Are the Russians Gaining Wordwise?

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Unclassified

A heretofore neglected aspect of the Cold War.

Many Americans do not realize that the English and Russian languages have much more in common than the word *vodka*. In my experience as a Russian-to-English translator, I have noticed many other similarities, including startling evidence that Russian and English are engaged in a gobbledygook race. Since Congress will probably never get around to comparing American and Soviet cliché production, I feel it my patriotic duty to bring these similarities to the attention of some of the millions of Americans who still think of Russian as some kind of unlearnable "semi-Oriental" language.

It is true that enrollments in Russian-language courses have been increasing slowly since World War II, but many people are still frightened away from studying Russian because it is written in a strange alphabet. Actually the alphabet constitutes only a minor obstacle. Everyone who has studied eighth-grade geometry knows the Greek letter *pi*. From that beginning, with a greater or lesser knowledge of the other Greek letters, he can go on to memorize the rest of the Russian alphabet. This purely mechanical problem of transliteration (the representation of sounds in different alphabets) has its own fascinations. Someday I might write an article about them, and include the joke in which the Russian words *amurskiy kazak* (Amur River Cossack) are translated into French as "Cossaque d'Amour."*

In the meantime, however, I shall just discuss words, rather than the representation of them.

First, Russian and English have many words in common. Most grammars point out that Russian and English are related languages, since both are descended from Indo-European, a common language that once extended from Western Europe to India. They point out that Russian and English share a basic vocabulary (for example,

*The transliterations throughout this article are based on the Board of Geographic Names system, rather than the NSA system, since words transliterated by the former system often have a less forbidding appearance to the average reader. While the transliteration "amurskij," for example, might, for various technical reasons, be preferred by language specialists, I think that it might have the effect of scaring off precisely the readers I am attempting to reach.

moloko-milk, sestra-sister). But the languages have had a separate development for many hundreds of years and this basic vocabulary has by now changed so much that only trained linguists can match up such legitimate pairs as *vosem'-eight* or *znat'-know*. Therefore, when looking for similarities that will help a person to learn Russian, we ought to disregard this basic vocabulary (family relationships, numbers, parts of the body, certain basic verbs, etc.) with a long, complex, and often unrecorded history.

Instead, we should emphasize only the comparatively modern words that Russian and English share. These include many words of Latin or Greek origin, such as *armiya-army, interesnyy-interesting, komfortabel'nyy-comfortable, psikholog-psychologist*. Many Russian words that look like English words, however, were taken into Russian from German and therefore show the effect of reverse English (to use a pool-player's, rather than a linguist's, term). The Russian words *konstruktor, fabrika, komandirovat'*, and *futbol*, for example, mean "designer," "factory," "to send," and "soccer," since they were derived from the German words Konstruktor, Fabrike, komandieren, and Fussball (= soccer).

Inexperienced translators often commit boners when translating words that "look English." Thus, they translate *professional'nyy soyuz* as "professional union," instead of "trade union," or *tekhnicheskiye kul'tury* as "technical cultures," instead of "industrial crops." They often forget that Russian also took in many words from French and Polish and therefore they ignore *Rule 1* in translating Russian, which is never to trust any word, no matter how similar it looks to English.

If this seems confusing, it may be comforting to know that the Russians share the confusion along with the words. It is reported, for example, that during the Russian uprising of 1825 one political faction that wanted the Tsar's brother to return from Poland and to assume the throne as a constitutional monarch, got the populace to chant "*Konstantin i konstitutsiya*" (Konstantin and constitution). The leaders of the faction were a bit abashed to learn that the populace thought that Konstitutsiya was the name of a wife that Konstantin had acquired in his travels.

The same confusion seems to continue to the present time. The word *poliklinika* (polyclinic) is mispronounced *poluklinika* by many Russians who feel that the Russian prefix *polu-* (half) indicates the distinction between a real hospital, with beds, and only "half a clinic," which only has out-patient facilities.

In the field of technical terminology, no such confusion about borrowed words exists. The Russian word *kreking-protsess* in literature on petroleum refining is actually translated "cracking process."

But there has been a campaign in postwar years to "purify the Russian language," just as the Nazi purified the German language by officially "recommending" the replacement of words like Telefon by nice German words like Fernsprecher. Hence it is now "recommended" that terms like *kreking-protsess* be replaced by purer terms like *protsess rasshchepleniya*. Notice the improvement?

However, new technical literature is translated into Russian so quickly that apparently Russian will always have a certain impurity content, such as *krosingover* or *tranzistor*. This type of word-borrowing can be handy for purposes of establishing scientific priority. A new Russian word *barn*, for example, was used as a unit of measurement in an article claiming Russian priority in the field of electronic microscopy. Strange to say, prior to that time the English word "barn" had also been used in that field as a unit of measurement, but only as a sort of joke at the expense of earlier experimenters who had grossly understimated the magnitude of nuclear cross sections.

English has done more than its share of borrowing words from other languages, but it has taken comparatively few words from Russian into the general vocabulary. These include the words *intelligentsia*, *soviet*, *samovar*, and *vodka*. Other Russian words are familiar to English-speaking specialists in various fields. The terms *chernozem* and *glinozem*, for example, are familiar to any American soil scientists. Most often, however, the terms for Russian concepts borrowed into English are translated, so that the term "black earth" as a scientifically definable soil type is perhaps just as current as *chernozem*. But the word *kolkhoz*, even though it is listed in Webster's, is undoubtedly not as common in English as its translation "collective farm."

