

VELIMIR KHLEBNIKOV
1922–2022
One Hundred Years of a Myth

edited by
Luca Cortesi
Gabriella Elina Imposti

University of Bologna
Department of Modern Languages,
Literatures, and Cultures – LILEC

Bologna
2024

Velimir Khlebnikov 1922-2022. One Hundred Years of a Myth

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Велимир Хлебников 1922-2022. Сто лет мифа

под ред. Л. Кортези, Г.Э. Импости

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Front-cover: Stepan Botiev, *Zvezdnaya noch'*, courtesy of the author.

This volume is published online in Open Access

on the platform AMS ACTA by AlmaDL

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University of Bologna, Department of Modern Languages, Literatures, and Cultures – LILEC

ISBN 9788854971820

DOI [10.6092/unibo/amsacta/8072](https://doi.org/10.6092/unibo/amsacta/8072)



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Olga V. Sokolova

EXPERIMENTS WITH UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE FROM THE 1910s TO THE 1930s: Velimir Khlebnikov, the Gordin brothers, and the “Kosmoglot” Society

Abstract. This paper deals with the concepts of “universal language” common in linguistics and in the poetic Avant-garde in the period from the 1910s to the 1930s. During that period, socio-political reforms gave rise to new realia and concepts, which required an updated vocabulary. “Language construction” was important both for peoples with no written languages and for future international communication in the context of faith in world revolution. These factors underlie not only the renewal of language policies, but also the creation of universal languages by linguists and poets. Interlinguistics was developing during these years; within which the “Kosmoglot” society played an important role. Among the Avant-garde concepts, Khlebnikov’s “star-language” and the Gordin brothers’ “cosmic language of AO” are of particular importance. The Gordin brothers followed Khlebnikov but went further in their search for cognitive and linguo-social changes. This paper compares these linguistic and poetic universal languages and concludes that the orientation towards linguistic experiment in the period in question was paramount for scholars and poets alike.

Keywords. universal language, interlinguistics, linguistic creativity, poetic Avant-garde.

Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются концепции «универсального языка», распространенные в лингвистике и поэтическом авангарде в 1910-30-х гг. В этот период социально-политические реформы породили новые реалии и понятия, что требовало обновления словарного состава. «Языковое строительство» имело значение как для безалфавитных народов, так и для будущей интернациональной коммуникации в контексте веры в мировую революцию. Эти причины легли в основу не только обновления языковой политики, но и проектирования мировых языков лингвистами и поэтами. В эти годы получает развитие интерлингвистика, в рамках которой большую роль играет общество «Космоглот». Среди авангардистских концепций особое значение имеют «звездный» язык Хлебникова и «космический язык АО» братьев Гординых, которые развивали традицию Хлебникова, но пошли дальше в своей интенции на когнитивные и лингвосоциальные изменения. В статье сопоставляются научные и поэтические универсальные языки, и делается вывод об общности установки на лингвистический эксперимент в 1910-30-е гг.

Ключевые слова. универсальный язык, интерлингвистика, языковое творчество, поэтический авангард.

1. Introduction. Trends towards linguistic “universalization”.¹

The desire to overcome the Babylonian “confusion” of tongues and revive the “lingua humana”, the first language of mankind, has stimulated the development of projects for a “universal” language throughout the ages. This concept underlies the theory of “language construction”, which arose in the age of the Enlightenment, thanks to the efforts of Marin Mersenne, René Descartes, Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz and others.

At the end of the 19th century, economic globalization gave rise to the need for international communication, marked by transition from the theoretical construction of artificial languages to their practical use. Starting with such artificial languages as Volapük (1879) and Esperanto (1887), international languages acquired the social character of interethnic communication. Interlinguistics arose as a field of linguistics aimed at building an optimal artificial international language.

2. The search for a universal language in the poetic Avant-garde: Khlebnikov’s “star-language” and the Gordin brothers’ “cosmic” language.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Modernist and Avant-garde poets participated in the creation of universal languages. The Avant-gardists sought, on the one hand, to carry out a “revolution of language”, to “cleanse” it of the usual form and conventional meaning², and on the other hand, to create a new “universal” artistic language. The origins of these ideas can be traced to the poetic concept of “apophatic” language by Hugo von Hofmannsthal (*The*

¹ This research is funded by grant № 19-18-00040 of the Russian Science Foundation and is carried out at the Institute of Linguistics of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

² For details about “the revolution of language” and “the language of revolution”, see Feshchenko (2023).

