kultura

OCTOBER 10/2006

Language and Social Change: New Tendencies in the Russian Language

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kultura. Russian cultural review is published under the supervision of
Professor Wolfgang Eichwede,
director of the Research Centre for East European Studies at Bremen University.
Editorial board: Hartmute Trepper M.A., Dr. Isabelle de Keghel (until June 2006), Guest Editors
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The Russian Language between (Un)Political Violence and Virtual Freedom

editorial

This issue of *kultura* was ready for publication when, on Saturday, 7 October, news broke of the murder of the well-known Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya. Most Russian media assumed it was a contract killing, and noted that the murder had taken place on President Putin's birthday. Politkovskaya had targeted Putin in her critical articles ever since he came to power. At first glance, this tragedy has nothing do with either culture or the Russian language. Nevertheless, readers of this edition will notice that the way certain people speak is more relevant to Russia's political culture than may at first be suspected.

This is true, above all, of the speech behaviour of Vladimir Putin, the protagonist of Russian politics. The French linguist Rémi Camus builds his enquiry into the main features of early 21st century Russian political language around a micro-analysis of a single remark by Vladimir Putin. In 1999, at a press conference shortly before the outbreak of the second Chechen war, the then prime minister uttered a sentence which has since become his linguistic business card and, more generally, a cultural symbol of his first seven years in power.

However, any analysis of language and politics must look beyond official rhetoric and politicians' verbiage. The philosopher Alexei Penzin writes about the language of the new Russian Left, made up of young people who were children or teenagers when the USSR collapsed. The neo-Marxist philosophers, artists and sociologists who have come together in the *What is to be done?* group are faced with a massive rejection of all things 'left' by a majority of their post-Soviet compatriots. Penzin reflects on whether young Russian intellectuals can ever hope to develop a language of their own out of the vocabulary of the Western mainstream liberal left born of the ruins of the Second World War.

In the second analysis of this issue, five Russian poets who maintain weblogs reflect upon the ways in which that medium affects poetic language. By publishing their texts in blogs, they enter a unique dialogue with their readers, who effectively become co-authors. The poets are well aware of the threat this new relationship poses to their poetic self. The role of the muse is now played by their online 'friends'. These readers are both like a many-headed hydra insatiably hungering for new texts, and like a siren who treacherously holds out the promise of linguistic variety, but often ultimately offers nothing but linguistic degeneration.

The final article deals with the predicament of the Russian language outside Russia's present-day borders: in Ukraine, the cradle of medieval Rus. Kyiv-based philologist and journalist Mariya Kopylenko discusses the paradoxes of Russian-Ukrainian bilingualism. Her essay centres on the phenomenon of 'semi-lingualism'. She sees this as a threat to Ukrainian society and its cultural self-awareness, which is lagging far behind its new-found political sovereignty.

About the guest editor:

Gasan Gusejnov (born in 1953) is a philologist, historian of culture and essayist. He is currently participating in a research project on the history of *samizdat* at Bremen University's East European Centre. He has a research interest in political language and history of ideas.

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'We'll Whack Them, Even in the Outhouse': on a Phrase by V.V. Putin

Rémi Camus

In 1999, Vladimir Putin threatened that Chechens who raided neighbouring territories would be 'whacked in the outhouse'. Through numerous repetitions and reformulations, this previously unknown expression has acquired an extraordinary density of meaning in addition to the blood-chilling threat it originally carried. This article intends to show, briefly, how words may shape historical events and their perceptions.

The usual periodisation, which divides recent Russian history into a Yeltsin decade and the seven-year spell of Putin's reign, is of little use to the linguist. There are no grounds for thinking that transformations in the Russian language follow political events. Gone are the days when language was seen as a regal prerogative. Yet do we not all sometimes naïvely consider language to be a simple mirror of reality? I would like to argue, on the contrary, that texts have easily verifiable features of which, for example, Vladimir Putin may in a way be said to be a product – with all due respect, of course.

What did he really say?

By way of example, I have chosen a sentence which (then) Prime Minister Vladimir Putin was famously reported to have said at a press conference in Astana (Kazakhstan) on 24 September 1999 in justification of the Russian army's air attacks on positions inside Chechnya. Here is one version of that sentence:

"I am tired of answering these questions. Russian aircraft are only attacking terrorist strongholds. We will pursue them everywhere. Excuse my saying so, if we catch them in the toilet, we'll whack them in the outhouse." (*Yesli, pardon, v tualete ikh poymayem, i v sortire zamochim*)[1]

This statement, which places its author in the tradition of De Gaulle, Khrushchev and others who famously liked the odd profanity, has been little commented yet frequently repeated. Good dictionaries immediately recorded several formulations. It has become a popular phrase, often modified for ironic use. Finally, in many instances it is used in quotation marks, suggesting faithfulness to a supposed original source, yet these quotes rarely use the same wording. Numerous examples may be found on the Internet (I am omitting the quotation marks):

And if we catch them in the toilet, well then we'll whack them in the outhouse. *(A yesli v tualete poymayem, my ikh i v sortire zamochim…)*
Excuse my saying so, if we catch them in the toilet, we'll whack them in the outhouse. *(Yesli, pardon, v tualete ikh poymayem, i v sortire zamochim…)*
Pardon my language, if we catch them in the toilet, well, then we'll whack them in the outhouse. *(Vy menya izvinite, v tualete poymayem – my ikh i v sortire zamochim.)*

The third quote is taken from an article by a linguist who wishes to illustrate 'the wave of slang words that is sweeping Russian public speech'. The source given is indicative of the way this sentence is disseminating: the essay refers to an article in the *Argumenty i fakty* newspaper (No. 39/1999) which includes the phrase in a list of politicians' aphorisms quoted out of context and accompanied with humorous comments.
The search for a single authentic version is of little relevance to the linguist. Just as the anthropologist Lévi-Strauss did in studying myths of Oedipus or of the Pueblo Indians, we must discard no

1 From an online article entitled 'Federal aircraft continue attacks on Chechnya…', published on 24 September 1999, which quotes an Interfax report.

