



Russian in the USA

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Russian in the U.S.*

According to the 2007 Census, the U.S. is home to 851,170 immigrants from Russia (Community Survey, US Census). Whatever their ethnic identity (“nationality”) was according to their Soviet passports, in America they become “Russians.” Russian is one of the ten most spoken languages in the U.S., excluding English, and according to the latest Censuses, the number of native speakers of Russian is steadily increasing (Potowski 2010, Kagan – Dillon 2010). This increase owes to a significant influx of Russian speakers who left the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as to a more recent wave of immigrants from Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States in the post-Soviet period. Although Russians first set foot on American territory in the 18th century and arrived in a number of “waves” throughout the 20th century, only a few descendants of these old immigrants speak Russian.¹ In this paper, we will focus on the most recent immigrants from Russia and the CIS because unlike the representatives of the earlier immigration waves, they still speak Russian en masse.

The bulk of those who came from the Soviet Union to the U.S. in the 1970s and 1980s were Jews, who were able to immigrate (officially, to Israel)

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¹ Religious groups, such as the Old Believers and the Molokans, also speak Russian. In their case, however, the transmission of the language from generation to generation is motivated primarily by its role in the preservation of religion, rather than by its importance in everyday life (see the collection edited by Кюльмоя, the works of Касаткин and Касаткина, Никитина, Кононова, as well as Biggins 1985, Friedberg 2008, Holdeman 2002, Morris 1992). This article does not touch on these groups.

thanks to the Soviet-American agreements signed at the end of the Cold War.² These people had been highly assimilated even before their immigration from the Soviet Union: the vast majority were native speakers of Russian (for many, that was the only language they spoke) and consumers of the Soviet Russian cultural brand. Among the waves of Russian immigration to the U.S.—which reaches back to the start of the 20th century—these immigrants make up the so-called third and fourth waves (Andrews 1993a, 1999; ПфанДЛЬ1994). The immigration of the post-Soviet period can be regarded as the fifth wave—although, since it is still going on, the term “wave” may not be entirely appropriate. This wave consists of representatives of various nationalities and ethnic groups whose immigration is often motivated by educational and professional opportunities in the U.S. The fifth wave differs from all the preceding ones in a fundamental way. With the fall of the Iron Curtain, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the spread of the Internet, recent immigrants have many more opportunities to keep abreast of the developments in their former homeland. In addition, post-Soviet immigrants often retain the ability to return to Russia or to maintain a bi-continental lifestyle. Consequently, the Russian language remains vital to them, not just a frayed postcard in a scrapbook of the old country. Immigrants of the third/fourth waves, on the other hand, did not expect to return to Russia; for them, the preservation of Russian was more a matter of sentimental and nostalgic, rather than practical, value.³

The difference between the third/fourth and fifth waves is likely to play a role in the preservation of Russian in America. However, in 2011, at the time of this article, it is too early to judge the development of the fifth wave, and so we will consider all three waves as a single mass phenomenon.⁴ The most important difference for us will be between immigrants of the first and second generations, whose language we will address in the following sections. Before we turn to a linguistic analysis of Russian in America, we will provide a brief socio-demographic description of the nation’s Russian-speaking population.

² There are still no accurate data as to the number of non-Jews who actually managed to leave under the banner of Jewish emigration—either through intermarriage or through a search for some fictional Jewish ancestors—but one assumes that there were many.

³ For a detailed analysis of the history, reasons for, and results of emigration from the USSR, see Isurin 2011.

⁴ Another argument in favor of not distinguishing between these waves is a demographic imbalance: there are far more immigrants of the third and fourth waves than of the fifth wave; they have had more time to integrate themselves into economic life of the U.S., and they can therefore set both the linguistic and cultural tone to which the fifth wave must, at least partly, adhere.

Immigrants from the former Soviet Union can be found in many American cities and in almost every state of the U.S. Unlike representatives of other nationalities who immigrated to the U.S. in the early 20th century, Russian-speaking immigrants have not formed compact neighborhoods (with the possible exception of the famed Brighton Beach, which has long been a parody of the Brezhnev-era Russia). They settled most densely in America's major metropolitan areas, such as New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Houston (Andrews 1999). There, they have founded many private kindergartens (which, incidentally, are called “kindergartens” [детские садики—invariably in the diminutive form] in everyday U.S.-Russian parlance), day-care centers for the elderly, cultural and educational centers, and stores. The number of Russian-language publications rose continuously since the 1980s, but recently, due to the spread of the Internet, it has begun to decline (a phenomenon not unique to the Russian-language press). Nevertheless, one can purchase Russian-language periodicals—published both in Russia and the U.S.—in Russian stores throughout all major American cities. The U.S. has several major Russian-language television and radio stations (Russian World, RTR-Planeta, RTVi, NTV America, Channel One, Davidzon Radio in New York, New Life Radio in Chicago), and viewers can access broadcasts from Russia and Israel. There are still no accurate data about reader- and viewer-ship, but judging by polls of the Russian-speaking population, the main consumers of the Russian-language media are the elderly and the middle-aged. The younger generation, as we shall see below, reads mostly in English.⁵

