

Trends in the Russian Language Debate: The Response of Contemporary Poetry

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RUSSIAN writers have traditionally played an important role in linguistics, as well as in questions of a more ethical and philosophical nature. Today, their position as moral authorities is a disputed issue even among the writers themselves, but at least in linguistic matters, they are still occasionally consulted. Writers have been invited for instance to roundtable discussions about the state of the Russian language after *perestroika*,¹ and to contribute to the mapping of views on contemporary language development as well as on the role of state intervention through censorship and language regulation.² However, the insights of writers into linguistic matters may be found not only in their explicit statements on the subject, but also in their creative work. Through their practice, these writers often provide us with implicit, but also intriguingly nuanced commentaries on linguistic and cultural matters. This point is richly illustrated by Liudmila Zubova's extensive research into the language of contemporary poetry.³

In the present article, I shall similarly concentrate on poetry, more specifically on the St Petersburg poets Elena Shvarts (b. 1948) and David

1 S.I. Bogdanova & P.E. Bukharkin, eds. 2004, *Besedy liubiteli russkogo slovo: Pisateli o iazyke*, St Petersburg.

2 *Otechestvennye zapiski* 2, 2005: URL: http://magazines.russ.ru/oz/2005/2/2005_2_6.html (accessed 02.03.2006).

3 Cf., in particular, L.V. Zubova, 2000, *Sovremennaiia russkaia poeziiia v kontekste istorii iazyka*, Moscow, and, 2004, "Russkii iazyk kontsa XX veka v poeticheskom otrazhenii," *Kul'turno-rechevaia situatsiia v sovremennoi Rossii*, ed. N.A. Kupina, Ekaterinburg, pp. 130–45.

Raskin (b. 1946). Through close readings of one poem by each poet, I will show how they address problems of language culture in post-Soviet Russia and what specific viewpoints they offer in relation to the linguistic and cultural turmoil that was triggered in the mid-1980s, and to the debate that has accompanied this commotion. I believe that a close reading that takes into account both intratextual ambiguities and the complex relationship between the text and the world, may reveal not only the poet's views on language and culture and his or her feeling for language, but also a possible ethical dimension to these issues. Finally, these analyses will be compared to the responses of the two poets to a questionnaire on the state of contemporary Russian language and culture.⁴ First, however, I will discuss the general trends in the Russian language debate, with a particular view to the possible role of poetry.

The language debate and the potential of poetry

In the years before the passing of the law that secured freedom of speech on 1 August 1990, the language of the Russian mass media was already being flooded by nonstandard elements. In spheres where language had been under state control a chaotic mixture of Russian and foreign, oral and written vocabularies saw the light of day. This public distancing from the totalitarian language of the Soviet state has since been the subject of much linguistic research, and has been accompanied by a debate about language and its role in state-building and identity formation.

According to Michael Gorham, those viewing language as “a weapon for social and political change” dominated the debate in the late eighties and early nineties, whereas those “highlighting its more organic link to a national cultural tradition” have gained more authority in the course of

4 In the summer of 2005, I compiled a questionnaire in which I included general questions on the state of the language and more specific ones about the language of selected poems, and invited twenty St Petersburg poets to respond. I am grateful to the poets who answered for giving me a rich and lively impression of their work and for sharing their thoughts on language and culture. (Since Elena Shvarts had recently answered another questionnaire in *Otechestvennye zapiski*, I was content to include these answers in my analysis.) I am likewise indebted to Liudmila Vladimirovna Zubova, who helped me generously both before and during my stay in St Petersburg. For a more exhaustive treatment of the subject, see Annika B. Myhr, 2005, *Diktningens perspektiver på språk og språkutvikling i dikt av Elena Sjvarts, Sergej Zavjalov, David Raskin og Svetlana Bodrunova*, MA dissertation, University of Bergen.

the past decade.⁵ These two approaches to language and identity are not in fact new, but existed even before the standardization of the Russian language took place,⁶ and have been termed respectively “nominalist” and “realist” by Boris Gasparov:

In Russian culture, the conflict between the two main approaches to the problem of “language and identity”—they can loosely be called “nominalist” and “realist”—has played a significant role over the past two centuries. In the “nominalist” view, language is a tool whose shape and development are contingent on the changing intellectual and cultural needs which it is supposed to serve. In the “realist” view [...], the native language itself is the embodiment of its speakers’ collective mentality and cultural tradition.⁷

When, in the nineties, ordinary people were allowed to break the undemocratic tradition of censorship, these same ordinary people also became a factor to reckon with in the further development of and debate on language. In the days of linguistic and ideological censorship, the elite specialists who had been in a position to regulate the Russian language—through grammars, for example, dictionaries, or laws—had also been very important, evidently, to the development of the language. However, the trend in the 1990s to displace standard language with colloquialisms and slang was not only a clear-cut acknowledgement of the egalitarian rights of ordinary Russians to express themselves freely, but it also made it imperative to recognize unofficial and less explicit statements on language as part of the language debate. For example, the language usage of the average Russian speaker, his or her comments on the language usage of others, anecdotes, *blatnaia muzyka* (“thieves’ cant”),

5 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; pp. 616–17.