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variant. To paraphrase his famous saying, Putin's phrase remains Putin's phrase 'as long as it is perceived as such'. By unravelling the variations between different occurrences of the sentence as much as possible, we obtain the material for an interpretation and reconstruction of what may be called 'Putin's phrase'. In other words, 'Putin's phrase' as an object of discourse is not a given; it needs to be reconstructed. It is not the same as the sentence actually uttered by the then Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. But this is where the parallels with Lévi-Strauss end: my investigation will be no more than an illustration; the sources used are far from comprehensive enough for a thorough study, and my approach is not 'structuralist'.

WETNESS AND LIQUIDS

mokry: wet, moist, soggy
→ (consonant shift k → ch)

(za)mochit: to wet, to make/get sth. wet, to bedabble (with water or another liquid); to soak
gangster jargon: to whack, to bump off, to kill

mocha: (e.g.1881) 1. moisture, wetness, that which wets; 2. urine
(e.g.1983) only remaining meaning: urine
(the name of the river Mocha goes back to the original meaning)

BLOOD IN THE OUTHOUSE

Let us start with the verb *zamochim* ('we will whack them'), a central and invariable component of the sentence. It occurs in all known variants, whereas *v sortire* has at least one alternative, cited in a dictionary of contemporary Russian slang: *zamochu u parashi* ('I will whack you/him/her/them on the chamber pot/by the shit bucket').

One dictionary of political language notes that *zamochit* has been the most popular verb in recent years. It has spawned other words (such as *mochilovka*, 'carnage') which is now sanctioned since it is used by the political establishment.

Still, it is very clearly a vulgarism that originated in criminal slang, one of the many expressions that have recently found their way into public speech which the linguist V. Khimik has called 'criminonyms'. The verb *zamochit* seems to be linked to the expression *mokroye delo* ('a wet thing', i.e. murder), occurrences of which were documented as early as the 1920s and 30s. In criminal slang, *sukhoye delo* (theft) is contrasted with *mokroye delo* (an act of banditry that involves murder or injury). Thus the 'wet' thing referred to is the blood that is flowing or will flow. But it is also that which is wiped out through liquefaction, that which is radically and brutally annihilated. This meaning can be found in *Ot nego ostalos mokroye mesto* ('A wet spot is all that is left of him') or the more extreme *Ot nego ne ostalos mokrogo mesta* ('Not even a wet spot is left of him'), but also in some uses of the verb *zamochit* itself. One dictionary records an 'ironic' use:

'To remove from official positions, to deprive of capacity for action. Example: The current regime's main instinct is to neutralise [*zamochit*] Berezovsky, to strip him of his political and media resources. (*Moskovsky komsomolets*, 6 December 2001)'

This suggests an ambivalence between two meanings of *zamochit*: 'to pummel', 'to beat cruelly' (compare *mochitsya* as an intensive synonym of *dratsya*, to scuffle), and 'to eliminate', 'to kill', which puts *zamochit* in the same group as *zarezat, zavalit, zagasit* ('to stab to death', 'to knock off', 'to extinguish'). The first meaning very theatrically suggests bloodshed; the second stresses extermination.

This ambivalence, pointed out by several lexico-

graphers, is preserved in Putin's phrase. Some dictionaries offer a more general gloss, where the nature and result of the punishment remain open:
'To whack [*mochit/zamochit*] so. in the outhouse/ by the shit bucket. Criminal/prison slang. Contemptuous. To settle accounts with someone cruelly and mercilessly.'

As we shall see, this ambivalence is one of the mechanisms at work in Putin's phrase. First, however, let me point out one final connotation of *zamochim*, suggested by the following quote which contains a related criminonym, *mokrukha* (my emphasis):
[about a nocturnal journalistic investigation] 'As usual, there is a lot of *mokrukha*. The corpse of a middle-aged woman was fished out from a river *romantically named Mocha* near the village of Zharkovo in the Podolsk region.' (*Moskovsky komsomolets*, 31 July 1993)

The mention of a toilet inevitably conjures up the thought of urine (*mocha*). This is yet another element of what Putin's phrase evokes: an inferno reminiscent of Vladimir Sorokin's novels.

Urban Guerilla and Special Forces

It is the word *sortir* that transforms Putin from a criminal boss (*zamochim*) into a true Master of Words. As the newspaper *Komsomolskaya pravda* ironically remarked (on 30 December 2003):
'We fell in love with Putin as soon as that chap uttered the words "we'll whack them, even in the outhouse."'
Sortir designates, above all, the setting of the drama, its topography, already identified in the preceding clause: *if we catch them in the toilet.* This detail evokes an urban guerilla, or rather a chase carried out by shock troops, anticipating the operations of the *spetsnaz* anti-terrorist force during the Nord-Ost hostage crisis in 2002 or in Beslan in 2004. It indicates several things: the thoroughness of the search, which will include the most obscure corners, the utterly humiliating form of punishment (which, on one interpretation, will not even give the terrorists time to relieve themselves), and its swiftness: without further process, the enemy will be struck on the spot, in the narrow and secluded place to which he has withdrawn. This immediateness is accentuated in those variants which leave out the conjunction between the two clauses: 'Excuse my saying so: catch them in the toilet – whack them in the outhouse.'
The sentence thus conjures up a chthonic realm marked by obscurity, swiftness and secrecy – the exact opposite of the quasi-Promethean narrative offered somewhat later by George W. Bush: 'Even 7,000 miles away, across oceans and continents, on mountaintops and in caves – you will not escape the justice of this nation.' (*State of the Union Address*, 29 January 2002)

Civilisation vs. barbarianism

This brings us to a more unstable and volatile component of Putin's phrase. Most variants, including the first quote, cite it as a two-clause sequence:
"Excuse my saying so, if we catch them in the toilet, we'll whack them in the outhouse."
This means that, while *tualet* and *sortir* ('toilet' and 'outhouse') refer to the same object, we must nevertheless distinguish between them. Used merely as a reiteration (*tam zhe i zamochim*, 'then that's where we'll whack them', would be a possible reformulation, and might well be what was actually said), the vulgarism reveals all its connotations: it suggests unheard-of, humiliating violence and orgiastic profligacy. Furthermore we can see that the differences between the variants are due, to a non-negligible extent, to the

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difficulty of combining the reformulation *tualet -> sortir* with the particle *i*, which introduces the final element of an imaginary series (the meaning here is: 'the punishment could not be inflicted in a more terrible place'):

- Excuse my saying so: catch them in the toilet – whack them in the outhouse.
- Excuse my saying so, if we catch them in the toilet, we'll whack them in the outhouse.