Letter of Lord Chandos, 1902), Stefan George’s “lingua romana”, August Stramm’s language experiments, Fernando Pessoa’s “language of the future”, Khlebnikov’s “star-language”, the Gordin brothers’ “cosmic” language, Alexander Svyatogor’s “volcano-language,” Eugene Jolas’s “transatlantic language”, and others.

Khlebnikov’s “star-language” is one of the most developed projects of a poetic universal language. Researchers have repeatedly addressed various aspects of Khlebnikov’s project and emphasized its significance ([Solivetti 1988](#); [Lennkvist 1999](#); [Pertsova 2000](#); [Ivanov 2000](#); [Grigor’ev 2006](#); [Moretti 2013](#)). It should be noted that Khlebnikov’s “star-language”³ was part of a universal language project and was only one of the languages he created, some others being the “numerical” language, “zvukopis” [sound-painting], the “language of birds”, the “language of gods”, and “zaum” [transrational language].⁴

Khlebnikov’s project of a universal language developed chronologically throughout the entire corpus of the poet: from the early 1910s to the early 1920s. We find the first examples in the manuscripts *Znachkovyi yazyk* [*Sign Language*] published by Natalia N. Pertsova, which date back approximately to 1904–1908 (Pertsova 2000: 372–382). A burst in word creation occurred in 1907–09, when the poet was working on the dictionary of a new language. In his essay *Vremia - mera mira* [Time is the Measure of the World] (1916), he wrote about the imperfection of natural languages and reflected on Leibniz’s universal language. However, the name “star-language”, as well as dictionaries and alphabets of universal language appeared between the late 1910 and the early 1920s.

Pertsova proposed the following dual understanding of the label “star-language”:

³ This translation of Khlebnikov’s term “zvezdnyi yazyk” was offered by Paul Schmidt in ([CW I](#): 342, 343).

⁴ For more details see Imposti ([1981](#), [1991](#)); Janecek ([1996](#)); Gurianova ([2015](#)).

1) as a language that is vaguely understood by a person; as the opposition of the «pure essence» of the word, that hides «starlight intelligence of nighttime», and the «everyday dross» of the word, that hides «sunlight intelligence of day» (*Nasha osnova* [Our Fundamentals], 1919)⁵;

2) as a language «common to the whole star inhabited by humans»⁶ (*Tsarapina po nebu* [A scratch across the sky], 1920) ([Pertsova 2000](#): 361–362). Viktor P. Grigor'ev emphasized the internal diversity of Khlebnikov's "star-language": the language is «both artificial, anticipating modern science-fiction literature, and poetic; it has a whole range of functions, but has primarily a poetic, rather than pragmatic, significance» ([Grigor'ev 2006](#): 222).

The first main feature of Khlebnikov's "star-language" is the non-arbitrariness of the connection between signifier and signified, where the sound of the word takes precedence. This approach intersected with the theory of the "internal form" of the word by Russian linguist Alexander A. Potebnya and philosopher Gustav G. Shpet. The second feature is the possibility of "calculating" values, combining them, since «each name is only an approximate measurement, a comparison of several values, and some kind of equal signs» ([SS VI.1](#): 108). The poet himself emphasized the continuity with Leibniz's theory, citing the philosopher's exclamation: «The time will come when people, instead of arguing, will calculate (exclaim: *calculemus*)» ([SS VI.1](#): 108). The third characteristic of Khlebnikov's conception is a revival of the Proto-Slavic language layers: the poet selected common Slavic roots to establish new connections with modern Slavic languages.

Projects of his alphabets and dictionaries were based on the semantization of consonants and their selection as significant units of language. *Tsarapina po nebu* and *Zangezi* provide "star-language"

⁵ Translated quotations from this passage are taken from [CW I](#): 377.

⁶ The English translation hereafter is my own, unless otherwise stated.

dictionaries (1920-22), verbal elements, mathematical symbols, and geometric signs:

V means the revolution of one point around another (circular motion).

L is the cessation of fall, or motion generally by a plane lateral to a falling point.