6 In the 1830s A.Kh. Vostokov (1781–1864) and N.I. Grech (1787–1867) published grammars that enable us to talk about a standard language (*literaturnyi iazyk*) from the 1840s on. See Martin Paulsen, 2004, *Istoriia grammatik: Razvitie vostochnoslavianskikh iazykov skvoz’ prizmu grammaticheskogo opisaniia prichastii*, MA dissertation, University of Oslo, pp. 30–31.

7 Boris Gasparov, 2004, “Identity in language?,” *National Identity in Russian Culture: An Introduction*, eds. S. Franklin & E. Widdis, Cambridge, pp. 132–48; p. 132.

and, as I mentioned above, literature, may include vital comments on and contributions to the development of language.⁸

As the influence of ordinary people and their language increased, a process whereby the mass media gained in influence, poets and poetry seemed to lose authority. The poet Sergei Stratanovskii (b. 1944) explains that in post-Soviet Russia Писатель перестал восприниматься обществом как человек, говорящий некую «правду», т.е. то, что противостоит тотальному вранью.⁹ A language serving the cause of this “total lie” had come into being with the birth of the Soviet Union, not without the support of literature: Формирование русского тоталитарного языка началось под влиянием Октябрьской революции, осуществлялось под жестким давлением идеологии (фактически — политики) и при поддержке носителей русского языка, в том числе — одаренных писателей и поэтов.¹⁰ This totalitarian Soviet language can be identified as the common “enemy” of unofficial Soviet literature and of the mass-media in post-*perestroika* Russia, and as the source of their *opposition* and *reaction*, respectively.

As Vitalii Kostomarov observes, the process of dissociation from the linguistic and ideological standards of the state did not commence in the mass media, and not as late as the 1990s:

Любопытно, что первыми ощутили и отразили изменение речевого вкуса, когда оно еще только зарождалось, поэты и писатели, а не журналисты, подчинившиеся новому вкусу когда он обратился в крайности моды. Исследователи прозы и поэзии 60–70-х годов увидели в ориентированности на бытовую речь

8 Sociolinguistic studies offer nuanced insights into the linguistic climate and the impact on this climate of different social layers; see for instance: N.S. Valgina, 2001, *Aktivnye protsessy v sovremennom russkom iazyke*, Moscow; L.P. Krysin, ed. 2003, *Sovremennyi russkii iazyk: Sotsial'naia i funktsional'naia differentsiatsiia*, Moscow.

9 Sergei Stratanovskii, questionnaire, St Petersburg 2005. “A writer is no longer perceived by society as a person who speaks a certain ‘truth’, that is, something which withstands the total lie.”

10 N.A. Kupina, 1995, *Totalitarnyi iazyk: Slovar' rechevye reaktsii*, Ekaterinburg & Perm, pp. 137–38. “The creation of a Russian totalitarian language started under the influence of the October revolution, was put into practice under the strict pressure of ideology (in fact, of politics) and with the support of the native speakers of Russian, including that of gifted writers and poets.”

зарождающуюся и перспективную тенденцию всего развития речи и языка [...].¹¹

This tendency in language was not only a matter of “taste,” but a process made imperative by history. As totalitarian states like the Soviet Union utilized language as a tool in achieving their goals (cf. “nominalist” ideas), the need to discuss the power of language in relation to reality and truth arose, and in this debate literature played its role. The death of Stalin in 1953 created the opportunity for greater freedom in society, and by the sixties an underground culture had arisen, its writers obviously enjoying a greater degree of linguistic freedom than official writers, who wrote more in line with the prevailing literary norms.¹²

At the beginning of *perestroika*, literature had split into three branches: on the one hand, there was the official literature and, on the other, the underground *samizdat* and *tamizdat*, both semi-official arenas for the national and international publishing of works that would otherwise have been silenced by the state censorship. The general agenda of the underground poetry was, in many ways, similar to that of *perestroika*—in the words of Boris Ivanov: Одним из направлений деятельности неофициального культурного движения было восстановление исторической правды, освоение забытого и «запрещенного» прошлого.¹³

Zubova’s philological research reveals that the linguistic side of contemporary poetry actually parallels the ideals of the underground culture as a whole: in her words, poets felt the need to пройти исторический

11 V.G. Kostomarov, 1994, *Iazykovoï vkus epokhi: Iz nabliudeniï nad rechevoi praktiki mass-media*, Moscow, pp. 69–70. “It is interesting that the first to become aware of and reflect the changes in speech taste, when they were just arising, were poets and writers and not journalists—who submitted to the new taste only when it turned into an extreme fashion. Researchers of the prose and poetry of the sixties and seventies have seen the orientation towards everyday speech as the emergence of a forward-looking tendency in the general development of speech and language [...].”

