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Concepts of the Word in Russian Traditional Culture¹

In these remarks on traditional Russian concepts of the nature of language, I am particularly concerned with such issues as who controls the word and language; with how deafness and dumbness (which, in traditional perceptions, signify not having access to language) are explained; with what the substance of the word is deemed to be, and how the word is constructed; with how communication is supposed to happen, and how people learn to communicate. The discussion focuses on words and language of a purposive, extraordinary kind. Spontaneous speech is analysed only in cases where the 'unintended' word is for whatever reason transformed into a word of a special, exceptional nature. I shall mostly be taking my examples from ethnographical material (descriptions of the relevant ritual procedures), and from folklore, but certain linguistic usages (e.g. proverbs) will be cited as well.

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Who Controls the Word?

According to beliefs held across Slavonic cultures, command of language is not a feature unique to human beings. Animals and even plants have their own languages akin to human language. For instance, the Gutsuls¹ think that animals not only understand what humans say, but speak like them too [Onishchuk 1909: 20]. Even if some particular creature has no tongue (and hence cannot speak), it can understand the language of other creatures and of humans (cf. the saying in Archangel province, '*The ant is a wise one; he understands all languages, but he has no tongue; that is why he is always silent, and usually listens intently*') [Ermolov 1901–1905, III: 412].

In the Biblical Apocrypha, the language of animals could once be understood by humans (Adam and Eve taught the creatures in the Garden of Eden to speak); but after the Fall, animals stopped speaking [Kolchin 1899: 50]. This motif constitutes the first instance of a tradition according to which the command of language was directly linked with the idea of the primal sin that had caused man's ancestors to be expelled from paradise. Later (as will be discussed below), this link between language and sinfulness would be one of the primary elements in concepts of the word and language. In the Apocryphal texts, the motif likewise has a continuation: on Christmas Night (Easter Night), or New Year's Eve, the animals once again talk among themselves in human language, and this language may be heard by human beings [Ivanov 1907: 64; Dragomanov 1876: 3; Gura 1997: 81]. But eavesdropping on animals' conversation is very dangerous, since they may foretell the death of their owners, and anyone who learns of his or her own death this way will either drop dead on the spot or be struck dumb. Beliefs of this kind were widespread in Ukraine, Bohemia, Poland, and Slovakia. However, according to Belorussian beliefs, a person who overhears animals talking will acquire secret knowledge that means he or she develops the powers of a wise man or woman [*Zemlyarobchy kalyandar* 1990: 292].² Plants also have the gift of speech, but they talk to each other only on St John's Eve.³ Thus, at the 'purest' times of the year, animals and plants regain their original capacity to speak and understand a single language, one shared with humans.

On the basis of material of this kind, it is possible to hypothesise a general set of associations between humans and animals according to the extent of their access to language, which may be schematised as follows:

¹ An ethnic group in Western Ukraine. [Editor].

² In the sense, a person capable of beneficial magic. [Editor].

³ i.e. Midsummer Night, 23 June. [Editor].

1. At one time, all God's living creatures — humans, animals, birds, and plants — could speak. Each different creature understood the others.

2. After human beings fell into a state of sin, they stopped being able to understand 'other languages'. Here one should add that texts explaining the origins of different kinds of animals, plants, and birds, represent these as humans who have been punished for offences of various kinds. The punishment consisted in the loss of human form, including the ability to speak — indeed, including primarily this ability.

3. Times when the gift of speech returns to animals, along with humans' ability to understand that speech, represent a return to the 'original' situation.

Birds in particular are gifted with 'polyglot' capacities, the ability to speak foreign languages. In riddles, what they utter is denoted as speech in German, Turkish, Tatar, and so on. Cf. the following (on the swallow): '*Little black awl-spindle*' // *Flew through the sky* // *Speaking in German* // *Talking in Turkish*' [Sadovnikov 1959: 189, №1657a]. It seems probable that ideas about birds' 'loquacity' explain various magical procedures used to combat dumbness, for example, the use of pounded *maggie* tongues as a remedy [Gura 1997: 567]. As a correlative, all actions against birds (for instance, causing them harm, destroying their nests and so on) were seen as likely to cause dumbness, deafness, the loss of the ability to absorb human language and react to it in the right way.

In folk tales, human beings get access to the language of plants, animals, and birds by tasting particular foods. I shall come back to the motif of attaining power over language with the help of (and by means of) food later on. A diametrically opposed motif invokes animals who, having eaten *svyachenoe* [blessed foods] at Easter acquire the gift of speech and begin talking to each other at midnight [Gura 1997: 81].

Deafness and Dumbness

Yet not all human beings are capable of speaking, in the sense of having the ability to make themselves understood in a familiar language, using readily comprehensible words. Anyone who did not have this ability, who spoke some different, incomprehensible language was assigned to the category of 'dumb' ('mute'). Moreover, the idea was that 'once' they had been able to speak (to speak 'like we do'), but that, having committed some misdeed, they were

¹ *Shilo-motovilo*: a metaphor for the bird's appearance, where the beak is the awl, and the spindle (forked piece of metal holding threads) the bird's forked tail. [Editor].

deprived of this ability. So, by legend, Gypsies, for instance, stopped being able to talk in a way people could understand after a Gypsy woman cut her tongue on a nail from Christ's cross that she had hidden in her mouth [Belova 1999: 414].

