

Summary of the thesis

Languages of Islam and Christianity in Post-Soviet Russia:

Institutional Discourses, Community Strategies and Missionary

Rhetoric

By Gulnaz Sibgatullina

This thesis investigates how a language that has previously served only one religious system undergoes a profound transformation to enable it to accommodate two religions; and how this transformation stems from and further influences the course of political, social and cultural processes in a given society. The focus of this book lies, in particular, on the sociolinguistic development of two languages: Russian, which today meets the linguistic needs not only of Orthodox Christians but also of a growing population of Muslims in Russia; and Tatar, which essentially does the opposite – from being a predominantly Islamic vernacular, this language has been evolving to also accommodate religious communication within Christian communities. In this thesis I have analysed religious variants of the Tatar and Russian languages against the background of socio-political changes that have taken place in Russia in the immediate post-Soviet period, from 1991 to 2018.

As a result of this metamorphosis – where Russian and Tatar are used by both Muslims and Christians simultaneously – the linguistic systems of these languages are evolving to enable them to perform new functions. The chapters in this book demonstrate in detail how this process influences the form of these languages (e.g., script, morphology and grammar), as well as the meanings that speakers assign to religious vocabulary. The scope of the research goes beyond just the linguistic effects, as I have attempted to examine these linguistic modifications in relation to the socio-political conditions in which they have occurred. By focusing on the religious authority that sanctioned and conventionalized the use of a language within new religious settings, the thesis also explains major strategies and motives for instrumentalizing religious language in the struggle for resources and power.

One of the central concepts of this work is *translation*. When analysed in its narrow sense, the term casts the spotlight, first of all, on the approaches used to render the meaning of religious vocabulary from one language to another. As this process is never

ideologically neutral, the case studies presented in this book demonstrate how translation serves as a tool to claim and exercise religious and political authority. This is often done by emphasizing or concealing an “us versus them” dichotomy or cultural “foreignness”, and by challenging or reinforcing existing power hierarchies. Yet in its broader sense, the term “translation” refers not only to the transfer of vocabulary across languages and religions, but also to the travel of religious knowledge, identities and narratives. The thesis examines these symbolic “relocations” by focusing on religious mission and issues of conversion from and to Islam and various branches of Christianity in Russia. One observation is that the linguistic and religious transitions have influenced the present-day relations between Muslim and (Orthodox) Christian communities and their stance vis-à-vis the Russian state. Moreover, the expanding functions of Russian and Tatar to accommodate several religions also have far-reaching effects on discursive constructions of ethnic and national identities in their respective religious communities.

The thesis consists of nine chapters and has the following structure. Chapter 1 serves as a general introduction to the scope and subject of the book; here I also discuss the theoretical framework, methodology and data that were used in the course of the research. Chapter 2 further acquaints the reader with the subject of this research, by providing an overview of streams that shape the discourse on religion in present-day Russia, and discussing the main trendsetters – from official religious institutions, via the state, to various social actors with varying degrees of authority. Thus, the first two chapters aim to set the stage for the case studies presented in the main part of the book, and help to illustrate the inherent connections between the actors discussed there.

The main argumentation of this thesis is built on six case studies that make up the two parts of the book: Part I contains three chapters on the Russian language of Islam, and Part II on the Tatar language of Christianity. The case studies in each part examine one of the three types of authority that, I argue, sanction and conventionalize the use of a language for religious discourse. These are: 1) official religious institutions and their leaders, 2) religious communities, and 3) individual figures (religious entrepreneurs) who challenge the status quo and dispute the authority of official religious institutions.

Part I discusses the actors who are contributing to the establishment of Russian as the new Muslim *lingua franca* in Russia. I start by analysing the discourse of an eminent Islamic leader – Mufti Ravil’ Gainutdin (Chapter 3), who belongs to the Soviet generation of “turbaned elites” and thus creates continuity with the Soviet forms of official Islamic discourse. Chapter 4 then looks at the identity construction patterns

within a community of ethnic Russians who have converted to Islam in the post-Soviet period, and through their discourse are attempting to create a legitimate space for ethnic Russian Muslims. Finally, Chapter 5 introduces the discourse of a former Orthodox priest and convert to Islam – Ali Viacheslav Polosin, who in the early 2000s attempted to empower the Islamic mission in Russian and now serves as an advisor on Islam to Russia’s high-ranking politicians. At the linguistic level, all three of these actors use a strategy of translating Islamic terminology – Arabic and Persian loanwords – into Russian, often resorting to the marked vocabulary of Russian Orthodox Christians. Their goal is to deconstruct the image of Islam as a religion that is “foreign” and “dangerous” to Russian society and to argue that Islam is fully compatible with Russian norms and values. Yet the three actors differ on the definition of these norms and of what it means to be a Russian. Russia’s official Islamic authorities employ the state-supported discursive framework of Russia’s “traditional religions”, one of which is considered to be Islam, to secure an important contribution of Russia’s Muslims to the country’s political weight and progress. To construct what he refers to as *rossiiskii islam* (lit. “Russia’s Islam”), Mufti Gainutdin draws on, among other things, the prominent narratives from the official discourse of the Orthodox Patriarch, particularly on the so-called “traditional values” trope. In this way, Gainutdin argues for equal resources and representation for Muslims and Orthodox Christians in Russia. Ethnic converts to Islam, to the contrary, promote *russkii islam* (lit. “Russian Islam”), which is injected with implicit nationalistic ideas and claims of moral and ethnic superiority of Russian converts over born-as-Muslims. The third case study shows how the strategies of the two streams can be combined to receive broader political backing from the Russian state: Polosin, himself a convert and an affiliate with the institutions of official Islam, today mediates between the Islamic communities and the state, reinforcing the nationalistic agenda of the state.

