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'SECULARISATION OF THE WORD': THE SEMIOTIC IDEOLOGIES OF RUSSIAN ORTHODOX BLOGGERS

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Abstract: What does it mean to lose a 'divine' language? The liturgical language used in the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) (Church Slavonic) is perceived to index an authenticity because it is believed to be attuned to the inner, spiritual life of the worshipper. This article analyses the metasemiotic framing used by Russian Orthodox 'traditionalist' bloggers when discussing the status and fate of the 'divine language'. In accordance with the aesthetic consciousness of a traditionalist, the liturgical language has been semiotized for the linguistic code is perceived consciously and subjectively as a sign. Some traditionalists equate liturgical language reform with 'disenchantment' (for them an ingredient of secular modernity), and they discuss this disenchantment as 'a semiotic event'. More generally, this article shows how so-called ideologies of worship mediate semiotic assumptions made about linguistic codes.

Key words: semiotics; ideology; Russian; Orthodox; secularisation.

1. Introduction

The aesthetics of Orthodox religious practice are often conditioned in non-linguistic ways (Bandak & Boyston 2014, 25), but this article delves into what we might call 'sacred semiotics' and the potentialities of language by analysing Russian Orthodox traditionalists' blogs. I use the term 'traditionalist' to refer to worshippers who for a number of reasons wish to maintain at all costs Church Slavonic as the liturgical language in church services (and not switch to Russian). Through analysing the cultural implications of different perceptions of iconicity that arise from the blogs, the data help reveal the ideological foundations of what we might call the 'discourse of the sacred'. What is more, such online discussions provide material for further attempts at instrumentalising a semiotic approach to language ideology (Keane 2018, 64-87). It is perhaps ironic that I am using semiotics as a means to discussing perceptions of language which question the axiom that the nature of the sign is arbitrary for this very idea is foundational to semiotics itself. It is clear from these blogs that cosmologies of the sign shape religious practice and attitude, and are foundational to ideologies of worship (Robbins 2001b, 591-614).

Russian language blogs on the subject of liturgical language reform have been running now for about twenty years. Each time there are whispers, rumours and tacit suggestions that some kind of liturgical language reform might be imminent, bloggers are quick to take up the issue in earnest. For those of us interested in semiotic ideologies, these discussions are fruitful for the simple reason that the implication put forward by the traditionalists is that changing the liturgical language will inevitably result in a reorientation of the worshipper's identity and values (Kaverin 2008, 7-16). It is anticipated that such a change would result in a decline in the worshipper's symbolic, allegorical view of the world. The fieldwork that I completed in Moscow corroborates these essentialist approaches to language found in these blogs, but also raises a number of questions. All of my interlocutors are based in Moscow, and many of them attend my local parish church where I was made to feel very welcome. Over the course of about two years, I have been attending services at a number of churches in central Moscow. I collected qualitative data through participant observation as well as non-experimental, empirical data through interviews focused on worshippers' relationship to the liturgical language. I would like to thank all my interlocutors for their time and for helping me with my research.

One paradox arising from my findings is that the traditionalists tend to believe that the phasing out of the liturgical language will render a church service less sacred (сакральный), poetic and aesthetically pleasing (эстетичный). However, in my experience, a heightened reflection on language *form* which is representative of what Jakobson

(Jakobson 1960, 350-77) called the 'poetic function of language' is normally more apparent when there is a semi-understanding of the language as there is with Church Slavonic. If the language were fully understood as the traditionalists would surely wish, the worshipper's focus is likely to be predominantly on meaning and not form. The service might then, however, appear less poetic (in the Jakobsonian sense) and mystical to church-goers, and presumably therefore less conducive to feelings of sacredness.

Undoubtedly, the process of disenchantment (not in the Weberian sense of the eclipse of magic by monotheisms but in Taylor's (2007) sense of a nuanced version of secularity) which many of the bloggers indirectly refer to, has linguistic dimensions. Desecularisation of the public space is the trend of contemporary Russian society. Amongst the bloggers, there is a sense of, how can we know miracles if all we have is 'Protestant plain speech' (Yelle 2013, 4)? This, and a number of related topics such as the 'loss of the spiritual potential of language' were one of the primary concerns of Rozanov (1970) and often alluded to subsequently by Bakhtin (1979). Indirectly perhaps, these thinkers were asking the question: can we still recognise the intrinsic power of language? Many decades later and in the midst of an era of digitalisation and arguably commoditisation of language, these questions are more relevant than ever before. This article attempts to intertwine these themes and semiotic belief systems to shed some light on the issue of the potential and performativity of a 'sacred' language.

