

Introduction

THE title of this book highlights two concepts formulated in Russia during the 1920s and 1930s: “landslide of the norm” was Roman Jakobson’s characterization, in 1934, of recent developments in Russian,¹ while “language culture” refers to Grigorii Vinokur’s classic, *Kul’tura iazyka* of 1929.² Both concepts have to do with issues of language and politics that were much discussed and debated in the post-revolutionary and early Soviet years. The period was characterized by linguistic liberalization, instability and change, which included not only semantic shifts, the obsolescence of concepts and words from the “old social structure” and the activation of native word formational processes, but also radical transgressions across different spheres of language usage. As a result, the “language question”—the negotiation and articulation of a new linguistic norm—permeated all spheres of social, cultural and political life.³

Some two generations later, the notions of norm-breaking and norm regulation have again become both popular and pertinent. The first post-Soviet decade in Russia was turbulent, and rapid changes in the political and social life were accompanied by dramatic shifts in language culture. The policy of *glasnost*’ made it possible to call things and circumstances by their real names, and to question the meaning of ideologically charged words. Boundaries between different spheres of speech, firmly consolidated by official regulation during the Soviet period, were seriously challenged, while the abolition of censorship in virtually all areas of official

1 “Erdrutsch der Norm.” Roman Jakobson, 1934, “Slavische Sprachfragen in der Sowjetunion,” *Slavische Rundschau* 6 (5), pp. 324–43; p. 326.

2 G.O. Vinokur, 1929, *Kul’tura iazyka*, Moscow. The book was first published in 1925, with a second, enlarged edition 1929.

3 See Michael S. Gorham, 2003, *Speaking in Soviet Tongues: Language Culture and the Politics of Voice in Revolutionary Russia*, Dekalb, Ill.

language usage led to a stylistic and lexical diversity unheard of before. In public speaking a transition took place from a predominantly written linguistic culture with strict norms overseen by state control to a culture open to spontaneous speech and verbal unpredictability. Also, post-*perestroika* Russian has experienced a strong influx of new loanwords, above all of Anglo-American origin, accompanied by a dissemination of “internal” loans from various nonstandard varieties of Russian, such as jargon, slang, or vulgar language (*mat*).

The manifestations of this potent “landslide of the norm” met with various reactions. During *perestroika* and the early post-Soviet years, the linguistic situation was largely welcomed as reflecting society’s newly won freedom and was responded to with a general celebration of verbal diversity and spontaneous speech. However, as the rigorous probing of the limits of acceptable language escalated, voices calling for the articulation of a new norm gradually became more audible. Towards the end of the 1990s, issues of language legislation and regulation began to dominate the discussions of language culture, with purist tendencies coming to the fore. Language culture is understood in this context more as *language cultivation*, with a clear didactic agenda, grounded in an elitist view of the standard language as the only acceptable norm.

In this book, we apply a more flexible understanding of language culture.⁴ Inspired by Vinokur, we see the concept as encompassing all the linguistic practices of a society. Vinokur insists on seeing language as a cultural product, and while his own agenda is clearly both edificatory and elitist, his invitation to undertake a parallel investigation of linguistic and literary development would appear to be productive for a broad analysis of Russian language culture today.

From this expanded perspective we wish, furthermore, to explore the parallel development of language and literature as a *dynamic relationship*: the “landslide of the norm” itself expresses a linguistic turbulence which stimulates a range of responses in the linguo-cultural practices of the society in question. At the same time, these domains of human communication themselves shape and transform the changing linguistic environment.

4 In her contribution to the present book, Lara Ryazanova-Clarke prefers the term “linguistic culture” to “language culture,” in line with Harold Schiffman, 1996, *Linguistic Culture and Language Policy*, London.

