

Skin to skin: language in the Soviet education of deaf–blind children, the 1920s and 1930s

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Abstract The article deals with *surdotiflopedagogika*, a doctrine of special education for deaf–blind–mute children as it was developed in the USSR in the 1920s and 1930s. In the spirit of social constructivism of the early Stalinist society, *surdotiflopedagogika* presents itself as a technology for the manufacture of socially useful human beings out of handicapped children with sight and hearing impairments, “half-animals, half-plants”. *Surdotiflopedagogika*’s institutionalization and rationale as these were evolving under the special patronage of Maxim Gorkij are analysed. Its experimental aspect is also discussed. Exploring and implementing the most advanced ideas in the technology of communication, *surdotiflopedagogika* sought to compensate for the loss of speech, hearing, and sight by supplying the child with mechanical and human prostheses, including other people (assistants), technical devices, techniques of the body, and multiple communication codes to be translated from one into another. In the case of Soviet deaf-blind education, the Soviet subject appears as a technologically enhanced, collectively shared, and extended body in a permanent process of translation, internal as well as external. Technologies of language and acculturation that are of particular interest. *Surdotiflopedagogika*’s method as it appears in the theoretical writing of Ivan Afanasjevič Sokoljanskij (1889–1960), the teacher of the legendary deaf-blind author and educator Ol’ga Ivanovna Skorokhodova (1914?–1982) are given particular attention.

Keywords Soviet deaf–blind education · Defectology · Skorokhodova · Sokoljanskij · Soviet subjectivity · Soviet language philosophy

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Introduction: A deaf–blind–mute hegemony

My contribution deals with Soviet special education, namely, deaf–blind education (*surdotiflopedagogika*), an applied discipline in a quite peripheral area of knowledge in the Soviet 1920s and 1930s. This was a division of what was known as *defektologija*,¹ a discourse about the pedagogical and psychological rehabilitation of ‘defective’ children (*defektivnye deti*, all three Russian terms are discussed below). *Surdotiflopedagogika* denotes the rehabilitation of blind–deaf mute children, but has a wider significance due to the way it concerns the problems of language, society, consciousness and ideology. A social theory of language always contains an anthropology, a political philosophy, and a theory of subjectivity, even if these are not stated explicitly. Sightlessness and voicelessness are age-old metaphors, through the prism of which seeing and speaking people imagine political repression. Less often considered, however, are issues with which the present paper will be concerned: how non-metaphorical sightlessness and voicelessness is experienced by deaf–blind individuals in their socialization; how the implicit politics of deaf–blind education defines the role of language in the community of darkness and silence; and how the construction of deaf–blind language relates to the academic discourse of sociolinguistics, on the one hand, and to the programmatic statements of evolving Soviet official doctrine, on the other. An analysis of publications concerning *surdotiflopedagogika* shed considerable light on these issues, which are important for our understanding of both Soviet and post-Soviet subjectivity, its relation to language, ideology, scientific truth, and the politics of the body.

Consideration of these questions requires a preliminary consideration of the history of *surdotiflopedagogika*, a short outline of its history and scientific principles, as well as a sketch of the aesthetics and the fiction of deaf–blindness as imagined by *surdotiflopedagogika*’s non-deaf–blind patron, Maxim Gorky. I will highlight one aspect of the utopia of *surdotiflopedagogika*: its doctrine of language and body, including the very specific form of materialism in its understanding of sign, meaning, and thought. I will try to show how *surdotiflopedagogika* both reiterates and confirms Soviet grand narratives, but at the same time makes subtle and discrete commentaries on those narratives, and raises the possibility of critically revising them.

Surdotiflopedagogika involves a non-mentalist theory of non-verbal language based on the acquisition of ‘senso-motoric culture’ (Jakimova 1947, p. 108) and effected through the cognizing work of the touch and the smell. To the dominant majority of seeing, hearing, and speaking people, such a senso-motoric culture appears as inferior to the high culture of enlightenment and learning. Similarly, the hand, the organ of senso-motoric cognition, is less privileged in comparison to the supreme reign of the mind in the tasks of thought and reflection. And the ability of the deaf–blind body to cope with everyday routines is seen as lowly compared to the intellect, the crown of human capacities, performing the noble task of speculation

¹ The English-language edition of Lev Vygotsky’s *The Fundamentals of Defectology* translates *defektologija* as abnormal psychology and learning disabilities (Knox and Stevens 1993). Vygotsky included in its competence deafness, blindness, mental retardation, ‘difficult childhood’, and ‘moral insanity’ (Vygotsky 1993, pp. xi–xii).

while cognizing, classifying, and verbalizing the world. Thus, not only is *surdotiflopedagogika* democratic because it works with the deprived deaf-blind child, it also implies a horizontal, democratic politic of knowledge, with a focus on the minor, underprivileged members in the oppositions between the high and the low, the intellectual and the somatic, the abstract and the everyday, speculation and survival. This deeply democratic attitude leads to the questioning of the fundamental assumptions of sociolinguistics, a privileged discourse on language, and the Stalinist doctrine of subjectivity as it was evolving at the time of the institutionalization of *surdotiflopedagogika* during the 1920s and 1930s.

