

Criticizing Pelevin's Language: The Language Question in the Reception of Viktor Pelevin's Novel *Generation "P"*

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Логос устал «храниться», устал преть во рту бес-
сильного интеллигента—и возродился в языке
сражающихся демонов. В речи братков есть не-
вероятная сила, потому что за каждым поворо-
том их базара реально мерцает жизнь и смерть.

Viktor Pelevin¹

RECENT developments in the Russian language have attracted a great deal of interest from researchers as well as from the language community at large. Notions of radical change and even language decay have spurred debates on the state of the language and its future. These language changes have been attested on numerous occasions, by both Russian and foreign researchers,² but debates on such changes have also become the subject of academic works, most notably by Michael Gorham and Aleksandr Dulichenko.³

- 1 Quoted in Genis, 1999. "The Logos was tired of being "guarded," it was tired of rotting in the mouth of a powerless intellectual—and has been reborn in the language of fighting demons. There is an incredible power in the speech of the brothers, for life and death flickers behind every turn of their jabber." All translations are mine, unless stated otherwise. For full references, see the list of reviews at the end of this article.
- 2 Cf. A.D. Dulichenko, 1994, *Russkii iazyk kontsa xx stoletia* (Slavistische Beiträge 317), Munich; V.G. Kostomarov, 1994, *Iazykovoï vkus epokhi*, Moscow; E.A. Zemskaja, ed. 1996, *Russkii iazyk kontsa xx stoletia (1985–1995)*, Moscow; Larissa Ryazanova-Clarke & Terence Wade, 1999, *The Russian Language Today*, London & New York; L.P. Krysin, ed. 2000, 2003, 2004, *Russkii iazyk segodnia*, vols. 1–3, Moscow.
- 3 Michael S. Gorham, 2000, "Natsiia ili snikerizatsiia? Identity and Perversion in the Language Debates of Late and Post-Soviet Russia," *Russian Review* 59, pp. 614–29; A.D. Dulichenko, 1999, *Etnosotsiolingvistika "Perestroiki" v sssr: Antologiiia zapечатlenogo vremeni* (Slavistische Beiträge 317), Munich.

Notwithstanding the amount of scholarly work on the language developments of this period, the role of literature in language development has been given insufficient attention. One way of entering into an examination of this role, and particularly of the role of literature in the language debate, would be through an investigation of the reception of this literature. An obvious candidate for such a case study is Viktor Pelevin's novel *Generation "P"* (1999), the publication of which became one of the most important literary happenings in Russia during the 1990s.⁴

Both the language of Pelevin's literary works and the debate surrounding this language have been subject to earlier scrutiny. In 1995 Aleksei Antonov coined the term *vnuiaz*, when writing about the linguistic experiments in Pelevin's prose. He shows that Pelevin tends to create a unique language reality within each of his different texts, a language that functions only within the text in question—an *innerspeak*.⁵ The term, of course, refers to George Orwell's *newspeak*. Tat'iana Markova, meanwhile, has published two articles on Pelevin's language.⁶ The most recent, which focuses on the way in which Pelevin uses linguistic means to, among other things, deconstruct the Soviet myth, opens with a short examination of the debate about Pelevin's language. Markova observes that his language has been characterized in a great variety of ways: as буриметический, эклектический, русско-английский, современный новояз, въедливое аргю, лоскутное одеяло, винегрет, волапюк и т. п.⁷

In the current article I will examine the reception of Pelevin's language in more detail by analyzing the debate on the language of *Generation "P"* that took place in literary reviews. The focus will be on literary reviews immediately following the publication of *Generation "P"*; articles written after the year 1999 will therefore be excluded from the spotlight of this study. My intention is not to study the literary criticism as such, but to

4 Cf. Golyenko-Volfson, 1999: Фурор, вызванный новым романом Виктора Пелевина (даже ожиданием и предвкушением оно) — ЧП местного не только литературного, но и социального масштаба. "The furore which was created by Viktor Pelevin's new novel (even by the expectation and foretaste of it) amounts to a local state of emergency not only of literary, but also of social importance."