Infants were also looked on as 'dumb': indeed the word *nemchik* [little dumb one] was used for 'a baby, a child who cannot yet speak' [Fasmer 1971: 62, quoting Dobrovolsky]. Bad diction and stammering were also named as 'dumbness'. 'A babe makes a racket like a bell, it never lets up, but you can't make out a thing. It babbles words, but nothing good comes out of its little mouth. Eh, you nemtyr! [dumb cluck]. Your tongue ain't no good' [SRNG 1986: 88]. Inevitably, in turn dumbness became associated with silliness, stupidity — or to be more accurate, the word *nemoi* also had the meaning 'silly, stupid' [Fasmer 1971: 63].

The association with stupidity is even more characteristic in the case of deafness. Fasmer, for instance, considered that the word *glukhoi* 'may be related to *glupyi* [silly, stupid], because a person who cannot hear properly is often taken to be stupid' [Fasmer 1964: 417]. An example bearing out this suggestion is, 'He's little because he's a dimwit and a dimwit because he's little' [*Malyi, chto glupyi, a glupyi, chto malyi*].¹ Both the deaf person and the stupid person fail to react to words (or react to these in the wrong way). The absence of a correct reaction is also characteristic of the baby, who is considered to be both deaf and stupid, but who is named as stupid. It is worth observing that dialect evidence suggests that *glupost* [silliness, stupidity] is a term above all used to characterise children and whatever is in a state of maturation (for instance, the young of animals, plants, fruits), or exists in small quantities: 'Best finish ploughing, there's only a silly bit left [*tam glupost ostalas*]' [SRNG 1970: 212–3].² Other meanings of *glupost* such as 'weakness, incapacity for action, absence of energy', 'of low quality, primitive', are also linked — cf. the expression *glupyi stol* (meaning, 'badly made').

The main reason lying behind dumbness and deafness in adults was understood to be failure to carry out the prescriptions of ritual. One of the most widespread motifs here is punishment for sacrilege. As a matter of fact, sacrilege can have the effect not just of striking a person deaf or dumb, but also blind, or of 'turning them to stone', which means primarily the loss of speech. Cf.: 'They say that at the top of the cliff called the German *varyaka*³ were once sitting some Swedes who'd come to sack Solovki monastery, and they were having

¹ This is an untranslatable pun that depends on the double understanding of *malyi* as a) an adjectival noun meaning 'a young person' and b) an adjective meaning small. [Editor].

² Similarly, 'silly' is derived from *sely*, 'innocent', as used of young children. [Editor].

³ *varyaka*: a steep cliff (Archangel province dialect). [Editor].

their dinner and talking about the booty they'd get their hands on. One of those Swedes took a look at the monastery, all white in the midst of the sea, and he cried out: "Your beauty won't last!" At that very moment the speaker turned to stone, and all his companions turned to stone' [Severnye predaniya 1978: No. 140; cf. No. 103 etc.; Mifologicheskie rasskazy 1996: No. 412, etc.] The cited example is particularly interesting because the sacrilege in question took a verbal form.

Full or partial dumbness is often explained by an extended period spent by a person in some other domain. In the so-called 'mythological tales' [mifologicheskie bylichki] about people who had been 'led away by the wood demon',¹ such people lose the capacity to speak. This motif is especially characteristic in stories about children who have been cursed by their parents and thus banished to another world; when they return, talking to them is impossible, since 'they are not allowed to' [im ne veleno].² Cf. 'When he came out of the wood, his mother was not allowed to come near him, to say anything to him, for a whole month' [Mifologicheskie rasskazy 1996: No. 55]. Similar was the belief that dumbness and deafness could be caused by maleficium [porcha, 'spoiling'] carried out by sorcerers [Popov 1998: 31].³

Dumbness and deafness from birth are connected with the disruption by a child's parents of the ban on sexual intercourse on particular days, for example, holy days, days of remembrance,⁴ or fast days such as Fridays [Kabakova 2001: 206]. Cf. 'On baba eve [v noch na babu, i.e. the eve of a remembrance day] having conjugal relations is a bad idea, or a nemets [dumb person] will be born, or a cripple, or a freak — summat like that. That's where all the dumb ones came from' [Sedakova 1983: 258]. Disrupting the prohibitions on behaviour during pregnancy could have similar consequences: for instance, if the expecting mother taunted dumb people or people with speech impediments, her child would suffer from the same afflictions [Nikiforovsky 1897: 3]. In fact, there was a whole range of prohibitions on pregnant women's behaviour that could provoke dumbness or deafness if breached. For instance, she 'isn't supposed to sew on holy days, or she'll sew up the baby's eyes or mouth, and he'll be

¹ i.e. had wandered away, got lost for a while in the forest. [Editor].

