changes. This was the period of adaptation of the body of the language to the changes that took place in the preceding period. I would call it the adaptive period.

What came after that can be called the consolidation period. Certain fairly symmetrical and consistent laws developed in the language. Palatalization was concentrated in the dentals. The alternation of *o* and *e* with *i* followed the same rule as the alternation of *o* and *e* with zero vowel. Vacancies in consonantal subsystems were filled, so that if we had *k* the sound *g* was introduced; if we had *c* the sound *ɟ* was introduced; if we had *č* the sound *ʃ* was introduced, and so on. Stress became prominent. Hence such phenomena as the change of *o* into *a* in words like *bohattyj-bahattyj*, the development of *ukannja*, and so on. This third period lasted roughly until the late eighteenth century. Our perspective is too short to say whether a new period was ushered in with the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century or whether it was a period of disruption in the language system. The old rules to a great extent became inactive and unproductive. For example, while in old words in a closed syllable *o* and *e* changed into *i*, in new words they did not, so that we have *potočnyj* ('current') and not **potičnyj*, *slovnyk* and not **slivnyk*. Many rules lost their productivity altogether. Earlier there was an automatic alternation of *v* and *u* at the beginning of a word. This changed, so that, for example, *vprava* and *uprava*, originally one word that automatically exchanged and converted *v* to *u* and *u* to *v*, became two words with two different meanings: one, *vprava*, meaning 'exercise', the other, *uprava*, meaning 'governing board'. It is hard to say why these things happened, whether they were due to the normal process of attrition of old rules or to the powerful Russian influence (and, if so, to what extent). In any case, I would prefer to concentrate on the first three periods. I repeat the names I gave

them: (1) the formative period, (2) the adaptive period, and (3) the consolidation period.

If we look carefully at these three periods, we observe immediately that there is a single consistent line of development. There are no interruptions, there are no breaks; there is essentially one line. If we compare, we cannot but notice that the situation in the literary language was completely different. Here we can observe the succession of various literary languages, the introduction of one literary language that is fairly quickly, in two or sometimes three centuries, abandoned and replaced by another. These are well-known facts, and I shall refer to them briefly. First, in Kievan Rus, Church Slavonic was adopted. Then, in the Lithuanian state, Ruthenian, to use the traditional term, (which was essentially Belorussian) was adopted as the literary language and, parallel to it in a kind of diglossia, we also had a new version of Church Slavonic, which can be labeled Ruthenian Church Slavonic. Then in the mid-sixteenth century a new upheaval took place, and we had a new type of diglossia—the so-called *prostaja mova* ‘the vernacular’ on the one hand, and a new version of Church Slavonic, which is sometimes labeled Meletian Church Slavonic (because it was regularized by Meletii Smotrytsky), on the other. Then in the eighteenth century we can observe the almost entire loss of the literary language. And then, as if from nowhere, in the early nineteenth century modern literary Ukrainian was introduced.

Now let us return to general history. The drastic changes in the character of the literary language, in its very nature, correspond fairly accurately to the traditional periodization of general Ukrainian history: the period of Kievan Rus, the period of Lithuanian domination, the period of Polish domination, the period of the so-called Hetman state, and, finally, the period of Russian domination in the greater part of Ukraine. We are faced here with the rise and the dissolution of the Cossacks, with the problem (that was discussed at the conference) of recurrent losses and regenerations of the elite, with striking shifts in the very territory of Ukraine and of the Ukrainian language, which had shrunk so drastically by the end of the fifteenth century that it hardly spread beyond the frontiers of Galicia, Volhynia, Polissia, and Transcarpathia, and with the no less incredible *reconquista* of the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, when all the old areas of the Ukrainian language and of Ukraine itself were regained, and the nation and its language spread beyond these boundaries. With this approach to the literary language(s) and to the general history of Ukraine, we discover recurrent attempts to “fly” and an equally recurrent “falling down”: Icarus, who, in complete collapse, un-

naturally or, should I say, supernaturally always tried again. The choice between unnaturalness and supernaturalness depends on the historian (remember Tarasii Zemka).

The image of Icarus can be presented as proof of the irrepressibility and invincibility of the Ukrainian "spirit"; it also can be presented as proof of the nation's foredoom. In any case, if we return to the myth of Icarus, it should be said that with this approach the history of Ukraine appears to be a combination of two myths—that of Icarus and that of Prometheus. Of Icarus who was also Prometheus, and of Prometheus who was also Icarus. And this would to a great extent be true. The actual question is: is this sequence of downfalls and new *élans* a surface phenomenon, or is it the very substance of Ukrainian history? If we place an emphasis on this phenomenon, do we get to the essence of events? It seems to me that, in trying to establish more essential things behind the superficial ones, to some extent, though maybe not completely, we can agree with Skovoroda. In 1773 Skovoroda wrote:

Сие есть высокостепенное сумасбродство если думать, что в наших временах взошло солнце, отворился ключ здоровых вод, избобрѣтена соль. Самонужность есть повсемѣстная и вѣчная. Бог и премудрость безначальны. А то самая дрянь, что вчера с грибами родилось.

It is madness of the highest degree to think that the sun rose, that the source of salutary waters was revealed, and that salt was invented in our times. What is necessary is omnipresent and eternal. God and wisdom have no beginning. And what was born yesterday with the mushrooms is just rubbish.

Are Ukrainian historians not too much preoccupied with the *drjan'* born with the mushrooms? Are they not sometimes like those characterized by Kozelsky, whom I quoted earlier? Here we come to the lesson of historical phonology as compared to the history of the literary language. In historical phonology we saw a single, uninterrupted, long line of development. Not so in the history of the literary language, filled with internally contradictory attempts at tackling the problem of the literary language. The lesson that we may draw from the experience of historical phonology is that we must try to reduce the changing things under our scrutiny to a few essentials, as few as possible, and thus arrive at the permanence that in history is called continuity. (Permanence in history is not static, it manifests itself as continuity.) If we try that, we will, perhaps, be able to overcome the captivity in which we are kept by surface phenomena, and, by the same token, we will achieve, I hope, a greater degree of objectivity in our selection of

historical facts and thus a more adequate presentation of history as such.

I am not speaking of abandoning history for the philosophy of history. Knowing about mushrooms is a useful thing. Long live mycology! I speak about having a philosophy of history behind every venture into history. And I must say that I was very pleased by many of the papers I heard yesterday and today (and specifically by two—Mr. Sysyn's and Mr. Kohut's) because I think they faced these problems and were trying to find solutions to them.

It is time to finish. I apologize for my incursion into a realm of which I am ignorant, as I mentioned at the beginning of my talk. (I hope you remember the quotation from Prokopovych with which I began.) If you found this talk too dilettante or too pretentious, or, especially in its linguistic parts, too boring, or all of these, then take it simply as a lame, abortive, fully camouflaged attempt at advertizing my forthcoming book on the historical phonology of Ukrainian. After all, you did not fail to notice that I had no quotations from authors more recent than the eighteenth century. There were no references to Edward Carr, or Collingwood, or Gilbert Garraghan, or Jack Hexter, or Henri Marrou, or Karl Popper, or William Walsh etc., etc. Not to mention Croce or Hegel. The only modern author to whom I referred was myself, and that is, of course, referring to one of the mushrooms born yesterday. Thank you.