Yet many anecdotes and quotes, and even some dictionaries, only cite the second part:
We will whack them in the outhouse!

How is it that this two-part structure can be reduced to its second part? First of all, it should be pointed out that each part refers to one of the poles of a black-and-white dichotomy reminiscent of official American rhetoric (as in the expressions 'Evil Empire' and 'Axis of Evil'). The two parts are strictly symmetrical.

Protasis: the forces of the civilised world
Excuse my saying so, if we catch them in the toilet...
This hypothesis places us squarely in the ethereal realm of speculation. The most refined French civilities are marshalled to introduce the reference to the lavatory; indeed the different variants exhaust the whole range of polite formulas: 'Please do excuse my saying so'; 'If you will excuse my saying so', etc.

Apodosis: barbarianism
…then we will whack them, even in the outhouse!
Here French (*sortir*) has the exactly opposite function, recalling the English expression 'Pardon my French', used to introduce obscenities. Now the 'outhouse' takes on new and more precise contours.

Short version and long version

We now see why the two variants, the 'long' and the 'short' one, can be used in different ways.
The long version is a complex sentence which narrates the (conditional) transition from existence to demise. This aspect is taken up in the newspaper article referenced by the above-cited linguistic study:
'In other words, the terrorists have as much time left to live as it takes to go from the toilet to the nearest outhouse.' (*Argumenty i fakty*, 29 September 1999)
The scene described ultimately boils down to the terrorists' appearance and their subsequent disappearance. Some variants stress this point by using

interjection

From *Perestroika* to *Consolidation*: Word Creationis Not on the Agenda

Michel Niqueux

The most far-reaching changes in Russian political language took place during perestroika, continuing into the upheaval of the Yeltsin era. I remember how the emergence of the expression *values common to all mankind*, replacing talk about *class morals*, first persuaded me that unheard-of and profound ideological changes were in the making. Nowadays the catchword is *national values*, used for example by Vladimir Putin in his 2006 message to the Federal Assembly. There is no dictionary of Putin-speak; if there was, it would only contain two or three expressions such as *the vertical of power* and *great power*, and a few snippets of thieves' cant. The era of *consolidation* – another word from Putin's vocabulary – is not conducive to word creation. Euphemisms and 'political correctness' reign supreme. *(continued on the next page)*

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the verb *pryatatsya* ('to hide'):
'If the terrorists hide in the outhouse, then the outhouse is where we'll whack them.'

The long version is systematically associated with liquidating the terrorists:
'Allow me to recall the entire sentence (not literally, but I can vouch that this was its general meaning): We do not intend to negotiate with murderers and terrorists. We will destroy them. Seek them out and destroy them. Everywhere. "Forgive my saying so, but if we find them in the outhouse, well, then we'll whack them in the outhouse."'
The short version, stripped of the polite circumvolutions of the protasis ('Excuse my saying so' etc.), describes pure violence, i.e. the punishment in all its cruelty and exemplarity rather than a hypothesis. Here it is less clear than in the longer version which the pronoun 'we' refers to: the government? The international community? Our nation? Our people? Blood-hungry soldiers?

Conclusion

In attempting to reconstruct 'Putin's phrase', we have come across three rather distinct relationships between the words and the things they refer to:

- the perspective of premeditated, implacable and silent revenge: pure and simple liquidation;
- the description of a punishment of which all we know is that blood will flow and there will be a smell of urine;
- a new phrase that looks so natural it seems impossible that it did not exist earlier (and yet it did not). In dictionaries, it is reduced to a verb in the infinitive followed by a prepositional phrase: *(za)mochit v sortire*.

Have historians and political scientists noticed that there are at least three phrases of Putin?

Translated from the French and Russian by Mischa Gabowitsch

Comments on the Sources:

This article is based on dictionaries published in the last decade by following authors:
Khimik V.V., SPb 2004; Gusejnov G.Ch., Moscow 2003; Mokienko V.M. / Nikitina T.G., SPb 2001; Korovushkin V.P., Yekaterinburg 2000; Yermakova O.P. / Zemskaia E.A. / Rozina R.I., Moscow 1999; Yelistratov V.S., Moscow 1997 + 1994; Rozhanskii, F. I., SPb-Paris 1992; Baldaev D.S., Moscow 1992

interjection

(continued from the previous page)
At the same time, the use of English words continues to increase in the spheres of trade and finance. These terms are incomprehensible to most people outside the big cities, thus widening the gap between different strata of society. Incidentally, showing off one's knowledge of foreign words was a wide-spread fad in the early Gorbachev years. Nowadays Politicians make ample use of such words, even if they proclaim *national values* and speak out against *globalisation*: the Union of Right Forces is preparing for *rebranding* [rebrending], and Putin stresses that *the country's credit rating* [kreditny reyting] is the highest in the history of new Russia'.

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Reading Suggestions:

- Charlotte Wagnsson. Russian political language and public opinion on the West, NATO and Chechnya: securitisation theory reconsidered. University of Stockholm Press, 2000.
- Maria Yelenevskaya. Language as a Reflection of Ideology in Russia // International Sociology. SAGE, London a.o., May 2006, vol. 21(3), p.359–370. *http://iss.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/21/3/359.pdf*

A Different Marx or Our Imaginary Generation and its Political Language

Alexey Penzin

sketch

The Chto delat? – What is to Be Done? *platform*

What is to Be Done? *is a collective platform founded in the spring 2003 during the initiative 'The Refoundation of Petersburg'. Its goal is to politicise philosophical theory, art and social activism.* What is to Be Done? *has been publishing an English-Russian newspaper on issues central to political culture and cultural politics, with a special focus on the relationship between a repoliticisation of Russian intellectual culture and its broader international context. Individual issues of the newspaper are usually produced in the context of collective initiatives such as art projects or conferences.*

In its intellectual disorientation, the political language of the 1990s resembled the top of a lump of hardened ice. Many texts read as if they had developed a verbal rash caused by an allergy to the clumsy language of Soviet Marxism.