R is a point that penetrates a transverse area ([CW](#) I: 344)

Following Khlebnikov's experiments, Alexander Tufanov, who called himself "Predzemshara Zaumi", created his universal "zaumnyi" [transrational] language in 1924. In his project of "phonic music" as a new language he singled out the phoneme as the main unit, or "sound gesture". Tufanov paid attention to the processes of archaization and neologization, as well as to the combination of historical linguistic phenomena and language experiment. Tufanov's programmatic poem "Spring", written in "a language understandable to all peoples", consists of "fragments" of English words and is recorded in transcription:

siin' soon	s'ii selle	soong s'e
siing s'eelf	siik signal'	s'eel' s'in'

([Tufanov 1924](#): 12).

The poets of the “Group 41” proposed other concepts of universal languages. Ilia Zdanevich formulated the idea of the «pearl disease of the language», which can be cured only through the return of the language to its “pre-linguistic” state. Igor Terentyev put forward the idea of combining the poetic Avant-garde and the revolution on a global scale. This relied on the international “transrational” language as a mode of expression of non-objectivity and the new social order. His project of translating Marx into the “transrational” language became an expression of these revolutionary ideas (from Terentyev’s letter to Kruchenykh, December 23, 1923, see [Marzaduri 1988](#)).

In what follows, I will scrutinize another, lesser-known project of a universal poetic language: the Gordin brothers’ “cosmic” language.⁷ Its origins are to be found in Khlebnikov’s linguistic and poetic conception discussed above. The brothers called their project “AO language”, “cosmic”, “logical”, or “pan-methodological” language.⁸ The combination of letters “AO” meant “invention” in this language ([Gordiny 1924](#): 5). Using this name, they emphasized its creative nature, close to the Humboldtian understanding of language as “energeia”.⁹ The Gordin brothers created the first two versions of this language in 1919 and 1924 and in 1927 they presented it at the First International Exhibition of Interplanetary Machines and Mechanisms (dedicated to the 10th anniversary of the Russian Revolution and the 70th anniversary of the birth of Tsiolkovsky) in Moscow, where they also gave it a new name – the “cosmic” language.

⁷ “The Gordin Brothers” is the pseudonym of Abba (Abe) Leibovich Gordin (1887–1964) and Zev-Volf Leibovich Gordin (1884 or 1885 – not earlier than 1931). They were born into the family of a rabbi, received a religious education and mastered many languages (for a detailed biography, see [Geller 2019](#)).

⁸ For more details about the history of “cosmic” language creation, see Kuznetsov ([2014](#)); Kuchinov ([2019](#)).

⁹ Cf. Humboldt’s understanding of language as both “ergon” and “energeia”.

The Gordin brothers' political program is significant in order to understand the nature of their "cosmic" language. They were against the politics of violence and the culture of patriarchy. They aimed to create a new language as a means for interplanetary communication and sought to unite humanity under the sign of "pan-anarchism",¹⁰ which «means the synthesis (combination) of all the main social ideals, acts (actions) and aspirations for both a complete revolution and the *whole* society restructuring» ([Gordiny 2019](#): 241).

The Gordin brothers' idea of language became a part of their more general program to renew and transform humanity. At the same time, socio-anthropological renewal involved innovations in vocabulary and grammar. One of the most important concepts is "invention". In the imprint of the book *Izobret-pitanie (Kak vykhod iz vsekh sovrem. tupikov-razrukh i kak put' k bessmertiyu): Opyt popul. ocherka zhizneizobretatel'stva* [*Invent-Nutrition (As a Way out of all modern Deadlocks-Devastation and as a Path to Immortality)*] ([Behobi 1921](#)), they wrote the title of a self-invented city: «Aograd» and dated the beginning of a new count of time: «Year 2 of the Invention of Mankind» (1921). They also put forward the artistic and political slogan «Inventors of the whole globe, invent!» on the title page of the book. The Brothers created a whole paradigm of words with the root "isobret" [invent] in the field of linguistic terminology, since language is the tool through which it is possible to restructure reality. During this period, they changed the name of their residence from "Sociotechnicum" to "Vseizobretal'nya" [All-invent-room]: this housed the dining room and the club of AOists (Fig. 1):

¹⁰ For details about the Brothers' philosophical path, from their passion for Max Stirner's philosophy to the creation of a whole conception within their anarchist theory – pan-anarchism, see Gerasimov, Tkachenko ([2021](#)).



Fig. 1. “Vseizobretal’nya” by the Gordin brothers (1920–1926)

They introduced the concept of the «Humanity of All-Inventors» (Vseizobretately) and described their language in the *Grammar of the Pan-methodological Language of AO* (1924). In this book, the authors equated the grammatical system with the classification of the world in the section «THE FIRST or GRAMMATICAL CLASSIFICATION OF THE WORLD», where they gave the following definitions of parts of speech:

1. X% X20 azatso – invention or a verb.
2. +% X20 esatso – naizobretenie [oninvention] or adverb.
3. 0%X20 ozatso – poizobretennoe [overinvented] (or effected) or noun ([Gordiny 1924](#): 6).

