

# THE WORD AS AN ICON: THE EMBODIED SPIRITUALITY OF CHURCH SLAVONIC

## ABSTRACT

How do Russian Orthodox Christians frame their understanding of semiotic ideologies of worship? That is to say, how do worshippers interpret liturgical language 'signs' and how do these interpretations colour their views as to which language is 'right' for the Church? There are to be found two semiotic ideologies of worship in Moscow. There are traditionalists for whom the liturgical language is embodied; it becomes the language of God through its vocalisation and enactment. Then, there are those who believe that Church Slavonic is not an indelible part of Russian Orthodox life and that in terms of its semiotic status its relation to the world it represents is an arbitrary one. Those who invoke the former, folk understandings of semiotic praxis perceive the Holy language as an icon or experiential portal that makes the presence of God more presupposable. Conceptions of language and linguistic register vary intra-culturally. Fieldwork showed how different perceptions of form map onto consciousness, raising questions of intentionality as assumptions about who is speaking (God or the priest) are bound up with the form that is used.

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Keywords: liturgical language, embodiment, semiotic ideology, worship, icon

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'I am interested in the power of words and images over their beholders. I am interested in the voice of the word, not the meaning of the word' (Husserl 1958: 242).

## INTRODUCTION

The title of this article 'the word as an icon' came from a discussion with a Russian Orthodox worshipper in Moscow. In response to a question about proposed reforms of the liturgical language, he responded by saying that changing the language of church services in Russia would be unacceptable for the 'words were icons'.<sup>1</sup> As is so often the case with fieldwork, one utterance

from an interlocutor can set the ethnographer off on a long journey of epistemological discovery. For this interlocutor, Church Slavonic (what he called *старый русский* 'old Russian') words spoken by a priest during a church service were experiential portals for they facilitated a closer relationship with the divinity. In his view, the icons hanging on the walls of the church served a similar function.<sup>2</sup> They were gateways to spirituality, and like removing the icons, if you changed the language of the church you changed the spirituality of the people (Shargunov 2008: 17–26; Kaverin 2008: 7–16). It was such deeply held essentialist views regarding the ideological status of the liturgical

language that formed the starting point for this ethnographic research. It should be noted that his comments only related to the language used in the church, and not for instance when reading the Bible in Church Slavonic at home.

The broad question relevant to anthropological theory I am asking in this article is, how do Russian Orthodox worshippers frame their understanding of both linguistic and semiotic ideologies of worship? By linguistic ideologies of worship, I mean the package of beliefs that instruct church-goers that using a certain language is appropriate in relating their thoughts to God (and indeed God relating our thoughts to them). In order to answer this, I will need to make reference to both linguistic and semiotic ideologies of worship (Keane 2018: 64–87) because the evidence relates not just to the motivation behind the choice of idiom (linguistic ideology) but also to the perceived *semiotic* status of the liturgical language as used in the church. It should be borne in mind that my informants did not themselves speak explicitly of ‘semiotic ideologies of worship’: this is simply my means of unpacking what their reflections on the liturgical language meant implicitly.

According to Keane (2018: 64–87), semiotic ideology builds on the notion of language ideology by focusing on the dynamic interconnections among different modes of signification within a specific context. At stake here is the relationship between the exteriority of language and its implications for the interiority of speakers (Keane 1997b: 674–693; Leonard 2020b: 271–296). Keane used semiotic ideologies to describe the efforts of Dutch Protestant missionaries in Indonesia to ‘disenchant’ language, and thus his model is of particular relevance here. I will answer the question of the relationship between the exteriority of language and the implications

for the interiority of speakers with reference to Russian Orthodox Christians’ interaction and spiritual engagement with the Church Slavonic language. Panchenko (2019) has recently published a series of articles relating to semiotic ideologies and religious practice in Russia. It is hoped my work on language and experience will complement this body of research.

Firstly, a few words should be said about Russian Orthodox liturgical practice and the ever-changing status of the Church Slavonic language. The Divine Liturgy is celebrated in accordance with a standardised traditional ritual and is always chanted; the chanting highlights the sensory and aesthetic dimensions of the liturgical language. Even now that some reforms have been implemented, the liturgical texts must still be in Church Slavonic. The idea is that a *spiritual* language leads the believer towards a *spiritual* consciousness. At the priest’s discretion (and priests’ views on what should be the language of church services vary considerably), large parts of the service can now be conducted in Russian as opposed to the liturgical language which for reasons of its linguistic conservatism is fully understood by a small minority of worshippers.<sup>3</sup> One strategy to get around the problem of intelligibility is for a parishioner to hold a Russian translation in their hands whilst listening to the service. I often witnessed this during my fieldwork. Readings from the Old Testament as well as from the Acts and Epistles of the Apostles which are part of the New Testament can now be in Russian. The same applies for readings from the Gospel and for the reading of the entire text of the Four Gospels during Holy Week.<sup>4</sup>

It is fair to say that Church Slavonic has been an important feature of Orthodox Slavic linguistic consciousness for centuries not just vis-à-vis the vernacular but also the prestigious trinity of sacred languages (Latin, Greek, and

Hebrew) (Goldblatt 2007: 149–192). The written form of Church Slavonic was designed by the monks Kirill and Methodius so that Orthodoxy could be disseminated among the Slavs whereas the spoken language was not initially connected to Christianity. Throughout the Middle Ages, the language was a literary language, but is now an exclusively liturgical language (Uspenskyi 1987: 23). In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the sacrality of Church Slavonic was intimately bound up with the notion that its letters were not symbols, but actual manifestations of the divine (Goldblatt 2007: 160). As sacred texts of the divine spirit, it was believed these signs became non-arbitrary and the language of revelation. This view appears to reverberate in subsequent centuries. The semiotic ideology of Church Slavonic has therefore a long, but only partially documented history. Now that ecumenical heritage and linguistic patrimony are arguably being used to meet political ends (Solodovnik 2014: 55–83; Leustean 2017: 201–216), the symbolic status of the Church Slavonic language is as important as ever before. The views of contemporary worshippers, as discussed in this article, have become more acute of late now that the partial reforms relating to the language of the church referred to above have been introduced.

