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Review Essay: Popularizing Russian Language

Michael S. Gorham

Levontina, Irina (2010). *Russkii so slovarem*. Moscow: Izdatel'skii tsentr "Azbukovnik". 364 pp.

Guseinov, Gasan (2012). *Nulevye na konchike iazyka: Kratkii putevoditel' po russkomu diskursu*. Moscow: Izdatel'skii dom Delo. Index. 240 pp.

Krongauz, Maksim (2013). *Samouchitel' Olbanskogo*. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo AST. Illustrations. Index. 416 pp.

In an era rife with complaints over the degradation of language in the face of a host of commonly cited bugaboos (inferior schools, lazy pupils, declining morals, insidious new media technologies), one can only be heartened by the fact that language and language usage continue to be a source of popular discussion and debate. Even in American culture, where reverence for the national tongue has historically paled compared to the likes of France and Russia, one can find regular language-related rubrics in both print and broadcast media (e.g. "Word on the Street" and "Week in Words" [*Wall St. Journal*], "On Language" [a regular feature in *The New York Times* until February 2011], "A Way With Words" [*National Public Radio*]).

So much more the case in Russia, where popular books and shows on language date back well into the Soviet era and continue even through the tumultuous decades following the Soviet Union's collapse. The classic radio show *Radio Niania* may not have survived the transition, but language shows with a more modern twist, such as *Govorim po-russki*, which has aired on Sundays on Ekho Moskvyy since the late 1990s, and several others have filled the void—along with the plethora of books on language geared toward a popular reading audience.

So why, one wonders, all the interest in a topic that has been such a source of pain and suffering for generations of schoolchildren across eleven time zones? Part of the answer may actually rest in that common

schooling shared by all citizens, which is instilled in them from an early age, first, a belief that their national tongue was a sacred object whose mastery automatically initiated them into a rich cultural tradition that, more than most anything else, made Russians Russian and proud of it. At the same time, the schooling beat into their brains the fact that, so long as they did not master the tongue as perfectly as the patriarchs of the literary language (and they inevitably did not), they were somehow inferior linguistically, culturally, and even morally and spiritually. These dual motivating factors—the idea that how we speak largely defines who we are and the underlying awareness that our speaking and writing never quite meet the lofty standards of the literary language (and in Russia they speak of “literary language,” not just “standard” language)—combine to engage adults from a range of backgrounds.

Of course, it helps matters greatly a) when the language in question is undergoing particularly acute changes due to broader transformations in a society in flux, and b) when the forays into language are done on a voluntary basis (i.e., not force-fed by the school curriculum) and with the guidance of language specialists with a keen mastery of contemporary language and a deft pen capable of engaging their audiences in a manner closer to entertainment than medicine. Each of the authors of the three books discussed in this essay carry the credentials of bona fide specialists able to talk about language in an engaging and popular manner. Irina Levontina earned her *kandidat* degree from the Moscow State University Philology Department, works in the theoretical semantics section of the Academy of Science’s Russian Language Institute, and writes regular language columns for both print and web-based news outlets. Gasan Guseinov is a Doctor of Philology, Classics scholar, Professor at Moscow State and the School of Higher Economics, and author of books, columns, and blogs devoted to contemporary Russian language culture. Maksim Krongauz is a Doctor of Philology, Professor, Director of the Linguistics Institute at the Russian State University for the Humanities, and author of numerous books, articles, and columns devoted to language matters. Despite their elite pedigrees, all three authors share the ability to write in an engaging fashion. Indeed, all three appear as regularly featured guest specialists in a variety of popular electronic and online venues, as well—a topic to be addressed in future review essays.

The very strength of their ability to engage language matters in a popular manner carries a downside for more academically oriented

readers looking for coherent lines of argumentation and analytical depth in the books. While all three feature numerous glimpses of interpretive insight, the insights remain splintered across essays, rather than directed toward some overarching thesis. However, to subject them to the test of analytical rigor is largely to miss the point of the books. Their primary goal is to address matters of language and contemporary speech culture that are new, odd, trendy, troubling, or otherwise noteworthy—and possibly puzzling—to everyday users.