² The literal sense of the Russian original is actually, 'they have not been ordered to'. [Editor].

³ In her work on deafness and dumbness in traditional culture, Olga Boitsova also identifies other causes for these afflictions, for example, eavesdropping on a conversation indoors through the wall of the house (cf. the motif of eavesdropping on 'conversations' between domestic animals); making noise at untoward times; disrupting the rules of proper attire, and so on [Boitsova 2004].

⁴ Certain such days, also known as 'parents' days', are fixed in the calendar of popular Orthodoxy, for instance Holy Thursday and Holy Saturday. [Editor].

born blind or dumb' [Balov 1999: 56]. The worry over the two main channels of communication between the human being and the external world is indicative. Just as significant is the fact that the range of prescriptions and prohibitions included a more general rule related to the child's cognitive capacities: the pregnant woman must not put a crust of bread inside her bodice, or the child would grow up *'ignorant'* [Balov 1999: 56].¹

On the subject of dumbness from birth, it is worth citing the widely represented subject of the so-called *podmenyshi* (changelings, children who were exchanged for the real baby by evil spirits during the first forty days after the birth). Changeling children cannot speak: they just bawl and demand food all the time, but they can never get enough (see e.g. [*Predaniya i bylichki* 1997: No. 104, No. 105]). Their incapacity to speak is explained by the fact that they are not really human at all, though outwardly resembling the children they were exchanged for. According to the same principle, it follows that unclean spirits cannot talk 'like people do'. As a matter of fact, there is some evidence that such spirits were credited with the capacity to speak, but their manner of doing so was different from that of human beings: they were either credited with extraordinary rhetorical powers (particularly, the capacity to speak in rhyme), or extreme inarticulacy (they were able only to repeat constantly the same string of words) [Vinogradova 1999: 179–99].²

Deafness and dumbness, then, were seen as divine punishment. This perception of things not only explains the fact that it was not always customary to provide treatment for these conditions,³ but also the attitudes of 'normal' people to those afflicted. At the same time, deaf and dumb individuals inspired reactions that were in significant ways different. Deafness was uniformly associated with stupidity (and old age). But dumbness was not held to affect understanding; a dumb person was by no means considered stupid. He or she did have access to a language, but a language different from that of ordinary people. If deafness was associated with old age, then dumbness was linked with babyhood (on the belief that babies were endowed with special knowledge, see below). Dumb people could understand everything, though they never spoke, but

¹ 'Putting a piece of bread inside one's bodice' meant hiding it, indeed stealing it; punishment for this crime would be meted out on the woman's unborn child, rather than on her directly.

² On the use of incomprehensible or odd, 'marked', language by unclean spirits, see also [Uspensky 1984].

³ In places where people did make efforts to cure deafness, the main method used was making a show of piercing holes in the ears in order to open up a path for sounds to travel down (see e.g. [Popov 1998: 78]. [For a late nineteenth-century welfare campaigner's attestation of this attitude in the general population, see M. V. Bogdanov-Berezovsky. *Polozhenie glukhonemykh v Rossii* [The Condition of Deaf-Mutes in Russia]. St Petersburg, 1901]. [Editor].

deaf people understood nothing, though they could speak. The distinction was significant, and the attitudes to each group of people differed in correspondence with it.¹

Both deaf people and dumb people were viewed as woebegone and wretched; it was customary to extend pity to them, as it was to cripples, but at the same time, attitudes to the dumb were more sympathetic [Boitsova 2004: 13]. The attitude to deaf-mutes was once again specific. They were considered cripples in the full sense, but at the same time, precisely because language was totally inaccessible to them, they were seen as sinless. *I glukh i nem — grekha ne vem* [A deaf and dumb person knows no sin], was the saying.²

That concludes my brief survey of the capacity for language; I now move on to the subject of the first stages of the emergence of language.

The Mystery of Birth

The birth of a child was surrounded by silence. Or to put it more accurately, silence was the natural and inevitable background for the birth of humans themselves, and of the word. There was an almost universal attempt to prevent even close relations knowing about a forthcoming birth [Lebedev 1853: 183; Vinogradov 1915: 359, etc.] The reason given was, *'The more people are in the know, the harder a birth is'* [Uspensky 1895: 22]. But some evidence suggests that it was in fact less knowledge of the birth that counted than the manifestation, the verbalisation, of such knowledge.³ It was in the word itself that danger lay, and it was above all the knowledge of children and unmarried girls (which is to say, those who had yet to give birth) that was fraught with problems, as is made clear by statements along the lines, *'The grown-ups knew, but they said nothing'* [Vlaskina 2001: 64]. Among the Don Cossacks, even a woman's own mother was not supposed to know, or otherwise the birth would be painful [Ibid.].

¹ It is interesting to reflect whether the very distinguished contribution made by Russian specialists to therapy for deaf-mutes in the twentieth century, including extensive teaching of sign language, is at any level a reflection of the positive side of this attitude; on the other hand, the persecution of members of deaf and dumb associations in Leningrad in 1937 (when there were mass arrests on charges of spying for the Germans) might derive from the negative side. [Editor].