1. The Russian of the first generation

The American Russian of earlier waves was described in detail by Morton Benson (Benson 1960). Benson was one of the first to indicate the significant variance in the Russian spoken by immigrants in the U.S.: from purists who cling to the stylistic note upon which they left the Soviet Union to opportunists who frivolously mix Russian with English to the degree that suits them.

If we ignore the purists, who always constitute the minority (both in the home country and in the emigration), it is hardly news that the language of most first-generation immigrants— i.e., people who came to America as adults—does indeed change. First, one observes a leveling of registers, as even high-style language is pervaded by vernacular expressions and numerous regional forms;

⁵ For a more detailed social and demographic portrait of the Russian-speaking population in the U.S., see Andrews 1999, Polinsky 2000, Kagan – Dillon 2010, Isurin 2011.

speech styles are actively mixed while class distinctions fade even quicker than in the home country. The language of immigrants gives rise to a new norm that differs from that of the home country. Between the 1970s and 1990s in the U.S., this norm was clearly oriented toward the southern variants of Russian. Until recently, speakers of these variants outnumbered speakers of the central-Russian variant (Andrews 1994, 1999, 2006). Examples of this include the combination of the preposition *за* with the verb *скучать*, the use of the unreduced form of the reflexive particle after vowels: *купалася*, *старалися*, and the use of the conjunction *или* instead of *если* in indirect speech (see example (17) below).

As often happens in immigrant languages, Russian in the U.S. appropriates words from the dominant language, which become markers of adaptation to a new society—for example, *но* (pronounced [ˈno]) instead of *нет*, the word *паунд* (instead of *фунт*), the word *эрия* instead of *район*, and some others (see Polinsky 2000, 2006). Even the relatively stable domain of phonetics undergoes certain changes: the language of the first generation is characterized by a non-standard intonational contour in declarative sentences—that is, rising intonation (Andrews 1993b; Polinsky 2000).

When languages come into contact, lexical borrowings are unavoidable, and it is not easy to describe them; they are difficult to predict and systematize in any remotely compelling fashion. We can resign to note that a language borrows new words that reflect new or differing concepts. However, the Russian language of the post-Soviet era gives us a rare opportunity to compare changes resulting from intensive language contact in immigrant communities with those stemming from the processes that drive language development in the home country. Due to the powerful social changes of the post-Soviet era, the Russian spoken in Russia is also undergoing rapid and dramatic change, and just like American Russian, it is now strongly influenced by English (Кронгауз 2008; Левонтина 2010). Do these linguistic processes provide a historic opportunity for the immigrant language and that of the home country to become more similar, despite the ocean that separates them? Most likely not. Rather, the comparison of the two varieties provides a rare opportunity to demonstrate that the lexical impact of one language upon another is a somewhat random phenomenon. Alternatively, it might be reasoned that the differing social climates of Russian spoken in the U.S. and Russian in Russia give rise to different lexical borrowings. For example, Russian in the U.S. may be more likely to borrow words that are specific to American social and economic transactions, such as *pound* or *high school*.

In many cases, both varieties of the Russian language—Russian in the U.S. and Russian in Russia—borrow English words in the same manner; now *больница* is turned into *госпиталь* both in Moscow and Chicago,⁶ while *список* is transformed into *лист* on both sides of the Atlantic. To the list of borrowings firmly established in both variants of the Russian language, one can add *джеб-оффер*, *риелтор*, *брокер*, *резюме*, *гламур*, *химия* (in the sense of physical attraction between people), *трафик* (spotted even in the speech of Moscow’s new mayor), and the omnipresent *вау* (cf. Левонтина 2010). However, along with these similarities, there are significant differences.

First, American Russian often borrows words from English phonetically, based on the pronunciation, while the Russian spoken in Russia had, until recently, borrowed words mostly in transliteration; hence, we find such doublets as *Харвард* and *Гарвард*, *Юсиэлэй* and *ЮКЛА/УКЛА* (UCLA), *Эсэйти* and *САТ* (SAT), *калидж* and *колледж*, *пару* and *парти/пати* ‘party’,⁷ etc.

