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## A.A. Potebnja's Inner Form. An *Excursus* Starting from the Origins of Language

### 1. *Brief Overview of Scholarly Research*

The concept of inner form (*vnutrennjaja forma* in Russian), developed by the Ukrainian linguist Potebnja (1835-1891) is exceedingly interesting and complex, all the more so as it is the cornerstone of Potebnja's theory. As the notion has various definitions, one is left wondering as to how a set of so seemingly diverse attributes are attached to one and the same notion, so as to cause a continuous overlapping of different spheres of interest. The various definitions which are attributed to inner form will be listed orderly below, for now, it can be preliminarily defined as one of the elements present in Potebnja's tripartite verbal sign (the word), together with outer form (articulated sound) and content (of psychological nature).

By now a substantial amount of scholarly work has been dedicated to Potebnja. In 1931, Čecovič published a groundbreaking monograph in Ukrainian, which already presented an in-depth account of the concept of inner form and its role in Potebnja's theory, as well as a very informative section on Potebnja's biography. From the middle of the '30s to the end of the '50s the scholarly interest in Potebnja diminished (Presnjakov 1978: 9), with the notable exception of Jaroševskij's article on the concept of inner form (1946), and the English translation of Vetuchiv's 1926 Ukrainian article on a critical discussion regarding the scholarship devoted to Potebnja (1956). From the end of the '70s, scholarly research devoted to Potebnja began to proliferate in different countries, steadily increasing ever since. In Russian, Presnjakov's monographs (1978 and 1980) to this day represent an invaluable source regarding early publications on Potebnja, the state and content of his archive, and to his relationship to key figures of 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian intellectual life, like Veselovskij and Belinskij. In the same period, Fizer's monograph (1986) and Mocchiutti's short volume on Potebnja's conception of the word (1983) were published, whereas in Ukraine Frančuk's work appeared (1985). In the last twenty years, apart from Suchich's monograph (2001), Aumüller's seminal work *Innere Form und Poetizität* (2005) must be mentioned, where Wilhelm von Humboldt's<sup>1</sup> and Heymann Steinthal's influence on the development of Potebnja's inner form<sup>2</sup> is discussed in

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<sup>1</sup> Another earlier article on Humboldt's *innere Sprachform* and Potebnja's *vnutrennjaja forma* is Kokochkina 2000.

<sup>2</sup> The last part of the book is devoted to the relationship between Potebnja and Symbolism on the one hand, and between Potebnja and Formalism on the other. On Potebnja and Symbolism see also Weststeijn 1979.

great detail. In 2012, the aforementioned Frančuk published a second monograph on Potebnja, based on extensive archival research, which allowed her to reconstruct the relatively little known biography of Potebnja's family, and including a number of unpublished materials (both in Ukrainian and Russian). Other interesting Western publications are included in the first 2006 issue of "Revue germanique internationale" dedicated to the development of the concept of inner form in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in the 2016 issue of the "Cahiers de l'I.L.S.L.," dedicated exclusively to Potebnja<sup>3</sup>. Regarding research conducted by Ukrainian scholars, the works of Goljanič (2008) and Vakulenko (2005, 2006 and 2007)<sup>4</sup> are of special interest because these authors, contrary to the Western European scholarship, try to link Potebnja's concepts to philosophers, such as Locke and Vico, well beyond the *milieu* of 19<sup>th</sup> century German *Sprachphilosophie*.

Whereas much has been written on Potebnja and especially on the influence of his ideas on later authors, the scope of the present article will be limited to an as orderly as possible presentation of the concept of inner form as described primarily in *Mysl' i jazyk*<sup>5</sup> (first published in 1862 in the "Žurnal Ministerstva Narodnogo Prosvješčenija"), although Potebnja's other publications will be considered as well. Because the concept is so broad, our excursus will closely follow the articulation of *Mysl' i jazyk*, so as to provide an orderly exposition of the different spheres of Potebnja's theory where the inner form plays a role. Special attention will be devoted to the question of the origin of language, which has rarely been at the center of scholarly attention. More specifically, after a section introducing the structure of *Mysl' i jazyk*, we will grant particular attention to the problem of word-formation (*obrazovanie slova*) as conceived by Potebnja, thereby trying to bring to the fore some features of this process which have either been ignored or misunderstood. Furthermore, in our conclusions, some suggestions will be made regarding possible aspects of Potebnja's theory which are in need of further study.

## 2. *Mysl' i jazyk: Language and Cognitive Development*

Potebnja's research was insightfully described by Engel'gardt through the expression "gnoseological psychologism"<sup>6</sup> (Zenkin 2014: 142). Indeed, *Mysl' i jazyk*'s intention, as Belyj succinctly put it, is to "present[s] his [Potebnja's] fundamental views regarding

<sup>3</sup> Most articles in both issues are dedicated to the influence of the concept of inner form on later traditions. See, for instance, Dennes 2006, Fontaine 2006, Glanc 2016, Pilšikov 2016.

