

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

RUSSIAN LANGUAGE

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Overview Language fulfills several important functions in our lives. First, we use language to express ourselves and communicate with others. Among the Slavs, like other communities, language plays a crucial role in defining their culture and identity. As the most widely spoken East Slavic language, Russian has the status of being the most prestigious and dominant language not only in the Russian Federation, but also in Central Asia, the Baltics and the Caucasus states even today.

ANCIENT PERIOD

Indo-European people began to migrate to the west and east between 3500 - 2500 BC. The Slavic tribes that settled in the east spoke a language called Proto-Slavic (or Common Slavic). The Eastern Slavs were separated from the Western and Southern Slavs by geographical barriers and each group developed their own spoken language with certain dialectical features.

POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD

Writing was not known in Pagan Rus until it was introduced by Vladimir I in 988 during the Christianization process. It was the two brothers, Saints Konstantinos (Cyril and Methodios) who spoke a Slavic language and were sent by the Emperor Michael III from Constantinople to Moravia in the late 9th century, who created the first alphabet, *Glagolitic*, for the Slavs when they were forced to move to the south of Bulgaria. There they developed the first liturgical alphabet, *Glagolitic*, and later this alphabet was developed into *Cyrillic* by their disciples.

The liturgical language of Old Church Slavonic, created in Bulgaria, was a South Slavonic language. Although it was mutually intelligible to all Slavic languages, including Old Russian, there were clear differences between them. Old Russian became the state language of the first Eastern Slavic state, the *Kievan State*, and had northern and southern dialectical divisions.

With the rise of the *Muscovite State*, a center with a northern dialectical base, and the gathering the southern dialectal speakers in the center, a new transitional dialectical group called *central* was created.

Old Church Slavonic: Old Church Slavonic is the oldest attested Slavic language used in Slavic manuscripts, which date from the 10th or 11th centuries. At this early period, much of the writings' content was religious in nature, such as bible translations and saints' lives.

Old Russian: At the time of the emergence of writing among the Eastern Slavs, there was a single language called Old Russian, the oldest dialect of Russian, and the Proto language of the other East Slavic languages within the Slavonic branch of Indo-European. The oldest surviving documents date back to the 10th century. By the 10th century, the language of the Eastern Slavs had developed a number of distinctive features that distinguished it from them from other Slavic languages such as full vocalization (pleophony – polnoglasiye).

EARLY MODERN PERIOD

Late in the 14th century southern Slavic clerics from the Balkans escaping from the Ottomans migrated to Russia, and one effect of their immigration was the injection of Old Church Slavonic elements into Old Russian. By the 18th century, the Russian language had undergone an orthographic reform since the Russian language still had archaic features that were used incorrectly. At the end of the 18th century French influence was predominant and the French language was spoken by upper class families.

Civil script (*Grazhdanskiy shrift*): During the modernization and secularization period, Peter the Great introduced the simplified *civil script (grazhdanskiy shrift)* in 1708; This modernized Cyrillic alphabet distanced writing from the Church which continued to use the ancient script. All textbooks and works on mathematics, geography, artillery, and military science were produced with this civil script, but the Russian Orthodox Church continued to use the Church-Slavonic alphabet. During Peter the Great's reign, translations from European languages increased the capacity of the printing industry and the number of secular literature publications. In addition, the literary language was freed from religious influence and opened up to western borrowings.

Three styles of writing: Various writers such as A. Kantemir, A. P. Sumarokov and V. Trediakovsky made serious attempts to modernize the Russian language. Nonetheless, it was M.V. Lomonosov whose proposal of three styles of writing for Russian in his Russian grammar published in 1755 that contributed significantly to the development of the Russian language. According to this theory, in the high style, Old Church Slavonic should be used for the composition of epics, odes, and poems. The middle style should be used in dramatic works and literary prose; and the low style, the language of townsfolk and peasants, should be used for comedy and personal correspondence.

NINETEENTH CENTURY

During the 19th century, standard Russian took on its modern form, and modern norms were introduced. In addition to Lomonosov, writers such as G. R. Derzhavin, N. Karamzin and A. S. Pushkin made notable contributions in the development of the national language. The modern literary language is considered to have begun in the time of Pushkin, in the first half of the 19th century. By rejecting the high style and using low style vocabulary from the spoken language Pushkin created modern literary Russian; his language can be read without difficulty even today.

TWENTIETH CENTURY

During the period of the Empire, the ceaseless political upheavals such as the Russo-Japanese War, Bloody Sunday, the Revolution of 1905 and the First World War enriched the Russian lexicon with the inclusion of new revolutionary vocabulary. With the October revolution of 1917 numerous changes to the language occurred - the remaining superfluous Church Slavonic letters were eliminated in addition to other semantic transformations, some words were eliminated from active use, new words were introduced to the vocabulary, and a number of spelling and stylistic shifts were made. One of the characteristics of the Soviet period language policy was an extension in the use of certain words from narrow social circles to the language of the masses. A large number of these lexemes introduced into Russian at the turn of the century were words of foreign origin, and this political, economic, military, scientific and technological vocabulary that was imported from the West was adapted into Russian by the Soviets. The new Russian words injected into the lexicon of all the languages of the USSR gave the Soviets absolute control over the language and information.

Russification: Russian became the predominant language, and Soviet language planners tried to increase the influence of the Russian language so that all citizens in the Soviet Union could understand and communicate with one another and participate in the administration. With the development of a simpler and standardized spelling of the Russian language with its vast new lexicon, specifically through printed media in a growing number of public domains, the policy of Russification increased the literacy of the Russian speaking community in the Soviet Union.

Discussion/Questions

1. What type of linguistic reforms were introduced by Peter the Great?
2. What are the historical and socio-cultural factors that have played a role in the evolution of the Russian language?

Readings

1- Comrie, Bernard, "Russian", in *The World's Major Languages*, Edited by Bernard Comrie, Routledge, 1987, pp. 274-288.

2- Cubberley, Paul, *Russian: A Linguistic Introduction*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 12-51.

3- Worth, Deans S., "Language", *The Cambridge Companion Modern Russian Culture*, Edited by Nicholas Rzhevsky, 1998, pp.19-38.