

Language Culture in Post-Soviet Russia: The Response of Literature

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Отчего бы это,—сказал Никита Иванович,—отчего это у нас все мутирует, ну все!
Ладно люди, но язык, понятия, смысл! А?
Россия! Все вывернуто!

Tat'iana Tolstaia, *Kys'*

CONTEMPORARY Russian language culture has been the subject of passionate debate for more than a decade, reflecting the radical linguistic liberalization that has accompanied the dramatic social and political changes in Russia since the late 1980s. Linguists, educationalists, journalists and politicians alike engage in discussions about the “language question,” while the venues for such debates are journals,¹ round tables,² the mass media³ and parliament.⁴

1 In particular, *Russkaia rech'*, *Rusistika segodnia*, *Russkii iazyk v shkole*, *Mir russkogo slova*.

2 Cf., for example, “Kruglyi stol: iazykovaia norma i problemy ee kodifikatsii,” Institut russkogo iazyka im. V.V. Vinogradova, RAN, 13.02.2002, URL: http://www.gramota.ru/mag_arch.html?id=297 (accessed 10.01.2006); Radio Liberty: “Na kakom russkom iazyke my govorim?” 17.02.2003, URL: <http://www.svoboda.org/programs/pf/2003/pf.021703.asp> (accessed 10.01.2006).

3 Apart from the newspapers, radio and TV stations regularly feature broadcasts dedicated to questions of language culture (or cultivation), for instance “Govorim po-russki” (“Let’s speak Russian”) on *Ekho Moskvyy*, *Radio Maiak’s* “Gramotei” (“The one who can read and write”) and others.

4 Consider state initiatives such as Yeltsin’s “Russian Language Council” (1995), revived by Putin in 2000; various attempts to legislate linguistic norms (see Gorham’s article in this volume, fn. 19); the government’s target programme “The Russian Language” 2002–2005, renewed on 29 December 2005 for the years 2006–2010; the reference portal <http://www.gramota.ru>, sponsored by the Ministry of Publishing, Television and Radio Broadcasting and Mass Media of the Russian Federation.

In this article I intend to look for comments on the linguistic situation outside of these fora, exploring the language question as reflected in literature. I shall be less concerned with the direct manifestations in literary texts of recent linguistic changes, such as the huge number of loanwords or the growing use of jargon, slang, or vulgar language. Rather, I wish to examine literature's various reactions and responses to the main currents of contemporary language culture. As has been stated many times, recent Russian literature bears a significant reflective character, often oriented towards linguistic themes. As Boris Groys puts it, специфическим предметом [постмодернистской] литературы является не действительность, а язык.⁵ It goes without saying that in literary fiction (and I shall confine myself to prose texts), the language question is frequently raised on other grounds than in the official debates on the state of the language. To be sure, we do come across examples where literary texts comment explicitly on the issues that interest us here, but much more common are implicit and indirect responses.⁶ In a number of different ways, literary texts may thus give voice to critique, approval, defence, or playful response to some aspect of the present language situation.

Roughly speaking, the official debates on the state of the language display two main trends: one that approves of the development of contemporary Russian, welcomes the democratization of the language and of linguistic usage and sees in this a reflection of society's new-won freedoms, of renewal and creativity. This kind of reaction was predominant in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The second trend disapproves of the present language situation, arguing that the language needs to be protected against both vulgarization and foreign influence. The sceptics speak of "perversion" (искажение), "coarsening" (огрубление) and "pollution" (загрязнение) of the language. This trend has been more audible since the second half of the 1990s.⁷

5 As quoted in I.S. Skoropanova, 2002, *Russkaia postmodernistskaia literatura: novaia filosofiiia, novyi iazyk*, St Petersburg, p. 174. "the specific object of [postmodern] literature is not reality, but language."

6 Thus my focus is not on the views of writers on contemporary linguistic culture as expressed in interviews or questionnaires, even if this could certainly serve as interesting material for comparison. For a recent publication of writers' responses to a questionnaire about the current language situation, see "Pisateli o iazyke" *Otechestvennye zapiski* 2, 2005, URL: http://magazines.russ.ru/oz/2005/2/2005_2_6.html (accessed 16.01.2006).

7 For an overview of language debates in post-*perestroika* Russia, see Michael S. Gorham,

When we turn to literary fiction, its various responses to the language question may not be grouped as easily in opposite camps. Apart from the variety in itself, a major reason for this is the latent ambiguity and ironic stance of much contemporary Russian literature. As my following exploration of some recent literary works will illustrate, a single text may easily combine an approving and a critical attitude towards the linguistic situation and thus, in fact, question the axiological basis of the official debates.

