

Wrong Is the New Right. Or Is It? Linguistic Identity in Russian Writers' Weblogs

Ellen Rutten

IF ONE COULD map linguistic norm negotiations in post-Soviet Russia, one “negotiation space” that would be hard to overlook would be the blog. Ever since the Russian-speaking blogosphere sprang into life in 2001, weblogs have constituted a popular mode of public self-expression in Russia; in March 2009, the number of active Russian blogs approximates seven million.¹

As recent research shows, this popular new-media tool is a potent vehicle specifically for linguistic self-expression. Although blog services invariably allow users to include visual and audiovisual material, in practice bloggers are inclined to content themselves with *textual* rather than multimedia elements.² Not surprisingly, a recurring object of discussion among users is the language that they employ. If metalinguistic discourse has flourished in post-perestroika Russia at large,³ in the Russian blogosphere it is no less rampant than in other language-focused cultural spheres. “Talk about talk” is a discursive hobby horse, particularly in principally language-oriented blog types, such as those of the

1 Figure based on the daily updated Yandex blog report of March 16, 2009 (<http://blogs.yandex.ru>).

2 To my knowledge, there are as yet no statistical data on proportions of textual versus graphic/multimedia elements specifically in Russian-language blogs; but recent content analyses do indicate that the majority of blogs have a “low-tech” status: “most blogs [...] did not rely on a graphical user interface” and “did not make extensive use of multimedia elements” (cf. Zizi Papacharissi, 2007, “Audiences as Media Producers: Content Analysis of 260 Blogs,” *Blogging, Citizenship, and the Future of Media*, ed. M. Tremayne, New York, pp. 21–38).

3 Cf. Ingunn Lunde & Tine Roesen, eds. 2006, *Landslide of the Norm: Language Culture in Post-Soviet Russia* (Slavica Bergensia 6), Bergen.

professional writer.⁴ This genre, and, more specifically, the question how literary writers perform linguistic identity in their blogs, is what interests me here.

Since literary blog research is in its infancy, it is hard to provide exact percentages, but it does not seem incorrect to argue that writers' blogs make hearts beat faster especially in Russia. The Russian-speaking Internet has manifested a dazzling online literary activity from the start—and within that thriving digital literary landscape, writers and their respective blogs occupy a prominent position.⁵ From Evgenii Grishkovets to Linor Goralik, from Maks Frai to Aleksei Slapovskii, a substantial number of professional Russian writers and poets have launched personal blogs, whose audiences can amount to tens of thousands of readers each day.⁶

The writers in question embark on their blog adventures for various reasons, creating varying journals. For Evgenii Grishkovets, the diaristic-epistolary function prevails, with most posts starting and ending with Здравствуйте! and Ваш Гришковец.⁷ Svetlana Martynchik, alias Maks Frai, is interested—at least in her publicly available entries—rather in posting photographs.⁸ And Aleksei Slapovskii, in yet another type of writer's blog, uses his posts primarily for distributing links with information on his work or (extracts of) new writing.⁹

These individual differences notwithstanding, linguistic issues form an interest that many writers' blogs share. Not surprisingly, in a culture where literary authors have “long been accorded a special role in the con-

4 As “writers' blogs” I define blogs by a) professional writers who live off literary and/or creative writing, or b) authors for whom this is not the case, but who nevertheless enjoy a high symbolic status in professional literary-intellectual circles and whose writing is singled out in quality journals such as *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* or *Novyi mir*.

5 For an analysis of literary life on the Russian Internet, see, among others, Ekaterina Lapina-Kratasyuk, et al., eds. 2009, *kultura 1: Notes from the Virtual Underground. Russian Literature on the Internet*, http://www.kultura-rus.de/kultura_dokumente/ausgaben/englisch/kultura_1_2009_EN.pdf.

6 Yandex (cf. footnote 1) provides information on the number of readers of individual blog authors. In addition, bloggers' personal profiles generally indicate the number of his or her “friends”: readers who register and are officially accepted as readers of the blog in question. Both these numbers indicate that professional literary writers with blogs tend to generate thousands to tens of thousands of reader-“friends.”

7 “Hello!”; “Your Grishkovets.” See <http://e-grishkovets.livejournal.com>.