Secondly, the Russian spoken in Russia readily borrows from British as well as American English; hence, in Russia we find *карпарк* and *флэт*, known in American Russian exclusively as *паркинлот* and *апартамент*. As a result, the Russian spoken in the home country and the variety spoken in the U.S. serve as yet another confirmation of Oscar Wilde’s famous comment that two languages separated by an ocean (he was referring to British and American English) are remarkably different.⁸

There is no doubt, however, that contact with English is much more intense in immigration, and this finds expression in the asymmetrical number of borrowings from various parts of speech. As a rule, nouns are easiest to borrow, while verbs and functional elements (prepositions, conjunctions) are more commonly borrowed when two languages come into intensive contact (Thomason – Kaufman 1988; Myers-Scotton 1993, 2002). And indeed, the Russian spoken in Russia borrows mostly nouns;⁹ we encountered only a few commonly used borrowed verbs in the Russian of the metropoly, including, for example, the words *мониторить*, *постить* (*на блоге*), and de-nominal *пиарить* (legitimately de-

⁶ Here, we do not concern ourselves with the old usage of the word *госпиталь*, *i.e.*, ‘military hospital’; what is crucial for us is that the word is expanding its semantic content in both varieties of Russian.

⁷ The American Russian *пару* reflects the pronunciation of the letter *t* after the letter *r* as the alveolar flap [ɾ], characteristic of the American variant of English.

⁸ “We have really everything in common with America nowadays except, of course, language...” (Wilde 1887/1906: Ch. 1).

⁹ One exception is the realm of new technologies, including computer technology, where verbs, too, are borrowed.

rived from the borrowed noun *ниар*, from the English *PR, public relations*) and *копиейстить* (from *копиейст*). American Russian, meanwhile, freely borrows and adapts the widest variety of verbs, such as:

- (1) Я уже аплайнула (аплайилась/аплялась) (< *apply*) на работу
- (2) Я не энджояла (< *enjoy*) свой апартамент, до того что уже была готова игнорировать (< *ignore*, rather than *не обращать внимания на*) рент-контроль.¹⁰
- (3) За что можно так мисать (< *miss*) эту Вашу Калифорнию? Я вот не скучаю так за Харьковом.
- (4) На круизе будут больше энтертейнать (< *entertain*).
- (5) Все эти стоки рейзнули (< *raise*).¹¹
- (6) Она с ним брейкапнула (< *break up*), и он тут же энгейджнулся (< *engage*), так что выходит, он ее все это время обманывал.
- (7) Уже энаунснули (< *announce*) новую программу?
- (8) Лучше лизовать (< *lease*), не надо сразу все платить, и иншуранс¹² меньше.
- (9) Я уже чекнулся (< *check in*), а их все не было, мне пришлось ждать, и это всегда меня делает очень nervous.
- (10) Мы редко драйваем (< *drive*) на этом хайвее.
- (11) Ты должен побыстрее окешить (< *cash*) этот чек.
- (12) Вы рентуете (< *rent*) или купили?

The introduction of verbs into Russian American sometimes produces interesting semantic hybrids: if Russian already has a similar verb (cf. examples [2], [14], or [15]), or if a verb has already been borrowed into mainstream Russian (usually from Latin), its original meaning gets lost; instead, the verb adopts the meaning imposed by the American usage. For example:¹³

- (13) Вот старинный отель, в котором мы стояли (*стоять*+ *stay*). Там останавливался также Тенниси Уильямс.¹⁴
- (14) Республиканцы спекулируют (< *speculate*), что реформа не пройдет.
- (15) Он совсем сконфузился (=запутался, < *get confused*)¹⁵
- (16) Меня их развод очень шокировал (= потряс, < *shock*) [in standard Russian, шокировать is used exclusively in the sense of 'to scandalize'].¹⁶

¹⁰ In this example, both *апартамент* and *рент-контроль* are borrowings.

¹¹ The correct borrowing ought to have been the intransitive verb "to rise," but here we have the transitive verb "to raise." The word *стоки* is also a borrowing.

¹² *Страховка* (from insurance).

¹³ Cases of semantic interference occur, of course, beyond the realm of verbal vocabulary; cf. the word *сезон* "season," which in both American and native Russian, is gradually replacing *время года* "time of year," or the word *специальный* in the sense of "special/particular."