Among all parts of speech, the Brothers identified the verb as the main bearer of the invention function and they created the largest number of linguistic terms related to the verb: *samoizobretatel'nyi izobret* [self-inventive invent] or *samoizobretatel'nyi glagol* [self-inventive verb] √12H; *vzaimoizobretatel'noe izobretenie* [mutually-inventive invention] or *vzaimoizobretatel'nyi glagol* [mutually-inventive verb] √121X; *izobret-priizobretatel'noe* [invent-inventive] or *glagol-prilagatel'noe* [verb-adjective] H√%X20, and so on.

3. Interlinguistics in Soviet Russia in the 1920s–1930s.

To realize the specifics of the Avant-garde poetic experiment with universal languages, it is necessary to turn to the broader context of the 1920s in Russia. Revolutionary reforms and socio-cultural shifts gave rise to new realities and required a renewal of language policy, which also influenced the experiments of Russian Avant-gardists discussed above. In the 1920s, there were issues preventing international communication within the newly created USSR, such as the inadequate development of many languages and the absence of written forms of languages. To cope with these problems, established linguists like Evgeny V. Polivanov, Nikolay F. Yakovlev, and others, participated in the creating of the so-called “language construction” program, which was a range of linguistic activities grounded in the idea of social equality. The concept of equality between different nations manifested itself in the fact that the first alphabets for non-alphabetic languages of Soviet Russia were based on the Latin alphabet. Moreover, part of the project for the transition to the Latin alphabet was also a change in the graphics of the Russian language ([Alpatov 2017](#): 325). The prospect of such a change was

associated with the idea of international communication, necessary to prepare for “world revolution”.

Both linguists and Avant-garde poets realized the need to update the language system. The linguist Polivanov, who was close to Russian Futurists and was one of the founders of OPOYAZ,¹¹ declared: «The mass demand for a new word-creation not only increased the production of new words according to the old word-formation rules, but also created a new revolutionary method of word-creation» ([Polivanov 2003](#): 78).

In the study and creation of universal languages in post-revolutionary Russia these are the main scientific trends: the development of interlinguistics, which led to research and regulation of international artificial languages such as Esperanto, Ido, Interlingua, Novial (in works by Jan A. Baudouin de Courtenay, Nikolay V. Yushmanov, Petro E. Stoyan, and Ernest K. Drezen)¹²; the orientation towards the prospect of creating the language of world revolution, the first approaches to which were Latin-based alphabets (Polivanov); and the recognition of the “international” status of the English language (Boris Arvatov and others).

Representatives of interlinguistics in Russia were the Petrograd organizations “Volapük Speakers Circle” (founded in 1889), “Espero” (founded in 1892), the “Petrograd branch of the Russian World Linguistic Union” (founded in 1923), and “Kosmoglot” (1916–1921), which was located in Tallinn from 1921–1928 under the name “Kosmoglott”¹³, whose honorary president was Baudouin de Courtenay and which included not only linguists, but also representatives of other fields of science.

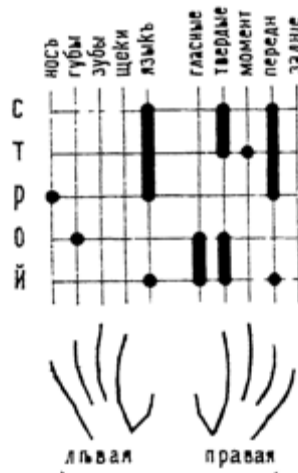
¹¹ Obshchestvo izucheniya poeticheskogo yazyka [Society for the Study of Poetic Language] (St. Petersburg, 1916–early 1930s).

¹² The study of world languages was financed by the state. In 1919, the People's Commissariat of Education created a commission on the problem of international language, which consisted of professors from Moscow University.

¹³ For more information about the history and activities of Kosmoglot, see Kuznetsov ([2016](#)).