8 Martynchik opts for “friends-only” posts, which can solely be seen by bloggers whom the author has formally accepted as readers. See <http://chingizid.livejournal.com>.

9 See <http://slapovsky.livejournal.com>.

text of the language question,” metalinguistic reflection is for many a writer-cum-blogger today a *sine qua non*.¹⁰ In their blogs, authors muse on the state of the Russian language at large, on their own linguistic style or that of colleagues, or—and this is a feature I want to zero in on—they ponder the linguistic specificities of blogging. On July 29, 2002, for instance, writer-cum-journalist Linor Goralik stated that she views blogging as the creation of fully fledged texts, whose composition requires meticulous linguistic attention: Я воспринимаю [...] многие свои посты, как тексты. То есть редактирую, пытаюсь соблюсти [sic—ER] какую-то внутреннюю ритмику, стилистику, то-се.¹¹ In a comment thread with 40 comments, prominent Russian writers and intellectuals such as Roman Leibov, Sergei Kuznetsov, and Dmitrii Kuz'min reciprocate Goralik's interest in discussion, arguing avidly about the alleged (non-)literariness of blog writing.

The discussion initiated by Goralik is programmatic for a trend among professional writers to share reflections on blogging as a linguistic practice. They do so eagerly, in interviews and in print, but also within the medium at stake: their own blogs.¹² From these bloggers-on-blogs discussions, the weblog emerges as a discursive space which differs principally from offline counterparts. If the participants of the debate are hesitant to pin down the “otherness” of blogs to one distinctive feature, then linguistic freedom and the absence of restrictive norms are repeatedly singled out as emblematic traits.

For some writers, the latter—complete liberty from restrictive language norms—is the very reason to launch a blog. This is the case with a weblog which I want to explore here in greater detail: *tanyant* or <http://tanyant.livejournal.com>, the blog of writer-cum-essayist Tat'iana Tolstaia. How can we define Tolstaia's “online linguistic identity”? And how do her metalinguistic reflections on blogging relate to the practice of her

10 Ingunn Lunde, 2008, “Писатели о языке: Contemporary Russian Writers on the Language Question,” *Russian Language Journal* 58, pp. 3–18; p. 3. In the article in question, Lunde scrutinizes the role—today still far from insignificant—that contemporary Russian writers play in debates about the Russian language.

11 “I see [...] many of my posts as texts. In other words, I edit them, try to observe some internal rhythm, style, etc.” (<http://snorapp.livejournal.com/45497.html>). Throughout this article, all translations from Russian into English are mine.

12 For a metalinguistic essay on blogs by Goralik, for instance, see 2002, “Sobrannye list'ia (ob odnom i tom zhe vseгда ob odnom i tom zhe),” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 54, <http://magazines.russ.ru/nlo/2002/54/lgor.html>.

own posts? These are the questions at stake in my analysis of Tolstaia's web writing.

In order to answer these questions, it is relevant to consider the conditions in which the author launched *tanyant*. Unlike Goralik, whose claim to fame lies primarily in the popularity of her blog, Tat'iana Tolstaia started blogging at a point when she was already a renowned writer, both in and outside Russia. At the time of launching her blog in December 2007, she had already acquired a large group of online "friends," even before managing to write her first post.¹³ Since then, this group has burgeoned to a steady 12,000–13,000 regular readers.¹⁴

In her first post, Tolstaia was eager to advise this all-too-impatient audience not to set their expectations for her blog too high. She did so with an emphatically metalinguistic warning:

Я оставляю за собой право:

— писать с ошибками;

— нарушать все правила грамматики по собственному капризу;

— материться.¹⁵

Typos, errors, swearing: *tanyant* uses her first entry to set a clear agenda. For *this* author, she seems to suggest, the blog is a confined discursive space—one where she will not allow herself to be restricted by the omnipresent eye of strict editors and the other stifling prerequisites that accompany offline publishing.

