

Performative Metalanguage: Negotiating Norms Through Verbal Action

Ingunn Lunde

Слова и вещи не оставляйте без присмотра! (“Do not leave your words or things unattended!”)—thus goes a recent *Duponism*, an example of one of the new linguocultural genres in Russia today. Language is discussed, reflected upon and negotiated intensively these days. The *Duponism* quoted combines a metalinguistic statement, in the form of a request, with a linguistic practice demonstrating the activity called for, in this case, a creative twist to a fixed phrase well-known from airports in many countries.¹ The point of departure for this article is a general distinction between these two principal forms of metalanguage: statements about language that are expressed straightforwardly by making comments that relate *explicitly* to language, and statements about language that are voiced in and through *concrete linguistic practices*.

Examples of explicit metalanguage could be a newspaper article on the phenomenon of *iazyk padonkov* (“scum language”), books such as Maksim Krongauz’s recent *Russkii iazyk na grani nervnogo sryva* (2007), or particular instances of language legislation. Examples of metalinguistic statements through concrete linguistic practices are works of literary fiction, jokes, slang expressions, creative word formation, and so forth. The distinction is not a binary one, and these two forms of metalanguage can easily overlap. Both ways of negotiating (in a broad sense) the linguistic norms of contemporary Russian can be found in Russia today, often in combination. In this article my main focus will be on the latter form, which I shall call *performative metalanguage*, and on combinations of the

1 Вещи can mean both “things” and “luggage.”

two. On the basis of several examples I will outline some characteristics and tendencies that can be observed in this particular way of negotiating linguistic norms in Russia today. I will touch upon various word formation practices, the genre of *Duponisms*, linguistic humour, and internet Russian. But first, a very brief historical review.

Performative metalanguage: a historical perspective

Both historical and contemporary cultural contexts influence the nature of linguistic negotiation, or metalinguistic reflection. The most immediate historical context in which to look for linguistic practices that make some kind of metastatements on language in Russia is the recent Soviet past. Throughout the Soviet era, but especially during late Socialism, alternative linguistic practices, language play, creative doubletalk and the like constantly challenged, negotiated and relativized the official language norms.² With a retrospective interest, this fact is also reflected in post-Soviet publications on *novoiaz*, or *newspeak*, the official, mainly political, language culture of the Soviet period. In many such publications, scholarly as well as popular, there is a clear tendency to focus on the various kinds of “countercultural” reaction to official newspeak. This includes puns, jokes (*anekdoty*), prison-camp poetry and similar phenomena—in short, the popular tradition of “counterspeak” (*protivoiaz*), “linguistic resistance” (*iazykovoie soprotivlenie*), or “the language of self-defence” (*iazyk samooborony*).³ In such practices, language is used to make a statement that for obvious reasons cannot be made in plain, explicit metalanguage. Needless to say, the statements of *protivoiaz* concern not only language *per se*; their main targets may well be ideological or political. However, language norms certainly formed part of the official ideology and were, as such, frequently confronted by alternative linguistic practices such as those described above.

2 For an analysis of many such cultural and linguistic practices, see Alexei Yurchak, 2006, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton & Oxford.

3 These are terms used in works such as Natal'ia Kupina, 1995, *Totalitarnyi iazyk: Slovar' i rechevye reaktsii*, Ekaterinburg; 1999, *Iazykovoie soprotivlenie v kontekste totalitarnyi kul'tury*, Ekaterinburg; Gasan Guseinov, 2003, *D.S.P.: Materialy k rus-skomu slovariu obshchestvenno-politicheskogo iazyka xx veka*, Moscow; Anna Vezhbitska [Wierzbicka], 1993, “Antitotalitarnyi iazyk v Pol'she: Mekhanizmy iazykovoi samooborony,” *Voprosy iazykoznanii* 4, pp. 107–25; Benedikt Sarnov, 2005, *Nash sovetskii novoiaz: Malen'kaia entsiklopediia real'nogo sotsializma*, Moscow.

In more general terms, what has been called the *logocentrism* of Russian and Soviet culture has also contributed to the central role of verbal practices, or quite simply, of *words*: in the shape of an ideological hegemony of authoritative texts, a literary canon, the privileged status of writers (consider the related term *literaturocentrism*), as well as a general high awareness of the spoken and written word, its power and potential.⁴ But there are even earlier signs that point to the centrality in Russian culture of metalanguage in the form of linguistic practices, stretching back, in fact, to the Middle Ages and the cultural translation of Byzantine Christianity to Rus'. There was less theology, less philosophy, less theory in Rus' literary culture and a stronger emphasis on compelling verbal and rhetorical performance than on theological doctrine and philosophical reasoning.⁵ In other words, the explicit metalevel was often absent, while norms, rules and linguistic competence were learned from textual practice rather than from theoretical handbooks.⁶ As Boris Gasparov has pointed out, this situation "made the state of the language contingent on the state of the linguistic consciousness of its users":

In the absence of any explicit norms (other than available precedents), norms had to be deduced—in effect reinvented—on every occasion that the language was used [...]. A copyist, writer, or reader had to negotiate between, on the one hand, his or her linguistic intuition [...] and, on the other hand, the concrete examples offered by earlier manuscripts [...]. Out of such negotiations between the available precedents and current linguistic sensibilities, new implicit norms would emerge, or be passed, through newly produced copies or original compositions, to subsequent generations, which in their turn would confront these precedents with their intuitive linguistic perceptions.⁷

4 On *literaturocentrism* in Russia, see Mikhail Berg, 2000, *Literaturokratiia: Problema prisoeniia i pereraspredeleniia vlasti v literature*, Moscow.

