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Smerdjakov's Suicide Note

1.

„Smerdjakov's suicide note, like everything he says, has a touch of semiliterate about it and is not quite grammatical“. This is how Victor Terras comments on Smerdjakov's last words in his *Karamazov companion* (Terras 1981. 397). Victor Terras' comment is an understatement: besides grammatical awkwardness, there is also a well-calculated ambiguity in Smerdjakov's note, which contains two messages – one of them intended for his half-brother and former spiritual tutor, Ivan Karamazov, and the other for the general public.

The exact wording of the note is: „Истребляю свою жизнь своею собственною волей и охотой, чтобы никого не винить“ (PSS 15. 85, 22f). Its first reading is reflected in the English translation of Constance Garnett: „I destroy my life of my own will and desire, so as to throw no blame on anyone“ (BK Garnett, 346). In this reading, the note is perfectly grammatical, although somehow pleonastic („своею собственною волей и охотой“). This is probably the interpretation adopted automatically by most readers of Dostoevskij's Russian original. In the world of the novel, however, this reading is accessible exclusively to Smerdjakov's half-brother Ivan, since he is the only person to know that the servant holds him responsible for the killing of their father Fedor Pavlovič. In his interviews with Ivan, Smerdjakov had constantly invoked the common ground allegedly shared by him and his half-brother, thereby creating a sense of false familiarity between them. His suicide note is a last move in this game: by packing into it a meaning that is decodable only for Ivan, Smerdjakov manages even beyond his death to preserve the atmosphere of conspiracy that links him to his half-brother.

For those who believe Smerdjakov to have passed the night of the murder in bed next to the room of Grigorij and Marfa, paralysed by an

epileptic fit (this is the majority of the novel's characters), the only possible reading is the one reflected in the translation of David Magarshak: 'I put an end to my life of my own free will and no one should be blamed for it.' (BK Magarshak, 766). Translated thus, Smerdjakov's words are quite typical of suicide notes of the time, as shown by two examples from Irina Paperno's book on *Suicide as a Cultural Institution in Dostoevsky's Russia*: Я написал бы „в смерти моей никого не винить,“ – но чувствую, что эта *стереотипная фраза* мне не к лицу; *Избитая фраза*: в смерти никого не винить, отправился на тот свет по собственному желанию (Paperno 1997. 274, 277; emphasis added). Dostoevsky uses this stereotype in Stavrogin's suicide note: Никого не винить, я сам (PSS 10. 516. 4f).

If we follow the first reading of the note, *чтобы* introduces a final clause directly subordinated to the main clause *Истребляю свою жизнь своею обшвенною волей и охотой*. The causal connection holds between the propositional content of the two clauses: Smerdjakov kills himself because he does not want to blame on Ivan his killing of Fedor Pavlovič. *Чтобы* functions here as a semantic connective. If we follow the second reading, the final clause introduced by *чтобы* modifies not the propositional content of the first clause, but the speech act that Smerdjakov performs by writing it down. The meaning of the note becomes clear if we imagine Smerdjakov introducing it by an overt performative like *Заявляю, что...*: I leave this message because I do not want anybody to be accused of murdering me. In this case, *чтобы* is a pragmatic connective (Van Dijk 1979): it links not one proposition to another, but a speech act to a proposition. Another way to put this would be to say that in the second reading, there is between the first and the second clause of Smerdjakov's suicide note a shift from the communicative to the metacommunicative level, with *чтобы* serving as a bridge between them.

This type of pragmatic connection is not uncommon in Russian; here are some examples from contemporary usage (source: Padučeva 1985. 46): Где Иван, а то им начальство интересовалось; Если хочет, я там вообще не был; Пока я не забыл, куда ты положил словари? *Чтобы* не спутать, в котором часу завтра собрание? There are also many interesting examples in Dostoevskij's work. In *The Idiot*, Ferdyščenko speaks the following words to Count Myškin: Я пришел вас предупредить: во-первых, мне денег взаймы не давать, потому что я непременно буду просить (PSS 8. 79. 44f). This example offers a nice illustration of the mechanism underlying the passage from the semantic to the pragmatic use of connectives: if we discard the introductory phrase Я

