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Писатели о языке:
Contemporary Russian Writers on the Language Question

Ingunn Lunde

Post-*perestroika* Russian society exhibits a pronounced concern with *the language question*. Linguistic issues are discussed at all levels of society, and a great many people engage in these debates: politicians, philologists, teachers, journalists, writers, students, bloggers, and others. Newspapers and journals feature columns or article series devoted to language; conferences discuss “the state of the Russian language”; the state sponsors a large number of radio and television programmes on language and language culture; various centres and institutions offer programmes promoting linguistic cultivation; there are information services on linguistic questions on the Internet; many blogs deal with the language question.

One group of language users frequently invited to contribute to the various forums discussing the language question are writers. Russian writers have long been accorded a special role in the context of the language question, which can be seen most clearly in the traditionally perceived close relationship between the standard language (*literaturnyi iazyk*) and the language of literature (*iazuk literaturny*). Although contested terms in themselves, *literaturnyi iazyk* and *iazuk literaturny* are regularly studied in close connection, both historically and in a synchronic perspective. In modern dictionaries and grammars, quotations from literary works are regularly used to illustrate word usage and grammatical phenomena. In the writing of linguistic histories of Russian, literature and its language traditionally take up a prominent part, the role of writers in the language debates are emphasized and their creative contributions to the development of the standard language underscored. Indeed, in the works of many influential philologists, for example Grigorii Vinokur, the history of the language takes on the form of an historical stylistics of Russian literature¹—the Soviet myth of Pushkin as the “founder” of the modern Russian standard language is only an extreme example of this trend.

Not only have the classics of Russian literature served as models in standard language education and maintenance, but there is also a tradition of collecting and publishing statements by professional writers on language and

¹ Helmut Keipert, “Geschichte der russischen Literatursprache,” in *Handbuch der Russistik: Sprachwissenschaft und angrenzende Disziplinen*, ed. H. Jachnow (Wiesbaden 1984): 459.

linguistic matters, often entitled *Pisateli o iazyke* (Writers on language).² Against the background of this historical tradition, I propose in this article an analysis of statements by *contemporary Russian writers* on the language question. After outlining the socioliterary context for my material, I will give an overview of the main tendencies in the writers' opinions, and try to determine whether as a group they give special emphasis to particular aspects of the language question; here, the current debates on the linguistic situation in Russia provide a backdrop. Furthermore, I will discuss the views of the writers on their own role and status with regard to the language question, expressed explicitly through their statements, or implicitly through their way of responding. Finally, I will briefly consider the role of writers as opinion-makers in questions of language culture from a broader perspective.

The language debate

The linguistic turbulence of the late *perestroika* and early post-Soviet years can be seen in the standard language—which for decades had been a stable and fixed entity closely linked to education, career, and prestige—being suddenly challenged simultaneously from several directions. A massive influx of foreign loans and a dissemination of elements originating from non-standard varieties of Russian combined to create a heterogeneous language culture with a wide range of linguistic registers that are now being used in many official settings. Hailed initially as a sign of a more democratic and liberal society, the linguistic unpredictability and “joyful relativity” (to use a Bakhtinian notion) that characterized the speech culture soon became the object of fierce debates, in the course of which developments in language culture have been linked with increasing frequency to questions of national identity, the cultural heritage or ethical standards.

Approaches to the language question are manifold. Politicians, philologists and teachers demand or debate norms and rules, set up language programmes or propose legislative measures; linguists describe and analyse language development in scholarly publications, issue dictionaries of standard and non-standard varieties of Russian, but also engage in public debates or serve as experts for language information services; writers, journalists, and critics participate in roundtable discussions or respond to questionnaires concerning the linguistic situation, while in their creative work, writers address the language question in less explicit, but no less

² Consider such comprehensive volumes as *Russkie pisateli o iazyke (XVIII–XX vv.)*, edited by B. Tomashevskii and Iu.D. Levin (Leningrad 1954); *Russkie pisateli o iazyke: khrestomatiia*, ed. by A.M. Dokusov (Leningrad 1954); *Pisateli o literaturnom iazyke*, ed. by A. Latynina and T.B. Bondareva (Moscow 1974); *Russkie pisateli XVIII–XIX vekov o iazyke: khrestomatiia*, ed. by N.A. Nikolina (Moscow 2000).

interesting ways; bloggers write about language—and the Internet community responds to their views, and to many articles in Internet publications, as most websites now offer forums for comments and discussion; and not least, all kinds of language users express views on language in their concrete linguistic practices.

Michael Gorham has identified a development from the optimistic and liberal attitudes of the late 1980s and early 1990s, celebrating the “liberalization” and “democratization” of the language, towards more purist tendencies in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when the changes in the language culture were seen as signs of the nation’s deterioration.³ In recent years, the language debate has also been characterized by a great number of state initiatives for language cultivation, such as the “Year of the Russian language 2007,” the “Russkii mir” foundation (2007–), Russian language programmes supporting radio and TV broadcasts on language culture, conferences, Internet sites with information services, and so on. Even if many Russians have gotten used to a greater degree of heterogeneity in the media, literature and other arenas of formal language use, the idea that “something must be done” in terms of regulation, language planning or language cultivation still seems to be quite strong among linguists and lay people alike.⁴ One group to turn to for advice in matters of language is constituted by the writers.