12 Cf. D.Ia. Severiukhin, ed. 2003, *Samizdat Leningrada, 1950-e–1980-e: Literaturnaia entsiklopediia*, Moscow. This is not to say that official writers were necessarily lesser artists than those of the underground.

13 B.I. Ivanov, 2003, “Literaturnye pokoleniia v leningradskoi neofitsial’noi literature 1950-e–1980-e gody,” *Samizdat Leningrada, 1950-e–1980-e: Literaturnaia entsiklopediia*, ed. D.Ia. Severiukhin, Moscow, pp. 535–84; p. 538. “One of the tendencies in the activity of the unofficial cultural movement was the restoration of historical truth, the assimilation of a forgotten and ‘forbidden’ past.”

путь языка заново, воссоздавая утраченное.¹⁴ This particular focus in poetic texts on language, and on exceptions to the linguistic norm, is common from the sixties onwards, and therefore, when examining “contemporary poetry,” Zubova includes the whole of this period.

As we can see, the official linguistic freedom of the nineties was foreshadowed in poetry, and by its implicit view of language; the poets of the Soviet underground seem to have worked in direct opposition to the “nominalist” idea that language should be used as a tool. Although this cannot be taken as clear evidence of support for “realist” ideals, Zubova, in the conclusion to her monograph, states nevertheless the following about the effect of linguistic experiments in poetry since the 1960s: можно сказать, что поэтика языковой деформации не разрушает, а сохраняет язык.¹⁵ The fact that there are forgotten and suppressed sides to the Russian language may serve to remind us that it has developed into what it is today because various agents of culture and society have employed it to attain certain goals.

The development of Russian society in the nineties, however, reversed the situation as far as poetry was concerned. While Russian society in its entirety started to enjoy a high degree of linguistic freedom, the linguistic registers, which in Soviet times had represented such a high degree of expressivity, became in many cases flat and banal. Freed from state censure, society no longer needed poets to speak a suppressed truth, and the latter were left without the moral authority they had previously enjoyed, reduced to sophisticated linguistic experts. But, as we shall see in the following close readings of two poems written in the nineties by two poets with different poetics and backgrounds, poets have continued nonetheless to address themes that are central to contemporary society and culture.

Elena Shvarts

Elena Shvarts was a leading figure in the underground culture of Leningrad, and has continued to be productive since the fall of the Soviet Union. The following poem, “Zaplachka konservativno nastroennogo lunatika,” is written at the crossing-point between the old and the new times.

14 Zubova, 2000, p. 398. “retrace the historical path of language over again, in order to reconstitute what has been lost.”

15 Zubova, 2000, p. 399. “one could say that the poetics of linguistic deformation does not destroy, but preserves language.”

Заплачка консервативно настроенного лунатика

О. Мартыновой

- 1 О какой бы позорной мне перед вами ни слыти,
- 2 Но хочу я в Империи жити.
- 3 О Родина милая, Родина драгая,
- 4 Ножиком тебя порезали, ты дрожишь нагая.
- 5 Еще в колыбели, едва улыбнулась Музе—
- 6 А уж рада была—что в Советском Союзе.
- 7 Я ведь привыкла—чтобы на юге, в печач
- 8 Пели и в пятки мне дули узбек и казах,
- 9 И чтобы справа валялся Сибири истрепанный мех,
- 10 Ридна Украина, Камчатка—не упомянешь их всех.
- 11 Без Сахалина не жить, а рыдать найгорчайше—
- 12 Это ведь кровное все, телесное наше!
- 13 Для того ли варили казаки кулеш из бухарских песков,
- 14 Чтобы теперь выскребали его из костей мертвецов?
- 15 Я боюсь, что советская наша Луна
- 16 Отделиться захочет—другими увлечена,
- 17 И съежится вся потемневшая наша страна.
- 18 А ведь царь, наш отец, посылал за полками полки—
- 19 На Луну шли драгуны, летели уланы, кралися стрелки,
- 20 И Луну притащили для нас на аркане,
- 21 На лунянках женились тогда россияне.
- 22 Там селения наги, кладбища, была она в нашем плененье,
- 23 А теперь—на таможене они будут драть за одно посмотренье.
- 24 Что же делать лунатикам русским тогда—вам и мне?
- 25 Вспоминая Россию, вспоминать о Луне.