I shall first discuss and compare two novels, Tat'iana Tolstaia's *Kys'* (2000, *The Slynx*)⁸ and Vladimir Sorokin's *Goluboe salo* (1999, *Blue Lard*).⁹ I then move on to an analysis of a short prose text of 1999 by Vladimir Korobov, which I shall eventually place within the context of a group of texts—self-commenting or self-reflecting texts. My main examples are, admittedly, somewhat “extreme,” each in its own way, but at the same time I believe they are representative precisely because they take to extremes certain particular, and much broader, trends in recent Russian prose.¹⁰

Tolstaia and Sorokin: linguistic investigations

The novel *Kys'* is inhabited by mutants living in the city of Fedor-Kuzmichsk, situated on the site of Moscow some two hundred years after the “Blast,” probably a nuclear catastrophe. As a result of the blast, people suffer from various types of “consequences” (последствия): claws, a tail, an unbelievable number of ears; Kudeiar Kudeiarych, the city’s “chief saniturion” is able to light up darkness by the pure force of his eyes, while Nikita Ivanych, one of the “Oldeners” (прежние), i.e. those who survived the catastrophe, can produce blasts of flame by his very glance. Not only people suffer the harsh “consequences”; language, too, falls victim to the catastrophe, and on various levels: first, the language of the novel repre-

2000, “*Natsiia ili snikerizatsiia?* Identity and Perversion in the Language Debates of Late- and Post-Soviet Russia,” *Russian Review* 59 (4), pp. 614–29. See also Gorham’s and Ryazanova-Clarke’s contributions to this volume.

8 Jamey Gambrell’s rendering of the title: Tatyana Tolstaya, 2003, *The Slynx*, Boston.

9 I will here be repeating some observations from another article, which contains a more detailed analysis of the two novels: “Literaturno-iazykovye strategii prozy rubezha XX–XXI vv. v kontekste sporov o sostoianii sovremennogo russkogo iazyka,” *Khudozhestvennyi tekst kak dinamicheskaiia sistema*, ed. N. Fateeva, Moscow (forthcoming 2006).

10 It should be noted that while Tolstaia’s and Sorokin’s novels have become bestsellers in Russia, Korobov’s text has, as far as I have been able to establish, only been published on the Internet. Its dissemination is therefore difficult to establish.

sents something principally new and peculiar in that the text combines a great variety of linguistic and stylistic forms: neologisms, colloquialisms, vulgar language, fairy-tale language, semantically reduced speech, and idiosyncratic, mutated words, such as ФЕЛОСОФИЯ, МОЗЕЙ, ТРОДИЦЫИ, ЭНТЕЛЕГЕНЦЫЯ, and so forth. These words, which, more often than not, have to do with the cultural sphere, are comprehensible only to the “Oldeners.”¹¹

Second, the language, or language culture, is distorted on the level of intersubjective communication, as a means of intellectual and emotional apprehension of words and their meanings, of people, life and the world. Among the common “dear ones” (голубчики), as they are called, there is no literacy, and their verbal interaction lacks both empathy and genuine understanding. In this way, the linguistic crisis is turned into an epistemological crisis.¹² One of the most striking examples of this is the cataloguing policy of the novel’s main character, Benedikt, who tries to put the library of his father-in-law, Kudeiar Kudeiarych, in order: he shelves together books, the titles of which show a superficial equivalency on the phonetic, lexical, syntactical or rhythmical level: *Evgenii Onegin* is placed next to a book by Evgenii Primakov, then follows *Evgenika—orudie rassistov*; *Gamlet—prints datskii* placed next to *Tashkent—gorod khlebnyi*; *Krasnoe i cherno*e next to *Goluboe i zelenoe*; or, the authors Mukhina, Shershenevich, Zhukov, Shmelev, Tarakanova, Babochkin all placed together.¹³

Innerfictionally, the lack of literacy—what we might call, in this context, the language culture or language situation—is associated with a dehumanization and degradation of society. At the same time, however, the author, through her linguistic inventiveness and sophisticated play on

11 For commentaries on these “barbarisms,” see Christine Gözl, 2004, “Das ABC der russischen Katastrophen: Tat’jana Tolstajas Roman ‘Kys’,” *Analysieren als Deuten: Wolf Schmid zum 60. Geburtstag*, eds. L. Fleishman, C. Gözl & Aa.A. Hansen-Löve, Hamburg, pp. 689–718; p. 709; N.A. Fateeva, 2004, “Absurd i grammatika khudozhestvennogo teksta (na materiale proizvedenii N. Iskrenko, V. Narbikovoi, T. Tolstoi),” *Absurd i vokrug: Sbornik statei*, ed. O. Burenina, Moscow, pp. 273–86; pp. 274–75.