“Pisateli o iazyke”: the framework for discussion

As “professional language practitioners,” “super users,” so to speak, writers are regularly invited to express their opinions on the language question. Let us take a quick socioliterary glance at the character of the various forums, and the selection of contributors. The material for this essay includes four main sources: the volume *Besedy liubitelei russkogo slova: pisateli o iazyke* (St Petersburg 2004); a thematic section in the journal *Otechestvennye zapiski* (2, 2005) entitled “Pisateli o iazyke”; a section entitled “Iazyk nash svobodn”

³ Michael S. Gorham, “Natsiia ili snikerizatsiia? Identity and Perversion in the Language Debates of Late- and Post-Soviet Russia,” *Russian Review* 59 (October 2000):614–29; idem “Language Culture and National Identity,” *Landslide of the Norm: Language Culture in Post-Soviet Russia*, eds. I. Lunde and T. Roesen (Bergen 2006):18–30. Other studies of the language debates in contemporary Russian include Lara Ryazanova-Clarke, “‘The Crystallization of Structures’: Linguistic Culture in Putin’s Russia,” in *Landslide of the Norm: Language Culture in Post-Soviet Russia*, eds. I. Lunde and T. Roesen (Bergen 2006):31–63; idem “The State Turning to Language: Power and Identity in Russian Language Policy Today,” *Russian Language Journal* 56 (2006):37–55.

⁴ Consider the numerous readers’ comments made on news paper articles concerning the state of the Russian language in Russia today, e.g., http://www.russ.ru/besedy/lingvist_ne_mozhet_byt_diktatorom [accessed 06.04.2008] or <http://www.kp.ru/daily/24075/311896/> [accessed 06.04.2008].

("Our language is free") with a panel of writers responding to particular questions on the basis of an article series on *Rodnaia rech'* ("The mother tongue") featured in the 2006 issues of the journal *Znamia*; and a roundtable on "Russkii literaturnyi" (the standard language/language of literature) published in *Znamia* 7–8, 2007.⁵ The print-run of *Besedy* is that of a usual philological publication, 500 copies, the journals *Znamia* and *Otechestvennyi zapiski* are, in addition to their printed copies of the issues in question (4300/4200 and 1000 respectively), available on the Internet (*magazines.russ.ru*). All these forums are quite formal and the writers participate by way of invitation. Also, most of the participants are relatively well-known, established writers.⁶ Key issues in the questionnaires and the writers' responses include language cultivation and language planning, the norm, the use of non-standard language, and, first and foremost, the relationship between the standard language (*literaturnyi iazyk*) and the language of literature (*iazyk literatury*).

Besedy liubitelei russkogo slova: pisateli o iazyke includes questionnaires, interviews and a roundtable discussion on the contemporary Russian language. The volume is the outcome of several conferences, research projects and a festival that took place in St. Petersburg in the years 2003 and 2004. The main organizers were the Russian Society of Teachers of Russian Language and Literature (ROPRIAL, the national branch of the international MAPRIAL association) with its president Liudmila Verbitskaia and St. Petersburg State University (where Verbitskaia was also Vice-Chancellor at the time). It forms part, moreover, of a research project entitled "The preservation and development of the Russian language as a foundation for national security in Russia," as well as the programme "Russian language and contemporary Russia."⁷ The events culminated in a "Festival of the Russian Word," and the presentation on 23 April 2004 of gold medals to three writers (Vladimir Makanin, Andrei Bitov, and Oleg Chukhontsev) for their "contribution to the development and preservation of the Russian language." The award ceremony was preceded by a survey in the form of questionnaires "in order to determine the attitude of writers to the language."⁸ Twenty-nine responses were gathered and published in the volume, together with interviews with

⁵ I also cite a few statements from a *Znamia* 2007 article under the heading "Russkii literaturnyi": "Rech' pro rech'" by the philologist and writer Fedor Ermoshin.

⁶ With the exception of a few less-known respondents from the regions participating in the *Besedy* questionnaire.

⁷ Other publications originating from these projects include the volume *Sovremennaia russkaia rech': sostoianie i funktsionirovanie* (St Petersburg 2004), as well as a follow-up of the *Besedy* volume with statements on the language situation by the clergy: *Besedy liubitelei russkogo slova: pravoslavnoe dukhovenstvo o iazyke* (St Petersburg 2006).

⁸ *Besedy* (2004):4.