At first sight, as *tanyant*, Tolstaia indeed employs a purely laconic, informal writing mode—one which differs drastically from the polished style of her print publications. In regular postings she tangibly revels in asking her audience practical questions ("Where can I buy straw in Moscow?" "Remind me, what was the name of that film?"), penning down recipes for salads and cakes, providing readers with logistic information about her public performances (where to watch her talk show, how to

13 Concerning the large online audience that had flocked together by the time Tolstaia started writing, see <http://tanyant.livejournal.com/548.html>; her first post generated 87 reactions (based on the number of comments received by March 12, 2009).

14 Figure based on Yandex blog reports of March 2009 (cf. footnote 1).

15 "I reserve the right:—to write with mistakes;—to disobey any rule of grammar if I feel like it;—to swear." (<http://tanyant.livejournal.com/2007/12/15/>).

attend an interview), and posting comic pictures or films with frivolous one-line comments.

Tolstaia, in other words, produces exactly the type of blog that the Russian scholars Irina Kasje and Varvara Smurova have branded *okolo-literaturnyi* or “near-literary.”¹⁶ “Near-literariness”; with that term Kasje and Smurova refer to a tendency among Russian blogs to serve as a literary “safety zone,” one where literature is not “the centre of attention” and authors are allowed to write “according to the laws of the amateur literary community”—even if, like Goralik, in practice they claim to opt for linguistic and literary perfectionism. In the “near-literary” sphere that Kasje and Smurova outline, literary fragments are persistently embedded in a mishmash of “emphatic reactions, mundane advice, literary instructions, offers to help out, to bring some tangerines, to adjust the second paragraph, or to rearrange a few words.”¹⁷ Tolstaia’s posts match this definition through their informal content; but they do so, too, through their metalinguistic bias—a bias which is more prominent, and more normative, than it might seem at first glance.

As we saw, in her first post Tolstaia vehemently denied any concern with linguistic norms. How free from normative restrictions *tanyant* really is, however, becomes clear only upon closer inspection of the actual blog posts. In her entries, Tolstaia turns out to fulfill only partially the pledges with which she kicked off. She does curse—and frequently so, with evident pleasure—but the warranted typos, language mistakes and grammar errors fail to appear.¹⁸ Apart from the occasional typo in brief comment texts (which cannot be corrected after posting), this reader, at least, could not catch the author making a single mistake throughout the entire blog. Apparently, when composing posts Tolstaia is too much of a professional writer not to cling zealously to the standard rules of Russian grammar and spelling. Her entries are meticulously crafted from a stylistic and linguistic point of view, even when concerning a topic as down-to-earth as instructions for making a good herring salad.

16 Irina Kasje & Varvara Smurova, 2002, “Livejournal.com, russkaia versii: poplach’ o nem, poka on zhivoi...,” *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* 24 (4), <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2002/4/kasje-pr.html>.

17 Kasje & Smurova, 2002.

18 Tolstaia discusses her own preference for spicy language and her readers’ reactions to it in her posts of June 16 (<http://tanyant.livejournal.com/18195.html>) and 17 (<http://tanyant.livejournal.com/18728.html>), 2008.

But if Tolstaia refrains from linguistic laconicism herself, she does use her blog to talk *about* erratic language; the aim of many a post exists in pillorying idiomatic mistakes or linguistic errors that the author either lauds or criticizes for deviating from the rules. Thus,

· on June 15, 2008, Tolstaia slated an advertisement by Livejournal¹⁹ for addressing users informally with ты rather than the more distant form of address вы: *У нас принято разговаривать на «вы», без дональд-даковской фамильярности, пока вас не пригласили перейти к более близкому общению и обращению (my emphasis—ER);*²⁰

· a week later, citing error-ridden comments to her blog by a non-native speaker, she praised one of his mistakes as a poetic neologism: Японский френд, пишущий по-русски, сообщает: «[...] У меня 3 страшные вещи в России [...] 1. в лесу ночью. 2. на машину с пьяным. 3. русская девушка когда она обидится [...]». К сожалению, ему объяснили, и он поправил «ночь» на «ночью». А такой *преlestный* неологизм получился, *хоть в язык вводи!* (my emphasis—ER);²¹

· in two entries posted in mid-August of the same year, she rejoiced in linguistic errors made by journalists: Комментаторы спортивных соревнований говорят: «В двухтыщи первом году» [...] ведь и в самом деле, *мы же говорим* «в двухтысячном году». Почему же не «в двухтыщипервом?» (my emphasis—ER);²²

19 Livejournal is the service that hosts *tanyant* (and the majority of Russian blogs); cf. <http://www.livejournal.com>.