In 1996, the well known translator of a volume of articles by Walter Benjamin wrote in his introduction to the book that the first pages of the famous essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' may be skipped: in that section, the author was simply indulging his eccentric interests by summarising 'tedious' passages from Marx.

Marx was unequivocally associated with the Soviet heritage, whereas the 'different Marx' seemed to be an intellectual plaything invented by Western intellectuals who had not physically experienced Stalinist terror or mentally suffered from late Soviet ideological decay.

For the *What is to Be Done?* group, this natural 'anti-Marxism' was itself already a thing of the past. From the outset, its participants began to search for a new language, new genres of statements and new types of inventiveness in order to articulate their aversion to apolitical anti-Marxism.

In their newspaper, they gradually developed forms of tactical practice such as clear and concise statements of their positions, poetic essays, conversations, interviews, dramaturgically arranged dialogue, intensive e-mail debates on topics discussed in the issue, heated disputes and unexpected forms of co-authorship. All these serve to demarcate us from our immediate ideological surroundings. These lines of demarcation are easier to understand if put in historical perspec-

tive.

One of our main tasks is to elaborate a language for the political thought of 'our generation'. By 'language' we mean substantive terminology, style and genre. 'Our generation' is so far mostly a figment of our imagination, for unfortunately relatively few people speak 'our language'. But maybe it is this lack of a mass appeal which reveals the *potential* of the distinctions we draw.

The first line of demarcation developed out of the crucial, and deepening, contradiction between our interest in the study of theory and philosophy on the one hand and the local Russian context of that interest on the other hand.

In reading contemporary Western philosophy as students in the 1990s, we could not help but notice its political aspect. Even if we exempt Marxist philosophy loyal to the 'party line', it is entirely rooted in the left-wing intellectual tradition, although it has proven capable of critically revising its canons.

Another position in the intellectual field consisted in the gesture of demonstratively shunning the political. The political events of the 1990s pushed some to view politics as a lowly sphere of corruption, manipulation and brute violence, especially by contrast with previous hopes for democratisation and social modernisation. The alternative was to withdraw to philosophical marginality, understood as the only available form of critical, radical thought. This went hand in hand with a revolution in the language of theory, stimulated by the study of contemporary Western theory, and with the surfacing of experimental discursive practices that had originated in the Soviet 'underground': from the subversive nonsense of the conceptualists to masterly grassroots sarcasm. But sarcastic commentary is no substitute for a theory of society.

This apolitical attitude continued to deepen as intellectuals were trying to escape a traumatic reality. Specialisation in, for example, phenomenology or contemporary French theory served as an alibi for a lack of interest in politics. The public role of the post-Soviet intellectual was reduced to commenting on events in the spheres of art, mass culture and the media, rather than engaging in political analysis and criticism.

At best they would take part in projects of 'political technology', which also expressed the traumatic view of politics as something profane and dirty, but also reflected the intellectuals' objective lack of financial means. They had to play by the new rules of the market, but the market did not 'straighten everything out' [as the reformers of the early 1990s had predicted]. There was no demand for knowledge of the fine points of deconstruction or schizoanalysis; the market only required rough-hewn products such as mendacious electoral programmes. With rare exceptions, the only opportunity intellectuals did have to demonstrate their knowledge was as clients of *nouveaux riches* who, in perfectly feudal style, funded 'intellectual journals' for their own amusement.

Our self-developed left-wing political language has secured us no advantages. We evolved this language by trying to read books while others were building a media reputation for themselves by writing for newspapers such as *Kommersant* or *Segodnya*. But simultaneous attempts [by reactionary communist and nationalist groups] to privatise the intellectual and symbolic heritage of the USSR also passed us by. Beyond books, we were confronted with new realities that could not be interpreted in the language of noble-minded media theory or a post-structuralism reduced to the mantra 'There is nothing outside the text'. The commercialisation of culture and education, the obtrusive promotional muttering of consumerism, the deprofessionalisation of universities and

sketch

the lumpenisation of large parts of the population are accompanied by shameless propaganda that serves as a cover for a new authoritarian consolidation of power and capital.

In public space, simulated modernisation yielded to a conservative and nationalist rhetoric swiftly adopted by many of those who, in the 1990s, had believed that 'Marxist passages may be skipped. Out of every discursive nook and cranny crept people who had been denied access to any significant parcel of the public sphere during the hegemony of liberalism: 'reactionaries of all hues' who began, among other things, to attack the former apolitical admirers of 'radical thought', be it by launching campaigns against 'putrid postmodernism' or by fighting for Orthodox values (or worse).

Meanwhile, our political language was conquering a place for itself on the relatively narrow strip between a liberal hegemony busy expiring in a puff of fragrant light smoke, the autistic pathos of the guardians of provincially *comme-il-faut* 'radical thought', and smug jingoistic defenders of traditional values. Some of them are, physically, our contemporaries, yet politically they represent an entirely different generation. We are barely visible because the contemporary Russian media apply the label 'left-wing' to something like the Communist Party of the Russian Federation – people who would have been called 'right-wing National Bolsheviks' by the Soviet liberal intelligentsia.

But then we have never had a 'different Marx' here in Russia. And so it remains open whether our language will become part of a genuine intellectual and political modernisation.