<sup>4</sup> The 2005 article is in Ukrainian but was previously published in English (Vakulenko 2001). The 2007 article quoted here is in Italian.

<sup>5</sup> Many critics, including Aumüller (2005), maintain that this volume contains a valid account of Potebnja's theory, which did not dramatically change through the years.

<sup>6</sup> Engel'gardt wrote two articles on Potebnja, which were posthumously published. The first, dated 1921, was entitled *Lingvističeskaja teorija Potebni i ee otnošenii k istorii literatury*, whereas the second dealt with the *Teorija slovesnosti v lingvističeskoj sisteme Potebni*, date unknown (Zenkin 2014: 139).

the origin and the development of language” (Belyj 1910: 241 [here and afterwards, unless otherwise indicated, the translations from Russian and German are mine, LT]) by outlining a comprehensive account of the relationship between thought and language starting from the first, primitive, pre-linguistic phases and ending with the achievement of highly developed, nuanced concepts. After the first chapters devoted to criticizing the theories of linguists such as Becker and Schleicher, Potebnja dedicates a section to Humboldt, whose theoretical superiority he praises. He then presents his view on what he terms *obrazovanie slova* (word-formation, i.e., the origins of language), and continues with several chapters on linguistic and cognitive development.

Wilhelm von Humboldt's theory of language is unanimously considered the starting point for Potebnja's research. According to his pupil Heymann Steinthal (Steinthal 1888: 59), the German *Sprachphilosoph* operated a cartesian revolution through his understanding of language as *energeia* (as opposed to *ergon*), i.e., as a dynamic activity constituting “the formative organ of thought” (Humboldt 1988: 54). For the German philosopher, the linguistic aspect was inseparable from a broader anthropological picture, and his devotion to education through his work as a statesman is explained by his conviction that language is what forms us as human beings in the fullest and highest sense. Humboldt saw language as the most important among the spiritual forces (*geistige Kräfte*) mankind is endowed with which make it possible for the single, historically situated individual, to strive toward the realization of the ideal *Menschheit* (Coseriu 2015: 372). Whilst never explicitly referring to an ideal *Menschheit*, Potebnja also considered language as the cognitive tool *par excellence*, as the primary force enabling mankind to break free from a primitive stage and making way for intellectual development. As Seifrid remarks, Potebnja was, in fact, the first one in Russia to effectively and inextricably link language with subjectivity and self-formation (Seifrid 2005: 52).

A *caveat*: Potebnja never maintains that no thought is possible prior to or without language. In fact, he very explicitly states that “from all this, it is evident that the sphere of thought by far does not coincide with that of language” (Potebnja 1976a: 68). The non-coincidence between the sphere of thought and the sphere of language in Potebnja's theory is highlighted by many critics, such as Avalor (Avalor 1983: 36) and Passarella, who remarks that for Potebnja highly complex cognitive activities, such as advanced mathematics, can be carried out without the help of language (Passarella 2007: 42). Nonetheless, it is only through language that a series of progressively more complex mental activities first become attainable. In a later work, *Psichologija poetičeskogo i prozaičeskogo mišljenija*, Potebnja claims for linguistics the primacy over all the other disciplines in the fields of the humanities<sup>7</sup> (*gumanitarnie nauki*) precisely on account of the fact that verbal language is the first step in the quest for progressively more advanced knowledge (Potebnja 1989b: 202).

<sup>7</sup> In the field of the natural sciences, the primacy is accorded to mathematics (Potebnja 1989b: 208). Even so, Potebnja specifies that, in order to develop complex mathematical concepts, language is first needed (Potebnja 1989b: 207).

Potebnja's ideas on the relationship between thought and language, *per se*, are not novel, as they are derivative of that cognitive tradition which became predominant over the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Dascal 1983). For instance, already in 1746, Condillac, in his *Essai sur l'origine des connoissances humaines*, understood language as "the catalyst of thought", as the use of verbal signs first allows us to go beyond the simplest ideas provided by our sensory perception (Seifrid 2005: 13). The epistemological system of the Enlightenment period also maintained that there are two stages of awareness: in the first one, there is a flow of presentations from the external world to the mind, in the second, the individual learns to consciously reflect on them and organize them (*Ibid.*: 17). Similarly, for Potebnja, conscious mental activity is possible only through language:

If we define the mind<sup>8</sup> as a conscious mental activity entailing the development of concepts<sup>9</sup>, which can be formed only through words, we will see that there is no mind without language, and that language is for it the very first event (Potebnja 1976a: 69).

By arguing in favor of the primacy of language over the mind, Potebnja is here polemizing against Humboldt, who, according to Steinthal, had been ambivalent regarding the issue, failing to address it properly (Aumüller 2005: 36).

The strong gnoseological drive in *Mysl' i jazyk* is now clear, together with the articulation of *Mysl' i jazyk*. First of all, the question regarding the difference between pre-linguistic and linguistic stages is addressed in order to substantiate the claim that only through language higher cognitive activities become possible. Secondly, linguistic and cognitive development through to language is taken into consideration. In all this, inner form plays a decisive role.