5 What Georges Florovsky called the "intellectual silence" of pre-Petrine Russian culture is only one aspect, and one view, of this picture (Georgii Florovskii, 1937, *Puti russkogo bogosloviia*, Paris).

6 With this strong focus on linguistic performance, it is not surprising that theological and liturgical debates, when they arose with full force in the seventeenth century, focused, to a large extent, on language and the semiotics of linguistic form.

7 Boris Gasparov, 2004, "Identity in Language?" *National Identity in Russian Culture: An Introduction*, eds. S. Franklin & E. Widdis, pp. 132–48; p. 135.

It is not implausible that this particular nature of Rus' medieval text culture—and in Russia, the Middle Ages lasted for nearly seven hundred years—is one of the long-term factors shaping the characteristic interest in *linguistic negotiation through verbal action* in Russian today.

Performative metalanguage in the context of today's language debates

The debates concerning language norms and norm-breaking, the place and status of non-standard language and foreign loanwords, issues of language in relation to legislation, education, national identity or ethical standards—in short, “the language question” in post-perestroika Russia—have by now become a relatively clearly defined topic of study.⁸ The diverse positions taken in relation to the language question are explored on the basis of a variety of material: the mass media, including TV and radio broadcasts, conferences and roundtables, language legislation and language planning, official information campaigns, so-called “folk linguistics” (“lay” contributions to language debates) in all kinds of context. However, when drawing a broader picture of the developments in language culture in Russia today, we must also take into account the variety of other, often alternative, voices in and responses to the ongoing norm negotiations, those of concrete linguistic practices. Not surprisingly, literary works present a particularly rich material,⁹ but there are also other forms and forums of performative metalanguage. Certain (alternative) linguistic practices are accompanied by explicit norm negotiation in the sense of manifestos, philosophies or theories, commentaries, general introductions, interviews and the like, while others promote their linguistic agendas without further explicit commentary. The latter is frequently true for literary fiction, but even here we can find examples of relatively explicit statements, positions and attitudes.¹⁰

8 Cf. in particular Michael S. Gorham, 2000, “*Natsii ili snikerizatsiia?* Identity and Perversion in the Language Debates of Late- and Post-Soviet Russia,” *Russian Review* 59 (4), pp. 614–29; 2006, “Language Culture and National Identity,” *Landslide of the Norm: Language Culture in Post-Soviet Russia* (Slavica Bergensia 6), eds. I. Lunde & T. Roesen, Bergen, pp. 18–30, other contributions to the same volume and to this book; Martin Paulsen, 2009, *Hegemonic Language and Literature: Russian Metadiscourse on Language in the 1990s*, PhD thesis, University of Bergen; thematic issues/sections of *The Russian Language Journal* (58, 2008) and *Scando-Slavica* (54, 2008).

9 See Natal'ia Babenko, 2007, *Lingvopoetika russkoi literatury epokhi postmodernizma*, St Petersburg.

10 I discuss this point in my analysis of Evgenii Popov's novel *Podlinnaia istoriia*

Some linguistic practices are attributable to the work, ideas and missions of single individuals (Epshtein's project *Dar slova*), others arise within one or several smaller groups in the context of what develops into a particular subcultural communication pattern, which—greatly assisted by modern technologies—propagates and eventually becomes a mass phenomenon (so-called *iaz'yk padonkov* or *olbanskii iazyk*). Most initiatives lie somewhere between these two extremes (*Duponisms*, literary fiction).

Several of my examples share an element of linguistic play and creativity; they reveal an attitude towards changes in linguistic usage and language culture that is fairly relaxed, but their explicit or implicit agendas can at the same time be very serious: they display an eagerness to challenge established methods of word-formation and semantic association, and perhaps also our manner of thinking about language and its possibilities.¹¹ Generally, the ability to have fun with the changes in language culture is an important aspect of the kind of linguistic negotiation that we are dealing with here.

Linguistic creativity; from Soviet to post-Soviet language play

Linguistic play is certainly neither unique nor new to Russian culture. During Soviet times it was one way of coping with Soviet newspeak, and probably also with Soviet reality. The important tradition of *protivoiaz* and the continued attention it receives today bear witness to this, as do the *stëb* and *mit'ki* cultures of the late Soviet era.¹²

What happens with the transition from the Soviet to the late- and post-Soviet era, is that the reflection which took place within the confines of Soviet language practices—for the most part the forms of “linguistic

zelenykh muzykantov as a statement about language and linguistic usage, and more specifically as an interpretation of, and response to, *the language question* in Russia today: Ingunn Lunde, 2009, “Footnotes of a Graphomaniac: The Language Question in Evgenii Popov's *The True Story of 'The Green Musicians'*,” *Russian Review* 68 (1), pp. 70–88.

11 See Tine Roesen's analysis in this volume of Aleksei Slapovskii's *Oni* (*They* 2005)—a literary elaboration of similar linguistic agendas.

