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Dangerous Words: Taboos, Evasions, and Silence in Soviet Russia¹

This paper concerns the dangers in Soviet Russia of what is apparently most close and familiar, one's own language. It will discuss not so much *what* is talked or written about (the signified) as with the words themselves (the signifier). Therefore the intention is not to provide an overall account of a political-discursive formation, but the more modest one of exploring what it was like for Soviet people to operate linguistically on dangerous ground. Because I am interested in how individuals perceived the social situations in which they said or wrote, I draw on descriptions of particular incidents, and especially on one extraordinarily perceptive memoir, that of Alla Andreeva [1998].

All language, even for a monolingual person, is '*not my own*' [Derrida 1998: 2]. We can understand this to mean that when we say something, it has to be said in a common language whose originator is not ourselves. By extension, Der-

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rida's statement implies that once something is said or written it takes on a social life of its own. It is this second point that I would like to explore, if only because people tend to be more aware of it and comment on it themselves. For example, the dissident Anatoly Marchenko remembers submitting his dangerous manuscript *My Testimony* for publication. It would take unknown routes, he speculated. Where would it be in a month? And would people be harmed by it along the way? [Marchenko 1989: 85–90].

Hesitation about how to say something, and fear of the tortuous trajectories of linguistic products as they pass among people, are common to all societies, but there are reasons for the particular significance of these phenomena in the Soviet case. The most obvious would seem to be the fact of political repression, especially in the Stalinist period, when saying words that denoted an ideologically condemned signified, such as religion, was enough to arouse suspicion that the speaker was engaging in anti-Soviet agitation.¹ But, thinking about it, is there not something remarkable about this culpability of the word? In this article I attempt to investigate this question further, and suggest that three closely interrelated factors weighed upon the speech acts of ordinary Soviet people.

First is the well-known fact that the social life of the Russian language was not left to meander according to its own devices, but was regulated by express political policy. Guseinov has pointed out the seminal consequence of the linguistic reform of 1918. This seemingly relatively insignificant alteration of Russian orthography not only estranged Soviet generations from the very appearance on the page of classical literature, religious texts and other Slavic languages: more important, the reform was the '*realisation of the possibility of fundamental interference in the very history of language*' [Guseinov 1989: 66]. A situation was created whereby Russian speakers were to consider themselves '*liberated*' from old and complex incorrect (or 'lying') forms and turned towards new, simple and truthful forms [Guseinov 1989: 66]. This impression of transparency was to be created within the substance of language itself. The reform took place in a historical context when the Symbolists and the Futurists had already proposed elaborate visionary schemes to create a democratic and universal language of the future. The theories of Blok and Bely drew extensively on the non-rational power of magical language to synthesise intuitive understanding with logical thought

¹ For example, Alla Andreeva, who was a Christian, writes about the 1930s: '*In the institute people didn't speak about this [religion] at all. In those days everything much was simpler than it is today. Society was divided into atheists, some of whom spoke more loudly and others more quietly, and believers, who were silent, because it was impossible to speak — the very acknowledgement of religiosity or the sign of the cross could be interpreted as anti-Soviet agitation and be subject to repression*' [Andreeva 1998: 90].

and were intended to transform the whole of life [Gutman 1997: 228–32]. As Gutman has argued [1997: 239], such searches for a fusion of poetics with epistemology and the teleology of history were abruptly taken over by the Bolshevik revolution, which installed Marxism as the comprehensive doctrine that would both envisage and produce the dreamed of future. To the new orthography were immediately added other wider changes in language, the introduction of new vocabularies, verbal formulas, and naming practices. As Oushakine puts it [2000: 993], the new political culture was accompanied by the establishment of a ‘*verbally constituted consciousness*’ [Voloshinov 1998 [1929]: 15], which was framed by historically specific limits and forms of the sayable.

At times, Oushakine suggests, changes in discursive fields and changes of ‘*verbally constituted consciousness*’ might be more telling, so to speak, than political changes themselves [2000: 993]. Aleksei Yurchak has argued that the Soviet era can be divided into three periods in respect of language [Yurchak 2003]. The revolutionary decade of the 20s, in which it was established that the Party had the duty and right to establish linguistic norms, was succeeded by the Stalin era, when the great *vozhhd* [leader] himself became the supreme arbitrator. Stalin pronounced not only on the approved vocabulary but also on the very nature of language [Gutman 1997: 240; Yurchak 2003: 488]. Subsequently, during Brezhnev times, the official language became a matter of standardised copying and reproducing ‘hegemonic’ conventional forms [Yurchak 2003: 490–91]. Meanwhile, the people who partially or completely identified their lives with the models proposed by the Party became much fewer, and irony or disrespect with regard to the official language became widespread [Halfin 2002: 406; Yurchak 2003]. Such ironic usages were no longer so sharply dangerous in a political sense, and the examples used in this chapter are therefore drawn mostly from ‘high Socialist times’ (early 1930s to late 1950s). Nevertheless, for the purposes of this article we can see the Soviet era as a single entity in one respect. For during this entire time it was the case that there was a ‘correct’ language referring to a broad ideology, and this language was established by political fiat.

‘Correct’ implies the presence of ‘incorrect’. What was ‘incorrect’ was the plethora of everyday slang, jargons, and curses in everyday use. These were ‘eclipsed’, in part because the official language was essentially a written language, and also because such oral forms were declared to emanate from the alien, decayed, ‘enemy’ or criminal classes that were excluded from properly Soviet society. ‘*The person who speaks thieves’ cant ceases to be a Soviet citizen,*’ [Chelovek, kotoryi ‘*stuchit po blatu*’, *perestaet byt sovetskim chelovekom*] said

¹ This was said in a speech in honour of the White Sea — Baltic Canal, quoted [Timroth 1986: 27].

Stalin in 1934.¹ A Soviet versus non-Soviet binarism forced linguists into constant attempts to define the common Russian language by creating definitive dictionaries that excluded ‘polluting’ terms. As Bauman has observed [1992], the elites of new political orders ‘need’ to produce homogeneity out of disunity and chaos, to produce ‘the people’ out of ‘the masses.’ Hence the need for a symbolic screen of common identity that could only be produced by a strong policing of the boundaries of what is correct and what is incorrect.¹ The contradictory character of this endeavour in the USSR — for the socialist ideology did after all extol the life of the ordinary people — can be seen from the fact that such dictionaries gave up claiming to represent the living [*zhivoi*] Russian language [Timroth 1986: 52; 92–3].