It is worth noting that the ‘language debate’ in Russia pitted what I will call traditionalists against reformists (this is an oversimplified taxonomy—not everybody I worked with fell into one of these camps and even some reformists did not wish to simply do away with Church Slavonic) and has been running for many decades now (indeed it goes back to the nineteenth century) becoming something of a *cause célèbre* (Fedotov 1991: 66–101; Kott 2000: 32–64). I take traditionalists to refer to those worshippers who strongly oppose reform of the liturgical language whereas reformists

tend to support the use of Russian in church on pragmatic grounds. I have no intention of contributing to this debate in any way. My intention is solely to use the ethnographic data I collected to add new dimensions to work conducted elsewhere on linguistic and semiotic ideologies of worship (Robbins 2001: 591–614; Keane 1997a: 47–71; 2008: 64–87).

In particular, I will take Keane’s (2018) work on semiotic ideologies in a new direction by using a phenomenological approach. This approach has been chosen because the ‘signs’ of the liturgical language were ‘experienced’ in different ways depending on the worshipper’s opinion of the liturgical language’s ontological status. What is more, my interlocutors described metaphorically vocal sound in ways that resembled the terminology of phenomenology. Parishioners’ views on the liturgical language’s ontological status coincided with their views on liturgical language reform, and I felt that this specific relationship was worth exploring in a little more detail.

Phenomenology brings to the foreground the importance of what one might call ‘zones of perception’ in the background. By ‘zones of perception’, I mean the subtle layers of spatial and acoustic awareness that we might not encounter everyday. The starting point is the idea that ‘enactments of language are themselves modes of experiencing the world’ (Ochs 2012: 142; Leonard 2021: 1–26). Phenomenology is the philosophy of experience, a method of reflective attentiveness that focuses on the individual’s first-hand inner ‘lived’ experience (Merleau-Ponty 2012; Moran 2000; Heidegger 1962 [1927]; Konurbaev 2018; Leonard 2013: 151–174). Phenomenology allows us to focus on the ways experience is embodied. By ‘embodied’ I mean being involved in one’s ‘lifeworld’, inherently connected to one’s environment in an ongoing, sensual interrelation. The physical

demands of Orthodox worship (at the Divine Liturgy and all Orthodox services worshippers stand for several hours—sometimes on empty stomachs as in the case of the forty day Lent leading up to Easter) are themselves one way in which experience is embodied for the worshipper. The body is the locus from which our experience of the world stems and language is part of this. Ochs (2012: 147) makes the case for language forms themselves seeping into the world of signification. As we will see, these observations are particularly pertinent when analysing how some Russian Orthodox traditionalists relate to the liturgical language. Language and experience are indeed conjoined, and that is the spirit in which this research was undertaken.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This article is concerned with an ethnography of both linguistic and semiotic ideologies of worship. One such linguistic ideology of worship might be that a ‘sacred’ language can only be ‘sacred’ if it is obscure, that is, not entirely intelligible to most listeners. It is clear that linguistic forms can restrict access to certain discourses (Briggs 1993; Urban 1996; Basso 1990). Adherents to such ‘a sacred language ideology’ would presumably resist any liturgical language reform as for them the relationship between ‘sacred’ words and their meanings is primordially defined and therefore cannot be recalibrated. According to this interpretation, the liturgical language is a matter of divine design and as such is the language of ‘sincerity’ (Haeri 2017).<sup>5</sup> This might represent what Malinowski (1935: 218–223) called the ‘coefficient of weirdness’ and could apply to an array of sacred methods of communication ranging from Vedic chants to the liturgical languages of Latin and Classical

Arabic in countries where these languages are not the vernacular. In this research, I am not focusing on ‘magical’ language in the way that Malinowski was or indeed ritual per se, even if Church Slavonic is a ritual or sacerdotal language. Even if I am not analysing ritual specifically, one might note that most of the Orthodox service is chanted and that ritual language generally speaking can be associated with a ‘heightened poetic function’ (Silverstein 2004: 621–652). I mention this because these two factors influenced to some degree my informants’ linguistic ideologies of worship. Amongst some worshippers, there was a sense that only certain formulaic language (specific phonemic combinations) could fulfill this poetic function and therefore have the desired sanctity.

In this research, I am asking more generally what are the cultural and semiotic representations of the nature of language in the context of Orthodox worship and ritual? I am interested in the linguistic aspect of religious aesthetics, the embodied praxis of religion, the holistic process of making meaning from a spiritual experience. My interlocutors spoke of how the experience of liturgy can be sensorially and corporeally felt, but what role does language play in this? How important is it as an element? How significant is the ritualised aspect of language in the Divine Liturgy to the overall experience? How do worshippers engage at a cognitive, sensorial and semantic level? These were some of the issues I was trying to tease out of the descriptions of regular churchgoers whom I got to know in Moscow during my fieldwork.