¹⁴ Cf. the incorrect usage of *стоять* 'to stay' in the first sentence, and the correct usage of *останавливаться* 'to stop' in the second.

¹⁵ In standard Russian, *конфузиться* means "to become embarrassed, disconcerted, put out."

Intensive language contact always breeds calques, and indeed, American Russian includes many calques from English, as Benson has already noted (Benson 1960). Here are some examples: *братъ выход (экзит), урок, курс, автобус, время; делать апойнтмент, резервацию, налоги/таксы; записать карандашом* (“to pencil in”); *работать/платить под столом; поступить в школу* (“apply to college”), etc. (see also Mikhaylova 2006).

We have already mentioned above that American Russian mixes various dialectal variants of Russian—a phenomenon not uncommon for immigrant languages in general (cf. the same can be observed in the history of American English, Algeo – Pyles 2004: Ch. 9). In addition to the proliferation of regional lexical forms, one should note the widespread use of the subordinating *или* in place of the normative *ли*. The former is characteristic of southern variants of Russian, but in American Russian, it occurs in the speech of immigrants from other dialectal regions. Here is an example from the speech of a woman who came to the U.S. from Moscow at the age of thirty-six (and has lived in the U.S. for fifteen years):

(17) Я сомневаюсь, *или* это Вам будет интересно.

Lexical change and confusion of dialectal forms are by far the most visible consequences of language contact. At the same time, the language of first-generation immigrants also undergoes subtler, less obvious changes. We will focus on two such processes: changes in word order and the loss of zero pronominalization.

Changes in word order are rather minor in the written language of Russian immigrants (cf. a similar observation by Benson). Those changes that can be observed can be attributed to hasty translation from English, as in the following passage, which bears traces of English in punctuation, spelling, and the link in the final sentence (*напишите свои/Ваши комментарии...*):

(18) Если для вас компьютер – как наркотик: вы сидите весь день перед экраном, несмотря на мышечные боли в спине и шее, а также головные боли – эта программа для вас! ErgoReminder будет напоминать вам, что надо сделать перерыв каждые заданные промежутки времени, при этом она отключает клавиатуру и мышь на это время. Разомнитесь – посмотрите в окно или сделайте упражнения – иначе вы заработаете себе остеохондроз, мигрень и проблемы со зрением. Напишите ваши комментарии об той программе! http://webideas.com/rusam/index_win.htm (accessed 12/2/2010)

¹⁶ The same usage of *шокировать* can now be encountered in Russia (Левонтина 2010: 139–141).

In spoken language, changes in word order are more noticeable. One of the characteristic changes is a weakening in the “verb – subject” (VS) order when introducing a new participant (for example, *Выходит Дед Мороз из машины; Вдруг появился какой-то новый гость*). When retelling the well-known story of the boy, the dog, and the frog (Frog story: Mayer 1967; Berman – Slobin 1994), adult native-speaking controls use VS between 6% and 9% of the time,¹⁷ whereas first-generation speakers of American Russian use this construction about 3.6% of the time (our study). The loss of flexibility in word order has often been noted in studies of language contact (cf. Thomason – Kaufman 1988; Seliger – Vago 1991), but as far as we know, there have been few such observations in respect to first-generation Russian immigrants since scholars have traditionally devoted their attention to written language where these changes are insignificant in number.

Another change in the language of Russian immigrants emerges in the realm of *pro*-drop (omission of non-emphatic subject pronouns). In Russian it is acceptable (and, in some cases, desirable) to omit the co-referential pronoun in the subordinate subject position, for example:

- (19) Я надеюсь, что (я) успею попасть на твой день рождения.
 (20) Ты боишься, что (ты) не сможешь с этим справиться?
 (21) Красная Шапочка была уверена, что (она) перехитрит злого волка.

We conducted a pilot experiment in which native speakers were asked to evaluate sentences such as (19) – (21) on a scale of 1 to 7 (1: totally unacceptable, 7: totally acceptable). Monolingual native speakers of Russian (in Russia) give some preference to examples in which the subordinate clause contains a null pronoun (*pro*) whereas Russian immigrants in America prefer sentences with an overt pronoun. At first glance, one might attribute this to the influence of English:¹⁸ in English sentences analogous to (19) – (21), it is impossible to omit the pronoun, cf.

¹⁷ The first number is from Isurin – Ivanova-Sullivan 2008 study; the latter (9%) is from our study.

¹⁸ For other examples of the influence of English on Russian in immigration, see Isurin 2007. This work examines a particularly interesting case: native speakers of Russian who not only use the language, but teach it to foreigners, and who are therefore particularly interested in maintaining pristine linguistic purity.