² On the link of sin and language, see further below.

³ A situation when everyone knows, but nobody says anything, can be explained by widely differing circumstances. There are always spheres in any culture to which the access of language is problematic. In most European cultures till very recently, sexual relations were one such sphere. The capacity of language to seep into different areas also varies. Originally, linguistic taboos were connected with ritual prohibitions (take, for example, the ban on using the names of unclean spirits, as mentioned by Zelenin [1930: 90]). In time, prohibitions of this kind 'descended' and became expressed in the idea and behaviour systems relating to gentility, hygiene, etc.

Among the Belorussians, *'if a woman from outside the family [storonnyaya zhenshchina] came into the house of the rodikha [woman giving birth], and only then found out what was happening, then she would not utter a word, but "grab a spoon and have some grub"'*¹ [*khapait' lozhku i es' stravu*] *if there happened to be any to hand, or if there were not, she would eat a piece of bread. Having swallowed a couple of bites, she leaves the house hurriedly, "keeping mum" [movchikom]*'. This is done so that the child should start speaking quickly [Nikiforovsky 1897: 15]. Here we encounter the motif of 'swallowing knowledge' (the reason why the woman visitor urgently needed food was so that she could swallow the news along with it). I will discuss this theme in more depth later on. The immediate point of interest here is that the woman does all this in *silence* and leaves in *silence* so that *'the child should start speaking more quickly'*. This emphasises that silence is essential pre-condition of speech.

The Ritual of 'Shouting Out' a Child

In a range of different Russian provinces, a ritual for bringing to life a child who had been born apparently lifeless has been recorded. The belief was that the child could be revived if the names of its parents were shouted out. For example, in Siberia, if a newborn child did not manifest any signs of life, the father *'banged the bottom of a frying-pan with a stick and barked out the name of the child's mother, if it was a girl, or his own, if it was a boy'* [Vinogradov 1915: 366]. In a recent article, Dmitry Baranov cites a whole range of comparable evidence relating to the Ryazan, Orel, Penza and other provinces, taken from the archive of the Tenishev Bureau.² In Baranov's view:

this practice functions as a naming ritual enacted by the child and addressed to the parents,³ on the one hand, and as a way of making the child acquainted with its parents (sometimes in the face of death, since it was possible the child might not survive) on the other. Hence, the sounding out (for which read, recognition) of the parents' names implants the child into a system of blood relationships and points to its position in the kinship situation, and thus answers the question, 'Who am I? Knowledge of the answer to this question [...] is an

¹ *strava*: food when served on the table. [Editor].

² An enormous repository of data on peasant life in late nineteenth-century Russia collected by literate informants living in the countryside, and submitted to the archive organised by V. N. Tenishev in St Petersburg. It constitutes one of the most important sources of primary data for historians of the Russian peasantry and of folk beliefs and practices. A substantial publication of material from the archive is B. M. Firsov and I. G. Kiseleva. *Byt velikorusskikh krest'yan-zemlepahtsev: Opisanie materialov etnograficheskogo byuro knyazya V. N. Tenisheva (na primere Vladimirskoi gubernii)*. St Petersburg, 1993. [Editor].

³ i.e., with the child itself conferring a name for the benefit of its parents. [Editor].

effective way of establishing a child's place in the human world [Baranov 1999: 77].¹

We can say, too, that in the given context the word is the thread that binds the child to living people and gives him or her the chance of a further life among words.

'Unknotting the Tongue'

According to traditional Russian folk beliefs, a child was born with its hands, legs, and tongue 'tied up', and its eyes and ears 'closed'. During the first six to seven years of life, 'unknotting' and 'opening' took place. In addition, it was believed that the ability to see, hear, walk and speak did not appear 'of itself', as a natural result of the child's biological development, but as a consequence of the execution of certain essential ritual procedures and the performance of special rites.

For instance, in Western Russia and Belorussia (as well as many other places) it was widely believed that:

even in the mother's womb the legs of every baby are tied together by invisible chains [...] With some children, these chains are very strong, and then the child will not walk for a long time. In such a case, it is considered essential to "cut through the chains and set free" the child. A "bundle of yarn" is tied to the child's head, and the mother — without using a spindle — spins as long and thick a thread as she can, making a cocoon to swaddle the child in completely, then, having raised the child up "on his hind legs", she cuts through the part of the cocoon between its legs with a single blow of the knife [Nikiforovsky 1897: 29].

There were also special rituals for 'opening' the eyes and the ears, as a result of which the child 'acquired' the ability to see and hear. Similar beliefs were connected with the tongue and language acquisition. It was thought that a child could not speak because its tongue was 'tied up'. Hence, in the Lake Onega region,² for instance, once a child had spoken its first words, scissors would be clicked three times next to a child's mouth, thus 'freeing' his or her mouth from the unseen threads binding it [Loginov 1993: 86].

It was much more common, though, for a child's own hair to be understood as the threads binding its tongue. This was probably the reason for the general rule forbidding cutting a child's hair till it was a year old, or had spoken its first words.