Performativity is not being referred to here in the strict Austinian (1962) sense of 'doing things with words' where certain formulaic words when uttered can bring about a concrete change in circumstances. Instead, performativity is being used in the more Bakhtinian sense (1979) where the word can be perceived as an 'event' (событийность, the 'eventness' of the word). Borrowing from this perspective, performativity might refer to the ritualistic power of a phrase, the sacral or even theatrical impact of a word. Some bloggers presuppose that the choice of idiom can bring about a spiritual (or indeed non-spiritual) transformation in the worshipper. Others write of the more pragmatic consequences of using the 'sacred idiom'. One blogger explained how he believed that a child with a stutter or a similar speech defect will lose the stutter if they learn to speak the Church Slavonic language.

In this article, the notions of disenchantment and performativity of the word are taken up in a semiotic sense. According to Keane (Keane 2018, 64-87), a semiotic ideology builds on the notion of a language ideology by focusing on the dynamic interconnections among different modes of signification within a specific context. At stake here is the relationship between the exteriority of language and its implications for the interiority of speakers (Keane 1997, 674-93). With reference to Russian Orthodox Christians' interaction and spiritual engagement with the

Church Slavonic language, I will show how for some such semiotic ideologies map onto how some worshippers relate to the sacred. There has been considerable discussion of Protestant semiotic ideologies (Bielo 2009; Crapanzano 2000; Engelke 2007; Keane 2007; Robbins 2001a, 901-912; Schieffelin 2002, 2007; Shoaps 2002; Tomlinson 2009), but the semiotic ideologies of Orthodoxy are less well-rehearsed. Panchenko (2019) has recently published a series of articles relating to semiotic ideologies and religious practice in Russia. It is hoped my work will complement this body of research. What should be clear from his work and from my recent fieldwork is that liturgical language reform feeds into much broader questions regarding the relationship between experience and language (Ochs 2012, 142-160; Leonard 2021, 1-26)

I will make reference to both semiotic and linguistic ideologies of worship. By linguistic ideologies of worship, I mean the package of beliefs that instruct church-goers that using a certain language is appropriate in relating their thoughts to God (and indeed God relating our thoughts to them). References are made to semiotic ideologies of worship because the evidence relates not just to the motivation behind the choice of idiom (linguistic ideology) but also to the perceived *semiotic* status of the liturgical language as used in the church. It should be borne in mind that neither the bloggers not my informants spoke explicitly of 'semiotic ideologies of worship': this is simply my means of unpacking what their reflections on the liturgical language meant implicitly.

2. Background

A few words should be said about Russian Orthodox liturgical practice and the ever-changing status of the Church Slavonic language. The Divine Liturgy is celebrated in accordance with a standardised traditional ritual and is always chanted; the chanting highlights the sensory and aesthetic dimensions of the liturgical language. Even once the current reforms have been implemented, the liturgical texts must still be in Church Slavonic. The idea is that a spiritual language leads the believer towards a spiritual consciousness. At the priest's discretion (and priests views on what should be the language of church services varies considerably), large parts of the service can currently be conducted in Russian as opposed to the liturgical language which for reasons of its linguistic conservatism is fully understood by a small minority of worshippers. About 20 per cent of the people I spoke to in my Congregation said that they had a really good grasp of the Church Slavonic language. Church Slavonic is of course a closely related language to Russian, and most Russians can understand partially the language after a period of study. At some churches, votes have taken place on which language should be used in church. A vote took place last year in a church in Balashshika, just outside Moscow. The majority voted for Church Slavonic. Readings from the Old

Testament as well as from the Acts and Epistles of the Apostles which are part of the New Testament can now be in Russian. The same applies for readings from the Gospel and for the reading of the entire text of the Four Gospels during Holy Week. At this stage, statistics are not available on the number of parishes that now conduct services largely in Russian. However, if the readings are in Church Slavonic, one strategy to get round the problem of intelligibility is for a parishioner to hold a Russian translation in their hands whilst listening to the service. I often witnessed this during my fieldwork.

