

# Introduction

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On 15–17 January 2013 an international conference on ‘Russian Society in Search of a Public Language: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow’ was held at the European University at St Petersburg (EUSP). The idea of the conference was (quoting the call for papers distributed in the spring of 2012) as follows:

Twenty years have passed since the last revolutionary transformation of Russia, but no effective mechanisms for the public discussion of vital problems have yet been developed in that country. The organisers of the conference start from the position that a ‘syndrome of public aphasia’ is not the least of the causes of this, and that it is the result of the underdevelopment of what might be called the ‘public register’ of the Russian language.

The ‘official register’ of modern Russian is well developed – the linguistic, stylistic and genre peculiarities of official speeches have been inherited in their entirety from the Soviet period, when strict regimentation and highly ritualised speech were combined with an extreme level of responsibility for anything spoken in public, and the result of any ‘discussion’ was known in advance. No less well developed – perhaps even better – is our ‘private register’: friendly, confidential conversations ‘in the kitchen’ are a distinctive characteristic of Russian late Soviet and post-Soviet culture. However, the register that would serve for the situation of speaking in public in front of an audience that is unknown and not necessarily friendly, which would help to convey one’s point of view to one’s opponents and successfully bring the two positions together, is almost totally lacking in modern Russian.

In these conditions either the official or the private register usurps the role of the public register in situations that ought to require it. The use of the official register in public discussions immediately evokes the sense of 'being organised', excessive formalisation and a pre-determined result, whereas the use of the private register is associated with the sense that there is no need to arrive at any result at all, and rather to defeat one's opponent than to try and find a compromise together.

The lack of skills for civilised participation in social discussions and the limited command of the public register is felt as a real barrier to the development of civil society in modern Russia: people are incapable of arriving at a consolidated opinion within a finite period of time, and are not prepared to seek mutually acceptable compromises together.

The conference organised by the EUSP is devoted to the discussion of the problem outlined above, and has both an academic and a social purpose: the academic purpose is to study the causes and origins of the 'syndrome of public aphasia', and the social purpose is to begin an academic discussion of the methods whereby this socio-cultural 'disease' may be cured.

This book is based on the ideas expressed in certain of the papers at the conference. The genre of the book is well described by the Soviet oxymoron 'a collective monograph': its chapters are written by different authors (historians, sociologists, linguists, literary scholars), but united by a common idea and single plan.

The problem considered in the book is this: after the collapse of the communist system, 'unanimity' in Russia was replaced by a cacophony of thoughts and opinions. However, the public discussions of this period did not bear the fruit that was expected of them, partly because Russians brought up on 'Party Newspeak' as the only permitted form of public speech lacked a common public language: they *had no language to speak*. This was not only because the people who might have spoken had no command of the appropriate variety of the Russian language. Some public figures of the late eighties and early nineties did speak it to a greater or lesser extent, but the people to whom they addressed themselves did not understand it. 'The Soviet people' knew only two varieties of speech: the private and the official Soviet. During the whole Soviet period the right to public expression in Russia had been regulated by the party apparatus, 'the competent organs' (an official euphemism for the KGB) and censorship, because the Soviet authorities had always been afraid of any manifestations of public initiative, and were thoroughly

mistrustful of any open expression of opinion, not to mention unauthorised activities, on the part of their citizens.

The inability of the broad masses of the Russian population to consolidate varying opinions and their unpreparedness for active participation in public attempts to arrive at mutually acceptable compromises are acutely felt today by the academic community. This is a consequence of the chronic, and neglected, socio-cultural malady of the period of so-called 'mature socialism'.