Much has already been written on the linguistic development of Russian after *perestroika*.⁵ The majority of these studies focus, not unexpectedly, on the language of advertising, politics, and in particular the mass media. Also, the nonstandard varieties of Russian, such as youth slang, vulgar language or various jargons, have become important fields of sociolinguistic and lexicographical research today. Literary scholars, in turn, have studied the trends and tendencies in contemporary literature from a variety of perspectives, for example, postmodernist aesthetics, socioliterary contexts, or the rise of mass literature.⁶

At the same time, a combination of linguistic and literary approaches is a rarity.⁷ Literary texts are seldom considered as an arena for linguis-

- 5 Cf., among others, A.D. Dulichenko, 1994, *Russkii iazyk kontsa xx stoletia* (Slavistische Beiträge 317), Munich; V.G. Kostomarov, 1994, *Iazykovoi vkus epokhi*, Moscow; Lew Zybatow, 1995, *Russisch im Wandel: Die russische Sprache seit der Perestrojka* (Slavistische Veröffentlichungen 80), Wiesbaden; E.A. Zemskaja, ed. 1996, *Russkii iazyk kontsa xx stoletia (1985–1995)*, Moscow; V.N. Shaposhnikov, 1998, *Russkaia rech' 1990-kh: Sovremennaja Rossiia v iazykovom otobrazhenii*, Moscow; Larissa Ryazanova-Clarke & Terence Wade, 1999, *The Russian Language Today*, London & New York; Lew Zybatow, ed. 2000, *Sprachwandel in der Slavia: Die slavischen Sprachen an der Schwelle zum 21. Jahrhundert*, 2 vols., Frankfurt am Main; Joern-Martin Becker, 2001, *Semantische Variabilität der russischen politischen Lexik im zwanzigsten Jahrhundert*, Munich; L.P. Krysin, ed. 2000, 2003, 2004, *Russkii iazyk segodnia*, vols. 1–3, Moscow. The main concern of most linguistic studies of modern Russian is the lexicon of the language. Zybatow, 1995, focusing on pragmatic aspects of language change and, in particular, on the changes within text-types (“Textsortenwandel”) and communicative patterns of behaviour (“kommunikative Handlungsmuster”), is an exception in this respect.
- 6 Cf., for instance, Jochen-Ulrich Peters & German Ritz, eds. 1996, *Enttabuisierung: Essays zur russischen und polnischen Gegenwartsliteratur*, Bern; Mikhail Epstein, Aleksandr Genis & Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover, 1999, *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture*, Providence, R.I.; Mark Lipovetsky, 1999, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos*, Armonk, N.Y.; N.L. Leiderman & M.N. Lipovetskii, 2001, *Sovremennaja russkaia literatura: Novyi uchebnik po literature v 3-kh knigakh*, vol. 3: *V kontse veka (1986–1990-e gody)*, Moscow; I.S. Skoropanova, 2002, *Russkaia postmodernistskaia literatura: Novaia filosofija, novyi iazyk*, St Petersburg; M.V. Tlostanova, 2004, *Postsovetskaia literatura i estetika transkul'turatsii: Zhit' nikogda, pisat' niotkuda*, Moscow; O.V. Bogdanova, 2004, *Postmodernizm v kontekste sovremennoi russkoi literatury (60–90-e gody xx veka–nachalo XXI veka)*, St Petersburg; Mikhail Epshtein, 2005, *Postmodern v russkoi literature*, Moscow; Stephen Lovell & Birgit Menzel, eds. 2005, *Reading for Entertainment in Contemporary Russia: Post-Soviet Popular Literature in Historical Perspective*, Bochum.
- 7 Rare examples are Liudmila Zubova, 2000, *Sovremennaja russkaia poezija v kontekste istorii iazyka*, Moscow, a number of articles in N.A. Fateeva, ed. 2004, *Poetika iskanii, ili Poisk poetiki: Materialy konferentsii-festivalia 'Poeticheskii iazyk rubezha XX–XXI vekov i sovremennye literaturnye strategii' (Institut russkogo iazyka im. V.V. Vinogradova RAN, Moskva, 16–19 maia 2003 g.)*, Moscow, and in Krysin, ed. 2000, 2003, 2004.