It is fair to say that Church Slavonic has been an important feature of Orthodox Slavic linguistic consciousness for centuries not just vis-à-vis the vernacular but also the prestigious trinity of sacred languages (Latin, Greek and Hebrew) (Goldblatt 2007, 149-92). The written form of Church Slavonic was designed by the monks Kirill and Methodius so that Orthodoxy could be disseminated among the Slavs whereas the spoken language was not initially connected to Christianity. Throughout the Middle Ages, the language was a literary language, but is now an exclusively liturgical language (Uspensky 2002, 23). In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the sacrality of Church Slavonic was intimately bound up with the notion that its letters were not symbols, but actual manifestations of the divine (Goldblatt 2007, 160). As sacred texts of the divine Spirit, it was believed these signs became non-arbitrary and the language of 'spiritual revelation' (духовного откровения). This view appears to reverberate in subsequent centuries. What is more, words on Russian icons used to be a sacred seal, but over the centuries became relegated to comments on images. The semiotic ideology of Church Slavonic has therefore a long, but only partially documented history.

In blogs, the language is described as a 'treasure that has absorbed the ancient traditions and the patristic spirit'. The language was intended for communication between man and God; Russian the language between men and women. Today, there are perhaps few who would vouch for the sacred power of words. For the traditionalists, a secular society is effectively a society without hierophanies or 'showings of the sacred'. It has never been an everyday language. Church Slavonic is perceived as the means of ensuring the worshipper is a participant in the living liturgical reality. Now that ecumenical heritage and linguistic patrimony are arguably being used to meet political ends (Solodovnik 2014, 55-83; Leustean 2017, 201-16), the symbolic status of the Church Slavonic language is as important as ever before. The views of contemporary worshippers, as discussed in this article, have become more acute of late now that partial reforms relating to the language of the church have been introduced.

It is worth noting that the 'language debate' in Russia pitted what I call traditionalists against reformists (this is an oversimplified taxonomy) and has been running for many decades now (indeed it goes back to the nineteenth century) becoming something of a *cause célèbre* (Fedotov 1991,

66-101; Kott 2000, 32-64)*. Unlike traditionalists, reformists support the use of Russian in church on pragmatic grounds. The Russian Orthodox tradition is of course not monolithic in its views on language. Not all Russian Orthodox christians believe that Church Slavonic is anyway a 'special language' (язык особенный) that accords with divinity.

3. Interpreting the data

In addition to the ethnographic data that I collected from working with Russian Orthodox Christians at a number of Moscow parishes over the last two years, the online data came primarily from the following Russian language blogs, all concerned exclusively with issues relating to the Russian Orthodox Church: pravoslavie.ru; bogoslov.ru; antimodern.ru; pravlife.org.ru; blagogon.ru; drevo-info.ru; pravmir.ru; pravmisl.ru

For many of the ROC traditionalists that write blogs on the more conservative webpages, reform of the liturgical language would amount to the 'secularisation of the word' and certain linguistic registers. I will return to what exactly is meant by this. Traditionalists' views on the subject are often expressed in rather semiotic terms. When speaking of the liturgical language (Church Slavonic), bloggers (and indeed my informants) made it clear that they perceive the Word of God to be an 'inexplicable creative force' (необъяснимую творческую силу) and that they do not regard meaning to be sequential to the image. On the contrary, they perceive the logos and the image as one phenomenological unit, the 'verbal flesh of divine thought' (словесной плотью богомыслия) as one blogger put it.

Phenomenology is the philosophy of experience, a method of reflective attentiveness that focuses on the individual's first-hand inner 'lived' experience (Merleau-Ponty 2012; Moran 2000; Heidegger 1927; Leonard 2013, 151-74). Phenomenology allows us to focus on the ways in which experience is embodied. By 'embodied' I mean being involved in one's 'lifeworld', inherently connected to one's environment in an ongoing, sensual interrelation. The physical demands of Orthodox worship (at the Divine Liturgy and all Orthodox services worshippers stand for several hours – sometimes on empty stomachs as in the case of the forty day Lent leading up to Easter) are themselves one way in which experience is embodied for the worshipper.

Where the traditionalists are concerned, it would seem that the words of the liturgical language themselves have a phenomenological undertone for they bear a certain relation to interior states. The liturgical language appears for them as something holistic and semiotically indivisible: the 'sacred' words represent a phenomenological form-meaning symbiosis. Note that this sense of symbiosis was applied to Church Slavonic, but the same bloggers raised concerns about liturgical

language reform resulting in a shift of focus from 'form to meaning' – perhaps a tangled notion if the perception of the sacred word is symbiotic. This effect came about largely through the habitual linguistic practices of chanting formulaic language.