¹ On naming as a way of introducing the child into a system of blood relationships, cf. also the practice of giving names that were already held by another family member (parents, grandparents, sometimes even older siblings). [Editor].

² An area about 200 miles north-east of St Petersburg which is a stronghold of traditional culture. [Editor].

Children less than a year old do not have their hair cut, '*so as not to cut off the tongue*', that is, so they will not be stopped from speaking. Their hair is cut only when they are able to say at least a few words [Mazalova 2001: 118; cf. Divilkovsky 1915: 599; Zelenin 1991: 331; Dobrovolskaya 2001: 102, etc.].¹

In accordance with such beliefs, the ritual of the first cutting of the hair carried the meaning (among others) of the 'unknotting of the tongue' [Baiburin 1991: 260–2].

In popular belief, hair was connected not only with the gift of speech, but also with intellectual activity — ² as in the saying, '*Hair is not cut till a year old, or else the brain will get shrink*' [Mazalova 2001: 118]. It is significant, for instance, that in Polesye³ '*parents might keep [the child's first cut locks of hair] in the same way they did the birth-cord, and give them to the child to untangle when he was already able to think and reason*' [Kabakova 2001: 130]. The ritual of 'unknotting the mind' was the culminating ritual in a whole series of such 'unknottings' [Baiburin 1995]. It took place somewhat later, at the age of five to seven: the child was supposed to unknot the umbilical cord, which had been knotted during his or her birth. It was believed that if the child was able to manage this, then it would be able to unchain its own mind. Materials from the Polesye suggest that the first locks of hair were sometimes also used alongside the umbilical cord.

The acquisition of the gift of speech signified the loss of knowledge specific to children. Up to this point, children were considered angelic beings who *knew all*, but *might not speak*. Until they begin using (human) language, children can understand angelic speech. Therefore, if one observes an infant closely, one can foretell the future, because such tiny children express God's power [Serzhputouski 1998: 184].⁴ Such concepts of the child's nature underlie the many beliefs about the significance of children's behaviour as a way of predicting climatic conditions, for instance: '*If a little child is playing on thawed patches of snow and lies belly-down on the earth, spring will be warm and early*' [Yakovlev 1906: 172].

¹ It is intriguing that in Olonetsk Province, for instance, a boy's hair would be cut '*only when he laughed for the first time*' [Mikhailovsky 1925: 624]. That is, laughter was given the same value as language.

² And also with memory. In Vyatsk Province it was considered that '*a dream will be remembered until a dreamer first shakes out his or her hair*' [Gagen-Torn 1933: 82]. Compare the role of hair in the domains of divination and prophecy.

³ An area on the borders of Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia. [Editor].

⁴ '*Children know all, for they are angels of God. But they may not speak of this, or else we might know the will of God and what will happen to us in the future. A child does nothing of its own volition, he is in God's power*' [Serzhputouski 1998: 184].

Children who cannot speak are not capable of sin. The very concept of sin is applicable only to those who have access to language (and laughter). What is more, language can be understood as the embodiment of sin. Hence, it was customary to say of a child that could not speak (as of deaf-mutes): *'He/she knows no sin.'* Acquiring linguistic competence forces children out of the 'angelic order', they cease being bearers of God's will. The word opens the way to another form of knowledge, a sinful one.

Children's knowledge needs no words. Indeed, it appears to be non-verbal on principle, being expressed in other ways, most particularly through gesture and behaviour. Adult knowledge, on the other hand, has to be expressed through language; it demands unnatural, artificial means of expression, such as words, to be articulated. For this reason, knowledge, and especially special, occult knowledge, is sinful and must be purged before death: a person has to return to his or her original, 'angelic', condition. This is probably the reason for the existence of a special ritual of transmission of occult knowledge, with its own particular verbal forms, which the holder of such knowledge must undergo before going into the next world. So far as the ordinary person is concerned, purification takes place in the form of the last confession, during which all sins are supposed to vanish with the final words uttered. What is more, the person being confessed is supposed not only to stop speaking, but to stop hearing what others say as well, that is to stop comprehending language.

In this regard, it is also highly significant that, according to folk belief, the deceased stops being able to hear and understand only after the funeral rite [*otpevanie*] has taken place [Smirnov 1920: 35]. As in other instances (for example *otpetye volosy*, *dead and buried hair* in the case of women) the funeral rite marks the point of no return (compare the many common figures of speech such as *'a dead and buried idiot'* [*otpetyi durak*]¹ — i.e. a hopeless, complete and utter, idiot.