The second factor I would draw attention to is the continuation in Russian culture of sensitivity to the ‘magical’ power of certain words and expressions. Here I would like to explain the idea of socially produced *eclipse* in language, that is, the relegation of certain types of speech to a publicly invisible interiority, or social recess, of speech practice. Eclipsing was regularly produced not only by the written/spoken divide, but also by the constant monitoring of spoken expressions, as if just their utterance marked the actual presence of forbidden intentions and their consequences in later events. What we might call ‘causally productive’ expressions in Russian, such as incantations [*zaklinaniya*] and spells [*zagovory*] were not forgotten among Soviet rural and working people. But they were subject to public eclipse when they were declared harmful ‘relics of the past’ and their use became punishable in law. Yet eclipse does not mean obliteration, either of the folk expressions themselves, or of the feeling that there might be an occult or omen-like character to pronouncing words. So despite the insistence on rational transparent meanings and the prohibition on spells, the shadow of this eclipse was apparent throughout Soviet times in absolutely everyday practices. An example would be knocking three times on wood, or exclaiming ‘*Tfu! Tfu!*’ over one’s left shoulder,² when a dreaded event was mentioned.

A third feature is important in explaining the dangers of words in Soviet times. Genis has drawn attention to what he calls Soviet metaphysics. ‘*In the eschatological coordinates of communism,*’ he writes, ‘*there was nothing that did not relate to the “End”, that is to the “vanishing point”, which invested signs with meaning*’ [Genis 1999b: 396]. The ‘*vanishing point*’ was situated not in a utopian future

¹ I am grateful to Sergei Oushakine for this important reference.

² In folk thought, angels sit on one’s right should and devils on the left. ‘*Tfu!*’ represents spitting at the devils to make sure they do not bring about the dreaded event.

but rather in the eternal — for since history was necessary, determined by the invincible forces of evolution, the finale was known in advance and all facts, whether leading towards the ideal or away from it, were tied to it. This metaphysics was the basis for a quotidian and ubiquitous transcendence of things and phenomena. Every act in everyday life — a ploughed hectare in the collective farm, a driven nail, each act of truancy or a mistake at the typewriter — was inflected with a parallel, hyper-real ‘historical’ meaning. Acts of speech or writing were also coloured by this ever-present metaphysical intimation. Crucial here was the capacity of the Soviet party-state to create substitutes that stood for reality, or mapped it out, (for example the report that functioned as a substitute for the past, the plan as substitute for the future). For this capacity enabled it to impart materiality to its phantoms [Genis 1999a: 215] and thus transform being into metaphor [Genis 1999b: 395–7]. Let me give just one example of what I think Genis is referring to: the word *vakhta*, which had meant a nautical watch, was given the ‘Soviet’ meaning of a task performed by a collective with particular enthusiasm and heroism. Using *vakhta* in this way enabled the particular everyday action to be envisaged as attached to the state, seen metaphorically as a ship ploughing its course commanded by the Party [Zemtsov 1985: 68–9].

As we know from countless sources, the everyday business of making correct representations in language was monitored with increasing scrupulousness through the Stalinist period. Mary Leder, an American-born woman who worked for TASS for much of her life, has described for example, the strict ‘vigilance’ of the editors, sub-editors and typists as they checked and re-checked one another’s copy. ‘Lack of vigilance’, even for typing mistakes, was punishable by demotion or sacking. Everyone in the office was responsible for everyone else [Leder 2001: 285].

It is significant for my theme that collective authorship and anonymity were the natural consequence of such self-regulatory regulation. The Soviet metaphysics could not have a single author.¹ For this reason, saying something new in public for the first time, and saying it *as oneself*, became fraught with danger. Of all the words in language, ‘I’ could be the most scary to say. From the 1920s, ‘I’ had contrasted with the ‘we’ that Zamyatin had found so intimidating (the dialogue of ‘I’ with ‘we’ was part of a particular historical

¹ Stalin was perhaps the sole exception to this statement. One Russian academic, Viktor Shnirelman, recently described to me his feeling in those days that writing in this ‘collective’ way was like a mediaeval religious practice. As God worked through His human agents, the writing was being created ‘through me’, as though coming from somewhere else. Shnirelman described his hesitation and his sense that a whole new structure was in place when he first dared to write ‘I’ in one of his articles.

formation of Soviet subjectivity which cannot be pursued here, see [Halfin, Hellbeck 2002]). The more hegemonic the collective public discourse became, the more 'I' (except in carefully delimited circumstances) became a disruptive note, originating from an alien, uncontrolled sphere.

If an immense cautiousness was manifest in the use of 'I' in general, this was all the more acute in linking oneself linguistically to named dangerous topics. Now what these names (of topics) *were* changed all the time — they could be names of disgraced leaders, alien ideologies, names of 'enemy' peoples, or expressions redolent of non-Soviet attitudes, and so forth. The point is that such dangerous words existed. What happened was that people avoided using them, these particular word signs. If we can call this avoidance 'taboo', it is also necessary to point out that sometimes these dangerous matters had to be talked about in some way, and so we have the necessary concomitants of taboo — evasion, substitution, and allusion.

We could borrow Guseinov's term and call this situation one of 'word fetishism' [*slovesnyi fetichizm*]. As he rightly observes, this is present to some degree in all languages. But in the conditions of Soviet life, where it was clear that the language of all users was a tool to be manipulated from on high, fetishism was exceptionally heightened and extended. I would like here to briefly discuss Guseinov's ideas in his article 'Lying as a Condition of Consciousness' [Guseinov 1989], since I consider them to be in part extremely illuminating, and in part mistaken. Guseinov, correctly in my view, links Soviet linguistic fetishism to '*traditional Russian ideas about the harm of language*'. Following from internal experiential anxieties, people refrain from speaking aloud both about what they most desire and value (so as not to 'put the evil eye' — *sglazit* — on these things) and they also avoid talking about what they most fear (so as not prophetically to bring it about [*nakarkat*]). '*The modest measures of super-cautiousness taken by people in their everyday lives*', he writes, '*are just the micro links in the historically formed structure of linguistic insurance, — insurance against lying as well as against the deliberate or inadvertent use of language for harm*' [Guseinov 1989: 65]. However, Guseinov's main argument, whereby he characterises the Soviet socio-linguistic experiment as creating a '*sphere of lies*', requires some critique precisely because it is aimed at an impossibility, the fixing of truth, and then claims that this sphere of official lies consists of '*emptied word-spells*' [*opustoshennoe slovo-zaklinanie*] [Guseinov 1989: 67]. Guseinov falls into the trap he sets himself: for to characterise the entirety of official formulae as '*lies*' is to take part in the binary game played by the state. And it is always easier to characterise a statement as a lie after the event. Many people simply believed the official statements. And others as it were 'had to' believe in them because of the official political roles they were

performing.¹ In fact, for Soviet contemporaries the factual truthfulness (or not) of the official language was not necessarily crucial — a far more complex dialogical and psychological arena of pragmatics was at issue.