5 Aleksei Antonov, 1995, "Vnuiaz," *Grani* 177, pp. 125–48.

6 Tat'iana Markova, 2004, "Metaforicheskoe prostranstvo v proze V. Pelevina," *Russkaia rech'* 5, pp. 44–47; Tat'iana Markova, 2005, "Osobyi iazyk' prozy V. Pelevina," *Russkaia rech'* 1, pp. 46–51.

7 Markova, 2005, p. 46. "Bouts-rimés, eclectic, Russo-English, contemporary *newspeak*, imposing argot, patch-work quilt, beetroot salad, volapük, etc."

look more closely at its role as an institution positioned between literature and the (language) community in general. My aim is to establish whether the literary critics comment on the language of the novel, and, if they do, how they do so and based on what understanding of language.

Language as a social phenomenon

The background to my investigation is the notion of language as a social phenomenon. Central to this understanding of language is the norm, where the norm, as a social institution, indicates what may be accepted within the language system. Renate Bartsch has defined language norms sociologically: "The norms are the constellations in social reality that create, delimit, and secure the notions of correctness."⁸ It is important to draw a line between the norm as common notions of correctness, and the codified norm, which is the marker of standard language. The codified norm is the result of a more conscious selection among linguistic elements. As John Earl Joseph puts it: "Standard languages are characterized by a rather complete hierarchization of their norms, consciously developed, pursued, codified, and inculcated."⁹ This hierarchization is conducted in grammars and dictionaries, and as it is established, it determines which linguistic variants are to be accepted, not only as the best choice, but as the "correct" choice.

As I see it, however, these norms are not only developed, pursued, codified and inculcated; they are constantly *negotiated*, even after a language has been standardized.¹⁰ This is essential as the standard language is intended to serve the needs of an ever changing society, and applies not only to lexical changes as new phenomena occur, but also to the notion of what should be the delimitation between different varieties of the standard language. Literature may play an important role in this negotiation.

8 Renate Bartsch, 1987, *Norms of Language—Theoretical and Practical Aspects*, London & New York, p. 70.

9 John Earl Joseph, 1987, *Eloquence and Power: The Rise of Language Standards and Standard Languages*, London, p. 118.

10 This, of course, implies the notion of a standard language that is not fixed, but subject to (more or less) gradual change. This is in accordance with the ideas of Prague School linguist Vilém Mathesius, who promoted the concept of flexible stability as an ideal for a standard language. Cf. Vilem Matezius, 1967 [1947], "O neobkhodimosti stabil'nosti literaturnogo iazyka," *Prazhskii lingvisticheskii kruzhek: Sbornik statei*, ed. N.A. Kon-drashova, Moscow, pp. 378–93.

According to Joseph, one of the roles of literature is precisely to challenge the standard:

[Literature] is a cultural manifestation by which language ceases to be an impartial means for conveying messages and becomes a message itself. [...] One of the principal means by which this is accomplished is “violation” of the norms and rules of the standard, by which is meant not the use of non-standard forms (though this may optionally be involved) but the expansion of what is possible within the standard[.]¹¹

Thus, my own focus on the reception of the language in a particular work of literature may simultaneously serve to illuminate notions of what is correct language.

The new literary reality

Pelevin’s novel was released at the end of a decade that saw certain profound changes to the social base of Russian literature. Some of these changes altered the fundamental dynamics of Russian literature as it had existed for the past two centuries: censorship was lifted, the so-called thick journals lost importance for literary life, literature was commercialized, new media and technology entered the arena. Various researchers emphasize different changes, but the bottom line is the same—the conditions for the existence of Russian literature changed fundamentally during the 1990s.¹²

Particularly important to our investigation is the lost significance of the thick literary journals, something which in Birgit Menzel’s opinion is connected both to the erosion of the intelligentsia and to the dissolution of the state institutions: “By their combinations of fiction and criticism, as well as through the social and political journalism they offered, these publications had shaped literary life in Russia and the Soviet Union ever since the early nineteenth century.”¹³

11 Joseph, 1987, p. 76.

12 Naum Leiderman & Mark Lipovetskii, 2001, *Sovremennaia russkaia literatura—kniga 3: V kontse veka (1986–1990e gody)*, Moscow; N. Norman Shneidman, 2004, *Russian Literature, 1995–2002: On the Threshold of the New Millennium*, Toronto, Buffalo & London; Birgit Menzel, 2005, “Writing, Reading and Selling Literature in Russia 1986–2004,” *Reading for Entertainment in Contemporary Russia: Post-Soviet Popular Literature in Historical Perspective*, eds. S. Lovell & B. Menzel, pp. 39–56.

