

History of the Russian language

Russian is a Slavic language of the Indo-European family. All Indo-European languages are descendants of a single prehistoric language, reconstructed as Proto-Indo-European, spoken sometime in the Neolithic era. Although no written records remain, much of the culture and religion of the Proto-Indo-European people can also be reconstructed based on their daughter cultures traditionally and continuing to inhabit most of Europe and South Asia, areas to where the Proto-Indo-Europeans migrated from their original homeland.

External history

Kievan period and feudal breakup

14th-century Novgorodian children were literate enough to send each other birch-bark letters written in the Old Novgorod dialect.

Up to the 14th century, ancestors of the modern Russians (who likewise called themselves ruskiye[citation needed]) spoke dialects of the Old East Slavic language, related to the dialects of other East Slavs. This spoken tongue and the literary Old Church Slavonic language operated throughout Kievan Rus. The earliest written record of the language, an amphora found at Gnezdovo, may date from the mid-10th century. (Until the 15th century, Gnezdovo was a part of the independent Principality of Smolensk.)

During the pre-Kievan period, the main sources of borrowings were Germanic languages, particularly Gothic and Old Norse. In the Kievan period, however, loanwords and calques entered the vernacular primarily from Old Church Slavonic and from Byzantine Greek.

After the Mongol invasion of Rus in the 13th century the vernacular language of the conquered peoples remained firmly Slavic. Turko-Mongol borrowings in Russian relate mostly to commerce and the military:

товар [tɐˈvar] Turkic 'commercial goods'
лошадь [ˈloʂəɫʲ] Turkic 'horse'

In Russia, Church Slavonic – which evolved from Old Church Slavonic – remained the literary language until the Petrine age (1682–1725), when its usage shrank drastically to biblical and liturgical texts. Legal acts and private letters had been, however, already written in pre-Petrine Muscovy in a less formal language, more closely reflecting spoken Russian. The first grammar of the Russian language was written by Vasily Adodurov in the 1740s,[citation needed] and a more influential one by Mikhail Lomonosov in 1755.

The Moscow period (15th–17th centuries)

After the disestablishment of the "Tartar yoke" (монголо-татарское иго, [tɐˈtarskəjə ˈigə]) in the late 14th century, both the political centre and the predominant dialect in European Russia came to be based in Moscow. A scientific consensus exists that Russian and

Ruthenian (the predecessor of Belarusian and Ukrainian) had definitely become distinct by this time at the latest. The official language in Russia remained a kind of Church Slavonic until the close of the 18th century, but, despite attempts at standardization, as by Meletius Smotrytsky c. 1620, its purity was by then strongly compromised by an incipient secular literature. Vocabulary was borrowed from Polish, and, through it, from German and other Western European languages. At the same time, a number of words of native (according to a general consensus among etymologists of Russian) coinage or adaptation appeared, at times replacing or supplementing the inherited Indo-European/Common Slavonic vocabulary.

глаз [glas] R; relegates (to poetic use only) ComSl око [ˈokə] = Lat oculus = E eye 'eye'

куртка [ˈkurtkə] P kurtka, from Lat curtus 'a short jacket'

бархат [ˈbarxət] G Barhat 'velvet'

Much annalistic, hagiographic, and poetic material survives from the early Muscovite period. Nonetheless, a significant amount of philosophic and secular literature is known to have been destroyed after being proclaimed heretical.

The material following the election of the Romanov dynasty in 1613 following the Time of Troubles is rather more complete. Modern Russian literature is considered to have begun in the 17th century, with the autobiography of Avvakum and a corpus of chronique scandaleuse short stories from Moscow.

Empire (18th–19th centuries)

The political reforms of Peter the Great were accompanied by a reform of the alphabet, and achieved their goal of secularization and modernization. Blocks of specialized vocabulary were adopted from the languages of Western Europe. Most of the modern naval vocabulary, for example, is of Dutch origin. Latin, French, and German words entered Russian for the intellectual categories of the Age of Enlightenment. Several Greek words already in the language through Church Slavonic were refashioned to reflect post-Renaissance European rather than Byzantine pronunciation. By 1800, a significant portion of the gentry spoke French, less often German, on an everyday basis.