Institutionalizing deaf-blindness

Russian deaf-blind education begins in the first decade of the twentieth century and rapidly develops into a field of intensive research and informed, internationally well-connected institutional practice (Jarmolenko 1961, pp. 6–14, Jarmolenko 1947, pp. 6–26).² However, the field really began to flourish under the auspices of Soviet education and psychology, with its interest in the normative studies of ‘abnormal’ phenomena. Before the Second World War, Soviet deaf-blind education had two main centres: the Leningrad Institute of Hearing and Speech and the clinical school for deaf-blind children affiliated to the All-Ukrainian Institute of Experimental Medicine in Kharkov. In the early 1920s, this latter school received strong official support as part of the development of ‘defectology’, a particular trend in psychological and pedagogical research and activities.³ It was for the purpose of organizing special education for deviant children (handicapped, homeless, vagrant, or criminal) that Lev Vygotsky was invited to Moscow (a project he initiated and very soon abandoned for more general studies in psychology, Prawat 2000, pp. 669–671). It was also under the slogans of defectology that deaf-blind education received its legitimacy. Briefly, Vygotsky’s defectology postulated child pathology

² According to Jarmolenko 1947, the need for deaf-blind education was first formulated by the Russian educators E. K. Gračeva and M. V. Bogdanov-Berezovskij who admitted the first documented case, a deaf-blind boy, to the St. Petersburg asylum for retarded children (*Peterburgskij prijut dlja umstvenno-otstalykh detej*) in 1905. In 1910, they established a philanthropic society for the support of deaf-blind children which was active until the revolution. In 1909, another deaf-blind education pioneer, M. A. Zakharova, first started the systematic education of deaf-blind children at the kindergarten for deaf-mute children that at that time was working at St. Petersburg. After the revolution, deaf-blind education was transferred to the Oto-Phonetic Institute (*Oto-Foneticeskij institut*) later transformed into the Institute of Hearing and Speech (*Institut slukha i reči*) (Jarmolenko 1947, pp. 16–17).

³ Some earlier initiatives in this area were undertaken at the department for training professionals working with disabled children (*fakul'tet po podgotovke personala dlja vospitanija defektivnykh detej*) which was established in 1918 as a part of the Institute of Preschool Education (*Institut doskol'nogo vospitanija*) in St. Petersburg. In 1920 the department was transformed into a separate Pedagogical Institute of the Social Education of Healthy and Disabled Children (*Pedagogičeskij institut social'nogo vospitanija normal'nogo i defektivnogo rebenka, PISVNIDR*). In the same year the 1st All-Russian Congress of the professionals working in the area of child disability took place in Moscow and the Moscow Institute of Child Disability (*Institut Defektivnogo Rebenka*) was founded. In 1924 the latter became a part of the pedagogical department of the 2nd MGU. For this information, I am deeply indebted to Katya Chown.

as a deviance chiefly resulting from adverse social conditions and accompanying pedagogic neglect (*pedagogičeskaja zapuščenost'*). Childhood deviance and handicap were defined as (socially produced) 'defect' to be compensated for by the unimpaired sense organs in a kind of solidarity of the senses (overcompensation). It was also supposed to be corrected through persistent psychological, organizational, and pedagogical work. The traditional practices of treating handicap with medical measures, confinement in special asylums, or philanthropic intervention by the church were rejected as anachronistic and exploitative. *Defekt* was defined as a stigma of class society with its poverty, inequality, and religious 'opiate' for the poor, while Soviet power historically destined to eliminate all 'defects' through proper care, education in labour, and equal opportunities to become equal citizens of the Soviet state (Vygotsky 1993, pp. 52–75; Knox and Stevens 1993, pp. 1–27; see Vygotsky's analysis of the schools' principles in Vygotsky 1993, pp. 61–64).

The Kharkov school was subject to the ideological fluctuations of the constructivist discourse of Soviet education and psychology as it was evolving in Moscow and then in Kharkov, while the Leningrad school, with its own centre at the Institute of Hearing and Speech, was more conservative. While the Leningrad group limited itself to 'observation' and 'rearing', the Kharkov group openly insisted on 'intervention'. After the Second World War, when the official publications of both branches in deaf-blind education finally appeared in print (Skorokhodova 1947; Šklovskij 1947; Jarmolenko 1961; Sokoljanskij 1962b, c and d), both appealed to Pavlov's materialist 'reflexology' (Vygotsky was not mentionable till the mid-60s). Both centres observed a division of research areas: Leningrad was more interested in deaf-blind communication as a theoretical problem of language, sign, meaning, physiology, and higher nervous activity (*vyssšaja nervnaja dejatel'nost'*), while Kharkov was interested in the practices of education and socialization through labour and emphasized the upbringing of deaf-blind children as self-supporting individuals, useful citizens of the Soviet state, and culturally accomplished personalities. Kharkov was also the centre for investigation into deaf-blind technology: techniques of language acquisition, communication, acculturation and socialization, as well as reading machines (*čital'nye mašiny*), devices for communication and re-coding messages from one medium into another. This technological approach also concerned matters of the body and the routines of everyday life. Kharkov was acutely aware of the technical aspect of communication and subjectivity, making its project particularly interesting in the context of the technological utopianism of the 1930s. *Surdotiflopedagogika* may be viewed as an instance of practical social engineering, the industrialization and mechanization of speech, thinking, and corporeality in one individual, a deaf-blind-mute child.

Traces of both schools, however, disappear some time between 1937 and 1945. According to the head of the Kharkov school Ivan Sokoljanskij, it was destroyed during the Nazi occupation and its pupils died during the period (Sokoljanskij 1962a, p. 14; Basilova 1989, pp. 10–14). It was only the young deaf-blind activist and author Olga Skorokhodova (ca. 1914–1982), the star of deaf-blind education who, as a handicapped person with a public history of Soviet activism (a well-known Komsomol member), miraculously survived in the occupied city. However,

it appears that the school was already disassembled as early as 1937 when Sokoljanskij was arrested and its pupils scattered among medical institutions and orphanages.⁴ What happened to the Leningrad deaf–blind children is not clear. Some say, they perished during the blockade. Others say, they became victims of the violent political repressions against the Leningrad intelligentsia in the 1930s. The post-war publications do not mention the fact of their deaths nor their lives as adults.

