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## Review: *An Introductory Course for Heritage Learners of Russian*

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**Dubinina, Irina, and Olesya Kisselev. 2019. *Rodnaya rech': An Introductory Course for Heritage Learners of Russian*. Washington DC: Georgetown University Press. 304 pages.**

*Rodnaya rech'* is a welcome newcomer to a rather empty field of modern Russian heritage language textbooks, previously represented on the US market only by the 2002 *Russian for Russians* textbook by Olga Kagan, Tatiana Akishina and Richard Robin. As a long-time instructor of heritage speaker courses, I have been using a combination of some parts of Olga Kagan's book and dozens of pages of my own materials, which came together in an overcrowded course pack in need of a major makeover. Therefore, I am very excited to see a new textbook finally hit the market.

*Rodnaya rech'* is designed to reflect the needs of heritage speakers, namely those who have a range of listening and speaking skills, but low to no reading and writing skills. The goals of the textbook, according to its authors, are as follows: 1) "to address the reduced morphological repertoire of heritage learners, especially in the nominal and pronominal declension systems," 2) "to expand learner's vocabulary knowledge," 3) "to provide heritage learners with opportunities to explore their bilingual and bicultural world and to express their bilingual and bicultural selves" (pp. xv-xvi). In my experience, these seem to be the basic goals that heritage language instructors hope to achieve. An ideal beginner heritage language course, in my opinion, should teach the Russian morphology (primarily case and verb endings) while expanding the vocabulary base in the modern cultural context. I find that *Rodnaya rech'* fully serves this purpose.

The book includes 12 chapters, an electronic workbook with corresponding icons in the textbook for suggested places to assign the activities (free for instructors, available for purchase for students), and Instructor's Manual and a Student Self-Study Guide (both are free on the website). Each chapter, except the introductory chapter and Chapter 11, is organized around a lexical/cultural topic, and each chapter title begins with "Как говорить...": e.g., "Как говорить о семье и друзьях," "Как говорить об учёбе," etc. Each chapter consists of three main sections: 1) В центре внимания: значение слова, 2) В центре внимания: форма слова, and 3) Подводим итоги. The first

part focuses on the vocabulary in a way that addresses the potential problems heritage students might encounter. It also includes some short texts for reading. The level of conscious analysis expected of students in this part is impressive: the beginning of each chapter offers the students to recognize in what way they are familiar with a list of words (i.e., “Never heard of it,” “Heard of it and can guess the meaning,” “Can explain the meaning and think of synonyms,” etc.). This encourages the students to access the depths of their intuitive or background knowledge, something that is uniquely beneficial for heritage learners. (The last part of each chapter offers a chance to revisit the same vocabulary after having worked on it and determine whether the student’s responses to the same questions will now be different.) The vocabulary section also provides opportunities for discussions based on the topic of the chapter, using the new words. Additionally, I find it useful that instructions for each exercise are given in both Russian and English.

The second part focuses on grammar and syntax. These parts introduce students to case, verbal tense and aspect, and other morphological and structural material in a heritage speaker appropriate way. The explanations offer the two-step approach: first, the students are introduced to the basic “simplified” idea of the grammar topic, like basic adjective endings “-ый, -ая, -ое, -ые,” and the fact that they have to correspond to the gender of the noun. After that, some chapters have a section called “Nuances/Нюансы” or “Tricky aspectual pairs/Сложные видовые формы)” which develop this introductory idea into a proper rule (in this case, the 7-letter rule) and a full chart, or otherwise expand on the introductory knowledge. This is an excellent feature as it eases the students into the full grammar, again building on their native intuition.

Another strong feature of this book—something I myself always do in class—is giving the students a chance to predict the “behavior” of certain grammatical elements. The book asks the students to anticipate the rules by posing questions, such as, “What do you think the following nouns should do in this environment?” or “What conclusions can you draw about the soft sign noun endings?” In my heritage classes, I find it extremely important to work with the learners’ intuition and to teach them to recognize the situations when they can trust it (as opposed to

situations when they should obey the rules and not what they “hear”). I find that *Rodnaya Rech'* does an excellent job of taking this approach into consideration.

The electronic workbook is a needed addition to the textbook, because it is a good idea to have a separate set of homework exercises on top of the printed textbook. All chapters have exercises for practice in class, and sections for each part called “Рабочая тетрадь” with a computer icon indicating that this can be found in the electronic workbook (with exercise numbers pertaining to the previous topic). Unfortunately, the workbook was not available to me at this time, so I cannot evaluate it. The same is true for the Instructor’s Manual and Student Self-Study Guide.

One unexpected feature of this book is that it does not include an introduction to Russian cursive or handwriting. I believe that it is important for heritage students to learn to read and write Russian longhand. It teaches them to read handwritten notes, which may soon be destined to become a thing of the past but are still used by the majority of the Russian native speakers, such as notes from their grandparents, or an instructor’s comments on the margins of their assignments. Additionally, the visual-motoric component of handwriting arguably provides a faster and more solid learning curve.

I also found the order of presenting grammatical material to be unusual. The first half of the book heavily focuses on verbs, including verbal aspect in Chapter 3. In my experience, verbal aspect is not a beginner topic for heritage speakers, nor are motion verbs (discussed in Chapter 7). Such students usually have serious lacunae in case endings, so I find it more important to focus on cases early on, with verb conjugations mixed in, and move on to the full verbal system only later. However, in *Rodnaya Rech'*, the first case to be presented in detail after the introduction to the concept of case, is Genitive, arguably the most difficult and nuanced one in terms of usage and endings. Prepositional case (which is the easiest) is presented in Chapter 9. Instructors may consider switching the order of the chapters, which should affect the overall efficacy of the book. On the whole, however, *Rodnaya Rech'* seems to be a solid and well-conceived textbook. I am looking forward to trying it in my classroom in the future.

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