The first inquiry, which precedes (chronologically and logically) the second, is clearly linked to the then still much-debated issue of the origins of language, which is framed by Potebnja in a very specific way. Regarding the second inquiry, its aim in *Mysl' i jazyk* is to understand how a word can be used to refer to a variety of similar objects, and, conversely, how it can expand its meaning by being applied in different contexts. What is notable here is that, although at first linguistic and cognitive development is tied to inner form, the latter must, at a point, disappear if the individual is to progress further. The presence / absence of inner form is also crucial, for it informs Potebnja's assumption regarding the difference between poetry and prose. In fact, the *poetičnost'* of a word is dependent upon the presence of inner form, so that words whose inner form has been forgotten cannot be poetic and mark the passage from poetic to prosaic thinking (Potebnja 1976a: 174).

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<sup>8</sup> The Russian term *duch* here translates the German *Geist* as used by Humboldt in his *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaus und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts* (first published in 1837). In turn, the German term has been translated either as 'mind' by Buck and Raven (1971), or as 'spirit' by Heath (1988).

<sup>9</sup> Potebnja has a peculiar understanding of the word concept, to which we will devote some attention later.

To summarize, three main spheres can be delineated when talking about inner form; word-formation, cognitive and linguistic development, and poetry. In each of these spheres, the meaning and function of inner form are different and so is the focus of Potebnja's inquiry. The following list<sup>10</sup> represents a hopefully complete account of the various definitions of inner form, ordered according to our three spheres of interest.

#### I. WORD-FORMATION

- The inner form is the first content embodied in the sound, as well as what links the sound and the content (Potebnja 1976a: 114-115).
- It is a representation, its function being to represent to the individual the content of his or her own mind through a single attribute (Potebnja 1976a: 115).

#### II. COGNITIVE AND LINGUISTIC DEVELOPMENT

- It is a *tertium comparationis*, something which allows the individual to compare two different magnitudes (Potebnja 1976a: 138).
- It is the immediate etymological content (Potebnja 1976a: 114).
- It serves as a stable predicate for multiple subjects (Potebnja 1976a: 148).
- Consequently, it is what allows for the same words to refer to more objects (Potebnja 1976a: 115).

#### III. POETRY

- It is what allows for the word to be poetic (Potebnja 1976a: 174).
- Its disappearance marks the passage from poetry to prose.

### 3. *Word-Formation: Potebnja and Steintal*

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the question of the origins of language was at the center of a heated debate among prominent philosophers such as Rousseau, Condillac, Lord Monboddo, and later Herder and Hamann<sup>11</sup>. According to Langham-Brown (Langham-Brown 1969: 24), contrary to the still widespread position that language is a divine gift, or the product of human reason, most of these philosophers claimed that speech originated from the cries of primitive men responding to the stimuli of their surroundings. Language, which in its first stages is composed of holophrastic onomatopoeia, developed from interjections and was subsequently subjected to refinement (Langham-Brown 1969: 32).

<sup>10</sup> Goljanič also presents a list with the salient features of Potebnja's inner form (Goljanič 2008: 20-21), although she leaves out the most of the features pertaining to our section on cognitive and linguistic development, as well as those pertaining to aesthetic experience (she is most interested in the cognitive sphere).

<sup>11</sup> For an overview of the different myths and tales about the origins of language, see, besides Langham-Brown 1969, Trabant 1996b and Graffi 2005.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, whilst not as prominent, the issue of the origins of language was still widely discussed by notable scholars, such as the aforementioned Heymann Steinthal, a pupil of Humboldt, whose position on the matter had a profound influence on the young Potebnja<sup>12</sup>. As Aumüller argues, through the work of Humboldt and Steinthal the study of the origins of language was profoundly reshaped, and the problem of the establishment of a link between a word and an object replaced by the “anthropological question regarding the interdependence of thought and language” (Aumüller 2005: 52): as a consequence, Steinthal, and Potebnja following him, are not interested in how an object is named, but rather try to describe the process whereby a psychological, emotional response is first transposed into sound, and thereby acquires meaning for the individual. Steinthal’s research on the subject is, first of all, characterized by heightened attention to the sphere of physiology. In *Ursprung der Sprache*, after devoting a bulky section to Herder and to his prize-winning essay *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (1772), and one to Humboldt, Steinthal proposed to investigate the question of the origins of language as a the *Entstehung des Geistes*<sup>13</sup> *aus der Natur* (Steinthal 1888: 111-112). The inquiry would, consequently, start in the realm of physiology by exploring the natural basis which first allows for the development of language. Drawing on Steinthal, *Mysl’ i jazyk* also aims at tracing the shift from physiology to apperception, that is, from articulated sound as a physiological necessity to the full-fledged word as a means to perform judgments and to gain further knowledge. It must be noted Potebnja understood judgments to be equivalent to comparisons, so that a person can reach the stage of apperception when he or she is finally able to compare two objects or phenomena on the basis of a *tertium comparationis*. Such middle ground, which is first attainable only through the word, serves as the basis for a process of generalization, which in Potebnja’s theory constitutes the primary means for linguistic and cognitive progress.

