

Ouvrier / Worker (nr. 250)

Commentary by Jan Stroop

The answers to question 250 of the first questionnaires of the ALE (... celui qui travaille avec ses mains dans une usine afin de gagner sa vie; 'one who works with his hands in a factory to earn his bread and butter') confronted the editor with particular problems of two kinds. The first kind concerned the emotional values connected with the notion as described in the question, the notion which, for practical reasons, I shall name *worker* from now on. The second kind of problem arose from the fact that the relatively recent notion of *factory-worker*, as meant in the question, does not always have a name of its own. In most cases the old known word for 'worker' underwent a semantic expansion in such a way that it could mean all kinds of workers, including the factory-worker. Probably there is no subject in the first ALE questionnaire concerning which the social aspects are so essential as they are with 'the worker'. To a great extent, it is possible to speak in objective terms about the sun and the moon, about the cow and the pig, and about the finger and the nose, but the mere use of the name of the worker always implies a social judgment, too. Besides, the notion 'worker' as we know it is the result of a long development. A 'worker' used to be someone who did manual work, and was therefore highly respected, but nowadays a 'worker' commands little respect. Usually he is an unskilled man, and therefore regarded as inferior, although in most cases he still does manual work.

Attitudes about work are often expressed in the word for 'worker'. The Dutch heteronyms *werkmens* and *werkman* express not only the fact that a person is a worker, but also (and this comes out strongly) that he has to work. These heteronyms express the idea that there will always be little social respect in a society that places intellectual achievement above the achievement of the artisan, though there has been a revaluation of the notion 'worker' perceptible every-where, due to the rise of the trade union movement. Through the rise of the trade unions the position of the worker has improved, which has also resulted in changing views as regards the worker. No longer is the worker considered to be inferior. Sociologically speaking, however, there is a difference in importance in the various parts of Europe. The ALE questionnaire was inadequate in so far as the different and differentiated social functions of the 'worker' were not brought to light. Here the fault lies clearly in the way in which the question was put. This is to be regretted, but not to be redressed. It should be noted that the editor of the map THE WORKER is conscious of the simplification of the reality he had to give, and that, in this case, it is not a linguistic matter but a social one. If from time to time remarks on emotional value and usage are made, they are based more on intuition of the notion 'worker' in former days. Some old names for 'worker' express hard and unpleasant work and an unattractive life in those days, for example Greek *duleftis*, a derivation of the verb *douleuo*, which means 'to be a slave'. But also the German word *arbeiten* is always associated with unpleasant and hard work, and, of course, the same goes for the derivations of this verb. Latvian and Lithuanian *darbenieks* and variants originally mean 'pedrail', which literally means "a device for facilitating progress of heavy vehicles over rough ground by attachment of broad foot-like supporting surfaces to the wheel-rims".

The semantic problems with which the editor of this map had to cope are a result of the fact that the question in their questionnaire asked for the most resent kind of worker in a factory. Factory-workers have existed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but people who work with their hands have existed as long as mankind. There are only a few areas where a special name for factory-

worker has come into existence. A good example is Finnish *työläinen*, a neologism from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as old as industry in Finland.

In Bulgarian, the common Slavonic *robotnik* appears to be a relatively recent name, which owes its spread to the industrialization of the country. Earlier, the word *robotnik* was not the name of a trade or social class, but it simply meant 'active, diligent person', at least in Bulgarian. I cannot say if the same has happened in other areas where derivations of *rabotja* are used. In several countries, the common word for 'worker' has been specified, but only because the question in the questionnaire specifically asked for a worker in a factory. So probably the names given have been used specially for this occasion, to emphasize that a factory –worker was concerned. I shall give a few examples: German *Fabriks-arbeiter* as against *Arbeiter*, Portuguese *empregado da fábrical* and *trabalhador da fábrica* as against *empregado* and *trabelhador*, Hungarian *gyári munkás* as against *munkás*, Mordvin *zavodin u ás* against *u ás*.

In Denmark, there is a difference between a factory-worker, who is called *arbejder*, and a man who does not have either a house or a farm of his own. The name of such a man is *arbejmand* or *daglejer*.

So in most languages no special word seems to exist for a person who works in a factory. In Dutch, for example, both a 'factory-worker' and a 'worker (not in a factory)' are called *arbeider*, but because this word was already known in the Middle Ages, one must conclude that the old word has undergone an extension in its meaning.

In some conditions, for example in the names of trade unions, *arbeider* means only 'factory-worker'. The same applies to *werkmens* and *werkman*, which are common in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. But a development of that kind has taken place in every community in which the number of factory-workers has exceeded the number of workers of another kind. Today there are already areas and countries in which agricultural labourers no longer exist. Of course, such a development has consequences for the meaning of the word: 'worker' has become identical with 'factory-worker'. It is possible to present these developments in phases:

Phase 1: NOUN 'agricultural labourer'

Phase 2: NOUN 'agricultural labourer' + 'factory-worker'

Phase 3: NOUN 'factory-worker'

This development in three phases is especially found in areas which have had a class-society, as in the Caucasus and near the Urals. There, the notion 'worker' has been unknown until modern times. In the first place, the names of the 'worker' in the languages in those areas only mean 'factory-worker', in the second place, we see a great number of borrowings from Russian *robotnik* and *rabocij*, always as 'factory-worker'.

The most striking thing which the map 'worker' shows us is that the names for 'worker' for the most coincide with the boundaries of the languages. A few examples: in France, the worker is called *ouvrier*, in Spain *obrero*, in Germany *Arbeiter*. The French-speaking area of Switzerland says *ouvrier*, the German-speaking area says *Arbeiter*. Throughout Hungary *munkás* is the word, except in a few German-speaking places, where it is *Arbeiter*. Latvian has *stradnieks*, Lithuanian *darbininkas*. The Dutch language-territory and the Rumanian one are the only language-territories with spatially determined heteronyms.

No doubt this uniformity is connected with the fact that in the whole territory of the ALE the notion 'worker' was formed relatively late. The fact that the name for 'worker' is not an original substantive anywhere, but a derivation from a verb or a substantive in all languages, points in that direction. The latest type of derivation only occurs in the Romance languages, in the Caucasian languages, in the Finnic and Turkic languages, and in a few languages near the Urals. Because most of the derivations have developed from the common word for "to work", the map shows, at the same time, the spreading of the verbs, most of which are original to the languages. There are only a few cases of borrowing to be mentioned. The Hungarian *munkás* 'worker' is formed from the Slavonic substantive *munka* 'work'. Two other Slavonic words, *rabotnik* and *rabocij* have spread outside the boundaries of the Slavonic language-territory. On the Indo-Germanic level, German *arbeiten* and Slavonic *rabotja* are related, because both are descended from the Indo/Germanic stem <sup>X</sup>*orebh-*: <sup>X</sup>*erebh-*.

Something like that is the case with English *to work* and Dutch *werken* on the one hand, and Greek *ergazomai* on the other. Here we must think of the Indo-Germanic stem <sup>X</sup>*wergô-* or <sup>X</sup>*worgô-*. In conclusion it should be pointed out that there are two small groups of heteronyms without the element 'work'. The first group is formed by Spanish *jornalero*, Greek *nerokamatjaris* and the double-forms Danish *daglejer* and German *Tagelöhner*, all in the literal meaning 'day-labourer'. The second group is that of names like German *Fabrikler*, Russian *fabrikn'ik* and Polish *fabrykant*. These are derivations of the substantive *fabric*. It is interesting to note that in other countries, for instance in the Netherlands, such derivations have the meaning of 'manufacturer, owner of the factory'.