## METHODOLOGY

This ethnographic fieldwork started in November 2018. All of my interlocutors are based in Moscow, and many of them attend

my local parish church where I was made to feel very welcome. Over the course of about 18 months, I have been attending services at a number of churches in central Moscow. I collected qualitative data through participant observation as well as non-experimental, empirical data through interviews focused on worshippers' relationship to the liturgical language.<sup>6</sup> My data was borne from my empirical observations: subjective responses to certain linguistic behaviour and speakers' self-reports on their perception of language usage. I employed the ethnographic approach because I wanted to discover how people use language, how they respond to it, what they think about it, and why they hold these beliefs (Heller 2008: 250).

A few words should be said about the context I have been working in. It can be rather sensitive for a foreigner to go round asking questions about religion and faith in contemporary Russia, and therefore great care was taken when undertaking this research.<sup>7</sup> Through a network of friends, it was not difficult to meet regular church-goers, priests, nuns, and theologians. I met all of my interlocutors through one intermediary or another who was already known to me and who could vouch for the authenticity of my academic interests. All of my interlocutors were and continue to be very supportive of my work. Given what some may perceive as sensitive, I did not raise any political questions during the course of this fieldwork and have focused purely on the relationship between the liturgical language and experience.

After first having got to know them, I interviewed informally 25 people of different ages, both men and women. Approximately seventy per cent of my interlocutors were women (church attendance is higher amongst women) and most of them were between the ages of 50 and 70. At the handful of parish churches

where most of this fieldwork was carried out, there are relatively few young people who are what one might describe as *прихожанин* or 'churched parishioner'. Only subsequently (through the network I established) was I able to meet younger church-goers. The interviews were carried out in Russian for the most part. Some of my younger informants were very competent in English. Discussions with them tended to switch between English and Russian. To protect my interlocutors' identities, I have used pseudonyms throughout and intentionally do not name the churches where I have been doing fieldwork. I am not myself Orthodox, but for many years have felt very drawn to Orthodoxy for its aesthetic and experiential dimensions, and for the sacred aura which its churches exude. Here, it seems to me, it is still possible to experience God Incarnate.

## ETHNOGRAPHIC DATA

Vigil lamps hang from brass chains. Mystical and heavenly, the First Antiphon is chanted from somewhere high above me in a capella harmony; fragments of a mystical vision, a bridge to the beyond. Rooted in past traditions and with the immediate symbolism of the relics, the voices seem to transcend time and the world: immutable and indifferent to temporal necessities. The Liturgy remains virtually unchanged, still enshrouded in the mystery of the Church Slavonic language whose zig-zagging sentences and repetitive poetics are just beyond the reach of the standing worshippers. They have been standing for over an hour now. I too stand, with the upright poise of the spiritual man, lost in borrowed thoughts and indulged in the inner lyrical grace of the words issuing forth. Bearded men in heavy vestments emerge from hidden doorways in the gilded iconostasis, swinging chinking censers. Then they disappear dragging

their shadows behind them, only to reappear moments later from another concealed door, grasping a heavy, ancient tome with marbled foreedges. The booming *basso profundo* of the priest's voice resonates from the ambon. We stand shoulder-to-shoulder in the packed nave.

I met Masha through a friend of mine. Masha is in her early fifties and a yoga teacher. She lived in Bali for 10 years before returning to Moscow. It turned out that we had been attending the same church services but had not met there. I asked her if she might join me for the Divine Liturgy. Afterwards, we met on a number of occasions and she would speak at length about what Orthodox religious practice meant for her. She spoke passionately about the 'energy' of the church and the agency of certain icons which she had personalised and developed communicative relationships with.<sup>8</sup> To have a reciprocal communicative experience with an icon was never construed as culturally something beyond an ordinary experience.<sup>9</sup> Icons have a sacramental value and make present the person or event depicted on them (Lepakhin 2002). The veneration paid to the icon passes over to the prototype. In popular Orthodoxy icons came to be seen as possessing a power of their own and could protect cities in times of war or bring healing to sick people. They might be perceived to act as links or semiotic conduits between this world and the other, a correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm. The earliest icons were images of individuals or events in the gospels, and their significance is bound inextricably with the sacred, liminal appeal of Russian Orthodox churches. Icons are found in all shapes and sizes, in peoples' homes (often in a prayer corner), hanging from car rear mirrors, in peoples' wallets etc. My comments in this article only relate to the role of icons as found in churches as these places of worship were the context of my research. None of my informants

spoke of a 'special' relationship with an icon at home or in their wallet, say, but just because they did not talk explicitly of this does not mean that it should be ruled out.

As we will see, for Masha words were not just icons, but icons were words. She confesses her sins to icons and asks them for forgiveness. This was a form of очищение ('cleansing') for her. Becoming a прихожанин was for her like a therapeutic homecoming: she described the church as her 'home' and the parish as her 'family'. As with a number of my informants, Masha did not have a theistic upbringing but found God after having 'a spiritual experience' with an icon in a church.<sup>10</sup> Subsequently, she studied Church Slavonic in order to understand the Divine Liturgy and became a more integrated member of the church community. In our discussions and interviews, she described the Church Slavonic language which she understood quite well as something магический ('magical') (but generally speaking, no references were made to the 'magical power of words' (Tambiah 1990)), поэтический ('poetic'), and изящный ('delicate'):