мачта [ˈmatʂtə] D mast 'mast'

интерес [ɪnʲɪtʲɪˈrʲɛs] GInteresse/Frintérêt'interest'

библиотека [bʲɪbʲɪtʲɛˈkə] Gr bibliothékē via Fr. bibliothèque 'library' (modern form)

At the same time, there began explicit attempts to fashion a modern literary language as a compromise between Church Slavonic, the native vernacular, and the style of Western Europe. The writers Lomonosov, Derzhavin, and Karamzin made notable efforts in this respect, but, as per the received notion, the final synthesis belongs to Pushkin and his contemporaries in the first third of the 19th century.

During the 19th century, the standard language assumed its modern form; literature flourished. Spurred perhaps by the so-called Slavophilism, some terms from other languages fashionable during the 18th century now passed out of use (for example, *виктория* [vʲɪˈktorʲɪjə] > *победа* [pəˈbʲɛdə], 'victory'), and formerly vernacular or dialectal strata entered the literature as the "speech of the people". Borrowings of political, scientific and technical terminology continued. By about 1900, commerce and fashion ensured the first wave of mass adoptions from German, French and English.

социализм [sətsʲɪˈlʲɪzɪm] Intl/G Sozialismus 'socialism'
 конституция [kənʲɪsʲtʲɪˈtutsʲɪjə] Intl/Lat constitutio 'constitution'
 антимония [ənʲɪtʲɪˈmonʲɪjə] Gr antinomía,
 metathesis 'useless debate, argument or quarrel' (dead bookish term)
 митинг [ˈmʲitʲɪŋk] Eng meeting 'political rally'
 прейскурант [prʲɪjskuˈrant] (the original unpalatalized
 pronunciation of [prʲɪ-] is still heard) G Preiskurant/
 Fr prix-courant 'price list'

Soviet period and beyond (20th century)

The political upheavals of the early 20th century and the wholesale changes of political ideology gave written Russian its modern appearance after the spelling reform of 1918. Reformed spelling, the new political terminology, and the abandonment of the effusive formulae of politeness characteristic of the pre-Revolutionary upper classes prompted dire statements from members of the émigré intelligentsia that Russian was becoming debased. But the authoritarian nature of the regime, the system of schooling it provided from the 1930s, and not least the often unexpressed yearning among the literati for the former days ensured a fairly static maintenance of Russian into the 1980s. Though the language did evolve, it changed very gradually. Indeed, while literacy became nearly universal, dialectal differentiation declined, especially in the vocabulary: schooling and mass communications ensured a common denominator.

The 1964 proposed reform was related to the orthography. In that year the Orthographic commission of the Institute of the Russian language (Academy of Sciences of the USSR), headed by Viktor Vinogradov, apart from the withdrawal of some spelling exceptions, suggested:

- retaining one partitive soft sign
- always writing ⟨i⟩ ⟨ц⟩
- writing ⟨o⟩ instead of ⟨ë⟩ after ⟨ж⟩, ⟨ч⟩, ⟨ш⟩, ⟨щ⟩, and ⟨ц⟩ if stressed or ⟨e⟩ if not
- not writing the soft sign after ⟨ж⟩, ⟨ш⟩, ⟨ч⟩, and ⟨щ⟩
- canceling the interchange in roots -zar/-zor, -rast/-rost, -gar/-gor, -plav/-plov etc.;
- canceling the double consonants in loan words

- writing only -yensk(iy) instead of two suffixes -insk(iy) and -yensk(iy), write only -yets instead of -yets or -its
- simplifying the spelling of ⟨Н⟩ (Н-Н) in participles: write double ⟨Н⟩ in prefixal participles and ordinary ⟨Н⟩ in non-prefixal
- always writing with hyphen the "pol-" (half-) combinations with subsequent genitive of noun or ordinal number
- writing the nouns beginning with vice-, Unter-, ex- together
- writing all particles separately
- allowing the optional spelling of noun inflexions

The reform, however, failed to take root.

Political circumstances and the undoubted accomplishments of the superpower in military, scientific, and technological matters (especially cosmonautics), gave Russian a worldwide if occasionally grudging prestige, most strongly felt during the middle third of the 20th century.