For these bloggers, the consequence of liturgical language reform where more Russian is introduced into church services would be that the ontological connection between the word and the image as an organic unit of the Church Slavonic language might be compromised. This would amount effectively to a form of lexical 'secularisation' whereby words lose their 'creative force' and implied spiritual performativity through contact with the vernacular. It is not meant that the Church Slavonic language variety is being used in a secular context.

A number of my informants spoke of the 'poetic function' of Church Slavonic (this was not a reference to Jakobson's thinking), its ability to pack so concisely and figuratively images into words, but one suspects they also had in mind the repetition, alliteration and rhyme of the liturgical chants. The repetition (as a mode of rhetoric) combined with the chanting seems to serve as a form of 'semiotic recognition' (Yelle 2013, 4) as well as endowing the service with a ritualistic dimension. By 'semiotic recognition', it is meant that an awareness of the semiotic character of the chants is brought about through their perceived theatricality.

As an example of this semiotic recognition, bloggers speak of the 'aesthetic requirements' of the words uttered in church and how the Russian language is unable to meet these requirements. These comments relate to the 'feel' and 'sense' of language, an approach to language philosophy that has not got the attention it deserves in recent years. I have in mind here Sapir's (1921) 'form-feeling' where Sapir speaks of the instinctive feeling we have for the inner phonetic system of a language. We live in a secular or post-secular age that is perhaps less inclined to entertain such explanations which do not appear to be rationalist. Semiotically speaking, liturgical language reform is seen by some bloggers as a shift from 'form' to 'meaning'. It is argued that if the focus is only on meaning, the evocative features of form will be passed by. Poetic form would be replaced by much less ornamental language for ornamental language would act as a distraction from meaning. The assumed outcome is that the service will 'feel' less sacred.

In many of their online discussions, the bloggers imply a form of sacred diglossia (Ferguson 1959, 325-340) whereby two varieties of related languages (Russian and Church Slavonic) should be used in two distinct contexts. Historically, this has been the case but in recent years more Russian has been introduced to church services. Many bloggers express their concern that if the sociolinguistic boundaries continue to become blurred in this fashion and the 'language of the street' (Russian) is introduced more fully to the church, then the spiritual experience will be degraded because the vernacular is not perceived by them to have the

same 'revelatory qualities' as that of the sacred language.

For many bloggers, the liturgical language operates as a code; an 'audible image' that reveals an 'inaudible prototype'. Liturgical words are thus seen as icons because as with the icons on the church walls a visible image 'reveals' an invisible prototype (Lepakhin 2005; Trubitsyna 2010). It should be noted that in the comments sections on some blogs you can find very strong opposition to the idea that the 'word is an icon'. Preserving the liturgical language is therefore tantamout to icon reveration. If the liturgical language were replaced, the traditionalists would feel spiritually 'cut off from their roots' in the same way they might if icons were removed from the wall. Now, most Russians no longer understand fully the liturgical language (as was surely Lenin's wish as one of the bloggers puts it), traditionalists argue that it is harder for worshippers to 'perceive divine energies' (божественной энергии). It is believed infact that the Church Slavonic language was never widely understood by Russians. One might note that my informants often spoke about the 'energy' of certain icons.

The argument seems to precede as follows: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was to God, and God was to the Word' (John 1:1). For the divine Word to reach mankind and become language, it must be 'revealed' and only a sacred language is fully capable of this revelation. The liturgical language is often perceived to be the sacred language that comes from God. If the liturgical language is replaced with a language that has historically served a very different purpose, then there is the risk of recalibrating the communicative relationship with the divinity because the new language will not have the same divine and cosmic energy.

As we can see from the blog extract below, at the heart of the problem lies a semiotic difficulty which for many traditionalists is borne from a perception of language which prioritises the written over the spoken word. The traditional Russian Orthodox Bible was printed in Church Slavonic, but Bible reading did not become popular in Russia until quite late and even then it was only the New Testament that was generally read by Russian laypersons lucky enough to be literate. If we can only regard language as something arbitrary (in the Saussurean form-meaning sense) and 'external' (i.e. with no appeal to a spiritual inner life), then according to this interpretation the spiritual link between language and thought might be assumed to be arbitrary too. It is an axiom of semiotics that the linguistic sign is almost always arbitrary (the standard exceptions relate largely to onamotopoeia and much discussed examples of sound symbolism).

