

# Understanding Marx's Practical Language View from the Perspective of Practical Thinking Mode

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**Abstract:** This paper provides a critical discussion of the traditional research on Marx's linguistic ideas, and it is believed that Marx's view of language does not constitute a special theoretical system with language as its direct object of study. Rather, it is a philosophical conception that has been based on the history and practice of life for a long time. From the perspective of the practice-based mode of thought, three key contents of Marx's practice-based view of language will be presented in an organized manner in this paper: language as a social form of practice; as a historically developed phenomenon; and as the immediate material medium for thought. Critique the traditional linguistic view that is both reification and isolation of language, and emphasize that research on language should focus on the dynamic processes of language use, socio-interactive contexts, and historical development, etc., to uncover the intrinsic unity of language, human production, social relations, and cultural development. The conclusion is that reinterpreting Marx's practice-based view of language can help people better understand the essence of language and provide new theoretical foundations and methods for the contemporary study of the philosophy of language and real-life linguistic practice.

**Keywords:** Marx; Practice-based view of language; Practice-based mode of thought

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## 1. Introduction

Through reflection on traditional studies of Marx's linguistic thought, people learn that it is not from specialized language research but from analyzing human practice history and reality. This differs fundamentally from previous linguistic studies in intellectual perspective and thought mode. Reinterpreting Marx's ideas through a practical viewpoint can elevate them to a philosophical concept: Marx's practical language view, an integral part of his worldview. This view links language closely to human life and production, regarding it first as practice. Language, therefore, is practical, historical, and the direct reality of thought—these four aspects constitute the core of Marx's practical language view.

## 2. Language as a way of life

Marx said that language is a practical, real consciousness that exists for others and is therefore also available to oneself<sup>[1]</sup>. Like consciousness, language arises from practice, the core of Marx's linguistic theory. Firstly, language is inherently tied to labor: it enables communication during work, while labor creates conditions for its development, shaped by real-life activities. Secondly, Marx viewed language and thought as intertwined: language serves as a tool for thinking, and thought is in turn influenced by language, with the two mutually shaping each other through practice.

Therefore, in language studies, people should focus on language use processes rather than just surface meanings or final results, emphasizing social interaction over abstract individual expressions. People must also consider the close ties between history, politics, and language, avoiding treating language as an independent entity. Thus, language research should adopt a process-oriented approach rather than relying solely on "linguistic facts"<sup>[2]</sup>. That is to say, in language research, people should view "words," "sentences," etc. as dynamic processes rather than fixed entities, updating rather than abandoning traditional ideas. For example, a "word" includes evolving semantic, morphological, and phonological variations; a "discourse" carries multiple meanings; Chinese is a fluid system with diverse dialects. In short, language is an ever-changing system, not a static set of words or rules.

Language research should prioritize real-life communication norms over theoretical rules. Power dynamics shape language use, with marginalized groups challenging linguistic norms to resist dominance. These "exceptional" cases stem from deep semantic complexity, requiring a shift from abstract analysis to Marx's pragmatic view of language in context. This perspective avoids the reductionism of traditional linguistics and its fetishization of formal rules.

Therefore, people should view language as a product of social interaction rather than individual thought. Individual linguistic uniqueness emerges precisely through this interactive process, as language exists to facilitate communication in communal living. Thus, individual expression and social interaction are inherently interconnected in language. Therefore, Marx believed that it was a social product of people, just like language<sup>[3]</sup>. The reason people are able to have their own language is that language is first and foremost a collective product formed through interaction and communication in social life. Although people can control what they say and have the right to speak in communication, because language is a social product that is influenced by society and culture, their own uniqueness is only one part of language; it is a result formed after language appears, not the whole thing.

People often tend to consider language to be an object because reified thinking is deeply rooted in common sense. They are not natural things in life but rather phenomena resulting from social interactions. Marx believes that through production, people will develop and change themselves, creating new forces and ideas, new ways of life, new needs, and new language. Changes in Language are often caused by shifts in society. When people speak, they are not only expressing their own thoughts and feelings but are also shaped by and influence the language they use<sup>[4]</sup>. Language is not the private property of individuals; rather, it is a process of social interaction and a common resource for society. Therefore, when individual speakers use language, they are both forming language and being formed by it.

To understand language better, people need to consider its history and connect changes in language with the development of human civilization, society, etc. Language is not an isolated system and will also change. Marx believes that, in any developed modern language, the speech that naturally arises is sometimes

promoted to become a national language due to the developmental history of the language, which has been formed from pre-existing materials <sup>[5]</sup>. People may consider “speech that emerges naturally” to be primitive or natural language; that is to say, a language that arises in society organically. Such language is usually not planned or designed; rather, it may represent the consensus of community members, cultural elements, and basic communication needs. The “language formed by pre-existing materials” can be regarded as a standardized and normalized language that has been developed through a certain degree of cultural and social progress, including literary works, legal documents, formal education, etc., and thus becomes the official or cultural language of a country or ethnic group. The connection here is that the development and progress of language are often related to the changes that occur in natural language when it becomes a national or ethnic language. Therefore, the development process of language is not just about changes in an internal system; it is also influenced by cultural changes, class conflicts, and the will of the people. If language is a kind of human activity, then its actual process is the history of all people and their societies.