12 Cf. Gözl, 2004, pp. 690f.

13 T. Tolstaia, 2005, *Kys’*, Moscow, pp. 207–208. *Evgenii Onegin*, Evgenii Primakov, *Eugenics—A Racist’s Weapon*; *Hamlet—Prince of Denmark*, *Tashkent—City of Bread*; *The Red and the Black*, *The Blue and the Green*; Mukhina, Shershenevich, Zhukov, Shmelev, Tarakanova, Babochkin (all surnames based on words for insects: fly, hornet, beetle, bumble-bee, cockroach, butterfly).

words, clearly demonstrates her own mastery of language. In this respect, the pages describing Benedikt's naïve shelving principle make hilarious reading. As a result, the novel represents a fundamental critique of the language which it portrays (and its users)—in particular, language in its capacity to make sense of the world—but at the same time, the text emerges as a playful experiment celebrating the meaning-generating capacities of language. In this light, the representation of linguistic culture in *Kys'* may be read as a challenge to language users to take responsibility for their own verbal life, as it were, a point which is also thematized in the novel through the role played by the “Oldeners” as bearers of (a lost) tradition in the new society.¹⁴ I would argue, however, that it is a challenge liberated from heavy moralistic overtones, since the novel's linguistic playfulness renders what I would propose to call its “ethics of language culture” ambiguous. After all, the linguistic habits of the “Oldeners” are mocked just as much as those of Benedikt.

In Sorokin's *Goluboe salo* the mixture of different linguistic and cultural elements is far more radical than in Tolstaia. This can be seen most conspicuously in the spoken language of 2068, the year when the novel's narrative starts. It is made up of Russian, Chinese, German, Tibetan, and English words, slang expressions, vulgarisms, invented as well as simply incomprehensible words. Here is one example:

—Stop it, рипс¹⁵ пиньфади¹⁶ тудин!¹⁷—подпрыгнула и коснулась плавающего потолка Карпенкофф.—Если кто еще раз заговорит

14 Throughout the novel, Nikita Ivanovich tries to teach Benedikt the alphabet, not only of letters, but the “true alphabet of life”; moreover, he erects, at various locations in Fedor-Kuzmichsk, signs with the “old” placenames of Moscow streets and squares, so that they would not be forgotten.

15 Рипс: международное ругательство, появившееся в устной речи евроазиатов после Оклахомской ядерной катастрофы 2028 года. Происходит от фамилии сержанта морской пехоты США Джонатана Рипса, самовольно оставшегося в зоне радиоактивного поражения и в течение 25 дней ведущего подробный радиорепортаж о состоянии своего облученного, умирающего тела. (V.G. Sorokin, 2002, *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh*, Moscow, vol. 3, p. 299). “International curse, which appeared in the colloquial speech of the Euroasians following the Oklahoma nuclear catastrophe of 2028. It derives from the surname of Jonathan Rips, US marine sergeant, who volunteered to remain in the radioactive zone and who for 25 days delivered a detailed radio report about the condition of his irradiated dying body.” Unless noted otherwise, translations are my own.

16 пиньфади: убогий (кит.) (Sorokin, 2002, vol. 3, p. 297). “miserable (Chinese).”

17 тудин: лысина (кит.) (Sorokin, 2002, vol. 3, p. 298). “bald spot (Chinese).”

о проекте—я сделаю ему малый тип-тирип по трейсу!¹⁸ Мы пьем ЖИДКИЙ ПАМЯТНИК! Кстати, где музыка? [...]

—Я хочу 45-МООТ!¹⁹ 45-МООТ!—прыгала, расплескивая ПАМЯТНИК, Карпенкофф.

—Марта, только не ГЕРО-ТЕХНО!²⁰—завизжал Бочвар. Я тер на это в десятилетнем возрасте!²¹

In the light of the huge number of external and internal loanwords (that is, foreign words and various substandard words) in contemporary Russian, it is, perhaps, possible to view Sorokin's representation of the language of 2068 as a kind of commentary on the language situation in Russia today.²² But whereas, in the current discussions on the role of external and internal loanwords, the focus is directed towards single words and expressions, Sorokin's interest seems to lie with the role of the *context* for the meaning and apprehension of such words. The part of the novel which takes place in 2068 abounds with words which, from a purely communicative point of view, are principally interchangeable, and the meaning of which is established exclusively by the context. Two things are noteworthy in this respect. First, the context seems to facilitate an intuitive, if sometimes not entirely precise, comprehension of potentially incomprehensible words. Second, even if the text as a whole sometimes borders on the limits of the meaningful, innerfictional understanding is

18 тип-тирип по трейсу: удачное стечение обстоятельств (Sorokin, 2002, vol. 3, p. 300). "a happy coincidence."

19 45-МООТ: LP-45 of the type M.O.O.T. (Music of Our Time).

20 ГЕРО-ТЕХНО: Cf. the musical style "hero techno"; Sorokin's list explains GERO-KUNST: направление в современном искусстве, использующее вибропрепараты реактивного действия (Sorokin, 2002, vol. 3, p. 299). "GERO-KUNST: a trend in contemporary art which uses vibropreparations with reactive effects."