20 “Here we say ‘vy’, without Donald-Duckish familiarity, until invited to enter into more intimate modes of communication” (<http://tanyant.livejournal.com/17734.html>).

21 “A Japanese ‘friend’, writing in Russian, announces: ‘[...] I have three scary things in Russia [...] 1. in the forest nighter. 2. on a car with drunken. 3. Russian girl when she is offended [...]’. Unfortunately, others explained it to him, and he corrected ‘nighter’ to ‘at night’. Too bad, he had created such a delightful neologism, ready to be put into use!” (<http://tanyant.livejournal.com/21058.html>).

22 “Sports commentators say: ‘In the year dvukhtyshchi [two-thousand; the word ‘two’ (dve) is conjugated here as a genitive (dvukh)—ER] and one’ [...]. After all, we are used to saying ‘in the year dvukhtysyachnom’. Why not ‘in dvukhtyshchi [with dvukh rather than dve—ER] and one?’” (<http://tanyant.livejournal.com/24350.html>; see also <http://tanyant.livejournal.com/24602.html>).

· and on February 17, 2009, *tanyant* scolded the subtitlers of an American TV series for their supposed linguistic incompetence: У вас что, жопа вместо головы? Какое право вы имеете переводить? [...] Какое право вы имеете зарабатывать, калеча смысл, калеча как английский, так и русский язык? Козлы, кретины, бездари и неучи, удавитесь (my emphasis—ER).²³

In these and a number of similar posts, Tolstaia adopts the tone of a somewhat conservative language specialist who tells readers “what we say,” “how we say” words, or informs them when a neologism is worth noting. More than in her print writing, she carefully masks this conservative dimension with slang and obscene language; illustrative, apart from the “arse” and “skunks” in the last example, is her conclusion of the ты-versus-вы post with лучше десять раз написать «хуй», чем такую козлиную пакость.²⁴ Ultimately, however, the omnipresent “pricks” and “arses” cannot hide the fact that Tolstaia denounces linguistic “chaos” and barbarization no less than many a conservative language critic.

The latter becomes crystal clear when one compares the cited meta-linguistic posts with other material from the same author’s blog. For one thing, Tolstaia expands her critical observations of orthographic, idiomatic or grammatic deviations in visually oriented posts. On May 13, 2008, for instance, she posted a picture of a sign that reads рекламное место здается, and accompanied it with the comment Всерьез?²⁵ But she is particularly keen on linguistic commentary when addressing readers directly, in the lengthy comment threads that invariably follow her posts. Representative are her reactions in threads following two posts on swearing. In an imperative tone, *tanyant* tells one reader that Блять пишется через «т», «блядь»—через «д». Блядь—существительное, блять—междометие;²⁶ thanks another for a Замечательное наблюде-

23 “So have you got arsens instead of heads or what? What right do you have to translate? [...] What right do you have to earn a living, garbling meaning, garbling both the Russian and English languages? Skunks, cretins, no-hopers and boneheads, go hang yourselves” (<http://tanyant.livejournal.com/40447.html>).

24 “better to write ‘cock’ ten times than this bestial filth” (<http://tanyant.livejournal.com/17734.html>).

25 “advertisement space for rend [sic],” “Are you serious?” (<http://tanyant.livejournal.com/13590.html>).

26 “Bliat’ [fuck—ER] is written with a ‘t,’ bliad’ [prostitute, slut—ER] with a ‘d’. Bliad’

ние, спасибо;²⁷ reprimands yet another with Да вот не надо мне рассказывать, что такое мат;²⁸ and corrects and instructs a fourth, who tries to create slang neologisms: Сами видите—не получается. Вяло, или темно, или тяжело, или все вместе [...]. Мат удивительно богат [...]. Мат надо любить и уважать, учиться его употреблять, а не валять все слова в кучу.²⁹

