

# THE STATE OF POST-SOVIET APHASIA: LACKING IN THE SYMBOLIC<sup>1</sup>

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... it is a matter not so much of expression accommodating itself to our inner world but rather of our inner world accommodating itself to the potentialities of our expression, its possible routes and directions.

--Valentin Voloshinov

Development only takes place in so far as the subject integrates himself into the symbolic system, acts within it, asserts himself in it through the use of genuine speech.

--Jacques Lacan

Among the questions that every new regime or movement tries to solve in the process of its establishing is a question of self-expression, more precisely – the question of finding a distinct linguistic style and linguistic sensitivity, of finding – to borrow Orwell’s term – a ‘*newspeak*’, to be associated with. Social changes thus manifest themselves as discursive changes, as changes *of* and *in* language, linguistic structures, and discursive practices. Correspondingly, the becoming of a new political, cultural, economic, or social subject is accompanied by the establishment of a “verbally constituted consciousness” (Voloshinov 1998, 15), which is framed by historically specific “limits and forms of the *sayable*” (Foucault, 1991, 59). At times, changes in discursive fields and changes of “verbally constituted consciousness” might be more telling, so to speak, than political changes themselves. In other words, socio-political changes can be approached through the transformation of “differentiated subject-positions and subject-functions” (Foucault, 1991, 58) that a “*discoursing* subject” (Foucault, 1991, 58) assumes within the discursive field under construction.

But what happens – subject-wise and discourse-wise – when such a (discursive) production of subjectivity fails to produce a speaking subject? Does the subject of speech cease to exist as subject, too? Does the subject’s speechlessness find itself in silence? Or does the subject’s inability to assume a certain subject-position and to perform a certain subject-function within the (dysfunctional) discursive field result in activation of different, substitutive, mechanisms that produce a subject who is neither necessarily a fully discursive nor a completely silent? By developing the concept of *the post-Soviet aphasia*, in what follows I want to examine a particular case of the discursive production of (post-Soviet) subjectivity in a situation when the very discursive field is going through a period of serious structural (e.g., semantic, syntactic, stylistic, etc.) transformation. My main questions are: Is it possible to speak of any internal logic, i.e., of the structure of this discursive change? How is this socio-cultural transformation of the discursive field reflected in the discursive practices? And, finally, what could be said about the subject who is to embody this transformational (or transforming?) discourse?

The main purpose of this elaboration is to attempt to outline a general theoretical framework within which to interpret the data I have collected during last three years (the major part of research was done in 1997). The textual material consists of 178 interviews and surveys, in which 15 to 22-year old Russians (eighty one males and ninety seven females) from my Siberian home town described their understanding of national and gender identity in general and post-Soviet gender and national identity in particular. By asking the young people – who were either high school students or first-second year students at the local universities – to describe three types of figures – the *Soviet* man/woman, the *new (rich) Russian* man/woman and the *post-Soviet* man/woman – and then to define their own position in regard to any of these three types, or to come up with their own models, I wanted to see how this largely post-Soviet generation would identify itself. And how/where it would (or would not) locate itself on the available symbolic map.

The choice of the group was determined by its unique cultural and historical location. In 1986-1989, when first important changes started happening in the USSR, the respondents were 3 to 11-year old. Their

perception of the Soviet regime to a large extent has been of a “secondary” nature, that is, it was mediated by their parents, mass media and general cultural and political climate. Ideally, such a position should have been beneficial for learning a cultural language of the “new,” post-Soviet epoch. However, as I will argue, this does not happen: the first *post*-Soviet generation remains somewhat locked up within a symbolically depleted discursive field of the Soviet period.