To the extent that the, at time extreme, lack of clarity of some excerpts regarding word-formation in *Mysl’ i jazyk* allows, we will attempt to reconstruct the main passages in Potebnja’s argument, relying on Steinthal’s somewhat clearer argument for help where needed.

Potebnja holds that, in pre-linguistic phases, both primitive men and young children are unable to meaningfully organize the stimuli received from their surroundings, and consequently live in a state of internal chaos which can only be overcome through language. A primitive, non-organized response to the external stimuli is represented by the so-called

<sup>12</sup> On the relationship between Potebnja and Steinthal see also Bartschat 1987. Belyj had already remarked the importance of Steinthal (Belyj 1910: 244), and indeed some of the similarities between Steinthal’s work and some passages in *Mysl’ i jazyk* are striking: to make an example, Potebnja’s Humboldt chapter is entirely based on Steinthal’s Humboldt section in *Ursprung der Sprache. Im Zusammenhang mit den letzten Fragen des Wissens* (first published in 1851), whereas his criticism against the linguist Becker relies heavily on the first chapters of Steinthal’s *Grammatik, Logik und Psychologie* (1855).

<sup>13</sup> In this passage Steinthal uses the term *Geist* in the same way as the term *duch* was later used by Potebnja.

*obščee čuvstvo*, an emotional state below the level of consciousness linked to bodily conditions, like intense hunger or lust, which can at times be disruptive for the individual (Potebnja 1976a: 85). Whilst the impressions (*vpečatlenija*) provided by the *obščee čuvstvo* are termed subjective, other emotions, usually linked to the higher senses, i.e., hearing and sight, are objective (*ob'ektivnye čuvstva* [Potebnja 1976a: 86]). Contrary to the former, the latter have the ability to unite to form sensuous images (*čuvstvennye obrazy*)<sup>14</sup> of external objects, a concept that Potebnja derives from Steinthal's *Anschauung* (Aumüller 2005: 57-58 and Passarella 2007: 45), and that indicates a chaotic *ensemble* of emotions which will become progressively ordered and explainable through language.

The primitive individual also responds to his or her surroundings through physical movement. Articulated sound, the outer form of the verbal sign, is also considered a movement – involuntary at first – of our phonatory organs, caused by some emotion aroused by an outer phenomenon:

[...] we must go further and say that articulated sound, the outer form of human speech, is, from a physiological perspective, of the same nature as the aforementioned phenomena, and it as well depends on emotions pressing on the soul. In the beginning, articulated sound too was involuntary, although it later became a loyal cognitive tool (Potebnja 1976a: 99).

As for Steinthal, for Potebnja what sets the whole process of the word-formation into motion is an emotion (*Gefühl, čuvstvo*) which, as Steinthal says, accompanies the *Anschauung* (Steinthal 1855: 311), and which literally presses upon the phonatory organs, forcing the person to utter certain interjectional sounds<sup>15</sup>. It must be stressed, however, that not every interjection can become a word, but only those connected to visual or auditory impressions, that is, with higher senses (Potebnja 1976a: 110), as they are the bearers of a (psychological) content which is much more defined than that provided by fuzzy emotions as pain or pleasure (Steinthal 1855: 308). We learn from Steinthal that interjections resulting from other, less refined emotions cannot form words, and that they cannot go beyond the so-called pathognomic phase<sup>16</sup> in the articulation of sound (Steinthal 1855: 307).

This perspective, corresponding to a widely circulating theory on the origin of language nicknamed by the Danish linguist Otto Jespersen 'the pooh-pooh theory' (Jespersen 1922: 414), presents a particularly interesting feature which calls for attention. Whereas the interjections are not intentionally uttered, there seems to be a kind of motivation between them and the psychological activity (the emotion) they are caused by: "we must maintain

<sup>14</sup> In general, as Svetlikova argues, the term 'image' was a key concept in the psychological studies of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, even though "the importance of the position it occupied was not coupled by its clarity" (Svetlikova 2005: 43).

<sup>15</sup> On interjections in Potebnja and on their difference from the full-fledged word see also Rigotti 1972: 246.