Май 1990¹⁶

In the opening lines of the poem, we find the Church Slavonic infinitives слыти (1), жити (2) as well as the Church Slavonic adjective драгая (3)—instead of the Russian слыть, жить and дорогая.¹⁷ The language used (Church Slavonic) is incongruous with what it describes (the

16 E.A. Shvarts, 1999, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, St Petersburg, p. 165. The numbering of the lines is my own.

17 “to have a reputation (for)/to pass (for)”; “to live”; and “dear,” respectively.

Soviet Empire), and just as one hears the Russian alternatives behind the Church Slavonic words in this poem, one can imagine how the suppressed (Church Slavonic and Russian) vocabulary must have been audible behind the compulsory Soviet language in communist times.

Mourning the dissolution of the Soviet Union in a language that is in itself a materialization of the values that the communists were determined to obliterate, as Shvarts does here, seems to me to be more of a celebration—of the resurrection of the Church Slavonic language and the Christian cultural inheritance. According to Boris Gasparov, Church Slavonic, Russian and, during the course of the twentieth century, Soviet vocabulary and style have all been charged with certain layers of meaning. This, in turn, has enabled writers to use linguistic form “as an implicit emblem of meaning, to enhance the message by purely stylistic and rhetorical devices.”¹⁸ In using Church Slavonic vocabulary to evoke Soviet motifs as well as communist nationalistic pathos, Shvarts mixes two of these emblematic layers, thereby accentuating the difficulties encountered in trying to come to terms with the Russian national identity.

The poem’s clichés about the motherland, *О Родина милая, Родина драгая* (3),¹⁹ carry a double reference to both pre-Soviet Russia and the Soviet Union. Furthermore, through the reference to Ukrainian *Рідна Україна* (10),²⁰ it becomes clear that Russian is not the sole national language of the whole of the nation. Regardless of these historical and geographical inconsistencies, the poem goes on to present the Soviet Union as a dimension given by nature: *Это ведь кровное все, телесное наше!* (12).²¹ The highly ironical depiction of the Soviet Union as a natural body made up of countries and regions in effect stresses the very opposite, namely, that the Soviet empire was an artificial, human creation. In her book on totalitarian language in the Soviet Union, Nataliia Kupina describes the moulding of the Soviet people in the following way:

Семь десятилетий Страны Советов оказались достаточным сроком для формирования советского человека с его политически запрограммированным мировоззрением и системой ценностей,

18 Gasparov, 2004, p. 147.

19 “Oh sweet Homeland, dear Homeland.”

20 “Homeland Ukraina.”

21 “It is all of our blood, our body!”

а также особого лингвокультурного сообщества, основа которого заложена не в национально-культурной, а в государственно-политической сфере. Советский народ— немиф и не публицистическое клише, это действенная и по сей день реальность, предполагающая определенное состояние сознания и установку на поведение личности.²²

In the light of Kupina's version of history, Shvarts' poem could be read as precisely a depiction of the distance between the ambitions of "state-political" ideologies and the power of "national-cultural" values. By "lamenting" the collapse of the Soviet Union in the language of pre-Soviet Russian culture and non-Russian ethnic groups, Shvarts seems to celebrate the "realist" view of a native language as "the embodiment of its speakers' collective mentality and cultural tradition."²³ On the other hand, by employing the pre-Soviet Russian cultural and linguistic tradition within the Soviet context, comprehending the "new world" in terms of the old, she is, in fact, using language in a "nominalist" sense.

In lines 18–19, early Rus' texts serve as stylistic models, when one of the most memorable achievements of the Soviet Union is recalled: *А ведь царь, наш отец, посылал за полками полки/На Луну шли драгуны, летели уланы, крались стрелки.* (18–19).²⁴ The tsar was the main symbol of Russian society before the communist revolution, and his death was a prime condition for the Soviet Union coming into being. The quoted lines, however, seem to indicate that the power structures of Tsarist Russia did not really die with the last tsar, but continued to prevail and develop in the Soviet Union, disguised as communist culture.

In lines 15–25 the achievements of the Soviet Union, and especially the imperialistic ones, are symbolized by the moon, which is portrayed as having been forced into a political agenda as well as a conflict over na-

22 Kupina, 1995, p. 3. "The seven decades of the Soviet countries turned out to be sufficient time for the creation of Soviet man with his programmatic political worldview and system of values, as well as of a particular cultural linguistic community, the basis of which is to be found not in the national-cultural, but in the state-political sphere. The Soviet people is not a myth and not a publicistic cliché—it is a reality, effective even today, propounding a particular state of consciousness and adjustment of the individual's behaviour."