Bitov, Makanin, and Dmitrii Granin, and a transcript of a roundtable discussion held on 13 April 2003 in the distinguished setting of the Derzhavin Museum, in the very room where the famous *Beseda liubitelei russkogo slova* took place some two hundred years ago.⁹

In terms of their position on the language question, the institutional framework and people behind the *Besedy* collection clearly display purist inclinations; one of its main organizers, Liudmila Verbitskaia, plays a prominent role in several political initiatives for language planning and cultivation, for example, by chairing the recently established “Russkii mir” foundation.¹⁰ Moreover, its position becomes evident from the preface, which includes some reflections on the interrelationship between “linguistic awareness” and the standard/literary language. The high degree of linguistic awareness and reflection seen as a general characteristic of literary texts is here interpreted in terms of the traditionally perceived proximity between the language of literature and the standard language:

Чем больше внимания уделяет человек тому, как он говорит, тем литературнее характер его говорения. Художественная речь в этом отношении наиболее литературна, ведь она отличается максимальной степенью творческой обработки, а следовательно — и осознанности.¹¹

In the same preface, however, the organizers emphasize the representativeness of the material, secured by a careful selection of participants of different orientations, regions and age, as well as by a liberal attitude towards the reproduction of (hand)written and spoken statements allowing for certain “peculiarities of spontaneous speech.” Thus, whereas the institutions and ideologies that constitute the framework of the *Besedy* materials appear as traditionalist and purist, the participating writers represent a relatively wide range of aesthetic and ideological orientations (from Natal’ia Galkina and Mikhail Eremin to Vladimir Voinovich, Mikhail Berg and Aleksandr Kushner).¹²

⁹ The *Beseda liubitelei russkogo slova* (The symposium of the lovers of the Russian word), established in 1811, was a literary society formed by Aleksandr Shishkov and his followers to combat foreign, in particular French, influence in Russian language and literature.

¹⁰ The Russkii mir foundation (<http://ruskiimir.org/>) was established in July 2007 on Putin’s initiative. Its purpose is to “promote the Russian language, as Russia’s national heritage and a significant aspect of Russian and world culture, and supporting Russian language teaching programs abroad.” (<http://ruskiimir.org/en/about/creation/> [accessed 12.03.2008]).

¹¹ “The more attention one pays to the way one speaks, the more “literary” the character of one’s speech will be. The language of literature is the most literary [is closest to the literary/standard language] in this sense, since it is distinguished by a maximal degree of creative elaboration, and, consequently, also by awareness.” *Besedy* (2004):4.

¹² Cf. Michael Gorham’s differentiation in the analysis of language attitudes between the levels of ideology, institution and individual [Gorham, 2006: 27ff]. The perceptible discrepancy between the institutional and individual levels in the case of *Besedy* raises the

Otechestvennyye zapiski is a critical cultural, rather than a literary journal, without any explicit ideological position. The section “Pisateli o iazyke” forms part of a thematic issue on “Society in the Mirror of Language,” with contributions mainly by linguists and philologists. The section presents a questionnaire consisting of eight questions and nine responses.¹³ The participants were asked to indicate their views on the changes in the Russian language and language culture, in particular with regard to foreign loanwords, to the use of non-standard language, and to language planning.

Znamia is generally considered to be a liberal journal, a reputation gained mainly from its remarkable change of profile and position during the late 1980s—from party-loyal organ of the Soviet Union of Writers specializing in literature on military matters to one of the main outlets for opinion-makers during *perestroika*.¹⁴ It was also the first journal to claim independence from the Union of Writers. During 2006, the journal featured an article series entitled *Rodnaia rech'*, in which writers, critics and philologists (the chosen authors often belong to more than one of these groups) were invited to write on the (state of the) Russian language, with contributions on, among other things, “creative philology” (Mikhail Epstein), linguistic play (Mariia Zakharova), new technologies (Gasán Guseinov), as well as more general reflections on linguistic development and language culture. In the December issue, the editors clearly felt the need “to include those, for whom the language is not only a means of communication, but also an ingenious tool for creative work—the poets and prose writers.”¹⁵ In addition to stating their views and position with regard to the optimistic versus pessimistic accounts of the state of the Russian language voiced in the article series, the nine writers were asked whether they think that they can influence the state of Russian and whether they set themselves this task. These questions along with the invitation to writers to sum up and clarify matters clearly point to the historical institution of publishing, and listening to, what writers have to say about the language (situation)—the *pisateli o iazyke* tradition outlined above.

question about whether writers may actually be used for ideological ends in the language debates. In this particular context, my impression is that they are indeed being used, at least to a certain extent. At the same time, we should remember that the relative impact of the *Besedy* collection on popular language attitudes is low.

¹³ Without providing exact figures, the editors note that more writers were invited to participate. Participating writers: Sergei Gandlevskii, Elena Shvarts, Mikhail Uspenskii, Assar Eppel', Mikhail Shishkin, Nina Gorlanova, Aleksei Slapovskii, Andrei Dmitriev.

¹⁴ Birgit Menzel, *Bürgerkrieg um Worte: Die russische Literaturkritik der Perestrojka* (Cologne 2001):187.

