# 7 The Imaginative Power of Language in the Vacated Space of "Free Speech" in Putin-Era Russia

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Since all language use is subject to social conventions, political judgments, and linguistic means, what can "free speech" mean in practice but *freer* than in some other situation, a different place, or an earlier time? I use such a relative and temporal definition of the idea to discuss the issue of "free speech" in contemporary Russia. This chapter discusses the effects of the sudden advent of an era of free (or freer) speech – and later its reversal – on language itself. After repeated revolutions, thaws, openings out, and shutting downs, the "unfree situation" that Russians referenced in 1989–91 was not some other country but the previous era in their own history. Yet, in rejecting that Soviet language of the immediate past and creating "free" language and socio-linguistic manners, people necessarily drew upon verbal forms within their ken to represent their liberated ideas. And when, from the year 2000 onwards, repression and censorship clamped down yet again and that space of political expression was seized from above, there still remained the irrepressible inventiveness of ordinary people's talk. In each of these two political about-faces, the paradox is that linguistic practices that at first sight appear to be purely contemporary have in fact turned to deep and multifarious historical roots. What this chapter aims to contribute to the work of Russianist scholars is a perspective that explores the temporal dynamics of the senses of freedom given by "free speech."

The demise of the Soviet Union with its monolithic ideology and heavily policed terminology initiated an era when *glasnost'* (transparency) was declared and censorship ended; when multiple and discordant voices could be heard in public, political leaders could speak of unfamiliar ideas, and previously completely silenced topics surfaced into discussion one by one. The 1990s was certainly a time when speech, as a general term for communications of all kinds, was freer than it had been before. But "freedom of thought and speech" has a lowly place in the present Russian Constitution (it is cited in Article 29),[1]

1 See the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission): Russian Federation Constitution (2021), available at https://rm.coe.int/constitution-of-the-russian-federation-en/1680a1a237.

and there has been nothing like the active lobby to support it that surrounds the First Amendment in the United States. From 2000 onwards there was a sharp reversal. Under Putin a series of legislative measures prohibited "undesirable content," "false fabrications," and "verbal crime" (Bogush 2017). These laws have distinctive contours: while racist, misogynistic, ethnic, and sexist invective normally goes unpunished and government ministers regularly engage in calumny and spin fabrications (Roudakova 2017, 218–20), censorship returned with an onslaught on overt criticism of state policies and actions, official versions of history, the president of Russia, and "Russia" itself. All such public critique is liable to criminalization and ongoing surveillance, at worst to assassination, prison, or exile. Yet, in private speech, there remains the great commotion of everyday life – vibrant, tangled, undisciplined – and its outbursts. Some of this found niches on the relatively freer internet, where until recently (2022 and the advent of war conditions), independent subjectivities could be expressed. Significantly, in print, as well as in public protests, there is a certain exhilaration in the invention of sideways, *non-overt* expression, in which Russians have honed techniques over the centuries. In short, if the freedom of "freedom of speech" is defined negatively as an absence of repression, it is at the point of extinction in present Russia; but if we look for freedom of speech in a delimited, positive sense, by which I mean the capacity to express one's ideas and feelings privately from a self-chosen, independent subject position,[2] then that, I suggest, is far from moribund.

Russia's switchback between authoritarian and volatile regimes has created a hostile terrain in which to perceive the kinds of "free speech" envisioned in influential Euro-American discussions, whether that refers to Foucauldian *parrhesia*, the direct speaking of truth to power, or the capacity for public democratic dialogue on political matters. What can be seen in Russia is the complicated, contradictory, and shifting coexistence of diverse political attitudes. Brave people took to the streets to protest notably in 2011–13 against election fraud, and in 2020–1 in support of Navalny and his anti-corruption campaign, but large swathes of the population and the media support the government on those issues, even if they wax indignant about certain local decisions, and many other citizens do their best to ignore politics altogether. Increasingly, writers and the intelligentsia have recourse yet again to various forms of indirectness, especially to what Russians call "Aesopian language," referring to the ancient Greek storyteller who used pointed animal fables to suggest uncomfortable truths about human society. Meanwhile, the state-approved media, such as the main TV channel Pervyi Kanal (Channel One), is pervaded by a crude simulacrum of plain speaking, staging shows in which "common sense" always wins out against "extremism."

2 See the discussion in Gerasimov et. al. (2013, 15–20) of Quentin Skinner's lecture entitled "So What Does Freedom Mean to Us?"

Nevertheless, as mentioned, counter-currents have emerged in what we might call living language, the inventive or taboo-breaking usages of the population at large. This chapter will attempt to explain how it is that certain (positive) kinds of freedom have come to be exercised in Russia *within the sphere of everyday language itself*. This is sometimes a matter of giving new meanings to signs that used to mark opposition to the Soviet government; but it has also taken the form of idiosyncratic and rebellious play against regulation as such, against the norms of language culture and their manifestation in the rules of grammar and orthography, occasionally in the end probing the very capacity of language to carry community-wide, generally understood meaning.

## Political Change and Linguistic Normativity

Russian sociologists, linguists, and anthropologists have raised the issue of what has become known as the "public aphasia" of the post-Soviet era. This refers not to the psycho-linguistic impairments analyzed by Roman Jakobson ([1956] 2004) but to a general discursive paralysis caused by the lack of a language of disinterested public debate (Guseinov 2004; Ushakin 2009; Vakhtin and Firsov 2016). Ushakin (2009, 763), for example, mentions the lack of generalizing mental maps and an insufficiency of symbolic forms adequate to express the essence of the situation that had arisen. Vakhtin and Firsov (2016, 7) echo several other writers in arguing that Russian society has been trapped by the dichotomy between the old Soviet official formulae and irreverent assorted kitchen-table opinions, neither of which can form a basis for constructive public debate, and they suggest that this is evident in the inability of public figures to consider facts from multiple points of view, to converse democratically with one another, or to reach a reasonable compromise.