Translated from the Russian
by Mischa Gabowitsch

About the author:
Alexey Penzin (born in 1974) lives in Moscow and is a member of the *Chto delat?* platform. In 2006 he defended his dissertation entitled *Dream Visions in Culture* at the Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

Reading suggestions:
What is to Be Done? A newspaper for engaged creativity:
http://www.chtodelat.org/index.php?option=com_frontpage&Itemid=135&lang=en

Five Poets in the Russian Blogosphere

Gasan Gusejnov

analysis

In this article, five poets of different generations who maintain blogs on the most popular Russian-language blog hosting service, the US-based livejournal.com, *share their views on language. Some of them admit they have lost more than they have gained from blogging; others note that in blogs, poetic language tends to become shallow and imitate pop culture. Still, to all of them the blogosphere has become a new home or even a new homeland.*

The first years of the 21st century saw the emergence of a Russian blogosphere. Like the Internet as a whole, the most popular blogging platform, *LiveJournal* or LJ, originated in the United States. In the space of a few years, LJ has become a permanent debating forum for the most advanced

segment of the post-Soviet political, and cultural scene. It is also used by those who, before the advent of blogs, had no hope of finding anyone to talk to, let alone a publisher.

From 'thick' print journals to the virtual periodicals room

In 2006, the online journal *Reading Room* celebrated its tenth anniversary. This site was set up by the makers of the web-based *Russian Journal* in the mid-1990s as a link between the crisis-ridden print journals and the World Wide Web. By the early 2000s, the *Reading Room* had become something like a national literary platform for the works of both Russian and foreign writers. Together with several independent literary sites (such as *Topos* or *Vavilon*), the *Reading Room* is a collective 'thick journal' that provides free access to dozens of new works daily. As with any online publication, the editors of the participating journal can also use it to obtain instantaneous feedback from readers. Authors entering a dialogue with those commenting on their texts become mere commentators among others.

From the point of view of language, one of the results of this meeting between authors and readers is the emergence of a new literary genre, the blog post. Posts bear the mark of the conditions under which they are written: they are laconic and full of expressive language and symbols. Their structure is open and closed at the same time: every post may trigger a response or remain the last contribution to a discussion thread, a tombstone to that particular conversation.

The road to the blogosphere: between gutter and goldmine

These forums created a set of paradoxical habits which prepared their participants to use a new medium, the blog. On the one hand, they became used to conferring the status of literature upon everyday utterances by turning oral remarks of little significance into written dialogue. On the other hand, the language and images used in this dialogue may be so coarse as to make site owners decide to cut the discussion short. Readers who discuss literature with professional writers, and literati who get off their high horse to delve into the thick of life, are marginalised in the literal sense of the word, since their dialogue takes place on the margins of literature. Not only is the language they use not 'sanitised for literature'; it is intentionally kept as colloquial as possible. An extraordinarily rich and variegated language has emerged on different levels of the Russian Internet – from the deliberately lofty or even courtly to the thoroughly obscene. Outlets for literature range from *topos.ru* to the pornographically perky *udaff.com*, and literary standards are set by anyone and anything from François Rabelais to the writings on toilet doors in libraries or train stations, and from Laurence Sterne to orally transmitted prison lore.

The emergence of an Internet jargon and, more generally, the spread of foul language, has diverted public attention from another evident fact: many web-based authors publish texts with a rich, zesty vocabulary and a nuanced syntax; texts which are laconic without being dry, and which usually comment on news that is a few hours or even a few minutes old. Outsiders or centre forwards of the post-Soviet literary coterie: they had all been waiting for the appearance of a new medium. LJ became that medium. Here, users can go beyond reading and commenting on other people's 'reading rooms' and start co-publishing their own journal and even own a web-based mini-publishing house.

The blogosphere as a mass medium

The emergence of a Russian-language blogosphere around 2000 has put the literary segment

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of the Russian Internet on a new footing. Looking back upon five years in LJ, many bloggers observed that their journals were now in the same league as corporate mass media. Their audience of 'friends' (other bloggers who subscribe to their posts and may comment on them) is at least as large as their actual or hypothetical readership in professional online media. LJ is a meeting place for pundits of all persuasions, something that would be impossible in any online publication with a prescribed political line. The shrinkage of uncensored public space in other Russian media since 1999/2000 has increased LJ's importance as a platform for communication between the most irreconcilable political opponents, including opposition figures, who no longer have access to television.

The appearance of this new platform has drawn particularly keen reactions from poets who use it for their work. *kultura* asked five poets of different generations to share their thoughts on how their presence in LJ is affecting their language: *Andrey Sen-Senkov* (born in Dushanbe in 1968), *German Lukomnikov* (born in Baku in 1962), *Sergey Malashenok* (born in Leningrad, now Saint-Petersburg, in 1953), *Miroslav Nemirov* (born in the Saratov region in 1963) and *Denis Yatsutko* (born in Stavropol in 1972).

Andrey Sen-Senkov, who started a blog in the spring of 2006, formulates his self-perception as an LJ user ironically by commenting on his 'friends', i.e. those whose blog entries he regularly reads on his 'friends page' and whom he trusts to read his own protected entries:

'LiveJournal is a compound mirror made up of electronic facets. Two hundred little <friend> mirrors (so far). Pressing a button pastes them together into one big mirror. It reflects me. I like the way I look in it. As fly no. 10384870.'

LJ veteran *German Lukomnikov*, who maintains several blogs, admits that his life has 'changed dramatically' over the past three years. 'Every new rhyme, every thought, every observation or "question to the readers" goes straight into my LJ… I check my mail over and over… That's what I've been doing virtually around the clock for over three years. LJ is my main means of publication, of getting feedback from readers, of looking for new friends and authors, and of communicating. It is my favourite reading matter, a continuous literary performance, a kind of addiction, a field for the study of linguistic processes, a source of all manner of information, simply a diary and much else.'