12 *Stëb* (стëб) is a particular kind of verbal humour involving parody and irony, frequently based on, and targeted at, clichés and “dead language.” The *mit'ki* movement originated in St Petersburg among a small group of artists and friends in the 1980s, who developed their ideas into an art-and-life-style. Central figures are Vladimir Shinkarev (the author of the book *Mit'ki*), Aleksandr Florenskii and Dmitrii Shagin.

resistance” described above—becomes part of the general metalinguistic activity. At the same time, linguistic play becomes a mass phenomenon on a scale that was unachieved in Soviet culture, where, although it certainly played a part in everyday life for most Soviet people, it did not usually figure in official speech genres or the mass media. In this way, while it is certainly the case that Soviet totalitarianism and state censorship not only repressed but also fostered alternative cultural and linguistic practices, we can observe that reflexive language in the form of linguistic play has undergone a remarkable revival over the last couple of decades.

This should not surprise us; reflexive language is particularly pertinent in a society undergoing radical social and political change, partly because such processes also involve the questioning of former and current ideological discourses. From the perestroika years onwards, we can see how linguistic clichés are inverted, played upon and recontextualized in an ironic manner, and key notions of the various post-Soviet periods playfully distorted in the fashion of катастрофка, приватизация, дермократия, and обирализация.¹³ The mass media, particularly in its use of newspaper headings, the language of advertisements, and many other genres, exhibits this kind of playful language use today. Here are a few recent examples of newspaper headings: В Белом будут черные: Барак Обама стал 44-м президентом США (*Gazeta* 6.11.2008); Газета в конце тоннеля: У читателей газеты «Метро» нет выбора (*Kompaniia*, 20.10.2008); Блогая сфера: Кто зарабатывает на онлайн-дневниках (*Kompaniia*, 17.11.2008), Урок права писания: На каком языке и с какими ошибками пишутся российские законы (*Novye Izvestiia*, 24.10.2008); Правописание политпредлогов (*Izvestiia*, 6.6. 2007).¹⁴ Not only do the last two of these examples play with words and word

13 “Catastroika,” “prikhvatization” (cf. privatization + *prikhvatit’* meaning “to grab”), “dermocrcacy” (cf. democracy + *dermo* meaning “shit”), “obiralization” (cf. liberalization + *obirat’* meaning “to rob”).

14 “There’ll be black (people) in the White (House): Barack Obama becomes the 44th president of the US”; “The newspaper at the end of the tunnel, readers of the newspaper ‘Metro’ have no choice”; “The blog [good/profitable, playing on *blagii*] sphere: who’s making money out of online diaries?”; “A lesson in orthography/the right to write: The language and errors of Russia’s laws”; “The orthography of PC prepositions” (heading of an article on the issue of the preposition *v/na* used in connection with “Ukraine”). Needless to say, I do not consider linguistic play in newspaper headings to be an exclusively Russian phenomenon. What can be said is that the trend has increased in Russia over the past couple of decades.

formation, they also draw attention to certain concrete linguistic issues, such as the language of Russian legislation (and implicitly also the question of language legislation¹⁵) and the question of political correctness (*politkorrektnost'*) in language.

Another field where linguistic forms respond playfully, as it were, to certain trends or topics in the language debates is slang and professional jargon. In computer slang, for instance, we frequently observe a peculiar interaction of Russian words with English terms, resulting in witty terms and expressions, often achieved by a humorous domestication—or Russification—of English words. Consider, for example хомяк, мыльница/мыло, мылить/намылить, обувь, батоны, форточки, девица, шаровары, etc.¹⁶ The common abbreviation ИМНО (“In my humble opinion”) exists as ИМХО in Russian, an abbreviation which has also received a number of alternative interpretations, such as Имею мнение, хрен оспоришь (“I have an opinion, and damned if you argue against it”).¹⁷ Other forms of Russian slang play with English words as well, as in вентилятор for “fan” in the sense of болельщик (fan, supporter).

In what ways do such slang expressions “comment” on the language question? In a most natural manner, I would argue, by *performing linguistically* in a way that demonstrates both the rich possibilities of Russian word formation, the input of English and, not least, the creative response, triggered by this input, to foreign linguistic influence. The humorous way this is done forms a comment in itself, displaying a relaxed attitude to the

15 Cf. the debates in connection with the drafts of the Law on the Russian Language of 2005, including many remarks on its style and language. For a discussion, see Lara Ryazanova-Clarke, 2006, “The Crystallization of Structures: Linguistic Culture in Putin’s Russia,” *Landslide of the Norm: Language Culture in Post-Soviet Russia* (Slavica Bergensia 6), eds. I. Lunde & T. Roesen, Bergen, pp. 31–63.

16 “Hamster” (*khomiak*) for “homepage”; “soap-dish/soap” (*myl'nitsa/mylo*) for “email”; “to soap” (*mylit/namylit*) for “to send email”; “provide with shoes/boots” (*obut'*) for “to boot up”; “loaves (of bread)” (*batony*) for “keyboard keys” (from “button”); “fortochka, small opening window pane” for “Windows”; “virgin” (*devitsa*) for “device”; “wide trousers” (*sharovary*) for “shareware.” See Boris Norman’s article in this volume for further examples of this kind.

17 The Russian Wikipedia lists a number of other variants, such as Индивидуальное Мнение Хозяина Ответа, Имею Мнение, Хочу Озвучить, Имею Мнение, Хочу Отметить (“The individual opinion of the author of the reply,” “I have an opinion and would like to make it known/to note that”). <http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/ИМХО>. The popular tradition of alternative decipherings of common abbreviations goes back to the early Soviet years.

question of Anglo-American influence, an attitude stripped of the discourse of threat and the moralistic and condemning overtones that can, from time to time, be sensed in the explicit norm negotiations.

