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Review: Сетевые разговоры: Культурные коммуникации в Рунете

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For any reader interested in the linguistic and cultural shifts that have occurred in the Russian language as a result of the explosion of Internet use in the russophone world, Zvereva’s work, Сетевые разговоры, is especially apt. In this timely and insightful work, Zvereva employs both discourse analysis as well as rigorous commentary from the corpus of work in media and cultural studies to fashion a critical review of current trends and innovations in the use of Internet-based media—predominately via RuNet (.ru)—as a means of initiating and developing communication. Emphasizing its broad appeal, Zvereva points to the relevance of the volume for anyone interest in developing a better understanding of the palpable changes taking place in the presentation and use of Russian online.

Zvereva cites Marshall McLuhan’s Understanding Media, his seminal 1964 work about the inevitable impact of media on global culture, as the point of departure for her discussion of the transformation of speech culture by new media. Zvereva’s monograph begins in Chapter One with an examination of the social network Twitter, and how this medium of terse, 140-character communication has shaped usage and meaning in Russian over the past decade. Zvereva uses the example of the occurrence of the word «дождь» on Twitter, following a prolonged drought in Russia during the summer of 2010. As the use of the word in the medium increased exponentially, many users began to post joke definitions of the word «дождь» in various contexts, such as “’Rain’ is the new Russian nuclear bomb,” or “’Rain’ is a new brand of vodka,” or even “’Rain’ is a bear playing the balalaika” (46-47). Zvereva goes on to conclude that use of this medium for native speakers provides insight into the eclectic usage and pragmatic choices employed in the typical tweet (50).

Chapters two and three focus specifically on the use of slang, jargon, and maledicta frequently encountered on RuNet, especially among the particular demographic subsets of teenagers and «подонки»,
the term attributed to the subculture of young Russian Internet users, who created their own unique language and idiosyncratic usage of the written language online. The tendency of this latter group, the «падонки,» is to codify their jargon into a rules-governed “real” language, and the normalization of many of the shortened forms used by the group into widespread usage on RuNet (82). Similarly, Zvereva contends that the online language used most commonly by teenagers has also developed into its own specific code of communication for young people interested in forming communities of friends and acquaintances in online environments. Most significant, in her analysis, is the way Russian teenagers establish their online identities in these communications (128).

The question of “self-identity” raised in Chapter Three is further elucidated in Chapter Four, in which the author tackles the complex questions surrounding the inevitable creation of online identities, and the effect of communicating under an assumed virtual autobiography. Zvereva’s comments focus on the «Живой Журнал,» the Russian-language iteration of “LiveJournal,” and the associated game of “100 Facts” through which users establish their online persona. She focuses her commentary on the tension between the user’s “real” identity and his/her online virtual “I” persona, and concludes that the RuNet personae, while often rich in detail and content, fail to create the larger narrative of a “real” person (162). Still, she credits the “100 Facts” portraits of «Живой Журнал» as instrumental in the creation of the online collective that inhabits these contemporary virtual spaces.

For language teachers, Chapter Five provides a particularly relevant examination of native («наши/свои») user/contributors, and non-native, or foreign users («чужие») of websites on RuNet. Zvereva focuses on the delivery of the daily news on Mail.ru and the feature that allows for user comments to be added and displayed. Of particular interest is her contention that being perceived as «чужой» did not cause any difficulties or raise any issues among users (190). Rather, the author contends, «… опасение и нежелание признать другого как 'своего' – указывает на глубину кризиса социальности, который переживали россияне в конце 'нулевых' годов (190). Zvereva also includes in this chapter a particularly rich supplement of user commentaries from a variety of news items on the site.

In Chapter Six, Zvereva takes on Russia’s largest social networking site, «В Контакте,» in examining the way contemporary
Russians remember and talk about the Soviet past online. The matrix-like construct of sites like “Facebook” or «В Контакте» creates a logical space for related individuals to recall, report, and comment on (re)constructions of the past and generates, as Zvereva posits, an “online memory” (235). The ease in creating live blogs or wikis on sites such as these facilitates discussions of past events and gives new life to the telling of the stories of an individual and collective past.

While not primarily intended as a methodological handbook for the language classroom, for teachers, researchers, and learners interested in fully integrating cultural literacy and norms of contemporary usage into their teaching or learning of Russian, Zvereva’s Setevye razgovory provides invaluable insight into the most productive sphere of online communication. The volume is rich in examples and original sources from RuNet that give ballast to its overarching premise: «Средство коммуникации, Сеть, все больше становится содержанием новой формы идентификации пользователей» (254). Such a contention could not be more apt for 21st century language teachers charged with creating students who are not only proficient users of the language, but also are prepared to participate in a fully global community.

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