

# Facts About The World's Languages

John C. Green & Carl Rubino

# FACTS ABOUT THE WORLD'S LANGUAGES:

An Encyclopedia of the World's Major  
Languages, Past and Present

*Edited by*  
*Jane Garry and Carl Rubino*

*Contributing Linguistics Editors:*

*Adams B. Bodo*

*Alice Faber*

*Robert French*

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# RUSSIAN

Thomas R. Beyer

**Language Name:** Russian. **Autonym:** *ruskij jazyk*.

**Location:** The Russian Federation (*Rossijskaja federacija*) and also in many of the former republics of the Soviet Union. Russian was frequently used as the language of communication between Russians and citizens in eastern European countries where Russian was a required language in most schools.

**Family:** Russian is the Northeastern subgroup of the Eastern Slavic group of the Slavic branch of Indo-European.

**Related Languages:** BELORUSSIAN and UKRAINIAN, both of the Eastern Slavic group.

**Dialects:** Universal education and a system of norms of language dictated from Moscow have resulted in a fairly standardized language among educated people. Standard modern Russian is most closely related to that spoken in and around Moscow. Dialectal differences occur across the broad expanse of Russia and are often distinguished by the pronunciation of certain vowel sounds in unstressed positions: so-called *akan'je*, *okan'je*, *ikan'je*, *jakan'je*. Another dialectal feature is the replacement of the velar stop [g] with a laryngeal fricative [h], mostly in southern areas.

Since Russian was also a required second language in the former Soviet republics, it was and is often spoken with distinctive national accents, such as ARMENIAN, GEORGIAN, and Estonian.

**Number of Speakers:** 154 million ethnic Russians. 250–300 million, including inhabitants of Russia and the former Soviet Union.

## Origin and History

The Slavs were some of the last Indo-Europeans to migrate into Central and southern Europe, where their presence is confirmed in the 6th century. Precise dating of early movements is complicated because of the lack of early Slavic written records. The language used by the Slavs was mutually comprehensible as late as the 9th century even as the tribes had separated into distinctive political groupings and three major linguistic families had emerged: South Slavic, Western, and Eastern Slavic (these latter two are sometimes referred to as Northern Slavic). The political center of the Eastern Slavs was Kievan Rus' from the 9th to the 12th centuries. This unity was destroyed by the invasions of the Mongols in the 13th century and subsequent occupation that resulted in an isolation of Russian from what developed as the Ukrainian and Belorussian languages.

The literary language was heavily influenced by Old Church Slavonic (based on Southern Slavic), and debates in the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries over the composition of a Russian literary language were resolved only with the emergence of Alexander Pushkin as a national poet in the first quarter of the 19th century. Also during that century, writers such as Pushkin, Chekhov, Tolstoy, Dos-toyevsky, Turgenev, and Gogol wrote enduring masterpieces of world fiction in the Russian language.

## Orthography and Basic Phonology

of religious texts. Modest reforms to the writing system were made under Peter the Great. The last reform of the Russian orthographic system occurred in 1918 after the 1917 Great October Socialist Revolution. The alphabet consists of 21 consonant letters, 10 vowel letters and two signs: the hard and soft signs.

Table 1: The Cyrillic Alphabet

Cyrillic	Transcription	Cyrillic	Transcription
Аа	a	Рр	r
Бб	b	Сс	s
Вв	v	Тт	t
Гг	g	Уу	u
Дд	d	Фф	f
Ее	je, e	Хх	x
Ёё	jo, o	Цц	c
Жж	ž	Чч	č
Зз	z	Шш	š
Ии	i	Щщ	šč
Йй	j	Ъъ	"
Кк	k	Ыы	y
Лл	l	Ьь	'
Мм	m	Ээ	e
Нн	n	Юю	ju
Оо	o	Яя	ja
Пп	p		

ized consonants are indicated by a following ' : *ugol* 'corner' vs. *ugol'* 'coal'. The consonant /c/ is always hard, and /č/ is always soft.