The post-war institutionalization of deaf–blind education was quite a different story, and I am unable to discuss the details here. It should only be noted that it was post-war defectology, already removed from the ideological and theoretical debates of the 1930s and purged of the spirit of social constructivism and the engineering intervention of the early Stalin period that started publishing innovative analytical and methodological work by defectologists from the pre-war period. These texts were apparently edited to make them read more scientific in a positivist sense of the word and more acceptable in the changing ideological conditions of the late 1940s–mid 1950s and the Khruščev Thaw. However, the remnants of the spirit of the 1920s and early 1930s are still there, and a close reading of those late publications in search of earlier ideological, conceptual and cultural influences in their textuality is worthwhile.

Gorky and the deaf–blind child's alibi

Maxim Gorky numbered the promotion of deaf–blind education among the many projects of Soviet enlightenment that he championed in the 1920s and 1930s. He once felicitously described it as research into the ‘techniques of sensation’ (*tekhniki oščuščenij*). One of his letters is widely quoted in the sources to which I refer here. It is addressed to Olga Skorokhodova, at that time a young blind–deaf woman, aspiring author, and student at the Kharkov clinical school for deaf–blind children. With Gorky's blessing, Skorokhodova later became a scholar, an educator, the author of an internationally renowned book (Skorokhodova 1947), and a 1948 Stalin prize winner. At the beginning of her career, Gorky addressed a letter of support to her:

The mere fact that you, a person deprived of speech, vision, and hearing was nevertheless given an opportunity of acquainting yourself with the material world and the world of concepts that are produced through the study of matter, – this fact, in my opinion, is of tremendous and most profound significance. Even though I am an ignoramus in the area of science, I still believe that the work of the Institute of Studies in Physical Defectivity⁵ is essentially the work of studying the techniques of sensation, and if it [the work] still does not

⁴ This information can be found in Skorokhodova's letter to Stalin (Skorokhodova 1938). An incomplete version as preserved at the Russian State Archive for Literature and the Arts, RGALI, the Goffenšerfer and Povolockaja collection 2585/1/116/63-73. I would like to thank RGALI for their cooperation.

⁵ Gorky refers to the Kharkov school-clinic for deaf–blind children, which was affiliated to the All-Ukrainian institute of experimental medicine in 1933. See Sokoljanskij's biography in (Basilova 1989, pp. 4–19).

recognize itself as such, then given such a convincing case as yours, it will have to acknowledge this fact. [...] And now, as I am imagining things, I allow myself to believe that it is probable that gnoseology – the science dealing with the cognition of the world – will, in time, become a science like all other ones that are based on the experiment. (Gor'kij 1955, pp. 272–273)

Gorky continues:

Nature has deprived you of three out of five senses which we use as a means of perceiving and experiencing natural phenomena; by affecting tactility, one of the five senses, science seems to have restored to you everything that you have been deprived of. This fact testifies, by the same token, to the imperfection and chaos that characterizes the forces of nature, as well as to the power of human reason, its ability to correct those gross mistakes that nature makes. (...) Nature made you a creature intended for experiment; nature seems to have created you specifically for that purpose, for science to be able to explore one of nature's criminal and crude mistakes. The reason of science has partly corrected this mistake but it is still incapable of eliminating the crime itself, of giving back to you your hearing, vision, and speech. But by what you are and by what science has done to you, you are already serving the humankind. This is true, Olga Ivanovna, and you have the right of being proud of your service. (Gor'kij 1955, p. 273)

Apart from mistakenly classifying speech as one of the senses, this fragment of Gorky's letter serves as a canonic representation of deaf–blindness for the Soviet public. It is referred to by Skorokhodova in her numerous pedagogical messages to the Soviet youth and she also cited it in her long letter to Stalin. In that letter, Skorokhodova begins by summing up the project of Soviet deaf–blind education: its history in bourgeois society (as the work of priests and nuns, and thus dominated by capitalism, clericalism, and idealism); its development in the Soviet Union (where every child is worthy of the care of the people and is educated on a collective basis to become a useful member of society); its necessity for science; its purpose and its fulfillment under the Soviet regime with its materialist philosophy; and its complete coincidence with the program of the advancement in knowledge, communist enlightenment, and Soviet education as a victory of technique over 'the criminal mistake of nature', over its 'imperfect and chaotic forces' as described by Gorky.

Given the Soviet eugenic project of constructing a holistic new individual, 'defective' deaf–blindness needed an alibi, while *surdotiflopedagogika* needed a *raison d'être*, and Gorky supplies both of these as he praises experimental knowledge. All life is technique, all knowledge is experiment, and the civic service of the deaf–blind activist is to sacrifice herself as experimental test material. Correcting nature's 'criminal mistakes' is the task of experimental study.⁶

⁶ Space limitations compel me to omit a more detailed discussion of inter-textual connections between Gorky's rhetoric and the earlier texts of materialist philosophy. Denis Diderot in his 'Letter on the Blind' (Diderot 1991 [1749], pp. 147–199) is equally fascinated by experiment in demonstrating blind thinking. A similar tone of enthusiasm for experiment sounds in the Baroque scholarship of sign languages

Such a study cannot be achieved through experiments on dogs, rabbits, and guinea pigs. What is needed is experimentation on man, it is on the human that the technique of the human organism (*tekhnika ego organizma*) should be studied (...) This task would require hundreds of human units (*čelovečeskikh edinic*), and this would be a real service to the humanity... (Gor'kij 1955, pp. 273–274).