**Author:** How would you describe your relationship to the liturgical language (Church Slavonic)?

**Masha:** Well, as I told you, I chose to study this language. And that changed entirely my experience of the Church. I felt closer to God for knowing this language. It was like a door opening for me. For me, the words of the Liturgy have an energy. I feel a warmth (literally) when I hear these words. I know others who have this feeling. I think this warmth must come from the fact that this is a language bound to holiness. This language is not just sounds and grammar. There is another layer to it. Each word has хитросплетения ('intricate subtleties of meaning')

**Author:** Could you say something about the appeal icons have for you?

**Masha:** Just as you have to learn the Church Slavonic language, you have to learn the ‘language of the icons’. I worked with icon artists for some years to understand how they were made before I was able to converse with them. I study in detail the histories of the saints that the icons depict. I then feel as if I am talking to a special individual, but also a person who I have come to know. Now, after many years, I have special relationships with a small number of icons. I confess my sins to them. I pray to them. They give me advice. I feel a warmth and energy when I approach these icons. I feel blessed for this. (Interview with Masha, translated by author)

Again and again during my research, informants spoke of their relationship to icons as if it were analogous to how they related sensorially to the liturgical language. The icons and the words of Church Slavonic were experiential portals to a phenomenological and embodied spirituality for they became entangled with the ‘authentic inner life experiences of individuals’ (Tiaynen-Qadir 2017: 1–14).<sup>11</sup> The icon has phenomenological attributes: the imagined gaze watching the worshipper. For some of those who had studied the liturgical language and Orthodox iconography, both icons and the words of the Divine Liturgy in Church Slavonic could act for them as a gateway to a transcendental, heavenly realm. In the case of icons on the wall, these were concrete gateways. The idea is that the icon *reveals* something rather than represents something: this revelation was seen as a ‘spiritual opening’. In the case of liturgical words uttered in Church Slavonic by a priest during a service, the notion of transcendence was admittedly

more abstract but nonetheless it was felt that words of the Holy language brought the believer closer to a form of divinity. In this sense, the Church Slavonic words were serving a similar function to the icons on the wall for they both helped reveal the image of God. I am not the first to make observations about the revelatory quality of the sacred language. In the context of Russian Orthodoxy, the ‘word as an icon’ is in fact a subject that has already been discussed from a number of rich and complementary perspectives (Lepakhin 2005; Trubitsyna 2010), but remains mostly understudied within the anthropological literature on Russian Orthodoxy (Engelhardt 2014; Kormina and Luehrmann 2018: 394–424).

Neither traditionalist nor reformist, Masha believed the Church Slavonic language was sanctified by the Holy Spirit. For her, the appeal of the liturgical language was its linguistic sanctity. Informants such as Masha advanced various linguistic ideologies of worship, all of which settled on the notion that the liturgical language permitted not necessarily an unmediated prelapsarian conduit to God (Kelley 2004: 66–87), but a ‘proximity to God’ (близость к Бору) at least. For these worshippers, the sacredness of Church Slavonic lay partly in its immutability and this correlated generally with their overall view of what Orthodoxy stood for. There was an isomorphism here: the liturgical language and the ethos of Orthodoxy interacted with one another to create a spiritual continuity.<sup>12</sup> For many of my church-going informants, the essence of Orthodox worship was that ‘things had to be done the right way’, and this meant that the old, spiritual language should be used as a means of accessing God’s grace.<sup>13</sup>

One linguistic ideology of worship that many Russian Orthodox worshippers I worked with (not just traditionalists, but particularly those who had studied the liturgical language) invoked was the idea that Church Slavonic

was the *правильный* ('right') language for the church because of its 'depth', 'beauty', and 'poetry'. Generally speaking, worshippers and theologians were in agreement that this sense of 'poetry' came from the language's remarkable conciseness, its ability to express complex feelings and sentiments in a very small number of words. It was suggested its 'depth' was due to the fact that it is extremely difficult to translate into Russian, and this is often used as an argument against reform of the liturgical language. The translator needs to have a good knowledge of Greek as well as Russian and the Church Slavonic language. I was frequently told that it was not always possible to achieve a satisfactory translation of the Church Slavonic into Russian. Worshippers spoke of this as if the language's opacity had an appeal in and of itself and that there was an intangible link between opacity and *святость* ('sacredness') or *духовность* ('spirituality').<sup>14</sup> In turn, this opacity gives the Liturgy some of its aesthetic power (aesthetics appear prominently in Russian religiosity): you can still feel an aesthetic connection to a language even if you do not understand it fully (Rastall 2008: 103–132). When one cannot quite grasp the meaning, the non-semantic features of the language, perhaps certain paralinguistic features or the stress, rhythm, and intonation patterns become perceptually more prominent.

Indeed, the first encounters with Orthodox materiality are often recollected as experienced on a sensory and intuitional level, connecting to 'something familiar and seemingly known, that one had been longing for' (Tiaynen-Qadir 2017: 2). Some of the Orthodox Christians I met referred to the sensorial atmosphere of a church as an intercorporeal phenomenon. Eisenlohr (2018) shows too the importance of sonic atmosphere, in this case in relation to Islamic religious practice in Mauritius.<sup>15</sup> Many

of my interlocutors spoke of intercorporeal sensations, embodied experiences, and a sense of apparent familiarity leading to an overwhelming peace, an awareness of a hidden dimension of reality. This was particularly felt during prayer to icons that adorn the church walls. For many, it was a feeling of being part of a higher world order. This was perhaps coupled with the belief held by many in the Russian Orthodox Church that Orthodoxy is the *original* Christianity. My hunch is that such comments were not meant as political. Worshippers hinted at *religious* superiority, but they did not speak explicitly of the Greater Russia (or its rebuilding). Nonetheless, these comments could be perceived to map onto semiotic ideologies (discussed subsequently) for it was once again predominantly the traditionalists who imbued Church Slavonic with a sacred essence that harbored these feelings.