Table 2: Consonants

	Labial	Dental	Palatal	Velar
Stops				
Voiceless	p	t		k
Voiced	b	d		g
Fricatives				
Voiceless	f	s	š	
Voiced	v	z	ž	x
Affricates				
Voiceless		c	č	
Nasals	m	n		
Resonants		l, r	j	

Voiced stops and fricatives are devoiced at the end of a word. In addition, Russian has progressive voicing assimilation: before a voiced consonant (except /v l m n/) a voiceless stop or fricative becomes voiced, and before a voiceless consonant a voiced stop or fricative becomes voiceless.

Table 3: Vowels

	Front	Central	Back
High	i	y	u
Mid	e		o
Low		a	

Russian has six vowel sounds, which are represented by 10 vowel letters. The vowels /u e o a/ are spelled differently depending on whether they follow a soft or a hard consonant. The soft vowel letters, when they occur at the beginning of a word, after another vowel, or after a hard or a soft sign, represent /ju je jo ja/. /y/ is a high, central, unrounded vowel.

Russian has only one stress per word, and unstressed vowels are reduced. Unstressed /o/ becomes [ʌ] if it is one syllable before the stress; two syllables before the stress or following the stress, it becomes [ə]. Unstressed /e/ is reduced to [i].

While not generally recognized as separate phonemes, /i/ and /y/ are clearly distinctive in modern Russian.

## Basic Morphology

Russian nouns occur in three genders (masculine, feminine, and neuter) and are inflected for number (singular and plural) and case (nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, instrumental, and prepositional). The inflected forms of *student* 'student' (masculine), *pis'mó* 'letter' (neuter), and *žénščina* 'woman' (feminine) are illustrated below.

### A. Singular

Nominative	student	pis'm-ó	žénščin-a
Genitive	student-a	pis'm-á	žénščin-y
Dative	student-u	pis'm-ú	žénščin-e

Accusative	student-a	pis'm-ó	žénščin-u
Instrumental	student-om	pis'm-óm	žénščin-ój
Prepositional	student-e	pis'm-é	žénščin-e

### B. Plural

Nominative	student-y	pis'm-a	žénščin-y
Genitive	student-ov	pis'em	žénščin
Dative	student-am	pis'm-am	žénščin-am
Accusative	student-ov	pis'm-a	žénščin
Instrumental	student-ami	pis'm-ami	žénščin-ami
Prepositional	student-ax	pis'm-ax	žénščin-ax

In the masculine accusative singular, a distinction is made between animate and inanimate nouns, e.g., *televizor* 'television, nominative and accusative', but *student* 'student, nominative' vs. *studenta* 'student, genitive and accusative'. A similar distinction is made for masculine and feminine nouns in the plural, where the inanimate accusative is identical to the nominative and the animate accusative is identical to the genitive, e.g., nominative *televizory*, *telegrammy*, Accusative *televizory*, *telegrammy*; nominative *studenty*, *studentki*, Accusative *studentov*, *studentok*.

Adjectives and other modifiers agree with the nouns they modify in gender, number, and case: *novyj student* 'new student' *o novom studente* 'about a new student', *staraja dama* 'old lady', *s staroj damoj* 'with an old lady'.

Russian verbs belong to one of two conjugations, and to either imperfective or perfective aspect. There are three tenses, present, past, and future. Imperfective verbs may occur in all three tenses, while perfective verbs may occur in past or future tense only.

Some perfective verbs are formed by adding a prefix to an imperfective verb: *govorít* - *pogovorít* 'to speak/talk', *délát* - *sdélát* 'to do'. Many pairs have an imperfective in the first conjugation with the perfective verb belonging to the second conjugation: *končát* - *kónčit* 'to finish', *povtorját* - *povtorít* 'to repeat'. Many imperfective verbs were derived from perfective verbs by adding -yva- after the stem and before the ending: *pokázývat* - *pokazát* 'to show', *proígrývat* - *proigrát* 'to lose'.

Present tense forms of the first conjugation verb *znát* 'to know' and the second conjugation verb *govorít* 'to speak' are illustrated below.

Infinitive	znát'		govorít'	
	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural
1st per.	zná-ju	zná-em	govor-jú	govor-im
2nd per.	zná-ěš	zná-ete	govor-íš	govor-íte
3rd per.	zná-et	zná-jut	govor-ít	govor-ját

The verbs *znát* and *govorít* are imperfective. When perfective stems occur in this paradigm, they are future tense. Thus, inflected forms of *yznát* 'to recognize' (derived from *znát*) such as *yznáj-u*, *yzná-em* mean 'I will recognize', 'we will recognize'.