Pygmalion assembling Galatea

Added to the 'promethean' drive of leftist language theory in the USSR as discussed by Katerina Clark (Clark 1995, pp. 207–223), Soviet deaf-blind education had an additional aesthetic dimension to it that I would call 'pygmalionic'. In the work of Ivan Afanas'evič Sokoljanskij (1889–1960; see his biography in Basilova 1989) artistic intention is very prominent in creating an accomplished human being out of the raw material of deaf-blindness. It is not by chance that he often describes his work as 'humanization' (*očelovečivanie*) and 'animation' (*oduševlenie*). In the practice of deaf-blind education, the utopian dream of the human automaton, a hand-made human being, thus receives a literal confirmation. The history of Olga Skorokhodova, walking proof of the truth of Soviet special pedagogy, is particularly illustrative of this pygmalionic aesthetic of artificial humanness: as I mentioned above, this Soviet Galatea was transformed from the 'inanimate' condition of 'half-animal half-plant'⁷ to become not only an accomplished human being, but also a perfect symbol of Sovietness, an icon in the Soviet pantheon of glory, and a living demonstration of the advantages of the Soviet way of life. Such, at least, was the myth. Elsewhere, I have attempted to distil some evidence of Skorokhodova's experience of the process of her *očelovečivanie* from her autobiographical writing (Sandomirskaja forthcoming). Here, I would like to focus on the technology of socialization as it was designed by Sokoljanskij and discussed in posthumously published work, and evidently based on his experience of teaching at the Kharkov clinical school for deaf-blind children in 1923–1937 (Sokoljanskij 1962b, c, d, I will concentrate on 1962b).

A young deaf-blind child at the pre-literate (*dobukvarnyi*) stage of learning appears to the seeing and hearing world as a figure of negativity: deprived of hearing and vision, the child is devoid of the possibility of 'entering contact freely and naturally' (lit. 'without coercion', *neprinuzdenno*, Sokoljanskij 1962b, p. 15).

Footnote 6 continued

(Dalgarno 2001 [1680], pp. 293–348)—an enthusiasm specific for this early discourse of technology and automatization in its speculative search for a universal language (of which sign language was believed to be a case.) Gorky's sentiment is pride mixed with prejudice. In an earlier letter addressed to Sergeev-Censkij (Sergeev-Censkij 1967, p. 235), he describes deaf-muteness as 'diabolic' freakishness, 'unspeakable, indescribable, inaccessible either to Swift, or to Breugel, or to Bosch, or to any other fantastic artist.' Deaf-mute language appears here as an exchange of obscene gestures, 'figs' (*kukisī*, the Russian gesture of denial, privation, and negativity). Cf. Aristotle's understanding of blindness as the exemplification of the logical category of privation (negativity, *eteresis*).

⁷ Sokoljanskij's expression which was often repeated by Skorokhodova herself.

As compared to a normal child ‘with a considerable store of impressions and conceptions’ (*s bol’šim zapasom vpečatlenij i predstavlenij*), the deaf–blind child’s perceptions are in an ‘embryonic condition’ (*v začatočnom sostojanii*, pp. 15–16). Due to the absence of hearing and sight, the child is also deprived of possibilities of learning human speech by imitating the speech of the others; even though he has an ‘inner world’ (Sokoljanskij uses this term in quotation marks) and an in-built potential for expression, without professional pedagogical intervention this potential cannot realize itself. Such intervention is only possible with the isolation from the family and admission to a closed school for special education (individual case histories are discussed in Sokoljanskij 1962d). The influence of the family was considered by Sokoljanskij to be harmful and was, therefore, restricted to the early years when the child needs the care of his mother. In communication with the mother, a deaf–blind child easily develops his or her own language, a primitive system of signs for everyday communication (see Sokoljanskij 1962c for a detailed analysis of a sign language devised by a little girl and her mother for communication at home.) This is *a lingua materna* unsuitable for further acculturation and can only be considered useful for the acquisition of some primitive communication, basic work skills, and basic knowledge about immediate surroundings. It is in isolation from the mother tongue of home-made gestures that the true, professionally informed, rationally designed, and collectively performed acculturation of the child begins. Thus, culture begins with a severe and artificially induced trauma of separation. *Surdotiflopedagogika* does not acknowledge the importance of such a trauma in comparison with the grandiose task of ‘animation’, but we receive a lot of indirect evidence about it while reading the methodological texts by the educators and Skorokhodova’s autobiographic writing (Sandomirskaja forthcoming). The complex trauma initially caused by deaf–blindness, deepened by the resulting alienation, and finally aggravated by the separation from the mother is described by Sokoljanskij in a tone of distant, objective scrutiny. As he or she is committed to the institution, the child, enraged and terrified by the loss of home, howling and screaming alone, violently aggressive and dangerous to herself, is lost in the total disorientation of a new sterile and frightening environment. Sokoljanskij was a master of taming the wild animal inside the deaf–blind child, a *doctor angelicus* in this world of screaming and raging fury that with time tended to develop into a totally immobile inert mass, if not attended to. In *surdotiflopedagogika*’s concept of sensor-motoric culture, note the characteristic use of ‘culture’ where one would generally think of ‘nature’ (compare Gorky’s ‘techniques of sensation’ and ‘techniques of the human organism’).