Linguistic play with an agenda: “the gift of a word” and “Duponisms”

Among the many creative language initiatives, the most famous is perhaps Mikhail Epshtein’s word-creating project *Dar slova* (“The gift of a word”).¹⁸ The idea of the project, which originated in 2000, is to create new words, mainly derivatives of and phrases with Russian roots, in order to enrich the lexicon, phraseology and even the structure of the language. Epshtein’s project should be viewed in connection with his overall culturo-philosophical idea, the overcoming of postmodernism, which he sees as a natural reaction to the strong tradition of Russian logocentrism.¹⁹ Epshtein accuses postmodernism of remaining in an everlasting playful present, while his own vision is directed towards the future, with creativity and originality as central components of any activity: “[...] originality, after being killed off by postmodernism, is reborn as a project that does not assume its own realization, but lives on in the genre of ‘a project.’”²⁰ With particular reference to language, Epshtein proposes a separate branch of linguistics, an applied, “creative philology” with a special task of “linguistic cultivation,” that is concerned not with rules, prohibitions or guidelines for usage, but with invention, challenge and creative linguistic involvement:

Задача творческой филологии—раздвигать границы языка, а значит, и границы мира, превращать языковедение в *языководство*, изучение языка—в конструктивную работу умножения его лексических и грамматических возможностей. Сегодня

18 <http://www.emory.edu/INTELNET/daro.html>.

19 See Wolfgang Eismann, 2006, “Projektiver Utopismus als Überwindung des russischen Logozentrismus? (Ein Projekt zur Überwindung der Postmoderne und die russische Tradition),” *Zeit—Ort—Erinnerung: Slawistische Erkundungen aus sprach-, literatur- und kulturwissenschaftlicher Perspektive: Festschrift für Ingeborg Ohnheiser und Christine Engel zum 60. Geburtstag*, eds. E. Binder, W. Stadler & H. Weinberger, Innsbruck, pp. 77–97; p. 83ff. In his discussion of Epshtein’s project, Eismann argues that it shows clear signs of standing in the very same tradition of Russian logocentrism that it claims to transcend. We shall return to this point below.

20 Mikhail Epstein, 1995, *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*, Amherst, p. 338.

нужны не просто критики, но и искусные инженеры языка, способные производить анализ языковой ситуации и на его основе—тончайшие синтезы новых слов и правил, новых моделей словосочетания и мыслепорождения. Лингвоинженер, *знакодатель*, строитель языка—тот, кто создает новые знаки и меняет навыки мышления в обществе,—едва ли не самая нужная, хотя еще и не востребованная фигура в России XXI века.²¹

Epshtein does not simply invent new words and new roots. His most common procedure is to pick a Russian root and, by employing a common word-formative inventory, extract from it a number of new lexical items. In some cases, Epshtein looks for an archaic semantic layer in a root, as is the case with *яр* (*iar*) in the sense of “male sexual organ.” In an original response to the widespread use of *mat* (vulgar/obscene language), he sees the need to create an alternative erotic vocabulary, and *iar* provides the basis for a number of new words such as *ярить* (*iárit'* as opposed to the existing *iarít'*), *отярить*, *заярить*, *яриться*, *ярщик*, *ярник*, *ярильня*, *яристый*, *ярovitый*, *крутояр*, *тугояр*, *быстрояр*, *тихояр*.²²

Epshtein creates not only words; he has recently started to invent ideomatic phraseology, or rather, new phraseology (*neofrazii*, sg. *neofraziia*) with the potential to become ideomatic. As in the case of his single-word

21 “The task for creative philology is to expand the limits of language, and therefore the limits of the world as well, to turn linguistics into *linguistic cultivation* (*iazykovodstvo*), to turn the study of language into the constructive work of increasing its lexical and grammatical possibilities. Today we need not only critics, but also skilled engineers of language, capable of conducting an analysis of the linguistic situation and of creating on this basis the most subtle syntheses of new words and rules, new models of word formation and of thought generation. The linguo-engineer, the *giver of signs*, the language-builder, the one who creates new signs and changes patterns of thought in society—that’s virtually the person 21st-century Russia needs most, although so far no one has called for such a figure.” Mikhail Epshtein, 2007, “O tvorcheskom potentsiale russkogo iazyka: Grammatika perekhodnosti i tranzitivnoe obshchestvo,” *Znamia* 3, <http://magazines.russ.ru/znamia/2007/3/ep18.html>. Translations are my own.

22 Mikhail Epshtein, 2008, “Vyzov matu, ili Novyi ljubovnyi slovar’,” reproduced on various internet sites and included in his 13 July 2008 issue of the *Dar slova* bulletin. See the article for definitions and examples of the various new words. The roots which serve as the basis for word-formation are not only Russian, however. A non-Russian example is the prefix *grafo-*, which in a recent issue provides the basis for new words such as *графопатия*, *графопат*, *графотерапия*, *графоспазм*, *логоспазм* (*Dar slova* 215 (285) 1 June 2008).

creations, he is guided by the need for a particular expression that he does not find in Russian. A recent example is the disapproving expression “dust keeper” (хранитель праха) “about a person of a conservative-restorative persuasion, a follower of the past, of old times” (о человеке консервативно-реставраторского толка, приверженце прошлого, старины).²³ Epshtein frequently asks his readers for suggestions, in case he has overlooked an expression or is simply not aware of it. Readers may respond by sending him particular expressions with excerpts from literary works as documentation.