tic negotiation or for reflection on the contemporary linguistic situation. Against this background, the main idea behind the research project “Landslide of the Norm: Linguistic liberalization and literary development in Russia in the 1920s and 1990s,”⁸ of which this book is the first major outcome, is to integrate linguistic and literary scholarship in order to study the language culture in post-*perestroika* Russia within a broad framework, including the development of the language in its sociocultural context, the recent language debates and, above all, literature’s various responses to the contemporary linguistic situation. Read from this perspective, literary texts offer alternative, often surprising views, which may serve to remodel the positions taken in the language debates.

In order to assess the language situation in post-Soviet Russia, it is essential to consider at least two background issues, which are also addressed in this book. It is important to bear in mind, first, the “historical memory” contained in certain turns of phrase or even single words. A critical stance, for example, can often be shown to advance a double agenda, questioning not only contemporary linguistic usage, but also challenging, or even deconstructing, the totalitarian language of the recent past.⁹ It is therefore necessary to take into consideration the interrelationship between language and politics during the Soviet era. Second, there is the comparative perspective already touched upon above: while the political circumstances of the 1920s and the 1990s are essentially different, the two transitory periods show significant parallels with regard to the language situation.¹⁰

8 For more information on the Landslide project, visit <http://www.hf.uib.no/i/russisk/landslide/home.html>. The articles in this book are revised versions of papers given at the project’s first conference, held 11–14 August 2005 in Bergen, Norway.

9 See N.A. Kupina, 1995, *Totalitarnyi iazyk: Slovar’ i rechevye reaktsii*, Ekaterinburg & Perm; N.A. Kupina, 1999, *Iazykovoe soprotivlenie v kontekste totalitarnoi kul’tury*, Ekaterinburg & Perm; Daniel Weiss, 1995, “Prolegomena zur Geschichte der verbalen Propaganda in der Sowjetunion,” *Slavistische Linguistik 1994 (Referate des 20. Konstanzer Slavistischen Arbeitstreffens, Zürich 20.–22. 9. 1994)*, ed. D. Weiss, Munich, pp. 343–91; Daniel Weiss, 2000, “Der posttotalitäre politische Diskurs im heutigen Rußland,” *Sprachwandel in der Slavia: Die slavischen Sprachen an der Schwelle zum 21. Jahrhundert: Ein internationales Handbuch*, ed. L. Zybatow, Wiesbaden, pp. 209–46. Zybatow (1995, pp. 184–283) traces the multifarious transformations of Soviet *newspeak* in the language of the post-*perestroika* Russian mass media. Cf. also Gasan Guseinov, 2004, *D.S.P.: Sovetskie ideologemy v russkom diskurse 1990-kh*, Moscow.

10 For a brief comparative treatment of the two periods, see Daniel Weiss, 2001, “Zwischen Pluralisierung und Brutalisierung—die Nöte des heutigen Russisch,” *Hochsprachen in*

As Michael S. Gorham notes in his book on language culture in the post-revolutionary and early Soviet years, metalinguistic discussion, or “talk about talk,” becomes more intense during times of radical social and political upheaval.¹¹ This is exactly what we can also observe today. Interestingly, a heightened degree of self-reflection has been ascribed both to the language users—professional linguists as well as ordinary people—and to the literature of post-Soviet Russia, whose authors are “professional” language users in a more specific sense.¹² Our book aims to present a spectrum of all these responses to the linguistic situation in Russia today: from the language use and language debates, including popular and professional linguistic attitudes and their ideological underpinnings, through works of artistic prose and poetry, to linguistic strategies and ideologies stemming from the Soviet era that continue to be relevant.

