

Russian bear of a language to learn

Last time I wrote about the struggles of foreigners learning English. Today I'll put the shoe on the other foot, and try to explain the battles an English speaker fights with Russian.

I studied Russian way back in the day, and this is my second time teaching in St Petersburg, so my Russian is now pretty decent. I can't pass as a native for more than a minute or two, but once the jig is up people still don't guess I'm American, so that's progress. But Russian is still a bear for English speakers to learn, because it is just so different.

For one, we've got to master a completely new alphabet. Some of the letters are the same. But that just makes it more confusing, particularly on my computer where English and Russian alphabets are constantly fighting over who gets to use my keyboard.

Handwriting is also a challenge. A Russian "ch" sound looks like an English "r," an English "r" sound looks like a Russian "p," a Russian "p" sound looks like an English "n." The only thing I can write in cursive English any more is my name. Anything else makes my head hurt.

Another concept that's completely new to English speakers is stress: Accenting the right syllable. Stress is a constant source of stress. In English, if you emphasize the wrong syllable, you'll sound weird but your meaning will be clear. In Russian, if you emphasize the wrong syllable, you could say something quite different from what you intended.

Consider the Russian verbs for writing and, shall we say, a form of excre-



OPINION

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tion. The only difference between them is in which syllable you emphasize. In what was surely a low point for Russian-American relations, I once told my students I was going to write a proof on the blackboard. The entire room burst into laughter. Rest assured, I now know pay close attention to stress.

Russian also has "diminutives," terms of endearment for just about everything under the sun. Not just for people (English has those, we call them nicknames), but for ordinary objects. The lid on a soft drink is a "cute little roof." A small purse is a "cute little bag." Even the hat check lady gives you a "cute little number." These are fun, although I'll probably never get the knack of forming them correctly. A few days ago, I tried "cute little fish," and mangled it pretty badly. The word, not the fish.

Probably the toughest thing for English speakers is the "case system." Russian is an inflected language, which means that the endings of words can change depending on their role in the sentence. The rules that determine how they change are called "cases," and unless you had high school Latin this concept will seem utterly bizarre.

English used to do this hundreds of years ago, but only a tiny bit of it is still around. "I" becomes "me" if it's not the subject, "he" becomes "him,"

and so forth. But in English, pronoun shifting is all that happens. In Russian, all nouns do this dance, as do adjectives. It would be as if we said things like "The chair is red," but also "Put that on the redom chairrel," "He is standing by the reduf chairrog," and so on. It's a perfectly reasonable thing for a language to do, I suppose, but it still gives me fits.

Oh, and did I mention that Russian words can be masculine, feminine or neutral?

Emphasizing the right syllable, mastering the case system, getting the gender right, plus half a dozen other subtleties I lack room to mention. I can hear them all executed perfectly every day by Russian 3-year-olds out for a walk with their parents. I like listening to Russian children talk. It gets me my daily dose of humility, and reminds me of the universality of human communication.

Not that we all speak the same language, far from it. But we all speak *a* language, the one we're born into. No matter where human babies are born, they can master whatever set of squeaks, grunts and pops their parents ask them to, because we as human beings are born to communicate with one other. For some reason, halfway across the world, I find that inspiring.

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