Let us take a closer look at the project of Estonian linguist Jacob Lintsbakh, who created a “philosophical language”. Criticizing Esperanto and Volapük for imitating the phonetic system of natural languages, Lintsbakh argued that universal language should focus on the graphic system, namely, the principle of pasigraphy ([Lintsbakh 1916](#)). Although Lintsbakh set out to create an “ideal” language, he achieved significant results not so much in the field of international communication, but in the field of semiotics. He created a universal semiotic system based on the transfer of concepts using different media channels. According to Lintsbakh, geometric drawings, algebraic formulae, musical melodies, ornaments, and decorations can take on the function of various information carriers ([Lintsbakh 1916](#): ix). He created a universal multimodal set of semiotic resources, highlighting the geometric foundations of language as a set of “short expressive schemes” ([Lintsbakh 1916](#): 67) capable of constructing a communicative event, including the field of artistic (primarily cinematic) discourse.

One of the ways to combine different semiotic resources was «multi-finger writing», which could be used for shorthand on special typewriters in which keys correspond not to letters, but to various organs and sounds of speech, to the degree of elevation of the the tongue and other principles of articulation (Fig. 2.1, 2.2):



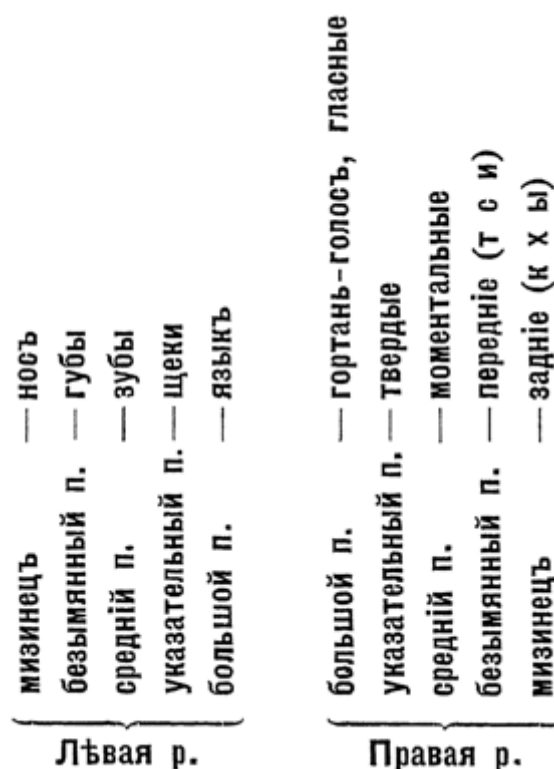


Fig. 2.1, 2.2. “Multi-fingered writing” ([Lintsbakh 1916](#): 28)

The scholar sought to reduce different forms of expression to binary oppositions. Based on a limited number of mathematical signs, colors on the palette and articulate sounds, Lintsbakh concluded that «wholesome comprehension» consists of a limited number of elements in art and science, mathematics and language, space and time. At the same time, the basis of logical, automatic thinking is the minimum number of elements, expressed as a binary opposition ([Lintsbakh 1916](#): 153-154). He designated them as «signs of the 2nd numeral», which can be perceived in different semiotic ways and whose visual expression can occur with the help of zeros and ones, white and black circles. He reduced the range of human movements to two elementary gestures (raised and lowered hand) and limited the system of articulate sounds to two elements: *a* and *o*,

which correspond to signs “one” and “zero”, and the numbers of the natural series (Fig. 3):

0	0	o
1	1	a
2	10	ao
3	11	aa
4	100	aoo
5	101	aoa
6	110	aa0
7	111	aaa
8	1000	aooo
9	1001	aooa
10	1010	aoao
11	1011	aoaa
12	1100	aaoo
13	1101	aa0a
14	1110	aaa0
15	1111	aaaa
16	10000	aoooo
17	10001	aoooa

Fig. 3. “The technique of sign representation. The system of articulate speech”
([Lintsbakh 1916](#): 155).

It should be emphasized that the Gordin brothers’ “cosmic language of AO” also relied on the allocation of two basic sounds, namely, *a* and *o*, which indicates the relationship between linguistic and artistic experimental projects in that period.

Julia Kristeva stated that Lintsbakh not only foresaw the formation of semiotics on the basis of linguistics, but also proposed the idea of isomorphism of “semiotic practices with other ways of organizing our world” ([Kristeva 1971](#): 39). Yuri Tsivian interpreted Lintsbakh’s general theory of the symbol as the first concept of multimodality, since in his approach he developed not only the

mechanism of information encoding, but also the mechanism of transcoding (Tsivian 1998). Susanne Strätling highlighted the interdiscursive nature of Lintsbakh’s universal language, characterizing it more as a “language of art” than as a planned language of international communication (Strätling 2021).