Delays in the development of language skills were often explained by the fact that the corresponding prohibitions and prescriptions had been violated. Alongside the prohibition on cutting hair (and nails) such prohibitions included that on feeding fish and fish soup to a child before it had started speaking, or else it would be *'dumb as a fish'* [Serzhputouski 1998: 184]. There was a widespread ban on pregnant women sewing on Sundays and saints' days — *'you'll sew up the child's mouth'* (see e.g. [Stefanov 1888: 160]). The lexicogra-

¹ *Otpevanie* refers to the funeral rite but also to the marriage service, alike perceived as once-and-for all threshold rituals (with no prospect of return to the former state). Hence the virgin/bride distinction mentioned here, as well as the figure of speech *otpetyi durak*. [Editor].

pher V. Dal¹ cites the following widespread prohibition: *'Infants must be stopped from kissing, or they will be dumb'* [Dal 1955: 332]. Indeed, the kiss is generally understood as one main way of 'sealing the lips'.

If a child did not learn to speak for a long time, the most common response was to take him or her up a bell-tower. For instance, among the Russians living in Karelia, the following custom was current:

If a child of ours takes a while to speak, then we put him in the bell tower under the big bell, and the bell-ringer rings the bell:

Ring-ring-ring

I say to you, little thing:

As loud as this bell is rung

Shall you speak, little one!

And the child is passed once, twice, fifteen times under that bell.

[*Russkie zagovory Karelii* 2000: 62].

The meaning of this rite is transparent: the sound of the bell is associated with the voice of God.

In order for the gift of speech to be acquired, other means might be employed as well. In the Lake Onega region, a splinter-light² would be broken over the head of a child, or else a loaf of bread baked specially for the purpose [Loginov 1993: 86]. In Polesye, they would cut up in the child's presence either a so-called 'overlook' (*zabytnyi*), i.e. a loaf that had been forgotten in the oven, or else a piece of bread that had been lying round on a path or road [Kabakova 2001: 129; Serzhputouski 1998: 184]. Actions of this kind were part of a single organic complex of methods required to 'open up speech'.

More interesting are the cases where a child was given something to eat or drink in order to 'free up the tongue' — the food or drink concerned had to be something beyond everyday diet. So, in the Belorussian part of Polesye a child would be made to eat bread or some other foodstuff found on the road [Serzhputouski 1998: 184]. Data from other parts of the Slavonic world also accord with this. For instance, in Moravia, if a child does not begin speaking for a long time, everyone in the household washes their hands in the same water, and a special bread is baked with the water — the *kravaiche* [a small round loaf], and the child is given it to nibble on three sides, and then the child, the *kravaiche* and all the spoons in the house are bundled up in a sack and someone from the household takes the sack round the outside of the house three times [Pashkova 1993: 67]. At

¹ Author of the most famous nineteenth-century dialect dictionary, *A Defining Dictionary of the Living Great Russian Language* (the edition cited was originally published in 1880–1882) [Trans.]

² Which is to say, a long piece of wood placed in a holder and lit at one end to act as a primitive form of illumination. [Editor].

Croatian christenings, the godfather would portion out the ritual loaf to those attending with the words, *'Eat the belly-button, then the child will speak more quickly'* [Pankova 1993: 64].

What all these customs and beliefs point to is that the word had an ambiguous nature. On the one hand, the word is an aural phenomenon, manifesting itself through sound. On the other hand, it has its origin in the mouth, is created by the tongue and thus is connected with food. The acquisition of the gift of speech can come about both through the ears and through the mouth. This probably explains the double strategy in cases where the child takes a long time to begin speaking. The child's condition can be helped by special sounds (e.g. church bells) but also by special foods. The second association is very significant for folk perceptions of the nature of language, of communication, and of language acquisition.

Communication

If one judges by texts such as spells, the word is communicated not only or indeed mainly by acoustic means. The words of a spell are usually directed at some object which functions as a kind of 'means of transport' for the transmission of the word to where it is finally aimed (i.e. to the ultimate addressee). The following examples are taken from Maikov's¹ collection of Great Russian incantations:

No. 1. 'To be spoken over a piece of gingerbread which is then given to the beloved girl.'

No. 3. 'Spoken over bread, wine and so on, which is then given to the person that the spell is being put on, or spoken over his tracks in the ground.'

No. 8 'Spoken over food and drink which is then given to the person that the spell is being put on, or spoken over his tracks in the ground.'

No. 10 'Spoken over food and drink which is then given to the person that the spell is being put on, or spoken over his tracks in the ground.'

No. 18 'Recited before sunrise at dawn above food of some kind which is then given to the maiden in question.'

No. 19 'Recited over a drink that is then given to the person intended.'

No. 22 'The young man catches and kills a pigeon, cuts the fat out of the bird, makes a dough from the fat, bakes a little loaf or bun and so on out of it, and then gives it to his beloved, saying...'

No. 28 'Spoken over a sour apple; while you speak the first twelve words,

¹ L. Maikov's collection of spells and incantations, first published in 1869, is still the fullest available anthology of such materials. [Editor].

stick your knife into the apple; wherever there is a full stop in the written text, stick your knife in, and say this on the dot of midnight.'

Instructions of this kind can be proliferated endlessly. They signify that words (or the words of spells, at any rate) are least of all intended for the ears. It is significant that the words of spells are whispered or muttered, or uttered in a deliberately incomprehensible way even if the ultimate addressee is standing right beside the person saying the spell.¹ For example, when a sick person is being treated, he is not addressed directly, but a spell is spoken over some object which the sick person is then given. Whichever way, the word enters the body, but not necessarily through the ears. An exceptional kind of word needs to travel along exceptional routes.

