

RUNGLISH TODAY

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On May 16, 2008, an audience gathered in the studio of Davidzon Radio in Brooklyn (NY) to watch the premiere of a documentary titled *Fathers and Sons* by Igor Chepusov. The director of the movie is known in the Russian American community as a film director, including reports of post 9/11 events. This time it was his new film dedicated to the changes in the Russian language in the Russian American diaspora. He sounded an alarm that children resist maintaining the language of their parents. There was consensus among the members in the audience, composed of Russian American newspaper, radio, and television personalities, that “the magic of the grandiose and vivacious Russian language” is disappearing in the Russian American community. I did not attend this premiere by accident; I came to this event because of my interest in the changes in the Russian language in America and my interest in Runglish. The neologism characterizes this ongoing transformation. After this showing I raised a question to the audience and the director about this term. It seemed to me that although almost everyone present shared my interest in the changes in the language few people were familiar with the term. I decided to investigate both the term and the phenomenon further.

This neologism was coined during a verbal exchange on a space mission on the International Space Station between Russian and American astronauts. This term merely gave a name to an phenomenon where English affects all of the world’s languages, particularly in technology and the on Internet. This is especially true for immigrants who come to a country where English is spoken and whose native language is something such as Russian. Every generation of immigrants accepts a new lexicon as it struggles to adapt to a new language, society and culture. The necessity of the newly coined hybrid phrases is evidenced by the difficulty of integration into a totally new and vastly different society. In order to ease their transition, most immigrants from the former Soviet Union (for whom Russian is either the native language or the dominant language), reduce the difficulty of the transition by integrating English words into their everyday Russian speech for terms and concepts previously unfamiliar to them.

Because there are often no analogous terms in Russian to express new concepts and objects found in America, English terms have to be introduced to convey the meaning of these concepts effectively. Most Russian speaking immigrants in the US arrived in the 1970s and there was a major influx in the early 1990s. These people had society based on a socialist ideal and entered a society primarily based on democracy and capitalism with a strong work ethic grounded on competition and individual enterprise. Many concepts that were relevant to Soviet citizens were completely useless in American. When faced with the multitude of new American concepts and objects, immigrants found no Russian words they could use. Naturally they picked up the aspects of the US.

Immigrants faced numerous hurdles. Obstacles ranged from the task of buying food at the store, or applying for and working at a first American and arranging the education of children. New experiences demanded new vocabulary. So Runglish became the vehicle by which the immigrant was able to conduct a life in the new world with its foreign tongue, while remaining grounded in the old world that speaks Russian.

One of the first experiences of the new immigrant is searching for a place to live. While many immigrants already had family with whom they were able to stay for the first few weeks or months after their arrival, there came a time when immigrants needed to find a place of their own. In the Soviet Union, apartments were given out to people on the basis of necessity and no money changed hands. The socialist system of the Soviet Union obviated the need to “shop around.” Housing was taken care of by the state. Thus when thrown into the capitalistic world of American real estate, Russian-speaking immigrants had new problems. Recent émigrés from the “socialist paradise” knew no such terms as *landlord*, *lease*, or *security deposit*. Russian speakers began to incorporate these English words into their everyday speech although these terms had a foreign air about them. Over time the terms became part of their everyday Russian. The plural of *tenant* *tenanti* (tenants), while the plural of *lease* became *leasi* and *landlord* became *landlordi*.

Looking for an apartment to rent or a house to buy, the Russian-speaking immigrant faces a major challenge but simply shopping for life’s necessities such as food confronts him with more than any Soviet Union supermarket did. The immigrant may never have known nor bother now to remember many terms for food. For example, although salmon was available in the Soviet Union (called *lasos*), the immigrant here called it *salmon*. Turkey (*indeika* in Russian) was seldom available in Soviet supermarkets, and here immigrants called it *turkey*.

Selling food in the US is different as well. In the former Soviet Union one bought a chunk of cheese, so here it was necessary to coin *slaysayushiy chiz* (sliced cheese). Soon one heard this term in the Russian-American enclave of Brighton Beach in Brooklyn. In a Russian-owned supermarket there you may be asked *vam naslaiysatz?* (“Do you want me to slice it for you?”). Also in the former Soviet Union as in most countries of the world except the US, the metric system is used. So Russian speakers in the US ask for *poundi* (pounds) of things and measure distances in *inchi* (inches). Shopping was a new experience for Russian speaking immigrants during the hungry 1970s and early 1990s when in the USSR people had to stand in line for hours to get the few things available while doing what Runglish calls *delat shopping* (literally “make shopping”).