Epshtein’s *neophrases* demonstrate one of the ways he thinks that Anglo-American influence should be met by a creative response on Russian soil and may include English phraseology translated (and slightly adjusted) into Russian, such as the following example:

картошка на кушетке или диванный овощ—о сидячем образе жизни у телевизора.//В молодости он был тот еще фрукт, а теперь остепенился и стал просто *диванный овощ*.//Эй, *диванный овощ*, ты что задремал? открой свои глазки, футбол начался!//Ну что ты расселся, как *картошка на кушетке*. Пошел бы хоть посуду помыл, для своего же здоровья.²⁴

Epshtein presents the expression *картошка на кушетке* as a translation of the English *couch potato*. Incidentally, the English expression was also coined by one individual (in 1979), eventually became standard American English and even entered the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1993).

While the *dar slova* project is very clearly a one-man enterprise, it is also equally obvious that Epshtein consistently tries to engage his readers and fellow philologists in it, by inviting them (us) to respond, be creative, reflect upon language and so forth. Another of his projects where we sense the same concern is the nomination and election process for the “word of the year,” initiated by Epshtein in 2007. The 2008 search involved read-

23 Dar slova, issue 222 (294), 16 November 2008.

24 “*Couch potato* or *couch vegetable*—referring to a sedentary lifestyle in front of the TV.//In his youth he was a bit of a handful (*frukt*: “fruit”), but now he’s become settled in his ways and little more than a *couch potato*.//Hey, *couch potato*, you’re dozing off! Open your eyes, the football’s started!//What are you doing lounging around, like a *couch potato*? You could at least go do the dishes; it’d do you good.” Dar slova, issue 222 (294), 16 November 2008.

ers of *Novaia gazeta*, of Epshtein's blog "Kleikie listochki" and recipients of the *dar slova* bulletins, before a jury consisting of philologists, writers and philosophers gave their final vote.²⁵ Both nominations (of about 100 words and phrases) and votes were frequently accompanied by remarks and reflections by their nominators, which Epshtein quotes in his various writings on the process, for he is always eager to spread the word about the vote, publish press releases, and so forth. With the 2007 word being *glamur* ("glamour") and the 2008 winner *krizis* (crisis), there was certainly much room this year for reflection on the response of language and language trends towards changes in society—locally and globally.²⁶

In his analysis of Epshtein's project, Wolfgang Eismann points to its paradoxical link to the Russian tradition of logocentrism, the tradition Epshtein includes explicitly in what he tries to overcome (his main target being Russian postmodernism). Epshtein's intense concern with linguistic development, Eismann argues, his endeavour to intervene in its process, as well as his focus on semantic and lexical issues, and in particular on single words (Epshtein's "Wortfixiertheit"),²⁷ are all reminiscent of this logocentric thinking. Indeed, even Epshtein's recent turn to phrases in addition to single words does not necessarily decrease his "logocentric" approach; his focus is still on the lexico-semantic level.²⁸ More importantly, we could actually add to Eismann's list of the logocentric features of Epshtein's project by claiming that his manner of intervening linguistically, namely through *linguistic practice*, through his own example of linguistic behaviour in concrete, word-creating activities, is another trait going back to the logocentric model of linguistic reflection.

Let us turn now to a less famous example of linguistic practices "with an agenda," the new genre of *Duponisms* (дюпонизмы), which features expressions such as Бредколлегия, Класс мелкочитающих, Слова и

25 See <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/data/2008/color50/03.html>, <http://mikhail-epstein.livejournal.com/>.

26 *Dar slova*, issue 299, 28 December 2008.

27 Eismann, 2006, p. 94.

28 In a recent interview, Epshtein claims a greater interest in grammar than in individual words, focusing on the interrelationship between system and norm, in particular on what he calls the non-regularity of Russian morphosemantics, for example the fact that one and the same suffix may—when added to different words—generate semantically highly disparate words. See *Novaia Gazeta*, 15 July 2009, <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/data/2009/075/22.html>.

вещи не оставляйте без присмотра, иногда-нибудь, закономерность, деконструктивизация, расстрел биографии, Уралфавит, отчаянное чаение чая, о чем они живут, лихорадио,²⁹ and many many more, revealing an extremely creative attitude towards word formation and flexible semantics. The project originated in Ekaterinburg but uses the internet and blog communities as its main outlet, even if the first thousand Duponisms have now also been published as a printed book.³⁰ The term *diuponizm* goes back to the founder of the genre, a fictitious Frenchman by the name François Dupon. The group behind the first Duponisms have created a kind of mythology around this person, with interviews, encyclopaedia entries and the like in order to “confirm,” as it were, his identity.³¹

The authors of Duponisms combine explicit and implicit metalanguage—or straightforward metalanguage with verbal action. As a result, they have on their website not only thousands of Duponisms, but also definitions and other explanatory texts *about* them. They organize conferences and celebrate the annual “Day of the Duponism” each 4 November, with activities such as the “Duponstratation” (*Diuponstratsiia*), or “Duponistic Procession” (*Diuponisticheskoe shestvie*). In short, the Duponists have a clear linguocultural agenda. Let us examine it a little more closely.