(22) I hope that #(I) will make it to your birthday party.

This explanation, however, is unlikely for two reasons. First, far from all first-generation immigrants speak English sufficiently well for it to interfere in such a subtle domain. Most of the respondents in our experiment rated their proficiency in English as “weak” or “average” (this is one of the differences between our subjects and those described in Isurin's paper [Isurin 2007]). Second, we also studied Russian speakers in Israel. They, too, tend to avoid null pronominals, even though in Hebrew *pro*-drop is preferable or even required in the first and second person (Borer 1989, Melnik, 2007). Fig. 1 presents a comparison of *pro*-drop in American Russian, Israeli Russian, and Russian spoken in Russia.

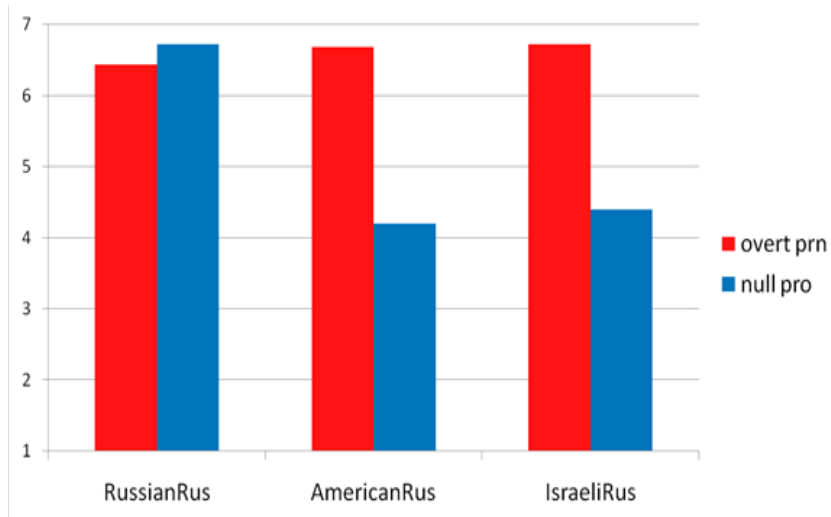


Fig. 1. Ratings of overt and null (*pro*) pronominals in subordinate clauses, 1–7 scale; Russian in Russia, Russian in America, and Israeli Russian (N=20 in each group, average age: 43).

In a recent study of the Russian Diaspora, Isurin (2011) also addresses the phenomenon of *pro*-drop in the speech of first-generation Russian-English bilinguals, but from an unusual perspective. The results of her study support our conclusions that monolingual Russians use more *pro*-drop than bilinguals, especially the “integrated” bilinguals (i.e., proficient English speakers), as Isurin calls them. In her analysis, Isurin discusses the relation between particular linguistic features (such as *pro*-drop) in a language and the degree of individualism vs. collectivism present in the culture in which that language is spoken. She lists several previous studies which show that *pro*-drop tends to be found in languages of “collectivist” cultures, rather than “individualistic” ones. She then argues that when speakers of a “collectivist” language move to a country with an

“individualistic” culture, their native language tends to shift toward individualism. Interestingly, this shift is manifested, among other things, in the decreased use of *pro*-drop, as is the case with Russian-English bilinguals in her study. Isurin suggests that avoidance of *pro*-drop must be a result of the cross-linguistic interference from English since in her study bilingual subjects with the least exposure to English omitted pronouns much more frequently and, therefore, resembled monolingual Russians most closely. Integrated bilinguals who spent only 10% of their days exposed to Russian were closer to monolingual English speakers in their avoidance of *pro*-drop.

The influence of English, suggested by Isurin, may indeed be a plausible explanation for the decrease of *pro*-drop in the speech of Russian emigrants. However, this explanation does not hold for Israeli Russian. Speakers of Israeli Russian also lose *pro*-drop, whereas Hebrew itself has it. Therefore, the change in Israeli Russian cannot be attributed to transfer.

Furthermore, changes associated with the loss of *pro*-drop, similar to those cited in our study, were also observed in Italian spoken in Spain and Spanish spoken in Italy (Sorace 2004, Sorace – Serratrice 2009). Those changes are particularly striking because, unlike Russian, both Italian and Spanish have standard *pro*-drop even in matrix sentences.