We can observe that it was not just fear of getting it wrong that impelled people to use the official discourse, as is implied by the idea that the formulas were empty lies [Guseinov 1989] or the concept of dissimulation used by Kharkhordin [1999]. Linguistic fetishes, taboos and evasions, I suggest, are present throughout language activity, including within the politically sanctioned discourse. They cross cut the divisions usually made — between official/non-official, professional/vernacular, educated/illiterate, or authored texts/anonymous folklore — and indeed, this article will suggest that they provide channels of mutual influence between such categories. Let me provide one example. Even long after the demise of Stalinism, ordinary people, at least in my experience, could be as emotionally involved in the official vocabulary as in their own seemingly more ‘natural’ everyday expressions. This was brought home to me when in the late 1980s I showed an article I had written, mentioning the Bolshevik Revolution, to a Russian engineer in Siberia. Now this man was intending to emigrate to Israel and was no devotee of Soviet socialism. Nevertheless, his brow darkened as he read the first paragraph, and he looked up and asked why I had written in such an unfriendly tone. I couldn’t think what he meant, until he explained, *‘We don’t say “Bolshevik Revolution”, you should call it “October”,’* and there was a special warmth in his voice as he said that word. I immediately sensed behind this the subconscious influence of a lifetime of school lessons, Pioneer songs, and all the rest of it, whereby the actual subject, revolution, becomes redundant and the single fetish word ‘October’ is enough, conveying not only an idea but also a set of emotion-laden values.

The argument I seek to elaborate in this article is that a regime — a discursive regime and a political regime — establishes itself by its limits, and these limits are in great part constituted by verbal taboos. ‘Taboo’ is used here as a shorthand for the political linguistic activity of including/excluding, which defines not just the publicly unsayable, but also the terms and phrases that are warmly approved. Yet paradoxically, the more strict the attempt to establish limits, the more difficult the endeavour. As even Soviet linguists acknowledged, living language [*zhivoi yazyk*] is created not by the authorities but by the people [*narod*], with all the indecent, rough, unseemly, laconic, archaic and imaginative expression that implies [Timroth 1986: 56–7].

¹ A wonderfully perceptive account of such a position is given in Orlova’s reminiscences [Orlova 1983], where she attempts to recall and understand her youthful sense of belief in the 1940s and 50s.

To the extent that the ‘unsayable’ was left unsaid and the right words aroused the right emotions (as with ‘October’), the Soviet linguistic experiment was successful — but it always was a battle. In this complex situation, ordinary speakers had to be ultra cautious about the kinds of effects their words produced in particular circumstances. Here, by ‘effects’, I am referring not only to illocutionary acts or performatives, but also to what we might call the occult or mythic effects attributed to language by its users. For the authorities themselves were engaged in creating the mystic meanings of communism on behalf of the people, in swamping the everyday connotations of words with definite and unavoidable ideological-emotional propositions [Yurchak 2003]. One could not stand aside from this process, which coloured the humble, ‘old-fashioned’ or impudent words it excluded as well as the official formulae.

Language Taboos

As mentioned earlier, it was not the meaning content (signified) that was tabooed so much as the word itself (the signifier). This has been demonstrated conclusively by recent studies of Russian swearing, *mat* [Uspensky 1996; Zorin 1996; Levin 1996; Erofeyev 2003]. *Mat* is classified by [Timroth 1986] as ‘taboo language’. It was absolutely prohibited in official speech from the 1930s onwards and also from polite discourse in general during Soviet times. Yet the sexual activities *mat* ostensibly refers to were of course talked about in euphemisms. And *mat* itself, expressions such as ‘fuck your mother’ [*yob tvoyu mat*], could frequently not mean literally that at all. They could be used between working-class men as cheerful greetings [Uspensky 1996: 12–3], or between politicians and their subjects as a sign of bullying authority [Marchenko 1989: 99; Erofeyev 2003: 48]. As *mat* has always been used by all kinds of people extremely widely, it is evident that its shock effect was entirely context-dependent.

There is a well-known Russian joke: ‘*Each Soviet person possesses three languages: his native one, Russian, and mat*’ [*Kazhdyi sovetskii chelovek vladeet tremya yazykami: rodnym, russkim i matom*] [Timroth 1987: 98]. The inference must be — the Soviet person could use these languages strategically. An example, interestingly associated with casting spells [*zaklinaniya*], appears in Arzhilovsky’s diary of the 1930s [Garros, Korenevskaya and Lahusen 1995: 126]. An old woman, a sixty-seven year old widow, had made a decent living with her husband in the past and now was threatened with being classed as a *kulak*. Pulling herself together, the woman made an appearance at the village council and gave the presidium a piece of her mind, ‘*using the most atrocious language*’. She thereby successfully proved that she was a genuine Soviet worker. As a result she was accepted

into the collective farm, where she became a Stakhanovite. She was very diligent. She baked bread and healed the sick using incantations. Even Party members came to her for treatment. Arzhilovsky was shocked at the contrast between the Soviet modernity of the farm (tractors, combines, automobiles racing past...) and right in the middle of it, this old woman chanting spells where everyone could hear, *'On the sea, on the ocean, on the island...'*. *'And evidently it worked!'* he exclaims. The old woman's power of language had worked in the village council too.

