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The Soviet Language Revolution

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Ять: yat, an obsolete letter

This week Russia may not be marking the 100th anniversary of the 1917 Revolution with much fanfare, but I am. Or rather I've been looking back at one aspect of the Revolution — linguistic.

I think it's fair to say that the Soviet revolution in the Russian language was monumental.

The first enormous change was the orthographical reform that was instituted almost instantly — in January 1918. But you shouldn't think that the first thing Vladimir Lenin and his cohorts did after capturing the Winter Palace was to sit down and contemplate redundant letters. In actual fact, there had been studies, proposals, and plans as far back as 1905, and the Bolsheviks just took the last proposal and said: Хватит обсуждать. Реформам быть! (Enough discussion. There will be reforms!)

The most striking part of the reforms was the elimination of four letters considered obsolete or redundant: "i" called the и десятеричное ("i" to the tenth, because it was the tenth letter in the alphabet); "ѣ" called ять (yat); "ѳ" called фита (fita), the "f" used in words from the Greek; and "ѵ" called ижица (izhitsa, the "i" used in words from the Greek and once the last letter in the alphabet). The hard sign, "ъ," was no longer used at the end of all words ending in a hard consonant.

Schoolchildren were probably delighted that ять was taken out to the revolutionary firing squad. By the 20th century, this letter sounded almost exactly like the letter "e" and kids had to memorize incredibly long lists of words to remember where the ять was. It makes the English rhyme "I before E, except after C or when sounding like A, as in neighbor or weigh" seem like, well, kid stuff.

But the ять did make some crucial distinctions, like есть (to be) and ѣсть (to eat); некогда (there's no time) and нѣкогда (no one knows when). The loss of "i" is also a source of confusion: мир (peace) and мiр (world, land). The Biblical "peace on earth" is the мир миру

— poetic but a bit ambiguous.

There were other changes, too, in the endings of masculine and neuter genitive singular adjectives, from –аго and –яго to –ого and –его. That's why that old church down the street is called Соборъ святаго Марка and not Собор святого Марка (Cathedral of St. Mark). Feminine and neuter adjectives had different plural forms: другія женщины (different women). Now that distinction is lost, and all plural adjectives are declined the same way: другие женщины, другие мужчины (different women, different men).

This might seem like a tempest in a teapot, but imagine what happened to poetry! Rhymes were lost forever. Poets like Marina Tsvetayeva never wrote poetry in the new system — she stayed true to her pre-revolutionary sounds, rhymes, and rhythms. And when the writer Ivan Bunin, who emigrated in 1920, was considering returning to what was now the Soviet Union, he stipulated that all his works be printed in the "old orthography." This was not to be.

The other part of the language change was lexicon. Overnight titles were out — no more князь (prince), сударь (sire); многоуважаемый (most esteemed) or even господин (mister) and госпожа (missus). Instead everyone was товарищ (comrade). Thousands of new words and abbreviations appeared to describe the new society, such as нарсуд (народный суд — people's court); Поссовет (поселковый совет народных депутатов — village council of people's deputies); or субботник (Saturday voluntary work day, usually spent cleaning a courtyard or park).

There seems to have a particular passion for long names of factories or organizations, which got cut down to manageable — but opaque — abbreviations. If someone is a member of РАПП, is that good or bad? Probably not too bad: it was Российская ассоциация пролетарских писателей (the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers) from 1925 to 1932. Membership might have provided a food ration (паёк) or maybe even a corner of a room in a communal apartment. That was better than being очередник (someone waiting in line) for housing — you might wait a lifetime.

And then: slogans and sayings. These were so engrained in people's heads that even today you could shout the beginning of one in a crowded bus and everyone over the age of 50 would complete it in a nanosecond. Верный (Loyal)... партии (to the Party!) Вся власть (All power)... советам (to the Soviets, i.e. councils).

If it seems hard to imagine people changing their speech so quickly after the 1917 Revolution, you only have to think back to 1992. This time, товарищ (comrade) was out. At first, people used name and patronymic to address people politely — using господин or госпожа (mister or missus) sounded odd to them.

But you know what? That lasted about six months. People got used to господин and госпожа very quickly. And now there are dictionaries of "Sovietese" to help young researchers read the newspapers and other sources.

So when people fret about хайп (hype) and харассмент (harassment), remind them: И это пройдёт (This, too, shall pass.)

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