Review: Acquiring the Major Speech Functions in Russian: For Intermediate and Advanced-Level Students

Olha Tytarenko
University of Nebraska–Lincoln

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both contemporary and Soviet-era examples of the Russian language will particularly be appreciated by language learners working with historical or historically themed texts. Overall, the book most distinguishes itself from other thematic dictionaries in that, along with collecting high-frequency words and phrases and their translations, it also seeks to recreate a larger linguistic context that will leave readers better prepared to handle the nuances of the Russian language on their own.

Although the authors envision their book equally as an asset to “those seeking to improve their active command of Russian” (xxxiii), it makes less of a contribution in this area. *Russian for All Occasions* will certainly allow students to augment their presentations and compositions with individual examples of idiomatic Russian adapted from its entries. However, it is difficult to imagine learners of Russian improving their active language skills based on dictionary entries without substantial supplementary materials. Moreover, while the authors devote significant space to explaining and translating Russian phrases that native English-speakers may find difficult, equal attention is not paid to presenting Russian equivalents for concepts idiomatic to English language contexts. To cite one example, in a section on politics, the text cogently glosses the word “либерал” in the context of debates between the Slavophiles and Westernizers (391–92), yet it does not at all treat the ways in which the English word “liberal” differs contextually from its Russian counterpart. As a result, students may find the book less useful in developing their ability to express themselves intelligibly in the Russian language.

Regardless, Khairov and Dunn have created a comprehensive resource that is of obvious use to intermediate and advanced students engaging in any tasks requiring the passive use of Russian. Prospective Russian-to-English translators, along with historians and political scientists looking to improve their Russian skills, will also find much to appreciate.

*Jason Strudler*

*Defense Language Institute-Washington*

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*Acquiring the Major Speech Functions in Russian* is designed to help Russian learners build communicative skills related to major speech situations such as greetings, requests, invitations, expressing gratitude, and so on.
The volume is built around various sets of scenarios from everyday life to help students understand and appreciate the cultural and social context of various speech situations and equips learners with the necessary vocabulary and background knowledge to participate effectively in a given speech act.

The volume consists of a foreword, acknowledgement, introduction, teachers’ manual, and thirteen chapters. Every chapter is built around a specific speech function. The topics cover the following: addressing people appropriately; communicating over the phone; greeting and introducing others; giving and accepting invitations; requesting and giving advice; agreeing and disagreeing; apologizing and accepting apologies; expressing support, compassion, and sympathy; giving and accepting compliments; congratulating and accepting congratulations; giving and receiving thanks; and saying good-bye. Every chapter includes four sections. Section A focuses on etiquette phrases, expressions, and commentaries. The author states that the reading assignments are available as supplemental audio recordings. Due to technical difficulties with the website, however, these recordings were not accessible for review. Section B includes drills and exercises that can be used for homework, classwork, or assessment. Section C features learning scenarios. One can truly appreciate the extensive array of diverse and authentic situations. Section D includes written assignments that reinforce speech functions discussed in the chapter. The instructional materials within each chapter target all four basic language skills. The teacher’s manual elicits methodology and provides recommendations on how to work with each chapter, namely, what parts should be practiced in class and what exercises should be assigned for homework; “transcripts of several stages of work with a learning scenario”; recommendations on how to provide feedback; and general observations. Furthermore, the volume includes useful cultural notes explaining cultural and social etiquette that might not be intuitive for Russian learners. Some additional linguistic or stylistic analysis would have made some expressions explained even more useful to the learners who use the book for self-study. Pertinent grammar overview is provided where necessary.

The sections with learning scenarios (84 scenarios in total) and written assignments (62 assignments in total) comprise a particularly valuable part of the volume. The choice of the language of the instructions and prompts is not always clear. Written assignments provide detailed situations that require students to respond in writing. These situations and tasks are supposed to reinforce the writing skills and offer additional practice of each chapter’s speech functions. These prompts are in the target language and give
students an extensive amount of Russian language (vocabulary, grammar, syntax) that can be used in their responses. A significant part of learners’ responses in each case would be copying and reproducing the language in the prompt with minor modifications. It might be beneficial to alternate some prompts written in the target language with prompts describing the situation in English. Since some exercises in the book are designed to be used either as homework or as summative and formative assessment, contextualized prompts in English might be more suitable for assessing writing skills. A certain lack of consistency in the translation can also be observed in how the Russian expressions are presented: some expressions are translated while others are not. This might be done purposefully to encourage independent work, or the book might intend these expressions to be explained in class. Slang is a valuable addition in each chapter, and the author provides good guidance on its usage. They are explained where necessary, and Russian learners would benefit if slang expression were translated consistently.

These minor drawbacks do not diminish the overall value of the book. The learning situations comprise a valuable section for instructors, and every language instructor can find something useful there for their classes. Drills and exercises are well organized, and it would be easy for students to navigate this part of the volume on their own. Additionally, the book includes helpful notes on cross-cultural differences, and the formatting allows for using the volume as a workbook. This volume ultimately does what it claims to do: it aids “students in acquiring speech functions in Russian” within a variety of speech situations, and if used effectively, it can help learners improve their communicative skills. This is a practical handbook that can be particularly useful for students who plan to spend some time in a Russian-speaking environment. As the author states, the book can be used successfully to complement the instructions at the intermediate and advanced levels or used within a course focusing primarily on enhancing communicative competency.

Olha Tytarenko

University of Nebraska–Lincoln