The subtitle of the project “Duponisms, or ‘a Million Names’” (*Diuponizmy, ili “Mil’en nazvanii”*) is the “renewal of the Russian language,” and clearly we are dealing with a conscious campaign on behalf of the Russian language. Here is a short definition of Duponist practices:

Речевая практика нестандартного обращения со словом и смыслом. Выражается в опытах по сопоставлению звуков, смыслов, по разрушению привычных алгоритмов мышления и речи при

29 *Bred* (delirium; gibberish) + *redkollegiia* (editorial board), “class of smallreaders,” playing on *klass mlekopitaiushchikh* (class of mammals), “Do not leave your words or things unattended!” “any-sometimes,” “abomination of laws,” playing on *zakonomernost’* (conformity to natural law) + *merzost’* (abomination), “deconstructivization,” “execution of the biography,” “Uralphabet,” *otchaiannoe chaianie chaia* (desperate waiting for tea), “what do they live about,” “feveradio,” playing on *likhoradok* (fever) + “radio.” <http://www.proza.ru/2006/03/15-75>.

30 Fransua Diupon [François Dupon], 2006, *Mil’en nazvanii: Sbornik diuponizmov*, Ekaterinburg.

31 See, for instance, http://www.expert.ru/printissues/ural/2007/12/interview_dyupon/.

помощи искажения, соединения, сокращения или разъединения слов и фраз.³²

It is defined, as we can see, as a concrete linguistic practice, where the process itself is perhaps more important than the result. Elsewhere, the practice of Duponism creation is in fact described as a sort of *exercise* for poets and philosophers. Interesting in this sense is also the reference to *iskazhenie*, which brings to mind the poetic potential of this device in modernist art.³³ Let us proceed to another definition, which illustrates nicely the point that the linguistic practice should act as a *metacomment*.

Дюпонизмы—буквы, фразы, слова, предложения, рожденные искажением, соединением или сочетанием слов, слогов и звуков, представляющие *нестандартные наблюдения, выводы и замечания об окружающем мире*, используя двусмысленность и многозначность. (Pavel Lozhkin, my emphasis)³⁴

“The surrounding world” towards which these “non-standard observations, conclusions and remarks” are addressed certainly does not exclude language. As is clearly seen, the Duponism is a device in which we can observe both types of metalanguage at work, explicit and implicit. In addition to such definitions, the Duponists also identify the main targets of Duponist activities thus:

необоснованное использование иноязычных слов и анклав «блатной фени», новорусский новояз, «язык гламура», речевые

32 “A linguistic practice involving a non-standard handling of word and meaning. It is expressed in experiments with putting together sounds and meanings, and with deconstructing the usual algorithms of thinking and speaking with the help of the distortion, combination, abbreviation or breaking up of words and phrases.” <http://pa-lozhkin.livejournal.com/9332.html>.

33 See Susanna Witt’s contribution to this book.

34 “Duponisms are letters, phrases, words and sentences, that are brought about by the distortion (*iskazhenie*), combination and coupling of words, syllables and sounds, and represent *non-standard observations, conclusions and remarks on the surrounding world*, using ambiguity and polysemy.” <http://pa-lozhkin.livejournal.com/tag/ignps>, entry of 12 December, 2006.

практики религиозного фундаментализма, регенерация поздне-советского канцелярита и т.д.³⁵

We recognize here some of the concerns of linguistic cultivators or the norm-police—the inflation of foreign loans or the use of substandard Russian, but also other, less frequently voiced anxieties, such as the linguistic practices of religious fundamentalism or the revitalization of late Soviet officialese. The latter type of speech, replete with clichés and “dead language,” would seem to be the perfect target for the original, challenging style of the Duponists; it is precisely the unreflective forms of linguistic practice which the Duponists are eager to fight.

With regard to standard language, the Duponist agenda is, in a way, twofold. On the one hand, the Duponists claim to fight “the excessive coarsening and vulgarization of the standard language” (превышение пределов огрубления и вульгаризации литературного языка) as well as the “violation of linguistic norms” (нарушение языковых норм).³⁶ On the other hand, as can be seen from the Duponist practice of word-formation, it is eager to challenge those very same norms, at least in as far as “standard (language)” is interpreted as “established (patterns)” and “common (usage).” In other words, we are dealing here with an original and creative attitude—with purist inclinations.

One could ask whether the Duponist practice does not simply amount to mainstream postmodernist play with words. Confronted with the question of postmodernist influence, however, the Duponists reveal an aim similar to Epshtein’s of overcoming postmodernism. In one of the “interviews,” François Dupon himself says: [...] у нас [...] прямая противоположность постмодернизму. Мы пытаемся вернуть искусство от беспредметной игры смыслами, которая имела место в постмодернизме, к предметному миру. To which one of the central Ekaterinburg Duponists, Sergei Ivkin, adds: Я бы сказал, что смысл—это главное, что отличает дюпонизм от постмодернизма и от простой игры словами. Главное—попытка заставить шевелить мозгами.³⁷

35 “The unjustified use of foreign words and the exclusive domain of of ‘thieves’ slang’, the new Russian newspeak, ‘the language of glamour’, the linguistic practices of religious fundamentalism, the regeneration of late Soviet officialese, etc.” <http://pa-lozhkin.livejournal.com/9332.html>, entry of 3 December 2007.

36 <http://pa-lozhkin.livejournal.com/9332.html>, entry of 3 December 2007.

37 “[...] what we do is the very antithesis of postmodernism. We are trying to draw art

Thus, the Duponism is generally described as an alternative linguistic practice which is intended to destabilize and deconstruct established linguistic models and in particular widespread tendencies that are seen as harmful for the Russian language. It is clear that this is a matter of conscious norm-breaking with the stated aim of revitalizing the language, advancing linguistic development and spurring original and creative thought. The main tools are linguistic creativity, promoting semantic elasticity and flexibility.