¹⁵ *Znamia* 12, 2006 (<http://magazines.russ.ru/znamia/2006/12/ia9.html>) [accessed 12.03.2008]. Participating writers: Maksim Amelin, Boris Ekimov, Oleg Ermakov, Vitalii Kal'pidi, Svetlana Kekova, Igor' Klekh, Vladislav Otroshenko, Olet Pavlov, Aleksei Tsvetkov.

Finally, in an extension of its thematic focus on language, *Znamia* was also the initiator, together with the Ministry of Press and Mass Media, of a roundtable on the language of literature in March 2007, with the participation of poets and prose writers, critics, linguists and culturologists. The transcript was published in the seventh and eighth issues of *Znamia* 2007. Ten participants (of whom six were writers) were asked to “discuss the state of the language of contemporary Russian literature and its interaction with life, with the linguistic environment where it emerges, and which it, in turn, influences (at any rate, it is supposed that it should do so).”¹⁶ In such statements we can clearly sense, again, the underlying expectations of writers and their dual model role as professional language users and opinion-makers in the language debates. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the roundtable is entitled “Russkii literaturnyi,” which is the established term for “standard language,” while the topic of discussion is clearly the language of literature. As mentioned above, the two terms are closely interrelated in the Russian tradition, at least historically. Whether this is still the case—or whether the interrelationship has changed—is one of my questions when now approaching the concrete statements of the writers.

On language, standard language+ –and the language of literature

Just as with other participants in today’s debates, we find a variety of voices and positions also among writers, ranging from the purist to the liberal. Generally, however, when asked about the concrete situation, challenges and prospects of the Russian language today, writers tend to have a strong belief in the language’s ability to take care of itself, and therefore to be sceptical about political interference in terms of language planning, censorship, or other forms of controlling influence. In many statements, language is seen not in need of protection or preservation, as called for by the proponents of language cultivation, but as a living organism, capable of coping with any problem:

Язык — в отличие от говорящих и пишущих на нем — может все. [...] Если же с языком происходит что-то болезненное (я этого не исключаю), то надо сказать ему прямо. Пусть выкручивается сам. (Vladislav Otroshenko, *Znamia* 12, 2006)¹⁷

¹⁶ “Russkii literaturnyi,” *Znamia* 6, 2007 (<http://magazines.russ.ru/znamia/2007/7/ia12.html>) [accessed 12.03.2008. Participating writers: Il’ia Kukulin, Vladislav Otroshenko, Maksim Amelin, Natal’ia Rubanova, Andrei Dmitriev, Dmitrii Prigov.

¹⁷ “Language—in contrast to those speaking and writing it—is capable of everything. [...] Now, if something bad is happening to the language (I cannot exclude that), then we should be frank and let it [i.e. the language] know. Let it work itself out of it.”

Нет, нет, я думаю, я уверен, что язык, сам по себе, он сам по себе могучий, живой и огромный. Язык – это океан. И испортить его невозможно. Он сам себя защищает. (Vladimir Makanin, *PoJa*, interview)¹⁸

Confidence in the language's, the speakers' and the writers' ability to cope without assistance is also reflected in the following quotations:

Существует единственный правильный язык — тот, на котором повседневно говорят его носители, вполне при этом понимая друг друга. (Aleksei Tsvetkov *Znamia* 12, 2006)¹⁹

Настоящий художественный язык — это всегда путь. (Fedor Ermoshin, *Znamia* 10, 2007)²⁰

Some writers express radical views on the traditional connection between the standard language and the language of literature. In fact, several writers deny that there is a link today, maintaining that *Современный русский литературный язык и язык современной русской литературы — два совершенно разных языка*. (Maksim Amelin, *Znamia* 7, 2007).²¹ For Amelin, the standard language is something fixed and even “enslaved,” an obsolete poetics of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, whereas the language of literature should be at the frontiers of linguistic development, constantly featuring new, bold and surprising combinations. He explains:

Первый [i.e. современный русский литературный язык] — намеренно усредненный, закрепощенный разнообразными нормами и правилами, некий выхолощенный конгломерат отживших и устоявшихся индивидуальных поэтик русских писателей XIX — начала XX века, отраженный в общеупотребительных словарях и справочниках по правописанию. [...] Второй — напротив, обязан быть чрезвычайно пестрым и свободным, находиться в подвижном, расплавленно-текущем состоянии; в нем одновременно сленг может соседствовать с архаикой, просторечие с заумью, смешиваясь и не мешая друг другу. Языковое творчество призвано разрушать всякую косность и проветривать застоялую затхлость ради создания новых словесных отношений, иногда довольно причудливых и всегда неслыханных. (Maksim Amelin, *Znamia* 7, 2007)²²

¹⁸ “No, no, I believe, I am convinced that language in itself, it’s in itself mighty, vital and great. Language is an ocean. And it’s impossible to destroy it. It protects itself.”

