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## The concept of “world language”

V. G. Kostomarov

Although the United Nations has declared that its working languages—English, Russian, French, Spanish, Chinese, and, more recently, Japanese and Arabic—are “world languages,” there is no strictly linguistic basis for such a claim. Indeed, many linguists reject the term, and many of those who do accept it believe that it denotes—roughly—an artificial global language. Moreover, many find in it an unpleasant hint of the pseudoscientific idea that one language can be superior to another.<sup>1</sup>

### Russian views of Russian as a world language

Russian linguists tried to move away from the purely axiomatic usage of the phrase by analyzing the unique peculiarities of Russian. Although that effort was tied in many ways to a view of Russian as sacred—because it was the unifying language of all nations, the bearer of the idea of Soviet order—there was a grain of reason in the linguists’ work. The Russian language was, in fact, more than simply the *lingua franca* of the USSR: it had grown before our eyes into a language in wide use around the globe.

Of Russian as a world language, V. V. Vinograd wrote in 1945:

With the headlong growth of Russian culture and civilization, with the influence of Russian literature, and with the growth of the Soviet government’s international influence, knowledge of Russian became more and more widespread, not only among peoples of Eastern Europe and North and Central Asia, but also penetrating the west—in Europe and in the Americas, and in the south and east—in Asian Turkey, Persia, China and Japan. (152)

Primarily on the basis of the widespread growth of Russian in Western Europe from the eleventh to the twentieth centuries, M. P. Alekseev (1984) noted that although the means and conditions leading to the expansion of a language beyond its borders had been sufficiently researched,

the aggregate of these factors is so complex—the means are so diverse, and the conditions are so dissimilar—that any attempt to elucidate several common features underlying the process by which a foreign language expands in foreign conditions runs into specific difficulties that stand in the way of strict scientific formulations.

The growth of a language’s use and popularity cannot be explained by its aesthetic or historical value, Alekseev argued. That growth “cannot be separated from the development of society, from the history of those people who are the creators and carriers of that language,” or from the history of the social formations that led to the language’s widening use.

According to Alekseev, a language spreads not because of its unique grammatical or aural qualities but because it serves as the instrument of thought of an advanced culture, enabling those who learn it to join the culture and to extract its spiritual wealth. Only the languages that have offered such advantages have gained universal use or achieved truly worldwide significance in their time.

### **World language and “the social functions of language”**

Most authoritative authors—including leading Russian sociolinguists V. A. Avrorin, P. A. Bulgakov, Yu. D. Deshereiv, M. M. Usaev, and I. F. Protchenko—have avoided using “world language” in their professional work. Other researchers, however, have fruitfully used the term, so that it has entered scientific usage and ceased to be the possession of publicists alone.<sup>2</sup>

Desheriev (1966, 32) developed well-known classifications of languages as national, intranational, and international. In 1979, he linked the position of Russian as a world language with its social functions—while simultaneously eliminating inaccuracies from his diagram of the language’s social functions, its spheres of usage, and the forms of its existence. It should be noted, however, that treating the social functions of language as a purely linguistic category, separated from the concept of spheres of usage, appears ill-conceived, resting as it does on the identification of nonlinguistic, extralinguistic, social-linguistic, and even strictly social concerns (see, for example, Mikhailovskaya 1983).

Ivanov, Mikhailovsky, and Pankin (1986, 17–20) provide a similar correlation of indicators of Russian as a world language based on a triad of national, intranational, and international language features.

It is only natural that social functions are determined on social or extralinguistic bases, but at the same time their linguistic content should also be determined, as should their distinctive and shared lexical-semantic, syntactical, and stylistic features. Even widely accepted distinctions between information-exchange functions and cognition—or, in keeping with functional-stylistic systems, the separation of these concepts into intercourse, communication, and influence—ultimately rests, like all modules of language function, on a foundation that is language-external, for these distinctions take into account such factors as the spheres and the purposes of language application.

For the practice of language teaching, particularly the teaching of “global” languages—those taught in the educational systems of the majority of countries—it is important that, despite the concurrence or convergence of their functions in the twentieth century, the principles of selection and composition of stable syntactic blocks of expression remain wholly distinctive in their overall stylistic-functional systems.

A language fulfills its purpose to the extent that it is stylistically differentiated, a differentiation that is historically determined by its social functions. But it is only through an examination of a language’s objective, material facts and of those styles that do not follow directly from the necessities of verbal communication (that is, from its *functions*) that one can assimilate the language’s fully shaped methods and modes of use for various purposes and under various conditions (Vinogradov and Kostomarov 1967).

### **The characteristics of a world language**

The nature of the language’s functions is an indicator of its status as a world language, one that exists in conjunction with national languages and serves as one of them. Such a language, for example, allows speakers to concentrate more efficiently and accessibly about the preservation and transfer of a mass of commonly valued information in projects shared by all members of an

international group. Consider, for example, scientific-technical information, much of which has weakly expressed national traits.

A global language is also characterized by particular usage-spheres (such as transportation or information networks); by the methods used to study it (usually it is not studied from childhood as a native language, for example); by the fact that it is used by people who have not completely mastered it; and by a cultural and ethnic neutrality, or, as theorists of English as a world language put it, a “denationalization” of the language (Kostomarov 1986).

In addition to its functions, other indicators of a language’s global status—and thus additional terms in any definition of “world language”—are the scope of the language’s dissemination (not simply the number of people who use it, but its presence in a majority of countries) and the degree to which it is consciously and deliberately used. Here, its designation as a world language by the UN might be seen as a minimum.

A language’s attainment of international social functions, like its overall functional development, is tightly linked to the presence of a literary standard—that is, of “words polished by masters,” in contrast to popular speech, dialects, and jargon—as well as by an advanced and strong written literary tradition that corresponds with educated, oral conversational speech, explicit principles and norms, a rich and varied lexicon; and other strictly linguistic parameters (Kostomarov 1972).

V. V. Ivanov, N. G. Mikhailovsky, and V. M. Pankin (1986, 17–20) provide a similar correlation of indicators of Russian as a world language based on a triad of national, intranational, and international language features. But when discussing social functions, the authors emphasize the degree of prevalence and dispersion of the language, the limits and dimensions of its use, and the forms of its assimilation.

Recently, under the weight of the situation in Russia and other countries of the former Soviet Union, we have seen a lowering of the prestige of the Russian language, a change in its social functions, and a decrease in its study in foreign countries. As a result, Russian scholars are losing interest in the study and development of world-language issues, quietly leaving this work for scholars of Chinese, Romance languages, and English.

The purpose of these remarks is to call attention to the unfairness of such a position: despite the current, unfavorable conjectures, Russia was and remains a great power, and Russian was and remains a full member of the club of world languages.

## Notes

1. A version of these remarks was published in Russian in 1997 in the *Bulletin of Russian Philology*, volume 82, number 1–2.
2. In the field of Russian language studies, one can list the dissertations of Czech scholars (I. Skatsel and I. Kraus), Poles (Z. Kharchuk, L. Grokhovskoi, and O. Spirydovich), Hungarians (I. Bakon, Ya. Gardush, and I. Poch), Bulgarians (S. Rusakiev, M. Bonev, P. Filkova, S. Peicheva, and A. Tseneva), and Russians (V. S. Lizunov, A. L. Grebenev, M. O. Sivenko, G. B. Khruslov, L. N. Grigoryeva, and many others).

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