So why does Russian lose its null elements, at least null pronouns, in immigration? There is, as yet, no full answer to this question, but Sorace and her colleagues have advanced the following hypothesis: if a language is spoken outside its dominant environment, it first undergoes changes related to its weakest links, which are usually located at the junction of two or more grammatical components (interface). Null pronominalization depends on both syntactic rules (zero pronouns can only occur in certain syntactic positions: in this case, as a subject in the subordinate clauses) and on the principles of information structure (the pronoun's referent must be the same as the referent of the nearest topic). In the language of immigrants, syntax and information structure are not properly linked, either because the rules governing their connection have not been fixed in the speaker's grammar or because the speaker lacks sufficient time to establish the connection in real time (so-called “problem of processing”). When a lexical pronoun is overtly stated, less effort is required to establish its co-reference with the previous antecedent. Consequently, such constructions have an advantage over those that leave the pronoun unexpressed.¹⁹

¹⁹ Cf. the discussion in Benmamoun et al. 2010; Montrul – Polinsky 2011.

Whatever the explanations for the asymmetry between overt and null pronouns under the conditions of language contact, the existence of asymmetry remains a fact. The significance of the asymmetry is that it shows that even the language of first-generation immigrants is vulnerable to structural change; one may not know the language of his or her new country very well, but one's native language is still subject to reorganization. Contrary to the popular view that all changes in an immigrant language have their roots in the language of the home country (Гловинская 2001, 2004; Земская 2001), not all changes arrive with the immigrant. Some, apparently, are related to universal principles of language structure and may occur independently of the processes affecting the language of the home country. We do not always know what these principles are, but studying immigrant languages allows us to observe them in action (Benmamoun et al. 2010).

A language's architectural design is nowhere more clearly visible than in the variety spoken by second-generation immigrants, a variety that is used at home with family members and that often preserves only the most basic principles of the language. In the next section, we will focus on this variety of the Russian language.

2. Heritage Russian: the language of second-generation immigrants

The language of second-generation immigrants has been referred to as "heritage language," the term widely used in modern English literature.²⁰ A heritage speaker is someone who grew up hearing (and maybe speaking) the home language and who, as an adult, can still understand this language and speak it to some degree but is more comfortable in another language, usually the dominant language of their society.

Heritage Russian speakers, mainly the ones living in the U.S., have already been described by a number of researchers (Andrews 1994, 1999, 2001; Isurin 2000; Isurin – Ivanova-Sullivan 2008; Bermel – Kagan 2000; Kagan – Dillon 2010; Laleko 2008, 2010; Pereltsvaig 2008; Polinsky 1997, 2000, 2006, 2008a, b, 2011; Smyslova 2009). In this section we attempt to summarize the latest research on heritage Russian and present some general characteristics of the language.

Not all second-generation immigrants speak heritage Russian. Some are strong, balanced bilinguals whose language is very close to modern spoken

²⁰ For a discussion of this term and a history of its use in American literature, see Polinsky – Kagan 2007.

Russian of the metropoly, but among second-generation American Russians there are few such speakers (Bermel – Kagan 2000; Polinsky 2000). The maintenance of language among second-generation speakers is supported by regular visits to Russia and generally correlates with the number of years spent in a Russian school (Kagan – Dillon 2010). The child who spent even a short period in a Russian school finds it easier to maintain Russian than a child who was born in a Russian family in the U.S. and attended American schools. This applies not only to Russian, but also to other immigrant languages in the U.S. and other countries. For example, similar observations have been made by Halmari (2005) concerning second-generation Finnish immigrants.²¹

No matter how sad this fact may be for those who cherish the purity of the Russian language, the majority of second-generation Russian immigrants are unstable bilinguals, thus heritage speakers. These are people who had been immersed in Russian from childhood and may have even started as monolinguals, but then, usually with the onset of schooling, began functioning much more in their second language, which gradually became their dominant language. Upon graduating from secondary school (i.e., as young adults), they understand and may still speak Russian, but their Russian differs greatly from that of the home country or even from that of their parents (the first generation), and they find it easier to speak their country's dominant language.

The use of Russian (expressed in percentage of total time) by heritage speakers (Kagan – Dillon 2010) is telling: they speak it with parents (85%), with

²¹ Halmari writes: “While my subjects were exposed to Finnish every day, and while they also used Finnish with monolingual visitors from Finland, their Finnish started to show signs of attrition as early as after the first two years in the United States: it was halting and filled with insertional switches into English, which had clearly become the preferred code. However, always a few weeks after the annual summer visits to Finland, their Finnish was again fluent and effortless, and switching to English was less frequent. There is a clear direct and causal link between the use of a language and the proficiency in it. In a monolingual environment, upon return to Finland, dormant L1 lexical items were reactivated, and while L1 attrition was a distinct threat in the early stages of the subjects' bilingualism, over the years, with the help of recurring visits to Finland, the L1 became more and more entrenched, even though English influence is still detectable in the Finnish of my subjects at the level of lexicon, certain restricted areas of morphology, and idiomatic expressions.