23 Gasparov, 2004, p. 132.

24 "You see, the tsar, our father, sent regiment after regiment—/Dragoons went to the Moon, uhlanes flew, riflemen stole there."

tional identity: nature has been invaded by culture; by Russian chronicles (18), myths (19), and people: На лунянках женились тогда россияне (21).²⁵ Now, if the moon goes its own way, the poetic “I” fears, then the country will shrivel (15–17). In turn, if the union is dissolved, the moon will become a huge problem:²⁶ на таможе они будут драть за одно посмотренье (23).²⁷

In 1990, the question as to how to handle a world without the uniting power of the Soviet Union was still open. In the final two lines of the poem Shvarts looks for an adequate reaction for the русские лунатики to the possible departure of the moon and the dissolution of the Soviet Union: Что же делать лунатикам русским тогда—вам и мне?/Вспоминая Россию, вспоминать о Луне. (24–25).²⁸ Who exactly the grieving subjects, русские лунатики, are remains ambiguous—as does the word лунатик, which can be read as “sleepwalker” or as a play on the English “lunatic,” meaning “crazy.”

The title of the poem, “Zaplachka konservativno nastroennogo lunatika,” reveals that we are dealing with a conservative person, obviously a “sleepwalker,” who cannot shake off the old times. But, since the country remembered in the poem’s last line is Russia (25), and not the Soviet Union (explicitly mentioned in line 6), the poem’s subjects, вам и мне (24), are not necessarily “sleepwalking” in the Soviet Union, but perhaps rather in Tsarist Russia.

To remember the moon as it was prior to the invasion by Soviet propaganda is a way of disentangling both the cosmos and pre-Soviet history from the Soviet propaganda and myth-making machinery, so dominated by “nominalist” views about language. Moreover, the splitting of the poem’s subject into вам и мне (24), and the ambiguity of the words русские лунатики, may indicate that the poem’s subject divides into two kinds of русские лунатики—sleepwalkers, living in the dream world of “national-cultural” values, and somewhat “crazy” people, who long for the lost greatness of the Soviet Empire, united through “state-political” ideologies.

25 “Then the Russians got married to moon-women.”

26 The poem was written in 1990, after the Baltic countries had declared their independence, while today there are still conflicts between the Russian and the native populations of these countries. In Chechnya the struggle for power is still going on.

27 “at the customs post they’ll fleece [people] in return for one look.

28 “What will the Russian “lunatics” do then—you and I?/When remembering Russia, remember the Moon.”

Although Shvarts in this poem seems to sympathize with the views of the “realists,” she explicitly states in the questionnaire that she sees language as an instrument.²⁹ But do “realist” views necessarily need to be in opposition to those of the “nominalist”? If what a poet does, by means of poetic verbalization, is to employ language in such a way that its historically and culturally given shades of meaning support the message of the text, the poet, in effect, combines the “nominalist” and the “realist” views. To achieve this requires a creative subject, and Shvarts in her questionnaire argues that language of itself cannot fulfil this role: Не верю в то, что язык сам творец, такой кот-баюн, сам себе рассказывающий сказки.³⁰ She goes on to define the task of the poet: Задача поэта как можно точнее передать то, что лежит по ту и эту сторону языка.³¹ Thus, in Shvarts’ view, it seems, the role of the poet is rather that of an interpreter. If language is the poet’s instrument, the many shades of meaning present in a word or particular phrase are parts of this tool and add nuances to the context in which they are used, that is to the poet’s creation.

It is an inherent quality of language that it contains traces of history, and therefore that historical representation might sometimes collide with linguistic memory. It was not the tsar who sent the regiments to the moon for example, but comrade Brezhnev. A pre-Soviet expression, such as the stock phrase *посылал за полками полки* (18), used within the Soviet context, reveals both the abyss between the past and the present, between truth and lies, and how unrealistic and fairytale-like Soviet propaganda actually was.

Some registers of language, however, seem to carry too much historical national baggage to be used within the context of a new modern national state—which is probably why Church Slavonic was a controversial subject during most of the Soviet era. Historically, poetry is a genre where high-style Church Slavonic words are organically at home, and today one can observe them alongside vocabulary from other stylistic registers of

29 Язык, как известно, инструмент [...]. “Language, as is well known, is an instrument [...]” Shvarts, questionnaire, St Petersburg 2005, *Otechestvennyye zapiski* 2, URL: http://magazines.russ.ru/oz/2005/2/2005_2_6.html (accessed 02.03.2006).

30 Shvarts, questionnaire, St Petersburg 2005. “I don’t believe that language itself is the creator, some singing tomcat telling itself fairytales.”

31 Shvarts, questionnaire, St Petersburg 2005. “The task of the poet is to render what is both on this side of language and beyond it, as accurately as possible.”

language, such as slang or professional jargon. In today's Russia, Church Slavonic has also come to be used as a sign of freedom from the communist past, and appears to be crucial to the kind of poetry that tries to pose questions about Russian and Soviet national identity and culture.