As Russia is not alone in the world in experiencing such effects, there must be other causes beyond the shock of 1991. But the outcome in Russia does play out in distinctive ways, notably the heightened presence of expletives, criminal jargon, and violent metaphors, even in ordinary conversation (Zemskaya 2004), a crude style that has been taken up in populist mode by politicians, including the president (Ryazanova-Clarke 2019). When truth-based, well-argued, and reasonable political discussion is side-lined into niche publications and academia, this leaves the public space of the "lack" to be occupied by some other kind of language. The Azeri linguist Gasan Guseinov (2017) argued that this is the smugly lying, boastful, and aggressive language that has taken over arenas such as mainstream TV and political electioneering. For calling this language "cloacal," Guseinov was attacked by a storm of xenophobic and nationalist invective from people who took him to be referring to the Russian language as such. He became the object, in effect, of the very "cloacal language" to which he was drawing attention. The word "language" here refers to the particular manner of communication or "language

culture" (Gorham 2014, 56) of the mainstream populist media, politicking, and electioneering. Yet that sociolect, while dominant, is but one among many. It feeds into and is fed by the "living language" – the vast range of available words, jokes and puns, metaphors, poetic fragments, religious references, commonly understood allusions, curses, foreign borrowings, internet memes, or high-flown literary phrases available to the population. Ingunn Lunde (2009) has referred to this complex interaction as the demonstration of "performative metalanguage"; namely, the deliberate negotiation of language norms by both political figures and ordinary people by voicings that are in effect statements about language.

Some historical background is necessary to explain the virulence of the feelings aroused by the word "cloacal." In Russia, as Guseinov (2004, 23) argues, language was always thought of as a normative instrument whereby rulers could govern the consciousness of the people. But if during the tsarist centuries the idea was to enrich and purify language with the aim of improving the population's usage, after the Bolshevik Revolution this goal ran aground when the ruling language was suddenly supposed to represent the speech of the proletariat and peasants. "Free speech" made a sudden public appearance, taking the form of egalitarian straight talk (formerly seen as rudeness). Courtesy and euphemisms were scorned as repellent bourgeois hypocrisy. A distant European historical analogy is the seventeenth-century Quaker puritan rejection of politeness as untruth (Bauman 1983). A closer comparison could be made with the "monotonous violence" that appalled Germaine De Staël (1800) in the standardized rhetoric of the Jacobins in the French Revolution,[3] or the crudeness and invective of the Red Guards that marked the Cultural Revolution in China (Perry and Xun 1997). However, in Russia in the early 1920s, as in revolutionary France and China, the "liberated" harsh speech was not in fact the language of the working classes. It belonged, rather, to the political activists. Bolshevik linguistic norms involved not just a hard-nosed style but also a party-originated linguistic bureaucratism that still afflicts Russia today. A host of difficult-to-master acronyms (VChK, VKP(b), Ispolkom, Narkomfin, OGPU, and so forth) became required markers of revolutionary consciousness.

Yet socialist transformation required the development of a unified, homogenous language for everyone that was to be founded, as Maxim Gorky argued, on the exemplary breadth and richness of the Russian literary language that did not exaggerate or falsify the speech of the people (see discussion in Gorham

3 "At many times in our Revolution the most revolting sophisms alone filled certain speeches; party slogans, repeated endlessly by the orators fatigued ears and dried up hearts. There is variety only in nature; only true sentiments inspire new ideas. What effect could be produced by this monotonous violence, by these terms so strong that they leave the heart cold?" (De Staël 1800, 375; my translation).

2000, 142–4). It was the nineteenth-century classical poets and novelists, Gorky wrote, that formed the "beautiful (*prekrasnyi*) Russian language." The idea of the "great, mighty, just and free Russian language" extolled by Ivan Turgenev (quoted in Vereshchagin and Kostomarov 1979, 174) gave rise, on the one hand, to the canonized institution of the "literary language," which became a staple of Soviet schooling, and on the other to the idea that the ordinary speech of the masses spoken from the heart could only be an "imperfect manifestation" requiring correction (Gorham 2014, 10). One of the early actions of the Bolshevik government had been to institute a reform of pre-revolutionary written Russian. Ostensibly, this was to make it clear and simple so that peasants and workers would be able to master it easily, but the deeper aim was to mark a new era, to break with tsarist Russia: *everything* was now to be new, including language (Baiburin n.d.). The new orthography rapidly became a policed orthodoxy, with extraordinary scrutiny given to ideologically marked details. For instance, while it was best not to write about God at all, it became a punishable offence to write the word "god" (*bog*) with a capital letter "B" (*Bog*) unless this word came at the beginning of a sentence (Guseinov 2004, 48). With the Soviet party-state's determination to educate people in the feeling of common values, "every act of speech became a political act" (Guseinov 2004, 24). That is why, when the grip of the atheist Soviet ideology finally loosened at the end of the 1980s, it was indeed a tiny political freedom to be able to write "God" rather than "god." This was only a relative freedom, however, as the overarching language ideology remained in place: namely, the conviction, not unlike the institutionalizing of French by the Académie Française, that there is a glorious, correct, and proper Russian language, and that it must be defended. This idea was and continues to be manifested most prominently by the ramparts of the "literary language."