Explaining the difference between publishing

Andrei Sen-Senkov

Africa as a meal plan

breakfast
when it rains here
it will rain for a long time
rather like
a translucent blood transfusion

lunch
the majority of this world's
whimsical insects (which are absolutely not of this world)
appears to have been drawn
during
a beautifully interrupted sexual act

dinner
the white god is bored in Africa
and when people visit him
he
hides behind the door
entertains himself
pretending to be a child
and in a changed voice
he says
"I can't open the door.
my parents aren't home"

(2006)

Translated form the Russian by Dina Gusejnova and Rebecca Steltner

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one's texts in LJ on the one hand, and in print or on other people's web sites on the other hand, *Lukomnikov* says that only a tenth of what he writes is ever printed, and, on average, only five years after he wrote it. 'This is due partly to the unusual format of my texts, partly to editorial sluggishness, and partly to my own laziness and lack of talent for polite conversation. In LJ, by contrast, the "editorial process" takes seconds.'

German Lukomnikov

my poem

my poem
is a poem
that I invented
wrote down
and did not cross out

a poem that I invented
wrote down
but crossed out

a poem that I invented
but did not write down

and a poem
that I did not even write down

my poem
(2004)

Translated form the Russian by Dina Gusejnova and Rebecca Steltner

'A COLLECTIVE LINGUISTIC LABORATORY'

The so-called friends page is probably LJ's main feature. This is a web page where the journal entries of all those whom the blogger chose to 'befriend' are presented in reverse chronological order.

'Since my poetics is partly based on play,' says *Lukomnikov*, 'my readers or "friends" frequently offer their own versions of my own text. Sometimes I even use those versions (although, unfortunately, readers' suggestions seldom yield a perfect match).'

Lukomnikov: 'In ordinary life we usually communicate with only a few dozen people; they mainly belong to the same circle and therefore speak more or less the same "language". Only accidentally and intermittently can we snatch bits of other "languages". Even our children, of course, don't talk to us the same way they talk to each other. LJ enables us to "hear" those other "languages", to master them. For a writer that is an invaluable opportunity. No print publication (and probably no online publication either) offers as much as one-hundredth of the linguistic and stylistic variety I see every day on my friends page, where the posts of a venerable philosopher are followed by those of a girl in love, and the ravings of madmen co-exist with the tomfoolery of a virtual persona [an LJ user who is especially careful about preserving his or her incognito – *G.G.*] – someone impersonating, say, an animal.'

Thus, in the poet's hands, LJ turns into a collective linguistic laboratory. It is the embodiment of Vladimir Mayakovsky's clichéd metaphor of the poet as an 'apprentice to the creator of language': 'the people'. Contrary to the wide-spread belief that LJ users become net nerds, blogging poets actually more often take part in poetry sessions held in 'real' venues. *Lukomnikov:* 'Formally this language is just little characters — literature —, but in spirit, in essence, it is spoken language.'

A 'VIRTUAL HOME'

'It is a borderland between oral, written and "inner" speech, a mix between the candid and the playful, a field of interaction between the "languages" of highly diverse circles. This and the very spirit of an open journal, which is so close to

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Denis Yatsutko

yatsutko (yatsutko) wrote:
2006-06-09 10:31:00
I keep missing everything.
Yesterday marked five years of my stay in LJ. […] a good occasion to thank everyone. Thank you.

P.S. Some facts:
My serial number in LJ - 171178
My first entry - http://yatsutko.livejournal.com/326.html

On 8 June…
…2002 I wrote about Lenin - http://yatsutko.livejournal.com/125510.html.
…2003 I did not write anything.
…2004 I was busy specifying, as part of my job, some peculiarities of Moldavian toponymy and was outraged by the fact that the stall seller from the Zheleskovskaya cossack settlement did not know the North Caucasion toponymy - http://yatsutko.livejournal.com/2004/06/08/.
…2005 I was narrating a dream about the metro, shared some interesting links and explained where you could by my book - http://yatsutko.livejournal.com/2005/06/08/
...2006 was yesterday.

nau _ rockmen
2006-06-09 11:16 am
I saw you in Kuzminki. Where the marshrutki stop. It was just impossible to get out of the packed bus…
How often did you have the urge in these past five years to delete all this for fuck´s sake?

yatsutko
2006-06-09 01:33 pm
Can't remember. Once?

svetoff
2006-06-09 12:13 pm
hm.. well, one feels like a veteran-oldtimer… how many of us, Russian-speaking users, were there back in June 2001? some three hundred?

yatsutko
2006-06-09 01:36 pm
Some seven hundred, I think. But not more, for sure…

Translated form the Russian by Dina Gusejnova

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my understanding of the very essence of poetry, has made LJ a home for me.'

Another poet who acknowledges that LJ has become a home or has at least brought him closer 'to a mythical Home' is *Denis Yatsutko*, who celebrated five years of LJ blogging in June 2006:

'LJ has almost destroyed my poetry. I never used to write much anyway. Now all I write is short LJ posts. Well, with very few exceptions. LJ is a very convenient structure for getting immediate feedback, for discussing specific topics, for spreading semiotic viruses, for social provocation, for finding a drinking mate or a lover… Of course all these are trifles and we ought to work for eternity, but those are clichés – ought we really? What do I have to say to eternity? Maybe I could say something if not for LJ: after all, LJ not only destroys a multi-layered, long-winded style; it also scatters your thoughts, distracts you from analysis, and kills time, speech, and sleep. It is a new way of social existence, and a surrogate family. When we say "Good morning", whom are we addressing? In LJ: those who read us on their friends page.'

Yatsutko calls LJ the third stage of his literary life (the first being his teenage years at the typewriter, and the second, army service). 'Today the features of LJ shape my style: its structure ('Those comments rule! Ban him!'), the imaginary social types that populate it ('fäshists', 'yidds'), the spread of the LJ dialect known as scumspeak or Ahlbanian, media viruses such as the polka *'Yak-tsup-tsop'*[1], readers' expectations based on their pre-formed perception of your blog, and the culture of virtual personae.'

LJ user Yatsutko (a pun: in Russian, *lzheuser* means 'pseudo-user') was assigned the registration no. 171178 as far back as 2001. No wonder

Miroslav Nemirov

Moscow has fallen, the randy whore has fallen, she has fallen!
How much for a ride in your underground much-vaunted halls?
Half a rouble: ten times as much as before!
What's to be had in your GUMs and TsUMs and fucking Yeliseyevs?
You can all suck my cock!
So why the fuck did you spread your legs for the Soviet regime?
Serves you right for it all.

