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A Year of the Language of War

A new set of language norms have taken hold in Russia.

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Jan Kopřiva / pexels

Нормы: norms

In the past year after Russia went from annexation and limited war in Ukraine to a full-scale invasion of the country, the Russian language has undergone a great change. If you dig into the archives and watch a day of Russian television in, say, June of 2021 and then a day in June 2022, you will make yourself sick shaking your head and snapping your mouth shut after it falls open in astonishment. Norms — нормы — have changed, to put it mildly.

I've written about this before, but as I look back this week, I'm struck by how stark the changes are and how utterly contradictory — if not to say schizophrenic — language norms have become.

On the one hand, official language has become a series of bland or cheery euphemisms that

flip reality 180 degrees. On the other hand, officials and public figures use coarse, even obscene language that was once prohibited outside the men's bathhouse to describe the country's enemies on primetime TV, social media and even in official statements.

The news is presented the way a yes-man underling describes reality to a temperamental boss who wants only good news. Only it is packaged for the country and world. In this language there is just a limited специальная военная операция (special military operation; actually a war) that has the task of освобождение территории (liberating territory; actually the bloody and destructive conquest of foreign villages and towns); or the occasional жест доброй воли (gesture of good will; actually being forced to retreat from captured territory when the Ukrainian army fought back).

There are not disasters, there are инциденты (incidents), like хлопки (pops), задымление (smoke, smokiness) or возгорание (flare up). In reality these are explosions, smoky fires and raging infernos.

In the war, the opponents are not men but неонацисты (neo-Nazis), нацисты (Nazis) and экстремисты (extremists). They are not killed but ликвидированы (liquidated).

Meanwhile on television and social media it's a very different language. Euphemisms are out; crude expressions are in. Outrageous is the way to go. One talk host says, Я вообще террорист, я б вообще сказал: значит так... Три дня — всем выйти мирным из Харькова, из Николаева, из Одессы. Если это не будет сделано — сносим квартал за кварталом (Actually I'm a terrorist and I'd say, "Listen... you got three days to leave peacefully from Kharkiv, Mykolaiv and Odesa. If that doesn't happen, we'll tear it down block by block.") But it shouldn't end there, he said later: Пощады не будет. Не только Украина будет денацифицирована, война против Европы и всего мира приобретает более конкретные очертания, что означает, что нам придётся действовать по-другому и гораздо более жёстко (There will be no mercy. Not only will Ukraine be denazified, the war against Europe and the whole world is more defined, and that means that we'll have to act differently and much more brutally.)

Another commentator says: Нужно просто уничтожить тех, кто с нами воюют и вырасти их детей в русском духе (We have to just destroy everyone fighting us and raise their children in the Russian spirit). A third compares Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas and Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin to белокурые арийки в концлагерях [которые] отправляли евреев, русских, цыган и других народов Европы в печи крематории (blond Aryan women in the concentration camps who sent Jews, Russians, Roma and other ethnic groups of Europe into the ovens of the crematoria).

Even the most belligerent TV hosts sound positively cultured compared to former president Dmitry Medvedev, who fills his Telegram channel with comments like нынешние европейские "лидеры" — сплошь жалкие дилетанты, махровые русофобы и интеллектуальные пигмеи (the current European "leaders" are all pathetic dilettantes, died-in-the-wool Russophobes and intellectual pygmies) and portrays Biden as suffering from dementia: Может по рассеянности начать третью мировую войну (He might absentmindedly start World War III). His verdict: Запад не добрый доктор Айболит, а доктор Менгеле. Он зловещий врач-убийца (The West isn't Dr. Doolittle, but Dr. Mengele.

The West is an evil murdering doctor).

Even the anti-American бабушки — a group of elderly women who are filmed in their courtyard demonstrating against the U.S. — have lost their last remaining shred of decency. They recently used the mysterious balloon that flew over America as a prop. They made their own balloon and scribbled on it Смерть Американскому Империализму (Death to American Imperialism) — a bit of a throwback to Komsomol protests — but then one woman threatened: Белые шары сейчас летают, но в скором времени может полететь кое-что другое (Right now white balloons are flying, but very soon *something else* might fly over...) — dramatic emphasis on *кое-что*. At the end of their protest the third woman held up the other side of the white balloon with a slogan that she proudly read out loud: ФАК ЮЭСЭЙ.

Finally, there is a third trend, which is really just the reappearance of the call, made at regular intervals, to eliminate all foreign words from Russian, particularly English words. In February 2023 the Duma passed a law banning the use of foreignisms unless there is no acceptable Russian equivalent.

Because I am immature and cannot resist low-hanging fruit, I have to point out the use of foreignisms in the law itself, particularly the obsession with нормативные (normative) — нормативные словари, нормативные грамматики и нормативные справочники, фиксирующие нормы современного русского литературного языка (normative dictionaries, normative grammar books and normative reference books that codify the norms of contemporary Russian literary language.) Норма and нормативный are of course borrowed from the French *normatif*.

There are three other foreignisms in that sentence alone.

The law says that норма "направлена на защиту русского языка от чрезмерного употребления иностранных слов" (the norm is intended to protect the Russian language from excessive use of foreign words). Yelena Yampolskaya, the head of the Duma Committee on Culture and the author of the law, says, 'Мы избавимся от кешбэков, билбордов, сейлов.' (We'll get rid of cashbacks, billboards and sales.)

I think, but am not certain, that she means the words, not the sales. And I am very eager to hear her short, pure Russian version of "cashback."

In any case, the law does not mention or outlaw чрезмерное употребление иностранных букв (excessive use of foreign letters). For some reason it is perfectly acceptable to write Za победу (For victory!) and Vежливые люди (polite people).

Is it any wonder that the most purchased book this year in Russia was the Russian translation of Orwell's *1984*?

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