Of course, the title of this book — “Language and Culture” — describes its subject. However, if I were to try to formulate its main theme, by which I connect the history of language and of culture in eighteenth century Russia, it could be described as “language and power.” From this point of view language is not merely a system of signs that makes communication possible but an instrument of human ambitions, desires and passions. I would actually assert that language is not even a single instrument, but a set of instruments that conform to the various situations in which it is used; the nature of these situations is changeable and defines the most vital cultural parameters.

For example, there were scarcely any spoken sermons in Russia before the second half of the seventeenth century. When sermons began to be given, a particular communicative space was formed whose characteristics were defined by the authoritative task that the sermon set itself. Sermons were delivered by the educated clergy, and their very nature, including their language, asserted the power of education over tradition; Baroque erudition claimed the right to interpret Holy Writ and thus to determine who of the Orthodox flock believed correctly and who was a heretic and should be driven from the church. Both the syntax and vocabulary of the sermon bear the stamp of this task and it is appropriate to study them primarily from this perspective rather than from that of some abstract semiotic system. More than a century later the sentimental tale, so different in appearance from the sermon, in essence realized the very same mechanism: in writing “Poor Liza” Karamzin not only introduced a new discursive practice but positioned himself as master of sentiment and mentor of emotional experience.

Language, as they said in the Age of Enlightenment, was determined by a people’s customs and mores. As these changed, so too did language, and vice versa: changing the language led to changes in manners. It wasn’t clear which came first, but it was perfectly apparent that they were interconnected,
and Russia, like other countries, had no dearth of historical figures who strove to make use of this interconnection for their own ends. In periods of change such attempts are particularly common and intensive. In this book this kind of cultural and political effort is evident with particular clarity in Peter the Great’s reforms. Peter loved to do everything himself, from building ships to pulling the teeth of his subordinates. He himself also gave orders about changes to the language, created the new civil script, made demands on the language of translations, and in general, wanted to create a new literary language for everyday use. His heirs did not attempt such an all-embracing task themselves, although this merely meant that the relationship between the literary language and politics became more mediated. The imperial court had its agents in the sphere of linguistic politics (such as Mikhail Lomonosov), and their choices represented the tastes and preferences of the ruling elite. Like imperial architectural projects, the construction of a new literary language demanded powerful support for its realization.

The Russian eighteenth century was a time of Europeanization and modernization. Starting with Peter, Russian monarchs strove to make Russia a European power, to transfer Europe to the banks of the Neva, so to speak. This newly created Europe was not very similar to the original, but this merely increased the importance of the very process of recreation, which, given the dissimilarity to the original, became an experiment in accommodation and invention that was full of creative potential and unexpected, sometimes contradictory, meanings. Until almost the end of the century the monarchy was the supreme authority that guided this process of recreating Europe, which even in this case could pursue different, competing projects and ends. It was the monarch who decided how much of the European and how much of the Russian was to constitute the “Russian European,” and the dominating formula changed from reign to reign and from decade to decade.

Thus in Catherine the Great’s journal *Odds and Ends (Vsiakaia vsiachina)* in 1769 there was a debate over the relative value of French (i.e., European) versus Russian (i.e., traditional) clothing, and a rather vague compromise was suggested as something desirable: “It is incontestable that Russian dress is more compatible with our cold climate; but that any long clothing decreases one’s maneuverability and ability to move quickly is also incontestable. But if we add a caftan to French dress, which it lacks, and subtract from Russian what is excessive, could we not come up with clothing that is compatible with the climate as well as with common sense?”

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1 *Vsiakaia vsiachina*, 1769, p. 203. Mention of the climate is not accidental. The issue is not only about common sense, but refers to the currently fashionable European discussions of
This Catherinean program, proposing a union of European and Russian, was polemically directed against the Petrine project (Peter, as is well known, made Russian nobles reject their own clothing for “German” dress), and represented a symbolic rejection of Peter’s radical violation of national traditions, offering instead a new conceptualization of the national past.

Competing projects of cultural importation defined both the development of the language and of literature. Characteristically, for example, the fashion of using borrowed foreign words that dominated in the Petrine period and gave the language social and cultural prestige was replaced in a few decades by “purist” moderation in using this kind of language. The mockery of the language of “petimetry” (from the French, “petits-maîtres,” dandies) that began in Elizabeth’s reign (e.g., by Elagin and Sumarokov) and continued in the age of Catherine by Novikov, Fonvizin and many of their contemporaries, did not mean, of course, that an orientation toward the West (first of all, France) was being rejected, but indicated the limits that were to be observed in reshaping oneself into a Frenchman. In debates over “foppish language” the issue was thrashed out concerning how to accommodate Europeanism and still preserve national identity.

Just such instances of rethinking the materials of language became part of the field of cultural and political contention that shaped the development of the Russian literary language, to which this book is dedicated. Naturally, in order to appreciate the specific nature of what was happening in Russia, it is necessary to understand the European background (first of all the French); only by comparison do the peculiarities of the Russian reception of European literary and linguistic practices stand out in relief. Therefore, I have paid significant attention to the French models on which Russian Europeans could orient themselves. It seems to me that work with linguistic materials may be extremely productive insofar as the historical practices that are reflected in language may be determined with much greater precision than ideological or literary processes. One might say that language limits the arbitrariness of interpretation, setting limitations for the researcher that are so sorely needed in this heyday of postmodern voluntarism.

