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Article abstract

An introduction to the English-language translation of an article authored by Iurii Shevel'ov (George Y. Shevelov) on the origins of the Ukrainian language.



George Yurii Shevelov as a Historian of the Ukrainian Language

Andrii Zhemakovs'kyi

As a Slavic linguist, George Yurii Shevelov (Iurii Shevel'ov [1908–2002]) developed specializations in various areas of scholarship: etymology, syntax, sociolinguistics, phonology, morphology, lexicology, onomastics, and literary languages. The linguistic section of the bibliographic catalogue of his works compiled by Andrii Danylenko and Lev Chaban includes 416 titles where particular attention is devoted to the Old Slavic, Belarusian, Polish, Russian, Slovak, Serbo-Croatian, Macedonian, and (primarily) Ukrainian languages. Shevelov wrote his works in the field of linguistics in the Ukrainian, English, German, French, Polish, and Russian languages. From today's perspective, we cannot help but admire his extraordinary productivity, consistency, and talent and his dedication to his calling and scholarly craft. Even if Shevelov's academic output had suddenly halted around 1940 (as happened to many of his colleagues who were victims of the Stalinist Terror) and his entire linguistic heritage would have constituted solely *The Syntax of Modern Literary Ukrainian: The Simple Sentence* (the original text was written in 1940 in Ukrainian) and "Notatky pro etymolohiiu" ("Notes on Etymology"; written in 1936),¹ we would still consider him to be an outstanding scholar—observing him as a follower of Oleksandr [Oleksander] Potebnia's ideas on

¹ Shevelov himself explains that these texts were composed in 1940 and 1936, respectively; see his preface to *The Syntax of Modern Literary Ukrainian* and his 1997 commentary relating to "Notatky pro etymolohiiu" (Shevel'ov, *The Syntax* 7–12 and "Dodatok"). "Notatky" was published in 1942. Meanwhile, the publishing trajectory of *The Syntax* was more complicated. The text was originally a Ukrainian-language piece written as a chapter for a collective work. This piece, now in the form of a section titled "Proste rechennia" ("The Simple Sentence"), was published in Kyiv in 1951—without reference to the author—in the two-volume collection *Kurs suchasnoi ukrains'koi literaturnoi movy* (*Course of the Contemporary Ukrainian Literary Language*), compiled by Shevelov's former university professor Leonid Bulakhovs'kyi (see Bulakhovs'kyi 5–141). An English translation of a version of Shevelov's section (revised and expanded to textbook size by Shevelov) appeared in 1963 under the title *The Syntax of Modern Literary Ukrainian*. For these and other details on the convoluted history of the publication of *The Syntax*, see Karunyk.

the philosophy of language—and see him as one of the most gifted students of the Kharkiv Linguistic School of Leonid Bulakhovs'kyi.

Shevelov took refuge from the tribulations of World War II in Western Europe. He fled to Germany in 1944, where he taught at the Ukrainian Free University in Munich (1946–49); he also obtained a doctorate there (1949). He moved on to Sweden, teaching at Lund University in 1950–52. He then went to the United States (US), where he served as a lecturer in Russian and Ukrainian at Harvard University (1952–54), associate professor (1954–58) and professor (1958–77) of Slavic philology at Columbia University, and president of the Ukrainian Academy of Arts and Sciences (1959–61, 1981–86). Fortunately in the US, Shevelov was able to continue his studies and write new masterpieces, virtually one after another: *Narys suchasnoi ukrains'koï literaturnoi movy / An Outline of Modern Literary Ukrainian* (1951); *Problems in the Formation of Belarusian* (1953); *A Prehistory of Slavic: The Historical Phonology of Common Slavic* (1964); *Die Ukrainische Schriftsprache, 1798–1965: Ihre Entwicklung unter dem Einfluss der Dialekte* (*The Ukrainian Written Language, 1798–1965: Its Development under the Influence of Dialects*, 1966); *Teasers and Appeasers: Essays and Studies on Themes of Slavic Philology* (1971); *A Historical Phonology of the Ukrainian Language* (1979); and *The Ukrainian Language in the First Half of the Twentieth Century (1900–1941): Its State and Status* (1989; in Ukrainian, 1987). In total, Shevelov penned some five hundred articles, reviews, and books on Slavic philology and linguistics and the history of literature.