This social sickness is rooted in the history of the Russian Empire, in the sphere of interactions between the government and society and of the official (first imperial, then Soviet) ideology and relations between various groups.<sup>1</sup>

There are both classical and recent works on totalitarian language (*newspeak*, *langue de bois*, etc.) and totalitarian orders of discourse (Zaslavsky and Fabris 1982; Karpinski 1984; Seriot 1985; Thom 1989). Invocation of 'Bolshevik language' has become ubiquitous (cf. Wierzbicka 1990; Young 1991; Epstein 1991; Kupina 1995; 1999; Zemskaja 1996; Dunn 1999; Gorham, 2003; Guseinov 2003; 2004; Poppel 2007; Chudakova 2007; Petrov and Ryazanova-Clarke 2015), but detailed studies of it are still rare. The approach proposed in this book is an innovative one: the authors approach the topic from the perspective of the (dis)order of discourse, using the notion of public register. Recently, several books have appeared that address Soviet and post-Soviet discourse (e.g. Gorham 2014 or Koteyko 2014), but their perspectives are quite different. Michael Gorham may be right when he says that 'periods of rapid and radical change both shape and are shaped by language' – but he is too hasty when he describes the current Russian situation as a situation 'after Newspeak': our book, on the contrary, tries to explain the mechanisms that hamper modernisation and democratic reforms in Russia precisely through the persistence of 'Soviet' types of argument. Nelya Koteyko in her recent book analyses loanwords and metaphors in order to reveal changes and continuities in the subtle interplay between language and politics in post-Soviet Russia. Her approach is also quite different from ours, in that our book offers the historical and generic range that is only possible in a multi-handed volume.

The book opens with two introductory chapters. In 'The Discourse of Argumentation in Totalitarian Language and Post-Soviet Communication Failures' Nikolai Vakhtin uses the concept of totalitarian language to construct the theoretical framework of the book, demonstrating the difference between Russian and American practices of public debate by means of the famous 'Kitchen Debate' between Khrushchev

and Nixon in 1959. The second half of this chapter summarises the methods and devices for teaching citizens how to conduct public debates in English-speaking countries and discusses the question of whether these methods can be directly borrowed or whether Russia needs to create its own. In Chapter 2 Maksim Krongauz ('Russian and Newspeak: Between Myth and Reality') studies the concept of Newspeak, introduced by George Orwell in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and its relation to the real processes that have taken place in Russian, and also the semantics of the word in modern Russian. The author's conclusion that the semantics of *novoiaz*, the Russian translation of 'Newspeak', have moved quite a distance from the original English word and developed a number of supplementary meanings, is important for an understanding of the chapters that follow.

Chapters 3–7 of the book describe the historical aspects of the problem.

Chapter 3, "A Society that Speaks Concordantly" or Mechanisms of Communication of Government and Society in Old and New Russia', by Dmitrii Kalugin, shows that the lack of a public register in Russian is the result of a conscious strategy, first of the imperial government, then of the Soviet government, and now of Putin's government, to make social dialogue impossible. This strategy has deep roots in Russian history. The author uses several examples: polemics in Old Russian literature from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries; the famous correspondence between Ivan the Terrible and Kurbskii; public discussions in the eighteenth century under the patronage of Catherine the Great; political discussions in the nineteenth century; and, finally, the attitude of society towards the judicial reforms of the 1860s and the introduction of trial by jury.

Chapters 4–6 are sketches of different periods of Russian history. Chapter 4, 'Legal Literature "for the People" and the Use of Language (Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century)', by Michel Tissier, takes up the story where Chapter 1 left off, describing various attempts to create a popular language for describing legal concepts at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, depending on how the 'élite' regarded the 'people' and their legal abilities. Should legal concepts be explained in simple words, so that 'the people' could understand them? Or should 'the people' be gradually educated and have their legal consciousness expanded through the use of complex legal terms?

Catriona Kelly's Chapter 5, "How to Write to the Newspaper": Language and Power at the Birth of Soviet Public Language', describes an important genre in the history of Russian public language, the 'letter to the editor', from the point of view of early Soviet culture. Attempts to make everyone 'speak Bolshevik' (in Stephen Kotkin's well-known

phrase) are less typical of the twenties than various attempts at modernising the language using experience from abroad. ‘Letters to the editor’, which were supposed to involve the Soviet masses in political discussion, raised the question of language, since Western ‘letters to the editor’ (which had existed since the eighteenth century) were traditionally written in the language of the educated classes. This problem was not solved, and eventually ‘letters to the editor’ as a genre were absorbed by the language of the Soviet political mainstream.