The Russian edition of this book came out more than ten years ago. However, having finished it, I did not cease working on either problems of the literary language or on the Russian eighteenth century. Insofar as I

the Russian national character in whose formation climate was held to be a defining factor. See the interesting recent work by Ingrid Shirle, “Uchenie o dukhe i kharaktere narodov v russkoi kul’ture XVIII v.” in “Vvodiv na wavy i obychai Evropeiskie v Evropeiskom narode”: K probleme adaptatsii zapadnykh idei i praktik v Rossiiskoi imperii, ed. A.V. Doronin (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2008), 119–137.
have continued to consider various issues touched on in the book, I could have added to or altered what I had written earlier. However, it would be regrettable to have my own books become inseparable life companions, as I would prefer to write new things rather than rewrite old ones. For this reason, here I will stand by the principle “What I have written I have written.” Nevertheless, I will note two issues that would have marked a “revised and expanded” version.

This book is dedicated to the formation of the Russian literary language. “Literary language” is understood (according to the definitions of the Prague linguistic circle) as an idiom possessing polyfunctionalism, general acceptance, codification and stylistic differentiation. This is the definition followed in this book, and it determined the interpretation of the main processes that are analyzed: the history of codification, how the need for a polyfunctional linguistic standard came to be realized, and how that standard was modified to meet the needs of the situation (the formation of the “Slavenorossiiskii” language). It seems to me now that this history lacks an institutional component whose theoretical importance I have tried to outline in another recent study.\(^2\)

If one is to write a history of the literary language as the history of its basic features (listed above), then a necessary component must also be a history of the institutions that guarantee the integrity of these features. This I have partially done for the first half of the eighteenth century, when I describe the Academy codification of the Russian language. Right up until the 1760’s the Academy of Sciences itself was the institution responsible for codifying the literary standard and for guaranteeing (or rather, for wanting to guarantee) the general acceptance of the standard they were codifying. The basis for this assertion is the fact that until the end of the 1750’s the Academy ran the single typography publishing books in civil type. Hence the norms that were applied in Academy publications were established as the standard for the language in this period.

The situation changed in Catherine II’s reign as the reading public expanded and the book market became more diverse. In this period, the general acceptance of the standard that had been introduced and the value of the Academic prescriptions were called into question and aristocratic literary men like A. P. Sumarokov began to express skepticism toward Academic prescriptions. At this time the norms of the literary language were being developed not so much as a reaction against Academic regularization as

much as at the expense of literary practice, which for all its diversity was nevertheless working out certain practices for public written speech. This change and its social parameters deserve more attention than that given in this book.

The establishment of popular schools (narodnye uchilishcha) in the 1780’s, when the Russian language became part of public education, had primary importance for establishing a literary standard and realizing its general acceptance. From this time the ability to write in Russian as part of elementary school education came to characterize the majority of the literate population. Obviously, after this the general acceptance of the language was ensured by the institutions of elementary education. To trace how this worked is not always easy, but one may point to specific indicators. For example, I have studied the language of the sermons by the Moscow Metropolitan Platon Levshin, published over many years (from 1779 to 1806) and making up twenty volumes. Going from volume to volume, one may clearly observe the gradual transition from a specific type of religious language (analyzed in detail in this book) to a more generally accepted linguistic standard. This generally accepted standard, connected to the school reform, undoubtedly played no small role here.

Unfortunately, the influence of the school on the development of the literary language is virtually unstudied, and this important issue is hardly touched upon in this book. At the same time, it seems to me that many of the issues involved in the dynamic working out of the linguistic standard could be significantly clarified if we had more information about the social parameters of elementary education, about the principles for creating textbooks and readers, and about the choice of examples from “classic” authors used in grammar and spelling exercises. When the native tongue is taught, model authors are those who have made their way into textbooks and passages from which are used in exercises and reproduced in expositions and dictations. It seems to me that is precisely through this means that literary syntax — very poorly described in school grammars and at the same time radically different from spoken speech—is established. It would be worth considering whether Pushkin’s role as creator of the Russian literary language grew out of such textbooks and readers. I hope that some future researcher will take up this set of issues.

A more particular question that it seems to me I could now present with greater fullness and clarity than in the book is that of the “simple language” of the Petrine era. I continue to hold that this language was formed by eliminating markers of bookishness from the traditional written language. However, study of the morphology of texts from that time has led me to
the idea that the composition of the simple language, shorn of markers of bookishness, could vary according to the writing habits of authors of different texts.3 These writing habits could derive from various written traditions (which in the book I refer to as “registers”), for example, the hybrid register or that of business or everyday writing. This explains the variety of texts in the simple language, which brought together what earlier had been dispersed among different registers of the written language. This chaotic development I call the “Petrine pool” and suggest that its lack of correspondence to European notions of a refined language was a fundamental stimulus to the normalizing activity that began in the Academy in the late 1720’s. While this notion is not crucial, it would bring more precision to the picture proposed in the book and permit us to explain a series of phenomena connected to the history of the linguistic standard (for example, the elimination of non-bookish syntactic constructions, similar to those in contemporary spoken Russian) which did not make their way into it.

In conclusion, I wish to thank my colleague and friend Marcus Levitt, who took on the none too easy task of translating this book, and to the publisher Igor Nemirovsky, who has graciously agreed to see it into print.

Victor Zhivov

Moscow
December, 2008

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3 See my book Ocherki istoricheskoi morfologii russkogo iazyka XVII–XVIII vekov (Moscow: Iazyki slavianskoj kul’tury, 2004).