13 Menzel, 2005, p. 40.

The diminished importance of these journals has meant that literary criticism too has lost some of its importance, and “although it had been one of the most authoritative institutions of Soviet literary culture, [literary criticism] has become marginal and rather meaningless over the past decade.”¹⁴ The reason for this, according to Menzel, is disorientation: such literary criticism was linked to the thick journals, but during the 1990s it moved to other media like newspapers and the Internet.

Norman Shneidman offers a rather sceptical assessment of the literary criticism of the 1990s, but although his claims are sometimes exaggerated to suit his rhetoric, he still gives us some insight into its dynamics, as in the following statement:

[Most critics] discuss only *what* the author of a novel writes about. Seldom do they deal with the issue of *how* the author writes, and rarely do they pose the question *why*, or examine the author's approach to his or her subject. Moreover, many critics use their platform not to analyse serious prose but to attack their opponents, promote their own ideas, exhibit their erudition, and elevate themselves above other writers.¹⁵

The release and reception of Generation “P”

As mentioned above, *Generation “P”* was much talked about. In fact, the discussions began already some weeks *before* the actual release of the novel.¹⁶ It was published in the second half of March, but by that stage one or two chapters had already been available for some time on the Internet.¹⁷ Some critics even wrote two reviews of the book, one based on the first

14 Menzel, 2005, p. 53.

15 Shneidman, 2004, p. 18.

16 Nemzer, 1999.

17 As far as I have been able to establish, the Internet version was published at the address <http://www.kvest.com/arc/pelevin1.htm> (currently inaccessible), before 1 March 1999. At least, this is the conclusion I have reached after reading an announcement to this effect posted on the pages of the Russian Internet paper *Gazeta.ru* on this date: <http://www.gagin.ru/paravozov-news/01mar99.html> (accessed 30.05.06). What seems to be the same part, the chapter “Vovchik Maloi,” is available today on this site: <http://1001.vdv.ru/books/pelevin/1.htm> (accessed 30.05.06). The novel itself was published around 20 March, as is confirmed by Viacheslav Kuritsyn in his Internet journal: <http://www.guelman.ru/slava/archive/18-03-99.htm> (accessed 30.05.06).

chapters, and another based on the entire book;¹⁸ while one critic wrote five different reviews of the same edition, seen from the standpoint of different hypothetical readers.¹⁹ The reviews appeared in newspapers, on radio channels, in thick literary journals, and, of course, on the Internet.

Most reviews of *Generation "P"* seem to be available on the Internet, whether they were originally posted there or have been republished there after appearing first in other media. Thus, the Internet has been the main source of the material for my study. There are some reviews that I have not been able to get a hand on.²⁰ They are few however, compared to the large number of articles that I do actually possess, and even though I agree with Irina Rodnianskaia that what is posted on the Internet probably differs from what is printed in newspapers, I do not consider this to be a major problem as far as my study is concerned.²¹ The missing newspaper reviews are extensively referred to and quoted in a number of other reviews, so I definitely have a clear idea of their contents.²² All in all, I have closely examined twenty-four reviews, seven of which were printed in thick journals, one in a newspaper, and the remaining sixteen published in other media: on the Internet, on the radio or in books.

The general reception of the novel was somewhat reserved. Many critics found *Generation "P"* to be poorer than Pelevin's preceding novel, *Chapaev i Pustota* (1996, *Buddha's Little Finger*), and urged the author to rethink his literary project.²³ Even those who were more or less satisfied with the novel often referred to a general scepticism among critics towards the author and the book.