Based on the above analyses, it can be concluded that language is a complex system of practice that has been interacting with various parts of society and history over time, as well as influencing people’s thoughts. Therefore, Marx’s idea of practical language is different from that in the previous linguistic concept. Language is no longer just a way to express thoughts and communicate; it is a real social behavior that is constructed and used in the process of interacting with others. The development and changes of language are caused by changes in society, culture, and people’s own ideas. Therefore, language is not only the manifestation of the essence of human activity, but also the way people think and live socially at all times during their lives and history. In this way, Language is also a historical phenomenon.

### **3. Language is a historical phenomenon**

Marx wrote in *The German Ideology* that “Language and consciousness have had the same long history” <sup>[5]</sup>. Therefore, people may be able to assert that language itself has history, and any theory about language should not ignore it or treat it as a minor issue. In line with the positivist view that may describe language in terms of development, expansion, convergence, corruption, and decline, the historical path of language is not uniform; rather, various factors in different areas and parts of a language progress at different speeds, making the temporality of change for a particular language more intricate and uneven. According to the phenomenon described by Stalin — language, like the superstructure, develops with the progress of each of its components in accordance with its own specific temporality — this gives rise to the phenomenon of survival (linguistic features, vocabulary, structure, etc., from previous periods or stages are still used in modern times) and also includes the phenomenon of anticipation (new linguistic features, vocabulary, structure, etc., that appear in current use hint at the future direction of linguistic development) <sup>[6]</sup>. Therefore, language is not independent; rather, it changes gradually with changes in the socio-economic foundation and superstructure. In this sense, the connection between general language (that is to say, language as an all-encompassing system of communication and a cultural phenomenon) and specific language (that is to say, linguistic forms in particular stages of history and social groups) should be considered from the perspective of social practice; language is a product of human interaction, which is shaped by specific historical circumstances and social environments, and it changes as these circumstances and environments change. Therefore, language is not a relatively fixed system that needs to meet all the internal demands of the system; instead, as a living

thing, it will be altered by changes in the social and cultural environment. Therefore, language is a historical phenomenon.

As it is well known, during Stalin's rule, his political ideas influenced the language and established a normal language. Language changes with the history of the people who speak it (the ruling class), and because language naturally has a tendency for metaphorical drift (that is, new meanings are applied to old words in various situations), lexical semantics are also affected. Gramsci affirmed this trait of language in the Prison Notebooks: "When I use the term 'act of God', no one will think I believe in astrology; when I say 'Heaven', no one will believe I am a worshipper of pagan gods." In Gramsci's view, "when a new idea takes the place of the old one, although its language has not been updated, some older words are still used" <sup>[7]</sup>. If people accept Gramsci's idea that all language contains a worldview, people can conclude that language is a sedimentation of history.

Williams was the first to elaborate on this view of Gramsci. Williams is one of the people mentioned in Marxism and Literature. First, he is disappointed that there has been too little attention to language in the Marxist tradition; thus, he will attempt to build a Marxist idea of language. Williams notes that in the development of Marxist theoretical thought on language, two essential aspects deserve attention: First, it is based on the idea of language as activity; second, it is considered to have history <sup>[8]</sup>. Thus, the history of language has been affirmed in this way. However, in the latter part of the chapter, Williams shows some concessions to the main philosophy of language. He argues: After establishing the necessary definition of language as a biological capacity (endowment, faculty), that is to say, that language is constitutive, people must equally define language development: language development (including both individual and social linguistic development) is constituted historically and socially. Although people do not deny that language may be a biological instinct, this recognition assumes that people are aware of the fact that language is created through history and practice.

Williams' place is to show that there is a history of language, and this history is built on top of one another. Williams pointed out that "each word I have collected has indeed drawn my attention at some time or in particular discussions; for me, the semantic problems of the word itself seemed intimately linked to the semantic questions that arose in those contemporary discussions" <sup>[9]</sup>. To explore the origins of words in a deep way, people need to move away from the usual methods of older dictionaries. Even the historical dictionary is not perfect and cannot reveal the changes in meaning over time. Therefore, people need to move beyond the conventional system of so-called "correct meanings" and use more profound research methods to understand the real changes and intricacies of lexical meaning. The above method is actually a historical one.

People can trace the history of semantic change, its problems and all sorts of applications, as well as processes such as innovation, obsolescence, restriction, expansion, repetition and transfer. People may also find that changes in meaning are sometimes overlooked, giving the impression of long-term stability, but in fact, both the core meaning and its extended connotations have changed considerably over time <sup>[10]</sup>. Based on Williams' study, people have learned that the key language words are not about describing physical objects or nature; instead, they form the system of social life, such as "family" and "culture." Williams introduced the idea of a linguistic situation and believed that meaning arises dynamically in speakers' social activities; therefore, it is not based on the fixed structure of language or the history of language. At this time, words will be spontaneously produced and realized through application, not merely learned. Fetishistic fixation breaks the link with the source and is therefore brittle and easily forgotten. However, language itself is also changing

constantly, and the decline of old meanings and the rise of new ones occur together in the course of history.

