WHERE TO FIND THE ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON RUSSIAN GRAMMAR

I was told in my undergraduate days that while an educated man need not know everything, he ought to be able to find the answer to any question. I have been troubled by that definition, especially when unable to find an adequate answer for a question raised by one of my Russian language students. Several years ago I read an article entitled “Skoraja lingvističeskaja,” which seemed to offer a solution. So when I was in Moscow for enough time to make arrangements, I called upon the Academy of Sciences to ascertain their services and ability to respond to queries about the Russian language.

Lev Ivanovič Skvorcov, zavedujúčij sektorom kul’tury russkoj reči, and Sergei Ivanovič Vinogradov, mladšij naučnýj sotrúdnik sektora kul’tury russkoj reči, met me at the Academy. Lev Ivanovič explained that the present day service originated from the thousands of letters and telephone calls directed to the Institute of the Russian Language of the Academy of Sciences. An Information Service in which all members of the Institute participated was established some fifteen years ago. In a current ten-year plan, the responsibilities of these individuals were formally assigned to the newly organized Sektor kul’tury russkoj reči. The major work of the sektor is divided into two aspects: to review and correct official documents; and to propose new terms and words. Considerable work, for example, was done by the sektor in preparation for the 1980 Moscow Olympics including the creation of new station designations for the Metro and an attempt to systematize all signs in the Metro system. In addition, the sektor is responsible for the radio broadcast, “V mire slov,” heard twice a month on Sunday afternoons. In the program, qualified specialists attempt to answer the most popular questions out of some 14,000 letters received yearly. In comparison to the work performed by the Institute in a single year, the activity of the telephone answering service seems insignificant. Yet, because of its immediacy and accessibility, the service occupies a highly visible position.

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I also asked several questions which had arisen before my visit. What is the proper pronunciation of Tolstoj’s hero in Anna Karenina: Levin or Lëvin? (Lëvin). For events with no admission charge does one say: вход бесплатный or вход свободный? (вход свободный). In joint American and Soviet ventures is the proper adjective Американо-Советский or Американско-Советский? (Американо-Советский). Sergej Ivanovič’s reaction when I asked whether one used в кухне or на кухне in the modern language was interesting. He first attempted to differentiate between the usages by ascribing to в кухне descriptions of the interior and items in the kitchen, as opposed to someone на кухне. After further consideration, he said the preferred form in modern Russian is в кухне for both persons and things. Questioned why the Soviet press uses Джеймс Картер or Дж. Картер instead of the transliteration for Jimmy, i.e., Джимми, he noted it had not come to the attention of the сектор, but had probably been decided elsewhere.

My main goal was to obtain information of practical use to the American community of Russian language teachers and scholars. I was specifically interested in the reference works the service uses to assist in answering the assorted queries. Služba jazyka provided me with a list of the materials on hand.2 The list is not extraordinarily long. It appears in the appendix to this paper. The items on the list, with one or two exceptions, give an indication of the basic minimum of reference materials for the libraries of colleges and universities where Russian is taught. Departments and individuals should be able to acquire most of the works considered by the Institute as essential. Books on the list are to be found in this country in one of three collections: The Library of Congress, The New York Public Library, and the library at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. 3

It cannot be assumed that possession of these texts will insure answers to the questions put to us; but they should help us to answer many of them. What we lack is the extensive card catalogue of the Služba as well as the knowledge and experience of the members of the Institute. They assured me, however, that they would be happy to answer any questions from their American colleagues.

Queries should be addressed to:

CCCP
г. Москва
ул. Волхонка, 18/2
Институт русского языка АН СССР
Сектор культуры русской речи

Sektor kul’tury russkoj reči
Institute russkogo jazyka, AN SSSR
Volxonka 18/2
Moscow, U.S.S.R.

If an immediate answer is required, one can always call Moscow 202-59-70 between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. local time weekdays except Wednesday.

Some friendly advice which they Institute adheres to is: When in doubt, look it up!
NOTES

2. I have verified all items and added the authors or editors for some works and publishers for all. Where several editions of a work exist, I have chosen the edition known to be in one of the three collections mentioned. Where more than one edition is on hand, I have cited the most recent one.

3. I wish to express my gratitude to the Slavic Reference Service of the University of Illinois for assistance in verifying the bibliographical information in this paper, and recommend their Service especially for those without access to a major library. They can be reached by telephone (217) 333-1349 or (217) 333-1343 from 8 to 5 weekdays, or in writing: Slavic Reference Service, 225 Library, University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois 61801.

APPENDIX
REFERENCE WORKS USED BY SLUŽBA JAZYKA