Further, the intervention is described as creation by the teacher of ‘concrete external conditions’ (*konkretnye vnešnie uslovija*) for the establishment of contact, to assemble a system of perceptions (*sistema vpečatlenij*) in the child; the system should be ‘created by the laws of strictest logic’ (*sozdannye po zakonam samoj strogoj logiki*), ‘the logic of nature’ (*logika prirody*). The teacher works towards ‘including the child in external conditions’ (*vključit’ rebenka vo vnešnie uslovija*), ‘efficiently guiding (the child’s) contact with the environment’ (*umelo napravit’ ego [rebenka] kontakt so sredoj*) and ‘forming (lit. sculpting, molding, or shaping, *formirovat’*) the child’s means of communication’ (*formirovat’ ego [rebenka]*

sredstva obščeniija), ‘providing the child’s physical and intellectual development with pedagogical means’ (*obespečit’ pedagogičeskimi sredstvami ego [rebenka] fizičeskoe i umstvennoe razvitie*) and exerting ‘permanent influence’ (*postojannoe vozdejstvie*) (quotes scattered throughout Sokoljanskij 1962b). Pygmalion exerts considerable coercion over the child, even violence in strict discipline under the uninterrupted control by the ever-present, permanently watching professional grown-ups.

As one can see in his few publications, as well as in the notes from the 1950s,⁸ Sokoljanskij speaks like a staunch Pavlovian, but means something quite different from Pavlov’s reflex study. Namely, Sokoljanskij does not only see the second signal system (i.e., language and consciousness) to be manipulable in teaching. His is a more ambitious project: he suggests intervention into the development of a reflex on the level of the first signal system. Such manipulation is possible because nature is ascribed a logic, and a strict one. At the same time, as it is represented in a deaf-blind child, nature might have a logic but has no will to make itself visible, nor any impetus towards communication ‘by itself’. This impetus has to be supplied by the educator, and its further development must be ‘guided’, ‘developed’ and ‘shaped’ because practically nothing in the deaf-blind child is capable of evolving by itself. As all logic is always-already in nature, so all grammar is always-already in the name; to teach a name (with its implicitly present attributes and predicates) means to teach the logic of nature in action: how to act in the world, how to use things, how to set functions in motions.

Sokoljanskij stressed that grammar is the logic of life to his own students, the younger generation of defectologists (as T.A. Basilova reminisced during our private conversation). Of special interest in this statement is an implicit biopolitics, a technological understanding of life as obedient to a ‘grammar’ of human actions as these actions are preserved in objects and their names. Life thus appears a continuum of correlation between the name and the world, as a calculus of technological operations within language and within the world, divisible into reproducible micro-operations (*postojannye komponenty priëma vozdejstvija*), calculable and teachable/practicable as thoroughly trained, endlessly repeated protocols. Pygmalion’s technological utopia consists of fabricating the new Soviet person out of a ‘defective’ ‘half animal half plant’. Its utopianism is summed up in precisely these expectations for the lived experience of social life to be completely adequate to, and exhausted by ‘grammar’, i.e., the calculus of techniques of perception, cognition, and communication.

On being ‘immediately impressed’

In the absence of sight and hearing, the only technique available for the child to learn about the world and communication is tactile examination (*osjazatel’nyi*

⁸ Sokoljanskij’s notes are preserved at the Archive of the former Institute of Defectology, now the Institute of Corrective Pedagogy in Moscow, and at the Joint Archives of the Russian Academy of Education (which at the time of my research were situated in Gorki Leninskie). I am very grateful to the staff of both Archives for their help in my research.

osmotr) that gives a child immediate, or unmediated impression (*neposredstvennoe vpečatlenie*) about the reality and human activity that is going on around. In ‘immediate’ and ‘impression’, the implicit metaphor of a physically direct and potentially painful confrontation occurs twice, throwing light on tactility as a very specific mode of perception and especially on the *dobukvarnyi* level of literacy, when the child is being prepared for the arrival of the word and linguistic representation as the mediators of knowledge, action, and ideology. ‘Immediate’ means ‘without mediation’, that is without any instances, any buffers in-between the world and the mind that are otherwise, in a ‘normal’ subject, produced by language. It also means, ‘without a means’ and ‘without a medium’, as compared to the mediating, instrumental function of the ‘normal’ word. ‘Immediate’ presupposes touching the world skin-to-skin, not reflecting on it through a linguistic metaphor. Tactility thus gives an instantaneous contact with the outside world as it is—but it fails to work, as vision and hearing do, towards the generalization of the world that is achieved through the classifying function of verbal representation, written or oral. Nor does tactility presuppose the reproducibility of the world thus contacted. In her childhood memories, Skorokhodova recollects that the nightmarish experiences of the initial period of her deaf–blindness were caused by the world’s non-reproducibility and the resulting disorientation: each time the child took away her searching hand from the surface of the object she was ‘tactilely examining’ the world would disappear *in toto* and irretrievably. Next time she touched, it would be a different world that appeared to her examining hand. Space would be losing its dimensions and distances, things would be getting out of their places, and she had to keep her hand permanently on the surfaces of things in order to preserve at least some order. Such is the reality of ‘immediate impression’: the deaf–blind world is the one without a deixis, without a *Zwischenwelt*, and without *Aufhebung*. Instead of ‘impressing’ itself against the *Zwischenwelt* of metaphor, as in ‘normal’ child, life violently and brutally (im)presses itself directly against the body of the small deaf–blind girl. Bruised, scratched, and wounded as she hurts herself on the corners of the furniture, as she cuts her fingers on a knife or burns her skin on the boiling hot cup of tea, the little deaf–blind Galatea becomes a living surface on which life’s ‘immediate impression’ writes its scriptures (Sandomirskaja, [forthcoming](#)). The pain of this ‘immediate impression’ she cannot express. And here lies nature’s ‘criminal mistake’, the great injustice of creation that Sokoljanskij undertakes to rectify through his pedagogical intervention.

He insists that such a child is handicapped not organically, but symbolically. Her experience is by far richer than one can imagine: ‘...experiment has revealed the availability in deaf–blind children of such vivid and vibrant images of the surrounding world, that no one had ever observed before’ (Sokoljanskij 1962b, p. 23). The handicap of the deaf–blind child is therefore has a double origin: (a) the over-production of ‘vivid and vibrant’ images conflicting with the poverty of the means of expression, it bursts the child from within; and (b) the inability of ‘normal’ conversation partners to read the child’s behaviour properly, the insensitivity, or, one could say, the deaf–blindness of a ‘normal’ observer with respect to the deaf–blind child’s desperate attempts to communicate. The young human being enveloped in darkness and silence is in fact a creature overwhelmed by and

brimming with ‘inner life’; it is the pressure of the ‘vivid and vibrant’ images inside and the indifference of the listener outside that produce the crises of deaf-blindness. The child explodes in rage—or implodes, collapses inside herself and then ‘no other needs, apart from organic ones, can be observed in the blind-deaf child during this (early pre-literate) period’ (Sokoljanskij 1962b, p. 19); the deaf-blind child is then not capable of any spontaneous linguistic development. If not encouraged, the child does not develop intention to communicate. The tragedy of deaf-blindness is that a ‘half-animal half-plant’ does not know how to ex-press, it is only capable of being im-pressed.

The genesis of *slovo*⁹ with the origin in immediate impression (the other as not-yet-the-same)

In a highly bureaucratized society like Stalinist Russia, where submission to ‘normality’ was raised to a principle of government, otherness was rarely conceived as difference. Instead, the deaf-blind child—the ‘defective’ other as opposed to the ideal human being as she appears in the discourse of Soviet normalization—is conceptualized as an almost-the-same or as a not-yet-the-same. *Surdotiflopedagogika* shared this view of normalization of ‘defect’ with the purpose of achieving sameness in normalcy. A handicapped child is not different from ‘us’, but she is not as yet the same as ‘us’. Hence, the emphasis on enlightenment, technologies of communication, generally on intervention in the modes of shaping, creating, and developing. The almost-the-same ‘defective’ child needs technical assistance—literacy, machines, techniques of special education—to reach the status of sameness, to join the majority of the same: ‘normal’, ‘developed’, literate and ‘socially useful’ ones.

This has to be kept in mind when we consider the almost-sameness of the Soviet constructivist theoretical and aesthetic other (including the other as it is produced by *surdotiflopedagogika*) in comparison to Bakhtin’s polyglossia which latter rests wholly and solidly on the premises of cultural multilingualism, the plurality of cultural worlds, and the radical otherness, the total non-sameness of the other, its irreducibility to the self. While the theoretical implications of otherness according to Bakhtin have been recently actively discussed in culture theory and political theory,¹⁰ this other-as-not-yet-same as it is implemented in sociolinguistics and applied fields like *surdotiflopedagogika* still awaits analysis.

⁹ Translation of this term is notoriously difficult as it may mean ‘word’ in the sense of a separate linguistic unit, or in the senses of ‘one’s word’. In a more general way, *slovo* refers to the totality of a verbal expression in man and to the totality of culture as it is achieved through *slovesnost’*, the art and science of verbal expression. As such it remains close to the Greek concept of *logos*, which combines both language and reason, and on top of the allusions to Greek philosophy also preserves a strong Biblical connotation. For this reason the original Russian term will be retained.

¹⁰ On the political implications hidden in a language theory in general, and on cultural hegemony as a linguistic hegemony in the work of Antonio Gramsci, see (Ives 2004a). Given the similarity of political agendas in Gramsci and Soviet Marxist language theories (see also Alpatov 2005), Ives’ interpretation can be extended to include these latter discourses, including the peripheral discourse of *surdotiflopedagogika*. Ives further engages the Bakhtin circle in his conceptualization of hegemony and dialogism

In her letter to Stalin, as well as in mass publications, Skorokhodova repeats insistently: we are not different, help us to become as you are. For the cause of deaf-blind education, public arguments of otherness as difference are hardly recommendable. To emphasize difference would mean to emphasize, by the same token, the inability to be 'normal'. In the name of the norm, such almost-same-otherness offered itself for experimental work, to further elucidate the conditions of the 'normal' and the same.

In the project of *surdotiflopedagogika*, the almost-sameness of the deaf-blind child is understood as a more complicated way towards the word (*slovesnaja rec'*, *slovo*), verbal speech constituting the supreme attribute of humanness, the bearer of thought, and the seat of ideology. Under no condition did *surdotiflopedagogika* agree to consider its children linguistically different or multilingual (which they in actual reality were). Such a premise would be damaging since being linguistically different might imply being ideologically different. Therefore, the otherness of the deaf-blind child is understood as a *controllable difference* of methods in achieving *the same aim* in education: *slovo* as the institution of cognitive and ideological identity.