The political collapse of 1990–1991 loosened the shackles. In the face of economic uncertainties and difficulties within the educational system, the language changed rapidly. There was a wave of adoptions, mostly from English, and sometimes for words with exact native equivalents.

At the same time, the growing public presence of the Russian Orthodox Church and public debate about the history of the nation gave new impetus to the most archaic Church Slavonic stratum of the language, and introduced or re-introduced words and concepts that replicate the linguistic models of the earliest period.

Russian today is a tongue in great flux. The new words entering the language and the emerging new styles of expression have, naturally, not been received with universal appreciation.

Examples

The following excerpts illustrate (very briefly) the development of the literary language.

Spelling has been partly modernized. The translations are as literal as possible, rather than literary.

Primary Chronicle

Се повѣсти времѣнныхъ лѣтъ • ѿ крѣдѣ єсть пошла руская зема • кто въ киевѣ нача
первѣе княжитъ • и ѿ крѣдѣ рѣскаѣя земля стала єсть.

'These [are] the tales of the bygone years, whence is come the Russian land, who first began to rule at Kiev, and whence the Russian land has come about.'

Old East Slavic, the common ancestor of Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian. Fall of the yers in progress or arguably complete (several words end with a consonant; княжит 'to rule' < княжити, modern княжить). South-western (incipient Ukrainian) features include *временных* 'bygone'; modern Russian *временных*). Correct use of perfect and aorist: *есть пошла* 'is/has come' (modern Russian *пошла*), *нача* 'began' (modern Russian *начал* as a development of the old perfect.) Note the style of punctuation.

The Tale of Igor's Campaign

Graphic of the text (if your browser's font is missing some characters), click to enlarge
Слово о полку Игоревѣ. с. 1200(?), from the Catherine manuscript, с. 1790.

Не лѣпо ли ны бяшетъ братіе, начати старыми словесы трудныхъ повѣстий о полку Игоревѣ, Игоря Святъ славича? Начатижеся тѣ пѣсни по былинамъ сего времени, а не по замышленію Бояню. Боянъ бо вѣщій, аще кому хотяше пѣснѣ творити, то растекашется мысію по древу, сѣрымъ волкомъ по земли, шизымъ орломъ подь облакы.

'Would it not be meet, o brothers, for us to begin with the old words the difficult telling of the host of Igor, Igor Sviatoslavich? And to begin in the way of the true tales of this time, and not in the way of Boyan's inventions. For the wise Boyan, if he wished to devote to someone [his] song, would wander like a squirrel over a tree, like a grey wolf over land, like a bluish eagle beneath the clouds.'

Illustrates the sung epics. Yers generally given full voicing, unlike in the first printed edition of 1800, which was copied from the same destroyed prototype as the Catherine manuscript. Typical use of metaphor and simile. The misquote *растекаться мыслью по древу* ('to effuse/pour out one's thought upon/over wood'; a product of an old and habitual misreading of the word *мысію*, 'squirrel-like' as *мыслию*, 'thought-like', and a change in the meaning of the word *течь*) has become proverbial in the meaning 'to speak ornately, at length, excessively'.

Avvakum's autobiography

1672–73. Modernized spelling.

Таже послали меня в Сибирь с женою и детьми. И колико дорогою нужды бысть, того всего много говорить, разве малая часть помянуть. Протопопица младенца родила; больную в телеге и повезли до Тобольска; три тысячи верст недель с тринадцать волокли телегами и водою и саньми половину пути.

And then they sent me to Siberia with my wife and children. Whatever hardship there was on the way, there's too much to say it all, but maybe a small part to be mentioned. The archpriest's wife [= My wife] gave birth to a baby; and we carted her, sick, all the way to Tobolsk; for three thousand versts, around thirteen weeks in all, we dragged [her] by cart, and by water, and in a sleigh half of the way.

Pure 17th-century central Russian vernacular. Phonetic spelling (тово всево 'it all, all of that', modern того всего). A few archaisms still used (aorist in the perfective aspect бысть 'was'). Note the way of transport to exile.

