Conversations on Dictionaries

The Universe in a Book

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18 Russian

Mikhail Kopotev

Alexander Pushkin, the father of modern Russian literature, used an original, nuanced language. He dramatically expanded the Russian lexicon by borrowing from other languages. Much variety springs from his innovative approach. No wonder Pushkin, a lover of dictionaries, is such a canonical figure in a language spoken by close to 260 million people. This conversation explores the tradition of Russian dictionaries, concentrating on Jacob Grot's *Dictionary of the Russian Language*, Dmitry Ushakov's *Explanatory Dictionary of the Russian Language*, Sergey Ozhegov's *Dictionary of the Russian Language*, and *The Great Academic Dictionary of the Russian Language*.[1] It also contemplates regional varieties and Russian as an international language, as well as bilingual dictionaries. And it reflects on Pushkin's standing in the language.

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ILAN STAVANS: Russians are avid dictionary-makers. How do you explain this passion?

MIHAIL KOPOTEV: While it is true, as you say, that Russians have been avid dictionary-makers, this engagement has a relatively short history. Unlike Western Europe, the Old Rus, a common ancestor of Belarusian, Russian, and Ukrainian cultures, did not reveal an advanced lexicographic practice. We know only limited and mainly non-original and non-systematic word lists (*slovniki*) and onomasticons (*imenniki*), which were in use in translation or exegesis of ecclesiastical texts; for example, "The speech of

[1] Yakov Grot, *Словарь русского языка* [Dictionary of the Russian language] (Санкт-Петербург, Типография Императорской Академии наук, 1891–1995); Dmitry Ushakov, *Толковый словарь русского языка* [Explanatory dictionary of the Russian language] (Moscow: State Publishing House of Foreign and National Dictionaries, 1935–1940); Sergey Ozhegov, *Словарь русского языка* [Dictionary of the Russian language] (Moscow: State Publishing House of Foreign and National Dictionaries, 1949); *Большой академический словарь русского языка* [The great academic dictionary of the Russian language], Vols. 1–27 (St. Petersburg: Russian Academy of Sciences, 2004–).

the Jewish language as translated into (Old) Russian" (Рѣчь Жидовьскаго іазыка преложена на Роускоую), or "The interpretation of not-convenient [words] for understanding in written speech" (Толкование неудобь познаваемымъ в писаниихъ речемъ).

IS: In spite of this short history, to me it seems as if Russians have produced what seems like an endless number of dictionaries, whether lexicographical or technical, historical, literary, and so on.

MK: The genesis of East Slavic lexicography is tightly connected to modernity. Starting from the sixteenth century and gradually increasing during the seventeenth, Western European culture interfered, mainly through Ukrainian and Belarusian influencers, in the turbulent East Slavic cultures. The most prominent linguistic shift during that period was the embrace of new cogitation patterns: while in Old Rus, written texts were typically memorized and reproduced, the advent of linguistic analysis in Eastern Europe during the modern era led to a more analytical approach toward texts.

The key innovative publications that reflected that change were rhetorical and grammatical treatises, as well as dictionaries – both translated and original. The latter, initially presented in the form of alphabetically organized lists (*azbukovniki*), quickly became the mainstream of early modern linguistic research of East Slavic scholars. The first dictionary, Lexis (Лєксис сирѣчъ реченїѧ, вькратъцѣ събранны) by Ukrainian scholar Lavrentij Zyzanij, was published in 1596.[2] During the seventeenth century, at least fifteen dictionaries and dozens of phrase-books (*razgovorniki*) were published. One reason why the lexicographic tradition in East Slavic countries was bolstered during that period is simple: dictionaries served as repositories of knowledge and cultural history, enabling the East Slavic people to conceptualize and represent a changing world. A new world requires new words.

IS: New words are needed to catch up with scientific, technological, and other advances. But neologisms also come from imperial quests, tourism, immigration, and the sheer movements of modernity.

MK: Memoirs from the Petrine time (beginning of the seventeenth century) reveal that Muscovites and inhabitants of the newly elevated Saint Petersburg literally did not understand each other due to the large number of foreigners flocking to the new capital. New words always indicate changes in society. By examining neologisms that entered the Russian language during a specific period, we can discern both the direction of influence and the areas where the old language lacked certain concepts.

For example, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Germanic and Romance civilizations were considered the main sources of both word-borrowing and technological progress. Many of these loanwords continue to exist in the modern language, such as *admiral*, *storm*, and *flagman* (from Dutch), *flag*, *graf*, and *gas* (German); *aria* and *solo* (Italian), *ball*, *band*, and *balkon* (French). Less known, but also significant, were the influences from Slavic languages: *borscht* and *Cossack* (Ukrainian); *akademia*, *monopolia*, and the most curious one, *vodka* (Polish).

[2] Lavrentii Zyzanii, *Лексис* [Lexis] (Vilnius, 1596).

IS: Tell me about the *Leksikon vokabulam novym po alfavitu* (Лексикон вокабулам новым по алфавиту), a Russian dictionary of foreign words written, though not published, during the reign of Peter the Great. It is attributed to Fedor Polikarpov-Orlov and possible date of publication, according to some scholars, is 1715.

MK: The reforms conducted by Peter the Great can be seen as the culmination of long-lasting changes that were evident in various aspects, reflected in lexicons and dictionaries. These linguistic resources served the purpose of either preserving the "proper old treasure" or legitimizing new words and concepts. One intellectual who addressed both of these needs was Fedor Polikarpov-Orlov (c. 1670–1731), a man of education – and Muscovite.

A prominent representative of the Enlightenment, Polikarpov-Orlov was one of the most influential scholars and officials in Peter's court of his time. He was born in Moscow and received a classical Westernized education at the Slavic-Greek-Latin Academy there. He served in the Moscow Print Yard and later became a director of this publishing house. During his life, he engaged in translation work, delivered lectures, and wrote books. His main works include *Abecedarium* (Алфавитарь рекше букварь, 1701) and the *Trilingual Lexicon* (Лексиконъ треязычный, сирѣчь реченій славенскихъ, еллино-греческихъ и латінскихъ сокровище, 1704), both of which were used in education for decades, as well as an unpublished "Lexicon of New Words" (Лексиконъ вокабуламъ новымъ по алфавиту).[3]

The "Lexicon of New Words" is a collection of foreign lexemes that was not published at the time and is likely attributed to Polikarpov-Orlov. This dictionary exemplifies the lexicographic trend mentioned earlier, which signifies yet another Western influence on Russian civilization. The dictionary follows an alphabetical organization, with each entry presenting the foreign word, its Russian equivalent, and a concise definition. The entries encompass various subjects such as science, technology, religion, and culture. The dictionary is particularly notable for its inclusion of many technical and scientific terms that were new to the Russian language at the time (e.g. *arest, komedia, kompas*, etc.). It also reflects Peter the Great's interest in modernizing Russia and bringing it into closer contact with Western Europe. Despite its historical significance, the "Lexicon" was not published until much later. Scholars believe that it was completed in 1715, but the manuscript was not discovered until the nineteenth century and was fully transcribed and published in the twentieth century.[4]

[3] Fedor Polikarpov-Orlov, *Алфавитарь рекше букварь* [Alphabet book, also called a primer] (Moscow: Moscow Print Yard, 1701); Fedor Polikarpov-Orlov, *Лексикон треязычный сирѣчь реченій славенскихъ, эллино-греческихъ и латинскихъ сокровище* [Trilingual lexicon, or treasury of Slavonic, Hellenic-Greek, and Latin sayings] (Moscow: Moscow Print Yard, 1704).

[4] N. A. Smirnov, *Словарь иностранных слов, вошедших в русский язык в эпоху Петра Великого* [Dictionary of foreign words that entered the Russian language in the era of Peter the Great], *Proceedings of the Department of Russian Language and Literature* 88, no. 4(2) (St. Petersburg: Russian Academy of Science, 1910), 363–82.

Polikarpov-Orlov's main lexicographic opus, the *Trilingual Lexicon*, includes 17,328 entries, organized alphabetically, and provides definitions of words in three "languages": Slavic (here Russian and Church Slavonic), Greek, and Latin. The entries also include information on the origins of the words and their usage in various contexts. One of the main purposes of the *Trilingual Lexicon* was to aid in the translation of religious texts. It was also intended to help Russian scholars and intellectuals better understand and communicate with their Western European counterparts. The *Trilingual Lexicon*, considered a significant contribution to the history of Russian lexicography, reflects the growing interest in preserving national heritage and the importance of cross-cultural communication in eighteenth-century Russia. Along with other dictionaries published at that time, it also demonstrates the role of dictionaries as tools for language learning, translation, and cultural exchange.

IS: What needs in Russian culture was Polikarpov-Orlov's endeavor responding to?

MK: As Russia sought to modernize and establish closer ties with Western Europe under the reign of Peter the Great, there was a need to expand the Russian language to encompass new concepts and ideas from various fields. Polikarpov-Orlov's dictionaries aimed to bridge the gap between the Russian language and the influx of foreign intellectual traditions. The *Trilingual Lexicon* specifically addressed the need for interpreting religious terminology, while also incorporating a broader cultural perspective, such as ancient Greek. The *Lexicon* facilitated the process of integration by providing translations and explanations, enabling Russian intellectuals to comprehend other traditions in their native language. Moreover, the *Lexicon* aimed to showcase the closer relations between Eastern and Western cultures by emphasizing the fact that the same concepts could be expressed equally in all three "languages."

IS: I want to move to Russian Romanticism, particularly the Archaists and Karamzinists. Pushkin was a product of these trends. I'm interested in its connection to dictionaries.

MK: The early nineteenth century in Russia saw the emergence of two fundamentally opposite groups of thinkers, known at that time as *Shishkovists* and *Karamzinists*, who questioned the prevailing Rationalist ideology. The Archaists, led by Alexander Shishkov, sought to revive the language and literature of ancient Rus, believing that the Russian language had become corrupted by foreign influences. They aimed to purify the language by returning to the old Slavonic written tradition and create a national literature that reflected Russian heritage.

Their work often included archaic words and forms that were not commonly used in contemporary discourse, not to mention that some were of Church Slavonic origin, not East Slavic. Their lexicographic efforts resulted in the first dictionary of the Russian Academy of Science, a six-volume compendium of almost 50,000 words attributed as *slavenorossijskije,* (lit. Slavonic-Russian, meaning "Church Slavonic") and published in 1794, which aimed to standardize the Russian language by providing clear definitions and usage examples.

In contrast, the Karamzinist movement, named after Nikolai Karamzin, aimed to construct a new language suited for the aesthetic needs of secular

educated readers, including women. Karamzin – a *Russian Sterne*, as he was called – played an important role in the development of the Russian language toward innovation. As part of this effort, he compiled a *History of the Russian State*, a fundamental twelve-volume compilation that included thought-provoking facts and romantic hyperboles about the Russian past.[5] As a writer, he created sentimental stories written in a modernized, "French" style.

Overall, the Shishkovists and Karamzinists were important contributors to the development of the Russian language and its vocabulary, although, in terms of lexicographic practice, only the Archaists have created a fundamental dictionary.[6]

Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837), often glorified – ideologically, in part – as the father of Modern Russian language and literature, was a product of both trends, influenced and criticized by both the Archaists and Karamzinists. His poetry and prose drew on archaic and classical forms and vocabulary. An example of his ambiguous position can be found in *Eugene Onegin* (1833), where Pushkin's ironic comments are directed against both modern borrowings and the archaic Academic dictionary.[7] This translation is by James E. Falen. All italics are in the original:

> Your interest piqued and doubtless growing
> In current fashions of *toilette*,
> I might describe in terms more knowing
> His clothing for the learned set.
> This might well seem an indiscretion,
> Description, though, is my profession;
> But *pantaloons, gilet,* and *frock* –
> These words are hardly Russian stock;
> And I confess (in public sorrow)
> That as it is my diction groans
> With far too many foreign loans;
> But if indeed I overborrow,
> I have of old relied upon
> Our *Academic Lexicon*.[8]

Pushkin's contributions to Russian language and literature were widely recognized already at his time; he was among the first to be promoted as a member of the Russian Academy of Science, although he did not make significant contributions to lexicography or any other linguistic studies. Instead, Pushkin's works provided a blueprint for shaping the "Russian literary

[5] Nikolai Karamzin, *История государства Российского* [History of the Russian state] (St. Petersburg: Gretsch Publishing House, 1816–18).

[6] *Словарь Академии Российской* [Dictionary of the Russian Academy], Vols. 1–6 (St. Petersburg, 1806–22).

[7] Alexander Pushkin, *Евгений Онегин* [Eugene Onegin] (St. Petersburg: Alexander Smirdin Printing House, 1833).

[8] Alexander Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse*, trans. James E. Falen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 16.

language," a concept that was fundamentally developed by Soviet scholars and attributed to Pushkin as the main (and sometimes the only) legitimate source of the standard language. His legacy continues to influence language policy today, with Pushkin and "his" language being a battlefield.

IS: Let's talk about what is perhaps the most famous Russian dictionary ever assembled – the *Explanatory Dictionary of the Living Great Russian Language* (*Tolkovyj slovar' zhivogo velikorusskogo yazyka*). This massive project was begun in 1918 by Vladimir Dal'. It was published in four volumes from 1863 to 1866.

MK: I will start with a fun fact: the real "living Russian language" is censored twice in the *Dictionary*. Initially, Vladimir Dal' intentionally did not include obscene words in the dictionary. Later, a Polish-Russian linguist, Jan Baudouin de Courtenay, enriched the vocabulary with many words, including the crispest ones, but Soviet lexicographers blacked them out again.[9]

Despite this fact, it is perhaps the most famous Russian dictionary ever assembled. The project was initiated by Dal', who – another trivia – in the capacity of a professional doctor attested Pushkin's death in 1837. By that day, Dal' had been compiling the *Dictionary* for almost twenty years, and it would be almost thirty-five more years until it was sent to print in 1863.

The dictionary was based on the extensive fieldwork conducted by Dr. Dal', who practiced throughout Russia, while also collecting examples of the language. He was particularly interested in preserving the language of the common people and their folklore. In this sense, the dictionary was in opposition to the lexicographic practice of the Russian Academy. Dal's dictionary aimed to provide a comprehensive explanation of the meanings of potentially all Russian words, to capture the rich diversity of Russian dialects. The dictionary included over 200,000 entries, with detailed definitions, usage examples, and etymological information.

In addition to its linguistic and lexicographic importance, the *Explanatory Dictionary of the Living Great Russian Language* has also played an important role in preserving Russian culture and identity: it helped to establish a common ground before and after the Revolution. With all considerations in mind, this dictionary was, by all odds, distorted at a minimum by the Soviet censorship, remaining the only publicly available pre-Revolutionary lexicographic source for several generations. No wonder that Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn leaned largely on that of Dal' in creating his *Russian Dictionary of Language Expansion* (Русский словарь языкового расширения).[10]

IS: The Soviet Orthography Reform of 1917 was pursued by Alexander Shakhmatov shortly after the Revolution. It is probably the single most significant change to Russian orthography that endures to this day.

[9] Vladimir Dal', *Толковый словарь живого великорусского языка* [Explanatory dictionary of the living great Russian language], 3rd ed., ed. Jan Baudouin de Courtenay, Vols. 1–4 (St. Petersburg: Academy of Sciences, 1903–9).

[10] Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, *Русский словарь языкового расширения* [Russian dictionary of language expansion] (Moscow: Nauka, 1990).

It removed a few mostly undistinguished old Cyrillic characters. But notably, Russian emigres did not adopt these changes immediately.

MK: A common assumption suggests that the reform was initiated and conducted by Bolsheviks. In fact, Alexander Shakhmatov, an academician of the Imperial Academy of Science, first reported on that matter in 1904, shortly after the orthographic committee had been established under the auspices of Grand Duke Konstantin Konstantinovich of Russia. The reform was supported by many scholars and teachers and was officially declared by the provisional government in May 1917. When the Bolsheviks came to power, they reapproved the reform in December 1917.

You are absolutely right that the reform was a significant change to the Russian orthography. It aimed to simplify the Russian writing system and bring it more in line with the spoken language. One of the key changes introduced by the reform was the removal of several old Cyrillic characters that were considered archaic and unnecessary; these included the letters ѣ (*yat*), Ѳ (*fita*), and others; some morphological forms were also unified. These changes were intended to make the Russian writing system more accessible to the general population and to reduce illiteracy rates.

Despite the fact that the reform was initially supported by conservative forces, including the royal family, it was not, as you mentioned, immediately adopted by Russian emigres, who continued to use the pre-reform orthography in their writing. This was partly due to momentum, as no new textbooks or dictionaries were available, but the main reason was indisputably political, as many Russian emigres were opposed to the Soviet government and its policies, while not fully aware of the historical background of the reform.

It was not until the 1940s, when the Soviet Union began to exert greater influence on the international Russian-speaking community that the new orthography began to be more widely adopted outside of the Soviet Union. Today, the orthography reform of 1917 is still in use in Russia and other countries that use the Russian language, and it is considered an important milestone in the development of the Modern Russian writing system.

IS: How about *Ushakov's Dictionary*, whose full name is *Explanatory Dictionary of the Russian Language,* published in 1935–40.

MK: The *Explanatory Dictionary of the Russian Language* (Большой толковый словарь русского языка), one of the most comprehensive dictionaries of the Russian language, was created during the Soviet era. At the same time, it reflects and is influenced by Soviet lexicographic practice.

It was edited by Dmitry Ushakov (1873–1942), a prominent Soviet linguist and lexicographer, and was published in four volumes between 1935 and 1940. On the one hand, the dictionary includes over 200,000 entries, with detailed definitions, information on the pronunciation and inflection of words, and usage examples. It is noteworthy for its comprehensive coverage of the vocabulary of the Russian language, including many archaic and dialectal words. On the other hand, despite its many strengths, the dictionary has been criticized for its emphasis on literary rather than spoken language. It is focused on the norms of the Soviet literary language and does not adequately reflect the diversity of Russian, as can be seen in the entry explaining the meaning of

символизм (symbolism): ". . . 2. A movement in the art of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that expressed the decadent reactionary moods of the bourgeoisie, creating symbols of mystical experiences and representations in artistic images" (my translation).

IS: In major lexicographic traditions, the twentieth century has seen a bonanza of dictionaries. This is the result of advanced technology, including the wide accessibility of online resources.

MK: The same happened in Russia, resulting in the countless dictionaries that can be found on library bookshelves today. There is a common perception for the Soviet fascination with dictionaries: the complexity and richness of the Russian language itself, as well as its wide spread across the globe. Russian is a highly inflected language with a rich and diverse vocabulary, and its grammar is notoriously difficult for both native and non-native speakers to master. As such, the production of dictionaries has been essential for preserving and advancing the language and associated culture.

However, there was a deeper reason for the boom in Soviet lexicography, which was politically driven and connected with what today would be called a need to colonize other nations, where dictionaries became a tool for ideological expansion. In the early Soviet period, many dictionaries for numerous languages were created that reflected a uniformed view of the world. For many languages spoken in the USSR, thousands of words were introduced in dictionaries with a "proper" interpretation. The socioeconomic background for new dictionaries to appear was massive internal migration, urbanization, and technological progress. These factors brought into view people who did not have a good command of Russian or did not possess specific terminology – the problems that could be addressed with dictionaries and unified education available to a wider audience.

Yet, Soviet lexicographic practice was grounded on the theory of the "literary language" (литературный язык), which was understood as "the superior form of the language existence" (my translation of the definition of литературный язык from *Linguistic Encyclopedic Dictionary*, published in the final year of the USSR's existence in Moscow).[11] This ideological construct presupposed creating dictionaries that were prescriptive yet addressed different social groups, from schoolchildren to foreign speakers.

To sum up, the Russian passion for dictionary-making is rooted in a tradition of Westernized intellectualism and the pursuit of knowledge that started in the late sixteenth century. During the era of Enlightenment and beyond, dictionaries evolved into a reflection of their times, either preserving old traditions or adopting a more modern and relaxed approach to word usage. In the twentieth century, the need to serve Communist ideology and support the industrial revolution with many people being relocated to cities resulted in a wealth of lexicographical, technical, historical, and literary dictionaries that played a vital role in preserving and advancing the Russian language within Soviet culture.

[11] Victoria Yartseva, ed., *Лингвистический энциклопедический словарь* [Linguistic encyclopedic dictionary] (Moscow: Soviet Encyclopedia, 1990).

IS: In other words, Russians, like other cultures, embraced dictionaries because France, Italy, England, and others already had them.

MK: Indeed, lexicography in Russia has been influenced by various traditions since its inception. Medieval word lists were often bilingual or multilingual, reflecting a leaning toward either Western or, in many cases, Byzantine intellectual tradition. In modernity, many lexicographers across Europe pursued similar goals, driven by the Enlightenment. Over time, however, lexicography in Russia evolved into a distinct discipline, and later, especially during the Soviet era, several unique lexicographic programs were established. One of the most well-known is the Meaning-Text theory, developed by Igor Mel'čuk and his colleagues. From a lexicographic perspective, the theory highlights the significance of capturing and representing the underlying semantic and syntactic structures and their holistic representation in dictionaries.

IS: Does this mean that during the Soviet period, dictionaries functioned not only as self-preservation tools?

MK: The vast majority of Soviet lexicographic production mainly served self-preservation aims, somewhat reminiscent of Jorge Luis Borges' *The Library of Babel*, which also aimed to preserve every possible ordering of information.[12] Some of them were purely descriptive, such as the dictionary of Pushkin's language (Словарь языка А. С. Пушкина) or the *Dictionary of the Names of Freshwater Fishes of the USSR* (Словарь названий пресноводных рыб СССР).[13] Others were, directly or indirectly, ideologically loaded, like Ushakov's dictionary of the Russian language or the *Dictionary of Word-Stress for Radio and Television Announcers* (Словарь ударений для работников радио и телевидения).[14] The latter, supposedly intended for a technical purpose, provides a notable example of how Soviet power sought to monopolize language. First, it assumed that there was only one normative variant of each word, and second, it presumed that linguists from Moscow knew it better. Specifically, many long-standing place names, which had been used by local residents for centuries, were appropriated and "normalized" in the dictionary.

Despite that, Soviet linguists developed dictionaries based on strong theoretical foundations. Until now, these resources represent the highest achievements in lexicography. One of the most famous ones is the *Grammatical Dictionary* (Грамматический словарь) compiled by Andrey Zaliznyak in 1977.[15] The dictionary may appear a bit cryptic (see Figure 18.1 to view three

[12] Jorge Luis Borges, *La biblioteca de Babel* [The library of Babel], *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* (Buenos Aires: Sur, 1941).

[13] Viktor Vinogradov, ed., *Словарь языка А. С. Пушкина* [Dictionary of A. S. Pushkin's language] (Moscow: Academy of Sciences, 1956); Georgy Lindberg and Aleksandr Gerd, *Словарь названий пресноводных рыб СССР на языках народов СССР и европейских стран* [Dictionary of names of freshwater fish of the USSR in the languages of the peoples of the USSR and European countries] (Leningrad: Nauka, 1972).

[14] Florentsia Ageenko and Maya Zarva, *Словарь ударений для работников радио и телевидения* [Dictionary of word-stress for radio and television announcers] (Moscow: Sovetskaya entsiklopediya, 1960).

[15] Andrey Zaliznyak, *Грамматический словарь русского языка* [Grammatical dictionary of the Russian language] (Moscow: Russian Language, 1977).

печь	**ж**	**8e, П$_2$**
печь	**нсв**	**8b/b (-к-), ё**
запе́чь	**св**	**8b/b (-к-), ё ◑II**

Figure 18.1 A fragment from the *Grammatical Dictionary*

complete dictionary entries), but it contains all Russian words with clear indices of their declensions and stress patterns. It enables the automatic generation of all word forms, which was quite an impressive feat considering the complexity of Russian morphology and lack of computers at that time.

Another extraordinary example is the *Explanatory Combinatorial Dictionary of Modern Russian* (Толково-комбинаторный словарь русского языка), edited by Igor Mel'čuk and Alexander Zholkovsky.[16] Due to political sanctions against the editors, its publication was significantly delayed, eventually seeing release in Vienna in 1984. Despite its modest size of only 282 entries, the dictionary's importance far exceeds its volume.

First, it is based on a rigorous theoretical approach that encompasses a holistic description of words, including morphological, semantic, stylistic, and idiomatic information, as well as government patterns, and encyclopedic information necessary for the correct usage of each headword. Second, it introduces the concept of *lexical functions*, which enable the representation of deep semantic relations between lexemes. For instance, the lexical function MAGN "to a very high degree" is manifested by different adjectives when used with different nouns:

- MAGN(illness) = severe
- MAGN(applause) = thunderous
- MAGN(joy) = great

IS: Today multilingual dictionaries – that is, a lexicon in three or more languages – are almost exclusively the domain of academic research. Is it the case in Russia as well? Of course, I'm excluding bilingual dictionaries, say Russian-English, Russian-French, Russian-Italian, which are favorites among a broad range of users.

MK: Yes and no. On the one hand, we have witnessed a decline in the use of traditional paper dictionaries, including multilingual ones, in recent decades. They are less practical for looking up words and are cumbersome to carry. On the other hand, electronic dictionaries have thrived. Various IT and EdTech companies have developed online dictionaries that offer quick and combined searches, easily accessible on devices that can fit in your pocket. The concept of simultaneously searching multiple multilingual paper sources was once unimaginable, but now one can combine as many sources as one

[16] Igor Mel'čuk and Alexander Zholkovsky, eds., *Толково-комбинаторный словарь русского языка* [Explanatory combinatorial dictionary of the Russian language] (Vienna: Wiener Slawistischer Almanach, 1984).

needs in as many languages as one comprehends, filter results based on topics, genres, or specific keywords – and *voilà*.

IS *Voilà,* indeed. How has Russian lexicography absorbed foreign traditions?

MK: Today, Russian lexicography is a rich and vibrant practice. It has absorbed venerable foreign traditions while also developing its own distinct profile. This profile encompasses two fundamental and non-mutually exclusive trends: prescriptive and descriptive.

The first trend is evident in the strong interest of those in power in controlling the language, which they perceive as a tool for manipulation. This interest extends to dictionaries as well. The most recent example of their activity is the State Language Act, passed in 2005 (and updated in 2024), which established that language norms are recorded, among other sources, in normative dictionaries. The list of these dictionaries is determined by the government of the Russian Federation.

The second trend is a flourishing academic lexicographic practice, which combines fundamental achievements from the Soviet era with cutting-edge computational approaches based on large collections of real language data. A brilliant example of this trend is the dictionaries prepared or edited by Juri Apresjan. Among them, the most ambitious one is the Russian "Active Dictionary" (Активный словарь русского языка),[17] which aims to provide a holistic description of living language phenomena based on real data. The ultimate outcome of which trend will prevail remains to be observed.

IS: In a number of linguistic habitats worldwide, governments, which play a role in safekeeping the language and are even the fiscal sponsors of dictionaries (think of the *Diccionario de la lengua española* in Madrid),[18] engage in a dialectical relationship with commercial enterprises whose business is to sell lexicons (*Merriam-Webster* in English, for example). What is the relationship between government-sponsored and business-oriented dictionaries in Russia today?

MK: In Russia, major lexicographic projects usually receive support through government grants or dedicated funding. This makes sense when you consider that these projects may span decades and require significant investments. For instance, the *Dictionary of the Old East Slavic Language* (Словарь русского языка XI–XVII веков) was initially thought up in 1925, saw its first issue published in 1975, and the most recent one in 2019 – and it's still ongoing.[19] Looking at it from this angle, these fundamental projects do not exactly scream commercial success. On the bright side, many of them are freely available online. However, smaller dictionaries, tailored to specific audiences, can turn a decent profit. This is particularly true for school or learner's dictionaries, whose demand is directly tied to the curriculum.

[17] Juri Apresjan, "Active Dictionary." In *Encyclopedia of Slavic Languages and Linguistics Online*, ed. Marc L. Greenberg (Leiden: Brill, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1163/2589-6229_ESLO_COM_032490.

[18] Real Academia Española-Asociación de Academias de La Lengua Española, *Diccionario de la lengua española*, tricentenial edition, 23rd printing (Madrid: Real Academia Española, 2014).

[19] *Словарь русского языка XI–XVII веков* [Dictionary of the Old East Slavic language] (Moscow: Nauka, 1975–).

A commonly seen practice, not just in Russia but also in other countries, is for new lexicographic projects to be funded by research foundations, governmental or private, with the distribution managed by publishing houses. Projects where the creation of a dictionary from scratch, without grant support, has been profitable are few and far between. This state of affairs has its advantages and drawbacks. On the one hand, fundamental lexicographic projects are mostly secured for years (if not centuries) until completion; on the other, the authorities might use this setup to enforce prescriptive norms by endorsing projects that align with their interests.

IS: How do you see Russian lexicography in the future?

MK: It's tough to predict what lies ahead, especially in the midst of such uncertainty. Setting aside potential economic and political fallout that could stem from the Russian invasion in Ukraine, I would like to shift attention to the linguistic implications. The rich lexicographic tradition, which I described above, will survive, as it has done many times before. However, one notable change is that the concept of Russianness is no longer monopolized by Russia. As we are observing right at the moment, numerous individuals are being displaced from Ukraine and Russia, and many Russian-speaking communities are distancing themselves from the Kremlin, whose ownership of the language has expired. This is leading to the emergence of a multicentered, globally distributed Russian-speaking populace, which has no single center of power.

This situation somewhat mirrors the aftermath of the Bolsheviks' rise to power, a time when many emigrants integrated into their host cultures. However, there is a key difference: in many countries like Kazakhstan, Belarus, or Latvia, the Russian language serves as a lingua franca – to say the very least. Before the full-scale invasion, Russian diaspora communities often adopted an opportunistic stance toward the "motherland," aligning with its linguistic norms. Today, the landscape is evolving and becoming more fragmented: from now on, dictionaries printed in Russia may no longer be considered the gold standard for "proper" language use – a situation that is already evident with fiction and textbooks published in Russia. These circumstances bear some resemblance to global English and its regional varieties, although significantly more work still needs to be done to decolonize the Russian language.

I anticipate that we will see initiatives popping up that aim to record local language usage, including regional vocabularies. It is tough to predict whether these endeavors will resonate with local communities, which may be at risk of the full assimilation into the broader linguistic environment. However, if a community is sufficiently large and tight-knit, it might be more inclined to shift away from the norms dictated by Moscow. From a lexicographic standpoint, I expect the development of dictionaries that capture and preserve local varieties of the language.

Regarding lexicographic practice in Russia, I believe that in the long run it will weather even the darkest storms. However, scholars currently stand at a crossroads: they can either choose (wholeheartedly or reluctantly) to adhere to conservative, prescriptive norms and politically driven dictionary use, or they could strive to reassess their practices and foster greater language diversity.

The latter would entail embracing more flexible regional norms, compiling non-Russian-centric dictionaries for the languages spoken in Russia, and, perhaps, even reevaluating the titles of dictionaries. To begin with, this should be applied to historical dictionaries like that of the Old **Russian** Language 11th – 14th centuries (Словарь древне**русского** языка (XI–XIVвеков) (emphasis added), which cover a period when three East Slavic languages – Belarusian, Russian, and Ukrainian – had not yet even diverged.[20]

IS: What about the tension between online and print in dictionaries? Is the latter becoming absolute in Russian? How are online Russian dictionaries reinventing their lifelong mission?

MK: The benefits offered by electronic dictionaries will likely position them as primary lexicographic resources in the future. Moreover, their further transformation is already underway. For instance, the lexicographic platform Gramota.ru is expanding beyond providing electronic versions of existing dictionaries. It now offers a meta-dictionary, which amalgamates various lexicographic resources into a single, user-friendly, and interactively linked system. Looking ahead, I envision future dictionaries as comprehensive and multidimensional databases, empowered by AI. These would not only offer full semantic descriptions of each word but also include information on constructional and idiomatic usage, semantic embedding, and real-time usage statistics. Essentially, this future system will evolve beyond mere word definitions to become an interactive information hub, a format that fundamentally differs from traditional paper representations. Would it still be called a dictionary?

Suggested Readings

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