21 Sorokin, 2002, vol. 3, p. 102. This passage does not contain footnotes, but some of the words and expressions are explained in two lists included in the novel's appendix. Where no page reference is given, "explanations" are my own. "Stop it, rips [14] pinfadi [15] tudin! [16] Karpenkoff jumped up and touched the drifting ceiling. 'If someone begins to talk about the project once more, I'll give him a little tip-tirip on the treis [17]. We are drinking THE LIQUID MONUMENT! By the way, where's the music?' [...] 'I want 45-MOOT [18], 45-MOOT!' Karpenkoff jumped up and down and spilled the MONUMENT. 'Marta, only no GERO-TEKHNO!' [19]—Bochvar let out a howl. 'I had enough of that when I was ten.'"

22 In this respect it is interesting to note the relatively low number, compared to other source languages, of Anglo-American loanwords in *Goluboe salo*.

obviously not a problem: within the represented dialogues, people talk, listen, understand, ask, reply, scold; in other words, they engage in a reasonably diverse verbal interaction without communicative problems.²³ In this, one could perhaps see a hint of language's capacity for self-regulation, well-known to linguists, but not always as readily accepted by the champions of language cultivation (*kul'tura rechi*). But at the same time, this language, just like the novel as a whole, is demonstratively *constructed*. In *Goluboe salo* language, literature, and life are all represented as constructable things. The novel's main hero, Boris Gloger is a "biophilologist," while its crucial substance—the blue lard—is produced by cloned writers (Tolstoy-4, Akhmatova-2 etc) in the process of their literary activity.

Again, a certain ambiguity arises as to the representation of the linguistic situation: on the one hand, the language, as portrayed, emerges as a very real fact that obviously works; on the other, this reality is demonstratively constructed, and therefore also regulated: within the novel by some unnamed institution, one surmises, for the readers simply by the author. The impression of authorial language control is enhanced by the novel's two appendices (each of two pages), containing lists of words and their explanations: Китайские слова и выражения, употребляемые в тексте and Другие слова и выражения.²⁴ In the explanations to some of the words, the reader is referred to other, incomprehensible words from the same short dictionary.

Thus, in Sorokin's novel, just as in Tolstaia's *Kys'*, the limits, challenges and potentials of language are investigated within a closed linguistic environment. But whereas with Tolstaia innerfictional non-understanding operates within the frame of a peculiar alliance between author and reader (through humour, linguistic play), in Sorokin's literary universe there are no problems of communication between the characters, while the reader is constantly challenged by non-comprehension and the potential meaninglessness of what he or she is reading.

It is characteristic of these two novels that in the representation of fictional linguistic realities, their complexities are not usually touched upon explicitly. To be sure, we do find certain commentaries and notes

23 A point made by Peter Deutschmann, 2003, *Intersubjektivität und Narration: Gogol, Erofeev, Sorokin, Mamleev*, Frankfurt/Main, p. 325.

24 "Chinese words and expressions used in the text" and "Other words and expressions."

concerning the fictional language situation,²⁵ but these are relatively rare. In general, the theme of language culture in these two novels is played out indirectly, and, when compared to the official debates, in a quite unconventional manner, potentially capable of blurring the borders and widening the issues of such debates.

If the language question is dealt with largely implicitly in the two novels by Tolstaia and Sorokin, then explicit commentary is the hallmark of another group of recent Russian writers, to whom I will now turn.

Self-commenting texts: Korobov, Popov, P'etsukh

As indicated by its prolix title, *Dal'nevostochnye ekspeditsii kniazia E.E. Ukhtomskogo i tantriiskie misterii ni-kha-yung-sle'i man-su-ro-bha. (Iz istorii semioticheskikh kul'tov)*, (1999, *Prince E.E. Ukhtomskii's Expeditions to the Far East and the Tantric Mysteries ni-kha-yung-sle'i man-su-ro-bh (From the History of Semiotic Cults)*),²⁶ Vladimir Korobov's text is written in the form of a quasi-scholarly essay, with thirty-eight footnotes and numerous bibliographical references. Korobov's own voice provides the frame for extended paragraphs written by the "scholarly I" of the orientalist Prince Esper Esperovich Ukhtomskii (1861–1921), who in 1890–91 accompanied tsarevich Nikolai, later Tsar Nicholas II, on his travels to the East. In the course of these, Prince Ukhtomskii took part in a particular Buddhist ritual, where he suddenly had the clear experience of understanding what was sung and said by the Tibetan monks. He was allowed to make a copy of the book that provided the texts for the ritual. Back in St Petersburg, he published small excerpts from the book in the columns of *Sanktpeterburgskie vedomosti*. The excerpts, some of which are quoted by Korobov, turn out to be a collage of (mostly) modernist poets, such as Pasternak, Blok, Kruchenykh, Mandel'shtam, and a few others. Innerfictionally, this can be explained by the fact that Ukhtomskii distributes copies of the book among prominent literary figures of the day. Also, Korobov inserts (quasi-)quotations from diaries and letters of

25 One example is the passage serving as an epigraph to this article: "‘Why is it’, said Nikita Ivanovich, ‘why is it that everything keeps mutating, everything! People, well, all right, but the language, concepts, meaning! Huh? Russia! Russia! Everything gets twisted up in knots!’" Tolstaia, 2005, p. 229; Tolstaia, 2003, p. 196.