The letter *B*/*b* is an example of the widely employed concept of the ideologeme. Originating with Bakhtin, who used the term in a broad semiotic sense (any word as a social sign is an ideological phenomenon), *ideologeme* has come to refer more specifically to a symbol bearing ideological content (Kristeva 1986), or to the minimal unit of written or spoken language that the speaker or listener takes to refer to an imagined code of ideological norms and attitudes (Guseinov 2004, 27). To use a capital letter, or not, when writing the word *god* was – in either case – to employ a widely understandable ideologeme throughout the twentieth century. But what has happened since then, I will suggest following Lara Ryazanova-Clarke (2016), is that all ideologemes have been radically destabilized.[4] Native wit and invention have reshuffled them,

4 The letter *b* on its own, extracted from any word, can in the living language stand metonymically for many things (*baba*, "woman"; *baraban*, "drum"; *bomba*, "bomb," etc.). This propensity for playful association on letters of the alphabet was encouraged by the pervasiveness

stuck them into inappropriate contexts, and garbled them into ever-changing neo-abbreviations, such that any sense of their general meaningfulness threatens to be lost. It is amid these shifting sands that the present substitutes for free speech (in its negative freedom sense) now appear.

### *Subject Positions of Speaking Out*

It was the notion of "linguistic aphasia" allegedly brought about by the drastic events of 1989–91, mentioned earlier, that first suggested to me that a historical approach is needed in order to understand contemporary linguistic tactics. I was reminded also of the temporal "aporias" invoked by John Borneman (2003, vii) in his edited volume about Germany, *The Death of the Father: An Anthropology of the End in Political Authority*, in which he refers to various kinds of bewilderment, such as the regime that ends without the death of its leader; the death of a regime that is not recognized by the populace; and the people's representation to themselves of the dawning of a new era when from an external perspective that change is difficult to recognize. However, while aporia indicates an impasse and aphasia denotes an absence – the post-traumatic lack of a language with which to create a meaningful and socially valuable narrative of the present (Oushakine 2000) – it was not the case that people in Russia were totally baffled or altogether silent in the 1990s. Rather, as Yermakov et. al. (2004) and others have richly documented, many assorted groups adapted Soviet-era linguistic habits of indirectness to handle relations with the "new" powers – the "aporia" in this case being that, while everyone realized that a new era had dawned, the leaders were not so new after all, since both Gorbachev and Yeltsin had been Soviet-ruling apparatchiks for decades. With the turning wheel of the Yeltsin–Putin–Medvedev–Putin-again eras, matters changed: there was an ever-faster process of resignifying of earlier ideologemes and mining of fresh ones, as will be described later in this chapter.

This issue of the temporality of "free speech" can be informed by arguments concerning the interpretation of protests in the Stalinist era. In his path-breaking paper on "speaking out," Jochen Hellbeck (2000) argued that influential Euro-American historians were wrong to assume that most Soviet citizens stood aloof from the values of the communist regime. He charged these writers with losing sight of the frames of meaning guiding individuals' articulations and actions, and which accorded people subjecthood only if they expressed themselves in ways that appeared to be dissonant with the regime. Focusing on non-compliance

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of Soviet acronyms. An example is VKP(b), which correctly stands for the All-Union Communist Party (Bolshevik), where uninformed people would guess wildly at the reference of the "(b)" while others deliberately subverted it. In a widely known mocking etymology, this "b" stood for *blyad'* (prostitute) (Guseinov 2004, 49).

meant that the encompassing temporal dynamic of social mobilization characteristic of modern revolution was ignored. Hellbeck showed that most dissent in the 1940s and 1950s was motivated by individuals' *self-creating involvement* in the political system and their dismay that the original revolutionary values were being cast aside by the Stalinist regime (73–4). These (doomed) working-class "speakers out" credited the October Revolution with giving them the very capacity to speak and understand themselves (81–2). The gist of this argument can be extracted from the era discussed by Hellbeck and shifted to later periods in Russian political life. The point is that we need to pay attention to the source(s) *from whence* people derive their felt authority to speak out, and to enquire about in what name and to what purpose they articulate their critical or uncomfortably offbeat acclamation of the powers that be. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, it would be anachronistic to assume that calls for "freedom" would refer to some default "Western" concept; rather, for the great majority of people, "freedom" (*svoboda*) would mean one of the kinds they had grown up with in Soviet schools, be that the poetical freedom invoked by Pushkin or the Leninist "democratic freedom" of a class (see Humphrey 2007; see also Kruglova 2017 on the continued salience of everyday "vernacular Marxism" in present-day Russia).

The "death of the father" has not happened in Russia. He has just reappeared in different guises. With chameleon Putin, various kinds of unfilial questioning have also taken on new colours. Some of these now draw on global sources, from American comics and Japanese anime to Russian folklore, films, and science fiction. Nevertheless, if we return to the key question that concerned Hellbeck (2000), the ideas in the name of which such communications happen, I suggest that the most numerous, varied, fertile, and experientially vivid are those deriving from lives lived inside Russia itself, and that these cannot be understood without knowledge of the revolutionary double bouleversement of the values that were elevated as politically legitimate in twentieth-century Russian history. In what follows I provide some examples, each of which is impossible to understand without their tortuous backstories. I do not claim they are representative or especially important features in the vast and varied field of linguistic innovation. The aim, rather, is to point to three kinds of transmutation – ploys with language proper, shifts in language culture, and a combination of the two – that have surfaced in the (vacated) place of "free speech." These moves, it should be stressed, are libertarian in the sense that they make willful play with the status quo of the literary language and its culture; but it would be wrong to assume that they are therefore necessarily politically progressive as that idea is understood in Europe.