Chapter 6 by Valerii V’ugin, ‘Between the Street and the Kitchen: The Rhetoric of the Social(ist) Meeting in Literature and Cinema’, shows that the ‘Soviet assembly’, including mass meetings, party meetings, and other forms of public assembly, had its own quite concrete discursive and spatial features. It analyses the image of this sort of meeting as reflected in literature and cinema, from the 1920s to the present.

Chapter 7, ‘Was Official Discourse Hegemonic?’, by Boris Firsov, demonstrates how Newspeak displaced ‘human language’ from ideological discussions, starting in the 1930s. The mass ideological stultification, the ubiquitous pseudo-Marxism, the persecution for the slightest deviation from the party line, all affected not only the masses, but the party leaders too. Using Anatolii Cherniaev’s diary, the author shows how linguistically and intellectually helpless Brezhnev and his entourage became if they had to speak ‘without a script’: the masters of the official discourse had lost the gift of human speech.

Chapters 8–12 provide some case studies of contemporary Russian society and media.

In Chapter 8 by Boris Gladarev, ‘Attempts to Overcome “Public Aphasia”: A Study of Public Discussions in Russia at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century’, the author considers that the reason for the incapacity for public discussion lies not only in the lack of a register, but in the lack of experience, illustrating this with the results of three sociological investigations: ‘The social history of the St Petersburg movement for the preservation of the historical and cultural heritage’, 2007–9; ‘Environmental activism in St Petersburg and Helsinki: Comparing analyses of political cultures’, 2010; ‘Urban movements in contemporary Russia: In search of the practice of solidarity’, 2011–12. The data gathered by participant observation clearly show the participants’ helplessness, irrespective of their social position and good intentions: people do not know how to turn the polyphony of opinions into a reasonable consensus. The signs and causes of this helplessness are examined in detail in this chapter.

Chapters 9 and 10 provide two further case studies of the phenomenon under discussion. Chapter 9, ‘Allotment Associations in Search of a New Meaning’, by Aleksandra Kasatkina, presents the results of

research conducted by participant observation into the general meetings of allotment associations – small, formally self-governed collectives of urban dwellers who hold small allotments. The ‘general assembly’ of this sort of association is formally its highest governing body: the chapter shows how the lack of a register of public speech and of the ability to listen to other people disrupts the course of a meeting and makes it meaningless.

Chapter 10 “‘Distances of Vast Dimensions . . .’: Official versus Public Language (Material from Meetings of the Organising Committees of Mass Events, January–February 2012)’, by Kapitolina Fedorova, studies material from the protest movements of 2012 and shows how fundamentally the meetings of the organising committees of anti-Putin and pro-Putin demonstrations differ: whereas the latter take place wholly within the framework of the ‘official’ linguistic register, the former are trying to develop and use a new public register.

Chapter 11 by Julia Lerner and Claudia Zbenovich, ‘Insides Made Public: Talking Publicly about the Personal in Post-Soviet Media Culture (The Example of *The Fashion Verdict*)’, shows what a powerful instrument television is for the reformation of language and the creation of new linguistic registers. The chapter describes the appearance of a new ‘therapeutic’ discourse created by the television talk show, principally *The Fashion Verdict* – a public discussion of fashion which constantly oversteps the accepted boundaries of the private.

In Chapter 12, ‘Distorted Speech and Aphasia in Satirical Counter-discourse: Oleg Kozyrev’s “Rulitiki” Internet Videos’, Lara Ryazanova-Clarke continues the line of the previous chapter, describing the language of satirical internet videos of the period of President Medvedev’s ‘liberal’ administration, showing how distorted speech and aphasia are used as satirical weapons in Oleg Kozyrev’s ‘Rulitiki’ clips.

Chapter 13, ‘The Past and Future of Russian Public Language’, by Oleg Kharkhordin, concludes the book. Beginning by describing the famous *Robert’s Rules of Order*, used for the conduct of public discussions in the USA, the author moves on to the attempts to create analogous procedures in the first Russian Dumas (1905–17), and thence to Bolshevik and late Soviet debates, concluding by discussing the prospects for public discussion in Russia. The basic problem is that the lack of a public register and of clear rules for conducting discussions typical of contemporary Russia helps the ruling elites to keep hold of their position as victors – at the expense of the vanquished.