A blogger at pravoslanie.ru takes up this issue: „Это учение явилось плодом протестантского богословия, которое психологизировало всё духовные, интеллектуальные и языковые явления. В результате установилось поверхностное понимание языка как чего-то внешнего и почти произвольного по отношению к мысли и духу, как внешней их словесной одежде, которая может быть той

или другой." (This teaching was the fruit of Protestant theology, which psychologized all spiritual, intellectual and linguistic phenomena. As a result, a superficial understanding of language was established as something external and almost arbitrary in relation to thought and spirit, as their external verbal clothing, which can be one or the other.)

ROC bloggers often lament this crudely logical approach to language for it deprives speakers of any alternative ideology which may make an appeal to an inherent linguistic sacredness. One blogger at pravoslanie.ru wrote: „Рассуждения современных обновленцев о языке богослужения показывают, что они не отдают себе отчёта о предпосылках своего сознания. Едва ли они сами догадываются, что в основе их рассуждений лежит теория об условности, конвенциальности языкового знака. Эта теория широко распространилась по всему свету и стала в буквальном смысле слова предрассудком массового интеллигентского сознания под влиянием лингвистического учения швейцарского языковеда Ф. де Соссюра." (The arguments of modern reformers of the language of worship show that they are not aware of the premises of their consciousness. They hardly understand themselves that their reasoning is based on the theory of the conventionality, conventionality of the linguistic sign. This theory spread widely throughout the world and became, in the literal sense of the word, a prejudice of the mass intelligentsia under the influence of the linguistic teachings of the Swiss linguist F. de Saussure.)

If language were merely an externalised form of dressing-up and presenting a concept, then how could a sacred language function effectively? For the bloggers, what makes a language 'sacred' is its innateness (врожденность). Church Slavonic is considered a verbal icon amongst some parishioners because it is felt to be inherently suitable for portraying the holy image. If they switch to Russian, parishioners are concerned that the holy image will be distorted by a 'colloquial vernacular'. A blogger on another website (pravmisl.ru) takes up the same issue bemoaning the 'Protestant ideology of language' and comparing it to the 'Orthodox theory of language': „Православная же теория утверждает иной онтологический статус языка: в соответствии с нею язык есть язык Самого Бога и мира, а отдельные человеческие языки суть приемники Божественных энергий." (The Orthodox theory asserts a different ontological status of language: in accordance with it, language is the language of God Himself and the world, and individual human languages are receivers of Divine energies.)

The verbal sign is always ideological (Petrilli 2016, 311) and the bloggers seem to be acutely aware of this in their resistance to embrace the arbitrariness language ideology. This plays into the problem outlined by Vološinov (Vološinov 1973, 57-8): 'what interests [...] the rationalists is

not the relationship of the sign to the actual reality it reflects [...], but the relationship of sign to sign within a closed system already accepted and authorised'. Challenging what they deem to be clinical, 'Protestant' views of language which are indicative of a monologic identity, many bloggers insist that the liturgical language *cannot* be replaced for 'it is the voice of God' (Церковно-славянский язык это речь Бога).With this in mind, a number of bloggers refer to the Protestant Church which does not have a liturgical language as 'a Church without spirit (or soul)': Протестантские церкви, в которых есть традиция, обряд вдохновенность но нет духа ('Protestant churches which have tradition, ritual inspiration, but no soul').

The comments throughout the blogs all seem to share one overall ideology of language, and that is that languages are imbued with certain innate qualities and characteristics, and it is this combination of features which determines the language's purpose and function. Given the quasi sacred diglossia (Hudson 2002, 38), it is perhaps not surprising that ROC traditionalist bloggers tend to perceive languages as 'internally homogenous and linked to distinctive linguistic practices' (Bucholtz and Hall 2004, 376). These bloggers are essentialists for they assume both implicitly and intuitively that the essence of the sacred language (Church Slavonic) is rooted in nature or an underlying reality. They are not specifically opining on the essence of parishioners who understand Church Slavonic and comparing them to those who do not understand the language and favour reform. As Church Slavonic has only ever been a liturgical language, those opposed to liturgical reform are not making any identity claims or assumptions about those who embrace or resist Church Slavonic. However, in the spirit of essentialism, the traditionalists perceive the languages' respective performativities as being quite distinct and believe that these boundaries should be absolutely respected, i.e. the assumptions are being made about the language, and not its speakers. Thus, their comments tell us something about the nature of their representations of the world.