<sup>16</sup> Potebnja also uses this word but does not comment on it (Potebnja 1976a: 114).

that a physiological necessity forces the soul to express through verbal sounds at least the general character of its inner state.” (Potebnja 1976a: 99). This idea, which is reiterated also some pages later (*Ibid.*: 101), is clearly drawn from Steintahl’s remarks on the so-called ‘onomatopoeic phase’<sup>17</sup> of language, where by onomatopoeia a correspondence, a ‘rhyme’ between the way the emotion presses upon the phonatory organs and the resulting sound is meant (Potebnja 1855: 309 and 311-312)<sup>18</sup>. We may now feel allowed to make some inferences: if a certain emotional state presses upon the phonatory organs and forces them to change somehow mirroring the content of said emotion, it follows that different emotions will produce different changes and different sounds. The sounds which will form the first words are then motivated, and:

[...] there is no arbitrariness in language [...] the sound *sta* was uttered by the individual upon seeing a standing object [...] because the emotion, exciting the soul, could impress upon the [phonatory] organs only that [sound] and not another (Potebnja 1976a: 116).

In Steintahl’s words: “it [the first utterances] is a sound-reflex, where the phonatory organs behave as a mirror [...] by mirroring back what acts upon them” (Steintahl 1855: 312). This is the peculiar way how Steintahl and Potebnja solve the problem of how a psychological content first becomes objectivized in sound.

The interjectional utterance of the sound, of course, does not exhaust the process of word-formation. At one point, through a process of self-observation on the part of the individual, the sound becomes associated to the sensuous image of the external phenomenon (Potebnja 1976a: 111) and the individual becomes (somehow) “conscious of the content in the sound” (*Ibid.*: 113). What links the image to the sound, the emotion which had caused the interjection, whose content had become incarnated<sup>19</sup> in the sound, is now called by Potebnja inner form (*Ibid.*: 115). Consequently, as Steintahl before him, Potebnja argues that the inner form does not represent the *Anschauung* / *obraz* to which the sound is linked

<sup>17</sup> Potebnja firmly rejected a theory of the origins of language based on a traditional understanding of the onomatopoeia (Potebnja 1976a: 114), and quite understandably so, as this would entail a conscious mimicking of certain sounds of nature by the individual and not an unintentional utterance. The term onomatopoeic, which he uses in *Mysl’ i jazyk* (*Ibid.*: 114), must be understood in its etymological sense (word-creating).

<sup>18</sup> In general, this is a feature of Potebnja’s conception of the origins of language which has remained in the shadows. Passarella takes the onomatopoeic problem into consideration, yet the only example she provides (that of the Chinese word “miao” for cat, taken from Steintahl) is misleading, as it points to a more traditional understanding of the onomatopoeia (Passarella 2007: 46), and, more importantly, because it actually refers to a later stage in the development of language according to Steintahl (the characterizing stage, not discussed by Potebnja) (cfr. Steintahl 1855: 313). Vakulenko also refers to the term in its traditional meaning (Vakulenko 2016: 190).

<sup>19</sup> The term incarnation is also used by Boris Gasparov to highlight the religious and romantic undertones of Potebnja’s conception of the origins of language (Gasparov 1994: 98).



in its entirety, but only through a single attribute (*priznak / Merkmal*), corresponding, of course, to the emotional content which had been embodied in the sound. The inner form is, in Steinthal's term, an *Anschauung der Anschauung* (Steinthal 1855: 309), an *obraz obraza* for Potebnja (Potebnja 1976a: 147), not merely the sensuous image of an object, but rather its representation (*Vorstellung, predstavlenie*) through a salient feature<sup>20</sup>. We are now able to understand why the inner form is also considered as "the first content of a word", and "the consciousness of the content of the mind in the sound", as it marks "the first time cognitive phenomena are represented through sounds" (*Ibid.*: 113-114).

The now full-fledged word stands for, in the mind of the individual, the sensuous image by representing it through a single attribute, thereby simplifying and making the process of thinking faster and more efficient (Potebnja 1958: 18 and 1989b: 215-218). Clearly, the newly formed word, even if necessary for further linguistic and psychological development, does not exhaust the sensuous image, but rather provides a more operative substitute for it by explaining it in one respect. Only in time, through a progressive experience of the world through language, will the sensuous image be analyzed (de-composed)<sup>21</sup>, even if it is doubtful whether it will ever be completely explainable. This excess, this unexplainable residue of the human psyche even after language has been attained, is also restated in the process of artistic creation, which somehow resembles the Potebnja's ideas on the origins of language: at first, the artist finds himself in a restless state<sup>22</sup>, haunted by something he cannot explain and which causes some movement in his soul, seeking an outlet. Whilst in creating the artist finds some respite, Potebnja insists that even for the poet himself the initial unclear thought can be explained through the work of art only partially (Potebnja 1976b: 312), and that, consequently, there remains a part of the artist's soul inaccessible even to himself.

#### 4. Generalization, Metaphors

A terminological *caveat*: until now, we have been using the terms inner form and representation as synonymous. Without a doubt, Potebnja's *Mysl' i jazyk* encourages this equation, however, Vakulenko is surely right when he argues that distinctions in Potebnja's quasi-synonymous terms must be made: "representation is a psychological term applied to the content being represented, while the linguistic means of expressing it is the inner form" (Vakulenko 2001: 321). Whereas in the process of word-formation Potebnja's

<sup>20</sup> I would suggest that this feature of inner form is reminiscent of Herder's 1772 *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*. According to the German philosopher, in fact, the word is formed when the individual is able to isolate a single feature from the object (s)he is observing. The word, then, originally names the object according to a single *Merkmal* (on this, see, for instance, Graffi 2005: 13).