26 URL: <http://www.russianresources.lt/dictant/Materials/Esper.html> (accessed 18.01.2006). This text was brought to my attention by Irina Skoropanova's (2002, pp. 137–39) short discussion of it.

well-known poets in order to demonstrate their acquaintance with the book, which Ukhtomskii, in russifying the transliteration of the Tibetan (*ni-kha-yung-sle'i man-su-ro-bha*), called *Kniga Iunglei Mansurova*.

At first glance, Korobov's text gives the impression of a serious scholarly essay; the names are real (Prince Ukhtomskii himself, literary figures such as Chukovskii, Blok, Gumilev, Kuzmin, A. Vvedenskii, Remizov) and the references look genuine. On closer inspection, however, the cited passages turn out to be fictitious quasi-quotations, while most of the bibliographic references are non-existent. Besides, the text contains numerous signals which point to its ironic, parodic or even absurd character. For example, the fact that the ritual verses Ukhtomskii hears among the Tibetan monks turn out to reflect a strange kind of Russian; Korobov's meticulous style and exaggerated use of scholarly clichés; and his commentary on a (non-existent) study by the (genuine) scholar Kennard Lipman²⁷ of the magical language (cf. below) of the Buddhist Tantric tradition: Исследование Липмана во многом явно носит предварительный характер. Многие положения раскрыты недостаточно полно и требуют уточнения и разъяснения.²⁸ The latter note functions, of course, as an ironic comment on Ukhtomskii's own investigation. Finally, there is Ukhtomskii's absurd reference to the "significant" fact of Kornei Chukovskii's parallel interest in the *Kniga Iunglei Mansurova* and Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (or *The Book of Jungles* as it is entitled in Korobov's commentary).

Throughout the text, the *Kniga Iunglei Mansurova* is presented in an atmosphere of mystification. The author, and with him the reader, seeks for a clue to its hidden meaning. From the quotations of the poets it is clear that their acquaintance with the book is something they find very significant, but do not want to talk about. Only towards the end of the essay does Ukhtomskii bring to the reader's attention the forementioned study by Kennard Lipman, presenting a theory of a "linguistic pragmatics": [...руководство] по лингвистической прагматике, в котором события и явления внешнего мира рассматриваются в их зависимости от определенных языковых фактов, от определенных способов

27 Whereas the article referred to does not exist, the book where it was "published" does.

28 "Lipman's investigation in many ways bears a preliminary character. Many points are revealed in an insufficiently complete way and require further elaboration and clarification."

использования языка.²⁹ Furthermore, Lipman is cited for his reference to a certain magical, secret language of the Tantric tradition, which turns out to have something to do with the *Kniga*, since the knowledge of the “structures” of this magic language is handed down from generation to generation partly through mantras and partly through the *Kniga*. Now, these structures are of a quite peculiar nature: структуры [...] полностью совпадали со структурой наличной действительности таким образом, что речь фактически являлась актом творения вещей и событий.³⁰ Moreover, they are not bound in principle to one particular language, but may use a certain language as a “carrier” (носитель): [структуры] [...] устанавливают отношения прямой зависимости между языком и вниманием, обращенным к внешним предметам. В результате, слово и вещь, данная в восприятии, как бы начинают звучать в унисон, взаимно трансформируя друг друга в новые слова и события.³¹ Today, this magical language, we are told, has been lost, because no natural language is able to incorporate these particular structures.

It transpires, so Korobov informs us, that Ukhtomskii had hoped for the *Kniga* to be read as a kind of practical handbook which might lead, through knowledge of the magical language, to a new linguistic and poetic practice. As this does not seem likely to happen, he concludes that the language—the Russian language, we must presume—is not yet ready: язык не готов еще.

Now, this essay is clearly a parody on a somewhat excentric type of literary criticism or anthropological study. At the same time, however, the way the case-study is presented also opens up for an interpretation of the text as a commentary on certain basic philosophical and linguistic problems. To be more precise, the very structure of the narrative—Korobov’s text intertwined with his own commentaries, lengthy quotations from Ukhtomskii’s notes as well as (quasi-)quotations from a number of other writers—introduces various levels for possible interpretation of these problems.