In shock-sensitive contexts, it is the very sound of the tabooed word that creates the frisson of infringement. A Swedish novel-memoir concerning life in Russia in the 1930s recounts how a family visited a smart restaurant. Little Nina was playing down on the floor and her mother called her to get up on a chair. She called loudly and clearly three times in Swedish, *'Stol, Nina!'* until Kristjan hushed her up, looking quickly around him. *'Stol, Nina'* sounded dangerously like *'Stalina'*. *'It's very important here to be able to keep quiet. But don't tell anyone,'* he said, and he lost some of his earlier playfulness [Helgason 2001: 305–6]. The sound of the call infringed the sacred space of a name that could not be yelled *in a restaurant*. On the other hand *'relentlessly chanting'* the name Stalin at Party Congresses [Gutkin 1997: 243], or soldiers invoking his name when going into battle, was *de rigueur*.

In some exceptional periods, a taboo could be more absolute. For example, from 1943 to 1957 the name of the Kalmyk people could not be pronounced at all in any circumstances. Accused (mostly unjustly) of collaboration with the Nazi armies, the entire Kalmyk people had been disgraced and sent into exile in Siberia. The Kalmyk Republic was annihilated, the name Kalmyk erased from encyclopedias and histories. It was as though these people no longer existed. The Kalmyk writer Elza-Bair Guchinova recalls how, at the height of all this in 1948, U. A. Alekseev went into a shop in Moscow and asked for brick tea (the compressed green tea used in eastern regions of Russia). *'Have we got any Kalmyk tea?'* shouted the shop assistant carelessly to her colleague. The name that could not be mentioned in the case of people was fine when attached to a commodity [Guchinova 2003: 110].

Thus, it is not that the taboo word can never be pronounced. For the speaking subject, we have in fact a structure of possibilities: to say (or write) it; to replace it with another term; to keep silent.

Saying Aloud

There are many possible approaches to the speaking of forbidden words — one could develop, for example, in particular Soviet contexts the different implications of Austin's work on illocutionary

speech acts, Althusser's notion of interpellation, or Judith Butler's ideas on injurious words [Butler 1997]. And this is not to mention the interpretative possibilities offered by psychoanalysis.

Here I discuss the ideas of Uspensky in his article on swearing [Uspensky 1996], since it provides an opportunity to investigate the continuation into Soviet times of the attribution of magical power to words. The linguist Trubachev had argued for the inclusion of swear words in Russian dictionaries, on the grounds that these words existed in the language. But later Trubachev changed his mind: taboos demonstrate the *special sensitivity* of Russians to these expressions, and it was particularly important to support this in the Soviet period of mass access to literacy and book production [Uspensky 1996: 10–11]. Uspensky himself goes on to argue for independence of taboos on cursing from context, since they are ultimately 'sacral expressions' and the speaker always has responsibility for using them. Swear words [*mat*] were used as spells [*zaklinanie*] by peasants, for example to save themselves from a devil or house-spirit [Uspensky 1996: 13].¹ Cursing has the sacral function of pagan religiosity he concludes [Uspensky 1996: 13].

Now Uspensky's idea about independence from context goes against what I have been arguing, but referring as it does to the *longue durée* of Russian culture it is worth investigating further. Let us consider the abundant evidence of Soviet prosecutions for referring to Stalin in incorrect ways, in the light of Claudio Ingerflom's research on punishments for injurious words against the Tsar.

An example from the Stalin era is the following. Alla Andreeva shared a cell in Lefortovo prison with a woman who had been among a group of young people chatting one evening. Someone said that things weren't working out, that it seemed Lenin did not plan the development of the country going this way. And someone added, 'Well, what's to be done, Georgians live a long time.' And someone else said, 'Well, it happens that they die.' The whole group were sentenced under the terrorism statute for this conversation [Andreeva 1998: 157]. Let us consider this in relation to Ingerflom's discussion of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century legal formula *gosudarevo delo i slovo* [acts and words pertaining to the ruler/state], according to which indecent [*nepristoinye*] words were held to proffer an insult to the Tsar. A force was attributed to *the words themselves*, independent of the intention of the speaker. Thus, in 1723, a peasant who admitted saying some words that sounded like an incantation ('*If the hand of our emperor falls ill our brothers will not be called up*'), when

¹ The culture of incantation and conjuration did not cease during the Soviet era. As recent biographies of contemporary Russian *narodniye tseliteli* [folk curers] make clear, most of these people, even the very highly educated, learned their 'powerful words' at the knee of grandmothers even while attending Soviet schools [Kharitonova 1994].

he heard that peasants were to be enrolled in the army, was severely punished with the whip. His protestations that he had not intended any harm to the Tsar were ignored [Ingerflom 1996]. This case reminds us of a striking Soviet-era case of culpability for words in the complete absence of intentionality. A schoolteacher was arrested because a young girl in her class had written in one of her essays, “*Life is good and to live is good, ” wrote Mayakovsky and shot himself.*” The teacher was accused in the end of preparing to assassinate Stalin [Andreeva 1998: 180]. The divorce of the harmful effect of words from intention explains why, in denunciations sent to the Tsarist court, the authors of such reports explain that they *cannot repeat* the words the accused had said about the Tsar. Such facts seem to support Uspensky’s idea about the independence of verbal taboos from context and personal responsibility. Nevertheless, I would argue that what Uspensky’s statement ignores is the relationality present in all such scenarios. At the simplest level, we can see that someone must have denounced the peasant to the Tsar, someone must have informed on the young people’s conversation, and indeed the schoolgirl’s essay.

We may also observe that the offending words themselves were referential or indexical in relation to the person held to have been harmed (‘the Georgian’; ‘our emperor’). William Hanks has pointed out the central importance of the image of the body in acts of deictic reference, for the body provides a schematic structure, the ‘raw materials’ of a series of oppositions that speakers can use to integrate the self with collective categories [Hanks 2000: 19]. Ingerflom is particularly perceptive in his analysis of the implicit figure of the body in the 17th–18th century cases of insult to the Tsar. In 1627, for example, two men quarrelled and one threatened the other with pulling out his beard. The other replied, ‘*Don’t you dare pull out my beard, I am a muzhik of the gosudar [ruler] and my beard also belongs to the gosudar.*’ In denouncing his adversary, the first man changed the latter phrase to, ‘*and my beard is like that of the gosudar.*’ He was severely punished for a false accusation. He had attempted to replace a relation of belonging with one of comparison. It was this, the comparison of one’s own body with that of the Tsar, that was punishable [Ingerflom 1996]. To make such a statement was not just to draw inadmissible attention to oneself. It was also held to be a ‘diabolical’ act, in that it evoked the physical human dimension of the sacred being. Now Russia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was of course quite different politically and culturally from the Soviet Union, and the conception of the sacrality of the body transgressed was also different, being explicitly Christian. Nonetheless, Ingerflom’s examples help explain the Stalin era cases, such as the one mentioned earlier, for it was surely the reference to the long life and the death of Georgians that was magically offensive.