### *The "Hard Sign"*

"If you ask me how the [post-soviet] renaissance of Russia started, I'd say, without thinking twice, with the hard sign" (Russian author quoted in Baiburin n.d.; my translation). The letter *yer* in the Russian alphabet, called the "hard

Figure 7.1. The "hard sign."

sign" (figure 7.1), has no sound and functions only as an orthographical means of showing that the previous letter is pronounced distinctly and separately from what follows and to show the masculine gender of the word. How could such a seemingly insignificant and ethereal entity be reckoned so game-changing?

When the Bolsheviks rushed through their language reform in 1918, they abolished several supposedly redundant letters of the alphabet, including the hard sign when used at the end of words, though it was kept in order to separate certain sounds within a word. Ostensibly the edict was aimed to simplify the writing of Russian in order carry out the urgent task of achieving literacy among the population. The weightier political reason was to demonstrate a sharp break with the previous era. After the Revolution *everything* was to be different, including the alphabet. Lev Trotsky turned letters into ideologemes when he wrote that the hard sign and the other eliminated letters were the "aristocratic estate" in "our" alphabet, abolished by "our" October Revolution; they were *parasitical letters*, while all the other letters were necessary labouring letters (quoted in Baiburin n.d.). The reform was hotly opposed. As a Russian linguist commented,

> People of the old world grasped at the meaningless hard sign as their banner. Bourgeois newspapers continued to use it despite the ban. Finally, decisive methods were necessary: sailors from the Baltic Fleet were sent to the printing houses of Petrograd to cleanse them of the letter *yer* … But wherever the White Armies resisted, where generals, factory owners, bankers, and landlords held out, the old hard sign went with them as their faithful ally. It advanced with Kolchak, retreated with Yudenich, fled with Denikin, and finally, with Baron Wrangel was killed off and consigned to the past. For several long years, this letter played the role of separator not only of sounds inside a word but, in the gigantic spaces of our country, it "divided" life and death, light and shade, the future and the past. (quoted in Baiburin n.d.; my translation)

Throughout the Soviet era, putting the forbidden hard sign at the end of a word was an almost unthinkable, bizarrely dissident act.

With the demise of the Soviet Union, the hard sign, unlike the other banned letters, was joyfully resurrected. It became the indexical sign of a new (relative) freedom, enthusiastically attached to the names of the institutions that

were the advance guard of capitalist enterprises: banks, trading businesses, private services, law firms, typographies. People would decide, for example, that their bank, correctly written банк, was now to be designated банкъ. One of the most influential newspapers of the new era, *Kommersant* (Коммерсант), added a hard sign to its name (Коммерсантъ) and then took to calling itself by the "Ъ" alone. It soon became evident that the hard sign, now fixed, against the rules of literary Russian, at the end of all kinds of inappropriate words, had many extra-linguistic connotations. One might imagine that a "meaningless" letter like the *er* would be a prime example of Ferdinand de Saussure's (1916) assertion of the arbitrary relation between the signifier and the signified. But the fault in that proposition, discussed in general terms in Jakobson (1966), is evident in the thoughts about deploying the hard sign expressed by contemporary Russian wordsmiths. Businessmen explaining why they use it in their brand name say it connotes firmness, uprightness, and determination like the shape of the letter (see Avetisyan 2016). If we follow Jakobson's (1966) rebuttal of Saussure, it is easy to see that the *er* as a written sign, with its jutting back edge, has an iconic and a symbolic character, reflecting both in its distinction from the "soft sign," which looks similar but lacks this jut,[5] and its function, to create "hardness" in the previous consonant.

Furthermore, the historical reference is lost on no one. To return to the issue of subject position raised by Hellbeck (2000), the hard sign ideologeme signalled not only a stance in favour of the new capitalism but also the desire to grasp a historically longer Russian identity. When applied to an institution like a bank, the hard sign is intended to convey the (illusory) message that this bank inherited the values of probity and reliability of Russia's flourishing pre-revolutionary international capitalism and has nothing in common with that treacherous sink of good money, the Soviet *sbergatal'naya kassa* (savings bank). And then, many present-day Russians have taken with alacrity to the idea that the hard sign ending was used to denote the male gender of a word. In this regard, the absence/presence of the hard sign has been attributed with magical social agency.[6] For example, alluding to the alleged Soviet policy of demoting men and advancing women in order to create the androgynous *Homo Soveticus*, the film critic Sandomirskaya wrote: "It turns out that having been

5 The soft sign imparts a softening *i* sound to the previous consonant. Jakobson (1966, 31–2) pointed to the numerous ways in which languages establish links between morphemes by binary or serial similar sound shapes (father, mother, brother) while distinguishing them by small significant differences. The hard and soft signs do this by means of graphic shapes.

6 Judith Butler (2021, xxi) discusses analogies in the United States concerning the fantasies brought into being by the extraordinary power attributed to dissident speech: "The criticism of racism will by some magic power take down white businesses; the criticism of rape will by some imagined power result in castration."

deprived of the hard sign to indicate the male gender, Soviet men were no longer in a position to preserve their gendered identity, which led to dire consequences" (quoted in Baiburin n.d.; my translation). The sexual connotations of the pairing of maleness and hardness are much celebrated in the triumphant return of the hard sign and enjoyed in innuendo, jokes, and stories. Meanwhile, the inoffensive, "feminine" soft sign, which has been used unchanged all along, has gone unnoticed. But the gendering of the hard sign presaged a corresponding spread of *feminitiva*, the adding of feminine diminutives to previously neuter words for professionals, such as *avtorka* (authoress) in place of *avtor*, *doktorka* (woman doctor), or *blogerka* (woman blogger). This trend is the opposite to that ongoing in Europe, and the new terms indeed sound ridiculous to many Russians, but they have been normalized in much of the media.