Job interviews in a competitive capitalistic market, involving writing resumes, and facing questioners was even harder than shopping and brought up new unfamiliar terms. The concept of “experience” to be reported on a resume did not exist in the USSR. There one’s work record was put into an official government document and workers could not craft a resume. In the US the Russians boasted *Mnogo experienca* (a lot of experience.).

There were new jobs here. In the USSR there was no *babysittersha* (babysitter). USSR bookkeepers have less responsibility, so immigrants coined *accountanti* (accountants) in the plural. In fact almost anything related to finance gives rise to new words of Runglish, whereas in some other cases Russian and English both have words for the likes of *nurse*. Runglish ignores the availability of a Russian term and says *nursi* (nurses).

In the USSR workers never had to speak about perks that went with the job because they were not paid on the basis of productivity and there was no measurement of how they on their jobs served the state. In the US immigrants encountered *benefiti* (benefits) and incentives for which new words were required. In the USSR medicine was socialized so health insurance did not exist. In Russian *insurance* is *strahovka* but the immigrant in the US doctor's office in reply to *U vas est insurance?* ("Do you have insurance?") might answer *U menya nyetu insuransa* ("I don't have insurance."). To see a doctor in the US one had to make one or more *apointmenti* (appointments). In the USSR as well as in many less developed countries family members take care of the elderly instead of having a home attendant or placing people in a nursing home (*dom prestarelih*). There is a certain stigma attached to the Russian word and a home attendant here is also more likely to speak Runglish and so to be called *muhatendra* or *home attenda*. These differing pronunciations make the word sound more Russian, and therefore more familiar to the elderly Russian speaker. They reveal that Runglish as a transitional mechanism for cultural assimilation clings to the old as well as reaching out to the new. Home attendants may seem like something of a luxury for immigrants, and certainly personal automobiles were too a luxury in the USSR. So as soon as Russian immigrants could afford it in America, they wanted a car *vodits* (to drive). This required a driving permit (*razresheniye na vozhdenia*) often called in Runglish *permit*. Sometimes whole phrases like the following occur: *draivaits v apsteit po Haiveyam* (to drive upstate on the highway). This phrase is 95 percent English in vocabulary and 100 percent Russian in grammar.

American education proved to offer problems for immigrant families. The parents educated in the USSR found that their children in the public schools were going to pick up not only American vocabulary but new American ideas of democracy and freedom of speech. In the USSR elementary, middle and highschooling was conducted in a single building while here Runglish was challenged to come up with new terms for *elementary school*, *junior* and *senior high school*. In higher education there were *freshman*, *sophomore*, *junior* and *senior*, plus *choosing a major*, *multiple choice tests* (where the USSR required essay questions and the student might say in Runglish to his parents *Menya suspendali* to convey the idea "I was suspended."

College and university education takes place on more sprawling campuses than in the USSR. The word *campus* itself came into Runglish. Runglish also had to cope with the fact that in the US a student could choose a major and might choose a college that offered the best educational track for a profession. In the USSR there were no majors and electives that could be freely chosen. After a successful run involving the need for new Runglish words equivalent to *loan*, *scholarship* or *grant*, etc. and *graduation* a student would complete his formal higher education.

Changing their language with the aid of Runglish Russian speakers transformed their lives and outlooks and tried to make cash (in Russian *nalichneye dengi*) and needed monetary instruments such as checks and credit cards. In the USSR there were no ATM's or buying on credit. Large expenses for higher education or a mortgage for a dwelling was taken care of by the government. Here Runglish spoke of *razkeshavats check*. In 2007 (the Year of the Russian Language), the Russian government took measures to try to preserve the Russian language which, in the year of globalization and nationalism in the former Soviet republics was beginning to be invaded by foreign terms. The purity of the language of Pushkin that worries the elite in Russia and the US continues to be challenged by modern events. And this was the danger that was discussed in that Davidzon Screening that I attended last May. It is for this reason that this article is written, but does not concern itself with changes in Russian in the Russia of today but rather with Runglish that has developed over the last several decades among immigrants living in Brooklyn (NY).

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