Here and elsewhere, the author's reactions can become acerbic to such an extent that the reproach "why do you bully your readers?" resounds as a leitmotif throughout different comment sessions.³⁰ This reproach perhaps best illustrates the resemblance of the contact between Tolstaia and her readers to a teacher-pupil model. In dialogues with online "friends" *tanyant* persistently performs the role of (language) teacher, even when enacting that role with a solid dose of irony. Although she evidently enjoys entering into a dialogue with readers and listening to their ideas, "pupils" who dislike or refuse their role as such are consistently rebuked. A comprehensive explanation for Tolstaia's preference for this particular communicative model lies beyond the confines of this essay; but it is likely to be motivated at least in part by her professional background. First, the author taught literature at a number of (American) universities.³¹ Secondly, having received her linguistic training at a time when Russian academia was dominated by a highly normative *kul'tura rechi*, she shares with conservative language critics an inclination towards what Michael S. Gorham labels, elsewhere in this volume, "'authoritative' norm negotiation": a predilection for "'top-down' metalinguistic practices such as clarifying, articulating and generating rules, laws or guidelines about

is a noun, *bliat*' an interjection." (<http://tanyant.livejournal.com/18195.html?thread=1821715#t1821715>).

27 "Splendid observation, thank you" (<http://tanyant.livejournal.com/18195.html?thread=1871635#t1871635>).

28 "Don't try to tell me what foul language is" (<http://tanyant.livejournal.com/18195.html?page=3#comments>).

29 "You can see for yourself: it's not working. It's dull, or obscure, or grave, or all of them at the same time [...]. Foul language is remarkably rich [...]. Foul language you have to love and respect, you must learn how to use it, rather than dumping all the words in a pile" (<http://tanyant.livejournal.com/18728.html?thread=1987624#t1987624>).

30 For an example within the thread on swearing, see <http://tanyant.livejournal.com/18195.html?thread=1969171#t1969171>.

31 In the 1990s, in the US, Tolstaia taught literature at Princeton University and Skidmore College.

what is right and wrong, proper and improper” rather than “interactive, give-and-take, discussion and debate.”³²

That *tanyant*-aka-Tolstaia enjoys the former rather than the latter type of norm negotiation will come as no surprise to readers familiar with her writings in print. Having graduated in Latin and Greek, Tolstaia is a professional linguist who has posed as a specialist of written and spoken Russian ever since the start of her career. Her essays of the 1990s shrewdly attack linguistic inaccuracies or deviations from standard language—from imprecise translations from English to Russian (Венцом искусства перевода [...] надо признать перевод заголовка «Деревянный пенис» как «Пенис Вудена») to Russian emigrants’ inadvertent use of Anglicisms (Ну свесьте полпаунда чизу; Вам послайте или целым писом?), or the street-talk trend to speak with monosyllabic words only (Кипр клев! [...] Как ночь—муж в душ, дочь—прочь, тут грек Макс—тук-тук!—враз секс, кекс, бакс [...] Вот так-с!).³³ Her novel *Kys’* (*The Slynx*, 2000) can be read as an ongoing linguistic comment; as Ingunn Lunde has argued, it presents “a challenge to language users to take responsibility for their own verbal life.”³⁴

Hence, the role of linguistic commentator is not new for Tolstaia. Neither is that of the slightly pedantic schoolmarm. Long before Tolstaia started her blog, Svetlana Boym had already criticized the author as a “Russian writer with a burden of her last name,” whose work is complicated by “bigger ambitions”:

When she writes as a journalist or as a public intellectual using the same persona of a kitchen-table storyteller, it becomes [...] problematic. When she speaks of America, there are times when she sounds like a well-educated and witty Rush Limbaugh [American radio

32 For a description of the *kul'tura rechi* in 1950s–1960s Russia, see Michael S. Gorham’s and Ingunn Lunde’s contributions to this volume.

33 “One of the highlights in the art of translating [...] must be the translation of the title ‘Wooden penis’ as ‘Vuden’s penis’; ‘Half a pound of chiz for me please;’ ‘Do you want it slaised or in one piz?’; and ‘Crete: cool! [...] Bright night, John gone, rid of kid, Greek beau—knock-knock!—quick sex, sigh, bye [...] See?’ Cf. Tat’iana Tolstaia, 2001, “Perevod s avstraliiskogo,” *Den’*, pp. 243–53: 252; “Nadezhda i opora: Serdtsa gorestnye zamety-1,” *Den’*, pp. 427–32: 427; and “Na lipovoi noge: Serdtsa gorestnye zamety-2,” *Den’*, pp. 433–40: 440, respectively.