If one aspect of the relationality implicit in use of tabooed words concerns the harm held to have been caused to the person referred to, another concerns the reflexive situation of the speaker. In some cases the tabooed word, objectified and separated out from the rest of speech by the horror it evokes, comes to stand for an abstraction, evil [zlo] itself, as Alla Andreeva recounts [Andreeva 1998: 19–20]. As a child she was provoked one day by some neighbourhood boys into reading aloud a word of three letters they had scrawled on a tree-trunk in the yard. *‘Of course, it was that very word,’*¹ writes Andreeva. The boys were triumphant, but a passing adult neighbour and then her mother told Allochka seriously not ever to say that polluted [pogano] word again. *‘Even now I can remember my feeling then of a sort of cosmic catastrophe, as I would put it now. [...] Suddenly it appears that bad words exist, which mustn’t be spoken! It seems that there is something bad. Something bad that exists by itself, incomprehensible!’* In this example, we see that the danger of tabooed words does not just rest in their potential for harmfulness ‘in society’, but also in their capacity to call up a sense of absolute dread in the self. Of course not all children would have reacted in such a way, and it is relevant that Andreeva was brought up in a literary and Christian family. Most significant is the fact that such a reaction is possible at all. Despite her long years in the camps, surrounded by cursing, Andreeva refused to utter *mat* for the whole of her life. Even in the 1990s when Soviet restrictions had long passed, Andreeva could not bring herself to actually write the three-letter word.

Allochka’s ‘encounter with evil’ through a word seems to have nothing to do with Soviet life. But concepts of evil [zlo], even including religiously defined evil, were part of the discourse of the time. Indeed, defining the good and the bad was central to the myth-creating activity of the party-state, done by attributing ideological value to names (names as ‘descriptions’). Mandelshtam’s poem ‘What street is this? Mandelstam Street’ mocked the leader for whom everything was named (cited in [Brooks 2000]).² Perhaps the most powerful example of such *‘divine power of naming’* [Butler 1997: 32] was the imposition of the general label ‘anti-Soviet’, which was virtually impossible to dispel through the procedures of law. The label was enough to colour the entire behaviour of ‘witnesses’, prosecutors and guards. It could only be lifted in the same way it was imposed, by fiat. During the height of the purges arrested people could only be referred to by inserting a word such as traitor [*predatel*]

¹ i.e. the Russian word for the male organ, which is strongly taboo [Editor].

² By contrast, those subjects the Soviet authorities wished to disclaim or pour scorn on were termed ‘so-called’ (the ‘so-called Jewish problem’, for example). Just as bad was to be labelled ‘self-proclaimed’ (*samozvannyi*). [Or indeed ‘a certain’ [*nekii*], an adjective used for Pasternak during the persecution that followed the award to him of the Nobel Prize. [Editor.]

before the name. This resulted in some grimly comic situations. A prominent politician in Rostov called Sheboldaev, in whose honour a city park had been named, was deposed and disappeared. *'Where are you going?'* Valentina Bogdan asked a young boy. *'To the Park Named after Traitor Sheboldaev,'* he replied [Bogdan n.d.: 125].

Most frightening was the direction of such labels to oneself or one's close associates. To see how this worked relationally in everyday life, let us take the word *baryshnya* ['girl from the nobility, young lady'], which for the communists was redolent of bourgeois values. Soviet-era nannies, unaware of the new discourse, went on innocently calling their little darlings *baryshnya*. But in public life the word was taboo in any friendly encounter, for to name someone this way was tantamount to accusing them of being a class alien and therefore anti-Soviet. In the novel *Deti Arbata*,¹ the upright communist Nina suddenly experiences shocked dread when a work colleague refers casually to her pretty sister as a *'gifted baryshnya.'* She assumes it to be an insult and she knows the authorities are on the search not just for individuals but for networks of anti-Soviet intrigue. Therefore *'baryshnya'* could well be an omen-like sign of an impending accusation in which she herself will be implicated. So how come the colleague seems to be looking at her in a friendly way? [Rybakov 1987: 203–4]. We may agree with Guseinov about the fetishistic character of such words, though not with his statement that they were *'empty'*. To the religious mind the words of *mat* are curses, that is they can *'put a curse on some one'*. In the cosmology of communism it was as if even a relatively mild word like *baryshnya* could also have occult effect — that is they could be experienced subjectively as *bringing about* a maleficent situation.

Ambivalence, Evasion, and Substitution

In such an atmosphere of sensitivity to words, even ordinary swearing could be picked out by the authorities and punished under the heading of hooliganism [*khuliganstvo*] [Levin 1996]. Linguistic acts therefore always had the potential for political resistance. I have argued elsewhere, however, that the mechanisms of repression, self-censorship and informing were so pervasive in the period of high Communism that open resistance was very rare — it was virtually to take a voluntary step into the gulag. On the other hand, an ambivalent use of correct phrases was very common, deploying them both in their overt meaning and to imply contextually a host of potentially subversive connotations [Humphrey 1994]. Direct political confron-

¹ This novel describes the early 1930s. It could only be published after *glasnost'*, though it was written in mid-Soviet times. It is widely acknowledged to have been an attempt to describe the 1930s with maximum 'ethnographic' fidelity and therefore I feel justified in citing it here.