For the most part, all three authors do so in an ideologically neutral manner, assuming that language is as it is for good reason and will, in the end, sort out extraneous fashion from words and phrases that for one reason or another, deserve a right to linguistic citizenship. Levontina clearly stakes out her own language ideology in the preface of *Russkii so slovarem*, stating that language change is natural, particularly in times of radical change, and that, “If a new word or a new meaning to an old word takes root in a language, it means it is somehow needed by that language—that a new concept, a new understanding for which there is no adequate linguistic shell has entered our consciousness, our culture” (9).

Levontina divides the book into eleven chapters, each containing between eight and sixteen thematically linked essays. The early chapters dealing with new lexical trends are the strongest—addressing loanwords, neologisms, and extant Russian words that have taken on new meaning or markedness. Of particular interest are those observations that clearly link language to a newly emerging Russian mindset—such as the attempts, in post-Soviet Russian, to come up with an equivalent for English’s *challenge*, and the new positive use of formerly negatively marked terms such as *карьер*, *амбиция*, and *уверенность* (20-21). *Успешный*, Levontina likewise reminds us, only recently has been used to describe people, rather than just actions (16-19). If they can avoid gross cultural stereotypes, such examples often provide intriguing insight into cross-cultural differences and the changing values and/or worldview of the target culture (“here, we’re dealing not just with the change in the semantics of specific words, but rather with the reconstitution [обновление] of an entire fragment of a linguistic view of the world” [19-20]).

Of similar interest are the author’s observations on the consumer culture’s contribution to the new Russian lexicon. In her discussion of *комфортный*, for instance, Levontina distinguishes it from *удобный* and

уютный, arguing that it “has made its way into Russian in order to describe one of the most important values of the new age of consumption: in the course of life, while tending to personal affairs, people must constantly receive pleasure—[but a pleasure which is] not too noticeable, nor distracts them from their affairs” (60).

In Chapter Four, Levontina takes on an eternal bugaboo of language purists—loanwords that come into fashion when, on the surface, there seem to be perfectly fine equivalents in Russian. Why borrow bizarre-sounding terms like *креатив*, for instance, when Russian already has *творчество*? In a deft anti-prescriptive twist, Levontina turns the argument on its head, suggesting that, in fact, these seemingly barbarous words actually *protect* the existing words from devaluation—or profanization—in the wake of invading Western phenomena:

“В появление смешных слов *креативщик* и *креативить* можно увидеть не отсутствие уважения к великому и могучему русскому языку, а, наоборот, подсознательное следование его матрице. Для русского языка, как известно, характерно своеобразное “двоемирие”—удвоение важных понятий, разделение их на “горний” и “дольний” варианты: *благо* и *добро*, *истина* и *правда*, *долг* и *обязанность*.... А вот теперь еще новая пара: *творчество* и *креатив*.” (133)

With the introduction of the more “earthly” variants, the lofty options may be preserved to describe the truly sacred work of the poets, rather than risk being vulgarized by the jingles of Russia’s new ad men and women.

In some cases, Levontina argues, Russia is actually handicapped due to the absence of terms to express key concepts: *частная собственность*, she claims, simply does not carry the same meaning as *private property* (one is better off posting a sign reading “Осторожно, злая собака” to protect one’s space, she quips [153]), and this is indicative of a larger problem: “В российском обществе представление о собственности еще совсем не укоренилось. Мы не видим разницы между хозяином, который владеет чем-то, и чиновником, который это что-то контролирует. Главное, кто может распоряжаться, заказывать музыку” [154].

While most of Levontina’s observations are incisive, the reader gets somewhat weary by the book’s end of the anecdotal trope used to introduce many of the essays (“Смотрела я как-то передачу...” [98], “Недавно у меня прозошел смешной разговор с одной знакомой...”

[155], “Недавно по телевизору показывали...” [216], “Один мой коллега говаривал...” [305]). The device underscores the fractured origin of the original pieces: even in a book geared toward popular consumption, one would like to see a bit more attention devoted to overarching trends and themes. Still more problematic is the frequent lack of coherent guideposts that would allow the more targeted reader to locate and focus on specific language phenomena of interest. Essay titles frequently offer no indication as to the topic under discussion below (e.g., “Кенгуру и верблюды” for a discussion of the misuse of *харизм* and *бедуин* [185–86]). The fact that the publisher opted not to include even a basic index of key words and phrases makes matters worse. While the book is, for the most part, an entertaining read from cover to cover, the language instructor rushing to locate Levontina’s incisive justification of *креатив* over *творчество* will be at a loss in the absence of good reading notes.