34 Ingunn Lunde, 2006, “Language Culture in Post-Soviet Russia: The Response of Literature,” *Landslide of the Norm: Language Culture in Post-Soviet Russia* (Slavica Bergensia 6), eds. I. Lunde & T. Roesen, pp. 64–79; 68.

host and conservative political commentator—ER] spinning cultural stereotypes.³⁵

What *is* new, is that Tolstaia adopts these familiar roles in her blog—a discursive genre whose interactivity allows us to see the author’s preference for didactic commentary “on the work floor,” as it were. Her answers to readers tell us that the same Tolstaia who in interviews claims “to avoid schoolteacherism as much as possible,”³⁶ in practice reveals herself as a schoolteacher to the backbone. In other words, the linguistic identity that *tanyant* performs differs significantly from the pose with which she identifies in meta-comments.

This is true not only with respect to the author’s didactic stance. *tanyant* displays yet another discrepancy between linguistic metadiscourse and, to recycle a term introduced in this volume by Ingunn Lunde, “performative metalanguage”—comments on language “voiced in and through *linguistic practices*.”³⁷ As seen, Tolstaia used her very first post to set her blog apart as a distinct discursive genre, with ample room for grammatical mistakes and typos. This view of the blog, as a genre where linguistic imperfection reigns, joins with popular discourse on the so-called “Web 2.0,” a global trend in Internet use toward more user-generated content since roughly the year 2000. According to popular belief, the participatory Internet is a radically novel virtual world where consumers become “producers” (my emphasis), where “high” and “low” culture blur, and amateurism and imperfectionism rule.³⁸

35 Boym in Celestine Bohlen, 2003, “A Tolstoy Speaks, Russia Listens,” *New York Times*, 11 January, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C04EFDA1F3EF932A25752C0A9659C8B63&sec=&spn=&pagewanted=all>. For a more extensive analysis of Tolstaia’s inclination to donnishly “provide clichés in two directions” (Russian stereotypes of Americans, American of Russians), see Andrew B. Wachtel, 2006, *Remaining Relevant after Communism: The Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe*, Chicago.

36 Tolstaia in Sally Laird, 1999, *Voices of Russian Literature: Interviews with Ten Contemporary Writers*, Oxford.

37 See Ingunn Lunde’s contribution to this volume; emphasis original.

38 The term “producer” (a conflation of “producer” and “user”) was coined by Axel Bruns, 2008, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Producership*, New York, or <http://www.producership.org>. For influential contributions to the popular debate on “amateurism” and “mass collaboration” in the Web 2.0 age, see—for a pessimistic view—Andrew Keen, 2007, *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today’s Internet is Killing Our Culture and Assaulting Our Economy*, London; and—for an affirmative approach—Charles Leadbeater, 2008, *We-Think*, London.

To what extent this picture complies with reality is one question; but that deliberately flawed, amateur-like aesthetics are *en vogue* in the digital era is beyond doubt. Box-office hit films shot with cheap handheld cameras, digitally created designs rejoicing in mutilated forms, and YouTube music videos which are as shoddily produced as they are popular, show that in twenty first-century artistic culture, imperfection counts as an artistic asset.³⁹ Celebrating the liberating, democratic potential of new technologies, the deliberate amateurism of these (and many similar) examples at the same time functions as an aesthetic protest gesture; their makers defy the digital perfection in which the same technologies are considered to smother creativity. Perhaps the best articulation of the anti-perfectionist credo comes from the UK, from writer-cum-graphic-designer David Earls, who produces quasi-handwritten digital fonts. Earls explains his decision to create seemingly handcrafted typefaces by claiming:

Imperfection [...] adds excitement, colour and fun to life, yet is the very thing that is missing from most modern digital typography. The fonts released under this foundry are experiments in deliberate imperfection, designed to counteract the clinical and precise nature of digital typography.⁴⁰