29 “a handbook of linguistic pragmatics, where events and phenomena of the external world are viewed in their dependency on particular linguistic factors, on certain means of linguistic usage.”

30 “the structures [...] fully coincided with the structure of present reality in such a way that speech was in fact equivalent to the act of creation of things and events.”

31 “[the structures] [...] establish a relationship of direct interdependency between the language and the attention directed towards external objects. As a result, the word and the thing, given in the perception, begin, as it were, to sound in unison, while mutually transforming one another into new words and events.”

On one of these levels, the essay contains some quite extreme linguistic statements: on the one hand the archaic idea of a magical language capable of changing reality by its very pronunciation, as well as the well-established link between this theory and the poetic tradition; on the other hand the idea of language as an independent, self-regulating system, as in Ukhtomskii's *язык не готов еще*. Indeed, by this very comment, a telic dimension is added to linguistic evolution, implying that language is on its way to a "fuller," or more perfect state. In Ukhtomskii's vision, these two views are united in a way which also echoes several poetic manifestos of his time, for example Aleksandr Blok's "Poeziia zagovorov i zaklinanii" (1908, "The Poetry of Spells and Incantations"), Andrei Belyi's "Magiia slov" (1910, "The Magic of Words"), or Konstantin Bal'mont's "Poeziia kak volshebstvo" (1915, "Poetry as Magic"). Belyi's essay, for example, suggests that language will regain its archaic, magical powers when reborn in Symbolist poetry. Korobov's text, then, establishes a link between these ideas, much in fashion among Symbolist poets, and the literary life in Russia today. Towards the very end of the essay, he becomes quite explicit in his critique of contemporary poetic practice:

Э.Э. Ухтомский, распространяя «Книгу», видимо надеялся, что она будет прочитана как некое практическое руководство, однако этого при его жизни не произошло. Мистерия исчезла, превратившись в литературу, которая в России сама стала культом.

Сегодня культ литературы умирает. Вернется ли слово мистерией?³²

These statements become ironic and ambiguous in the light of the text's parodic character in general, and of the author's unreliability in particular. Nevertheless, Korobov's story, promoting the mystical-utopian message "structure seeks language (and language users) in order to change reality," manages to challenge conventional views of the interrelationships between man, language and society, most remarkably by turning upside-down the traditional conception of the relationship between

32 "In distributing the *Book*, E.E. Ukhtomskii apparently hoped it would be read as a kind of practical handbook; however, this did not happen during his lifetime. The mystery disappeared, having turned into literature, which in Russia has become a cult itself. /Today, the cult of literature is dying. Will the word return as mystery?"

language and reality. In a modern setting, the text may thus be regarded as a commentary on, and perhaps a critique of, both linguistic regulation and language policy, and of linguistic and poetic practice.

In terms of form and genre, Korobov's text belongs to a trend of self-reflecting and self-commenting texts in contemporary Russian literature. Many of these texts reflect on the language of literature and its particular function in the portrayal of reality. To name a few examples: Iurii Buida's novels *Ermo* (1996) and *Boris i Gleb* (1997), Evgenii Popov's *Podlinnaia istoriia 'Zelennykh muzykantov'* (1998, *The True Story of 'The Green Musicians'*) and several of Viacheslav P'etsukh's works.

The use of footnotes, which in Korobov's case was motivated by the scholarly genre, is a no less prominent feature of Popov's text, labelled a novel. *Podlinnaia istoriia 'Zelennykh muzykantov'* consists of a main text (58 pp) written in the 1970s and published 1998 with 888 footnotes (255 pp) and an index of names appearing in the footnotes (22 pp). Popov's commentary is holistic in scope,³³ digressive in organization, parodic in character and humorous in style. He comments on the language, style and facts of the story, providing an overwhelming quantity of details: background information, explanations of realia and socio-historical or literary circumstances, anecdotes, personal reminiscences, and even additional prose passages. Here is a typical example:

А, а!... на!—сказал Иван Иванович (376)

(376), но вовсе не употребил, как вы, конечно же, подумали, нехорошее слово на букву «х», на месте которого стоят три точки. Иван Иванович не любил матерщину и правильно делал: и так все изматерились—народ, интеллигенты, партия, правительство...

33 With reference to the novel's bent towards exhaustiveness, one reviewer has suggested that the work is a parody of Iurii Lotman's commentary to Pushkin's *Evgenii Onegin*. Cf. Nadezhda Grigor'eva, "Evgenii Popov: Podlinnaia istoriia 'Zelennykh muzykantov': roman-komentarii," URL: <http://www.guelman.ru/slava/nrk/nrk3/19.html> (accessed 18.01.2005). Naturally, Nabokov's *Onegin* commentary also comes to mind. More recent examples include Iurii Scheglov's commentary to Il'f's and Petrov's diology: *Romany I. Il'fa i E. Petrova: Sputnik chitatelia* (Wiener slawistischer Almanach, Sonderband 26), 2 vols., Vienna, 1990–1991, and Aleksandr Ventsel's commentary (among other things) to Scheglov's commentary: *Komentarii k kommentariiam, komentarii, primechaniia k kommentariiam, primechaniia k kommentariiam k kommentariiam i komentarii k primechaniiam*, Moscow, 2005.