In *Nulevye na konchike iazyka*, Gasan Guseinov acknowledges the relatively arbitrary organization of content by structuring the book around the key words and phrases listed in alphabetical order (which, along with the keyword index, makes it easy for readers to pick and choose based on interest and need). Averaging 3-4 pages in length, the entries feature insightful and engagingly crafted observations on 71 different words and phrases. Although oriented more toward political discourse than Levontina’s lexicon, the list largely defies categorization, with entries covering such varied topics as politics (“Власть,” “Медвепуть, или Тандем,” “Мочить в сортире и выковыривать”), history (“СССР,” “Сталин и сталинизм—2010”), the Internet (“Блоггер против блогера,” “Вебдваноль,” “Смайлы, смайлики, лыбики”), political correctness (“Афрососсиянин или негр?” “Женщина без названия”), international relations (“Беларусь и Белоруссия, но не трактор,” “Пиндостан”) and trends from everyday speech culture that have emerged as thorns in the side of Russian language guardians (“Буква Ё,” “Кто крайний?” “Практически,” “Прописные буквы”).

As with Levontina’s book, the lack of topical coherence is a direct result of the genre: the book is made up of a series of sketches collected by Guseinov over years of observation of written and spoken language in both the public and private spheres, and from the mouths of passengers on Moscow Oblast commuter trains as well as Russian emigrés from Guseinov’s second home, Germany. (His linguistic-ethnographic notes provide for some of the book’s most valuable material, presented in

transcribed dialogue form under the rubric “Железнодорожноподслушанное.”) Indeed, one curious notion that emerges from the book is that colloquial and off-color Russian speech are alive and well both in and outside of Russia, underscoring the degree to which Russian has gone global.

As far as language ideology is concerned, Guseinov is hard to pin down. Although he opens the book with a sketch on Russia’s growing illiteracy with regard to numerals and their grammar, he rarely comes across as the didactic purist. At times, as in his recounting overheard railway conversations and in his sketch on obscenities (*mat*), he strikes a romantic tone toward morphological creativity of non-standards speech:

...освободившись от своего буквального значения, этот бывший мат начал примеривать на себя все богатство русских приставок, суффиксов, и окончаний, все наши дивные долбо-, зае-, уе-, остое-, пое-, прие-, -йня, -дец, -тота, -йло, -банат, -альник, -бень, -еватый, -оватый, -анутый, -анный, -ёвый, -бище, -бический, а также значащих слов, легко образующих незабываемые комбинации, вроде –есос, -еплёт, -добол или – дочёс. (112)

The impressive list of forms cunningly repositions the debate about *mat* from the realm of purism into that of language innovation: Guseinov goes on to rightly question its widely perceived “non-normative” status, wondering “How can it be non-normative if it is formed according to the strict rules of Russian word formation, obeying all the norms?” (113).

Despite the post-modern, alphabetic structure of the book, Guseinov masterfully sustains the reader’s attention with the seemingly endless insights on contemporary Russian language and life. Be it an excursus on *инновация* and the need for leaders to create “magic words” (92-94) or a critique of the wrong-mindedness underlying the decision to rebrand *милиция* as *полиция* (150-52), the discussions consistently venture well beyond the narrow bounds of “proper usage” to undogmatically illustrate the greater import and implications of the keywords that surround us. His essay on *педофильское лобби*, the derogatory euphemism used by pro-Putin parliamentarians in reference to opponents of state Internet regulation, presciently anticipates the cynical culture wars initiated by the Russian parliament after the political turmoil of 2011-2012.

If Levontina’s focus is mainly on the language of everyday life and Guseinov’s on the language of the public sphere, Maksim

Krongauz's *Samouchitel' Olbanskogo* describes the slang, linguistic distortion, and communicative play characteristic of the Russian-language Internet—which he misleadingly terms *олбанский язык*, a term more frequently used as a synonym for the so-called *язык падонков*, or “scumbags’ language.”