пришел вас предупредить, i.e. if we view мне денег займы не давать not as a complement to предупредить, but as an autonomous modal infinitive („don't lend me money“), the connective потому что must be interpreted pragmatically. Our next example is from Snegirev's first dialogue with Aleša: Нет, однако, мог возбудить столь любопытства, ибо живу в обстановке, невозможной для гостеприимства (PSS 14. 182. 9f). Again, the meaning becomes clear if we supply the missing performative „Since I am not in a position to receive guests, *I ask you* why you have called on me“. Ivan's interviews with Smerdjakov provide us with two more examples of pragmatic connectives: Я завтра в Москву уезжаю, если хочешь это знать (PSS 14. 249. 40; spoken by Ivan Karamazov to Smerdjakov) and АН ВОТ ВЫ-ТО И УБИЛИ, КОЛЬ ТАК (PSS 15. 59. 25; spoken by Smerdjakov to Ivan Karamazov). All cases occur in dialogues, which is probably no coincidence: the construction has a distinctly colloquial ring to it.

To almost all of the novel's characters, it is the second and not the first reading of Smerdjakov's suicide note that makes more sense. But this reading, preferable as it may be from a logical point of view, poses a grammatical problem: the zero subject of the infinitive винить has the wrong controller (or rather no controller at all). The subject of the underlying performative phrase is the author of the note (i.e. Smerdjakov), the subject of винить the people who could (and should not) accuse somebody else of his alleged murder. This is why Smerdjakov's suicide note sounds „not quite grammatical“ – not just to Victor Terras, whose statement was quoted at the beginning of this paper, but also to the public prosecutor Ippolit Kirillovič (PSS 15. 141, 21-25): Повесившись, оставил записку, писанную своеобразным слогом: „Истребляю себя своею волей и охотой, чтобы никого не винить“. Ippolit Kirillovič goes on: Ну что б ему прибавить в записке: убийца я, а не Карамазов. Но этого он не прибавил: на одно совести хватило, а на другое нет?

The public prosecutor's remark makes clear another aspect of the meaning of Smerdjakov's suicide note: in its second reading, it triggers the inference (the *implicature*) that Smerdjakov is not the murderer; and this, in turn, implies that he holds somebody else responsible for the killing of Fedor Pavlovič.¹ Thus, the second reading of Smerdjakov's suicide is not just distinct, but in fact quite opposed to the first: the first denies its autor's wish to blame anybody, the second is an indirect accusation.

¹ This has been already noted by Morson 1986. 240.

2.

The peculiarity of Smerdjakov's suicide note stands out even more clearly if we compare it to the note Dmitrij Karamazov holds out to Petr Il'ič Perxotin just before his departure for Mokroe: „Казню себя за всю жизнь, всю жизнь мою наказую!“ (PSS 14. 364. 12). This note consists of two clauses, too, but the logical relation between them is quite transparent: the second clause repeats the content of the first. The fact that Dmitrij calls his note a „riddle“ is just one more proof of his naivety. Compared to Smerdjakov's, this note has nothing mysterious about it, and its translation poses no particular problems: the English versions of Garnett and Magarshak agree with each other almost word for word: „I punish myself for my whole life; my whole life I punish!“ (BK Garnett, 213); „I'm punishing myself for my whole life, my whole life I punish!“ (BK Magarshak, 474). On the other side, the chiasmic arrangement of the key words (казню ... жизнь ... жизнь ... наказую) and the rhythmic texture give Dmitrij's note a certain poetic flavour that is the exact opposite of the bureaucratic clumsiness in Smerdjakov's last words.

The insidious ambiguity of Smerdjakov's suicide note and the bragging despair of Dmitrij's are both perfect expressions of their character. Both notes were certainly composed very carefully by Dostoevskij, who was an avid reader and an astute analyst of suicide notes (Paperno 1997, Shneidman 1984). There is no doubt that the ambiguity of Smerdjakov's note was intended by the author of the novel. But are we to believe that it entered Smerdjakov's intentions as well?