Материться, очевидно, и вообще нехорошо, вредно. Поэтому я в какой-то степени благодарен КГБшникам, что они забрали у меня рассказ «Неваревализм» и торжественно сожгли его у себя в топке по собственному постановлению, если они, конечно же, не врут. Рассказ этот имел крайне простой сюжет, но был написан исключительно нецензурным языком. Хотя—какая в этом моя вина, если народ так говорит и думает? Сюжет рассказа был прост: врач Царьков-Коломенский и его друг Бывальцев пьянствуют и философствуют во дворе около огромной деревянной бочки, которую они готовят для засолки капусты. Это делается следующим образом: в костре или печи докрасна накаляется орудие пролетариата—бульжник, после чего его с шипением опускают в бочку, закрывая ее плотной материей. От внутреннего пара бочка очищается, а от горячей воды разбухает и перестает течь... В это время над двором пролетает вертолет, из которого прямо в бочку падает пьяный мужик, которому от воздушного падения решительно ничего не делается худого, и все на радостях продолжают выпивать дальше. Кроме жены Царькова-Коломенского, которая, глядя на все это в мутное окошко, внутренне и наружно осыпает их чудовищными, нецензурными, циничными проклятиями. Они ей отвечают тем же.

А впрочем, все в этом рассказе любят друг друга, но только очень сильно ругаются, прямо ужасно!

Трудно русскому человеку без матерщины. У Пантелеймона Романова есть рассказ, как мужик-фронтовик поклялся, что, если останется в живых, прекратит материться. Он вернулся в родную деревню после империалистической бойни 1914–1917 гг. и вскоре повесился, так как не мог ни с кем в деревне разговаривать.

А у нас в экспедиции на Таймыре был один Саня, который знал, что «выражаться» при дамах нехорошо, поэтому он все время при разговоре давился, как обьевавшая кошка. Только и слышалось нечленораздельное «бньть, бньть».

Я бы не рекомендовал пишущей молодежи записывать нецензурные слова *буквально*. Ведь дело не в сути, а в звуке.

Поэт Инна Лиснянская рассказала мне, что однажды попросила Юза Алешковского не материться в ее присутствии, так как она представляет все сказанное *буквально*. Юз изумился, пожалел ее и никогда больше в ее присутствии не сквернословил.³⁴

34 Evgenii Popov, 2003, *Podlinnaia istoriia 'zelenykh muzykantov'*, Moscow, pp. 33, 181–82. “Ah, ah!... well!—said Ivan Ivanych (376). (376), but he didn't use at all, as you of course think, the bad word starting with the letter 'kh' that has been replaced by the three dots. Ivan Ivanych didn't like vulgar language and he was right: even so, everyone is using it in plenty—the people, the intellectuals, the party, the government... /Obvi-

The commentary deals with the use of *mat*, a recurrent subject of contemporary Russian language debates rarely discussed without passion. How very different is the style and voice of this passage. After having stated that the story's main character Ivan Ivanych did not use the bad word, which nevertheless "has been replaced by the three dots," the narrator opens with a clear if somewhat naïve denunciation of *mat*. There then follows, however, a string of "examples" or parables, written in a slightly graphomaniac style, which all highlight the natural function and, literally, vital importance of *mat* in people's speech and life. Towards the end of the passage, the narrator offers the paradoxical recommendation to young writers not to render unquotable language literally, since "it's all about the sound, not the essence." The effect of the whole passage is humorous, innocently provoking, but also potentially conciliatory: Popov's style is reminiscent of classical Russian writers such as Gogol and Dostoevsky,