It is clear that the maintenance of the L1 is best accomplished if children are periodically sent to a monolingual L1-speaking environment, preferably to the ‘old country.’ This means that L1 maintenance may turn out to be a costly endeavor, and, unfortunately, not all immigrant parents are able to undertake such an effort. To compensate for the visits to the cultural and linguistic environment in the ‘old country,’ parents need to work even harder to simulate the L1 monolingual environment in several domains of life at the home setting.” Halmari 2005: 428.

grandparents (95%), and with “adult” strangers (72%). With peers, they use it a meager 12%. This last figure undoubtedly indicates language loss and functional reduction since it shows that heritage speakers switch to English when they realize that their interlocutors are fluent in that language. In addition, the speech of more advanced heritage speakers is often characterized by code-switching (see Schmitt 2000, 2003, Mikhaylova 2006, Pavlenko 2003). Harbingers of “pure” language love to complain about code-switching, condemning the second- (and first-) generation immigrants who engage in it, while in reality this phenomenon testifies to the relative strength of the language rather than its decay, since switching is characteristic of balanced bilingualism (Myers-Scotton 1993, Backus 1996, Poplack 2004 and others). As a rule, those who speak Russian poorly do not jump easily from one language to another in the same sentence since they lack the necessary understanding of language structure and sufficient confidence in their language skills. They try to stay in one language, doing so slowly and with great difficulty, primarily due to lexical access problems.

Heritage speakers hear what is spoken around them (i.e., the language of their parents, replete with calques, lexical borrowings, and other changes discussed above) and take these changes even further in their own speech. For example, heritage speakers exhibit a more weakened (or completely absent) null pronominalization not only in cases of subordination (which is common for American Russian in general), but also in cases of co-ordination, completely ungrammatical in the baseline. Cf.:

(23) Мальчик удивился и *он* стал радостным, потому что черепаха жила. (Isurin – Ivanova-Sullivan 2008)

(24) Я встала к двух часам и я вчера почти то же самое время встала.

The decline in use of the VS word order in American Russian has already been noted above. In the language of second-generation immigrants, this order is used even less frequently (according to Isurin – Ivanova-Sullivan 2008, in about 2% of all sentences in oral narrative texts). There are also observed cases when this word order is employed incorrectly, leading to inappropriate constructions from the point of view of information structure (i.e., the focusing of the subject, when its referent has already been introduced and does not require focusing). For example, in the aforementioned story of the boy, the dog and the frog, one heritage speaker uses the following sentence (25) when describing a scene in which the boy and the dog (who have already been introduced) wake up.

(25) Мальчик проснулся, и тоже проснулась собака...

This utterance implies that the dog is contrasted with some other participant, which is not the case in the picture the speaker is describing.

In addition to the development of features that characterize American Russian in general, second-generation immigrant Russian has a number of unusual grammatical features which both differentiate it from the baseline and bring it closer to other second-generation immigrant languages. These features include the reduction and leveling of the case system (Polinsky 2000, 2006), the attrition of aspectual restrictions (Pereltsvaig 2008, Polinsky 2006, 2008a, Laleko 2008, 2010), the reorganization of gender categories (Polinsky 2008c), and the reorganization of complementizers, i.e., the use *если* instead of *ли* in subordination, cf.²²

(26) Зачем ты спрашиваешь, *если* ты завтра будешь к нам приходиться?

This example—in which, from the standpoint of the baseline, the analytic future (*будешь приходиться*) is used incorrectly—points to yet another feature of second-generation immigrant language: the increase in analyticism, which is, in turn, associated with significant changes in morphology.

It is commonly thought that heritage speakers have difficulty speaking since they lack automaticity, but that this in no way affects their comprehension. Unfortunately, this view is not supported by case studies. The illusion of the comprehension proficiency stems from the fact that until recently such speakers were observed either at home or in the classroom. In both environments, the context is strictly defined, which aids comprehension in a significant way. One can accurately evaluate heritage speakers' comprehension only under less optimal conditions. A recent study by Sekerina – Pugach (2005) demonstrates that heritage speakers' comprehension is much reduced outside of familiar contexts or when they are faced with ambiguity. In this study, adult subjects were shown the objects as in Fig. 2 and given the following tasks:

(27) Положите лошадку на тарелку и в коробку.