Before I go into the discussion of the phenomenon of the state of post-Soviet aphasia, a short terminological explanation is in order. For a long time, aphasia was understood as a speech disorder (literally - “*inability to speak*” in Greek) caused by physiological reasons, more precisely by a certain type of brain damage (see, e.g., Luria, 1970, pp.17-26). The structural study of aphasia initiated in the early 1940s by the Russian linguist Roman Jakobson has allowed for a different – utterly non-physiological – understanding of this type of linguistic behavior. In this paper, I would like to apply Jakobson’s analysis of aphasia, understood as a process of “*regression and disintegration*” of the individual speech (Jakobson, 1971, 13), to the post-Soviet field of discursive practices in general. This change of the *object* of study (i.e., a collective verbal behavior as opposed to Jakobson’s more individual approach), however, leaves intact Jakobson’s basic premise. Namely, aphasia will be understood structurally, that is to say, as a manifestation of *regression* to the previous symbolic forms caused by the individual’s *disintegrated* ability to find proper verbal signifiers for his/her signifieds. Aphasia, in other words, will be construed here as a *double* phenomenon that makes apparent discursive “losses and compensations” (Jakobson, 1971, 31). On the one hand, the term will indicate what Jakobson called “the ‘frozen’ beginning stage” (Jakobson, 1968, 15) where the desire to communicate is not complemented by the ability to communicate *something*; from that point of view aphasia will denote *the lost capacity* of the post-Soviet subject to creatively use language. On the other hand, following Jakobson, I will also understand aphasia as a *compensatory* type of discursive behavior, in which a lack of a new creative symbolic production (“disorder of output”) *is substituted* by complex patterns of usage of the symbolic forms acquired during the previous stages of the individual development.

### The Limits of the Sayable

When replying to my questions about their own national identity, majority of the students chose to identify themselves as the post-Soviet. But what does exactly this position imply? The following responses were typical:

*The post-Soviet man and post-Soviet woman? These are us – the ones who happened to catch the demise of the Soviet Union and who live now in a not-yet-settled-down (neustanovlenoi) Russia. (f-17)<sup>2</sup>*

*Post-Soviet person – I guess, that’s me, for I cannot describe myself either as a Soviet or as a new Russian. (f-17)*

*Post-Soviet people – the ones who have not become new Russians but who are not Soviet anymore. They are the main part of the Russian population – dreaming about old times while knowing that there would be no return of the past. (m-17)*

With some rare exceptions, what all these comments indicate is a certain feeling of being caught *in-between*: between two classes (*poor* vs. *rich*), between two times (*past* vs. *future*), between two systems (*Soviet* vs. *non-Soviet*). Certainly, this feeling of being on the borderline could be interpreted as the students’ reflection and projection of their own marginal structural location – *between* the family of their parents and their own family, *between* the school and the future job, *between* a situation of financial and social dependence and (anticipated) economic and social autonomy.

The interesting thing, though, is that neither of the poles that defined the students’ frame of references – be it the “Soviet” or the “new Russian” – functions in the essays as a site of possible identification. Both symbolic figures are seen rather negatively. For example, a female student describes the two alternatives known to her in the following way:

*A Soviet man? He wears the same shirt all year around, unshakable in his opinion and decisions (and he has the ground for that – “the Party’s directives”...). Woman for him is seldom of secondary importance: it is good if she occupies the tenth line on his list of priorities.*

*Soviet woman? Despite her own wishes and desires, her family is always overshadowed by her job problems. Work always goes first. Plus all the financial problems of the family life. In her early 30s*

she is already talking about men in this manner: "... those guys., what could you expect from them..." In other words – these are largely unhappy people with an abnormal (unnatural) life style.

*A New Russian man? Those who have a business bent are happy today, but what about all the others? ... New Russian man – is a man of will, who needs nobody. He is also unhappy... The New Russian man is a parody of an 'average American' from a cheap Western movie."* (f-18).

A male student gives similar, although less 'personalized', account of the alternatives nether of which is attractive:

*The Soviet Union – the leadership cheated the simple-hearted Russian man with his ideals of universal justice and his readiness to die for them.*

*The new Russia? Everyone wants to get as much as possible; everyone thinks: 'I can keep stealing until I am caught' – and thus our Russian society is falling apart* (m-17).

Yet another student, having described the Soviet past and the new Russian present, demonstrates a typical situation of not willing to identify herself with any of the categories available:

*The Soviet man and woman? They had faith in Communism, they were fixed on it, and on their work. Women were lacking in femininity. Men were sort of bossy, with brief-cases. At first glance they looked totally innocent but were corrupt and rotten inside.*

*The new Russian men? These are the hard-core bold guys with golden neck-chains, crosses and huge bellies. They are not especially famous for their intellectual abilities but they are certainly good in counting money. They are way too far from being perfect. They spend money easily for it was not hard for them to get it. The new Russian women are slightly better, but not by much. The new Russians look down upon ordinary people, but at the same time they are effective and business-minded persons.*

*I cannot relate myself either to the new Russians, or to the post-Soviet, or to the Soviet. I believe, my friends and I belong to a new generation that would be able to change life for better. At least this is what I hope for.* (f-17).