This book is intended for everyone interested in current problems of contemporary Russian society and their historical, cultural and social

causes. The topic of the book is taken from real life. Russian society, tired of the unanimity and servility forced upon it during the Soviet stage of its development, reacted forcefully to the rights and liberties offered to it with obstinacy, conflicts of values, demonstrations of disharmony and a fatal inability on the part of all social subjects almost without exception to reach reasonable compromises.

Russian society is still trapped by the dichotomy of 'officialese' and informal discussion, neither of which is satisfactory as the basis for constructive public debate. Being very far from ideas of deliberative democracy with its requirement to consider relevant facts from multiple points of view, to converse with one another, to think critically (see: [deliberative-democracy.net](http://deliberative-democracy.net)), Russian society is still incapable of acknowledging that multiple points of view have the right to exist at all. As an anonymous reviewer of this book has written, '[w]hile Habermas's model of disinterested rational debate may not be achieved perfectly anywhere, it is extremely far from realization in Russia, where discussion is often either structured by hierarchies of power or too disorderly to be effective, and where communication is often less than courteous.'

It has not been the object of the authors of the book to calm the raging waves of social disagreement. Their mission has been to indicate a resource which might decrease the level of dissonance within the life of Russian society. This resource is language and its particular function of ceasing to split fellow-citizens into irreconcilable factions and instead helping them to limit their individual egoism and to integrate society. Language may be the means which allow people to come to agreement and overcome the 'syndrome of public aphasia'. This optimism is founded on the well-known proposition that the role of language is not only to reflect social realities. Language *constructs* reality and is a sort of foundation for complete and multifarious interaction between people.

So as not to end the introduction on a pessimistic note, we shall conclude with a quotation from Chapter 8 of the book itself: 'The acquisition of communicative competence, the learning of the "manners" and rules of public behaviour are cultural rather than political processes, and culture changes slowly. Nevertheless, recent empirical observations of the discussions of various initiative groups, meetings and social movements make visible a striving to overcome the habitual communicative barriers, find the right words and discover that *common* element that makes us a *commonwealth*.'

## NOTE

1. The first time the malady was noticed and analysed (though not named) was probably in the famous collection of articles *Vekhi* ('Landmarks, Milestones'), published in 1909, above all in articles by Nikolai Berdiaiev, Mikhail Gershenzon, Aleksander Izgoev and Bogdan Kistiakovskii (see Brooks 1973).

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# Was Official Discourse Hegemonic?

*Boris Firsov*

Even when we were thinking like human beings (who wants war?)  
we spoke the language of ideology.

(Cherniaev 2008: 19)

## INTRODUCTION

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**T**he author quoted in the epigraph – Anatolii Sergeevich Cherniaev – worked in the apparatus of the supreme state power in the USSR for over twenty years. His individual culture, upbringing and way of life in no way corresponded to what he had to do at work for the greater part of those twenty years. Cherniaev writes truthfully and frankly about what he heard and read and took part in. The words quoted from his diary, to which I shall be referring as an invaluable source, were written in 1972, at the beginning of his career in the apparatus.

Cherniaev's diary is full of evidence for how and why the members of the apparatus switched from 'human' to official language. There were several reasons. First, they were under pressure from the notion of the state as an ideological power, part of the international communist movement, engaged in the struggle for the affirmation of communist ideas. Second, the decades had taught them to represent any phenomenon only in ideological terms. Third, ideology was the source of the livelihood of a vast number of people, the whole social and party mechanism. Fourth, ideology helped them to settle personal scores and keep science, culture and art under control. Fifth, ideology had merged with the false propaganda of success. It was the chief means of maintaining the status quo and at the same time a tool for hiding the true state of things (grain was

constantly being imported!) at a time when the West was always 'lying', proclaiming our 'difficulties' to the whole world.