tation by means of forbidden language only became possible after the end of the Soviet period. One of the first effects of perestroika was to challenge the taboo on public use of *mat*. In 1991, a demonstration in Red Square, consisting of forming ‘three letters’ (of *mat*) with the demonstrators’ bodies, was intended to ‘*de-sacralise this space, to make it a genuinely People’s Space*’. The performance resulted in a fight with security officers and a prosecution the next day [Zorin 1996: 136]. This example shows that in fact *mat* continued to convey insubordination even after the Soviet period,¹ and that it continued to be associated with ‘the ordinary working people’. We are reminded that the Soviet distinction of language genres and their association with social classes was one particularly strict phase in the long history of hierarchisation of styles in Russian. In the eighteenth century, Lomonosov had divided Russian into three styles,² below which lurked a fourth substratum, of obscene and rude language. It seems that lowly Soviet workers, as it were the descendants of the denizens of the fourth zone, could believe that rude language, being their own, did not count in terms of the political effects. Marchenko, listening fearfully to a fellow camp inmate speculating idly about Furtseva (the Minister of Culture) ‘*fucking with all comers*’, was assured that ‘*They don’t get you for slander unless you’ve been to a university*’ [Marchenko 1989: 166]. Should I have tried to enlighten him, Marchenko wonders, to explain that anyone could be jailed, regardless of his level of education? ‘*Should I have told him that I had done time with some guys with only five or six years of education who wound up in a camp for political on Article 70 for telling jokes?*’ [Marchenko 1989: 166–7]. It can be seen from this that, while the Soviet authorities may usually have tacitly allowed linguistic mayhem in the fourth zone, in the end the absolute quality of powerful words stood. There were plenty of legal citations (fetishes in their own right) — ‘agitation,’ ‘propaganda,’ ‘fabrications,’ ‘slander,’ ‘parasitism’ and ‘hooliganism’ — under which the searchlight could suddenly reveal a careless word as ‘resistance’.

The most prevalent form of evasion was to avoid saying the dangerous sound and substitute another. In Russian, as in all languages, euphemisms are very common and perhaps the only specific feature of evasive speech in Soviet times was the particular range of signifieds that were avoided. This topic is too vast to be covered in this article.

¹ Erofejev notes that the politician Zhirinovskiy was recently (late 1990s) investigated by the Duma for using *mat* in a private conversation about American policy in Iraq, a conversation which found its way onto a videotape [Erofejev 2003: 48].

² The ‘high style’ (for tragedy, odes, and epic poetry), the ‘middle style’ (for prose and polite comedy), and the ‘low style’ (for broad farce). The division is set up in the introduction to Lomonosov’s grammar of the Russian language. As well as the scientific discoveries for which he is best-known in the West, Lomonosov was a pioneering literary theorist, and the first great master of syllabo-tonic verse in the Russian language. [Editor].

I would observe only, for example, that evasive terms were especially abundant for ideas that made people uncomfortable because they linked the ordinary citizen with the more punitive activities of the state. Examples of such disguises include acronyms, e.g. *chesir* (from the initials ChSR, family member of a traitor¹), or slang, e.g. *khimiki* (literally ‘chemists’) used for convicted labourers sent to work in hazardous chemical industries. Sometimes even the substitutes were avoided. In Anatoly Rybakov’s novel, *The Children of the Arbat*, the conventional Vika told her outspoken friend Varya not to refer to an acquaintance, Yura, who worked for the security service, as *legavyi* [a substitute word for police spy deriving from *legavaya*, ‘pointer dog’]. ‘Vika did not want to repeat the word *legavyi*, it was not she who had pronounced it. “Your epithets are of the street,” she said. Varya flared up: “But I was raised on the street.” Vika replied. “You got me wrong. I wasn’t talking about vulgarity; that was not my idea. But it is better to keep away from certain things and certain words. Yura does his thing, and you and I do not understand it.” Varya was silent’ [Rybakov 1987: 210–1].

It is worth noting that some of the cautious use of language in Soviet times had more to do with Russian culture than the socialist political structure. In rural areas avoidance of using ‘I’, for example, may have been more concerned with long-standing habits of deference and the more cosmological fears lying behind social hierarchy than with the observance of collectivism. In provincial Russia even now, and the more so in the Soviet decades, a young person would dishonour herself by daring to stand out as ‘I’. In the kindergarten children were told, ‘*Ya — eto poslednyaya bukva alfavita*’ [“I” [ya] is the last letter of the alphabet’].² In the presence of seniors, such a young person would never say ‘I think’ [*Ya dumayu*], which would be regarded as very disrespectful. Instead, the reflexive [*Mne dumatsya*] was used. The elder, meanwhile, could say ‘I’ with impunity. In such ways, people avoided challenging (by calling into being equal and opposed agencies) the cosmological certainty of hierarchical social relations.

The last example reminds us that words can be understood anthropologically as social property, in the sense that some categories of people are excluded from using ‘good’ words, while ‘bad’ words are said to ‘belong’ to other people. An example of the former type is

¹ In Stalin’s time ChSR stood for *Chlen sem’i izmennika rodiny*, member of the family of a traitor to the motherland; in Khrushchev’s time they stood for *Chlen sem’I repressirovannogo*, member of the family of a repressed person [Corten 1992: 35].

² Sergei Oushakine recalls from his childhood in the 1970s that when he and his sister tried to defend their use of ‘I’, his grandmother would retort, ‘*Korova shla, kvostom makhnula i skazala “my”*’ [The cow went and waved its tail and said ‘we/moo’], thus putting down the use of I/we as something rude and uncultured.

the prohibition on labour camp inmates in the 1940s–50s from using the word *tovarishch* [comrade]. The prisoners were told repeatedly by guards that they were not people [*ne lyudi*]. They were not entitled to address the guards as comrade, a word that evoked equality and friendship. Instead, they had to substitute the term *grazhdanin nachalnik* [citizen chief], which combined the acknowledgement of the state with the recognition of subordination [Andreeva 1998: 163; 177]. *Tovarishch* [comrade] is exactly the kind of word that we can see, following Genis, as belonging to Soviet metaphysics. It was metonymic, linking the actual (flawed) relations between the people entitled to use it with the ideal social relation — an ideal that belonged to the glowing other world of communism. Similar in its mythic role was the colour red, emblematic of revolution. As ‘enemies of the people’ prisoners were forbidden to use red paint or cloth when making slogans or banners in the camps, and instead they had to substitute a brownish colour [Andreeva 1998: 164]. Losing their right to such meaningful signs, many prisoners — thought not Andreeva — felt deeply bereft.

As regards ‘bad’ words, there is plentiful evidence of another form of evasion, which is to displace the ‘ownership’ of ‘dirty words’ onto other peoples. The reactions to the new linguistic freedom of the 1990s, when *mat* and slang came to pervade public life, are telling. Letters in the paper *Chas Pik* wrote of ‘*selling the Russian spirit and conscience [sovest]*’, ‘*anti-Russian diversions*’, and ‘*Russian-Tatar-Jewish jargon*’ [Zorin 1996: 135]. This reaction coincides, Zorin observes, with the old legend that Russian swear words come from the Tatars, removing the sense of responsibility to other shoulders [Zorin 1996: 135].