## Khamstvo *("Malicious Boorishness")*

I now shift attention from ploys with writing to "language cultures," by which I refer to the numerous socially created linguistic practices that are identified as distinctive in Russia.[7] Guseinov (2012, 178) has observed that written freedom of speech (*svoboda slova*), as distinguished from private oral conversation, reached Russia only with the internet; meanwhile, he notes, for ordinary people dealing with that borderland between the personal and the social – from the school and the shop to the railway ticket office or the town graveyard – speech is made up of obliqueness and interjections, or chatter lubricated by swearing. Guseinov evidently considers this crudeness as just a careless use of language, but *khamstvo* (boorish, injurious talk) stands out as an objectionable contravention of social norms (210–14). The *kham* (boor) dispenses with euphemisms, politeness, and kindly gestures (not to mention the cheery emoticons scattered through written communications indicating that one does not want to offend one's respondent). This stark language culture is not linguistically free in the sense of coining new words, metaphors, or spinning flights of fancy,[8] yet I will argue that it has, like the "Aesopian language" mentioned below, a deeply rooted kernel of "freedom of speech" in a socio-historical sense. This is not just because the *kham* assumes the freedom to flout the everyday habits of consideration for others; rather, the paradox lies in the concept itself, which is said to be untranslatable, and for which "boor" is undoubtedly inadequate.

7 See the discussion in Gorham (2014, 5–9) on the distinction between language culture and language ideology, the former referring to distinctive attitudes and practices in using language and the latter to conceptions of the nature, form, and purpose of language as such.

8 It is because *mat* (swearing) has exactly these features, having long ago taken leave of crude sexual connotations by means of linguistic inventiveness, that Guseinov (2004, 165–72) argued for its importance in linguistic freedom.

*Khamstvo* hurts the people who are its objects and, in this respect, recalls the "injurious speech" analyzed by Butler (2021). But hate speech owned by white majorities in Western democracies, despite the occasional resignification of notable insults from negative to positive (such as "queer"), contains no substrate of liberation. Indeed, the very reverse. The concept of *khamstvo*, on the other hand, is founded on a convoluted history that includes a ghost of social release.

The word *kham* has a religious origin, referring to Ham (*Kham*), the son of Noah. The biblical text (Genesis 9:20–7) is succinct: after the flood, Noah takes to farming, creates a vineyard, but then gets drunk and is seen by Ham lying asleep in disgraceful nakedness. Ham speaks out and tells his brothers Shem and Japhet. They, in contrast, behave with respect, cover their father with a piece of cloth, and avert their eyes. When Noah wakes up, he curses Ham's son and all his descendants for Ham's transgression (looking and telling). In Russian exegesis, Ham not only "saw" Noah but also laughed scornfully at his sleeping father when telling his brothers. Ham thus stands for the lack of love and respect for the father and indeed for the use of speech in the desire to humiliate him in the eyes of others. The expanded social connotations of the story give further depth to the notion of *khamstvo*. Russian biblical explanation elaborates on the meanings given to the brothers' names and extended to their descendants: Shem is said to mean "name" and "honour," Japhet means "spreader" (of God's word), and Ham means "hot, burning, black, and dark complexioned" (Prajt 2017). As was also common in European medieval traditions, these designations gave religious legitimation to racial categorization, but in Russia they also served to denote the social hierarchy within the country. God is said to have decreed that Shem's descendants would lead, Japhet's would live with them, and Ham's would serve them both. In the nineteenth century, Russian nobles used the word *kham* to denigrate the ineradicable baseness and impudence of peasants, workers, servants, and lackeys; by the early twentieth century, the category included the *meshchanstvo* (the mixed lower-middle-class estate), characterized by the nobility as the "soul of pandering, lack of spirituality, and hooliganism, as an anarchic [social] wave" (quoted in Vojvodina 2010, 16; my translation).[9] By the time of the 1905 and 1917 revolutions, the insolence and defiance of the so-called *khams* was directly pointed towards social and economic liberation.

As an aside, if we think about the ancient precedent recalled in the notion of *khamstvo*, an analogous genealogy applies to the notion of "Aesopian language." For after all, who was Aesop? He is held to have been a repulsively ugly son of a slave. This was the lowly figure who is said to have invented the cautious

9 Merezhkovskii was the author of a famous 1906 article, "Gryadushchii Kham" (Coming Ham) that predicted the terrible triumph of *khamstvo* coming from the social depths.

language game of the politically powerless, the fable that turns to lions, hares, and frogs to depict right rule, cruelty, enslavement, and freedom. The advantage of the fable is that it allows the author's irony to be instantly retracted, for it is the *listeners* to the story who perceive the political analogy in the shenanigans of the animals (Clark 2021, 25). The fable is most effective as a weapon in despotic regimes, writes a nineteenth-century editor of the stories: "a tyrant cannot take notice of a fable without putting on the cap that fits" (quoted in Clark 2021, 25).