¹⁹ “There exists a single correct language—the one in which its speakers speak every day, fully understanding each other.”

²⁰ “True literary language—it’s always a road.”

²¹ “The contemporary Russian standard language and the language of contemporary Russian literature are two fundamentally different languages.”

²² “The first is a kind of emasculated mixture of outmoded and crusted individual poetics of Russian writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, deliberately made uniform,

Aleksei Tsvetkov goes even further, radically denying the existence of a *literaturnyi iazyk* in literature altogether:

Такого языка [литературного ИЛ], конечно же, не существует, это жандармская фикция — ни один стоящий писатель на нем не писал. (Aleksei Tsvetkov, *Znamia* 12, 2006)²³

With all its radicalism when seen from the perspective of the history of Russian language culture, this position is actually reminiscent of one particular understanding of standard language within standardology, the professional branch of standard language studies.²⁴ Here, the process of standardization is seen as an *ideology*, while the standard language—the result of this process—is considered to be not a reality, but rather an *idea*. The standard language as an *idea* or *ideal* implies that no variety of a given language, including the language of literature, will be identical to the standard language. The standard language will, however, affect all kinds of language usage in a given linguistic society.²⁵

The need for a norm

On the concrete question of whether the language of literature should follow the norms implicit in the codified form of standard language, writers tend to reply by reversing the question, either in negative terms: Считаю, скорее, обратное. (Aleksandr Melikhov, *PoIa*); Скорее наоборот. (Andrei Stoliarov, *PoIa*), or in positive formulations: Хорошая литература есть норма. (Andrei Bitov, *PoIa*, interview).²⁶ The writers may seem to be slightly provoked by the question, which is not unreasonable, given the traditional idea of literature as a model for the standard language rather than the other way around.

Nevertheless, even if the standard language has clearly lost its position and close link to the language of literature, many writers express the view that some kind of norm or standard is necessary, demonstrating in this context a rather surprising and somewhat utopian belief in the role of dictionaries.

enslaved by various norms and rules and represented in commonly used dictionaries and handbooks of orthography. [...] The second, by contrast, is obliged to be exceptionally colourful and free, and to be in a dynamic state of flux; in this language, slang may coexist with archaisms, low-style colloquialisms with 'transrational' language [*zaum'*], blending and not disturbing each other. Verbal art is summoned to destroy any vacancy and to air stale mustiness for the sake of the creation of new verbal connections, sometimes rather fanciful and always unheard-of."

²³ "Such a language [the standard language] does, of course, not exist, it's a policeman's fiction. Not one real writer ever used it."

²⁴ I thank Martin Paulsen for drawing my attention to this point.

²⁵ For further discussion of this view, see Martin Paulsen, "Hvordan forstå standardspråket? Modellenes rolle i vitenskapen," unpublished paper, University of Bergen 2008; and James Milroy and Lesley Milroy, *Authority in Language: Investigating Standard English* (London 1999).

²⁶ "I would rather say the opposite"; "Rather the opposite." "Good literature is the norm."

Sergei Gandlevskii describes the dictionary as a kind of linguistic guide book for the writer:

Надо, чтобы была норма — печка, от которой плясать. Словари, прежде всего, которые старались бы поспевать за языком, но вершили бы над каждым новым словом свой авторитетный стилистический суд. Разумеется, пусть там будет слово «экслюзивный», но пусть оно будет и аттестовано соответствующим образом, чтобы человек, следящий за своей речью, знал, что слово так себе. (Sergei Gandlevskii, *OZ* 2005, 2)²⁷

The first thing we can notice is that even if Gandlevskii refers to the dictionaries for authoritative guidance, it is he, the writer, who pronounces the verdict on the sample word *ekskliuzivnyi* as being *tak sebe* (“without much to it”). If we take his message at face value, however, and recall the abundant use of examples from literary texts in order to illustrate words and their meanings in authoritative Soviet-era dictionaries, Gandlevskii’s attitude—reversing, as it were, the roles of the dictionary and the literature—may seem surprising. But he is not alone in showing this trust in the dictionaries. Tsvetkov expresses a similar view, calling, at the same time, for a shift in the mainstream lexicographic tradition from a prescriptive to a descriptive approach:

Хотя литературного языка не существует, в языке развитого общества существуют стилистические слои, и совершенно ясно, что часть лексики, нормально звучащей в бане или в баре, не вполне уместна на дипломатическом банкете. В отсутствие лингвистической жандармерии роль распределения слов по таким слоям [...] берут на себя словари. Важно при этом, чтобы [...] они были не прескриптивными, как до сих пор в России, а отражающими реальное словоупотребление и его коммуникативную роль. (Aleksei Tsvetkov, *Znamia* 12, 2006)²⁸

It seems that, as a tool that can be consulted by the individual writer on his or her own initiative, dictionaries should replace what is in the view of these

²⁷ “We need a norm, a starting point; above all, dictionaries that would try to keep up with the language, but which would make their authoritative stylistic judgment on every new word. Of course, the word *ekskliuzivnyi* (=‘exclusive’) should be included, but it should be qualified accordingly, so that someone who takes great care in his speech would know that it’s a word without much to it.”