There is an interesting tendency in the way the students symbolically map their picture of Russian society. The extremes which they define – *the old Soviet vs. the new Russian* – cannot be easily and straightforwardly connected. The extremes are not on the same continuum; nor do they indicate the path to follow. The post-Soviet person is not the new Russian's embryo, nor is s/he an over-developed version of the Soviet one. Instead, as one student puts it,

*A post-Soviet person is the one who is lost in this world. The one who tries to find his or her self and who, despite the constant failure to accomplish this, has not lost his faith. Because this faith is the only thing he has (he is totally naked – spiritually, materially, and nationally)* (m-17).

I shall return to this idea of being spiritually, materially, and nationally naked later. Now I want to quote yet another example.

On March 11, 1999, a Moscow newspaper reported that the lower house of the Russian parliament – the Duma – approved a draft of the law "*About the State Anthem of the Russian Federation.*" The draft proposes to use as the anthem of today's Russia the music of the Soviet Union's anthem written in the 1940s. As the newspaper reminded us, this move of the Duma challenged the decision made in 1990 by the Duma's predecessor – the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Soviet Federation. In 1990 the Supreme Soviet chose to use as the anthem of the 'independent' (i.e., "*post-Soviet*") Russia the music of the *Patriotic Song* written by Mikhail Glinka in the early 1830s.

The 1990 decision, however, left unsolved one essential problem – the anthem's text: the lyrics of the *Patriotic Song*, glorifying the Russian Emperor and the Russian people, were utterly inappropriate in the contemporary situation. As a result of this political (or rather, textual) inapplicability, coupled with the inability to create a *new* text, for eight years the *Patriotic Song* – to quote a title of a famous Russian New Year TV-show – *the song about the most important* – during official ceremonies was performed without words.

The newspaper indicated that a specially created committee of the Duma had come to conclusion that it would be impossible to produce a text that would match Glinka's music. This forced the deputies to take a drastic step and – as a member of the Duma from the "Yabloko" party, put it – to replace Glinka's music with the less convoluted and more familiar melody of the Soviet anthem, whose lyrics are also yet to be re-written. The paper quoted a deputy representing the Communist Party as saying, "all the working people and

the working class are impatiently looking forward to the situation when Russia will finally acquire its new [i.e., Soviet- S.O.] anthem” for “we were born with the words of this anthem and we shall die with them.” “There is no reason to hurry with dying” – the newspaper comments sarcastically, “for there are no words so far” to die with (Korsunskaya, 1999).

I find these two examples – the wordless post-Soviet Soviet anthem and the students’ inability to find a proper symbol, a proper signifier in order to represent their ‘post-Soviet’ location very similar in their origin. It seems to me that, besides a clear lack of creativity, these examples reflect a more fundamental tendency of the individual and collective inability either to “put in words” normative ideals and desired goals of the post-Communist period, or to “express” the changes that have already happened in Russia. Despite (or maybe because of) the politics of *glasnost*, the gaps that separated so well during the Communist time one’s words from one’s thoughts and one’s actions have not become any narrower. Instead, as Andrei Sinyavsky, a prominent Soviet dissident, pointed out shortly before his death, there has been “an incredible devaluation... of words” in Russia (Sinyavsky, 1997, 75). As if, words not only “lost” their former political appeal, but also somehow became *meaningless*. That is, both *unable* to manifest content and *unnecessary* for this purpose. Thus the anthem remains without words, and the discussion – also symptomatically – is reduced to choosing among *already existing* melodies; i.e., the lack of “new words” is covered by the old (musical) symbols.