You were the Politburo's bitch, weren't you, slut?
You acted like a red sheep dog, didn't you, slutty bitch?
You fucking ate the whole Soviet people out of house and home,
didn't you, you vermin, you bitch?
You strutted around in stolen silks, didn't you, slut?
Well then go and strut your stuff now.

Serves you right, bitch, but this is only the beginning!
Let the wogs hold sway over you now, the Chechens, the Americans!
Didn't fucking want to be honest?
Then run now, serve them junk food,
That's all there's left for you to do,
You skank, you venal piece of filth, oy-oy-oy-uy!

(on the failed August putsch of 1991)

Translated from the Russian by Mischa Gabowitsch

GUM, TsUM = in Soviet times, the main showpiece department stores in central Moscow.
Yeliseyev = An elegant delicatessen on Tverskaya Street in Moscow, founded in 1901; known officially as 'Grocery Shop No. 1' in the USSR; now operating under its old name. [Translator's note]

1 *Ievan Polkka*: a song by the Finnish band Loituma whose chorus mainly consists of meaningless syllables. In spring 2005, recordings of the song spread across the Russian LJ like wildfire. [*Translator's note*]

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that in June 2006, with the overall number of Livejournal.com users crossing the 11 million mark, he is feeling melancholic. 'True, there are highly active communities forming in LJ and around LJ. But I find it hard to connect with them… Then again I probably never really tried; yet Russian LJ users have already written and published quite a few books and organised hundreds of exhibitions and readings, all with the help of LJ…'

A niche of the 'new stagnation'

Even before the advent of LJ, *Miroslav Nemirov*, the 'grand master of foul language' as he was dubbed by the critic Vyacheslav Kuritsyn, did more than write poetry: he organised collective poetic performances and poetico-political groups. The best-known of these was *OsumBez* (Enmaddened Lunatics), the latest is called *Dadaohui* [originally a late 19th century Chinese secret society whose name sounds obscene in Russian]. For *Nemirov*, LJ is not fundamentally different from the unofficial literary scene of his teenage years in the 1980s:

'The exact same audience, no different at all from that of the 1980s, either socially or culturally. Often they're the same people. Even OsumBez and Dadaohui are essentially made up of my friends from the early 1980s. Plus new, younger people who are roughly the same as we were in the early 1980s. To put it shortly, they're interested in all things new and like to be at the cutting edge of art (or the arts – all of them). It's funny, but even the social atmosphere feels the same again: deepening stagnation.'

Nemirov does not reflect upon the language of LJ or the changes LJ has wrought in his own language. Why not? 'I simply live in it! I use it to communicate with people; I use it as a source of information about the world; I use it to realise my ideas and ambitions; I even use it to make a living: LJ helps me to find publishers, both print and online (and it helps them to find me), who pay me to write texts which I would otherwise write for free and post in LJ.' *Nemirov* compares LJ to 'Athens in the 5th century BC, at the time of Pericles: all the country's great spirits and talents are at arm's length, or rather at a mouse click.'

The contradictions inherent in writing down what is essentially oral speech may leave individual style impoverished. This goes especially for the acceptance into poetic language of a huge layer of idioms – obscene and dialectal expressions – traditionally associated with lower-class culture. For the poet *Nemirov*, part of his mission in LJ consists of dealing a blow to hypocrisy, to reading-between-the-lines, to the apolitical and asocial inhabitants of ivory (or mock-ivory) towers. The wealth of obscene and abusive vocabulary in *Nemirov's* poems is usually a gesture of self-defence against internet glamour. In the political context of the 2000s, it is also a refusal to abandon the free 1990s for the pluperfect of the 1980s.

However, the linguist Viktor Grigoryev, who

Sergei Malashenok

The working classes have vanished somewhere,
Hey, Russia, your stomach is boundless!
The gentry, peasants and petty demons
And party whores, no trace of them either!
And yet it is sad about the working class,
Which had just disappeared, and basta,
Instead of the ferroconcrete mass
Only the scattered, malicious masses.
And what if that class had been invented
By the fucking Marxists?
And only the bourgeois were for real,
The scholars and the writers?
(2006)

Translated form the Russian by Dina Gusejnova and Rebecca Steltner

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studies Russian poetic language, considers that, for all the 'new belletrism', LJ threatens to automate writing. In LJ, a writer's popularity is measured in terms of circulation, i.e. the number of 'friends' who subscribe to the poet's blog.

The Saint-Petersburg-based poet *Sergey Malashenok*, who uses the pseudonym *un_ma*, vigorously resists the threat of superficiality in LJ. *Malashenok* employs a whole system of devices to guard himself against LJ popularity. He abruptly swerves from the delicate tradition of Saint-Petersburg lyrical expressionism to caustic autobiographical tragifarce that translates the style of the painter George Grosz into written words. After especially brusque changes of register, he sometimes shuts down his blog. *Malashenok* explains this strategy by saying that since creativity in LJ is achieved as a 'rhetorical special spontaneity', what needs to be protected is precisely 'what looks at first like the contingency, non-representativeness and chaos of LJ poems', which 'suddenly turns out to be a free vitality (if I may put it that way) which opens up new linguistic possibilities, a new poetics.'

The cost of self-expression

*Sergey Malashenok***:** 'A real LJ author only exists until such time as he or she acquires a critical mass of admiring "friends". It is difficult not to pay attention to them, to live "between memory and forgetting". Moreover, every "spiritual" public activity in the public world outside (whether "on paper" or on the Net) necessarily imposes a cost in the "real world" of one's own life. Living two simultaneous lives – a sin every writer must be prepared to commit – is especially costly. But LJ adds a third life: that of the self-publisher.'

'A third life' is what the LJ blogosphere has become for Russian poets. Life in the 'new homeland' paradoxically combines a rich individual and collective linguistic experience with a standardisation that threatens to render the author's individual voice inaudible, fragmenting it into facets and making it increasingly resemble those of his ever-present and ever-closer 'friends'.