It would be rash to answer this question only in the affirmative. Smerdjakov „embodies“, according to G. S. Morson, „anomaly to all possible systems“ (Morson 1986. 234). An aspect of this anomaly is that it is difficult, if not impossible to draw a sharp line between what he does intentionally and what happens to him by accident. His epilepsy attack in the night of the murder (first feigned, then real) is a pertinent case in point. True, Smerdjakov shows a remarkable „ability to manipulate language“: he „simply outmaneuvers Ivan in their verbal duels“ (Morson 1986. 240). But here again, he can feel manipulated, too, because it was in the first place Ivan who made him, a person of exemplary honesty up to then, consider murder and theft as permissible.²

So let us leave the question of intentionality open and limit ourselves to the observation that already at his first appearance in the novel,

² The „duality of voices“ inherent in many of Smerdjakov's words has recently been pointed out by Lee Johnson (2004. 77f).

Smerdjakov betrays a preoccupation with the linguistic mechanism that he (be it consciously or unconsciously) exploits in his last words. Chapter 7 of Book Three is called *Контроверза*. In this chapter, the two servants of Fedor Pavlovič, Grigorij (Vasil'evič Kutuzov) and (Pavel Fedorovič) Smerdjakov, argue about a Russian soldier who was taken prisoner in Asia and had rather preferred to be flayed alive than to renounce his Christian faith. Smerdjakov refuses to recognize the value of the soldier's act of martyrdom and supports his point with a whole array of arguments. In fact, he goes even so far as to contend that renouncing Jesus Christ in this situation would be no sin at all. The way by which he arrives to this strange conclusion is quite remarkable: Ибо едва только я скажу мучителям: „Нет, я не христианин и истинного бога моего проклиная“, как тотчас же я самым высшим божьим судом немедленно и специально становлюсь анафема проклят и от церкви святой отлучен совершенно как бы иноязычником, так даже, что в тот же миг-с – не то что как только произнесу, а только что помыслию произнести, так что даже самой четверти секунды тут не пройдет-с, как я отлучен, – так или не так, Григорий Васильевич? [...] А коли я уж не христианин, то, значит, я и не солгал мучителям, когда они спрашивали: „Христианин я или не христианин“, ибо я уже был самим богом совлечен моего христианства, по причине одного лишь замысла и прежде чем даже слово успел мое молвить мучителям (PSS 14. 118, 25-33; 119, 16-20).

In J. R. Searle's well-known classification of speech acts, the utterance „Нет, я не христианин и истинного бога моего проклиная“ is a declaration. Declarations are speech acts „which effect immediate changes in the institutional state of affairs and which tend to rely on elaborate extra-linguistic institutions“, e.g. excommunicating, declaring war, christening, firing from employment (Levinson 1983. 240). In other words, a declaration is a proposition that can (under the appropriate circumstances) acquire a positive truth value just by virtue of being uttered – a speech act whose propositional content is the speech act itself. Smerdjakov's fallacy rests on the assumption that this unity is only apparent: he suggests that in the speaker's mind, the proposition predates the speech act. By this sleight of hand, Smerdjakov manages to transform the declaration into a representative utterance, i.e. into a simple factual statement. The same kind of reasoning is at work in his suicide note, in which the final clause *чтобы не винить никого* acquires a completely different meaning according to whether it is connected to the speech act or to the propositional content of the preceding clause. In his argument

with Grigorij, Smerjakov artificially separates a speech act from its propositional content to build a fallacious argument; in his suicide note, he (deliberately?) overlooks their separation to produce an ambiguous utterance.

The analogy between Smerdjakov's argumentation in the Chapter *Контроверза* and his suicide note can be supported by two more arguments. The first of them is that, on the symbolic level, the renouncement of Christ can be considered as spiritual suicide. The second argument has to do with the fact that there *is* after all a reading that does away with the ambiguity of Smerdjakov's suicide note: we could regard *истребляю* as a performative verb. Then, the suicide note becomes an explicit performative utterance, and the possibility to add yet another performative with which the connective *чтобы* could be linked disappears. Of course, this means to transform Smerdjakov into a kind of supernatural being who is able to kill somebody (including himself) just by the force of his word – an idea that contradicts the fact that he was found hanged but that seems not so far fetched after all if we remember his close connection with Ivan's devil. Thus, the explicit performative utterance *Нет, я не христианин и истинного бога моего проклинаяю* prefigures the suicide note because renouncement of faith is a kind of spiritual suicide, and the suicide note harks back to the renouncement formula since it is so built that it can be disambiguated only at the cost of being transformed into an explicit performative utterance.

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