The Bolshevik Revolution brought the so-called *khams* triumphantly into power (Arctus 2017). In the view of many in the Christian noble and upper classes, once the "low people" were in charge, their God-decreed Ham-like unworthiness and malicious disrespect would lead to the destruction of society. Indeed, society was overturned, and with it the direction of *khamstvo*, which almost immediately came to be identified no longer with rebellious insolence but with the *top-down* enaction of the *khams'* propensity to deride and humiliate. It was seen in the new bosses' use of insultingly vulgar language to bully subordinates, disloyal telling on rivals, gloating at others' failures, taking advantage of principled people's weaknesses, and so forth. Indignant people added another quality to the characteristics of the Soviet *khams* – their assumption that anything was allowed to them. In the 1990s many people hoped that this type of behaviour would disappear, but in the 2000s, as Guseinov (2012, 214) writes, "the *kham*, the *zhlob* (obnoxious aggressive person) – whether among officials and oligarchs or just among the ordinary people – arose again." Now *khamstvo* was perceived everywhere, in insolence from below and in brutal betrayal from above. People began to ask, is it something inescapable, an intrinsic fault of the Russian character? A recent documentary film entitled *Pravda li, chto khamit' u nas v krove?* (Is it true that boorishness [hamming] is in our blood?), showing incidents of *khamstvo* in schools, hospitals, offices, and taxis, for example, interviewed sociologists, psychologists, journalists, and teachers asking each of them why they thought it was so prevalent (see Redactsiya 2021). They replied variously, but a thread runs through the responses that has to do with the current degraded culture of interpersonal communication, revealed most sharply in language.

The documentary film as well as linguistic monographs (e.g., Zemskaya 2004; Yermakov et. al. 2004) make evident how power and status are held in place through language. In post-socialist Russia, encounters between ordinary citizens and those of high rank still entail one-sided deference and formality. For example, written communications should be "translated" from ordinary language into the formulae of the bureaucratic sociolect. They take the modular forms of the complaint (*zhaloba*), the demand (*trebovaniya*), and the various kinds of request (*proz'ba*) – for "support," "cooperation," "permission," or "a decision." These are written by citizens, who will only receive curt but polished answers from above (if they receive an answer at all), in awkward, unpractised officialese (Yermakov et.al. 2004, 62–7, 77–9). Oral communications from

below must take respectful forms and circumlocutions rarely used in everyday life, and bosses react sharply to over familiarity. Meanwhile, also retained from Soviet practice, still frequent modes between officials and direct subordinates are straight oral commands or deliberately belittling offhand obstructiveness. But today when older principles of precedence, such as governmental office, are challenged by newer ones, be that sheer wealth, threat of physical violence, technological expertise, or cosmopolitan education, the jarring incompatibilities of esteem multiply the occasions for susceptibility to insult and loss of face. Linguistically, disrespect can be expressed in a multitude of ways, from the insulting use of the informal "you" (*ty*), immodest use of the word "I" (*ya*), simply questioning why, or giving unwanted advice, to the minefield of forms of address. With the abandonment of "comrade," the Russian language has no polite term such as "sir" or "madame" for addressing an unknown person. All that is left is basic physical categories ("Young man, you are in my way," "Woman, you have dropped your glove") and, as was remarked in the documentary about *khamstvo*, this bluntness can be experienced as a tiny insult right there. As Butler (2021, 1–2) observes, "We ascribe an agency to language, a power to injure, and position ourselves as the objects of its injurious trajectory … To be called by a name is one of the first forms of linguistic injury one learns."

*Khamstvo*, however, is not fundamentally a matter of breaching codes of politeness. Rather, it is on one side a performative self-assertion and on the other a *diagnosis*, perhaps mainly of betrayal of a presumed trust, that is made from radically different social positions. From a subordinate's perspective, the *kham* is someone who has assumed a right to lord it that they do not deserve and does so in a harmful way. From above, the *kham* is a lowly person who "gets above themself," who acts independently when they should be grateful and keep quiet, still worse a whistle-blower or an "agitator" for some alien cause. In the documentary film, one rare man recognized himself to be a *kham*, if only in the eyes of the director-journalist, and he responded that acting in ways that happened to humiliate others was exactly his right.[10] "Isn't it natural," he exclaimed, "wouldn't any upstanding person respond to the knocks of the world frankly, by striking out?" (Redactsiya 2021). Here we can see that the ghost in present-day *khamstvo*, the biblical Ham, is still somehow present in one unresolvable paradox presented by the story: for honesty and frankness are regarded in Russia as virtues, and Ham told the truth, even if that was also precisely what he should not have done. Remembering that "the death of the father" has not yet taken place,

10 A post on one website comments: "Many people in Russia think that *khamstvo* is the manifestation of pure freedom … but attempts to defend the right to *khamstvo* are a true sign of the demise of [the culture of] dialogue. The *kham* does not listen and cannot bear any restriction on his own means of expression. Monologue-ism has become the mark of the times" (Vasilievich 2020; my translation).

I would therefore suggest that the continued acute sensitivity to *khamstvo* is an important factor, largely unnoticed by the external world, in Russian life; it mitigates against the despairing claim of those such as Roudakova (2017, 218–19) or Pomerantsev (2016) that epistemological commitment to truth has vanished in Russia. Truth, indeed, seems to be superfluous in politicians' performances and the pro-government media, but that is not the case among the people at large.