The author of this statement may be based in London, but by the time Tolstaia started her blog, the artistic trend towards deliberate imperfection would have been well known to her, if only through the influential “erratic” language experiments of Russian *padonki* subculture.⁴¹ What

39 For a scholarly approach to “deliberate imperfections” in film “in the era of digital perfection,” see Nicholas Rombes, 2008, *Cinema in the Digital Age*, London; on the preference for handmade design among contemporary artists, see Paul Greenhalgh, 2002, *The Persistence of Craft: The Applied Arts Today*, London; and on the popularity of flawed/amateur aesthetics in Russian net art, see Claudia Cialone, 2009, “Making Things Strange’: A New Russian Audiovisual Poetry?” unpublished research paper, Dept of Slavonic Studies, University of Cambridge.

40 David Earls, 2001, on *My Fonts: Zeep*, <http://new.myfonts.com/foundry/Zeep/>.

41 On *padonki* counterculture see the contributions by Gasan Guseinov, Vera Zvereva and Ingunn Lunde to this volume; on the *padonki*’s “erratic semantics,” see Gasan Guseinov, 2005, “Berloga vebloga: Vvedenie v erraticheskuiu semantiku,” http://speakrus.ru/gg/microprosa_erratica-1.htm; 2008, “Nepolnaia kommunikatsiia v blogosfere: errativy i literaturativy,” <http://speakrus.ru/gg/litulative.htm>.

is more, by 2007 the linguistic “landslide of the norm” which marked (post-)perestroika culture had outlived its most turbulent early days, and outcries against a supposed decay of Russian language began to make way for a more sober, less normative debate on language.⁴² A keen observer of linguistic developments and trends, Tolstaia plays with these contemporary views on language, and incorporates them in her meta-linguistic comments. In *this* blog, she tells her audience, imperfection is all but the rule, and readers with conservative views on language had better pack their bags. In concrete blog posts, however, Tolstaia enacts a much more traditional role. Rather than an error-embracer, in practice *tanyant* reveals herself as the linguistically impeccable, stylistically immaculate professional writer Tat’iana Tolstaia, who has a clearly defined view of what is wrong and what is right in linguistic matters.

Now why does the above matter? Why is it relevant to dissect Tolstaia’s language and “dismantle” her as an author who, hiding behind a cloud of provocative slang and promises of error-ridden writing, pleads for a strictly normative linguistics? First of all, *tanyant* herself matters. Tolstaia is a prominent public intellectual in Russia and abroad, who, rather than producing literary output, used her talent in recent years to fulfill a leading role in prominent literary juries and professional literary institutions;⁴³ and to produce and host—together with filmmaker Avdot’ia Smirnova—the popular, award-winning television talk show *School for Scandal* (*Shkola zlosloviia*).⁴⁴ Her blog permanently ranks among the fifty widest read blogs in Russia,⁴⁵ and some of her posts receive over a thousand reader comments.

But a discussion of the linguistic identity of Tolstaia-aka-*tanyant* is relevant not only because it deepens our knowledge of a central figure in contemporary Russian cultural life. It can also help us in developing a “scholarly sensitivity” to processes of linguistic norm negotiation in post-Soviet Russia at large. Rather than relying on metalinguistic comments, the case of *tanyant* confirms that it is best to adopt a sceptical

42 Cf. Lunde & Roesen, eds. 2006, and Michael S. Gorham’s contribution to the current volume.

43 For an overview of Tolstaia’s institutional activities, see Sergei Chuprinin, 2003, *Russkaia literatura segodnia*, Moskva, pp. 272–73.

44 For a description, see the show’s official website at <http://promo.ntv.ru/programs/family/shkola/index.jsp>.

45 Figure taken from Yandex’s blog rating (cf. footnote 1).

stance towards metalinguistic comments; even where a professional writer ardently subscribes to new linguistic-cultural trends, performative metalanguage does not necessarily comply with his or her metalinguistic statements. Analyzing *tanyant's* meta-comments might lead us to think that linguistic imperfection is her new poetic device; but measuring them against her actual blog writing teaches us that wrong, for Tolstaia, is perhaps not the new right after all.