Language Acquisition

Even from the limited evidence of the contexts discussed above, it is evident that the most widespread method of acquiring language is through swallowing (drinking), i.e. absorption of the word in the most literal sense. In this way, a person acquires knowledge and skill by mouth. According to popular Russian perceptions, then, the acquisition of knowledge was a physiological process whose nearest analogue was the ingestion of food and drink. Indicative in this regard is the ritual of initiating little girls into spinning, as practised among the Russians and Belorussians. The first thread that the girl had managed to spin by herself was burned, the ash was dissolved in water, and the girl was made to drink it — the idea being that otherwise she would never learn how to spin. One might compare the folk tales in which the hero, deliberately or through ignorance, eats or drinks something (for instance, 'fish' soup actually prepared from snakes) and is suddenly able to understand the language of plants, trees, or animals (see above). Such concepts, evidently, also underlie the prohibition found in folk tales (and not only there) upon eating and drinking anything when one is in a strange place. Those who ingest alien food get to know things proper to an alien world, and forget what is proper to their own (as in, '*don't drink that water, brother, or you'll turn into a little goat*').

You can even swallow your own thoughts. In this connection, typical is the observation of a person carrying out a spell: '*She ate what she was thinking, she ate it all by herself*' [Rusские zagovory Karelii 2001: No. 108]. After the initiation rite as a sorcerer, the sorcerer carrying out the initiation takes the person being initiated into a bath-house, where he summons up a frog. '*Up jumps that leaper, and you have to swallow that leaper right down*' [Mazalova 1977: 26]. In other

¹ See [Radenkovich 1999: 201–3] on the special types of performance of spells among the Eastern Slavs.

words, so as to acquire knowledge of sorcery, ‘otherworldly’ knowledge, you have to eat something symbolising the other-worldly domain (in this case, a frog).

Comparably, in riddles the book is often evoked by culinary terminology:

*One person boiled it up,
Another person poured it out,
No matter how much you eat,
There'll be enough left over for everyone else*
[Sadovnikov 1959: No. 2236].¹

One might compare also the following riddle about ‘human language’: *‘What is sweeter, what more bitter?’* [Ibid.: No. 2438]. Words — like books — are gobbled down, digested, tasted.²

Evidently, the semiotic field to do with food and eating was considered especially suited to the depiction of concepts of knowledge and language in popular culture.

If one continues the analysis of spells, then it emerges that language can also be acquired by tactile means. The following examples are also taken from Maikov’s collection:

No. 23. The man should get up a good sweat, then wipe himself down with a handkerchief, then wipe his beloved down with the same handkerchief, meanwhile muttering to himself..

No. 25. Spit into your hand and recite the spell over the spit, then secretly tap the girl or woman over the heart; or recite the spell over food or drink and get her to drink or eat it.

No. 26. Say this three times over a new needle never yet used for sewing, and then over a stout thread put through the eye of the needle; having uttered the spell, pull the needle and thread through a woman’s dress, over the heart, from the front or from behind.

The same method of procedure is evident in the custom, current for several centuries in Russia, of asking a priest to supply a name for a newborn and to recite a prayer ‘into a hat’. Here too physical contact was needed for the power of the word to be effective. The priest would pronounce the name and recite the prayer into the hat of the father or godfather who had come to find out the name; the latter would immediately put on the hat and return, taking care to keep its ‘contents’ from dispersal. Then the hat would be shaken out

¹ lit.: for any other *artel*, i.e. communal living and eating facilities shared by workers pooling resources. [Editor].

² It is hard to capture this in English, but common phrases such as ‘to swallow something whole’, ‘to eat one’s words’, ‘to eat humble pie’, ‘to devour a book’, have the same idea behind them. [Editor].

over the newborn, or put on his or her head, so that what the priest had said was sure to reach the addressee. This was also the way in which prayers were carried to sick people in villages far from a church. The practice, though regularly denounced by the church authorities, continued in force into the twentieth century [Uspensky 1982: 172–3].

The impression created is that people were constantly trying to ‘tame’ the word, to make it accessible to concrete forms of perception. One might compare the formulaic opening of spells: *‘May my words be firm, strong, lasting...’* A major shift in perceptions came with the invention of writing and the capacity to *see* the word and hence to do something with it — to correct it, divide it into parts, to mould it, and to make different patterns with it. This theme needs detailed consideration in its own right. I will observe in passing, however, that this opens up the possibility of a play not only *on* words, but also *with* words, with separate sections of the word — as for instance in riddles of the following kind:

*Boris has it in the front,
Gleb has it behind,
A girl doesn't have it till she marries,
A bride has it always and always.*

[Answer: the letter B]

[Sadovnikov 1959: No. 2270].