The solution of this task requires a strict continuity in the development of means of contact (between the child and his immediate environment), i.e. the means to produce adequate responses (complex reactions) to the environment in the following order:

1. Congenital mimicry (the expression of organic needs and states).
2. Pantomimicry (the expression of more complex organic conditions, the beginnings of conditional mimicry and conditional pantomimicry, and the beginnings of the formation of the gesture).
3. Gesture. The formation of the gesture as an analogue of the future word.
4. Clay modelling: three dimensional (sculpted) visual means of expression.
5. Verbal speech and its varieties: (a) dactylic; (b) graphic (writing on the hand); (c) graphic low print; (d) graphic point high print (Braille); (e) oral (Sokoljanskij 1962b, p. 18)

Thus, the deaf-blind child's path towards *slovo* lies through something that is radically non-verbal: the body. The *slovo* of *surdotiflopedagogika* is not of mental origin, it is primarily corporeal. Linguistic metaphor thus relies on tactility: a new route for its own evolution, an additional dimension, a haptic closeness between life and meaning, a skin-to-skin mode of cognizing the world. The question is, how one translates skin-to-skin experience into word images, how one achieves conformity between the motivation in individual tactile expression ('immediate impression') and the arbitrariness of an institutionalized, conventional verbal meaning.

As with 'normal' children, Sokoljanskij divides deaf-blind child development into the periods of pre-literacy and literacy. Pre-literacy coincides with the period

Footnote 10 continued

(Ives 2004b, pp. 97–133). Bakhtin's linguo-philosophy has recently been discussed as a political and social philosophy and a theory of culture (Brandist and Tihanov 2000; Hirschkop and Shepherd 2001).

when the child's communication is dominated by an idiolect, a *lingua materna*: a restricted vocabulary of gestures that the child invents in communication with the family and for the performance of the easiest routines of everyday life at home. However, due to the absence of vision, it is impossible for the child to learn elementary communication by mimesis: even the most primitive mimic and body movement for the expression of most primitive physiological needs (*organičeskie potrebnosti*) have to be encouraged, evoked, and endlessly trained. Thus, the child's 'instinctual mimicry'—the mobility of facial muscles in different emotional states—is often inadequate to the state itself: 'while a deaf child is in a good mood, his face expresses sadness, and vice versa' (Sokoljanskij 1962b, pp. 16–17). The educator invents a set of methods to teach the child to control this adequacy, to bring a blind face back to life. Thus, even a very young deaf-blind child must be capable of very strict self-control: in Sokoljanskij's method, there is no space for the child acting spontaneously. Sokoljanskij demands control on the level of the child's unconditional reflexes (to use a Pavlovian term) to be able to develop her mimicry into a primitive sign system, namely a repertoire of mimic and pantomimic movements in which the same movement would refer to the same 'need'.

With the acquisition of 'conditional gesture', i.e. with the acquisition of the sign and consequently with the learning of the significant difference between involuntary bodily reaction and a signifying gesture, the child can move on towards *slovo* as the second signal system. The triple semiotic construction of the sign as the unity of name, denotation, and signification in Sokoljanskij's functional approach corresponds to a triad in the composition of the gestural sign: gesture—physiological need—satisfaction of the need.

At the same time, a *slovo* thus obtained is much richer in terms of its motivation, since it originates in the tactile image: the result of direct contact between the hand and the object. A gesture is not descriptive, but performative: in a gesture, the child not only signifies and thus abstracts, but also sculpturally recreates the object in question.¹¹ Literally speaking, the gesture of the hand signifies by shaping, by creating a three-dimensional metaphor. Such a tactile trope—a sculpted inner form—is much more living in comparison to the trite verbal metaphor. The world perceived by hand is not the abstract world of conditional non-motivated signs as it appears in the language of 'normal' people. The world as it emerges from the tactile observation by a deaf-blind child is a very concrete and non-speculative, materialist one:

[...G]esticulation is being formed on the basis of mimicry and pantomimicry, and on the basis of gesticulation the child's ability considerably expands to express sculpturally his impressions and perceptions of concrete reality that immediately surrounds the child [...] It is well known that precocious development of verbal (oral) speech in seeing and hearing children often leads the child away from concrete reality ...[This] creates too early a world of purely verbal images which suppresses the surrounding reality. A deaf-blind

¹¹ The performative aspect in the cognizing/expressive work of the hand was described by Avgusta Jarmolenko: '...a human hand is a unity of the act of perception and the act of reproduction—a property not found in any other sense organ' (Jarmolenko 1947, p. 45).

child, on the contrary, remains quite long in the world produced by concrete relations with his milieu, and this creates a more durable foundation for adequate connections between the image and the word. (Sokoljanskij 1962b, p. 24).

A sculpturally produced deaf–blind word is, therefore, a better and a safer one (as compared to the excessive verbalization of ‘normal’ language development), it is more natural for the little child to remain in, and it is better for future education as it preserves the concrete materialism of the world in its three-dimensional gesture-utterances. This is probably Sokoljanskij’s strongest critical statement against ideology and ideological education (as excessive abstractness of verbalization). Note the strong Rousseauistic connotations in his discourse of (deaf–blind) childhood (which will be discussed elsewhere) and the subtlety of Aesopean expression in this criticism of Soviet ideological pedagogy (‘a world of purely verbal images’). And again, consider the amount of bodily self-control, the degree of technical self-regulation that Sokoljanskij’s little child has to exert in order to remain in this ‘natural’ state of concrete materiality.