But this fact does not seem to have had much impact on the number of reviews, as the reception of the novel soon developed its own dynamics. The critics turned from the novel itself to the phenomenon of Pelevin, and even to the importance of this phenomenon in contemporary Russia. As a result, the discussion came to focus on what other critics had written,

18 Kuznetsov, 1999a; Kuznetsov, 1999b; Kostyrka, 1999a; Kostyrka, 1999b.

19 Dolin, 1999.

20 Most notably: Aleksandr Rojfe, 1999, "Dushka Pelevin," *Knizhnoe obozrenie*; Aleksandr Gavrilov, 1999, "Strashnyi Sud kak strashnyi son," *Nezavisimaia gazeta* 11.03.99; Aleksandr Arkhangel'skii, 1999, "Do shestnadtsati i starshe," *Izvestiia* 24.03.99.

21 Rodnianskaia, 1999.

22 Cf. Kostyrka, 1999b, where both Gavrilov's and Arkhangel'skii's reviews are extensively quoted.

23 Kaganov, 1999; Lipovetskii, 1999; Genis, 1999.

and quotes from other reviews often exceeded the quotes from the novel itself. Most often mentioned was Andrei Nemzer and his openly critical review. As observed by Mark Lipovetsky: [С]начала были опубликованы фрагменты, затем появились первые рекламные отклики, затем обрушился вал рецензий, причем, и в том, и в другом случае роль «буки» была не без блеска отыграна Андреем Немзером.²⁴

If we turn our attention to the language question, we see that it is actually raised in the majority of the reviews. At the same time, in nine of the reviews there are no remarks about the language of the novel at all.²⁵ In addition, there is a big difference between those who throw in a short comment that is somehow related to the language of the novel, and critics like Lipovetsky, Aleksandr Genis and Andrei Minkevich, who devote entire pages to the significance of Pelevin's language. However, even the shorter comments are of interest to us, as they often underscore the importance of particular attitudes towards Pelevin's language.

This, in fact, could also be said of the various comments on Pelevin's alleged influence on the way Russians express themselves. Both Lev Rubinshtein and Aleksandr Gavrilov claim that *Generation "P"* would be widely quoted: Самое запоминающееся в книге—это как раз описания рекламных клипов. Нет сомнения, что многие из них обречены на безудержное цитирование.²⁶ Программная статья буддийствующего Че Гевары украшена изысканными неологизмами, половина из которых должна разойтись в пословицах и передовицах радикальных журналов.²⁷ The same point, expressed in very similar words, is made by Minkevich and Aleksandr Arkhangel'skii.²⁸

This enthusiasm is not shared, however, by Leonid Kaganov and Maksim Pavlov. They are both distressed by the large amount of coarse

24 Lipovetskii, 1999. "To begin with they published fragments, and then appeared the first commercial comments, then a flood of reviews was unleashed, while in both cases the role of the 'bogey man' was played, not without splendour, by Andrei Nemzer."

25 Rozhdstvenskaia, 1999; Kuznetsov, 1999a; Kuznetsov, 1999b; Tuchkov, 1999; Kostyrka, 1999a; Kostyrka, 1999b; Kolobrodov, 1999; Golyenko-Volfson, 1999; Ulianova 1999.

26 Rubinshtein, 1999. "The most memorable parts of the book are, in fact, the descriptions of the commercials. There is no doubt that a lot of them are doomed to be quoted unrestrainedly."

27 Kostyrka, 1999b. "The programme article by the meditating Che Guevara is embellished with refined neologisms, half of which should spread over into proverbs and the editorials of radical journals."

28 Cf. Minkevich, 1999 and Kostyrka, 1999b.

language: Зато стало заметно больше мата, и с моей точки зрения это не хороший показатель—цензура уже давно вполне свободна, и повышение количества матюгов можно объяснить разве что выхолащиванием изобразительных средств автора.²⁹ Minkevich, on the other hand, takes a different view of the role of coarse language in *Generation "P"*: Пелевин весьма целомудрен в употреблении мата и использует его только там, где он уместен и необходим.³⁰ Thus we can see that opinions differ quite considerably on the use of the very same linguistic elements. The full implications of these differences will only be revealed, however, after we have considered certain other features of the debate surrounding Pelevin's novel.