Another worshipper, Tatiana, who is in her 60s and has been attending the same church for 30 years, also perceived both the icons *and* the liturgical language as portals to the Kingdom of Heaven:<sup>16</sup>

**Author:** How important is it for you that the liturgical language is not the same as the vernacular (Russian as a spoken language)?

**Tatiana:** When I hear the priest chant the Divine Liturgy (in Church Slavonic), I hear the voice of God. It is His voice that I hear. I do not understand every word. But, I think that is the point. God is speaking to me through the priest. If He were speaking Russian to me, I would be surprised. I don't think it would seem right.

**Author:** In our discussions, you have often described the Church Slavonic as 'beautiful'. What is it that makes it 'beautiful'?



**Tatiana:** Well for me, this is a language devised under divine inspiration. This language enables us to hear the voice and words of God. For that reason, it is very special. For us Slavs, this language is наша словесная икона ‘our verbal icon’.  
(Interview with Tatiana, translated by author)

The phrase наша словесная икона is frequently used in such discussions. It is a means of saying the liturgical language should be considered as a venerated feature of Russian Orthodoxy on a par with church buildings and the icons on the walls of the church. For Tatiana, the *spoken* Church Slavonic language was the embodiment of God; the *almost* accessible words were reimagined in her inner speech, enabling both a physical and psychological interiority that constantly manifested itself as a presence. In her opinion, had the words been in Russian it would not have resulted in the same embodied effect. The liturgical language was part of the благодать (‘grace’)—the sense of the connectedness to the divine.

The default assumptions regarding speech (Hanks 1996: 168), participatory roles, and mutual intelligibility are suspended in this spatio-temporal context. Relevant in this regard is De Certeau (1988) who asked whose voice is it worshippers hear? God’s or the priest’s? For Tatiana who had a reasonable understanding of Church Slavonic, this depended on which language was being spoken. When it was Church Slavonic, she heard the voice of God—the sounds of revelation; when it was Russian, it was the voice of the priest. The participants of the conversation were thus present, but the true identity of the voices could not be presupposed throughout. When Church Slavonic was spoken, the author of words appeared distinct from their animator. And it was perhaps the

distinctiveness of the language which reflected the relative authority of its words (Volosin 1973: 123). The switch to the sacred language could restructure relations between the ‘speech event and an other world’ (Keane 1997a: 60). According to her interpretation, chanting in Church Slavonic was thus (aptly) analogous to prayer as it sought to nurture interactions with entities or persons that would otherwise not occur.<sup>17</sup> The linguistic distinction between Russian and Church Slavonic was all-important for her and her views surely reflect the persuasive nature of ritual speech and how it can index divinity (Boyer 1990); it was only when she heard Church Slavonic that she became God’s addressee. It was the linguistic form that made the spiritual world manifest; the linguistic form was an experiential portal, for it had a similar transcendental agency to that of certain icons hanging on the walls of the church. For Tatiana, if liturgical speech practices were reformed, her implicit assumptions made about the participants would be shattered and the divine agency would be lost.

This interpretation suggested the role of the priest’s volitional agency in producing the Church Slavonic words was diminished, leaving the discourse decentred (Bauman and Briggs 1990). It would seem Tatiana was invoking here the distinction between a Holy language and a holy language (Fishman 1997: 11) where Holy languages are ‘those in which God’s Word, or the word of the earliest and saintliest disciples (...) was (or still is) received’ and holy languages classified as those in which God’s Word is spread. Tatiana was unusual in this regard and was the only person I got to know who expressed the distinction in these terms. She was not, however, the only informant who believed that the priest had incremental authority and persuasiveness if he could only be heard (and not seen) (Briggs 1993; Bledsoe and Robey 1986). As well as

many other things such as political structures and institutional arrangements, we might perhaps remind ourselves at this point that religion is founded on the subjective experience of an invisible presence (James 1902).

In contrast to this, those in support of liturgical language reform sought an unmediated access to this 'invisible presence' and perceived Church Slavonic as representing a 'closed' register, an obstacle in their path. Traditionalists might think of this as a kind of 'secularisation of the word' (Lepakhin 2005). In terms of linguistic ideologies of worship, they stood apart from the traditionalists who tended to reiterate the ideology of the sacred appeal of 'the not entirely accessible'. Traditionalists believed that a proximity to the Divine was facilitated through the idiom of Church Slavonic, but that this proximity was largely acoustic and vocal as opposed to one inextricably tied to semantic intelligibility. The idiom's agency flourished in the sonic atmosphere of the church, and not in any other context. The tension seems to revolve around the powers of agency, and whether access to the Divine should be intangible and spiritual, or more transparent and semantic. The latter and the emphasis on correct biblical interpretation feels of course more Protestant. This sacred-profane distinction amounts to a continuum of religious consciousness: some Russian Orthodox worshippers like the idea of a separate spiritual world (the transcendent appeal), others want a bridge to the spiritual world but for it to be separate, while still others aspire for the sacred to be entirely accessible in the pragmatic present. However, it should be emphasised that the various views amount to a continuum, and not a simple binary dichotomy.