Michael S. Gorham’s article “Language Culture and National Identity in Post-Soviet Russia,” examines contemporary manifestations of language purism in order to discuss its relationship to the issue of national identity and its potency as a mechanism for reshaping the norm. Gorham’s working hypothesis is that, following a period of verbal innovation in Russia which has now been superseded by a purist reaction and a polarized language debate, this debate will eventually assume a more moderate, synthesized tone. Having drawn attention to the possible innovative and “constructive” aspects of purism and to the complex web of ideological, institutional, and individual factors that shape post-Soviet language culture, Gorham points in conclusion to signs of a new linguistic reconciliation on the institutional level.

The purist trend in the language debate is further explored by Lara Ryazanova-Clarke in her article “‘The Crystallization of Structures’: Linguistic Culture in Putin’s Russia.” Defining her material as the “metalinguistic discourse” (discourse about language) in both its official and popular variants, Ryazanova-Clarke provides a number of examples of

Europa: Entstehung, Geltung und Zukunft, eds. K. Ehlich, J. Ossner & H. Stammerjohan, Freiburg im Breisgau, pp. 185–209; pp. 201–202.

11 Gorham, 2005, p. 4.

12 See I.T. Vepreva, 2005, *Iazykovaia refleksiiia v postsovetsskuiu epokhu*, Moscow, and the articles on contemporary Russian literature in T.L. Rybalchenko, ed. 2004, *Russkaia literatura v xx veke: Imena, problemy, kul’turnyi dialog*, vol. 6: *Formy samorefleksii literatury xx veka: Metateksty i metatekstovye struktury*, Tomsk.

purist calls for language protection and language cultivation. These examples and their dominating metaphors are contextualized throughout with reference to underlying ideologies, myths and power struggles. The conclusion is in line with Gorham's view: language legislation now appears as a linguistic version of Vladimir's Putin political project—"the vertical of power." However, as Ryazanova-Clarke underlines, the situation may be completely different when we turn to actual language usage.

Indeed, within the field of contemporary literature, as the following articles demonstrate, there seem to be few signs of any crystallization of a norm, with regard to either language usage or linguistic attitudes. Moreover, the response of literature to the changed and changing linguistic environment is at one and the same time more complicated than the positions assumed in the language debate, given the inherent ambiguities of literary form and its sophisticated means of language treatment, and capable of complicating that very same debate through its experimenting with words and with word-made possible worlds. These points are underlined and exemplified in Ingunn Lunde's article "Language Culture in Post-Soviet Russia: The Response of Literature." Lunde's main examples are two novels, Tat'iana Tolstaia's *Kys'* (2000, *The Slynx*) and Vladimir Sorokin's *Goluboe salo* (1999, *Blue Lard*), both of which respond to the linguistic situation in epistemological terms and confront the reader with extremely challenging fictional language cultures: the limits, challenges and potentials of language are thoroughly investigated here within closed linguistic environments. In the second part of her article, Lunde turns from implicit to explicit linguistic responses, presenting three "self-commenting" texts, which she terms "footnote literature," with a view to their ironic, humorous and multi-levelled reflections on the language of literature and its function in the portrayal of reality.

While Lunde analyses manifestly extreme examples of literary response to the language situation, Tine Roesen in her article "Discretion: The Unpretentious Text in Contemporary Russian Literature," turns to a kind of text which is above all discreet with regard to linguistic and literary devices. In contrast to the verbal play and literary experiments of much contemporary prose, this text is characterized by simplicity and modesty. Through her analyses of individual works by Liudmila Petrushevskaia, Iurii Buida, and Andrei Gelasimov, Roesen shows how these unpretentious texts play down all the characteristics traditionally

regarded as defining literary prose composition—in terms of narrativity, fictionality and aesthetics. Placing the texts in the tradition of the “little man” in Russian literature, and identifying them as part of a neo-sentimentalist trend in contemporary Russian literature, Roesen argues that despite their unpretentiousness they may nevertheless imply strong statements about the actual and desirable development of post-Soviet Russian language and literature.