ously, to swear isn't good, in general, it's harmful. For this reason, to a certain degree I'm grateful to the KGB people for confiscating my story 'Nevarevalizm' and solemnly burning it in their furnace in accordance with their own resolution, if, of course, they're not lying. This story had an extremely simple plot, but it was written exclusively in unquotable language. Although—am I to be blamed, if people talk and think in this way? The plot of the story was simple: a physician, Tsar'kov-Kolomenskii, and his friend Byval'tsev are drinking and philosophizing in the courtyard by a huge, wooden barrel that they are preparing for pickling cabbage. This is done in the following way: a cobble-stone—that weapon of the proletariat—is made red-hot in a fire or stove and then lowered sizzling into the barrel, which is covered with a thick piece of cloth. From the steam inside, the barrel is cleansed, while from the hot water it swells and stops leaking... At this point a helicopter is passing over the courtyard and out of it drops right into the barrel a drunken fellow, who does not suffer at all from the fall through the air, and everyone continues to drink in their joy. Except for the wife of Tsar'kov-Kolomenskii, who, looking at all this through the gloomy window, inwardly and outwardly heaps monstrous, unquotable, cynical curses on them. They answer her in the same way./However, everyone in this story loves one another, it's just that they use very bad language, it's awful!/It's tough for Russians without vulgar language. Penteleimon Romanov has a story about a peasant who fought at the front who swore that if he survived, he would give up using bad language. He returned to his native village after the imperialist slaughter of 1914–1917 and soon hanged himself, as he couldn't talk to anyone in the village./And with us, on the expedition on Taimyr there was a certain Sania who knew that it isn't good to 'express oneself' in the presence of ladies, and therefore he was always choked during conversations, like a cat that's overeaten. You could only hear the inarticulate 'fck, fck'./I wouldn't recommend young writers to render unquotable words *literally*. After all, it's all about the sound, not the essence./The poet Inna Lisnianskaia told me that she'd once asked Iuz Aleshkovskii not to use bad language in her presence, because she would conceive of everything that was said *literally*. Iuz was amazed, felt sorry for her and never used foul language in her presence again."

whose narrators often cite at length painful matters that they have just promised the reader they will pass over in silence; through his use of this device, Popov demonstrates the integral place in literature of one of the most disputed linguistic phenomena in contemporary Russian.

A story by P'etsukh published the same year as Popov's novel, "Muzhchiny vyshli pokurit'..." ("The Men Went Out to Smoke..."), uses footnotes in a similar way to explain the author's literary devices and thematize the interrelationship between fiction and reality. Particularly characteristic of P'etsukh's text are the ironic effect and ambiguous meaning of the over-explicit, almost naïve, commentary. Consider footnote 4, which reflects on the relationship between spoken and written (literary) language:

Прямую речь литературных персонажей приходится облагораживать против натуральной, приводить ее хотя бы в соответствие с нормами русского языка. В действительности у нас объясняются коряво, с пятого на десятое, употребляют множество междометий, так называемых слов-паразитов, матерной брани, вообще разговаривают малограмотно и с гнусцией. Как говорят литературные персонажи, живые люди не говорят.³⁵

While the characterization of contemporary language usage may remind us of the purist voice in the language debates, the effect is parodic, since the concluding phrase turns the argument upside-down.

Through experiments in form, style and genre, the self-reflecting works, in addition to their explicit commentaries, are frequently able to make indirect statements about the problems, challenges and potentials of literary discourse in the representation of linguistic reality. Moreover, I venture to suggest that the occasional graphomaniac and over-explicit explanatory tone of voice in several of the works discussed mocks certain views found in popular discussions of linguistic usage and linguistic behaviour, both with regard to the language of literature and to language culture in general.

35 Viacheslav P'etsukh, 2003, "Muzhchiny vyshli pokurit'," *Proza novoi Rossii v chetyrekh tomakh*, ed. E. Shubina, Moscow, vol. 3, pp. 230–35; p. 231. "The direct speech of literary characters must be improved against natural speech, at least it must be brought into accordance with the norms of the Russian language. In reality people here speak clumsily, in snatches, using a great number of interjections, so-called parasite-words, vulgar swearing; on the whole, people speak crudely and with disgrace. The way in which literary characters speak is not the way living people speak."

Concluding remarks

Self-reflection is often seen as a typical postmodern feature of contemporary literary texts. As shown by my examples, it is also interesting to view the implications of this particular trend more specifically in the context of linguistic commentary. In this respect, Korobov's ludic text responds to certain general and very basic problems concerning the interrelationship between language and reality, with a slightly absurdist call to today's writers to take up a particular "linguistic pragmatics" in their literary practice, in order to challenge or even change reality. Popov's and P'etsukh's texts are more straight-forwardly ironic and parodic, suggesting both in style and content that the contemporary language debates may be counted among their targets. Turning from the "footnote literature" to the novels of Sorokin and Tolstaia, these texts also point to today's language situation. In the context of the debates on language culture, we can observe that both novels portray diverse linguistic and cultural voices simultaneously, with the focus clearly on the context, and on the problems of inner- and extrafictional communication. Both works respond to the linguistic situation in epistemological terms, thus transferring the discussion of language culture to a philosophical level. The implicitly thematized question of language's capacity for self-regulation, on the one hand, and of man's endeavours to regulate its developments, on the other, challenges the reader both on this philosophical level and with regard to very concrete linguistic phenomena.

I should like to stress that I believe all these complex questions can be examined on a far more nuanced level, simply by looking at a wider range of texts. The ways in which literature may invite us to reflect on a society's language culture are in principle infinite; the "extreme" manner of the texts I have explored here nevertheless serves the important purpose of making sure we do not overlook the invitation.