
Preface and Acknowledgements

The language of Soviet science always fascinated me. Working on my first course papers after coming from what then was the Soviet Union to the United States for graduate study in 1992, I quickly discovered that the dominant styles of academic discourse in the two countries were vastly different. While American academics preferred precise, unambiguous wording, Russians often valued more intricate and vague formulations open to multiple interpretations. Pondering the cultural roots of this phenomenon, I was particularly intrigued by the story of the Soviet cybernetics movement, which made a bold attempt to introduce “precise language” into Soviet science. In this book, I explore intellectual, social, and political tensions arising from the clash of different styles of academic discourse. Ironically, this book itself is an amalgam of different styles: I tried to make the narrative both strict and imaginative, both direct and subtle, both impartial and emotional. The story I am about to tell has many dimensions, and I tried both to make it comprehensible and to preserve its complexity.

From Newspeak to Cyberspeak began its life as a doctoral dissertation in the Program in Science, Technology, and Society at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. After defending my first dissertation at the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow in early 1992, I could hardly imagine that a few years later I would write another one. When I was in Russia, my research focused on the United States; ironically, when I moved to the United States, I shifted this focus to Soviet science and technology. This book is the result of my geographical, cultural, professional, and linguistic transition into a new world. At the same time, this book is about the world I left: the country which since disappeared and the circle of Soviet intelligentsia which since dissipated into networks of post-Soviet intellectuals.

I still love that old world, but my feelings, like my thoughts and dreams, are now expressed in English.

My life changed after a fateful meeting with Loren Graham in Moscow in January of 1991, when he came to the Institute for the History of Natural Science and Technology to meet with young Russian historians. His great curiosity, vast erudition, and originality of thought have become my primary source of intellectual challenge and personal delight. As his research assistant for many years afterward, I benefited both from his material support and from his friendly advice. He encouraged me to come to the United States and did everything he could to ease my cultural shock. As my dissertation advisor, he trusted me to work in my own style, at my own speed, and never expected less than my best efforts. Finally, Loren himself has become for me a model of creativity and integrity in scholarship and in life.

It was my privilege to meet and work with many colleagues and friends, whose intellectual fire and hearty attitude made my work on this topic a pleasure. Members of my dissertation committee—Jed Buchwald, Tom Hughes, and Elizabeth Wood—sacrificed much time and effort trying to make my thoughts clearer for me. Jed not only allowed me to omit mathematical formulas from my text but even gave some advice on how to make the narrative more engaging. Tom posed pointed questions that set me on the right track. Elizabeth opened for me a whole new perspective on Soviet history and on “the Soviet language,” making me reexamine many conventional assumptions. I am also profoundly grateful to many American and Russian colleagues and friends who read drafts of various dissertation and book chapters and journal articles and provided useful comments and criticisms: Pnina Abir-Am, Mikhail Arkadiev, David Mindell, Anne Fitzpatrick, Hugh Gusterson, David Hounshell, Paul Josephson, Lily Kay, Alexei Kojevnikov, Nikolai Kremmentsov, Miriam Levin, Andy Pickering, Silvan Schweber, Mark Solovey, John Staudenmaier, SJ, and Jérôme Segal. I also benefited from personal and electronic communication with Mark Adams, Mario Biagioli, Chris Bissell, David Bloor, Nathan Brooks, Carl Caldwell, Andrew Jenks, Yale Richmond, James Schwoch, Asif Siddiqi, and Douglas Weiner. I am especially indebted to the reviewers of my manuscript for the MIT Press—Paul Edwards, Peter Galison, and David Holloway—who not only refused anonymity but also actively helped me revise the manuscript by providing frank and detailed criticism and extremely valuable

suggestions. My special thanks to my editor, Larry Cohen, whose gentle support and guidance allowed me to survive the ordeal of major manuscript revisions.

This study greatly benefited from my interviews and correspondence with people who were personally involved in the Soviet cybernetics movement: the chemist Iurii Adler, the linguist Vladimir Alpatov, the philosopher Boris Biriukov, the mathematician Akiva Iaglom, the psychologist Mikhail Iaroshevskii, the mathematician Iakov Khurgin, the mathematician Ol'ga Kulagina, the chemist Elena Markova, the philologist Susanna Maschan, the linguist Igor' Mel'čuk, the mathematician Il'ia Muchnik, the mathematician Nikolai Nagornyi, the mathematician Vasili Nalimov, the computer programmer Rimma Podlovchenko, the biologist Inga Poletaeva, the mathematician Gellii Povarov, the mathematician Iulii Shreider, the military analyst Oleg Sosiura, and the linguist Alexander Zholkovsky. I am especially grateful to the biologist Natal'ia Liapunova, who not only told an emotional and touching story of the life of her father, the late cybernetician Aleksei Liapunov, but also gave me the wonderful opportunity to examine the immensely rich archive of her father's personal papers.

My research would not have been possible without enormous help from the staff of the Russian Academy of Sciences Archive, the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art, the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History, the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, and the Central Archive of Social Movements of Moscow. Stanislaw Raczynski, Deputy Director of the Institute of Precise Mechanics and Computer Technology in Moscow, helped me access the archival papers of that institute. Elizabeth Andrews of the MIT Archives rendered assistance in my study of the papers of Norbert Wiener and Roman Jakobson.

My colleagues at the Institute for the History of Natural Science and Technology in Moscow welcomed me back every summer when I returned to Moscow for archival research, and they provided for me an enjoyable and stimulating intellectual milieu. Alexander Pechenkin and Kirill Rossiianov helped with collecting copies of archival and printed materials.

Special thanks to the Program in Science, Technology, and Society at MIT and to the Dibner Institute for the History of Science and Technology for providing teaching and research assistantships and fellowships that sustained me through the years of my doctoral and postdoctoral study. I also benefited from a short-term grant from the International Research &

Exchanges Board, with funds provided by the US Department of State (Title VIII Program) and the National Endowment for the Humanities. None of these organizations is responsible for the views expressed.

The most difficult problem of my cultural adaptation in the United States was to find my voice in English. My copy editor, Paul Bethge, tried patiently to harness my unruly metaphors and to find seriousness in my irony. I cannot thank him enough for his companionship in the search for an approximate English expression of inexplicable Russian thoughts.

Finally, my parents, Raisa Sklyar and Aleksandr Gerovitch, my brother Simon, and my wife Maya offered me the kind of love, respect, and support that nobody else could give. Their belief in me held me up at difficult times. Thanks to them, in the last several years I found home in a new land and experienced some of the happiest moments in my life.