David Raskin

David Raskin imports a large proportion of the vocabulary in his poetry from practical spheres such as professional jargon, information technology, official and scientific terminology; and in this rather factual style, he poses philosophical questions of current interest. Raskin had been writing poetry for almost three decades before he was first published in 1989.³² The following poem is taken from his most recent collection.³³

- 1 Иссякли волнения, осталась лишь трезвая воля,
- 2 Отчетливый свет, привычка к рассудочному порядку.
- 3 Попискивает компьютер в режиме лексического контроля,
- 4 Любое новое слово принимая за опечатку.
- 5 Чем больше живешь, тем больше пахнет простудой или тревогой
- 6 Любая неправильность, любая альтернатива.
- 7 Нечистая муть оседает во сне, и лучше ее не трогай—
- 8 Навалятся старые страхи. От Лахтинского разлива
- 9 Туман наползает на Гавань, рождая томление духа,
- 10 Не хуже, чем в детстве, когда любой непонятный стук или шорох
- 11 Пронизывал ужасом, тоской первобытного слуха
- 12 И жалкой верой, осевшей грязью в узких зазорах
- 13 Между не бывшим и будущим. И, словно бетонные плиты,
- 14 Предчувствие и память легли громоздкой основой
- 15 Всего, что еще не достроено. Наглухо окна закрыты.
- 16 В ложном воспоминании вся жизнь не кажется новой.
- 17 И слаще вина и табачного дыма стали повторы.
- 18 Впрочем, словарь подключен и возможны корректировки.
- 19 Вместо природы—привычка, и не нужна другой опоры,
- 20 И только для виду еще продолжают перестановки,
- 21 Не нарушающие ни сути, ни обихода

32 D.I. Raskin, 1989, *Dokazatel'stvo sushchestvovaniia: Stikhi 1962–1987*, St Petersburg & Omsk.

33 D.I. Raskin, 1998, *Zapozdalye soobshcheniia: Stikhi 1988–1998*, St Petersburg & Omsk, p. 30. Bold markings are in the original.

- 22 Зажанной повседневности. Как у улитки, хрупок
 23 Панцирь обычных обозначений: **воля, свобода,**
 24 **Необходимость, судьба,** в конечном счете, **поступок.**

Difficult as it has been throughout history to imagine the clear and enlightened will, existing without emotional interference, accustomed to a pragmatic orderliness, this is exactly what we now have in the computer (1–2). But this technological invention understands only what it has been programmed to understand. For instance, on the basis of the spell check function the computer perceives any new word as an orthographical mistake (3–4). Not only can human beings guess at the meaning of new and unknown words from hearing or seeing them in context, they also differ from the computer in that they are able to accumulate experience.³⁴ As we have the ability to learn from our mistakes, rather than dismissing unfamiliar words as “wrong,” we try to make sense of them.

However, as a person grows older the more difficulty he or she may experience in adjusting to and accepting new changes: Чем больше живешь, тем больше пахнет простудой или тревогой/Любая неправильность, любая альтернатива. (5–6).³⁵ Along with the ability to understand and adapt new elements to fit an older system, the human being also has the opportunity to resist these changes. One reason for this may be that to accept change implies a challenge to what one accepted earlier (7–8).

The anxiety of the elderly person in the poem, however, is depicted as being not so very different from that of a child: не хуже чем в детстве (10).³⁶ A child’s lack of experience, due to its “non-existent past,” could be identified as the не бывшим (13).³⁷ To someone who does not have the knowledge to distinguish between “old” and “new,” everything is in fact equally new. However, age does not lead to full knowledge—the realm of the unknown still accompanies a person from the womb to the grave.

34 Certain computer programmes can be taught to recognize mistakes, e.g. text recognition programmes can learn to decipher unclear letters or numbers, email programmes to identify spam mails, and linguistic tools to recognize and correct certain spelling or grammar mistakes. But for these programmes to develop, human intervention cannot be avoided.

35 “The longer you live, the more it smells of cold or anxiety/Any irregularity, any alternative.”

36 “no worse than in childhood.”

37 “that which has not been.”

Later on in the poem it is stated that the new is built on both our past experiences and our expectations for the future (14–15). Since these expectations are based on our understanding of previous experiences, however, the way we remember them is crucial: *Наглухо окна закрыты./ В ложном воспоминании вся жизнь не кажется новой.* (15–16).³⁸ To see the present as it is, presupposes that we understand it not only in terms of what we have already seen; our knowledge might actually destroy the originality of the moment and turn it into one of many identical ones.

And this is exactly what the computer does: equipped with a norm that has been programmed into it, the computer can only understand retrospectively, and is thus unable to be innovative. It has been given a linguistic norm and a standard vocabulary, but is not able to adapt the new without further instructions. Nonetheless, the computer has opened new possibilities for us: The “windows” in line 15 might be read both as the windows of the computer, which allow us to enter the new technological space of our time, and as the windows in a child’s bedroom which may easily be opened to the threatening night.