Vladimir Sorokin, whose *œuvre* is the subject of Dirk Uffelmann’s article “Лед тронулся: The Overlapping Periods in Vladimir Sorokin’s Work from the Materialization of Metaphors to Fantastic Substantialism,” is obviously an important representative of the transgressively innovative literature of today’s Russia. However, as Uffelmann shows, it would be wrong to propose any simultaneity between the general landslide of the linguistic norm and norm-breaking in Sorokin’s work. Once again, literature does not fit the pattern established by the language debate. Uffelmann discusses earlier attempts to identify periods in Sorokin’s *œuvre*, and suggests an alternative periodization which takes into account not only the writer’s treatment of language, narration and storyline, including the implied ontological presuppositions, but also the reception of his work. An important point in Uffelmann’s periodization is his rejection of distinct periods in favour of three overlapping tendencies, as well as his comparison between the various periods of Sorokin’s literary output and the contemporaneous development of language and politics in Russia.

In the next article, “Iurii Buida: A Writer’s Search for Authenticity,” the question of reception forms the starting-point for Brita Lotsberg Bryn’s exploration of Buida’s widely published and diverse *œuvre*. How are we to read this *œuvre* as a whole, given that interpretations and classifications of Buida’s works range from the labels of experimental and postmodern to the use of traditional elements in form as well as content? Basing her argument on an analysis of four of his short stories, Bryn argues that despite its heterogeneity, Buida’s work may be characterized in fact as one coherent project; not so much as a postmodern project aiming to undermine concepts of reality and of self, but as a quest on the part of the author for meaning and authenticity. This quest involves the fictionalization of contemporary social and linguistic realities as well as the use of historical and mythological character types, and is presented—again,

ambiguously—in an eloquent language interspersed with local slang, jargon, and profanities.

The potential of literature to complicate the (pro)positions and topics of the language debate is fully realized in the case examined by Martin Paulsen in his article “Criticizing Pelevin’s Language: The Language Question in the Reception of Viktor Pelevin’s Novel *Generation ‘P’*.” With the intention of looking more closely at the role of literary criticism as an institution positioned somewhere between literature and the (language) community, and working from the assumption that literature may play an important role in the ongoing negotiation of language norms, Paulsen analyses the debate about the language of *Generation “P”* (1999) that took place in literary reviews following the publication of the book. In the case of *Generation “P,”* as Paulsen shows, many critics comment on the language of the novel, but there is no consensus either on its character or on its possible justification. Describing the approaches of the critics as “functionalistic” and “normative,” Paulsen gives a clear picture of the complexities of language evaluation and norm negotiation at the intersection between general and literary language usage.

In the various genres of poetry the situation is no less complex, but for this very reason—because it tries out, elaborates on, and contextualizes words—poetry functions as an exceptionally rich dictionary of linguistic change. Such is the general conclusion of Liudmila Zubova’s article “Novye slova v poeticheskom vospriiatii,” which provides a number of examples of the way in which new linguistic elements are incorporated into contemporary poetry: political expressions, computer-related terms, terms from various spheres of life that give rise to new metaphors, reactions to the language of commercials, and, not least, disapproval of the recent language developments. Poets are not only language users, Zubova reminds us, but also portrayers of language, and explicit linguistic reflection is not unusual in poetry. Zubova also points out and exemplifies how the language of post-Soviet Russian poetry was anticipated in many ways by the poetic language of the 1960s–1980s and its linguistic opposition to the official rhetoric.

Annika B. Myhr, in her article “Trends in the Russian Language Debate: The Response of Contemporary Poetry,” continues the approach of Zubova. Against the background of general trends in the language debate, she undertakes close readings of two poems with a particular view

to their incorporation and treatment of problems of contemporary language culture. Elena Shvarts' "Zaplachka konservativno nastroennogo lunatika," which addresses the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and David Raskin's "Issiakli volneniia, ostalas' lish' trezvaia volia...", in which the computer is a prime metaphor, each challenge in their own way the concepts of "language norm" and "standard language." Faced with the ambiguity of literary art, readers and critics alike often feel inclined to seek answers from the author responsible for it. In these two cases, Myhr is actually in possession of such answers. She can therefore round off her close readings with illuminating comparisons of the texts to the two poets' answers to questionnaires on the state of contemporary Russian language and culture. Not that these answers dissolve the ambiguities; rather, by involving the opinion of the "creator," they serve to develop further the important issue of creative linguistic reflection.