The scale on which this language was churned out made one think not only of its limitless potential, but also of its ubiquity and immanence. Everyone had to learn the science of Marxism from the same textbook, namely the *Short Course of the History of the ACP(b)*.<sup>1</sup> In fifteen years, from 1938 to 1953, it was published 301 times, with a total print-run of 42,816,000 copies in 67 languages, and was a means of unifying the national consciousness on the basis of the ideas of Stalinism, the personality cult of Stalin, and the concept of barracks socialism. Its conversion into the *History of the CPSU*<sup>2</sup> textbook (eight editions, 1959–85) was accompanied by a refusal to criticise Stalin or the *Short Course of the History of the ACP(b)*. As a result the conceptual resemblance of the *History* to the *Short Course* was striking. The thought of publishing yet another 'Short Course' of the CPSU continued to be entertained by the highest leadership of the party until its collapse.

'The CPSU could not think or act otherwise!' (*Sovetskaia istoriografiia* 1996: 269). This was the language spoken by the Komsomol, the organs of Soviet power, the trade unions and the mass media, and cultural and educational institutions, publishers and so on had to use it willy-nilly. But the chief milieu where this language was generated and formed in order to be reproduced in every cell of the social organism was the CPSU itself.

## THE THEORY

The theory proclaimed from the pulpits of scientific communism was a paraphrase of the *Short Course of the History of the ACP(b)* and in essence a falsification of canonical Marxism. These were myths devoid of any probative force or foundation, and in fact they dissolved society instead of binding it together (beginning with the object of creating a communist society). Still, could it have been otherwise if the language of the ideological myths and the language of real politics were mutually exclusive? (Cherniaev 2008: 59). The mythology had little in common with reality and turned into journalistic babbling. Since they knew perfectly well whence it proceeded, people spoke of the feebleness of their rulers. This ideological senility on the part of the fathers repelled the children more and more (Cherniaev 2008: 178).

So-called 'academic Marxism' dominated philosophical literature from the 1970s on. Its creator was Academician Piotr Fedoseev, Vice-President of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR; educated employees

and consultants at the Central Committee of the CPSU always called it 'Fedoseev Marxism' – timid, helpless, ignorant, incapable of stating a problem, for its object was not to penetrate the reality of things, but to stigmatise revisionists abroad and catch them out at home (Cherniaev 2008: 45).

Akin to Fedoseev Marxism were the reports of the secretaries of the Central Committee of the CPSU, who led the ideological sections and claimed the status of people who applied Marxism-Leninism creatively for the purposes of party policy. Reports presented on significant anniversaries in the 'red calendar' were particularly important. A typical product of this sort of 'theorising' is the report by Mikhail Zimianin, secretary of the Central Committee, on the 107th anniversary of Lenin's birth, which was essentially nothing more than a call to level everything down to the school theory taught in all Soviet establishments of higher education without exception, reflecting the main aim of the CPSU of that time: faithfulness to the canon (doctrinal Leninism).

Most often what really circulates in history are inconstant imitations, forgeries and distortions of the original concepts in the minds of the next generations, but it is these that influence people's behaviour. 'So Marxism is not necessarily what Marx wrote in *Das Kapital*, but the beliefs of a multitude of mutually antagonistic sects, whose members all consider themselves his only true followers' (Lippman 2004: 115). These words, written in the 1920s, have proved prophetic and have not lost their value at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

## MASS INDOCTRINATION

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Although theory does have primary significance, the official language 'failed' not in theoretical studies, but in its attempts at mass indoctrination. The masses quenched the revolutionary spirit of the canons by gradually refusing to believe in them. The pioneer of the enfeeblement of the 'explosive force of Marxism' was Stalin. Stalin used the polemic that he started in the 1950s with Academician Nikolai Marr (who had died in 1934) to deprive Soviet society of the possibility of swift and sudden changes. Where there are no hostile classes there is no need for 'explosions'. Genuine Marxism, which proclaimed the revolution as the midwife of history, had become politically dangerous to the country's leaders. The chief point of this theory was that it proposed a single direction of evolution, when in fact there were many.