One of these features is the widespread language blending, or "volapük" as Nemzer terms it.³¹ To him, this blending of Russian and English represents no artistic value, whereas to Rodnianskaia and Minkevich it is one of the strengths of Pelevin's writing: Да, весь текст Пелевина—волапук. Только не «серых переводов с английского», как тут же добавляет Немзер, а живого, вьедливого арга. Что делать, если в очередной раз «пantalоны, фрак, жилет—всех этих слов на русском нет».³² Minkevich explains the need for a correct portrayal of the current language situation in Russia, in a passage that ends on an almost panegyric note: Одним словом, это мой язык. Спасибо писателю, что он называет рендер—рендером, Public Relation—PR, не путает Fuck с его русским эквивалентом, словом, не пытается говорить со мной на птичьем языке, которого нет.³³

29 Kaganov, 1999. "But on the other hand, [he now] uses more obscene language, and from my point of view this is not a good sign—censorship has been lifted already long ago, and the increasing number of obscenities may probably only be explained as an emasculation of the author's means of expression." Compare Pavlov, 1999.

30 Minkevich, 1999. "Pelevin is very chaste in his application of obscenities and uses them only where they are appropriate and necessary."

31 The name of this constructed language has acquired a distinctly pejorative meaning in Russian.

32 Rodnianskaia, 1999. "Surely, the entire text of Pelevin's is volapük. Only not 'of grey translations from English' as Nemzer hastily adds, but a vivid, imposing argot. What can you do, if, yet again "dress coat," "waistcoat," "pantaloons"—in Russian all these words are not." The quotation is from A.S. Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* as translated by V. Nabokov (1964, London, vol. 1, p. 108).

33 Minkevich, 1999. "In short, this is my language. Thanks to the writer for calling render "render," public relations—PR, for not confusing *fuck* with its Russian equivalent, in a word, for not trying to speak to me in a made-up language that does not exist."

Rodnianskaia shares Minkevich's appraisal of the language in *Generation "P,"* but not necessarily for the same reasons. To her the strength of the novel's language lies in its ability to meet the demands of this specific literary genre. As a dystopian work, *Generation "P"* needs a language without splendour, a language that can be taken for granted. Genis takes a similar approach, but disagrees as to whether Pelevin achieves what he appears to be aiming at:

Стиль Пелевина требует предельной точности. Лучшим пелевинским сочинениям свойственен перфекционизм телефонной книги. Язык тут функционален до полной прозрачности — мы его не замечаем, пока он выполняет свою роль, перевозя нас от одной страницы к другой. Но не обращать внимание можно только на правильный язык. Каждое лишнее или «приблизительное» слово привело бы к таким же последствиям, как перевернутая цифра в телефонном номере — сообщение не находит адресата.

Generation "P" написан привычно скупой, но непривычно небрежно.³⁴

One of Genis's objections concerns Pelevin's many puns. Whereas others have praised this feature of the novel, Genis finds it exaggerated, the main problem being that it breaks the rhythm of the text. Thus, the problem is not so much Pelevin's style of writing in general, but the degree to which it is successful or not in this particular work.

Like Genis, Lipovetsky is not very impressed by the novel or its language. He nevertheless expresses his praise for Pelevin's ability to create an impressive blend of Russian and English:

Несмотря на успех всех предыдущих романов Пелевина в английских переводах, вряд ли перевод *Generation "P"* может быть адекватным — ведь этот роман написан на фантастической сме-

34 Genis, 1999. "Pelevin's style demands the uttermost precision. His best works are marked by the perfectionism of a telephone directory, where the language is functional to the point of total transparency. We don't notice it so long as it fulfils its role, leading us from one page to the other. But only correct language can go unnoticed. Every superfluous or 'approximate' word would lead to the same effects as a distorted number in a telephone number—the message doesn't reach the receiver./*Generation 'P'* is written usually sparingly, but unusually carelessly."