The moulding of the world—the production of an invisible replica of the world in the process of hand communication—also includes the work of the child on the moulding, shaping, or sculpting of her own self. Literally, this task is operationalized by Sokoljanskij in his innovative technique of ‘demaskization’ (*demaskacija*). As noted above, Sokoljanskij was concerned about the absence of adequacy between the deaf–blind child’s inner state and its expression in the facial mimicry. To resolve this inadequacy, he taught his children the tactile inspection of the living faces of ‘normal’ people as they express one or other emotion: happiness, anger, etc. When the child had familiarized herself with the facial expression on a seeing face, she was expected to reproduce the same sculptural pattern sculpting it with her own hands on her own face and thus to memorize the adequate mimicry. In Kharkov, Sokoljanskij used plaster masks instead of living faces for the training of expression of emotion (on a photograph, they are strikingly reminiscent of the masks in the ancient Greek theatre); the child would inspect such a mask and then mould her own face into a likeness of plaster. The child thus became the sculptor and the clay, the Pygmalion and the Galatea in one and the same person. Needless to say, demaskization required thorough semioticization of emotions, the understanding of emotional reaction in terms of its expression: Sokoljanskij’s was a pioneering project that can only be compared to the work of the semioticization of theatrical movement in biomechanics and that of routinization of the movements of the working body in Taylorism and other early theories of automatisisation (Law and Gordon 1996, Gassner 1992).

Thus, the way towards the ideologically correct and culturally accomplished *slovo* lay through a sculpted word (a gesture), a three-dimensional utterance (clay-modelling of natural objects), and three-dimensional narratives of identity (demaskization, mimic narratives of a happy child, an unhappy child, a sulky child, and so on).

As already noted, the technological utopianism of Sokoljanskij’s pedagogical republic of ‘realistic’ and ‘concrete’, materialist-minded children lies in his belief in

the complete correspondence between the grammar of expression and what he called the logic of life, between “the logic of the child’s actions and behaviour (...and) the logic of surrounding environment in all its complexity” (Sokoljanskij 1962b, p. 28). The logic of life is thus resolved in syntax, correct syntax presupposes correct action, while correct action presupposes correct reality. Since life makes itself available to tactile examination, and since tactile examination is available to a grammatical order, then also life’s own ‘grammar’ and ‘logic’ should be available to the deaf-blind child in the long run: verbal or non-verbal, *slovo* should still obey the *same* grammatical rules, and the reality as signified by *slovo* should obey the *same* logical rules. It is precisely this conformity between the words and reality and between grammar and logic that allows the journey of the deaf-blind child towards ‘normality’ to be successful. What is needed is control over life, and this is what the world’s most progressive (Soviet) regime promises to all its children, ‘defective’ or normal.

Under the premises of reality’s complete homology to grammar, what is needed for socialization is only to teach the child literacy: a whole array of mutually translatable codes and the art of re-coding them into each other. Such codes are, in a strictly observed order: individual mimic and pantomimic gestures, hand sign language, dactylic alphabets (a number of systems of writing on the hand of the child); and later on the ‘normal’ alphabet of letters executed in relief or in the points of Braille script. These measures, the training of multiple encoding procedures and intra-linguistic translation between codes, would cure the handicap of communication and achieve the ultimate elimination of any damaging difference in the deaf-blind child; this will be a step towards the desirable sameness with the majority of ‘normal’ citizens as the child would become capable of ‘communicating with any, even scarcely literate [‘normal’] person [...as] every literate person can write on the child’s palm what he or she wants to tell the child.’ (p. 26).

The subject: a speaking deaf-blind-muteness

I am unable to present a description of deaf-blind grammar as it was taught according to Sokoljanskij here. Suffice it to say that much in the structure of this language resembles the universal artificial languages that were invented and promoted at the time. The vicissitudes of their status parallels that of Stalinist monoglotic principles in politics, aesthetics and theory, that was gradually degraded from an ambitious universal language to a much more modest technical aid. The end of the decline of the deaf-blind language was marked by Stalin’s irritated remark in his *Marxism and the Questions of Linguistics* about deaf-mutes as ‘abnormal language-less people’ with a language of gestures whose significance ‘due to its extreme poverty and restrictedness is negligible’, ‘an auxiliary medium’. (Stalin 1950, p. 24) Stalin thus finally medicalized this discourse and for some time arrested any possibility of discussing deaf and deaf-blind sign languages as alternative languages, and deaf-blind humanness as an alternative way of being human. In the late 1940s, deaf-blindness practically disappeared as a theoretical issue and became a matter of applied practice (in defectology) and propaganda

(in the all-Union glory of Olga Skorokhodova). Only after Stalin's death did some analytical reflection of the problem become possible again, as is witnessed by the publications I am reviewing here. A renaissance of deaf-blind otherness as part of the revision of Marxism in the work of the group around Evald Il'enkov during the 1960s is another complicated episode that I must pass over. Deaf-blind language (rather, languages) is itself a complex subject that also demands a separate discussion. I will, instead, go directly to the result of Sokoljanskij's experiment:

Soon after she (a female pupil. – *IS*) acquired the understanding of sentences within a system of texts, as she was sitting on a sofa during a break between classes, the girl started talking 'aloud', as if speaking to herself (in deaf-blind sign language. – *IS*). As the girl had already learnt type-writing, she was asked to write down what she wanted to say. She thus began expressing her thoughts on a daily basis and in written form.

It was a curious sight. She rarely borrowed the content of her compositions from the life of the laboratory and the clinic, but was describing the episodes of her past (...) sometimes from the period of her early childhood... (Sokoljanskij 1962b, pp. 29–30)

A curious sight: a moment of the awakening of memory and identity in an act of writing: speaking to herself, telling stories to an absent listener. I will allow myself to treat this fragment as an allegory of humanness: deaf, blind, speechless, blockaded in the isolation of her 'defect', alienated from the symbolic reality—and writing. In subsequent work I will suggest an allegorical reading of this fragment as a representation of Soviet and post-Soviet subjectivity, and probably of any modern subjectivity in general. Considered as a politics of language and identity, deaf-blind-muteness is a suitable metaphor for subjectivity and power that is necessary for understanding the human condition under the sign of modernity in general, and Soviet modernity in particular.

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