²⁸ “Even if a standard language does not exist, there do exist in the language of a developed society stylistic levels, and it is quite clear that certain words that are all right to use in the bath-house or the bar are not entirely appropriate at a diplomatic banquet. In the absence of a linguistic police, those taking upon themselves the task of distributing words according to such levels [...] are the dictionaries. Here it is important that [...] they should not be prescriptive, as up to now in Russia, but should reflect the real usage of words and their communicative role.”

writers the “norm police” or censorship institutions—the great majority of writers in my material categorically reject political interference in terms of language planning or control. Even if dictionaries are not likely to fulfill the functions called for here, this attitude is understandable, given the long history of literary and linguistic censorship in Russia. At the same time, it is symptomatic that the writers call for an implied form of standard, a kind of inner censorship or restraint (as can be seen from formulations like *печка, от которой плясать; нормально; не совсем уместно*). Perhaps this attitude is a consequence of the many years of strict regulation and monitoring of writing activities during the Soviet period. To the majority of respondents included in this study, being a writer seems to require having the necessary degree of self-control and restraint in matters of language and style.

Non-standard language: a case study of *mat*

While many professional writers emphasize the right and even the duty of contemporary literature to experiment with language, explore new combinations and celebrate stylistic diversity, almost all of them demand high standards and strict rules for the ways in which this should be done. This tension between freedom and restraint can be studied more closely by looking at a concrete example, the use of *mat* (vulgar language or profanity) in literature.

When asked about the role of *mat* in language use in general, the majority of writers acknowledge its right to exist, allocating its use to “extreme situations.” For one writer, *mat* is necessary in real life only when she is driving, for another because she lives in a *kommunalka*. Furthermore, almost every writer in my material distinguishes, first, between the use of *mat* in everyday language and its use in literature (if it is permissible at all), and, second, between the use of *mat* in the language of the author or narrator and in the speech of the characters (if, again, it is permissible at all):

[использую мат о]чень редко, только для характеристики персонажа, если нет возможности охарактеризовать его иначе. (N.V. Galkina, *Пола*)²⁹

Я лишь в крайнем случае могу употребить матерное слово в речи персонажа, обычно при этом ставлю точки внутри слова. Например, *герой говорит корове*: «Ты что, п..да рогатая, наделала?» (Nina Gorlanova, *OZ* 2005, 2; my emphasis)³⁰

²⁹ “[I use *mat* v]ery rarely, only in order to describe the characters, if there is no other way of describing him/her.”

³⁰ “Only as a last resort would I use a *mat* expression in the speech of a character. When doing so I usually insert dots. For instance, *the hero says to a cow*: ‘Hey you, you horned c...t, what have you done?’”

In the last example, the “extremeness” of the situation is stressed in that the addressee of the vulgar word is not a human being, but a cow. More interestingly, while most language cultivators are concerned about the standard language being swamped with vulgar expressions, writers in general worry more about the purity of *mat* itself:

[...] следует расходовать эти перлы бережно и по делу. (Mikhail Uspenskii, *OZ* 2005, 2)³¹

Одновременно страдает и обценная лексика — она опресняется, т. е. утрачивает действенность. Скажем, в «Войне и мире» одно, если не ошибаюсь, бранное слово, но оно под пером мастера «работает» на 100 процентов. (Sergei Gandlevskii, *OZ* 2005, 2)³²

[...] я бы допустил нецензурную лексику, начиная, скажем, с третьего переиздания книги. Или даже со второго, но не ранее, чем через 10 лет после первого. (Aleksandr Melikhov, *PoIa*)³³

A similar standpoint in defence of *mat* is sometimes voiced by linguists as well. Anatolii Baranov of the Institute of Russian Language at the Russian Academy of Sciences argues that “If *mat* becomes ordinary vocabulary, it will lose its expressive and figurative functions [...] We’ll lose a distinctive phenomenon of the Russian language and instead we’ll get the kind of ordinary swear words that exist in the European languages.”³⁴ More recently Maxim Krongauz, Head of Department of Linguistics at the Russian State University of the Humanities, has characterized Russian *mat* as a “national property,” lamenting that: Случилось самое страшное: мы теряем наше национальное достояние, наш русский мат.³⁵ As we can see, the wish to put restraints on the use of *mat* that we often see among the purists is expressed by writers and linguists as well — but with quite different motives.

“Writers” as a group

Is it at all possible to treat writers as a single group? It is, up to a point. Some writers, admittedly, have very subjective views on today’s Russian. Consider,

³¹ “These pearls should be consumed cautiously and professionally.”