<sup>21</sup> The Russian term is *razloženie* (Potebnja 1976a: 151), which is translated in English by Vakulenko as decomposition (Vakulenko 2001: 321).

<sup>22</sup> In one of the section of *Iz zapisok po teorii slovesnoti*, entitled *Inspiration (Vdochnovlenie)* Potebnja describes inspiration in terms of the Platonic *mania* (Potebnja 1976b: 360-363).

interest had been focused on the establishment of a link between sound and content, i.e. on the process through which the material sound comes to bear a meaning, in the first stages of linguistic development the ability to subsume a complex psychological content in a word through a single attribute comes to the fore, something which also lies, according to the same scholar, at the core of Lazarus' conception of inner form (Vakulenko 2007: 69 and 2016: 193).

The first thing that an individual can do through the newly-acquired word is to generalize its use by employing it to refer to a set of similar objects<sup>23</sup>. The fact that the word expresses only a *priznak* of the content serves precisely this purpose. This is considered by Potebnja as an act of apperception, or a judgment, and as such, it is equivalent to performing a comparison between two elements on the basis of a *tertium comparationis*, as it is apparent from the following quotation:

For instance, if a person, upon feeling the motion of the wind, says 'Wind!', we can explain such expression through a whole sentence: this (the emotional impression of the wind) is tantamount to that (a previous image) which is represented to me as 'that which blows' (Potebnja 1976a: 148).

It is then clear why the inner form is defined as a *tertium comparationis*, or as a stable predicate for changing subjects, as it allows a single word to refer to more objects.

There is another fundamental way in which inner form / representation acts as a *tertium comparationis*. In fact, for Potebnja one of the fundamental characteristics of (poetic) language is that it enables the individual to compare and explain something unknown through something known. In his later writings, he explained this process with a famous formula, whereby an unknown phenomenon (x) is compared by the individual to the bulk of his or her knowledge (A), until a common attribute (a) is found, which can help the individual to interpret x (Potebnja 1976b: 301; 1989b: 217). For instance, Potebnja described the case of the little boy who referred to a lamp through the term *arbuzik* ('small watermelon') (Potebnja 1958: 17) because they were both round. Another example, taken from *Mysl' i jazyk*, is that of the verb *modet'*, whose meaning ('to burn badly', 'to flicker out'), was metaphorically applied to a sick individual wasting away (Potebnja 1976a: 138-139).

It is fundamental that Potebnja considers these metaphorical shifts not as a mere expansion of the content of a word, but as the formation of a new one (even if the outer form stays the same) bearing a new, living representation:

[...] as soon as we give a word, even if its representation is forgotten, a new meaning, we encounter a new representation with a clear meaning. [...] a new word is formed with a new representation (Potebnja 1989b: 223).

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<sup>23</sup> This is a part of Potebnja's theory which has already been well explained by many, starting from Čechovič (1931: 62).

When a new word is born thanks to a metaphorical shift, the attribute which was selected in the psychological act of comparison becomes the living inner form of the newly-formed word, a process which appears fundamental for linguistic renewal.

The aforementioned examples seem to contradict the often accepted view that the inner form of a word is *tout court* equivalent to its etymon (see, for instance, Aumüller 2005). Indeed, the link between the inner form and etymology is evident, as the former is indissolubly linked to the process of word-formation. Furthermore, Potebnja often resorts to etymological research to uncover the lost inner form of words. Even so, the more distant we grow from the first stages of language, the more it becomes clear (especially in publications other than *Mysl' i jazyk*) that Potebnja is interested in a feature of the development of language and thought which by far exceeds the possibilities of the mere etymon of single words: through the expression 'immediate etymological content', which we have indicated in our list, Potebnja meant something broader and more momentous than the historical research of the etymon, more akin to a living linguistic mechanism, to borrow Ermen's expression (Ermen 1995: 218). As Vakulenko (2007: 70) explains, for Potebnja the immediate etymological meaning is a sort of 'living etymology' allowing the speaker, even by means of associations dictated by paratimology, to always generate new metaphorical meanings by providing a preexisting outer form with a new inner form.

That being said, there seems to be a tension between this understanding of the immediate etymological meaning, indicating a rather free if not downright personal usage of language (Passarella 2007: 47), and another meaning which Potebnja attaches to the same expression (Potebnja 1976a: 114), to which he at times refers to just as immediate meaning (Potebnja 1958: 19-20). Through the distinction between the ulterior meaning, which is strictly subjective, and the immediate one which is collective and belongs to the people<sup>24</sup> (*Ibid.*: 20), Potebnja tried to solve the problem of interpersonal communication and to overcome the duality between the individual and the collective plane in language. A preliminary indication for a possible solution lies in the fact that, at times, Potebnja seems to indicate that all major transformations in language actually happen thanks to some internal logic which had been marked from the very beginning<sup>25</sup> (cfr. Potebnja 1958: 480 and 1989b: 224). Nevertheless, the tension between the individual and the collective, and between freedom and necessity in language, two antinomies which already belonged to Humboldt's thought and which Potebnja discusses in the opening sections of *Mysl' i jazyk*, is an aspect of Potebnja's theory which needs more attention.