Besides language being contained in history, its history is also due to the history of human beings. Marx noted in the marginal notes of *The German Ideology* that “Men have history because they must live by working, and must work in a certain way”<sup>[1]</sup>. Traditional philosophy focuses on abstract human reason, while Marx emphasizes people as active laborers, stressing life and work as key to understanding humanity. Marx views language as a social product shaped by historical activities, evolving alongside society to record social and cultural changes.

In short, whether people look at the internal characteristics of language or the fundamental nature of human language, it is an object that has a history. Indeed, language is practical and historical. Therefore, language as a form of practical and actual consciousness must necessarily be the comprehension and expression produced by real people in their daily lives; thus, language is also a direct reality of thought.

#### **4. Language is the direct object of thought**

Marx said: Language is the direct object of thought. Based on the above, thought is the foundation of all things and also constrains the development of language. Language is the expression of thought; at the same time, thought is also its origin and substance. Therefore, in this sense, Marx believes that the element of the life expression of thought is language and that language is essentially a sensory nature of the world<sup>[10]</sup>.

In short, all thoughts are consciousness, and generally, thought and consciousness can be regarded as the same thing. Only when something comes into awareness can people begin to think about it, and what people are able to think about is limited by what people are aware of. Therefore, in daily life, people often use “thought” and “consciousness” interchangeably, and they are generally referred to as “thought-consciousness.” However, upon deeper study, it can be seen that thought and consciousness are not the same thing; rather, there is a process of transformation among them. In other words, at the beginning, consciousness is an intuitive reflection of the external world and all kinds of relationships; as it develops from this initial state of awareness, it forms a deep, organized system of thought through a certain process of development. Thought can uncover the inner reasons and laws of things better than consciousness. Although this view has some reason for describing the relationship between thought and consciousness, it may also lead to a misunderstanding, that is, the idea that thought is the result of consciousness developing to a particular stage. If this view were correct, people would be unable to move directly from foundational thought to the level of language and would thus be off track in terms of truth.

Thought can refer to various things in daily life. Spiritually, cognition, thought, and consciousness are essentially the same. However, if thought is viewed as the result of deep thought and systematic reflection, it will possess the attributes of such extraordinary consciousness. At the same time, when thought is regarded as a direct expression of essence and origin, it takes an initial, proactive form, appears before consciousness in the traditional sense, and forms the foundation of consciousness. From the standpoint of dialectics, thought not only moves beyond consciousness but also comes before it; yet, there is no conflict. Instead, the two work together and are in agreement. In fact, thought is a more organized, advanced, and basic form of consciousness. As the most direct expression of consciousness, thought is undoubtedly the determining factor in defining the nature of things and has had a profound impact on people’s understanding of and grasp of their surroundings and the relationships among them. This kind of thinking is at the beginning of the

development of consciousness and provides the basis for constructing higher-order consciousness. At the very beginning, when people first learn about thinking, they believe it is the original design of the world; this is why they believe that thinking creates the world and allows people to live in it. Therefore, it can be concluded that thought precedes consciousness. Therefore, thought is not the origin of consciousness; rather, consciousness is the expression of thought.

If Marx views language as the direct reality of thought, it is not mere mental activity or an expression tool. Linguistic experiences reflect human emotional life, not just philosophical frames or scientific objects. Sensuous consciousness precedes conceptual thought. It forms language's foundation. Current linguistic analysis ignores thought's root. Traditional philosophy wrongly sees language as thought's basis. True reality is sensed through experience. Marx criticized philosophers for constructing language as an autonomous kingdom, arguing that the real challenge lies in translating abstract ideals into daily life. He emphasized that language gains true meaning only through practical use in everyday contexts. Marx's practical view of language, rooted in real human life, fundamentally differs from speculative views that isolate language in the realm of concepts. He posited that language and thought are shaped by life experiences, while simultaneously playing a role in constructing and transforming reality.

## 5. Research

Marx's practical idea of language is not the same as any earlier theories of linguistics. It not only explains life but also leads people to experience and learn from life. This view firmly believes that the purpose of Marxist philosophy is not to interpret the world, but to realize language in the life of real people through practice, and to use it as a material force to guide all people in changing the world. Professor Sun Litian believes that language comes from the actual life of people and is thus a form of life. For people, the real problem is how to assimilate all philosophical achievements, including those of the philosophy of language, and then correctly present and direct modern people's self-awareness and self-perception. Therefore, people need to arouse and promote a dialectical mode of thinking that is close to human nature and the essence of language<sup>[1]</sup>. From this perspective, to re-examine Marx's practical view of language in the light of the mode of thinking based on practice holds deep theoretical value and practical guidance for the real life of contemporary real people.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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