### *From* Khamstvo *to the Irreverent Internet*

Since around 2000, communication on the internet has been freer than in the mainstream media, ranging from serious comment on events, to live observation blogs, to calls for action and support of victims, to irreverent mockery. Nevertheless, one would hesitate to call this democratic "free speech" in a political sense, since genuine dialogue with the powers (*sily*) is altogether absent and websites and blogs are subject to abrupt closure. Still, the internet abounds with diverse counter-cultural linguistic invention. For example, *padonskii yazyk* (the language of the scruffs, from *podonki*, "dregs, scum") has now gone out of fashion, but it was essentially an attack on social hierarchy by means of subverting the rules of the "great Russian language"; it was written in deliberately distorted, misspelled, ungrammatical Russian with ample use of swear words and criminal slang (Dunn 2006, 5; Lunde 2009). Certain of its memes, migrating to the right, became nationalistic slogans, such as "*Vypei iadu*" (Drink poison) during the Kremlin's ban on Georgian wines (Dunn 2006, 4), and some of its plays on words were taken up as populist gestures in arenas like President Putin's staged question-and-answer sessions with the people.[11]

Other more recent internet genres, far from being taken up by pro-government groups, are condemned as "the language of *khamstvo*." Writing in the patriotic journal *Russkii Mir*, the linguist Vladimir Yemel'yanko (2021) observes that a "mutant form" of language has developed on youth-oriented sites and in social media. This is *kheit*, from the English "hate." *Kheit* is conducted in an ever-changing vocabulary, mostly adopted from the West. Status in its battles

11 On Putin's staged "direct lines" and "conversations" with the people, see Gorham (2014, 152–3, 166–7). An account of the injection of the deliberately confusing "*medved*" into such an event can be found at "Preved!," Wikipedia, accessed December 2021, https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Превед. *Medved* was an acronym for **Me**zhduregional'noe **Dv**izhenie **Yed**instva (Inter-regional Movement for Unity, later to become the pro-government United Russia Party), which became a *padonskii* meme-brand in the form of an anthropomorphized brown bear (correctly written *medved* would have a soft sign, *medved'*). But *medved* also refers to Dmitri Medvedev, the politician. In one such staged show, a cheeky *padonskii* question prepared for Putin, "What do you think of *medved*?," was in the end replaced by "What do you think of the journal *Medved'*?"' Foreign journalists nevertheless assumed Putin was being asked about Medvedev, which, in a sense, he was.

depends on speedy abandonment of out-of-date words and mastery of the latest ones. As of 2021, *inflyuensery* have *follovery* and *kheitery*, and the norm is to reply to the sarcastic posts of the latter by *kholivar* (holy war). A *chel* – someone up with it, with good self-esteem but not too much *ChVS*[12] – should retaliate with a witty barb aimed to humiliate or *bodisheim* (body shame) the opponent. It is not clear, however, that *kheit* can be straightforwardly identified with Western "hate speech" as a social phenomenon, as the latter consists of easily understandable invective against mostly public targets, whereas *kheit* appears to be far more inward-looking and aimed at scoring against weaker members of the given online community.[13] The public resonance of the genre is limited by its barbarically foreign vocabulary, along with the coded and mysterious Russian neologisms it has invented. The result is a "language" that older generations cannot understand and suspect conceals a harmful activity. In Yemel'yanko's (2021, 20) view, the young practitioners see themselves as able to explore their own thoughts in *kheit* precisely because in this way they can fence themselves off from the world of adults, and he reports that teachers and parents see *kheit* as a "frightening foreign abracadabra." Thus, *kheit*, like *padonskii yazyk*, is a linguistic form in which deep alienation from an imagined "proper" society can be expressed by flouting linguistic normativity.[14] But such forms could be described as *over-free* speech, since by flying so far from general intelligibility they create only consternation in the population at large and fail to have a noticeable political effect. However, it is not the case that young people only take inspiration from Western social media, nor that they always want to keep their communicative inventiveness hidden from view; some of them have been taken onto the streets in mass demonstrations.

### *Protest Placards*

The following observations concern the 2011–12 street protests against unfair elections, which I can discuss here because they have been extensively documented and studied (Breininger 2013; Arkhipova et al. 2014;

12 *ChVS* is the *kheit* acronym for "feeling of one's own importance" (*chuvstvo sobstvennoi vazhnosti*).

13 It is for this reason, the desire and ability to humiliate someone in a situation where respect would be expected, that Yemel'yanko (2021) identified *kheit* with *khamstvo*.

14 I am indebted to Tamiza Tudor for directing me to numerous examples of the creation of distinctive "languages" by which groups in Russian society are separating themselves. If one is *osob yazyk*, the deliberately obscure code of officials, most are the "secret languages" of youth, such as *solenyi yazyk* (salty language), *pesochnyi yazyk* (sandy language), and *kirpichnyi yazyk* (brick language). These work by regularly substituting certain consonants and adding vowels. In salty language, an *s* is added after every vowel and then the vowel is repeated, so *mama* becomes *masamasa*.

Akhmetova 2012). Hundreds of placards were held aloft. Unlike the 2020–1 pro-Navalny and anti-corruption protests, where there were few banners and those were printed, mainly with messages addressed to other demonstrators ("Don't be afraid, don't be silent"), in 2011–12 most banners were homemade, and many called out the authorities. They were extremely various, reflecting the heterogeneity of the crowd in occupation, ethnicity, age, and gender. They were noticeably literate, including quotations from Che Guavara, Vaclav Havel, Andrei Sakharov, and other icons of the left. They included accusations ("You stole our voice at the elections. We won't forget, we won't forgive"); allusions to symbolism ("White ribbon versus black belt");[15] insults ("Vova – *zhlob*!" [Putin's a slob!]); slogans ("Power to the People, Bear [*medved*] to the Circus," referring to Medvedev, the then president); exhortations ("Give us back our voice!"), and appeals to unity (‘"Ъ" – thank you for being with us!"). An unsmiling elderly woman using a walking-frame hung a placard round her neck that stated, "I would exchange Putin for Khodorkovsky" (the jailed oligarch).[16]

The most popular genre of placard spoke to the theme of temporality that has been central to this chapter: the derivation from the past of an allegorical precedent through which to designate a political stance. In this case, the immediate reference was to a recent event, a statement by Putin in 2011. Most of the slogans and appeals mentioned earlier were like shouting into the wind, since the linguistic forms did not invite response and, in any case, it was certain that the powers, while no doubt watching, would not reply to any messages addressed to them. This case was different. By taking Putin's own words and inserting themselves into the image-world he had conjured up, these placard-bearers were in a fable-like way venturing a dialogical stance with the president.