And so, the bloggers' essentialist reasoning dictates that if you replace or phase out Church Slavonic, then it will gradually become challenging to feel the sacred for only the священного языка ('sacred language') can facilitate the conjuring up of sacredness. There is a correlational perspective here too, and perhaps not an unreasonable one. One might argue that the diminishing or disappearance of the sacred (admittedly something difficult to quantify) is correlated to the dying out of liturgical languages. To experience a sense of sacredness is surely not purely a linguistic phenomenon, but the comments of many bloggers imply that without a sacred vehicle of transmission, the spiritual experience is inevitably compromised. As somebody who is not Orthodox and who only has a partial understanding of Church Slavonic, I would contest this claim. I have for many years been drawn to Orthodoxy, and its

sacred appeal comprises a great combination of things of which language is only one part. The icons, the chanting and the sensory pageantry all contribute to the sense of the sacred.

It is this compartmentalisation of language performativities implied in the perception of diglossia that lead bloggers to talk of how the liturgical language (Church Slavonic) can 'feed the soul' whereas vernaculars and in particularly English can only serve other functions and satisfy other needs. Languages such as Russian and English are perceived to index society's distance from God as we can see from this blog extract: „Обучение английскому языку весьма полезное в жизненных обстоятельствах, ровным счетом ничего не дает для души" („Learning English, which is very useful in life's circumstances, gives absolutely nothing for the soul.")

The idea here is that a rationalising language such as English cannot lead to spiritual enrichment. It is not able to engender the same nourishment, thought or feeling. These views on language have a Humboldtian or Herderian feel to them (Underhill 2009). One of the bloggers insists: 'language is a whole world; a whole world view' (Язык – это целый мир, это целое мировоззрение). In order to know the sacred, bloggers speak of how you need to 'feel' the language. Intelligibility and understanding the language is one thing, but spiritual enrichment can only come about when you can actually 'feel' the language, then the language 'will meet your inner needs' (когда он отвечает твоим внутренним потребностям). Once again, the prevailing idea is not that language use is constitutive of social identities (the focus of so much work in sociolinguistics), but that different languages have different performative functions. Priests told me that in order to 'feel the language', there needs to be some spiritual will, a desire on the behalf of the worshipper to know the sacred.

4. What is a sacred language?

In harmony with the ROC bloggers, Haeri's *Sacred Language, Ordinary People* (2002, 12) notes too that Muslim Egyptians do not believe either that the relation between linguistic forms of the Qu'ran and their corresponding meanings is arbitrary. This time, the given reason is because they believe the text reflects the words of God. It is often claimed that the forms of the language of the holy book *cannot* be translated. If the form is as important as the meaning, that takes us into a new domain of linguistic ideologies. If form and meaning are inseparable as some Muslim Egyptians and Russian Orthodox Christians seem to suggest, can you have translation? Or just interpretation? If Church Slavonic is of divine origin, should we able to fully understand it? Some bloggers make reference to the mystical appeal of only partial intelligibility. One blogger believes that

this attracts younger people to the church rather than deterring them. On a personal note, I can very much relate to this myself.

As well as bloggers, my interlocutors were unanimous in thinking that God is more likely to hear us in our prayers if we address him in Church Slavonic rather than in Russian. So, what are the properties of this sacred language that facilitates such performativity? One blogger defined them as follows: (a): arose in a sacred context; (b) recognised as 'sacred' by creed; (c) actively used in the sacred sphere; (d) distinct from the secular language; (e) appears as sacred in the font, alphabet and numerical value of each letter as it appears in liturgical texts; (f) rich in metaphor. In the view of this particular blogger, only two languages fulfill all these criteria – Hebrew and Church Slavonic. My interlocutors agreed with many of these criteria and spoke of the 'conceptual and metaphorical capacity' (Его слова имеют понятийную емкость и метафоричность) of Church Slavonic being superior to Russian. For this particular informant, Tatiana, a regular church-goer in her fifties, Russian was perceived as a language that was manipulated by the Bolsheviks so that it could be used as a language of slogans. This manipulation rendered it unsuitable for the Church.