It is precisely this lack of symbolic capacity demonstrated in contemporary Russian society, a certain inability to express or to articulate the on-going social changes or already changed reality, it is the post-Soviet life “without words” that I want to discuss here. To put this differently, I want to look at the situation that is usually defined by linguists and social psychologists as the “expressive disorder of language” (Blumstein, 1974, 123) or as a “disorder of output” (Geschwind, 1974, 115). By using terminology and concepts of socio- and psycholinguistics, in what follows I will describe this situation of “wordlessness” manifested in the post-Soviet Russia as the “*state of post-Soviet aphasia*.” Or, in other words, as a situation that is characterized by a profound difficulty in bringing together a ‘world of words’ with a ‘world of things,’ a difficulty in mastering, managing the social world – even if only on the level of language.

The main questions certainly are: What are the reasons and What are the consequences of this post-Soviet aphasia? To answer these questions I first briefly outline the linguistic characteristics of this post-Soviet *aphasia* and then I offer my interpretations of political and personal implications of this symbolic condition.

### **The Loss Of Transition**

First of all, when I asked the students to find a proper definition, to find a proper symbolic frame or a symbolic content that could correspond to their understanding of their own personal social location, in fact, I asked them to perform an operation of substituting one word for another. Or, to put it differently, an operation which is usually called in linguistics and poetics a ‘*metaphoric operation*.’

However, as Roman Jakobson, a prominent Russian linguist pointed out, there are certain linguistic rules that accompany this operation of metaphoric equation. As he writes:

The interpretation of one linguistic sign through other, in some respect homogeneous signs of the same language, is a metalinguistic operation... Similarity in meaning connects the symbols of a metalanguage with the symbols of the language referred to. Similarity connects a metaphorical term with the term for which it is substituted (Jakobson, 1971, 59, 72).

To put this in a more straightforward way. Even a simple symbolic comparison presupposes one’s ability to master at least a couple of semiotic codes. Just to give you a quick example. A twenty-year-old female student substitutes the term “Soviet Union” with the following association:

*Soviet Union? It reminds me something grand, metallic but totally corroded. On the surface – light and shiny, but inside all the mechanisms are missing (stolen).*

What one can see here is how the ‘capacity to name’ and to interpret is realized through bringing together two domains – the domain of political terminology and the domain of a broader symbolic associations, which Jakobson calls ‘metalanguage’. Let me quote several examples that refer not to the well-known Soviet past but rather to a contemporary situation and to the students’ personal position within this situation. When asked to define his own location, a male student responded: “Where am I? I cannot associate myself with any of these categories – be it ‘Soviet,’ or the ‘new Russian’ (m-21). Another one puts it somewhat more resolutely: “I am not a new Russian but I have no idea who I am’ (m-20). And finally, “my attitude to the changes is

negative, and I do not see there any place for myself” (m-15). As I argue, this inability to find a ‘code’ with which to ‘dissect the knots’ of reality is rooted in the individual’s lost capacity to name, to refer to a metalanguage – the verbal behavior that is usually called *asymbolic aphasia*.

This lack of a metalanguage typical for the state of post-Soviet aphasia is, however, reflected not only in the difficulties with defining one’s *personal* location. Also, such an absence of a broader symbolic framework undermines one’s ability to get a *general* sense, a *general* meaning of a situation or, for example, a text. The following quote epitomizes this tendency. A male student writes: “To describe new Russia? It is a country whose future is unclear, whose present is foggy and contradictory” (m-17).

How did this disappearance of metalanguage, demonstrated on *the cultural level* by the wordless anthem and on *the personal* - by the students’ inability to find themselves on the available symbolic map, become possible? What are the social mechanisms behind it? I want to indicate at least two reasons of this situation. One of them has to do with the dominant political ideologeme while the other reflects the condition of post-Soviet cultural production.

In post-Communist scholarship, it has become by now almost a commonplace to say that “the revolutions of 1989 were not the bearers of new political ideas. Instead their shared ideology was one of restored normalcy, of a return to Europe” (Vachudova and Snyder, 1997, 1). Thus the term *transition* borrowed from studies of south European and Latin American democracies (Schmitter and Karl, 1994; Bunce, 1995a) was to represent – almost literally – a geographical shift, a unification of the previously separated Communist Eastern European and Eurasian archipelago with the democratic European mainland. This “geographical shift,” in other words, was meant to manifest the “wave of *democratization*,” that is, a *transition of democracy* from the West to the European East (e.g., Schmitter and Karl, 1994; 1995)

This understanding of transition that provided a more or less clear-cut geographic and ideological scheme for symbolic representation of the changes, was definitely present in the public discourse of political and economic reforms in the Soviet Union of the late 1980s. Suffice it to mention the title of one of the bestsellers of the period of early transition - Gorbachev’s book about Perestroika. Written in 1987, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World* called – somewhat imperiously – for a new world-picture in general, and for a new vision of “our common European home” in particular (Gorbachev, 1987).