Alexandr Pushkin

From "Winter Evening" (Зимний вечер), 1825. Modern spelling. [listen](#) ([help](#)-[info](#))

Буря мглою небо кроет,
Вихри снежные крутя;
То, как зверь, она завоет,
То заплачет, как дитя,
То по кровле обветшалай
Вдруг соломой зашумит,
То, как путник запоздалый,
К нам в окошко застучит.
Tempest covers sky in haze[s],
Twisting gales full of snow;
Like a beast begins to howl,
A cry, as if a child, it will let go,
On the worn-out roof it will clamour
Suddenly upon the thatch,
Or as though a traveller tardy
Starts to knock upon our hatch. (lit., window)

Modern Russian is sometimes said to begin with Pushkin, in the sense that the old "high style" Church Slavonic and vernacular Russian are so closely fused that it is difficult to identify whether any given word or phrase stems from the one or the other.

Fyodor Dostoevsky

From Crime and Punishment (Преступление и наказание), 1866. Modern spelling.

В начале июля, в чрезвычайно жаркое время, под вечер, один молодой человек вышел из своей каморки, которую нанимал от жильцов в С-м переулке, на улицу и медленно, как бы в нерешимости, отправился к К-ну мосту.

In early July, during a spell of extraordinary heat, towards evening, a young man went out from his garret, which he sublet in S— Lane, [entered] the street, and slowly, as though in [the grip of] indecision, began to make his way to K— Bridge.

19th century prose. No archaisms. "European" syntax.

Fundamental laws of the Russian Empire

Основные законы Российской Империи (Constitution of the Russian Empire), 1906.
Modern spelling.

Императору Всероссийскому принадлежит Верховная Самодержавная Власть.
Повиноваться власти Его не только за страх, но и за совесть Сам Бог повелевает.

"To the Emperor of all Russia belongs the Supreme Autocratic Power. To obey His power, not merely in fear but also in conscience, God Himself does ordain."

Illustrates the categorical nature of thought and expression in the official circles of the Russian Empire. Exemplifies the syntactic distribution of emphasis.

Mikhail Bulgakov

From *The Master and Margarita* (Мастер и Маргарита), 1930–40

Вы всегда были горячим проповедником той теории, что по отрезании головы жизнь в человеке прекращается, он превращается в золу и уходит в небытие. Мне приятно сообщить вам, в присутствии моих гостей, хотя они и служат доказательством совсем другой теории, о том, что ваша теория и солидна и остроумна. Впрочем, ведь все теории стоят одна другой. Есть среди них и такая, согласно которой каждому будет дано по его вере. Да сбудется же это!

"You have always been a passionate proponent of the theory that upon decapitation human life comes to an end, the human being transforms into ashes, and passes into oblivion. I am pleased to inform you, in the presence of my guests, though they serve as a proof for another theory altogether, that your theory is both well-grounded and ingenious. Mind you, all theories are worth one another. Among them is one, according to which every one shall receive in line with his faith. May that come to be!"

An example of highly educated modern speech (this excerpt is spoken by Woland). See Russian humor for the essential other end of the spectrum.

Internal history

The modern phonological system of Russian is inherited from Common Slavonic but underwent considerable innovation in the early historical period before it was largely settled by about 1400.

Like other Slavic languages, Old East Slavic was a language of open syllables. All syllables ended in vowels; consonant clusters, with far less variety than today, existed only in the syllable onset. However, by the time of the earliest records, Old Russian already showed characteristic divergences from Common Slavonic.

Despite the various sound changes, Russian is in many respects a relatively conservative language, and is important in reconstructing Proto-Slavic:

- Russian largely preserves the position of the Proto-Slavic accent, including the complex systems of alternating stress in nouns, verbs and short adjectives.
- Russian consistently preserves /j/ between vowels, unlike all other modern Slavic languages.

- Russian preserves palatalized consonants better than all other East and West Slavic languages, making it important for the reconstruction of yers.
- The Russian development of CerC, CorC, CĭrC, CŭrC and similar sequences is straightforward and in most cases easily reversible to yield the Proto-Slavic equivalent. Similarly the development of the strong yers is straightforward and preserves the front-back distinction. (But note that Russian shows early development of *CeIC > *CoIC and *CĭIC > *CŭIC, obscuring the front-back differences in these sequences.)