Later, in his book *Transcendental Algebra*, Lintsbakh developed a “mathematical ideography”: “ i_1 – I, i_2 – you, i_3 – he”, an example of which is shown in Fig. 4:

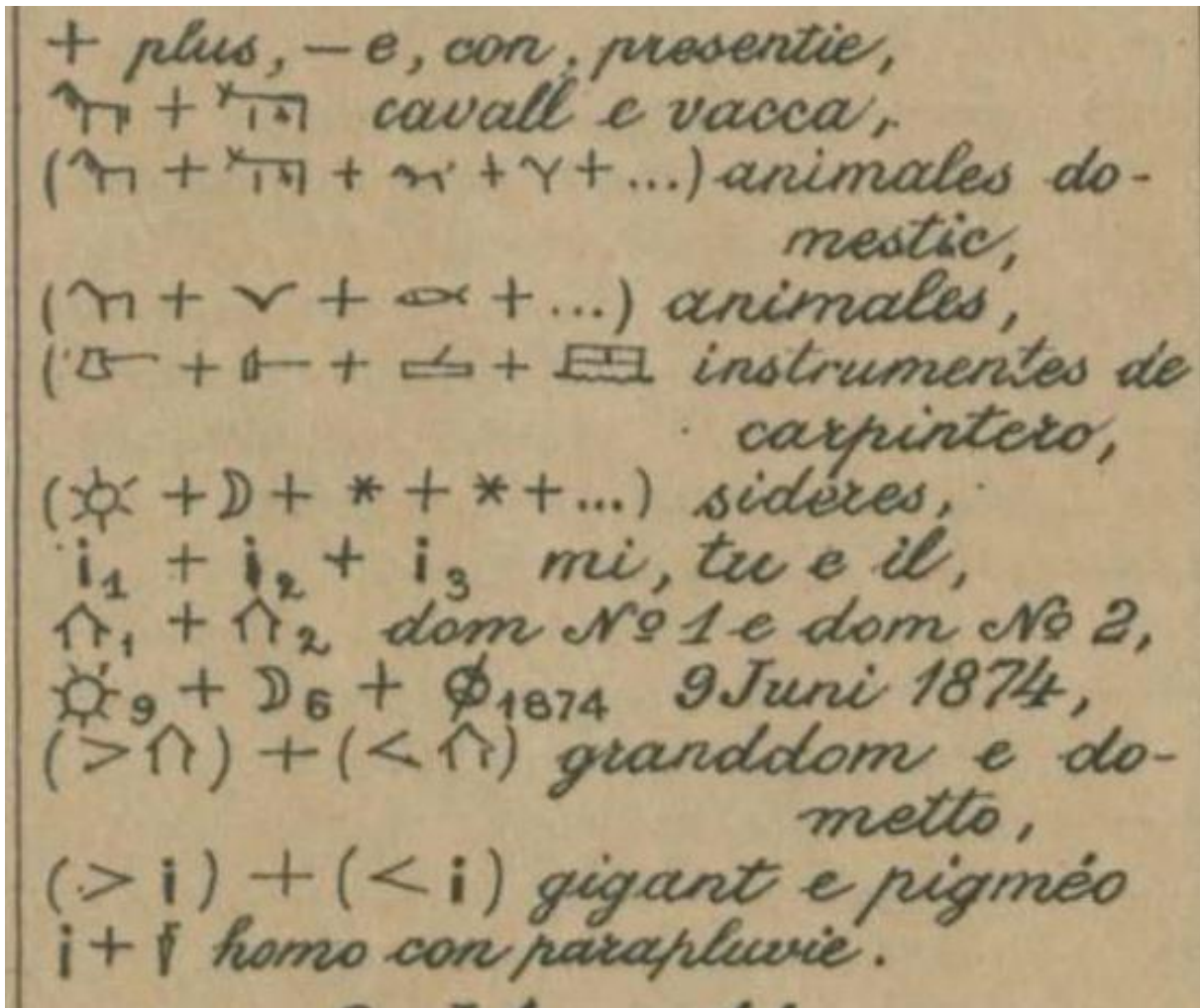


Fig. 4. “Mathematical ideography” (Lintsbakh 1921: 3).