However, the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the political, economic and social turbulence that has followed it ever since have resulted in quite a different public discourse of changes in Russia. By the middle of the 1990s, the democratic European mainland did not become any closer, nor did capitalist prosperity. NATO’s enlargement accompanied by heated debates in Russia made the discourse of Russia’s *return to Europe* increasingly inappropriate. Thus, after the decade of transformation launched in March 1985, the country apparently ended up at the same point from which it had departed, facing the same old problem – where to start? And the book published by Gorbachev in 1995, again, captured these social (as well as rhetorical) changes pretty well. The book title read, *The Search for a New Beginning: Developing a New Civilization* (Gorbachev, 1995).

The uneasiness of the “search for a new beginning” was made even more complicated during the presidential elections campaign of 1996 which squeezed the political landscape into one binary: *Communists* vs. *non-Communists* (see, for example, Mason et al, 1997). The 1996 version of ‘*transition*’ resulted from such a polarization, then, implied not so much a *return* to Europe but rather a *retreat* from carefully presented horrors of the Communist past.

On the level of personal comprehension of on-going changes such a juxtaposition of two symbolic constructions, which Michael Urban framed as “Communist phantom” vs. “non-Communist phantom” (Urban, 1994, 737), produced the *state of post-Soviet aphasia*, i.e., the state of incapacity to symbolically frame, to verbally describe, to reproduce on the level of speech the new social, political, and cultural situation. The negative identification with the Communist past, not counterbalanced or even supplemented by a ‘*new*’ alternative beginning, left the major part of the population locked within the old frame of symbolic (e.g., Soviet) references, forcing them to build their new identity on the basis of “mythic notions retrieved from the past” (Urban, 1994, 737).

Having said that, I must also admit another point. Certainly, to say that during the transition there was no attempt at all to envision a bright(er) future in a more pragmatic way would be a mistake. A strong campaign

that aimed to equate the new Russia with the Russia of the new rich was vividly articulated in the Russian media in 1995-1997. However, its emphasis on sophisticated consumption as the main tool of new identity construction could hardly provoke a mass appeal in the country whose economy heavily relies on barter and unpaid salaries. As attractive as it is, for a large part of the population the new (mostly foreign-oriented) Russian *patterns of consumption* do not cross the boundaries of the limited sphere of the imaginary activity, of the ideal rather than actual experience. Nor does the *figure* of the new Russian wo/man has become a model to identify with and/or to copy. In the following comment a student expresses this attitude to the new Russian style and the new Russian people quite clearly:

*New Russia? This is a murky time; dark forces – greed and cruelty – get unleashed. In front of the beaten up people lacking in any initiative a bright perspective of a fairy-tale society (i.e., democratic, law-based, etc.) was suddenly opened. What came out of this? You can see yourself. One cannot treat the mentality of several generations this way. For a long time our people had been forced not to look beyond their own nose and then abruptly they were pushed in a white-water of the market relations, the ones that demand courage, creativity, ability to take a risk and foresee the outcome. And yet some people got used to this life – they quickly realized that a combination of today’s chaos with today’s freedom may bring a lot of cash. These people are ‘new Russians’. I am very sorry that the combination of these two words – which are so nice and positive when separate – produces an awful picture of a nuovo riche whose basic principles are: “my life should be beautiful” (the “beautiful” here is exclusively a matter of the surface) and “when I am gone – everything may fall apart.” (f-19)*

Without distinctively articulated social and personal landmarks to signal the direction(s) of the transition, how the changes can be visualized and personally appropriated? What could function in this case as an object of positive identification? In other words, What can fill the post-Soviet symbolic void, then? As some commentators on post-Soviet cultural development in Russia have pointed out, its is a profound cultural nostalgia – an “epidemic of no(w)stalgia,” as it was defined recently (Ivanova, 1997, 205) – that frames the post-Soviet symbolic landscape (see also Mason et al, 1997; Koshkareva, 1998; Urban, 1996).