Part II of the thesis also consists of three chapters on the different types of authority, and examines the process of “Christianization” of the Tatar language. In my analysis of power hierarchies in this part, I start from the bottom – from an individual entrepreneur (Daniil Sysoev, Chapter 6) – and move upward via religious communities (the Kräshens and baptized Tatars, Chapter 7) to the official religious institutions. These religious institutions are represented by the three organizations that have produced translations of the New Testament into Tatar, thus filling the niche of the official voice in standardizing the new religious language (Chapter 8). All three case studies in this part demonstrate an approach to the translation of religious vocabulary that is similar to the one discussed in Part I: Christian religious terms are

fully rendered into Tatar by the existing Tatar religious terminology, which often maintains strong Islamic connotations. This strategy has been actively used by missionaries, as it makes the religion of the Other – (Orthodox) Christianity – seem “familiar” and hence acceptable to the target audiences, which in most cases are communities of Muslim Tatars. The texts that introduce Christianity via familiar Islamic terminology contribute to the construction of a religion that is Tatar in form but Christian in content, which makes the “non-standard” religious affiliation more palatable. In the communities that emerge as a result of the Christian mission, the Christian Tatar language serves as a marker of distinct identity that allows its speakers to distinguish themselves from both Orthodox Christian Russian and Muslim Tatar majorities. Together with communities of ethnic Russian converts to Islam (Chapter 4), these Christian Tatar groups constitute in-between communities that challenge the fixed ideas on the role played by the language-ethnicity-religion triangle in identity formation. In other words, they argue that one can be both a Russian and a Muslim, or a speaker of Tatar and a Christian. Finally, my analysis of the discourse of religious entrepreneurs such as Sysoev demonstrates that as long ago as the early 2000s there were already harbingers of an approaching conservative turn within the major religious institutions, especially in the Russian Orthodox Church. A proactive missionary agenda and piercing rhetoric in the style of Sysoev, which the Orthodox Church initially opposed with vehemence, have transformed within a decade from being “radical” to being “normal” in the public eye.

The findings of the thesis are summarized in Chapter 9. By contrasting linguistic practices in six case studies on Russia’s Islam and Christianity, I have argued that religious language – as a system of communication and a set of symbols – can function, first of all, as a mirror that reflects the socio-political transformations in a given society; at the same time, it can also be instrumentalized to acquire power and resources. In the case of Russia, the analysis of religious variants helps to elucidate the ongoing political and ideological convergence of Muslim and Christian religious institutions and communities, which function under the close scrutiny of the Russian state.

The big faith organizations in Russia are already forced to cooperate and develop an interreligious “dialogue” – however shallow and declarative-natured this dialogue in fact is – in order to sustain religious peace in the country. More importantly, as this research shows, Islam and Christianity in Russia are also coming closer to each other at much deeper and more fundamental levels. They are developing similar views on Russia’s domestic and foreign politics, similar doctrinal lines of defence against the challenges of modernity, and both of them interpret and protect

societal moral norms along the same conservative lines. In practice, this means that religious language is used not only to emphasize religious identity; increasingly, it also functions as a marker of belonging to the familiar and inclusive “us” group or as a manifestation of desired ethnic, national and political identities. As a result, Christianity and Islam are bringing about a *sblizhenie* (convergence) – a mutual movement toward each other (although on the understanding that the Russian Orthodox Church, with its gravity, will have to move less than the “light” and vulnerable representations of Islam). But the process is not without festering conflicts; in fact, the tension inherent to the paradigms of “us versus them” and Christianity versus Islam, which has characterized relations between Orthodoxy and Islam over centuries, is now placed into one joint box – the dominant discourse on religion, through which these two religions have to define themselves. The limited space within that box might increase the ideological tensions, which risks leading to physical consequences, such as sudden outbursts of violence.

This thesis also makes a valuable contribution to the broader field of sociolinguistics, as it further elaborates on mechanisms that allow a language to serve two or more distinct religious systems. By focusing on actors, contexts and motives that rely on religious language, the thesis has emphasized the *use* of religious vocabulary and its *functions*, which are embedded in the power struggles that go beyond religious denominations. The results of this research call for religious texts to be viewed not as passive sources but as instruments of domination and resistance, and invite a careful examination of religious language as a lens that might shed new light on the relationship between religious, social and political identities and their discursive constructions.