The final three articles take us back to the moulding of Soviet language culture in the 1920s and subsequently. In Elena Markasova's article "U istokov novoi normativnosti: 'liubov' k rodnomu slovu', ritoricheskii arsenal shkol'nogo obrazovaniia 1920-kh, i iazykovaia refleksiiia 1990-kh godov," the question of conscious opinion versus creative intuition is shown to be also affected by what the writers and poets learned at school. Whereas the relationship between the ruling ideology and the educational system in Soviet Russia has often been subjected to analysis, Markasova sets herself the task of scrutinizing the influence of this ideologically charged teaching on the tastes and creative style of various writers. Her focus is the (changing) didactics of the reading and writing programmes used in the Soviet school system of the 1920s, a didactics which was also used in the training of the illiterate masses. In conclusion, Markasova sees a connection between the impact of this training on Soviet literature and its reception and its possible formative role in the normative approaches that now dominate the contemporary debates on language.

A writer who experienced this Soviet training but never really internalized its lessons was Isaak Babel. Enhancing our understanding of the difficult issue of language and identity, Knut Andreas Grimstad's article "Performing 'Bolshevism' or, The Diverse Minority Idiom of Isaak Babel," presents Babel's Red Army prose as the writer's incongruous and unsuccessful attempts to assimilate himself to the new Soviet style. Through his analyses of the linguistic, cultural, and political aspects of these uncon-

ventional narratives, Grimstad brings out the problematic—in Stalin’s Soviet Union—indeterminateness not only of Babel’s political stance, but also of his treatment of ethnic (Cossacks, Jews, Poles) and gender-related (manliness, womanliness) issues. By means of his diverse literary idiom, and despite the fact that he is writing in the language of and about the achievements of the dominant, Soviet-Russian culture, Babel challenges good Bolshevik taste—with fatal consequences.

There was no room for vagueness and ambiguity under Stalin. But are we right to feel at a safe distance from his rule? This question is answered in the negative in the final article, Irina Sandomirskaja’s “Iazyk-Stalin: ‘Marksizm i voprosy iazykoznaniiia’ kak lingvisticheskii povorot vo vse-lennoi sssr.” Here, Sandomirskaja analyses the elements and symbolic implications of Stalin’s well-known contribution to theoretical linguistics. Sandomirskaja argues that, not only does this work pose some of the same questions that we might ask ourselves today, it also provides elaborate answers. Most importantly, perhaps, Stalin’s theory of language is also, as Sandomirskaja shows in detail, a self-portrait: like the unequivocal language, Stalin too is free from mistakes, a perfect source of unalterable and unmistakable, tautological utterances. The close interrelationship in Stalin’s text between “Stalin,” “language,” and “USSR,” which eventually acquires cosmogonical dimensions, links Sandomirskaja’s analysis to the important theme of language and national identity—but in this case as seen from above, from a dictator’s perspective and as a tool of power. This perspective from above is unexpectedly proto-cybernetic and technological (not ideological) *par excellence*: in the new circumstances of the Cold War, Stalin seems to be reinventing the USSR as a *universum* of communication, with language as its medium, and himself as its instrument. Eliciting a series of other characteristics, Sandomirskaja suggests in conclusion that in the mythopoetics, norms and institutional mechanisms surrounding the Russian language even today, Stalin is eternally present.

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A note on transliteration

The book uses the Library of Congress transliteration system, with the exception of certain names where other forms are commonly used in English, such as Brodsky, Babel, or Trotsky.