Krongauz does devote the first of three parts to the now out-of-trend *язык падонков*, providing copious texts from the pioneers of sites like Udaff.com and Fuck.ru that document the origin of most of the main keywords and the nature of the language play. Specialists will find themselves wanting for in-depth analysis and will be frustrated by the near total absence of secondary sources, but Krongauz is quite clear that his main target audience consists of the few Russians left who are unfamiliar with the Internet and its language particularities. That said, in his extended discussion of Padonki slang, Krongauz nicely demonstrates a) that it requires no trivial level of literacy to master, and b) that the phenomenon is thus best understood as a language ideology consciously embracing *anti-literacy*, rather than a marker of web-based *illiteracy*. Rather than wallowing in some sort of orthographic anarchy, would-be proponents must learn a relatively coherent set of counter rules in order to employ it properly.

Weighing in on the Internet’s impact on Russian, Krongauz rightly argues that in some respects it has improved literacy, as it has led to an increase of writerly output on the part of common citizens (119-120). He does see a negative impact, particularly on the current and future generations of digital natives, who he thinks are more prone to orthographic errors and lack all sense of “shame” with regard to them (123-24).

The second section (“О смайликах и других играх с формой”) provides an historical, structural, and functional overview of the use of emoticons, rebuses (e.g. 4 for ч), abbreviations (*ИМНО/ИМХО*, *LOL*, *OMG*; and some native Russian creations, such as *АПВС* [*А почему вы спрашиваете?*], *СЗОТ* [*сорри за офф-топ*], *ОБС* [*одна бабка сказала*]), and various play with Latin-Cyrillic keyboard inversion (e.g. *ЗЫ* for *P.S.*, *лытдыбр* for *diary*) in web-based communications—again targeted at a mass-market audience either unfamiliar with these graphic novelties or curious as to their origins.

The third and final section (“О словах и мемах”) tackles a variety of keywords and memes that have come to us by virtue of the Internet. Histories and debates about terms such as *Internet* (capital or small “И?”),

blogger (one “r” or “two?”) are of some interest, though could be amply treated in fewer pages. Of greater interest is the discussion of *френд*, *лайк*, and their various permutations, and the ambiguities and nuances with regard to their usage (how is *френд* different from *друг*?; what message are you sending when you *лайкнуть* an article reporting news that is not necessarily “likable,” such as the death of a widely revered public figure?). So, too, is the discussion of the parallel worlds of on- and offline worthy of closer attention—particularly Krongauz’s observation that the derivation of terms such as *оффлайн*, *в реале*, and *развиртуализироваться* underscore the degree to which, rather than creating parallel worlds, the online, virtual world has essentially supplanted the “real” world (270-72).

Like Levontina and Guseinov, Krongauz is handcuffed by the generic rules he selects for the book; it is meant as a primer and, as such, does a good and sometimes excellent job, providing useful background on existing Internet phenomena (e.g. *Превед Медвед!*) and at times introducing terms that readers may not have been aware of in the first place. But due the fact that, by his own admission, Internet language is evolving so quickly, the book cannot help but be outdated in places and the dearth of in-depth linguistic analysis and interpretation makes it of little value to those interested in unlocking some of the larger issues and trends underlying specific phenomena. If there is one broader take-home message in Krongauz’s discussion, it would have to be that oral discourse is taking over the written word in Internet communication and often does so in a playful manner. This is precisely why new media is such fertile territory for debates over the “spoiling” versus the “enriching” of the Russian language.

While contemporary Russian language culture leaves much linguistic fuel to stoke the flames of purist alarm, the three books reviewed here leave readers with the overall impression that a) the language itself will survive, and b) its users are as much innovators (even if accidental) as they are contaminators, whose use over time will lead to language change that every tumultuous period in Russian history has witnessed and survived. In fact, the continued vibrancy of this genre of popular books on Russian suggests that lamentations over Russian’s demise and degradation are premature (though in the future they may well appear in a different medium). Shortcomings aside, all three books contain gems of information and insight presented in a highly accessible and entertaining manner. Time with them is time well spent for any

teacher or scholar of Russian or contemporary Russia, and sections of the books, if carefully culled, would most certainly be appropriate for the advanced language classroom as well.