But for our purposes, the most significant feature here might be (d). Once again, according to the traditionalists' rather essentialist language taxonomy, there are sacred languages and there are secular languages. Members of each taxon share an essence or underlying propensity to develop the socio-pragmatic proclivities typical of that category (Gelman 2003, 282). The languages' referential meanings may be the same, but their pragmatic meanings and performative potential are assumed to be quite different. The appeal of the liturgical language is that it is отличительный ('distinctive'). When it comes to the 'language debate', traditionalists' frustrations stem from the fact that in their view these two spheres have become muddled (перепутались), and that once again in accordance with an essentialist interpretation this is liable to lead to spiritual confusion amongst worshippers. Semiotic arbitrariness is assigned to 'secular languages', but it seems does not apply to 'sacred languages' where words are not concepts abstracted from their specific embodiment and situatedness.

As with Tatiana, some traditionalists see the Russian language as a language that has lost its spirituality (духовность) (even if one might assume that according to their taxonomy, Russian could never be a 'spiritual language'). Recently, she attended a Russian language service out of curiosity and described it as a 'pile of inconsistent sounds' (нагромождение несогласованных звуков). Many kindred traditionalists are concerned for the future of their spiritual patristic heritage. I was often told the Russification of church services will 'damage the soul' (навредит душе), the soul being a focal point for Russian cultural cosmologies (Pesmen 2000). In making these comments, it seems

it was assumed the switch to the secular language could restructure relations between the 'speech event and an other world' (Keane 1997, 60). The overarching idea expressed in these blogs is that language is not just a reflection of society and culture, but has a constituitive influence on the morals and 'soul' of its speakers. According to this perception, language through the sphere of intersubjectivity is one of the foundations of the social world.

Some bloggers speak of the inherent features of the liturgical language. One commented that Church Slavonic is based on 'grace' (благодать). Another insisted that the language is endowed with inherent spiritual and mystical properties (он обладает особыми духовно- мистическими свойствами). As we have seen, many of my informants mention the 'energy' of the liturgical language, but one blogger goes further and says that we should perceive the letters of Church Slavonic as 'chariots' and 'carriers of Divine energy' (колесницы, перевозчики божественной энергии). The idea is again that liturgical communication becomes disrupted if Russian is even partially used; the flow of energy is broken. The letters of the Church Slavonic language itself are thought by some to be imbued with certain qualities (the liturgical language has its own caligraphy known as вязь). Challenging again the hegemony of the arbitrariness ideology, the letters are not perceived to be arbitrary, but Divine icons. Some bloggers go further and claim that the moral foundations of life are laid out in the alphabet. As the sounds of the letters are perceived to be 'Divine creations', they are in turn able to carry the grace of God.

In online discussions of what comprises a 'sacred language', one also encounters a pervasive discourse of purism. Reform of the liturgical language is described as a 'virus' (вирус) or 'spiritual contamination' (духовного осквернения), the breath used to speak Russian is described as несвежий ('stale'). Borrowings from English are described as мутной ('muddy'), the implication being that they might soil the 'clean' liturgical waters. In contrast to this, the Church Slavonic language is described as 'pure', spiritually high and sanctified by the Grace of the Holy Spirit. A number of the blogs contain Fishmanian (1996) like references to the 'beloved', 'perfect' and 'sublime' language. Conservative worshippers believe that it is these characteristics that put us on the right path to understanding God. The 'correct' idiom is not only a sacred repository, but is the only vehicle to spiritual knowledge.

Some bloggers speak of Russian as being a language 'polluted by routine' (язык перестает «загрязняться» атмосферой повседневной рутины), a 'dirty language' (грязный язык) and 'linguistic filth' (языковой грязью). For these commentators, the liturgical language is regarded as 'pure' (чистый) while the Russian language is seen to be pathological or the result of some kind of contamination. We can see how

language and this essentialised thinking is anchored in dualistic thought. If language is not 'pure', it is by definition 'impure' or 'dirty'. As Douglas (Douglas 1966 36) points out in her classic work on pollution and taboo, 'where there is dirt, there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements.' Linguistic purism aims to induce this kind of symbolic, antithetical thinking, but few in modern Russia, I suspect, would apply these beliefs to the language of the Church.

Church Slavonic is regarded by many as a creation of God (Церковнославянский язык – это творение Божие), a gift from the Apostles Cyril and Methodius. The language is thought to be transformed by the Holy Spirit and communication with God using Church Slavonic is described as смиренный ('humble'). It is considered God's ordinance, portrayed as the soul of the Russian people (Церковнославянский язык поистине – душа русского народа). "To abandon the Church Slavonic language is to abandon ourselves", one blogger wrote. Lomonosov (1757, 3) wrote about this: „The Russian language in full strength, beauty and wealth is not subject to change and decline, as long as the Russian Church will be adorned with the doxology of God in the Slavic language."