си русского и английского, где один и тот же текст и даже просто слово наделяется двойным смыслом в силу двойного статуса, т.е. на ходу становится метафорой.³⁵

Lipovetsky points to Pelevin's novel, as well as to Vladimir Sorokin's *Goluboe salo* (1999, *Blue Lard*), as examples of how linguistic plurality can serve as a basis for creative writing, and compares them with the early Gogol, Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, and the writers of 1920s' Odessa.³⁶

But not everyone wants to give Pelevin a place among the great classics. In fact, some critics hardly accept *Generation "P"* as literature at all. The following statement from Nemzer has already been referred to, but is worth quoting more fully: Точно так же, как всегда писал на волапюке серых переводов с английского. Разбавлять эту литературщину дешурными «как бы», «типа », «по жизни» и кондовой матерщиной не значит работать с языковым мусором и кичем.³⁷ But he is not alone in rejecting the language of the novel. Rubinshtein's statement cannot be misunderstood: Язык? Язык с точки зрения адептов «качественной» прозы—никакой.³⁸ Mikhail Novikov is more precise as to what is wrong with Pelevin's style of writing: Язык пелевинских текстов—тоже как бы стертый, безвкусный, «всехний».³⁹ Statements to the same effect can be found in the reviews of Pavel Basinskii, Viacheslav Kuritsyn, and Leonid Filippov. These are all evaluations of his style of writing, but these critics do not, as Rodnianskaia or Genis, ask whether his language meets the demands of the literary genre. On the contrary, they refer to a common understanding of how the language of literature should be, and judge the text based on this understanding.

35 Lipovetskii, 1999. "Notwithstanding the success of all of Pelevin's earlier novels in English translation, the translation of *Generation P* will hardly be adequate—after all this novel is written in a fantastic blend of Russian and English, where one and the same text or even simply a single word acquires a double meaning by virtue of its double status, i.e. it becomes a metaphor in the process."

36 In this connection, see Knut Andreas Grimstad's article on Isaak Babel in this volume.

37 Nemzer, 1999. "The exact same way as he has always written in the volapük of grey translations from English. To dilute this pseudo-literature with the standard phrases 'as if', 'like', 'in life' and the traditional obscenities doesn't mean to work with linguistic garbage and kitsch."

38 Rubinshtein, 1999. "The language? From the viewpoint of adherents of 'quality' prose the language is worthless."

39 M. Novikov, 1999. "The language of Pelevin's texts is also kind of rubbed out, tasteless, 'everyones.'"

A certain paradox in this argument may be traced in Basinskii's review: Грубо говоря, с точки зрения «высокой эстетики», Пелевин пишет «плохо». Но зато живо, увлекательно, читабельно,⁴⁰ and even more so in the continuation of the quotation from Rubinshtein's review cited above: Это язык нынешнего «нового журнализма» — не без изящества, не без наблюдательности, не без бойкости и даже виртуозности, не без пронизательных и парадоксальных обобщений.⁴¹ That is, Pelevin writes vividly and in masterly fashion, with hints of elegance, but not quite well enough for proper literature.

Vladimir Novikov and Minkevich take the debate about Pelevin's language a little further, not just by referring to a common understanding of how the language of literature is supposed to be, but also by entering into a discussion about the preconditions for this understanding. Novikov undertakes an interpretation of Pelevin's attitude towards language and explains why he cannot accept it:

Если же всерьез, то для читательского взаимодействия с пелевинскими текстами надо принять две предпосылки:

1. Слово есть ничто, оно не имеет никакого значения. Любой язык — русский, английский, язык Достоевского или Блока, язык информационных систем или простой мат есть мусор — и ничего более.
2. [...] Для многих такая система заведомо неприемлема ведь для нас в начале было Слово и до конца (нашего, во всяком случае) оно пребудет главным в литературе. Мы привыкли в каждой фразе видеть молекулу целого произведения, обладающую всеми его свойствами[.]⁴²

40 Basinskii, 2005 [1999], p. 195. "To put it bluntly, from the viewpoint of 'elevated aesthetics', Pelevin writes 'badly', but on the other hand vividly, captivating, readably."