Fear of the new and unknown probably contributes to the joy that we, as users of the computer, absorb into the safe haven of habit: *И слаще вина и табачного дыма стали повторы.* (17).³⁹ Of course, the norm that a computer has been programmed to follow is not conditioned by the emotional and intellectual economy that creates habits. In Raskin’s poem, habits have replaced nature: *Вместо природы—привычка, и не нужно другой опоры* (19).⁴⁰ But how are we to understand the word “nature” here?

Let us concentrate on the linguistic side of the computer’s functions. The poem’s focus on the dictionary tool of the computer—*Впрочем, словарь подключен и возможны корректировки* (18)⁴¹—renders possible an interpretation of the word *habit* as the pleasure we humans take in pursuing the standard language, the word *repetition* as the computer’s understanding of linguistic norms, and the word *nature* as language’s natural and unregulated ways of developing. We can use the computer as a tool that gives us clues as to what is correct, but it is our choice

38 “The windows are tightly shut./In false memory all of life does not seem new.”

39 “And repetitions have become sweeter than wine and cigarette-smoke.”

40 “Instead of nature—habit, and no other support is necessary.”

41 “However, the dictionary is switched on and corrections are possible.”

whether to follow or ignore its recommendations. In this interpretation, Raskin implies that without human intervention, language does not develop. Natural development depends on human action, as does the regulation of a language by norms. But what would happen if the norm and repetition were to govern alone, and no new linguistic phenomena were accepted into usage? We would have the computer's model of language development.

For sure, language can develop without the introduction of new vocabulary, and within the syntactical norms with which the computer is equipped. Through minor changes in syntax or to the context of a word, linguistic nuances can be created and new meaning added to already existing words. On the other hand, the introduction of a large number of new words to a language does not automatically change its grammatical structures, or core values in its culture. The new technological vocabulary that Raskin includes in his poetry, however, reflects actual changes that have affected many people's everyday lives, language, worldview and opportunities. And yet in spite of this, the poem states: *И только для виду еще продолжаютя перестановки,/ Не нарушающие ни сути, ни обихода/ Заданной повседневности.* (20–22).⁴² In making or accepting changes, we may, in fact, just be replacing one habit with another, and, of course, making rearrangements can also become a habit.

The metaphor in the poem's last lines seems to indicate that the designation, обозначение (23), is nothing but a fragile shell for the essential content; it seems not to matter what word is used: *Как у улитки, хрупок/ Панцирь обычных обозначений: **воля, свобода, Необходимость, судьба,** в конечном счете, **поступок.*** (22–24).⁴³ Synonyms such as “liberty”⁴⁴ and “freedom,” “necessity” and “destiny” are only symbolic surfaces for meanings, and changing the words does not change either their content or the influence of this content on everyday life (20–23).

The meaning of the five words in bold type suggests a philosophical question about whether or not we act in accordance with predestination, necessity or free will. This question also makes clear the fundamental

42 “And only for the sake of appearances, the rearrangements are still going on,/ Without distorting the essence, or the given daily routine.”

43 “Fragile as a snail's shell is the shell around the usual designations: **liberty, freedom, necessity, destiny,** finally, a **deed.**”

44 *воля* can mean both “liberty” and “will.”

difference between people and computers. Whereas people can be ascribed motives for their actions or non-action, the computer has only programmes. To discuss with the computer's programmed reactions is difficult—which does not imply that the computer actually has the *трезвая воля* (“sober will”) that we remember from the poem's first line. How can you have a “sober will,” if you do not have a will at all?

In the natural development of a given language, the free will of human beings would seem to be a decisive factor in relation to both renewal and regulation—in different proportions at different times. When using the dictionary tool of the computer, the question is whether one chooses to let the computer correct one's language, to act from habit, or to make new choices and act in a new way. Of the five words stressed in the poem's last stanza, the word *поступок* (“deed”) is the only one that is presented without a synonym, and it is additionally emphasized by the phrase *в конечном счете* (“finally”), as well as through being the poem's final word. It is thus highlighted as the most important of the five words. It seems that what really matters is to act. But what it actually means to “act” is not so easy to comprehend.

In the development of linguistic norms, however, one person's deeds are, obviously, not all it takes to change them. A word or an expression is normally allowed into any given standard language only when it has many users. Meanwhile Raskin's answer as to whether the changes in the Russian language in the 1980s and 1990s are reflected in his poetry shows that he includes words into his vocabulary in accordance with the same principle:

Возможно, где-то я и употребляю новые выражения или слова, но очень редко и лишь постольку, поскольку они вошли в массовое употребление и стали принадлежностью если и не литературного, то, по крайней мере, общеразговорного языка, утратив черты молодежного жаргона или блатной лексики.⁴⁵

45 Raskin, questionnaire, St Petersburg 2005. “It is possible that in some places I use new expressions or words, but very rarely, and only in so far as they have entered mass usage and become part of, if not the standard language, then at least the common colloquial language, having lost the traits of youth jargon or thieves' vocabulary.”