³² “At the same time the obscene vocabulary is suffering—it becomes desalinated, that is, loses its effectiveness. For instance, in *War and Peace*, if I’m not mistaken, there is one single swear-word, but from the master’s pen it ‘works’ 100%.”

³³ “I would allow vulgar language starting from, say, the third edition of a book. Or even from the second, but no earlier than ten years after the first.”

³⁴ Quoted in Victor Erofeev, “Dirty Words: The unique power of Russia’s underground language,” *The New Yorker*, September 15, 2003. Erofeev’s essay is an excellent introduction to *mat* in Russian culture. Himself a writer, his characterization in this text of *mat* as “linguistic theatre, verbal performance art” is also worth quoting.

³⁵ Maksim Krongauz, *Russkii iazyk na grani nerovnogo sryva* (Moscow 2007):158. “A most awful thing has happened: we are losing our national property, our Russian *mat*.”

for example, Assar Eppel's assessment of new words in contemporary Russian: Хороши слова «бомж» и «крутой», остальные крайне омерзительны. (OZ 2005, 2).³⁶ Also, opinions on examples of "good language" in contemporary literature vary significantly: when the 29 critics and writers of the St. Petersburg roundtable were asked to name contemporary writers with "good language," 65 names were given, of whom only five received more than four votes.³⁷

These extremely subjective views may be explained by the fact that the attitude of writers towards language and linguistic issues is a deeply serious and often very personal matter, as becomes clear from many of their statements. Some writers even identify with the Russian language; consider Andrei Dmitriev's comment, replete with pathos:

Строй моего языка есть строй моей души, моя речь есть моя мысль, структура языка — это структура моей личности, вообще русский язык — основа моей идентичности. (Andrei Dmitriev, OZ 2005, 2)³⁸

And, as in the case of the general language debates, linguistic development is often seen in close connection with cultural and ethical standards:

А вообще — глобально: снижение требований народа к языку означает снижение требований к морально-этическим нормам вообще. Деградация языка — деградация нации. Или еще проще: язык — совесть народа. И если он грязен, значит, совесть не чиста. (Aleksei Slapovskii, OZ 2005, 2)³⁹

In Maksim Amelin's statement, this attitude is taken *ad absurdum* when he links events and disasters from the beginning and end of the twentieth century—such as "the October Revolution," "gangland lawlessness" (*banditskii bespredel*), and the "controversies between business units" (*spory khoziastvuiushchikh sub'ektov*)—to what he identifies as the lack of a clearly developed category of constructions using "be" and "have" verbs (*byt'* and

³⁶ "The words 'bum' [*bomzh*] and 'cool' [*krutoi*] are good. The rest are extremely disgusting."

³⁷ This non-agreement is in line with the diversity in preferences documented in reader surveys of the 1990s and 2000s on the greatest Russian writers. See Birgit Menzel, "Writing, Reading and Selling Literature in Russia 1986–2004," in *Reading for Entertainment in Contemporary Russia: Post-Soviet Popular Literature in Historical Perspective*, eds. S. Lovell & B. Menzel (Bochum 2005):48.

³⁸ "The form of my language is the form of my soul, my speech is my thought, the structure of language is the structure of my personality; generally, the Russian language is the basis of my identity."

³⁹ "In fact, globally, people's lowering of demands of the language means a lowering of demands of moral and ethical norms in general. The degradation of language is a degradation of the nation. Or to put it even more simply: the language is the conscience of the people. If it's dirty, this means that the conscience is guilty."

imet') in Russian, as opposed to the predominant cross-linguistic structures of Standard Average European (SAE). (*Znamia* 12, 2006).

Different attitudes also have to do with the various writers' perceptions of language in the first place, that is, independently of the concrete "language question" in contemporary Russia. As has become clear from the quotations, two main tendencies may be distinguished: writers with a quasi-metaphysical, organicist attitude to language, treating it as a pre-existent entity with its own rules, characteristics and life, and writers who perceive of language first of all as a creative tool which is influenced by cultural contexts and may be used for various purposes.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, and in spite of these general, individual and sometimes disparate tendencies, the group as a whole can be said (1) to express a high confidence in language's ability to take care of itself, (2) to have serious reservations about political initiatives in language cultivation or language planning, and (3) to advocate a combination of liberal and elitist views on what the language of literature should be. This stance corresponds to the classical views of the Russian intelligentsia. In addition, some of the writers challenge the traditional understanding of the Russian standard language as well as of the interrelationship between the standard language and the language of literature.