41 Rubinshtein, 1999. "This is the language of contemporary 'new journalism' — not without splendour, not without attentiveness, not without liveliness and even virtuosity, not without penetrating and paradoxical generalizations."

42 V. Novikov, 1999. "However, to be serious, to establish the interaction between the reader and Pelevin's texts one needs to include two presuppositions: /1. The word is nothing, it does not have any significance. Any language—Russian, English, the language of Dostoevsky or Blok, the language of information systems or simple obscenities is rubbish and nothing more. / 2 [...] To many people such a system is obviously unacceptable, for we believe that in the beginning was the Word and to the very end (ours at least) it will be the most important part of literature. We are used to seeing in every phrase a molecule of the entire work, possessing all of its qualities."

The point is not so much that Pelevin's language seems to lack a certain artistic quality, that it does not reach the level of literature proper, but rather, or so we are led to believe, that the author does not seem to accept the importance of even aiming for this.

The opposite view is advanced most clearly by Minkevich, who accepts the notion that Pelevin's language diverges from the Russian literary language: Язык книги далек от русского литературного настолько же, насколько далек от него современный разговорный язык.⁴³ But to him this is an asset, an attitude that originates in another view of language as such: Господа критики Пелевина, ваше слово в защиту русского языка. Только помните, что язык—это не идол, не священная книга, а живой процесс.⁴⁴ Thus, the debate seems really to be about whether or not to endorse ongoing linguistic developments or to protect the sacred Russian language.

Conclusion: On functionalistic and normative approaches to language evaluation

This study of the reception of *Generation "P"* shows that the publication of the novel did lead, to a certain extent, to a debate on its language: different critics comment on the language themselves as well as refer to and comment upon statements about the language made by other critics. Even if one third of the critics do not pay any attention to the language in the novel at all, the rest do take notice of it, disagreeing fundamentally about its quality.

These critics' evaluation of the language is clearly based on their different attitudes towards language in general. Whereas some critics reject its quality based on the idea of the language in literature as something

43 Minkevich, 1999. "The language of the book is as far from the Russian literary language as is the modern spoken language." The term *russkii literaturnyi iazyk* which is used here by Minkevich is notoriously ambiguous, as it refers both to the language of Russian literature and to the Russian standard language. This difference is not always emphasized when the term is applied, and in the given context it could be taken to refer to both, even if the argument seems to indicate the language of literature. Cf. D.N. Cherdakov, 2001, "Russkii variant teorii literaturnogo iazyka i ego istoki," *Russkii iazyk kontsa xvii–nachala xix veka: Sbornik statei*, ed. Z.M. Petrova, St Petersburg, vol. 2, pp. 7–37; S.I. Ozhegov, 1974, "O formakh sushchestvovaniia sovremennogo russkogo natsional'nogo iazyka," S.I. Ozhegov, *Leksikologiya. Leksikografiia. Kul'tura rechi*, Moscow, pp. 332–35.

44 Minkevich, 1999. "Gentlemen critics of Pelevin, have your word in the protection of the Russian language. Just remember that the language is not an idol, it is not a holy book, but a living process."

sacred and elevated, others praise it because of its proximity to the language of contemporary Russians. Yet others disagree as to whether the language meets the demands of the literary genre in question.

The latter group, most notably Rodnianskaia and Genis, form their judgements of the language according to their understanding of the novel's genre. Rodnianskaia decides that it meets the demands of a dystopian text, whereas Genis claims that Pelevin has failed to meet the precision he aimed for. Their evaluation is detached, so to speak, from the language debate in society at large, as it does not refer to any authority outside the text. This way of evaluating the language could be termed *functionalistic*, in the sense that the evaluation is based on functional criteria. These criteria, in turn, derive from genre considerations.