Lintsbakh's conception caused a stimulating discussion among his contemporaries. Ideas related to the universal cinematic language received a particularly lively response in connection with the publication of a fragment of a book entitled "Cinematography as Language" in the journal *Mir ekrana* [The World of the Screen] (1918). As Tsivian argued, this interpretation was greatly appreciated by Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein, each of whom tried in his own way to use as a "visual Esperanto" ([Tsivian 1998](#)). In addition, Lintsbakh's ideas resonated with Khlebnikov's "star-language", Miturich's "star-alphabet" and Vsevolod Meyerhold's biomechanics, as well as the algebraic calculations underlying the Gordin brothers' "numerical" "cosmic" language.

The projects of other linguists close to the "Kosmoglot" focused on creating a simplified model of communication, among which were Waldemar Rosenberger's "Idiom-neutral," Nikolay V. Yushmanov's "Etem," V.K. Petrashevich's "Nepo" and "Glot", and V.F. Shmurlo's "language of Ariadne" ("Esperido" or "Ariadna lingvo", Ariing). Many of the listed languages aimed to improve existing international languages, like Esperanto and Ido. They also focused on the unification of European languages and cultures. Thus, Yushmanov claimed that an ideal "mezhduyazyk" [interlanguage] or "mezhduevropeysky dialect" [Inter-European dialect] was a synthetic form of the Germanic, Romance and Slavic languages ([Yushmanov 1927](#): 3).

The creation of the "Inter-European language" intersected not so much with the ideas of Russian and early Soviet Avant-garde artists, as with the conceptions of the Anglo-American Avant-garde. Eugene Jolas (1894-1952), a multilingual poet, editor, translator, and friend of James Joyce, developed the concept of a Euro-American, "crucible" language, trying to carry out the project of an

international literary Avant-garde language on the pages of his “transition” magazine.¹⁴

The linguist Ernest Drezen (1892-1937) made a significant contribution to the typology of international languages. In his monograph *Search for a universal language (Three centuries of searching)* (1928), the scholar reviewed almost all theories of universal language that existed at that time (a total of 373 projects), including the language experiments of Russian poets. Under the heading “Futurism of Language” he considered the “Salvador” language by the Salvadoran poet and playwright Francisco Gavidia (1864-1955), the “Numeric Language of AO” by the Gordin brothers, and the “star-language” by Khlebnikov. Drezen rejected the ideas of the Gordin brothers because of their pan-anarchic principles, yet he treated Khlebnikov’s “star-language” more sympathetically, highlighting its phonetic foundations and the principle of non-arbitrariness as advantages.

Characterizing a wider circle of scholars who were not members of “Kosmoglot” society, it can be mentioned that Polivanov, on the one hand, recognized the importance of Esperanto ([Polivanov 2003](#): 55), and on the other hand, saw great perspectives in creating a language of world communication: he considered the construction of Latin-based alphabets as the first step to this objective. He called such an alphabet an “international phonetic alphabet,” describing its choice (for example, by the Yakuts) as “a bold step into the future, towards the Latin, i.e. to the most international writing” ([Polivanov 2003](#): 85-86).

¹⁴ For more details, see Sokolova, Feshchenko ([2017](#)).

4. Conclusions.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Russia was fertile ground for language experiments in linguistics and the poetic Avant-garde. This was due to many reasons: socio-political changes, the recognition of equal rights for all languages in terms of “language construction”, and the expectation of a world revolution. The state realized the need for international communication and supported associations for the study of international languages; linguists, as well as avant-garde poets, were constructing universal languages. Although these projects were not fully implemented, they influenced the development of such disciplines as semiotics, machine translation, sociolinguistics, terminology, and cognitive linguistics.

The “Avant-garde” projects of a universal language deserve special attention. As early as the 1910s, Khlebnikov created his “star-language”, which influenced many poetic universal languages of the 1920s: those of Tufanov, Zdanevich, Miturich and the Gordin brothers. The fundamental difference between “poetic” languages, such as Khlebnikov’s or that of the Gordin brothers, and constructed international languages, like Esperanto and Volapük, is that the native speaker does not receive a ready-made “petrified” product, but a dynamic system that is in constant development. Poetic universal languages are not just a tool for conveying information, but they are “ars inveniendi”, that is “the art of invention”, mechanisms for discovering new concepts and relationships between units. Among the most interesting linguistic projects was Lintsbakh’s “philosophical” language, which was not only a tool of communication, but also a universal semiotic multimodal system for information transcoding.

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