The powers of agency aside, what is clear is that the ancient texts used in the Russian Orthodox Church are embodied through serial chanting. This embodiment conjures

up notions of worship which precede what De Certeau called the 'scriptural economy' (1984: 137) where writing was privileged over orality. For Tatiana, the prioritisation of orality as articulated through embodied chanting and repetition (two of the many features that are perceived to ritualise the service) gave these ancient Church Slavonic texts a primordial, transcendental appeal. The repetitiveness of the liturgy hints at the power of the linguistic form as well as serving to perpetuate authority.<sup>18</sup> And yet despite the effects of ritual speech's pragmatic properties, the text in the Russian Orthodox Church remains significant; the music is arguably secondary, and the only instrument allowed in the Orthodox churches is the human voice. But even if the text is key to the Divine Liturgy, the Orthodox service remains effectively a dialogue between priest and choir. There is much less focus on the written word and its precise biblical interpretations than in Protestant churches, for example.

When it came to the 'language debate', Tatiana was a traditionalist who felt it was important to preserve the use of Church Slavonic language. She was concerned that if the language was phased out, people would lose the connection, the bridge with God (связь с Богом) that Church Slavonic provided. At another church, some reformists suggested such an attitude is effectively a form of fetishism (my phraseology, not their's) (Keane 1996), but presumably no more fetishistic than praying to icons and thereby imputing subjectivity to inanimate listeners. She was not the only person who described the liturgical language as наша словесная икона 'our verbal icon'. For these traditionalists, the words of the liturgical language were sometimes compared to icons, mystically partaking of what they depict (Lepakhin 2002; 2005). From the worshippers I spoke to, it seemed that traditionalists and

reformists subscribed in fact to two quite different linguistic ideologies of worship.<sup>19</sup> This brings me to the crux of my argument in this article.

The underlying semiotic assumptions that the traditionalists made about the liturgical language were quite different from those worshippers who favoured liturgical language reform (Mathiesen 1984: 56–58). In a semiotic sense, the latter tended to perceive Church Slavonic as any other language—a system of arbitrary signs and logical relations (in the Saussurean sense) (Saussure 1916; Bennett 2011: 81; Kamchatnov 1999).<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, many Orthodox traditionalists regarded the liturgical language as something ‘embodied’ and experiential with a divine appeal in and of itself. For the traditionalists, the liturgical language becomes the language of God in the manner of some kind of divine ordination through its vocalisation and enactment, and not through its powers of indexicality where a sign points to its referent. Moreover, the liturgical language appears for them as something holistic and semiotically indivisible: the ‘sacred’ words represent a phenomenological form-meaning symbiosis. This effect came about largely through the habitual linguistic practices of chanting formulaic language: the fact that the words were barely intelligible gave the listeners the impression they were hearing little more than phono-semantic strings. Not being able to quite grasp the meaning of the words appears to have contributed to the notion that they were somehow divinely ordained.

These traditionalists were invoking a semiotic ideology of worship; the presuppositions they were making about sign use were dictated to them by the specific spatial and spiritual context where the liturgical language was heard. Such ‘sacred speech events’ triggered for them sensory modalities that included voice

and other somatic phenomena. This amounts to a semiotic ideology of worship because all the church-goers agreed on the function of Church Slavonic, but disputed the ontological status and effects of the liturgical language signs. And yet the same worshippers shared semiotic interpretations of church iconography relative to the transcendental world. I do not wish to suggest that all the traditionalists assigned a non-arbitrary form-meaning interpretation to liturgical language signs, but it was for them at least the semiotic ideology that they subscribed to that lent these words their ritual significance. Ritual meaning was thus enmeshed with views regarding the role of signs. These opposing semiotic ideologies do not have any real consequences as long as the language of the Divine Liturgy remains Church Slavonic. However, in the event of *complete* liturgical language reform, it is a moot point as to whether traditionalists would recognise any consequences in terms of the ‘felicity conditions’ of perceived sacred ‘performatives’ where certain formulaic words can bring about a concrete change in circumstances when uttered (Austin 1962; Searle 1969; Leonard 2020a: 914–28; Leonard 2019: 1–10).

Both the traditionalists and the reformists are guided by their respective semiotic ideologies; they interpret the same signs in different ways. These different interpretations are grounded in their respective linguistic ideologies (the belief systems that indicate the choice of idiom to be used in the church). For the reformists, the words of Church Slavonic do not show the way to God anymore than Russian words do. These signs do not represent a transcendent reality and do not introduce us in any special way to the mystery of Christ. We can see therefore that the reformists do not on the whole share the traditionalists’ phenomenological experience of the liturgical words in Church Slavonic. For

them, the form of the words is just as arbitrary as the equivalent words in Russian. Where the reformists are concerned, the words of the Liturgy cannot have any divine origin and do not enjoy any heightened appeal just because they are only partially understood. However, one ardent reformist, a teacher in his fifties, occasionally expressed opinions which seemed to undermine or even contradict this standpoint. In Sergei's view, Church Slavonic was a 'dead' language that had outlived its purpose. Surprisingly perhaps, he could however appreciate the appeal of a widely understood liturgical language and to this end wished for a new liturgical language to be created (surely an unlikely undertaking): a language distinct from both Russian and Church Slavonic that would be taught to worshippers.

According to the more traditionalist semiotic ideology of worship, certain linguistic signs uttered in a specific context can become to an extent inseparable from what makes them meaningful, and this is fundamental to the Merleau-Pontian phenomenology of language (Merleau-Ponty 1945 [2012]; Inkipin 2016). And so words do not just represent objects but *are* objects. These spiritual words do not objectify experience but *are* experience: the liturgical words were integral to the image, and not just indexing the image. This might be perceived to be a Wittgensteinian (1961: § 5.6) view where language and world are coextensive with the liturgy resulting in an experiential transcendence. It takes us away apparently from the *ideology* of the signification theory of language based on a form-meaning dualism. One might pause to note at this point that the nuns and theologians I worked with were quick to remind me that transcendence came through the Divine Liturgy as preparation for receiving communion, and not through icons or language specifically. Some worshippers, however, had

a different take on things, and for the purpose of this article at least their views are arguably more relevant than the presuppositions of theological doctrine.