The placards in question referenced *banderlog*, the Monkey People,[17] from Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book*. This set of stories was translated several times into Russian and became the subject of a popular Soviet film, so they can be seen as widely shared childhood knowledge. In Kipling, the *banderlogi* appear as unruly outcasts who do not obey the Law of the Jungle. They have no speech of their own but use the stolen words they overhear when they listen and peep. They are a horde with no leaders. They boast and chatter and pretend they are a great people. They are evil, dirty, shameless. In Soviet Russia, the word *banderlog* came to mean an aggressive, uncultured, clamorous, and dull-witted person, and it was sometimes used for *churki* (uncouth "apes" from the

15 The white ribbon was the symbol of the protesters; Putin is well-known to have a black belt in judo.

16 See "Slogans of the Russian Movement for Fair Elections," accessed December 2021, http://slogans10dec.blogspot.com/2012/01/24122011-pavel-otdelnov.html.

17 *Banderlog* is from the Hindustani *bandar* (monkey) and *log* (people).

southern republics of the USSR) (Akhmetova 2012, 288–9). In Kipling's story, the *banderlogi* steal Mowgli and take him to their cave. Mowgli is rescued by the python Kaa, who invited the Monkey People by saying, "Come close to me," but then hypnotized them and subsequently ate them.

In December 2011, during the presidential elections, Putin engaged in one of his "conversations" with the people. He said:

> There are those, of course, who hold Russian passports but act in the interests of a foreign state and on foreign money. We will try to make contact with them, but that is often useless or impossible. What to say in this situation? You know what can be said in the end: "Come close to me, *banderlogs*." From childhood, I have always loved Kipling. (quoted in Arkhipova 2014, 131; my translation; see also Akhmetova 2012, 287)

Immediately after Putin's broadcast, internet commentary cast him in the role of Kaa and the demonstrators as *banderlogs*. The narrative now spiralled on its own course. Kaa, a positive character in Kipling, was transformed into a negative one and renamed Puu. And while Kaa was a python, Puu became a boa constrictor, enabling the association in both English and Russian between "constrictor" and the idea of a restrictive authoritarian government (Akhmetova 2021, 290). Some of the placards echoed Kipling's old pejorative idea ("Russia is not India, and we are not *banderlogs*"). But the great majority identified with alacrity with the subject position of the monkeys and took the boa as the enemy: "Unite, Banderlogs! Chase the beast from its lair!" Referencing the dire state of the law, one placard read: "Jungle Law is for boa constrictors, people have the rule of law and fair elections." Several placards expressed the idea: "You have called us, Great Puu? We have come!"

Once the Puu/boa ideologeme was established, invention was free to play with the etymological link between *udav* (boa constrictor) and *davit'* (to pressurize, bear down on, stifle). Allusions were made to the illustrations from another childhood favourite, Antoine de Saint- Exupéry's *The Little Prince*, of the boa devouring its spoils, or sitting with an elephant inside it: quotations were pasted up and one placard depicted Kaa/Puu with Russia inside its stomach. The *banderlog* identity was equally fertile; one placard read "Macaques take revenge," and another with a picture of a chimpanzee face mocked Soviet style "internationalist" slogans with "Ardent greeting to my African comrades." Kipling's jungle scenario can be seen as an imaginative childhood paradigm that was dormant until it was ignited by Putin, but it was powerful in ways the president almost certainly did not anticipate. In response to the image of the snake-mesmerizer, which had been reinforced by the way Putin had slowly uttered the phrase, "Come one step closer to me," raising his hands to the audience as a hypnotizer does (Akhmetova 2012, 289), one woman's placard

expressed a responsive subjectivity: "Their hypnosis is our terror (*strakh*)." Others waved challenge-banners: "Be afraid, the *banderlogs* have come!"[18]

## A Brief Conclusion

This chapter has shown that with the imposition of punitive measures against "free speech" after 2000, many Russians have turned, perhaps paradoxically, to the resources of language itself – to express controversial ideas, to take a stance in society, or simply to use language as a performative in battling against conformity. I have argued that these linguistic resources can only be understood temporally, both as regards the political limits of operation at a particular moment and the historical sources of people's moral-political convictions. This argument applies equally to particularistic ploys, like the resignification of the hard sign to mark rejection of the Soviet and acclamation of the late tsarist eras, as to more general practices, such as the battles over social status, respect, and government probity seen in accusations of *khamstvo*. I have tried to provide some indication of the enormous riches of language (seen broadly) in a highly literate country like Russia, where allusion, metaphor, allegory, and references to myth and literature are part of everyone's lived experience from childhood and are widely shared. Only the existence of these common resources enabled Aesopian language and the fable of the jungle to be effective, to join thousands of people in pointed address to their political masters. The mass arrests that followed the 2011–12 protests show the response of the "father who did not die." Even now, in a tragic era when mere hints of independent thought are smothered, there is no better conclusion than the words of the Russian editors of the journal *Ab Imperio* in 2013:

> After all, the condition of freedom is not the absence of restrictions themselves (every organized society is based on restrictions), but the refusal to accept the predetermined nature of one's acts or decisions. When the only positive content of public life is borrowed from the past (as in Russia today), the only path of emancipation becomes not the overcoming of restrictions, but the production of new meanings and emotional bonds of our own in society. (Gerasimov et al. 2013, 20)

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18 All references to placards in this and the previous paragraph are from Akhmetova (2012).

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