The word *kolkhoz* is typical of many Russian words that actually consist of the first syllables or first letters of other words that are too big a mouthful for rapid discourse. *Kolkhoz* is thus the abbreviation of *kollektivnoye khozyaystvo*; *linkor* (battleship) is *lineynyy korabl'*; *Gosplan* (State Planning Commission) is *Gosudarstvennaya planovaya komissiya*. The Russian word for "higher educational institution" is *vuz* (rimes with "noose"), which is much quicker to say than *vyssheye uchebnoye zavedeniye*. The difference between Russian and English is that the large number of such words in Russian are used not only in everyday speech, but also in formal writing, whereas such words in English usually have a limited usage. Most English words like this are trade names (Socony, Nabisco), cable addresses (Genradco), official or service designations (BuPers), or occupational slang (lox = liquid oxygen). The English word of this type with the least limited range is probably Unesco, since I doubt whether

the word "syndets," which is used by a certain large-circulation magazine in this country, will ever entirely replace the words "synthetic detergents."

If the United States is behind in the formation of such new words, it is way ahead of the Soviet Union in the formation of tricky abbreviations. Apparently every new organization has to have a name similar to CARE (Cooperative for American Remittances to Everywhere, formerly Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe) or ACTION (American Council to Improve Our Neighborhoods). Even things thrown into orbit have to have catchy names, like MOUSE (minimum orbital universal satellite of the earth) or "Dyna-Soar." Russians can't beat names like that.

The Russian lag in the formation of cute abbreviations is analogous to the Russian lag in the formation of unusual first names. America has had a long history of unusual first names that extend from the Colonial merchant, Preserved Fish, through ZaSu Pitts, to current Hollywood names of the Steele Helmit variety. But only since 1917 has it been permitted to use anything other than a saint's name as a first name on a Russian child's birth certificate. Even so, one would think that in forty-three years there should be more unusual names than Elektrichestvo (Electricity), Stalina, Vil (initials of Vladimir Il'ich Lenin), and Ninel' (Lenin, spelled backwards.)

English seems, on the other hand, to be taking a leaf from Russia's book of rules on the formation of noun-qualifying constructions. Russian abounds in constructions like "I stepped on a lying under the table cat." For the time being, I shall not discuss whether this is more or less "funny-sounding" than the comparable German "I stepped on an under the table lying cat" or "I have on an under the table lying cat ge-stepped." "Funny-sounding" or not, constructions similar to the Russian ones (but with lots of hyphens thrown in) are apparently becoming more frequent in English. In addition to television commercials urging us to buy the "kind-to-your-hands lotion with the kind-to-your-pocketbook price," we encounter such constructions in print. A magazine tells us that the best way to keep a bathroom sink unclogged is to make regular use of "a specially-prepared-for-that-purpose cleaner." And a letter to the editor of a Washington, D. C. newspaper states that the conversion of Rock Creek Park to a throughway would be comparable to an attempt to "slice up the original copy of our Constitution into more-convenient-for-the-Great-American-public-to-look-at pieces." I'm afraid, however, that we have a long way to go before we can match the following sentence that appeared in a recent Soviet scientific journal: "The Presidium proposes the confirmation of the in-

detail-worked-out-and-preliminarily-widely-discussed-and-approved-by-last-year's-June-meeting-of-the-Academy text of the Charter."

Another feature that Russian and English technical literature share is the perhaps universal tendency to use cliches. Many Russian cliches are translations of German ones (*tselyy ryad* = eine ganze Reihe = "a number," literally "a whole row"; *imet' znacheniye* = Bedeutung haben = "to be important," literally "to have significance"; *igrat' rol'* = eine Rolle spielen = "to play a role"). I find it refreshing to think that Russian stylists undergo the same agonies as English ones in trying to stamp out these hackneyed expressions. Russian stylists complain, for example, about expressions like *tselyy ryad voprosov* (literally, "a whole row of questions"). They ask sarcastically, "Isn't there ever half a row?" Furthermore, they say, writers cannot even keep the cliches straight, but use expressions like *imet' rol'* ("to have a role") and *igrat' znacheniye* ("to play importance"). But Russian purists, like English purists, will never win: cliché-wise or weird-innovation-wise, many things keep getting into print that shouldn't.

In my work as translator I have always enjoyed recognizing old clichés as they come up in Russian, much as the executioner during the Reign of Terror must have enjoyed the arrival of each new tumbrel. I delight in finding what I think is confirmation of my theory that there must be some universal law that makes all electrical engineers, whether they be American, Russian, Japanese, or Javanese, write "Then the process of the flipping of the switch was accomplished by the author of this article," instead of "Then I flipped the switch."

At least one confirmation of this linguistic universality is the way that "literally" in the sense of "not literally" seems to have taken hold in Russian. My collection of English sentences that include "The audience remained literally glued to their seats" and "His eyes literally popped out of his head," has been enriched by two occurrences of the Russian word *bukval'no* in just as nonliteral environments. One sentence states that after a person had kept anxious reporters waiting for several hours while he gave his report to his superior, he finally emerged and "was literally bombarded with questions." The scene that evokes! Impatient reporters petulantly writing down their questions on slips of paper, chewing them into spitballs, and just waiting for M-minute. The other sentence is one in which a prerevolutionary Russian rifle team was so humiliated at finishing last at a Stockholm championship match that they did not even wait for the distribution of the prizes, but "literally ran all the way home to Saint Petersburg in disgrace." I assure you that the work involved in learning the Russian alphabet was small compared

to the joy with which I can still recreate the scene of the skunked Russian team dog-trotting through the snow, sobbing uncontrollably, past a cluster of uncomprehending Lapplanders.