A judgmental attitude to language, its hierarchisation, and the tendency to avoid reproducing in writing the actual irreverent words of ordinary people was enforced by the Soviet state but it was reproduced by all who used the literary language. As far as writing was concerned, the entire discursive field of Soviet ‘*verbally constituted consciousness*’ was pervaded with linguistic fastidiousness. Thus Solzhenitsyn, seeing himself as an educated ‘writer’, with that social status, composed *Gulag Archipelago* using euphemism, rather than render the actual speech of inmates (for examples, see [Zorin 1996]). What this shows is that the structures of repression in official/public language tend to reappear in the language of opposition. Even Shalamov, describing his time in the camps, wrote that *blat* words [prisoner’s jargon] were ‘*poison in the soul of the prisoner*’ (quoted in [Timroth 1986: 96]).

Silence

Silence seems as though it must have been the only truly safe option. But as we have understood long ago from Voloshinov/Bakhtin: silence is understood. An ideological product — and the word is the ideological sign par excellence — can arise only in inter-individual territory. The word is the semiotic material of inner life, of consciousness, of inner speech. It can function in this way without outward expression [Voloshinov 1993: 1–8]. Thus a silence in an interaction remains a sign, one that refers to what might have been said and expected.

Lyudmila, a woman who began life as a miserably poor peasant, inherited a secret. Telling the story of her life to two historians, she recalls how her father strictly instructed his family never to mention to anyone what had happened to his own father. *‘One word too many and I will be arrested right away?’* [Bertaux and Garros 1998: 51]. The paternal grandfather had presumably been condemned as a kulak. But this is never entirely clear from Lyudmila’s own spoken words, because even speaking in the 1990s she refers only to an enigmatic *‘before...’* [this event] or *‘afterwards...’*. As the editors Bertaux and Garros comment, Lyudmila was subject to *‘a double interdiction of memory, imposed paradoxically by a loving father and a ferocious power’* [Bertaux and Garros 1998: 14]. Lyudmila’s silence extended elsewhere also. Recalling how her mother had rescued a small icon when the communists came to tear down the village church, she said, *‘Mummy, who at that time was still...’*, and her listeners are left to wonder what the absent word might be — still a believer? Still a Christian? Or, even more dangerous, a rebel against the Soviet iconoclasm? [Bertaux and Garros 1998: 15–6].

In public life, however, the meaningfulness of silence turned keeping quiet into a tactic, and one that could easily become the target of official suspicion. In the ambience of collectivism, one was supposed to be an active social subject, to speak one’s mind. As Kharkhordin has so ably described, the Soviet individual attained his or her social personhood through speech-acts of public self-analysis, self-criticism, evaluation, discipline, revelation, and confession [Kharkhordin 1999: 123–279]. The practice of taking minutes and ‘sending in’ reports of meetings both fetishised the utterances and silences and attached them to subjects, since these bureaucratic procedures attributed speech/non-speech to individually named people. The obligation to speak was dangerous. Kharkhordin recalls a worker, Fadeeva, at a tobacco factory in Moscow who said at a meeting that the proposed rationalisation of production would put women workers at a disadvantage. The response from the director was to call Fadeeva *‘a counterrevolutionary and an enemy of the working class’* and to demand that her words be registered in the protocol of the

meeting. As a result Fadeeva ‘became possessed by the idea’ that her words were ‘registered’, fell ill, and died [Kharkhordin 1999: 151]. But not speaking, or not publicly approving the prepared speech of a spokesperson by voting in favour, could equally be perilous. There are numerous accounts of surveillance of such speeches and raised hands during the period of the purges (e.g. ‘*And we all voted. We understood perfectly that anyone who did not raise a hand would himself, today, be sent to the same Lubyanka. And everyone raised their hands, voting for the death penalty*’ [Andreeva 1998: 67]). What Andreeva records, significantly, is another kind of ‘silence’ following on from such terrible sessions — people sincerely forgot they had taken part. She records her amazement at the absence of memory of one such totally honest friend and comments, ‘*Later I realised what was happening. When someone does something foul, that contradicts their character, it is so terrible that the memory as it were throws out this recollection by itself. It simply shuts itself off. Then I understood in my conversation with my friend that people coming out of such meetings cast all the proceedings from their memory*’ [Andreeva 1998: 67–8].

In Stalinist conditions, the act of ‘being silent’ could become objectified as a matter of later reflection. This situation is documented by Mary Leder, the previously mentioned editor at TASS. She was called in by the authorities and pressurised to become an informer. Deliberately silent in respect of the incriminations of her colleagues the investigator was attempting to draw from her, she filled in the blank space of not answering by chattering about irrelevant matters. She recalls that ‘*not speaking*’ was a topic of subsequent private conversations. In the aftermath of trials people anxiously worked out from the length of sentences whether ‘*a case had been made*’, i.e. whether informers had kept relative silence or engaged in incriminating speech [Leder 2001: 289–90]. Silence could work on many fronts. Someone might blurt out an anti-Soviet comment — and then avoid you forever afterwards, thus allaying the fear that you might have reported her by the magic of blotting out the relationship [Leder 2001: 239].¹ Even in later periods, silence did not necessarily gain one any peace. One could be ashamed of having just ‘repeated slogans’ during late Soviet times, but also of just being silent (‘doing nothing’) through not knowing how to act in any other way [Riordan and Bridger, eds. 1992: 20].

The implication here is that ‘silence’ is rarely manifest as a complete absence. It is apparent in negatives, such as a lingering shame or the

¹ Another foreigner, Freda Utlej (*Lost Illusion*. London, 1949), who worked in Soviet government during the 1930s, also recalled this situation. In her case, she coped by deliberately failing to learn to speak Russian fluently, so that her silences were interpreted as linguistic incompetence. [Editor].

blotting out of memory, and it can also be manifest in language intended for oneself or within oneself (private diaries, silent monologues, unwritten poems, or dreams). ‘Silence’ also has its own ‘other life’ in society, that is, among people. This was the case with manuscripts that were written for publication but could not be published, as they passed from hand to hand, were copied out, xeroxed, or quoted. Alla Andreeva recalls how during the 1960s the manuscript of her husband Daniil’s poem *Roza Mira ‘lived its own life’*. It began to circulate in deformed, sometimes shortened, sometimes edited, and occasionally even rewritten versions. People discovered Andreeva’s phone number and telephoned her about the book. She was living in a communal apartment. *‘I replied that I knew nothing about this book and that I did not understand what they were talking about. I couldn’t reply in any other way. I did not know who was ringing and from where. I knew that searches were being carried out in Moscow, that Roza Mira had been confiscated several times and taken off to the Lubyanka. I knew that one incautious word could have called down a search on me and that would have meant everything perished. Therefore I maintained perfect silence’* [Andreeva 1998: 269].