In today's context, ten years since the annexation of the Crimea and occupation of parts of the Donbas by the Russian Federation and over three years into the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russian imperialistic propaganda is still present in many Slavic-studies curricula globally, which thus marginalizes Ukrainian culture and history. This propaganda and its influence also distort the history of the Ukrainian language, which experienced long periods of repression, as well as outright prohibition, in imperial Russia and the Soviet Union. Prior to 1917, the issue of the separateness of the Ukrainian language from the Russian language was both linguistic and political in nature. The voices of linguists were crucial in proving to other academics and the wider public that Ukrainian was indeed a distinct language with a long history, equal to any other Slavic language, including Russian. One such voice belonged to Potebnia—the most prominent Ukrainian linguist of the nineteenth century. He was a professor at Kharkiv University who specialized in four areas: the philosophy of language; the historical phonetics of East Slavic languages; etymology; and Slavic historical syntax. Reacting to the Ems Ukase of 1876, which prohibited

the printing and distribution of Ukrainian-language publications within the Russian Empire, Potebnia wrote:

Examining languages as profoundly different systems of ways of thinking, we can expect from the presumed replacement in the future of the diversity of languages by one universal language simply a lowering of the level of thought. (Potebnia, "Language" 152)

If it were at all possible to unite humankind under one language and within one nationality [*narodnist'*], such action would lead to the demise of synthetic human thought—like the supplanting of many senses by [only] one sense, even if the individual sense would not be touch but sight. For a person's existence, other people are needed, and for the existence of a nationality, other nationalities are required. (my trans.; qtd. in Shevel'ov, "Vyznachnyi ukrains'kyi diiach" 47–48)

Shevelov, who was Potebnia's spiritual disciple and a Kharkiv University graduate himself (candidate degree, 1939), studied under Bulakhovs'kyi and then lectured at his alma mater in Slavic linguistics (1939–41). Like his prominent predecessors, Shevelov valued linguistic diversity and believed in the power of linguistics, a discipline that dealt with facts rather than opinions. As he put it in 1948 in one of his polemics with Ukrainian scholars, "[T]here is no need . . . to distort the facts in any way. The facts speak in our favour. It is enough to carefully study them and to be able to systematize them" (my trans.; Shevel'ov, "Holovna nebezpeka" 6).

Shevelov (who wrote under the pen names Iurii Sherekh and Hr. Shevchuk, among others) was not only a well-respected scholar but also an influential literary and theatre critic and essayist. It was in the latter role that he served as vice-president (1945–49) of the MUR literary association (Mystets'kyi Ukraïns'kyi Rukh [The Artistic Ukrainian Movement]); edited the monthly journal *Arka* (*Ark* [Munich]); and co-founded the Slovo Association of Ukrainian Writers in Exile. In addition, he was editor-in-chief (1978–81) of the journal *Suchasnist'* (*Contemporaneity* [Munich]). There are several collections of his many articles in the fields of literature, literary criticism, and theatre, including *Ne dlia ditei: Literaturno-krytychni statyi i eseï* / *Not for Children: Essays on Modern Ukrainian Literature* (1964); *Druha cherha: Literatura. Teatr. Ideolohii* / *The Second Round: Literature—Theater—Ideologies* (1978); and *Tretia storozha: Literatura. Mystetstvo. Ideolohii* / *The Third Vigil: Literature—Arts—Ideologies* (1991)—all published in the West. Shevelov was rediscovered in Ukraine as an essayist and a critic in the 1990s, particularly after the majority of his literary essays were reprinted in his native Kharkiv in the three-volume edition titled *Porohy i zaporizhzhia*:

Literatura. Mystetstvo. Ideolohii (*The Rapids and the Region beyond the Rapids: Literature; Art; Ideologies*, 1998). Earlier, Shevelov defined his view on the essay as a genre:

If one were to ask me what an essay is, I would give the following reply: an essay is a literary genre that observes in [the space of] reality something that is not generally perceived, and it encapsulates and distills that one *side* so that it becomes [for the reader] as if the entire [essence of] reality. This, in turn, engenders thought and a new and greater closeness to reality. (my trans.; Shevel'ov, "Viktor Petrov" 428)

As many of Shevelov's colleagues have noted, prior to publishing his celebrated essays, he would often run individual texts past his friends—reading them aloud and jotting down notes.

Shevelov also wrote some of his specialized scholarly texts in an essayistic style. One example is the piece presented in this *EWJUS* issue. Here, one will find translated from the Ukrainian Shevelov's article titled "Stattia persha, movoznavcha" ("Article One: A Linguistic Approach"), taken from his publication *Chomu obshcherusskii iazyk, a ne vibchorus'ka mova? Z problem skhidnoslov'ians'koï hlotohonii; Dvi staty pro postannia ukrains'koï movy* (*Why Obshcherusskii iazyk and Not Vibchorus'ka mova? On the Problems of East Slavic Glottogony; Two Articles on the Emergence of the Ukrainian Language*).² This publication is unique among Shevelov's works on linguistics because, on the one hand, it presents a concise, weighty, and convincing summary of the author's scrupulous research undertaken over more than thirty years on the origins of the Ukrainian language and, on the other hand, it is written in a clear essayistic style that is accessible to a wider audience. The original version of this text took the form of a public lecture delivered by Shevelov in September 1992 at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. Unfortunately, there are no known recordings of this presentation.³ Here, the translation is based on a slightly revised and expanded, set-down version of this lecture (published in 1994).

² See Shevel'ov, *Chomu obshcherusskii iazyk* 3–19 and "Article One."

³ Recordings of other lectures by Shevelov are extant. See, e.g., Shevel'ov, "La Montée."

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