When asked about whether he invents words or not, Raskin answers: *Никогда. Это вытекает из моего отношения к языку, как к чему-то данному, более объективному, чем мы сами.*⁴⁶ He seems intent on protecting the Russian language's "objectivity," which he defines as the nuances of its various linguistic layers—Church Slavonic, Russian and loanwords that have been accepted into it historically.⁴⁷ Such conservative attitudes to language are shared by others, among them the "realists," but the trend in post-Soviet Russia is rather the opposite, in that it is highly inclusive of the new. Thus, new elements enter the language, while older elements live on, alongside the current standard.

However, linguistic changes reflect the changes in culture and society, and Raskin also explores the poetic potential of the field of technological development. In using language as a means of grasping the philosophical implications of the new technology, and of assimilating human beings to their new environment, Raskin might be said to come close to the "nominalist" view in the language debate.

In his poetry, Raskin seems to be trying to identify our place in a world where technology has changed our living conditions. In this particular poem, he focuses on the computer as a tool of language and as a powerful challenge in terms of linguistic and stylistic choice. The poem demonstrates a wish to comprehend human reluctance to accept the new, and if I interpret his answers to the questionnaire correctly, Raskin feels that the possibility for objectivity, incorporated in the standard language, will be threatened if we accept too much of the new into the old. Nevertheless, a major concern in this poem seems to be that without changes, a language is neither natural nor human. One alternative might be that humans could further develop nuances in the given language, instead of introducing such rapid changes to the vocabulary.

Conclusion

The two poems that I have chosen to analyse here are both linked to the new post-Soviet Russian reality through their introduction of new themes and motifs, such as the creation of the new Russian state, and

46 Raskin, questionnaire, St Petersburg 2005, "Never. This is due to my attitude to language as something given, more objective than ourselves."

47 See Raskin, 2004, "V pogone za prostorechiem," URL: http://folioverso.2hearts.ru/misly/misly2/v_pogone.html (accessed 15.11.2005).

the possible role of new computer technology, as well as through new vocabulary (компьютер “computer”) and realia (лексический контроль “spell check”). Whereas Raskin only accepts new words from selected areas into his poetry, Shvarts does not seem to set any limits as to what vocabulary or stylistic registers she can include in her texts. But as older words and expressions tend to contain more nuances than newer ones, certain linguistic elements coloured by history and culture may contribute more shades of meaning to the text through their usage. For example, she uses Church Slavonic vocabulary to describe the artificiality and constructedness of the Soviet Union as a nation, as well as significant words that point to the country’s suppressed religious past.

The different possible interpretations of the conservatism depicted in Shvarts’ poem, reflect a crucial crisis of values and ideals. How can inhabitants of contemporary Russia feel as one united people, when, to some, the core of Russian identity is to be found in the Russian Orthodox faith, while others long for the communist days and the greatness of the Soviet Empire? The “multiple past” of today’s Russians can, as Shvarts’ poem shows, also be rendered linguistically, as some words have both a Church Slavonic and a Russian version, for instance *жити/жить* (“live”), and some institutions have both Soviet and pre-Soviet Russian names, such as “president” or “tsar,” as does the country itself, Russia and the Soviet Union being mentioned here.

In Raskin’s poem human conservatism is understood as a phenomenon determined by habit, culture, and identity. In contrast to the linguistic norm of the computer, it is obvious that the detours people make from the norm, and the changes that they introduce into language, are a healthy sign of life, and imagination. The computer continues on the track that it has been programmed to follow, not out of any feeling or understanding of self. If we take into account Raskin’s concern for the development of the standard and poetic language, it becomes clear that he seeks to avoid the extremes, stagnation and chaos that the computer and unregulated human “creativity” can represent. As a consequence, in his poetry, he chooses to offer his readers new connotations to words from the official style, thus allowing for a different perception of these today than was possible in the Soviet era, and to introduce vocabulary from the most vital development of our time, namely information technology.

These two poets, together with others studied by Zubova, challenge the concepts of “language norm” and “standard language.” The language is charged negatively or positively by its cultural context—and thus, there is no such thing as correct or incorrect, dirty or elegant language *per se*. People’s attitudes to contemporary language culture are decisive in the development of contemporary Russian language and language usage—factors which, in turn, also impact on the language of poetry. The two poems analysed here show that poets address linguistic and cultural themes in ways so different that the individual value of every poem cannot be overestimated.