Silence is one of the most heavily weighing overhangs from previous periods of intense fear. Its habits carry on, it seems, long after it looks as though conditions have changed. Such habits are passed on and learned in families. A father had said nothing about his time in the camps to his son, daughter and grand-children, as one man revealed, and he therefore, even though he was writing after *perestroika*, he begged for his letter to a newspaper to remain anonymous. *‘I always wanted to tell them my story, but some deep-rooted fear stopped me’* [Riordan and Bridger, eds. 1992: 32]. Perhaps his family indeed knew nothing about his life in the camps — but they must have known that he was silent. In the provinces, in small towns where everyone knows the people who used to be informers, the habit of reticence was learned virtually at the same time as speaking. *‘It’s in our blood,’* one Buryat man said to me. (And this was not because he was a Buryat but because this was how his people lived). The reproduction of this kind of extra-caution in families is one reason, it seems, that too much can be made of the distinct mentality of different Soviet generations; we need also to be able to think in terms of continuities, overlappings and recapitulations across generations. One could make a far more nuanced study than I have been able to do here of language practices in particular periods or generations or social classes. But it would be necessary also to attend not only to explicit injunctions from previous generations, as in the case of Lyudmila’s father, but also to seepings of habit through time, in which previous ways of speaking (or keeping silence) are only subtly altered in new circumstances.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to sketch some of the dangers of language use in Soviet conditions. It has been argued that the sheer fact of fear is not sufficient to explain all the phenomena observed. Firstly, the interference of the Party-state in the very material of language (initiated by the linguistic reform of 1918) served to heighten the tensions about ‘getting it right’ that are inherent in utterance when language is the tool of an exhaustive promulgation of ideology and social order. Second, the teleological ‘metaphysics’ of the communist party-state was a creative impetus in the ascription of symbolic or metaphorical meaning to the units of the official language. As was also the case of any everyday socio-political action, the nouns and verbs of the communist vocabulary were injected with their own ‘historical’ intentionality, transforming them into elements of the transcendental story.

Thirdly, I have suggested that long-standing folk ideas of the ways language as such can cause harm, ideas linked for example to the unextinguished practice of cursing [*proklyatie*] and casting spells [*zaklinaniya*] continued to have force in Soviet times. In any society beliefs about causal connections in time may be relevant to language use when *acts* of speaking are at issue. But in the Soviet — and above all the Stalinist — atmosphere of tension about language and socio-political intrigue, the frisson created by the fact of a particular word having been said could transform that word into an omen-like event. It, almost like the spell, could seem to be the harbinger of a potentially dangerous state of affairs. To avoid this, long-standing and self-reproducing cultural habits of linguistic caution were inherent to conduct in Soviet public arenas. These dispositions acquired extra sharpness and resonance during high Stalinism, but they did not altogether disappear thereafter. One reason for this continuity is that social relations themselves are reproductive. As Butler has written, ‘...*their linguistic bearing toward one another, their linguistic vulnerability toward one another, is not something simply added on to the social relations to one another. It is one of the primary forms that this social relation takes*’ [Butler 1997: 30]. In this situation, words are seen as harmful because they have harmed other people in the past. The idea of context here refers not to the internal content or structure of a speech but to the fact that these words have had some history. As I suggested with the examples of injurious words referring to the Tsar/Stalin, the intention of the speaker can be ignored because what is really crucial is not just the particular incident at hand, but the whole chain of events (or in Butler’s terms the social relations) in which the harmful words are located.¹

¹ I am grateful to Sergei Oushakine for clarifying this point.

A discursive regime constructs itself by its creative use of its own language — and also by the limits it sets itself, the ‘eclipse’ of certain kinds of speech and the ‘taboos’ on words it instigates and enforces. It would be idle to pretend that fear of arrest, imprisonment, exile and also death was not central to the dangers of language use in the Stalin era. There was pervasive silence. But I have suggested that this silence was not without meaning, and also that it acted as a veil to hide what went with it, equivocal, recalcitrant or defiant consciousness that was secreted in private thoughts and dreams. Nor, of course, was the silence complete, for evasion, substitution, allusion and euphemism were all active tropes of public speech at the time. ‘Taboo’ thus not only set limits, but also tended to expand the power of the repressed. We can contrast this *creative silence* with the phenomenon of aphasia, literally the ‘*inability to speak*’, that [Oushakine 2000] describes for post-Soviet provincial Russia. Aphasia as interpreted by Oushakine is a collective discursive disorder, manifested by regression to symbolic forms of the previous era and especially by society’s disintegrated ability to find proper verbal signifiers for the signifieds of the new socio-political regime [Oushakine 2000: 994]. Oushakine relates the silence of this aphasia to post-Soviet transitionality and ‘in-betweenness’, the lack of clues about directions to follow [Oushakine 2000: 995], resulting in a cognitive vacuum reflecting a societal state of uncertainty [Oushakine 2000: 1004]. The opposite was the case in Soviet, especially Stalinist, Russia. Then, the signifiers were riveted to signifieds by fiat; the clues about directions to follow were not clues but orders. It is because people understood these signposts all too well that silence could have such clear implications in inter-individual territory and that people sometimes had to resort to evasions to disguise their thoughts. And it is because the communist language itself was dripping with collective emotion that its own key words — like ‘comrade’ and ‘October’ — could be the pivots of anxiety and the various phenomena of ‘taboo.’

Linguistic vulnerability, I have suggested, was pervasive in Soviet society. There was no entirely safe sphere, neither that of formulaic officialdom nor that of cursing workers. I have perhaps stressed the continuities too strongly — this being a reaction to studies that have overemphasised (in my view) discontinuities and separateness along the lines of public/private, official/unofficial, conformist/dissident, and so forth. As the case of the collective farm woman described by Arzhilovsky demonstrates, it was possible for individual people to use their abilities with dangerous words across the socio-political field. Indeed, might we not speculate that the woman’s talent with spells was what enabled her to win over the praesidium with her ‘*atrocious language*’?

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