##### 5. *The Oblivion of Inner Form and the Appearance of Concepts*

Inner form is destined to disappear in later stages of linguistic development, thus leaving the word with only its outer form and its content. This process is necessary to give way to

<sup>24</sup> On this issue see also the recent article by Ferrari-Bravo 2016.

<sup>25</sup> On this see also some hints in the articles by Penkova (1977: 129) and Vakulenko (2001: 323).

the formation, in the mind of the individual, of concepts (*ponjatija*), which, in turn, play a pivotal role in endowing the word with a greater degree of systematicity and order (Potebnja 1976a: 161). As Vakulenko points out, this is linked to the process of the de-composition of the sensuous image (Vakulenko 2001: 321), which, in *Mysl' i jazyk*, begins with the individual overcoming the purely holophrastic phase characterizing the first linguistic stages. According to Potebnja, the sensuous image can be progressively analyzed in its components, so as to be better understandable and controllable by the individual. When a series of two or more words are placed together, a second-degree judgment is performed which allows the word to gain the status of 'substance'. The word *trava*, when placed together with the word *zelena*, stops being regarded as "that which provides food" and becomes pure substance ready to take up any attribute (Potebnja 1976a: 159). Utterances of the kind "the water runs" or "gold is yellow" (*Ibid.*: 157) are the first steps to de-compose the unitary but fuzzy image, and to eventually achieve a concept. Potebnja also draws a distinction between the psychological and logical side of concepts (*Ibid.*: 166). From the logical perspective, which he equates with that of the content, a judgment is an *ensemble* of attributes: following Potebnja's example with the word grass, we can imagine that the sensuous image of grass is, with time, de-composed into a series of attributes (we can guess, wet, dry, burnt etc.), so that it acquires greater clarity and completion for the individual. The disappearance of the inner form, we learn from Potebnja's later writings, happens precisely because of this proliferation of attributes attached to the sensuous image, which causes an ever-growing disparity between the expanding concept and the single attribute originally expressed by the word (Potebnja 1976b: 365 and 1989b: 222). From a psychological perspective, which takes into account the psychological activity required of the individual, concepts are composed by a certain number of judgments, which means that they correspond not to a single act in the mind of the individual, but to an orderly succession of them (Potebnja 1976a: 165 and 1989b 219). This is, of course, a far cry from the initial mental abilities of the person, who at first could subsume a mental image only through a single attribute, and bears testimony to the great development that he or she has achieved thanks to language.

## 6. *Poetry, Prose*

As Belyj did not fail to remark, the word for Potebnja is an aesthetic phenomenon, and it is, by itself, poetic (Belyj 1910: 249). Potebnja himself is quite clear on this point when stating that mankind would have not known singing or poems if each word had not been poetic in the first place (Potebnja 1976a: 154). It is interesting to remark the closeness of Potebnja's position to that of many previous philosophers such as Herder, Hamann, Rousseau and even Vico, according to whom first words were poetic, and they somehow resemble singing, while later language becomes more prosaic (Trabant 1996a: 93). In the Russian context, Buslaev shared the same idea (Presnjakov 1978: 50).

As far as single words are concerned, Potebnja mentions one prerequisite for the aesthetic experience to be possible which resonates very well with our earlier remarks about

the origins of language. In fact, the poetic quality of a word is provided by its symbolism, that is, by the motivated unity of sound and content, provided by the presence of inner form (Potebnja 1976a: 177), as many critics, such as Lachmann (1982: 303) and Passarella (2007: 48) have noted. For Potebnja, one will never see the beauty of a word if:

[...] he does not see, why namely that combination of sounds [Potebnja is here referring to the Lithuanian word *baltas*, meaning white], and not another one, should signify goodness *et cetera*, and conversely, they do not see why that content should require precisely those sounds. If the link between the sound and the meaning is lost, then the sound ceases to be the external form of a word in the aesthetic sense (Potebnja 1976a: 176).

Potebnja's stance regarding symbolism<sup>26</sup> is probably one aspect of his theory in need of further study. Whereas he was critical of those arguing that single sounds (such as 'a' or 'u') can have meaning in isolation, and whilst he was weary of scholars hastily trying to establish a motivational link between sound and content (Potebnja 1976a: 117-118), as we have seen, there is no arbitrariness in his description of the word-formation, and the aesthetic experience of the word is marked by our perception of a necessary link between sound and content (*Ibid.*: 177).