The writers as opinion-makers, or, the self-referential intelligentsia

How do writers understand their own role when it comes to the concrete task of influencing the linguistic practices of Russian language users today? Traditionally, classical Russian literature, by being read and studied in schools, has played an important role in maintaining the standard language. What writers today say about the link between the standard language and the language of literature indicates two things: (1) that the concept of standard language is still very much associated with classical, nineteenth-century literature, and (2) that the task of today's literary language is seen as an altogether different one from that of the past. The altered relationship between the standard language—as traditionally understood by Russian language users—and the language of literature has also been noted by outside observers, for instance, by linguists.⁴¹ Meanwhile, several writers point to contemporary literature's role in caring for the *future* of the language:

Возможно, необходим такой институт русского языка, где работали бы не только сухие лингвисты, занимающиеся прошлым языка, [...] но и

⁴⁰ Cf., similarly, Boris Gasparov's differentiation between "realist" and "nominalist" attitudes to language in his "Identity in language?" in *National Identity in Russian Culture: An Introduction*, eds. S. Franklin and E. Widdis (Cambridge 2004): 132–48.

⁴¹ Cf. Irina Levontina's remarks at the roundtable *Russkii literaturnyi* in *Znamia* 7, 2007.

писатели, которые занимались бы его настоящим и даже будущим. (Maksim Amelin, *Znamia* 12, 2007)⁴²

Поэзия движется в авангарде языка. Поэт — наиболее чувствительный, чуткоконюхий, но и самый зыбкий агент в этом мире речи. Если сравнить язык с шахматами, то пешками будут журналисты, турами — прозаики (с их эпической обстоятельностью и неповоротливостью), политики — конями (не знаешь, куда увильнет, и от корявого косноязычия до афоризма один ход), поэт — ферзем: он может ходить, как ему вздумается, он дерзок, размашист и почти всемогущ, но его гибель наиболее разительно сказывается на всем балансе сил. (Fedor Ermoshin, *Znamia* 10, 2007)⁴³

With the fall of the Soviet Union, the collapse of subsidies and privileges for (officially acknowledged) writers, the growing commercialization of literature, the rise of popular culture, and differentiation of tastes and reading habits, the status of the writer changed radically.⁴⁴ In today's modern world of mass and new media culture, it is clear that literature is but one among many verbal arenas with a potential impact on the general language culture. The writers' views are realistic on this point, yet both in their attitudes and in their style of responding to the language question, we can still sense the traditions and lines of thought of the past: the writers respond to questions about the language situation with a natural authority. Further evidence of this attitude may be found in a less official publication within the *pisateli o iazyke* genre, a private email correspondence between two poets, Aleksandr Levin and Bakhyta Kenzheev, published on Levin's website and also in the journal *Ogonek* (2000).⁴⁵ The main topic of their email exchange is the influence of foreign loanwords in Russian, with Levin representing the more liberal opinion on loanwords, focusing on their usefulness, on semantic nuances distinguishing foreign loans and their Russian "equivalents," while Kenzheev embodies the traditionalist view of Russian as being in need of cultivation

⁴² "Perhaps we need such an Institute of the Russian Language, where there would work not only dry linguists, dealing with the past of the language, [...] but also writers who would deal with its present and even future."

⁴³ "Poetry moves at the forefront of language. The poet is the most sensitive, perceptive, but also the most unstable agent in this world of speech. If we compare language to chess, then the pawns are the journalists, the rooks are the prose writers (with their epic circumstantiality and footdragging), the horses are the politicians (you don't know where they will wriggle out, and from the rude twist of the tongue to the aphorism there is only one step), the queen is the poet: he can move at his own sweet will, he's daring, bold, nearly almighty, but his ruin will have the most dramatic impact on the whole power balance."

⁴⁴ For an overview, see Menzel 2005.

⁴⁵ [http://www.ogoniok.com/archive/2000/4629/02-37-40/;](http://www.ogoniok.com/archive/2000/4629/02-37-40/)

<http://www.levin.rinet.ru/TEXTS/Kenjееv-Levin.html>. I thank Liudmila Zubova for drawing my attention to this material.

and protection against the influx of Western loanwords. What is noteworthy in our context is the fact that the two poets start an email correspondence about the language question with the stated aim of publishing it in a literary journal or newspaper, clearly seeing a public interest in their—the writers’—views on the language situation.⁴⁶

Meanwhile, even if the relative impact of the writers’ opinions on linguistic matters in Russia today is probably low, the sociological framework of the four forums that I have discussed suggests that at least parts of the contemporary Russian society—above all the intelligentsia and academic milieus—still have certain expectations and hopes with regard to the role of writers in the language question.

⁴⁶ At the same time, it is hard to take the ambitious Gogolian title entirely serious—**ВЫБРАННЫЕ МЕСТА ИЗ ПЕРЕПИСКИ БАХЫТА КЕНЖЕЕВА С АЛЕКСАНДРОМ ЛЕВИНЫМ** *по вопросу о проникновении в современный русский язык всяких иностранных слов, к порче или же, насупротив того, к вящему процветанию оногo всенепременно приводящем* (“Selected passages from a correspondance between Bakhyta Kenzheev and Aleksandr Levin on the question of the intrusion into contemporary Russian of various foreign loanwords, which is inevitably leading to its damage, or, by contrast, to its greater prosperity”)—and it is, perhaps, indicative of the need they seem to feel of playing down their own seriousness, giving the whole text a slightly ironic touch.