Some of the most enlightening comments can be found at the end of blogs under the 'comments' section. More than one commentator said they were prepared to die for the Church Slavonic language and for the Julian calendar. One commentator, Sergei, implores Orthodox Christians to be custodians of the divine Word. For him, the words of Church Slavonic have, it seems, the 'taste and context' of the sacred (Bakhtin 1981, 293).

For the traditionalists, words uttered in Church Slavonic tend then to confer sacral power. And with this sacral power comes a sense of responsibility to continue the liturgical tradition and maintain the holy thread. *Sic semper erat, sic semper erit.* Their approach to language is arguably Bakhtinian (1979): the 'sacred' word participates in the event of Being through the unique context in which it is uttered. The word is an event, and words of a sacred language create through their utterance a holy event. In a Bakhtinian sense, the Divine Liturgy uttered in Church Slavonic could be perceived as a repeated enactment of a given sacred world in words. There is a religious resonance here, the notion of 'the Word was made flesh'. The sacred nature of the word has a long tradition in the Russian mentality. Today, amongst traditionalists there remains an aura of sanctity, the notion that sacred words can have transformative powers. Their understanding of sacred language implies a need to go beyond a purely human presence.

What connects the likes of Bakhtin (but also Mandel'shtam and Rozanov) with the liturgical traditionalists is an acute awareness of the sensorial significance of the word. They share a yearning for the tangible presence and situatedness of words, a sense that the relationship between the word and the eye has become too strong, the idea that it is the sound

of the word that confers its allegorical power. The liturgical traditionalists are not just comparing the sacral pull of two related idioms. They are indirectly lamenting the fact that the relationship between form and meaning has become overwhelmingly semiotic (as opposed to symbiotic) with the result that we are deaf to the impact of sacred language. The general complaint is that language has become too detached from experience. Rozanov (1970) believed that the disproportionate influence of the printing press was to blame for this outcome. In a secular world, some traditionalists regret the primacy of vision where form is wedded to content. But if the acoustic were primary, the 'form can no longer contain its content' (Levinas 1989, 147). In tune with Rozanov, the arbitrariness form-meaning ideology is the product of a civilisation whose focus is predominantly the visual and the printed word.

Other liturgical traditionalists strike a more Merleau-Pontian note talking of the need to regain the feeling of 'the living force of words'. In contrast to the above, they believe instead that our sense of words has been blunted through the overwhelming predominance of the vernacular. The Merleau-Pontians would hold that we seldom stop to ponder an expression, and that we are alienated from the vitality and sensuality of words. And when words become dissociated from life, life itself is lessened.

5. Conclusion

The discourse of semiotics itself has ideological foundations (Nöth 2004, 11-21). For many scholars, there is an ideological resistance to questioning the Saussurean, algebraic construct of the sign. In their support of what they perceive to be the sacred, Russian liturgical traditionalists are just one group who unwittingly expose these ideological foundations. There are indeed alternative semiotic ideologies of language, but it is seldom that we get to hear about them. In a world of digital bombardment, present and past Russian thinkers remind us that we should occasionally stop and reflect on the secret life of words – their etymologies, associations, their previous users, the different worlds and societies in which they have collided. It is surely all these things that make up the existence of the word. With the liturgical traditionalists, we witness a celebration of the experiential aspects of the sacred code, an ethnographic prizing of sincerity and authenticity (Wilce & Fenigsen 2015, 137-52).

It is hoped that this piece of research reminds us that we should use semiotics not just to reiterate the workings of a pre-determined theoretical model, but as an ethnographic means of accounting for difference in semiosis. To assume the arbitrariness of the sign as a universal is to overlook the riches of ethnography. For the traditionalists, language is creative rather than created. The roots of sacred language at

least are experiential; Church Slavonic embodies a set of values and a sense of shared experience. Perceptions of iconicity have cultural implications. Russian Orthodox traditionalists are of course not the only people to endow linguistic signs with sacred power. Many indigenous and non-indigenous groups believe in a form of word magic. What all these groups undoubtedly share is the idea that language is ontologically prior to that which it describes.

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