In the context of Russian Orthodoxy as practiced in these Moscow parishes we can formulate an ideological dichotomy between what one might call Saussurean formalists (generally speaking the reformists, that is, those in favour of changing the liturgical language to Russian) and Merleau-Pontian phenomenologists (the traditionalists).<sup>21</sup> There are those who wish to democratise the language of the Holy Writ (or phase it out through translation) and there are those who wish to preserve what they perceive to be the sanctity of the Holy language as often manifested through its relative inaccessibility and its embodied chanting. It should be noted that I am only talking about semiotic ideologies of *worship* as pertain here to the liturgical language. The opinions and comments that were articulated to me bear only upon Church Slavonic, and not Russian or indeed any other language that is not generally considered 'sacred'.

Tatiana was careful to draw a distinction between what you might call the language of Gods and the language of men (my characterisation, not hers). Another interlocutor, Vladimir, whom I had got to know in a social context before discovering that he sang in a choir at a church not far from me, often alluded to a similar distinction. Vladimir is in his thirties and has lived all his life in Moscow:

**Author:** as a member of a choir at a Russian Orthodox Church, how would you say you relate generally to the Church Slavonic language?

**Vladimir:** Well, I had to study this language first as I understood relatively little of it. It is of course closely related to Russian. When I sing this language, the feeling is

quite distinct from Russian. This is a sacred language, and therefore I take greater care when I sing it, articulating it more clearly perhaps. I feel as if it is something delicate that you should handle with care. For me, if the language of prayer is distinct from the normal language, it feels more истинный ('true or authentic') and has greater impact. Maybe I think like that because that is all I know. I am not sure...

(Interview with Vladimir, translated by author)

When discussing prayer with my informants, it was common to invoke such a sacred-profane symbolic distinction when talking about Russian and Church Slavonic and to reference the liturgical language's distinctiveness. Vladimir warmed to the fact that the liturgical language is отличительный ('distinctive') and for many, it would seem, the appeal of this distinctiveness is enough to warrant its continued use. The service felt authentic when worshippers heard the distinctive language being used for the Liturgy. Hearing the prayer in the original language gives it an essential connection to the text and thus ensures authenticity. If they were cited (most Orthodox clergy know the prayers of services by heart) in the vernacular, I was often told the link to the original manuscript would not be the same. This appears to be significant for many Orthodox Christians. Vladimir and others felt as if the use of Church Slavonic symbolized the sanctity of the word itself, and in turn he felt a sense of sanctity when he heard the words of this language.

The singer, Vladimir, in particular spoke as if the 'beloved language' (Fishman 1997) had a soul or spirit of its own. Such assumptions of agency were widely shared amongst parishioners. These perceptions must derive in part from the fact that Church Slavonic is bound

so inextricably to worship and prayer. Were it to be used additionally as a vernacular, the linguistic perceptions forged would have surely been quite different. The notion of 'shared practice' (Gumperz 2009 [1968]: 66–73) is here extremely contextualized.

## CONCLUSIONS

Fieldwork amongst Russian Orthodox Christians adds to a long line of research which show that conceptions of language and linguistic registers vary widely, not only across cultures but intra-culturally (Silverstein 1979; Woolard 1998; Schieffelin, Woolard and Kroskrity 1998). Interlocutors framed their linguistic ideologies of worship by invoking folk understandings of semiotic praxis: the embodied spiritual language permitted a proximity to God. This article has shown how Russian Orthodox worshippers perceive the linguistic form (at an acoustic, and not semantic level). Unlike in Protestant circles, language is not the vehicle of the truth, but has an embodied value in ritual performance. As Robbins (2001: 591–614) shows, the internal relationship between ritual and verbal channels of communication vary from one culture to another. In a Russian Orthodox context, shades of two opposing semiotic ideologies of worship can be seen in the same culture. For the traditionalists, the words of the liturgical language themselves had a phenomenological undertone for they bore a certain relation to interior states. The same people wished to see a 'de-secularisation' (Lepakhin 2005) of the liturgical language as a means of (re)connecting to the divine.

Many of the Russian Orthodox worshippers I worked with navigated the semiotic difficulty of communicating with an 'invisible interlocutor' (Keane 1997a: 48) by appealing to an ideology of worship which perceived

the Holy language (Church Slavonic) as an experiential portal. The chanting of Church Slavonic throughout the Divine Liturgy was an embodied vehicle to access the Divine. For the more ‘traditionalist’ worshippers, the Holy language was something that made the presence of God more presupposable. This research has shown thus the effects of form on consciousness: assumptions about who is speaking are bound up with the form that is used and the religious context in which the words are uttered.

My fieldwork highlighted also the fact that in collective worship not all the participants shared the same assumptions about what was happening and where the voices were emanating from. These insights from a very specific language register help us understand how language works more generally by showing us the assumptions made about who is actually speaking and listening to utterances. Such issues relate to questions of intentionality and authorship which might be the subject of a subsequent article based on a larger sample of interlocutors.