And this brings me to my last theoretical point. As I indicated, from the middle of 1990s the metalanguage of Russia’s ‘return to Europe’ or “to the West” became unavailable due to the external political development. However, this rhetorical retreat from the West was not counterbalanced by what could be called, following Pierre Bourdieu, *the field of post-Soviet cultural production*. That is to say, the field whose structural task is to produce a field of *symbolic meanings* homologous to the fields of actors’ economic and political dispositions (Bourdieu, 1993). As I argued elsewhere, such a structural underdevelopment (or even absence) of “post-Soviet cultural industry” – connected with but not limited by the unstable structural location of the post-Soviet political and cultural elite and thus the hierarchy of cultural tastes – is compensated by a relatively developed field of *cultural consumption* of the previous cultural styles – manifested most notably in the nostalgic and parasitic reproduction of the Soviet (but not necessarily socialist) aesthetics. In a situation of the *symbolic shortages* (that is, shortages of symbols) – imaginary or otherwise – one has to make do with the symbols s/he already has. In other words, one has to reproduce the strategy of the person who lost his/her creative verbal ability but not speech, and whose utterances are a “ready made” collection of clichés.

This fundamental lack of mediating cultural structures – or a metalanguage – makes hard for the individual to assume a certain subject position vis-à-vis social changes. And, consequently, brings with it the problem of subjectivity, the problem of one’s self-localization and self-description in regard to the processes that have yet to be loaded with graspable meaning. To put it differently, the lack of mediating structures coincides with the lack of ‘tools’ with which to understand the transformation. Without such tools neither changes themselves nor one’s relation to them can become meaningful.

The main aspect of this epistemological paralysis, however, is not *merely* symbolic but has a lot to do with the role of symbolic mechanisms in production of subjectivity and agency, in mapping out one’s field of possibilities and trajectories. Hence, the post-Soviet asymbolia correlates with the post-Soviet anomie: the loss of words with the loss of the self.

What are the political and theoretical implications of such a lack of metalanguage able to point towards possible perspectives? The unproblematic equation of the logic of the post-Socialist transition with clearly defined (political or geographical) point of departure and point of arrival does not hold true at least in regard

to post-Soviet Russia. In fact, confused and chaotic picture (if any) of the *post*-transitional condition reduces the conceptual usefulness of the notion of *transition* largely to its poetic, metaphoric function (see also Bunce, 1995a, 1995b).

When the final destination of the transitional stage is not accompanied by a corresponding field of cultural production, such a “transition,” instead of marking the new beginning, is more likely to result in active parasitic (“nostalgic”) re-use of the symbolic vocabulary of the previous stage. As a result, instead of the process of “passing *from* one stage *to* another” we might deal with the process of *institutionalization of the transition*.

Moreover, the epidemic of nostalgia might be an indicator of yet another tendency. On the personal level, as Donald Winnicott, a British psychologist and psychoanalyst suggests, a fixation on the “previously significant” pieces of reality (“transitional objects”) is usually sustained by creating an imaginary realm, a certain “*realm of illusion*” (Winnicott, 1997, 14) which acts as a “resting-place” (Winnicott, 1997, 2) alleviating the difficulties that the individual faces when entering a new (political, social, cultural, etc.) environment. However, as I suggest, in a situation of *permanent transition*, instead of struggling with the decoding of the new reality, a post-Soviet person might retreat into the “realm of illusion” using the already familiar objects as points of such a retreat. Or such a paralysis...

I want to finish with a yet another quote from a student’s essay. As she writes:

*The post-Soviet person is the answer to the old puzzle: “If it is neither fish nor fowl, what is it?” It is a crayfish. Same with the post-Soviet man – he does not know where he should move – forward or backward.*

Nor, as I suggest, does the post-Soviet person have a language to describe his/her situation. Except, maybe, for the old songs about the most important. With lyrics. Or without.

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Letters in the brackets (*m* or *f*) indicate gender of the respondent, number indicates his/her age.