At the same time, the very thought of a crisis of Marxist doctrine in our country was considered 'blasphemy' and sedition. Discussion

of Marxism, let alone doubting its canons, was not allowed. The ideological machine was working at full blast. Lectures on the foundations of Marxism-Leninism were read in university lecture theatres. These courses were read by people whose faces were by no means stupid, but were as inaccessible as secret documents, who spoke without intonation or emotion, hardly ever smiled and were capable of reciting by heart whole pages from the works of Marx, Engels and Lenin. They lived in a world of illusions which had power over them and were unquestionably stronger than reality. In this world nothing was discussed and nothing was substantiated, but unlike religion it *claimed* to be substantiated. Among these Marxists there were also those who were frankly idiots, who read their lectures stupidly from well-worn typewritten sheets, like one reader of the Repin Institute who, after being caught taking bribes, ended up in charge of the publicity department of a zoo.

But the majority of them were rational people, like augurs who would not acknowledge even to themselves anything but their sincere devotion to the ideas that they set forth. (Their minds had been irrevocably infected with inflamed loyalty!) Behind them stood a mysterious, unreal power, and they were the direct instruments of the Supreme Will. People were afraid of them, and with good reason. (German 2006: 198)

When in the course of their lectures some of them made personal reprimands in iron, staccato tones, remembering everyone's name, the students felt as if they were behind bars and were struck dumb with terror of their academic warders. They had to make *précis* of the sources, which was a torment, because, when they read Lenin's withering passages about 'the renegade Kautsky' without, of course, ever having read Kautsky, it was impossible to understand anything, and, above all, nobody wanted to understand anything – it was mind-numbingly uninteresting. It was however constantly and unremittingly drummed into us, the way they tell new recruits: 'If you don't salute, you'll be put on fatigues.' In other words, we were used to the obligation of meaningless rituals, put up with them, and lost the power or will to think (German 2006: 198–200).

In 1970 the centenary of Lenin's birth was celebrated all over the country. At the beginning of the 1970s, as if in memory of their leader, blue- and white-collar workers, including the employed intelligentsia of every stripe, took 'the Lenin exam', preparing for it in the all-embracing system of party education. The most conscientious of these students, who got top marks, were rewarded by their party committees with a prize

– *On Lenin's Course* by Leonid Brezhnev, in five volumes. Published in a huge print-run, this masterpiece of party political thought had been gathering dust for ages in over-filled storerooms until the invention of this Jesuitical method, blessed by the rules of the 'party religion', of distributing the five-volume sets amongst the masses of citizens interested in 'contemporary questions of the theory and practice of the building of mature socialism'. There was no way of getting rid of this present. Although the collection of waste paper was in full swing all over the country, and in return for it one could 'obtain' the sort of literature or adventure stories that were in short supply, it was strictly forbidden to accept the five volumes for 'recycling' (by weight).

The far-sightedness of Western scholars and of a number of communist parties (mostly European) with regard to the observation of a crisis of Marxism (and of its Sovietised version) was in the Soviet Union ignored on principle. Their faith in the inexhaustible epistemological potential of Marxism was one of the reasons why the social disciplines turned their attention too late to alternatives to a Marxist (monist) understanding of the world. Monism in this case was a synonym for a certain theoretical narrow-mindedness. This was what stopped them from seeing the crisis of the only correct and invincible doctrine and making it the object of *public* scholarly debate and a constant topic in the discussion of theoretical problems and disciplines within the social sciences.

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## PUBLIC LANGUAGE AND THE LEADERS

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Siniavskii writes:

There appears an industry of abstract words and concepts, which in practice do not mean anything, but which are nevertheless pronounced with aplomb in the course of mindless discourse. This is the supreme élite echelon of Soviet language and at the same time its metaphysical kernel and foundation. (Siniavskii 2001: 282)

For me this is a metaphorical statement, but it is a vivid definition of the official register, subject both to the elemental forces of language and to the bureaucratisation of speech, but at the same time incapable of obliterating the speech of the people. Living conversational speech, which is much richer and more interesting, will exist in parallel with official speech, but not apart from it. It is another matter to what extent official language will be drawn to involvement and contact with the native word. So let us listen to the leaders' public speeches.