It also came to light how sacred language is deeply implicated with underlying notions of transcendence, and for some worshippers at least the liturgical language indexes the transcendence of divinity. Hence, certain linguistic registers can lend support to religious interpretations and conviction. The priest is visible to the worshippers, but the words of his language belong to the sacred domain hidden behind the iconostasis and thus for some may ‘feel’ like a command from God (the authority and agency of the voice is heightened further if the priest cannot be seen for the listener is more inclined to ponder the source of the words). In this liturgical context, semantic intelligibility appears to be of secondary importance. Those who were most passionate about preserving the

use of Church Slavonic were often those whose understanding of the language was incomplete.

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## NOTES

- 1 Not everybody might wish to describe Church Slavonic as a ‘liturgical language’. Bennett (2011: 12) prefers to describe it as ‘hieratic’—an archaic version of a vernacular marked by non-secular usage.
- 2 Church Slavonic should be distinguished from Old Church Slavonic with which it is often conflated. Studied by philologists, Old Church Slavonic refers to the literary language of a limited corpus of texts. Church Slavonic emerged out of Old Church Slavonic but has been influenced by local vernaculars. It is an ecclesiastical language that can function as a supranational linguistic medium (Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Serbia etc.). Church Slavonic is the term used by Gamanovich (2001). Other terms include Russian Church Slavonic (Worth 1984) and Synodal Church Slavonic (Mathiesen 1972).
- 3 About 20 per cent of the people I spoke to said that they had a really good grasp of the Church Slavonic language. Church Slavonic is of course a closely related language to Russian, and most Russians can understand partially the language after a period of study. In the churches I attended, it was common for parishioners to have open a translation in front of them of the key liturgical

- texts. Haugen (1966: 280–297) referred to communication between speakers of different Scandinavian languages as ‘semi-communication’. The same might be said of Orthodox worshippers’ understanding of the Slavonic language.
- 4 At this stage, statistics are not available on the number of parishes that now conduct services largely in Russian.
  - 5 For Haeri, ‘sincerity’ is the relationship that the individual forms with the divine.
  - 6 Very recently, I have managed to attend the occasional service where a great deal of Russian was spoken. I think it is too early to draw any conclusions as to whether these parishioners behave in any different kind of way.
  - 7 On the whole, I did not encounter many of the issues that Weaver (2011a: 145–157) discusses. The reason for this might be that my fieldwork was conducted largely in Russian. Political issues were of course raised by my interlocutors during my fieldwork, but these observations bore little relevance on semiotic ideologies of worship and thus have not been included in my research. It might be noted that many of the people I spoke to felt as if the alleged close ties between the Russian Government and the ROC had been somewhat exaggerated by the media and the western Press.
  - 8 Her references to ‘energy’ may of course been motivated by her profession as a yoga teacher.
  - 9 One of my informants, a nun at one of the Moscow monasteries, broke her arm very badly. The doctors said they could do nothing for her. She was advised to pray at a certain icon at a church in north Moscow. It was believed the icon had special healing powers. She visited the church everyday for 6 months and prayed to the icon. Initially, she did not pray for her arm to be healed. She just ‘got to know the icon’. After 6 months, her arm was miraculously healed without any surgery or medical assistance. She referred to the reflexivity of the icon, and how the icon prayed for her.
  - 10 Cf. Weaver (2011b: 394–419) whose research shows how icons figure vividly in the experiences of her informants.
  - 11 The word *о́бла́к* can mean ‘window’ and ‘icon’: it implies an icon is a window onto another realm.
  - 12 Changes were made to the liturgical texts under Patriarch Nikon in the 17th century to make the Slavonic texts closer to the Greek. Patriarch Nikon’s reforms led to a schism in the church and the establishment of the ‘Old Believers’ (*старообрядцы*).
  - 13 The literal meaning of Orthodoxy is ‘right belief’ or ‘right worship’.
  - 14 The recent history of how this word is used is fascinating and is discussed fully in Rousselet (2020: 38–55).
  - 15 See also Harkness (2014), Kapchan (2008); Wirtz (2005) and Leonard (2021: 1–26); Leonard (2016: 204–214) for anthropological studies of how people see value in non-semantic aspects of language.
  - 16 Many informants spoke about bells as experiential portals too. The Russian Orthodox Church blesses bells. They often have particular significance for workers in the countryside who do not always have time to attend church. Working outside and hearing the bells made them feel part of the church service.
  - 17 For a broader discussion of the nature in prayer in Russian Orthodoxy, see Kormina and Luehrmann (2018: 394–424).
  - 18 As an example, the word *gospodi* ‘Lord’ is frequently repeated 12 or even 40 times. These repetitions are symbolic, referring to the 12 apostles and 40 days in the desert.
  - 19 Ideally, it would be better to speak to far more people to make generalisations about linguistic ideologies of worship, but nonetheless I do not think it is unreasonable to speak of such an ideological dichotomy amongst Russian Orthodox worshippers.
  - 20 As a tangent, one might note that some Protestant denominations tend to believe that language is the only route to God. They reject the fetishism of objects, and the Lutheran tradition (*sola scriptura*) emphasises the idea that words in the form of the Christian scriptures alone are the sole infallible source of authority: the Bible contains everything one needs to know in order to reach salvation. My concern here is solely linguistic ideologies of worship, and not theological doctrine.
  - 21 See Mathiesen (1984: 56–58); Cassedy (1994) and Mechkovskaia (2000) who touched on similar and related arguments. Cf. Fishman (1997: 12): ‘In the West we tend to associate the transition from the Holy to the holy with Protestantism, i.e. the move from the Holy language of God to the vernacular of holy people’.

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