Translated from the Russian
by Mischa Gabowitsch

URLs of the 5 poets:
Lukomnikov:
http://lukomnikov-1.livejournal.com/profile
Malashenok:
http://un_ma.livejournal.com/profile
Yatsutko:
http://yatsutko.livejournal.com/profile
Nemirov:
http://nemiroff.livejournal.com/profile
Sen-Senkov:
http://sensensen.livejournal.com/profile
The poems - original Russian text:
http://gasan.livejournal.com/49416.html

Reading Suggestion:

- Eugene Gorny. Russian LiveJournal: The Impact of Cultural Identity on the Development of Virtual Community. In: Henrike Schmidt, Katy Teubener, Natalja Konradova (Eds.): Control + Shift. Public and Private Usages of the Russian Internet. Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2006, p. 73–90.
- *http://www.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/russcyb/library/texts/en/control_shift/Gorny_LiveJournal.pdf*

focus

Together Apart: Russian in Ukraine

Mariya Kopylenko

How is the Russian language faring in Ukraine? How does it co-exist with Ukrainian? This has always been a political issue. Today you will mainly hear Russian spoken in Eastern Ukraine, and Ukrainian in the West. Yet Ukrainian is the country's only official language. Much has been written over the past two decades about the Soviet-era confrontation between the two languages, about the persecution of Ukrainian speakers, the dominance of Russian, and the exclusion of Ukrainian from all spheres of public life in Soviet Ukraine.

But in all honesty, it must be acknowledged that while Ukrainian was indeed subject to persecution in Soviet times, it was simultaneously being fostered. During the final years of Soviet rule in Ukraine, it was much more difficult to publish a book in Russian than in Ukrainian. Only a handful of publishing houses in the humanities, such as Kyiv State University's *Lybid* (Swan), were authorised to produce Russian books. By contrast, *Vsesvit*, the Kyiv-based journal of literary translations, was for some time famous for being able to publish semi-tolerated Western novels earlier than its Moscow equivalent, *Inostrannaya literatura* (Foreign Literature), could. At Kyiv University, many lectures and seminars were held in Ukrainian without being perceived as acts of moral courage. Parents were free to send their children to a Ukrainian school. In Kyiv, Tchaikovsky's opera *Eugene Onegin* was staged in Maxim Rylsky's wonderful Ukrainian translation. The Academy of Sciences published the most comprehensive dictionary of the Ukrainian language ever produced.

The Ukrainian language was seen as part of the officially sanctioned trappings of 'unfettered national development', which did not keep the authorities from cruelly clamping down on any dissidence, especially if it was clothed in nationalist garb.

Some predicted that, once the country gained independence, Ukrainian would see a period of unprecedented bloom, and its nearly 50 million inhabitants would start using the language for everyday communication. These expectations now look naïve: as a matter of fact, both languages are in crisis. Among other things, it has turned out that very few people actually have a command of Ukrainian. Those who do are those who used the language widely in the past: journalists, academics, some writers, some politicians, school teachers and university lecturers. Urban Ukrainian-language schools used to be frequented by sons and daughters of the creative and academic intelligentsia as well as children of recently arrived rural migrants. Soviet officials and engineers preferred to send their children to Russian schools as they believed Ukrainian would offer them limited prospects.

In post-Soviet times, as graduates of Russian schools were forced to use the new official language, they took to altering it as they saw fit, just so it would not sound Russian. 'New Ukrainian' is full of Polonisms and Anglicisims, but they are formed according to the rules of Russian rather than Ukrainian. This yields neologisms with Russian suffixes that are unacceptable by the norms of standard Ukrainian, e.g. *kavovarka* (literally 'coffee-cooker') instead of *mashynka do kavy* for 'coffee machine' or *vantazhivka* (literally 'cargo-er') instead of *vantazhny avtomobil* for 'lorry'. Other incorrect forms include nominalised participles such as *vidpochivayuchy* ('the resting one') for 'holiday-maker' or *likuyuchy* ('the treating one') for 'doctor'.

Many people who don't speak Ukrainian believe it is a still-developing language without fixed norms which therefore has no rules for word-formation and syntax. Yet these rules are documented in the Academy of Sciences' eleven-volume

Dictionary of the Ukrainian Language, which was completed by 1980!

Despite fifteen years of political autonomy and linguistic self-determination, Ukrainian has not managed to escape the influence of its 'big brother'. For example, the Ukrainian language still lacks slang words of its own: they are all loaned from Russian. Russian remains a source of missing vocabulary. The same goes for the criminal and prison cant that is widespread across all social strata in both Ukraine and Russia.

At most schools in the urban areas of Eastern Ukraine, tuition is in Ukrainian, and Russian is not usually taught at all. During breaks, however, children speak Russian with each other. They are unable to write correctly in Russian, their main language of private communication. Conversely, they do study Ukrainian, but never use it. Parents are aware of this problem, and some of them hire private Russian teachers for their children. But few can afford this private solution. Finding a way to learn Ukrainian properly, however, is a difficult task. The state officially encourages the spread of Ukrainian, but provides no funding for its advancement. Language policies are still restricted to banning Russian rather than developing Ukrainian.

Yet Russian and Ukrainian will continue to coexist in Ukraine for many decades, with the balance tipping one way or the other depending on the political situation. For the time being, both languages remain in crisis. This is best illustrated by some East Ukrainian regions' attempts to give Russian the status of a second official language. The memory of the negative Soviet experience is so far hampering progress towards full-fledged bilingualism, which would be the ideal solution.

Translated from the Russian
by Mischa Gabowitsch

About the author:
Mariya Kopylenko is managing editor of the magazine *National Security: Problems and Prospectives* (published in Ukrainian and English) and a member of the Ukrainian Union of Journalists. She writes in Ukrainian and Russian about aspects of Ukraine's European integration.

Reading suggestion:
Laada Bilaniuk. Contested tongues: language politics and cultural correction in Ukraine. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2006.

Topic of the November issue of *kultura*:
Theatre in Russia between Tradition and Renewal
Guest Editor: Ruth Wyneken (Berlin)