

DISCUSSION AND NOTES

Thomas R. Beyer, Jr.*

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,"¹ 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, *zavedujuščij sektorom kul'tury russkoj reči*, and Sergej Ivanovič Vinogradov, *mladšij naučnyj sotrudnik 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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Služba jazyka Instituta ruskogo jazyka AN SSSR operates four days a week (Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday) from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Moscow time. Seven members of the service take turns, one per day, monitoring the telephone. All have at least the кандидатская степень, and in the past, even those with the degree of доктор наук have participated. In the course of the four hours, twenty to twenty-five questions are answered--although some days, more than forty calls have been received. The Institute discourages prank callers and those whose information can be found in a dictionary. The majority of calls come from editors, secretaries, writers, teachers and employees of government ministries or agencies. All questions and responses, along with the name of the respondent, are recorded in a journal and later transferred to a card catalogue system arranged both alphabetically and thematically. Every attempt is made to answer questions immediately although there are cases when the service returns calls if the answers are not immediately available.

Areas covered by the questions and answers are broad and range from problems of punctuation and spelling to those of grammar, etymology, and stylistics. The service makes no claim of omniscience; often, for example, they are unable to answer questions concerning the etymology of phrases. If unable to provide an adequate answer, they try to recommend other sources. Individuals assigned to the service do not consider themselves to be arbitrators of norms or originators of new rules; rather, they see themselves as an information clearinghouse. The norms of the contemporary language are determined not by the service, but by the *Sektor kul'tury russkoj reči*. Even so, there is a tendency to be descriptive rather than prescriptive. Lev Ivanovič noted that one of the major tasks of his *sektor* is to educate the public that variants often do exist and to overcome the grammar school psychology that only one form is acceptable.

I asked Sergej Ivanovič, who answers the telephone on a regular basis, to recall some of the most frequent questions. He replied that there are several areas particularly troublesome for Russians, one being able to determine the correct form: *согласно приказу* or *согласно приказа* (*согласно приказу*). Other popular inquiries involve the declension of names and the use of capital letters. One difficult question concerned the proper form for the male counterpart of *швей-мотористка*: *швей-моторист* or *швей-моторист* (*швей-моторист*). The strangest question, according to Sergej Ivanovič, and one which he refused to dignify with an answer is "What is the longest word in the Russian language?" He was also unable to remember the strangest answer he had ever given.

As an example of the day-to-day work performed by those in the service, Sergej Ivanovič mentioned a few of the questions received during the first hour of the morning. The first question dealt with punctuation. Where does one place the comma(s) in the expression: *Слава Тебе закаленный в борьбе Комсомол?* (One comma after *Тебе*). Next came a question regarding the correct spelling and the use of a hyphen in the word *естественнонаучный* (no hyphen). Another caller wished to learn the correct spelling of the Russian word for a scanner (скеннер).

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 *Американско-Советский* or *Американо-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 *Джэймс Картер* or *Дж. Картер* instead of the transliteration for Jimmy, i.e., *Джимми*, he noted it had not come to the attention of the *sektor*, 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:

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

Sektor kul'tury russkoj reči
Institute ruskogo 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

1. N.V. Solov'ev, "Skoraja lingvističeskaja," *Russkaja reč'*, 3 (1974), pp. 80-83. See also L.N. Kuznecova, "Služba jazyka," *Russkaja reč'*, 3 (1974), pp. 83-86.

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) 333-1348 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

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