Internet Russian

Duponisms are only one example of a broader trend in contemporary Russian culture that reveals a heightened sensitivity towards linguistic reflexivity and linguistic play in particular. I shall not go into detail on internet language in Russian, since there are several other articles in this book devoted to that; just a few brief remarks. One of the most conspicuous linguistic phenomena on the Russian internet is the so-called *iazyk padonkov*, a particular form of jargon based on a phonetic approximation of standard orthography to spoken Russian, in the manner of афтар (*aftar*) instead of автор (*avtor*), кросафчег/кросавчег (*krosafcheg/krosavcheg*) instead of красавчик (*krasavchik*), превед (*preved*) instead of привет (*privet*),³⁸ a number of fixed expressions to signal a positive or negative response to a blog posting, such as афтар выпей йаду! (*aftar vypei iadu!*), афтар пеши исчо (*aftar peshi ischo*), аццкая сотона (*atstskaiia sotona*), лытдыбр (*lytdybr*), and the like. This deliberate distortion of the standard orthographic norm has acquired its own linguistic term, *errativ*, coined by Gasan Guseinov.³⁹ Let us look briefly at the word лыт-

away from the objectless play with meanings that took place in postmodernism, and return it to the world of objects.” “I would say that it is meaning that above all distinguishes the Duponism from postmodernism and from simple play with words. The key point is that we are trying to make people use their brains.” http://www.expert.ru/printissues/ural/2007/12/interview_dyupon/.

38 As we can see, it is not just a question of exchanging written standards for spoken ones. Examples such as кросафчег (or сотона instead of сарана) do it the other way round, as it were, demonstrating the systematic will to “get it wrong” (or simply to be different or original). Also, the *padonki* style displays not only orthographic distortion, but also creative word-formation, alternative semantication, and other linguistic and stylistic features. See Gasan Guseinov’s contribution to this volume, with references.

39 Gasan Guseinov, 2005, “Berloga vebloga: Vvedenie v erraticheskuiu semantiku,” http://www.speakrus.ru/gg/microprosa_erratica-1.htm.

дыбр. Лытдыбр is the Cyrillic rendering of *lytdybr*, which is what you get if you want to write *дневник* (“diary”) in Russian but forget to switch keyboards. The first to use this word in the Livejournal⁴⁰ was the Tartu philologist Roman Leibov. In the Russian blogosphere, it has come to mean “a narrative replete with the spirit of *the humdrum*” (повествование наполнено духом повседневности), in other words, a boring blog or blogpost.⁴¹ Лытдыбр is a simple, but nice innovation, because it shows how technical features of internet communication spur creative linguistic play and semantification.

Now, what kind of “statement” does *iazyk padonkov* make? First, one should keep in mind that there are thousands of (occasional) users of this “language,” or elements of it, and they certainly have different views on the character and function of *iazyk padonkov* and on its relationship to standard language. Nevertheless, it is possible to point to certain typical characteristics. It usually involves linguistic play and creativity, and it displays a certain *laissez-faire* approach, sometimes bordering on a more challenging attitude.⁴² This nature of the *padonki* style becomes clearer when we look at the reactions to it.

Not surprisingly, the linguistic practice of *iazyk padonkov* has activated the metalinguistic discourse and led to reactions, both in the form of critical comments or pro-et-contra discussions,⁴³ and in a concrete counter-*aktsiia* (2005–2006) called “I can speak Russian” (я умею говорить по-русски), which flags banners on websites and blogs with slogans such as “I wish to read text in proper Russian” (Хочу читать тексты на правильном русском языке); “*Aftar*—become an Author” (Афтар—стань Автором!; “I write Russian” (Пишу по-русски); “*Aftary* are requested not to disturb” («Афтарам» просьба не беспокоить). What is more, we can observe an explicit discussion among the users of *iazyk padonkov* about the norms implied by this—more often than not—conscious norm-breaking, that is, the “wrong” and “right” forms of *iazyk padonkov* are debated.⁴⁴ This indicates that the sense of linguistic

40 Livejournal (<http://livejournal.com>) is a service hosting the majority of Russian blogs.

41 In the early years of blogging, diary blogs were more common than now, when blogs have become much more differentiated, sophisticated and generically more varied.

42 One should probably also mention the purely technical motivations of escaping filters and indexation tools.

43 <http://www.lovehate.ru/opinions/67727>.

44 See Vera Zvereva’s contribution to this volume.

norms is (still) very strong in Russia; it is taken most seriously by both the norm-police and the norm-breakers. This is understandable in view of the Russian tradition of linguistic cultivation (*kul'tura rechi*), a centralized linguistic policy, the high status of normative and authoritative dictionaries and grammars, and the promotion of the one and only correct standard language in schools.

Curiously, we can note that even the famous internet “Manifesto of antiliteracy” (Манифест антиграматности) displays several reminiscences of that very same culture; here, the opponents of the “antiliteracy” of the *padonki* are accused of not being “literate” (or cultured, НИ ЯВЛЯЮЩА ГРАМАТНЫМИ ЛЮДМИ) and are ridiculed as “just having good spellcheckers!” (проста у них хорошие спилчекеры!); furthermore, there is a reference to the “mighty Russian language” (в магучим нашим изыке), which recalls Turgenev’s famous великий и могучий русский язык, probably the most frequently occurring quotation in the Russian language debate, cited mostly by the voices that call for measures and regulations; and finally there is a quotation from Pushkin (Биз грамотичиской ашипки я русской речи ни люблю!, писал наш лудший паэт Аликсандыр Сиргеич Пушкин), the number one authority on the modern Russian standard language.