In his later writings, Potebnja argues that, in more advanced stages, the primitive form of *poetičnost'*, dependent upon the inner form single words, is replaced by the ability to aesthetically perceive a series of more words, thus multiplying the possibility of poetic thinking (Potebnja 1976b: 370). Whereas poetry for Potebnja chronologically precedes prose, in his later writings he makes it clear that in every epoch (but for the most primitive linguistic stages) poetry and prose coexist and represent two different ways of thinking. Poetry is characterized by allegory in its broadest sense, that is, by the ability to interpret something as something else on the basis of some similarities, whilst prose is based on the attempt to establish laws which are able to describe a series of facts (*Ibid.*: 367). Potebnja also argues that the development of scientific (prosaic) thinking, however momentous, never causes the complete disappearance of poetry, as there are many ways for poetry to regenerate. For instance, Potebnja writes that new words with living inner forms are continuously being created, especially, as we have seen, through metaphors. Further, as already remarked by Rigotti (Rigotti 1972: 250), a dying inner form can be revived by the formation of symbols<sup>27</sup>, which is achieved when a word with a fading inner form is placed together with another word with the same (or similar) representation (like *deva krasnaja*) (Rigotti 1989a: 285-286). Hence the proliferation, in folklore, of stable epithets and quasi-tautological expressions.

Quite predictably, the aesthetic experience in the case of complex texts does not coincide with the sum of the inner forms of every single word present in them. This means

<sup>26</sup> This issue is also linked to the role of the outer form in the aesthetic perception. For a discussion of this, see Aumüller 2005: 115ff.

<sup>27</sup> The relationship between this conception of symbol and the aforementioned understanding of symbolism is to be studied further in-depth.

that something akin to the inner form can also be found in combinations of more words. The problem of the poetic *obraz* (as opposed to the sensuous *obraz*) cannot be dealt with here<sup>28</sup> for reasons of space, and because it falls outside the scope of the article. Let us just remind that the poetic *obraz* acts much in the same way as the inner form in holophrastic expressions, as it is a meaning-generating mechanism based on similarity, which allows for a single text to be used and interpreted in a variety of ways. Then, Potebnja's literary theory is both attentive to the *Rezeptionsästhetik*, as the poetic image is the starting point for many possible different interpretations (the image is elastic)<sup>29</sup>, dependent upon different individuals, and, at the same time, is textually bound, as the *obraz* must be embodied in the text (Fizer 1986: 38 and Aumüller 2005: 120) however difficult it might be to locate it (Aumüller 2005: 137). We see here the same tension between a creative and subjective use of language and an objective, textually bound element which should be equally accessible to all readers.

## 7. Conclusions

Our presentation of Potebnja's concept of inner form could hopefully serve two purposes. First, by attempting a reconstruction of Potebnja's views on the process of word-formation, we have highlighted a facet of his theory which, although often neglected, provides an explanation for Potebnja's insistence that the poetic quality of single words is linked to the motivated relationship between sound and content. Secondly, by exploring the various sides of the concept of inner form and the issues related to them, it is possible to isolate certain critical aspects of Potebnja's theory which are in need of further study. Vakulenko's articles regarding the ties of Potebnja's thought to lesser known authors and to philosophers outside the sphere of the German *Sprachphilosophie* have been quite fruitful, and his example, already prefigured by Presnjakov, should surely be followed. A study regarding Potebnja's conception of symbol, and of the way symbolism operates in language, possibly in the framework of an in-depth comparison with Veselovskij, could prove useful. On a broader level, the tension between the individual pole as opposed to the collective, and between freedom and necessity in language could probably be the topic of further research. Lastly, the study of Potebnja's debt toward the German *Sprachphilosophie* would surely benefit from the creation of a compared lexicon of psychological terms, given the terminological complexity of the field and the vagueness and breadth of some key terms.

<sup>28</sup> On this see Fizer 1986, Suchich 2001, and especially Aumüller 2005, the second part of whose book is especially dedicated to Potebnja's *Analogie*, i.e., to the transposition of the tripartite model of the word to the artistic object as a whole.

<sup>29</sup> The Russian term is *gibkost'* (see, for instance, Potebnja 1976a: 182).

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### Abstract

Lidia Tripiccone

*A.A. Potebnja's Inner Form. An Excursus Starting from the Origins of Language*

The aim of the present article is to offer an orderly exposition of the various definitions and functions that the concept of inner form plays in the theory of the Ukrainian linguist A.A. Potebnja. The article mainly deals with *Mysl' i jazyk*, however, other later and earlier publications by Potebnja are taken into consideration. Because the concept of *inner form* is so broad, three main spheres of interest have been defined in the analysis: word formation (i.e. Potebnja's conception of the origins of language), cognitive and linguistic development, and, finally, the prose / poetry dichotomy. The article concludes with some suggestions regarding possible areas of further study of Potebnja's theory.

### Keywords

A.A. Potebnja; Origins of Language; Inner Form.