

The Hopeless Quest for Language Purity

Another year, another law on protecting Russian from foreignisms.

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

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Sergei Vedyashkin / Moskva News Agency

Общепотребимые слова: commonly used words

Every year or so some state organization at some level in Russia demands or proposes or drafts a law that would keep foreign words out of the Russian language so that the Russian language will remain, well, purely Russian.

The fact that this happens regularly suggests that the process is not successful.

I have to say that I have some sympathy with the anti-foreignism crowd, or rather that I get annoyed with folks who pick up foreign words — usually English — and bandy them about in Russian when there is a perfectly good word in their native language. I was particularly exasperated by the fad of using both the English-based word and its Russian equivalent — when officials would talk about “транспарентность и прозрачность бизнеса” (business

transparency and transparency). And I thought older Russians ought to be able to buy сосиску (a hot dog) on the street instead of puzzling over хотдод (a hot dog, only more expensive).

But these campaigns to purify Russian seem to coincide with xenophobic political campaigns, and none of the proposals actually deal with the reality of a living, changing, growing language — or with the practicalities of linguistic intervention.

And so it is now. There is a new draft law, passed in its first reading at the State Duma, that will modify the 2005 law "О государственном языке РФ" (On the State Language of the Russian Federation). This new law will prohibit the use of foreign words by anyone at any level of government service if there are *общеупотребимые российские аналоги* (commonly used analogous Russian words). Note the use of *российские* (having to do with the Russian state) instead of *русские аналоги* (having to do with Russian language, culture, or nationality).

Right now Russian must be used just about everywhere — in official documents and courts, on street signs and passports, in all media, movies, performances, and advertisements, although there seem to have been exceptions for special events, festivals and so on. The new law would also mandate Russian use in *образование... а также государственные и муниципальные информационные системы* (in education...as well as in state and municipal information systems).

To do this, they plan to introduce *обязательная лингвистическая экспертиза всех проектов нормативных актов и контроль за "корректным" использованием государственного языка чиновниками всех уровней* (mandatory specialized linguistic review of all drafts of normative acts and monitoring to ensure "correct" use of governmental language by officials at all levels).

Oh, sure. Like that is ever going to happen in Russia (or anywhere in the world) — especially since dictionaries and other materials for this process are only expected to appear in 2025.

But the head of the Duma Committee on Culture, Yelena Yampolskaya (United Russia party) is eager to get started with some serious re-Russification: *Появятся словари, и мы сразу избавимся от всех этих оупенов, сейлов, фудкортов, кешбэков, дискаунтов*" (As soon as those dictionaries appear we'll immediately get rid of all those opens, sales, food courts, cashbacks and discounts). She uses a politically charged phrase to describe this language: *лакейский суржик* (servile Surzhik, a language that is a mix of Russian and Ukrainian).

Yampolskaya also wants to clean up speakers' Russian grammar, especially in the media. I have to admit I'm always cheered to learn of the problems native speakers have with their language. According to the deputy, these include: *все эти безграмотные ударения, чудовищные склонения числительных, вульгаризмы, чуть ли не непристойности* (all of those ungrammatical word stresses, absolutely appalling declensions of numerals, vulgar words and what are practically obscenities).

For now this only concerns the use of language in official settings, *not в быту* (not in everyday life and language). Whew. Dodged a bullet there.

Even in the Duma not everyone is happy about this. Nikolai Alekseyenko (United Russia)

[pointed out](#) that: Борьба за чистоту надо, но у молодёжи есть свое понимание (We need to fight for purity, but young people have their own point of view on this).

Maxim Gulin (New People party) [wanted to know](#) where the funding for all these experts was going to come from and worried that Russian would revert to a pre-Petrine version: Не значит ли это, что госслужащие...[которые] работают в Госдуме станут думными дьяками? (Does this mean that state officials working in the Duma will become clerics in the Boyar's Council?)

Alexei Kurinny (Communist Party of the Russian Federation) [thought](#) the project was simply not feasible and noted между прочим (by the way) that слово 'лингвистический' тоже иностранное (the word "linguistic" is also foreign). Another member of his party called for a measured approach: если буквально будем пытаться убрать иностранные слова, Конституцию придётся переписывать: депутат, президент, республика... (If we are going to try to eliminate literally all foreign words, then we'll have to rewrite the Constitution: deputy, president, republic...).

What do Russians think about foreign words entering their language? In [a poll](#) this summer, 40% were neutral, 42% don't like them and about 30% use them at work or at school. The list of words they use, like it or not, is very revealing: фейк (fake); хайп (hype); уик-энд (weekend); месседж (message); инсайт (insight). They don't much like аппрув (approve) and кринж (cringe), but the most annoying foreignisms were deemed to be краш (crush, as in romantic attraction); брейншторм (brainstorm) and дедлайн (deadline).

As for me, I always get thrown off by тред, which I mentally mistranslate as tread instead of a Twitter thread, and I get tired of the trendy word треш (trash), which means anything trashy, including fashion, or anything you don't like. Там треш (It's rubbish). And my brain short-circuits when I read Что-то захотелось добить число фолловеров до 3к (For some reason I wanted to get up to 3K followers).

But I laughed at a response to the new draft law from a Duma deputy: Не хило нас кейс триггернул, коллеги, не правда ли? (Well, colleagues, that case sure triggered us pretty darn good, didn't it?)

Полный треш! (Complete rubbish!)

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