While we cannot rule out the possibility that the Manifesto of antiliteracy reflects an ironical attitude, not untypical of the *padonki* style, I am inclined to think that in this particular case, it does not. Irony and play is, however, certainly a feature of the “higher levels” of *padonki* practice, where the mass phenomenon becomes an art form (*ORFO-art*⁴⁵). In this sense, it may become something of a functional style, which can be turned on and off as the speaker moves in and out of virtual reality: «падонство» — не бандитская организация и не тоталитарный культ, а игра в некую реальность, наигравшись в которую, человек возвращается к обычной жизни.⁴⁶

45 N. Shapovalova, 2008, “ORFO-art kak primer karnaval'nogo obshcheniia v virtual'noi real'nosti,” *Filologicheskie etiudy: Sbornik nauchnykh statei molodykh uchenykh*, vol. 2, part 2, pp. 292–95, <http://ec-dejavu.net/o/Orfo-art.html>.

46 “The ‘padonki style’ is neither a gangsters’ organization nor a totalitarian cult, but playing around with a kind of reality, and after you’ve played for a while, you return to ordinary life.” Ivan Shyshkin, 2006, “Preved, krosavchegi! ili, Apologiia ‘padonkov,’” *Zerkalo nedeli* 13, <http://www.zn.ua/3000/3050/53059/?printpreview>.

Moreover, as apologists of the *padonki* style have repeatedly observed, in order to distort the norms of the standard language not just “correctly,” but with elegance and wit, one has to know the rules and break them in a conscious and sophisticated way:

«Аффтарты» не просто безграмотны—они безграмотны намеренно и подчеркнута. [...] Намеренное искажение слова—тоже элемент творчества, попытка преобразить слово, довести до абсурда, придать ему новое звучание, новый эмоциональный оттенок и новый смысл—или антисмысл. Даже нецензурные выражения у «падонков» искажаются настолько, что предстают в комическом виде, теряя часть негативного заряда.⁴⁷

The element of play, the comic, or even carnivalesque element is, as we have seen, prominent in both the Duponist practice and the language of the *padonki*, and may in various ways be connected to their “ideological” concerns. In the above-mentioned interview, “Dupon himself” says: Не все дюпонизмы, правда, смешны, и не все они должны быть смешны, но мир, в котором есть дюпонизмы, становится более смешным, ясным и менее страшным.⁴⁸ On the topic of *iazuk padonkov*, Ivan Shyshkin, in turn, declares: Его «смертельное» оружие—умение играть словами и железная уверенность в своей правоте. О, если бы все войны велись на форумах!..⁴⁹

The very ability to have fun with language is essential to metalinguistic awareness, according to Krongauz, and as long as this kind of linguistic reflection takes place, he thinks, there is still hope. Consider the following statement in one of his interviews in connection with the

47 “The *afftory* are not just illiterate, they are deliberately and emphatically illiterate. [...] The deliberate distortion of the word is also an element of art, an attempt to transform the word, reduce it to an absurdity, provide it with a new sound, a new emotional nuance and new meaning—or antimeaning. Even the *padonki*’s uncensored expressions are distorted to such an extent that they appear in a comic form, thereby losing some of their negative charge.” Shyshkin, 2006.

48 “True, not all Duponisms are funny, and they do not all have to be funny, but a world where Duponisms exist becomes funnier, brighter and less frightening.” http://www.expert.ru/printissues/ural/2007/12/interview_dyupon/.

49 “Its ‘deadly’ weapon is its ability to play with words and its utter confidence in its own righteousness. Oh, if only all wars were waged on forums!..” Shyshkin, 2006.

publication of his popular book, where he comments on what he calls the “language of glamour” in 1990s Russia:

[...] В газете прочел рекламу: «Кожаные изделия эксклюзивных и элитных производителей». Еще лет пятнадцать назад элитным производителем мог бы называться только какой-нибудь жеребец. *Вы улыбнулись? Тогда не все потеряно.*

— А если бы не улыбнулась?

— Значит, не понимаете, что происходит... ⁵⁰

Do endeavours of the kind I have briefly discussed in this article have any effect at all? I cannot, of course, answer this question within the confines of this essay, and it is likely to be rather difficult to answer under any circumstances. What I would like to point out, however, are two things. First, I think it is important to include such activity when we try to draw a broader picture of the developments in language culture, or, more precisely, in the norm negotiations taking place in Russia today. Second, it is not unlikely that such activity, and its reception, will contribute to a change in people’s *perception of linguistic norms*, that is, it can influence current ideas about language, or current language ideologies. What we have seen in most of my examples are instances where language and language users display and demonstrate great *flexibility*; flexible semantics in the *Duponisms*, flexible morphosemantics and an open attitude to the historical layers of the language in Epshtein’s project *Dar slova*, flexible orthography and semantics in the language of the internet or, in the case of *errativity*, a flexible and highly natural switching between codes by everyday users of Russian in all its varieties. In this sense, the main contribution of such endeavours—playful and serious—is to make popular and professional attitudes to language more open with regard to the flexibility and elasticity inherent in the Russian language, as in any language.

⁵⁰ “[...] I read an advertisement in the paper: ‘Leather goods from exclusive and elite manufacturers [breeders]’. Fifteen years ago or so only a stallion of some kind could be called an elite breeder. *You’re smiling? Then all is not lost!*—And if I hadn’t smiled? //—That would mean you don’t understand what’s going on...” (<http://www.kp.ru/daily/24075/311896/>).