The past tense is formed by the addition of the marker -l to the infinitive stem. Past tense verbs agree with their subjects in number and, in the singular, in gender. Unlike present and future tense verbs, past tense verbs do not indicate first, second, or

third person. *Olég zna-l* (Oleg know-PAST.M.SG) 'Oleg knew', *Maša skazá-la* (Masha say-PAST.F.SG) 'Masha said', *Okno bý-lo otkrýt-o* (window be-PAST.NEUT.SG open-NEUT.SG) 'The window was open', *Oni priéxá-li* (they arrive-PAST.PL) 'They arrived'.

The compound future tense is formed by combining a conjugated form of the verb *byť*: *Ja búd-u slúšat'* (I be-1SG listen-INFIN) 'I will listen'.

## Basic Syntax

Russian word order is relatively free; the function of a word is determined by its ending and not by its position in the sentence. As a general rule, old or known information is followed by the new information, sometimes resulting in the subject appearing after the predicate: *Priéxal v gorod novyj student* (arrived in town new student) 'A new student arrived in town'.

Adjectives usually precede the nouns they modify, and adverbs generally precede verbs: *Novyj student ploxó govorit porusski* (new student poorly speaks Russian) 'The new student speaks Russian poorly'.

Negation in Russian is relatively simple, formed by preceding any word with the negative particle *ne*, e.g., *On ne znaet urok* (He NEG knows lesson) 'He doesn't know the lesson', *On znaet ne pervyj urok, a vtoroj urok* (He knows NEG first lesson but second lesson) 'He doesn't know the first lesson, but the second lesson'. Russian does permit what appears to be a double negative: *On níkogda ne znaet urok* (He never NEG knows lesson) 'He never knows the lesson'.

## Contact with Other Languages

Historically, Russian has been enriched by its neighbors (GREEK, TURKISH, and in the 17th century, POLISH). During the 18th century Western European languages were an influence, in particular GERMAN, FRENCH, and DUTCH.

From German: *láger* 'camp'

From French: *pljaž* 'beach', *étáž* 'floor'

From Chinese: *čaj* 'tea'

From English: *ófis* 'office', *komp'júter* 'computer'

One of the official languages of the United Nations, spoken in the largest country in the world and by millions in the now neighboring countries, Russian continues to be a language of communication for hundreds of millions. Yet since the use of Russian was propagated by the former Soviet Union, the impact of local languages upon it has been minor. The major influence on Russian in most recent years has been the large-scale influx of English words in order to provide a vocabulary for Western-style market economy, management, and governance that has been newly introduced into Russia. The increasing use of computer technology has likewise expanded the use of English cognates significantly.

## Common Words

man:	mužčina	small:	málen' kij
woman:	ženščina	yes:	da
water:	vodá	no:	net
sun:	sólnce	good:	xoróšij
three:	tri	bird:	ptíca
fish:	rýba	dog:	sobáka
big:	bol'šoj	tree:	dérevo
long:	dlinnyj		

## Example Sentences

- (1) *Včera ja víde-l Maksím-a i*  
yesterday I see-PAST.M.SG Maxim-M.SG.ACC and

*Nín-u v nóv-om restorán-e.*  
Nina-F.SG.ACC in new-M.SG.PREP restaurant-M.SG.PREP  
'Yesterday I saw Maxim and Nina in the new restaurant.'

- (2) *čto vy déla-ete pósle závtrak-a?*  
What you.PL do-IMPERF-2PL after breakfast-M.SG.GEN  
'What are you doing after breakfast?'

- (3) *Kogdá oná priéd-et, s kem my*  
when she arrive.PERF-3SG with who:INST we

*búd-em igrát'?*  
be-1PL play:INFIN  
'When she arrives, with whom will we play?'

## Efforts to Preserve, Protect, and Promote the Language

Far from being preserved or supported, the teaching of Russian in many countries has declined since its peak at the end of the Gorbachev era (1990). In countries freed from Soviet domination, people have chosen to replace Russian with English as the language of choice for their acquisition of a second language.

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