

The Bolshevik revolution required a new public discourse to communicate to a largely unsympathetic population, argues Michael Gorham, and his stimulating book pursues the process of creating and refining a language culture that could speak to and for the new revolutionary society. This sophisticated, theoretically informed, and clearly written study narrates the development of a coherent language of state from the 1920s into the 1930s, drawing on fiction, state documents, newspapers, language policy, and pedagogical practice to illustrate his argument.

The need to cultivate an authoritative language provided the basic challenge for the new regime. Linguists in the 1920s recognized that a communication gap had arisen due to the mix of bureaucratese, slang, acronyms, stump-compounds, and Marxist rhetoric in which different elements of the population tried to express their revolutionary goals. Gorham investigates four successive models for resolving this Babelian confusion. Initially, theorists and writers like Vladimir Maiakovskii advocated a revolutionary and innovative language that would empower common citizens, utilizing dynamic and creative forms to resist ossification. The task here, recognized by Leon Trotsky and others, was to raise the ability of the population to use this language. An alternative populist approach emerged alongside this one, which supported a language model that derived from the voice of the people, however “unrefined.” This language culture would allow workers and peasants to speak and write as revolutionaries without losing their verbal roots in the factory and village.

These revolutionary and populist models, however, could not reconcile the competing authorities of the state and the people. In attempting to speak to power, the people instead became “tongue-tied,” unable to express complex and abstract ideas of

power and ideology in their populist vernacular. Here and throughout the book, Gorham provides illuminating illustrations from a variety of writers—futurists, proletarian writers, and the new Soviet intelligentsia.

To replace this tower of Babel with a uniform authoritative language, a set of odd bedfellows offered as a remedy the return to a national model of public discourse grounded in the authority of the prerevolutionary Russian literary tradition: the “classics.” Language purists abroad (*émigré* Russians) and at home (Maksim Gor’kii) denounced the vulgarization of Bolshevik speech practice. The only way to unify the enormous multiethnic semiliterate population, argued Gor’kii, was to create and maintain a single national language. Educators readily embraced this new movement and so-called proletarian writers also began to emulate the voice and unobtrusive narrator of the nineteenth-century classics. The campaign resulted in replacing the charismatic but chaotic orally oriented discourse of the revolution with a more established written and canonic literary language.

The need remained, however, for authority to speak to the people in ways that could be understood and that would transmit the values of the new regime. A fourth model, the “canonization of the party-state,” emerged by the beginning of the 1930s, leading to a gradual homogenization of the language models introduced to that point. The primary models for authoritative writing became the works of Lenin and Stalin, and the preferred genre moved firmly from oratory to the written, particularly the newspaper, text. The use of this party-state language became the cue to membership in the polity: the classics gave the language solidity, Soviet ideology gave it revolutionary content. Citizens needed to develop “dual competence” in order to participate in all the activities

of the state, economy, and daily life. The emphasis now, argues Gorham, turned from revolutionary state-building to the maintenance of the state, a process he implies was a logical progression in the development of a stable revolutionary society. In a richly argued final chapter, Gorham illustrates the triumph of this party-state language by examining a series of texts, from Dmitrii Furmanov's *Chapaev* (1923) to the "production sketches" penned by thousands of worker and peasant correspondents. He also highlights the ascendance of the canonic language by examining the linguistic "failures" of Boris Pil'niak and Andrei Platonov, whose works challenged the presumed integrity and legitimacy of the new language.

The low level of literacy at the time of the revolution, Gorham argues, worked to the advantage of the language project. Personal gain as well as membership in the new polity depended on acquiring language and joining the canonic "speech community." By the 1930s, he says, incantation rather than innovation became the guiding linguistic principle. But far from representing merely a "great retreat" to a prerevolutionary realist literary canon, Soviet language culture represented a new and stable synthesis of revolutionary experiment, populist orality, a realist literary canon, and the ideological code of Marxism-Leninism.

This exemplary interdisciplinary work should be read by all historians who use the texts of this period as their "sources."

Diane P. Koenker

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign