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Émigré Russian in the U.S.: An Analysis of Modifications in the Spoken Language of the Diaspora

In one of her articles, Russian writer Tatyana Tolstaya provides an example of typical Russian émigré speech: "Из драйввэя сразу бери направо, на следующем огне будет ю-терн, бери его и пили две мили до плазы. За севен-элевеном опять направо, через три блока будет экзит, не пропусти. Номера у него нет, но это не тот экзит, где газ, а тот, где хот-дожная" ("Take a right immediately out of the driveway, at the next light there will be a u-turn, take it and drive two miles to the plaza. Another right behind the Seven-Eleven, after three blocks there will be an exit, don't miss it. It doesn't have a number; it's not the exit with the gas station, but the one with the hot dog place"). Tolstaya comments, somewhat judgmentally: "на этой плазме изъясняются по всей Америке, - много, много людей. И, естественно, не только в … общественных местах, - с помощью подобных словесных обрубков что-то тщатся сказать друг другу родители и дети, друзья-приятели и даже влюбленные"\(^1\) ("this mix is used by people to express themselves all over America – by many, many people. And, naturally, not only in…public places - parents and children, friends and acquaintances, and even pairs of lovers attempt to say something to each other with the help of similar verbal fragments"). Tolstaya’s observations are accurate; although it may sound absurd to a Russian-speaking outsider, this anglicized form of Russian really functions as a means of communication within the diaspora. Nonetheless, growing dissimilarities between “standard” Russian and “émigré” Russian may create difficulties for members of the diaspora who maintain links with

Russia. Before the linguistic modification process that occurs in the diaspora can be reversed, it is necessary to understand how this linguistic mix comes about. The present project is an attempt toward that end.

As part of this project, I interviewed four Russian-speaking individuals. Two interviews were conducted over the phone; two were conducted in person. The majority of the questions concerned the respondents’ everyday life in the U.S. and their attitudes towards the Russian language. Three of the respondents live in the San Francisco area, while the fourth lives in Los Angeles. A more detailed description of the respondents follows. I hypothesize that a desire to retain the language does not play a significant role in preventing the “contamination” of émigré speech by the dominant language of their environment. However, because of the small sample size used, I can draw only limited conclusions from the present project.

Since the respondents reside in an Anglophone environment, their speech, to some degree, reflects the influence of the English language. Zemskaia, an eminent linguist who has studied modifications occurring in spoken Russian in several diaspora communities, identifies three reasons for émigrés’ insertion of English lexicon into their Russian speech: use of English when speaking about objects or phenomena that do not exist in Russia or the Former Soviet Union; use of English to “show-off” one’s knowledge of the English language; and use of English in a stylistic/expressive manner (for expressing one’s feelings towards something) (184-199). Zemskaia notes that immigrants associated with the third and fourth waves of immigration use English more frequently in order to integrate into their new society as quickly as possible (63). In addition to influencing émigré speech lexically, English may also cause phonetic and

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2 The interviews were conducted in May of 2006. I made notes of the respondents’ speech during the course of the interview.
grammatical modifications to occur in the spoken Russian of the diaspora. Examples from the respondents’ speech shed light on this process.

**Four Linguistic “Portraits”**

Respondents’ Background (Brief Summary)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Year of Arrival in the U.S.</th>
<th>Age of Arrival in the U.S.</th>
<th>“Wave” of Immigration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marina</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>born in the U.S.</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>2nd (3rd generation)3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yakov</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>5 yrs.</td>
<td>4th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>3 mos.</td>
<td>4th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irina*</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>in the U.S. temporarily</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The respondents were not told that the interviews would be used for a linguistics project, but rather for a project on the Russian diaspora in the U.S. In addition, each respondent was assured that if material from the interview was used, his or her full name would not appear alongside it.

Since the respondents were answering questions, their speech was not “natural,” as is often expected in linguistic research. It is important to note that an individual’s speech patterns change with conversational partners and circumstances, and that therefore truly “natural” speech is an elusive concept. The “unnatural” quality of the respondents’ speech can be further explained by the fact that my previous conversations with Yakov, Roman, and Marina had been in English. Despite this, the data gathered indicates the extent to which these respondents can

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3 The second wave of immigration is associated with World War II.
4 Irina’s ages at the time of the interview and the time of arrival in the United States are estimates. Irina has been in the United States for ten years but does not consider herself to be an immigrant, and believes that she will return to Russia eventually.
control their speech and to what extent it has been influenced by English. In contrast to the other respondents, Irina spoke more “naturally,” which reflected both her comfort with spoken Russian and the fact that I had spoken to her only in Russian prior to the interview. However, it is possible that her “natural” speech would have changed if she had been speaking with a visitor from Russia instead of another member of the Russian diaspora.

Marina

Twenty-year-old Marina was born and has lived her entire life in the United States. Prior to our interview, she had never visited Russia or the Former Soviet Union. Her maternal grandparents arrived in the United States during World War II. Marina’s father is American and does not speak Russian at all. At home, Marina converses in Russian with her grandmother and sometimes with her mother (although her mother is more comfortable speaking English), while with her father and brother she only speaks English. Marina attends a Russian Orthodox church; she was enrolled at a “Russian school” from the age of four to thirteen; she went to summer camps where Russian was spoken; and she took advanced Russian-language classes at UCLA. Marina considers herself Russian-American, and said that she would like to retain her language because it is associated with the Russian culture and because knowledge of the language helps her understand church services.

Marina’s reaction to her own speech (laughter) indicates that she is aware of her own mistakes but does not know how to immediately correct them:

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5 This interview was conducted in person.
6 In this paper, “Russian school” refers to an establishment in the United States, which offers instruction for children in the Russian language, usually once a week.
During World War II, they fled through Germany, and then they stopped in New York, and then came to San Francisco, but my grandfather, he was a merchant marine for Russia, and he left home when he was seventeen years old. He had been to the South Pole, and then they stopped in Seattle and he fled from the ship.

Marina utilizes English when she either doesn’t know or cannot recall a Russian equivalent for what she wants to say.

Grammatical errors are frequent in Marina’s speech. When speaking Russian, Marina uses similar grammatical constructions both correctly and incorrectly: «Они приехали в сороковых годах». Моя бабушка, она приехала когда она была двадцать два в сорок пятый году, и тоже дедушка приехал в сорок четвертом году ("They arrived in the forties. My grandmother, she arrived when she was twenty-two in ’forty-five, and Grandfather also arrived in ’forty-four"). When speaking about her life, Marina used the phrases: «когда он...»

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7 Standard Russian (SR):  «Когда шла...война»
8 SR:  «они бежали через Германию» (Marina confuses the verbs “to run” and “to flee”)
9 SR:  «остановились» (the fourth syllable is stressed)
10 SR:  «когда ему было семнадцать лет»
11 SR:  «они остановились в Сиэтле»(the fourth syllable in “остановились” is stressed)
12 SR:  «он бежал»
13 In translating the interviewees’ responses into English, my intention was to convey the meaning of what was said; I did not “translate” the respondents’ mistakes.
14 SR:  «в сороковых годах»
15 SR:  «в сорок пятом году»
16 correct as is
был семнадцать лет» (when he was seventeen years old), «он здесь приехал когда он был шесть лет» (he arrived when he was six years old), «когда я была четыре лет» (when I was four years old), «я кончила когда я была (corrects herself) мне было тринадцать лет» (I finished when I was thirteen years old); after having corrected herself in the preceding instance, she utilizes the grammatically-correct phrase «когда мне было пять лет» (when I was five years old). Marina appears to be bringing the English construction “I was” into her Russian speech; her grammatical inconsistency could be the result of learning the correct construction when the incorrect construction was already habitual.

Zemskaya refers to the declination of nouns as “the weakest link in the morphological system of the Russian language” (85), with speakers “preferring” the nominative case to the other cases. Morphological errors in Marina’s speech support this conclusion. Examples include: «мы с братом всегда очень любили эта книга» (my brother and I always really loved this book”), «мы очень много видели бабушка и дедушка» (“we saw Grandmother and Grandfather a lot”), «выхожу замуж за американец» (“am marrying an American”). Marina repeatedly utilizes the nominative case instead of the appropriate accusative case.

Yakov and Roman

Brothers Yakov and Roman moved to the United States with their family in 1993. Yakov spent the first five years of his life in Russia and attended a community “Russian school” from 1994 to 2001. Roman, however, was only 3 months old upon the family’s arrival in the United States.
States and only attended “Russian school” for one year in the States. Despite the substantial differences between Yakov’s and Roman’s linguistic education, an examination of their relative proficiencies yields interesting contrasts. They have lived in the same environment for years, and have on a daily basis conversed in Russian only with their parents, while speaking English among themselves and with their other siblings. During their interviews, both noted that they are more comfortable speaking English.

During the interview, Yakov did not code-switch, but did utilize English grammatical constructions. Asking that the question be repeated, Yakov said «можешь опять сказать?»\(^ {24} \), translating verbatim the English phrase “can you say [that] again?”. Answering the question, who he considers himself to be, Yakov responded «я думаю, что я американец. Мне нравится думать, что я русский тоже» (“I think that I am an American. I like to think that I’m Russian too”), translating the English phrase «I like to think that…» into Russian. Describing his typical weekend, Yakov said: «я сейчас часто гуляю с друзьями на выходных»\(^ {25} \) (“I often go out with my friends on weekends”), his answer perhaps influenced by the English phrase “on weekends.” Speaking about “Russian school,” Yakov said «там было несколько людей в каждом классе» (“there were several people in each class”), failing to differentiate between the collocations «много людей» и «несколько человек», which exist in Russian but not in English.

From Roman’s speech, it was evident that he had difficulty speaking Russian; he sounded exhausted from his efforts towards the end of the interview. In his speech, Roman made phonetic modifications, often giving preference to hard sounds over soft ones. He utilized the hard н

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\(^ {24} \) SR: «можешь повторить?»

\(^ {25} \) SR: «по выходным» in the context of doing something repeatedly
(«очень» instead of «очень») and ы instead of щ («с друзьями обшаемся»). In many instances he also substituted и for ы («мы» instead of «мы», «детские журналы» instead of «детские журналы»).

Roman’s speech was peppered with grammatical errors. The following excerpt serves as an example of speech that is typical for Roman (speaking about the cartoon «Малыш и Карлсон»):

Он мог летать потому, что у него был propeller. Он дружился с Малышом, и он любил кушать... (fails to find the word). Они были, как сказать, mischievous, и он еще варенья кушал много. Он Малыша, когда-то они что-то сделают плохо, когда они пытаются что-то сделать, что-то ломается и (unintelligible), но Карлсон уже улетел и Малыш попадает.

He could fly because he had a propeller. He was friends with the little boy, and he liked to eat... (fails to find the word). They were, how to say it, mischievous, and he also ate lots of jam. He, when they do something bad, when they try to do something, something breaks and (unintelligible), but Karlsson has already flown away and the little boy gets it.

Roman continues to stress the second vowel in the word «Малыш» («Малышом» and «Малыша») even though the stress should change when the word is not in the nominative case.

During the interview, Roman repeated the phrases «по-русском» and «по-английском» («Я смотрел много мультфильмы по-английском, американские» ("I watched a lot of cartoons in English, American [cartoons]")], merging the grammatically-correct phrases «по-русски/английски» and «на русском/английском», despite the fact that the grammatically-correct phrases were used in the interview questions.

26 Because of Roman’s pronunciation, specifically his use of the hard л, the word “propeller”/“пропеллер” is transcribed in English rather than Russian.
Irina moved to Los Angeles in 1997, for work-related reasons. Although she has lived in the United States for ten years, she believes that she will eventually return to Russia. Irina does not consider herself disconnected from Russia; she travels to Russia every year, regularly reads Russian fiction, visits Russian websites, listens to Russian radio, and often watches the news broadcast from Moscow.

Irina spoke without errors, with the exception of several English words used during the course of the interview. Irina utilized the phrase «научная community» («научная community, она, дело в том, что она очень однородна, она одинакова» (“the science community, it, the thing is, it is very homogenous, it is unvarying”)) twice in her speech. In this particular case, the use of English may be motivated by the fact that English is the language of the international scientific community.

Telling about how she spends her weekends, Irina stated «по субботам, иногда, не очень часто, я хожу в магазин – shopping – не продукты, а тряпки» (“on Saturdays, sometimes, not very often, I go to the store – shopping – not groceries, but clothes”) and «потом мы ходим grocery shopping» (“then we go grocery shopping”). In this case, the use of English may be masking the fact that Irina has forgotten the appropriate Russian construction. In Russian, the phrase «хожу в магазин» refers specifically to grocery shopping. Irina seems to realize that the construction she used is not quite correct - she should have used «хожу по магазинам» to refer to shopping for clothes. To compensate for her error, Irina uses the English word “shopping” with a Russian explanation («не продукты, а тряпки»). The few isolated

27 This interview was conducted in person.
instances of English use may be a sign that Irina is slowly starting to forget the Russian language; however, it is possible that she was tailoring her speech to her interlocutor.

Irina also used English when she said «вообще мы с мужем очень увлекаемся hiking» ("In general me and my husband are really into hiking") and «очень мы, такие, outdoor люди» ("we’re…outdoor people"). The word “hiking” has a Russian equivalent («ходить в поход»), but Irina may have utilized the English word because it has entered the mainstream Russian language. The word “outdoor” has specific connotations in English which would have been lost in translation.

Conclusion

My project suggests that the level of Russian oral proficiency is related to the age of arrival in the United States and the frequency of the use of Russian in everyday life. Although Marina and Roman make many mistakes in their speech, for them, Russian is not a second language; it was acquired “naturally” from their upbringing, not from textbooks, and secured through interaction (however infrequent) with other Russian-speakers. The difference in the level of proficiency between Yakov and Roman can be explained by the fact that Yakov was older when he arrived in the United States and that he used the language more frequently, for example, when he attended “Russian school.” Irina’s level of proficiency is far superior to the other respondents’ because she arrived in the United States as an adult.

Zemskaia notes two poles of Russian language retention: the first pole is made up of those who would like to retain their language, while the second pole consists of those who have left Russia permanently without plans to return, and who wish to assimilate into their new surroundings and adopt them as their own (63). Since many factors influence the level of
language proficiency, the conclusions that can be drawn from my project are limited. Nevertheless, the interviews indicate that the desire to retain Russian is not a significant factor in preventing modifications from occurring in émigré speech. If the speaker was born in the U.S. or arrived at a young age, linguistic modifications may occur before a child realizes that he or she would like to retain the language. Although none of the respondents, with the exception of Irina, plan on returning to Russia, all expressed the desire to retain the Russian language.
Works Cited
