

Russian Language Of Islam: From Mimicry Of The Church Discourse To Identity Marker

Today a growing number of Muslims from different parts of the former Soviet Union prefer Russian language to ethnic vernaculars as means for inter-ethnic Islamic communication. As Bustanov and Kemper (2013) argue, this makes Russian the new major medium of the all-Russian Islamic discourse and leads to development of “Russian Islamic sociolect”. This paper looks more closely at one of its variants – “Russianism” - from the perspective of its functions in contemporary Russian society. The variant can be distinguished from the other two, “Arabism” and “Academism”, by relatively little presence of Arabic/Persian/Turkic loanwords standing for Islamic terminology. To name Islamic terms speakers of Russianism predominantly use words of Church Slavonic origin, adopted from the discourse of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Previous research suggests that in multilingual and multireligious spaces the choice of religious language is determined by the ideology about the function of the language and its relative power to carry out that function (Pandharipande 2006: 160). In post-Soviet Russia religious discourse that employs similar topics and vocabulary as produced by the Church leaders, has significant symbolic power. This can be explained by the current church-state rapprochement, when religion becomes a substitute for a political ideology and legitimizes power of the secular state. I argue that Russia’s Islamic authorities adapt the Church discourse to promote images of “loyal” Islam and to gain political and financial privileges from the state. *Muftis* contribute to legitimization of Russianism as official Islamic language and codify it by introducing new collocations, such as “Christmas of Prophet Muhammad” and “a Muslim church”, as a norm for the language. As the next step, this variant receives approval and application in the community of ethnic Russian converts to Islam, who see Russian language and Islam as main identity markers in larger ethnic and religious communities. Prevalence of originally Russian (Christian) religious vocabulary allows them to distinguish themselves from other, arguably more radical converts, who excessively use Arabic loanwords in their discourse.

References

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