It is significant here, however, that the visible word is absorbed in the same way as the ordinary kind — it is swallowed. And this applies not only to illiterate peasants, who were given to screwing up prescriptions issued by the doctor and swallowing them. On the contrary: many written ‘instructions’ about how to use spells and prayers tell the reader first to write the spell or prayer out, and then to swallow it down. Very widely disseminated in the Russian North, for instance, was ‘The Prayer of Panfuty’, which was used in order to cure a fever. This prayer was supposed to be written out, and then the sheet of paper with the prayer written on it was supposed to be tied to the neck of the sick person, and then *‘the piece of paper is to be torn up into the separate words, and each word dipped in this water, and the sick person is to be given to eat the paper, and then to follow it down with a draught of holy water...’* [Russkie zagovory Karelii 2001: No. 206].

Interestingly, this was the treatment for fever all over Russia, independent of region. For instance, in Saratov Province,

believing that fever is afraid of crabs, they write on a scrap of paper the words ‘crab semoc’ (that is, comes written backwards), they tear those words dreadful to the fever into pieces, letter by letter, and give the invalid a single letter to eat each morning with some bread on an empty stomach [Zelenin 1914–1916: 1244].

In Vologda Province, a person beset with fever would be given water to drink that had been used to rinse a bell,¹ or they write out the first chapter of *St John's Gospel* on a piece of paper, they carry round this piece of paper on a cross wrapped round their baptismal cross for six weeks, then they burn it and swallow down the ash.

According to another comparable method:

They write the first and last letters of every word of the prayer that begins with the words, 'Which unto endless ages and all times',² and they give this piece of paper to the invalid to eat [Ivanitsky 1890: 114].

I want to end with a few words about the connection of the word with breathing and the soul.³ Like the word, the soul departs from man with the help of breath. Or more accurately, breath is what one might term the means and facilitator of the word. Analogies between the soul and the word, founded on the idea that breath 'substantiates' both, are ubiquitous. For instance, it is believed that the soul, like the word, cannot be seen, but it can be heard (through knocking on the window, footsteps in the house etc. [Tolstaya 1999: 165]. The fact that both the soul and the word are audible goes a long way towards explaining the peculiar status of the voice in popular beliefs. For example, if a wood demon manages to take possession of a person's voice, it strips him or her of their earthly powers and they die. The Belorussians believed that when a person was dreaming their soul would '*emerge from their mouth in the form of an immensely long ribbon, with one end inside the person and the other who knows where*' [Bogdanovich 1895: 48]. One thinks involuntarily of the tradition in the visual arts of showing a word or group of words emerging from a person's lips in the form of exactly such a ribbon, which in Russia begins with illustrations in medieval manuscripts, and continues through popular prints and right up to comic strips.

The relationship between the word and the soul is developed in a different way in folklore from the way that it is developed in literature, of course. All the same, it is significant that in late folkloric tradition, words may be properly comprehended only by the soul: '*It is not the eyes that see, but the person; it is not the ear that hears, but the soul.*' [Dal 1984: 248]. And on the other hand, the word is where the soul and the body are united, and it is in the word where they experience true unity.

¹ It was believed that rinsing an object (e.g. a bell, an icon) in water would transfer the essence of the object into the water; anything dipped in the water was also having contact with the icon, bell, etc. [Trans.]

² A prayer asking for God's protection in illness and affliction: '*Cleanse our bodies from sickness, evils and distress.*' [Trans.]

³ The two words are etymologically connected in Russian — *dykhanie, dusha*: cf. *anima*. [Editor].

Conclusion

In Russian folk tradition language (and most particularly language in one particular sense, the language of magic) was subject to a high degree of reification. The word existed not only as an aural phenomenon, but as a visual and tactile one: it could even be swallowed. What is more, swallowing the word was held to be the procedure that made it most effective, most easily absorbed by the person for whom it was intended. By entering a person, the word began to act upon him or her, to influence him or her in the most immediate way. There is almost no effective defence against language of this kind, which is why this method of communication and ‘taking possession’ is used first and foremost in spells, which are designed to achieve practical effects by linguistic means alone.

It is fair to assume that this archaic link of the word and eating is the basis for the established parallel between the verbal and culinary arts in Russian tradition (and not only in Russian tradition).

* * *

In this short article, I have been able to do no more than touch on a few subjects connected with the concept of the word in traditional Russian culture. It would, of course, be possible to proliferate almost endlessly. For instance, there was a widespread idea that each person was granted, at his or her birth, a limited store of words that he or she exhausted over the course of his or her life. There is a link here with the high value put on silence (*‘silence is golden’*), and with the idea that one should be economical with language (*‘a word is not a bird, once it flies off you’ll never catch it’*); one could mention other particularities of the relationship between language and utterance too. But I think that at this point I have exhausted my word-store, and your patience.

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¹ The term *inorodets* referred to a citizen of the Russian Empire who was not ethnically Russian and not a Christian believer. See John Slocum, 'Who, and When, Were the *Inorodtsy*? The Evolution of the Category of "Aliens" in Imperial Russia' // *Russian Review*. 1998. Vol. 57. No. 2. Pp. 173–90.

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