The situation is somewhat different if we look at those critics who pass judgement based on their conviction of how the language of literature ought to be. These critics, represented here by V. Novikov, Basinskii, Nemzer and Minkevich, evaluate whether or not the language of Pelevin's novel fits their idea of the language of literature. We could term this a *normative* evaluation, as it touches upon the question as to how the different varieties of language should be related to one another. Thus, the debate is about the norm of the language.

There is, however, a distinct difference between Nemzer and Basinskii, on the one hand, who use an understanding of the norm as their point of reference, and V. Novikov and Minkevich, on the other, who, as we have already seen, themselves engage in a debate on the norm. In so doing the latter two critics allow the debate on *Generation "P"* to become part of the general debate about language.

The critics pay particular attention to the striking presence of vulgar language and anglicisms in the novel. Some, but as we have seen not all, lament it. This is perhaps where the debate becomes most interesting. V. Novikov accuses Pelevin of showing contempt for the language of literature, for not drawing a line between vulgar language and other linguistic elements, or for not paying due tribute to the classics of Russian literary history. In fact, he suspects that Pelevin does this on purpose: *Безличность и безязыкость «литературы П»—это реакция на эстетское высокомерие так называемой серьезной литературы.*⁴⁵

45 Novikov, 1999b. "The impersonality and the non-languageness of 'the P literature' is a reaction against the aesthetic arrogance of so-called serious literature."

Minkevich, on the other hand, points to the fact that language is in constant change, and hails Pelevin for his ability to portray the language situation in contemporary Russia. The first position could be dubbed *conservative*, as it seeks to uphold a language situation that has been in existence for decades, the other—*liberal*, as it opens up for the acceptance of a larger variety of linguistic elements into literature, most notably vulgar language and foreign (here English) words.

A similar division (between language *guardians* and *innovators*) has been suggested by Michael Gorham.⁴⁶ Yet, Gorham describes a division amongst the representatives of the so-called *language professionals*—i.e. linguists, philologists, methodologists, teachers, and other Russian-language specialists, whereas (at least some of) the literary critics could indeed be said to represent the non-establishment in this respect. In the case of Minkevich, this is underlined by the comment by the editors of the Internet site *Russkii zhurnal*, which introduces his review: От редакции. О новом романе Пелевина уже сказано много плохого профессиональными критиками. А читатели его как любили, так и любят. За что? Ну объясните, за что? «Простой читатель» пытается раскрыть прелести романа, недоступные профессиональным филологам.⁴⁷

Thus, we can see how the publication of a novel of this importance serves as an occasion to bring together both the establishment and the non-establishment in the language community, especially under the new and more open conditions of present-day Russian literature, where the formerly dominant thick journals have lost their position. Indeed, this situation seems to weaken the very distinction between establishment and non-establishment, as the statements of the *non-professionals* are brought into the debate on the same level as the more famous professionals. This is, in fact, what happens in Markova's article when she examines the debate about the language of *Generation "P,"* even if she, curiously, attributes some of Minkevich's statements to Irina Rodnianskaia.⁴⁸

46 Gorham, 2000.

47 Minkevich, 1999. "From the editors. Professional literary critics have said a lot of bad things about Pelevin's new novel. But the readers love him as they always have. For what? Well, explain to us, what for? 'An ordinary reader' tries to reveal the novel's charms, which are so inaccessible to the professional philologists."

48 Cf. Markova, 2005, p. 46, where Rodnianskaia is credited for pointing out the relation between Pelevin's language and the Russian literary language.

Pelevin's novel has provided fuel, consisting of swearing and anglicisms, to the language debate. *Generation "P"* thus contributes to the ongoing negotiation of the place of such elements in the contemporary Russian language. In the light of this, it is interesting to observe how the novel's appearance presents a reason not only to discuss the future of the Russian language in general, but also to focus in this debate more specifically on the place of vulgarisms and anglicisms within the language. The way in which Lipovetsky dubs Pelevin's blending of Russian and English as fantastic, suggests that the result of this negotiation may, at least to a certain extent, depend upon the quality of the literary work in question.

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49 Most generously made available to me as a MSWord-file by Alla Khakhaleva, manager of the online department of the *Kommersant* Daily.