²² As we have already noted, this usage of *если* results from the interference of English (it also occurs in the speech of Americans learning Russian), but it is further reinforced by the use of the union *или* in first-generation immigrant speech.



(28) Положите лошадку на тарелке в коробку.

Fig. 2. The ambiguous context used in an experiment examining comprehension (Sekerina – Pugach 2005).

The control group (monolingual Russian-speaking subjects from Russia) easily handled the tasks whereas heritage speakers experienced serious difficulties, confusing *лошадку на тарелке* (the horsy on the plate) with *лошадку на тарелку* (the horsy that was to be placed onto the plate). The explanation for this lies in the fact that heritage speakers pay no attention to the weak and barely perceptible morphological differences between (27) and (28) (the unaccented



Fig. 3. Cf. (29)

Fig. 4. Cf. (30)

endings of *на тарелке -на тарелку*, and the presence or absence of the union *и*), which leads to misunderstanding and confusion.

Similarly, adult heritage speakers experience serious difficulties in interpreting relative clauses (Polinsky 2011). The main trend in this case is the interpretation of object relative clauses (30) as subject relative clauses (29):

(29) Где машина, [которая ~~манина~~ объезжает по кругу велосипед]? (Subject relative)

(30) Где машина, [которую ~~манину~~ объезжает по кругу велосипед]? (Object relative)

With statistically significant frequency, heritage speakers interpret sentences similar to (30) as subject relatives: that is, they perceive them as sentences similar to (29). This can be shown in a picture-matching task: instead of matching (30) with Fig. 4, heritage speakers match it with Fig. 3. Native speakers hardly ever make such a mistake.

What leads to such comprehension errors? In the absence of morphological indicators (which heritage speakers find difficult or impossible to perceive), a universal principle of interpretation serves as default: relative clauses describe the subject (Keenan – Comrie 1977, Schwartz 2007, Polinsky et al. 2011). The same principle would be applied by a native speaker of Russian to interpret a relative clause with ambiguous morphology (31). While in (31) both

interpretations are possible (the bus pulling the truck and the truck pulling the bus), the former one is much more preferred.

(31) Где автобус, который везет на буксире грузовик?

Finally, our description of Russian heritage speakers would not be complete without a discussion of their communicative competence. Despite the lexical and grammatical gaps that lead to significant structural reorganization of the language, heritage speakers can usually express their communicative intentions in a conversation quite adequately. For example, in a recent study (Dubinina, in press), two groups of Russian speakers—one consisting of heritage speakers and one of native controls—were asked to formulate a polite request in the context of a specific communicative task. In the first task, the interlocutors were assigned equal social status: a student, presumably having missed a lecture, was asked to request class notes from a fellow student before an upcoming test. In the second situation, a social hierarchy was introduced: the subjects had to ask an instructor to borrow a rare book, which is unavailable through the library or for purchase.

Ten heritage speakers and ten age-matched native speaker controls took part in the pilot experiment. At first sight, heritage speakers do not seem to differ from native speakers in formulating requests despite obvious grammatical deficiencies. In both communicative situations, both groups largely resort to conventional indirect requests—inquiring about the listener's ability to perform the action, as in (32). Moreover, the structure of the request was the same in both groups.

(32) Ты не могла бы мне одолжить конспект буквально на пару часов?

The request shown in (32) was typically preceded by the so-called grounding: an explanation of the reasons behind the request, sometimes an apology for troubling the interlocutor, the promise of a reward for providing the favor, proposals to reduce the degree of inconvenience, and so on. For example:

(33) София, мне одолжения надо попросить у тебя... Я пропустил последний класс, у меня очень сильно голова болела, и у нас экзамены, контрольная работа через 3 дня... *можно мне, пожалуйста, посмотреть конспект урока?* (heritage speaker)

(34) Слушай, так голова болела, вообще, никогда такого ещё не было, ужас просто, наверно, на погоду. Знаешь, у нас контрольная, ну ты как бы в курсе, да? *Ты не могла бы мне конспект одолжить, буквально на один день?* (native speaker)

However, upon closer examination, the two groups showed statistically significant differences in formulating the head act of the request. In both communicative situations, native speakers primarily used the conjugated modal verb *мочь* as well as conventional grammatical means of mitigating the imposition on the hearer (see Формановская 1989): i.e., the subjunctive and/or a negating particle, cf.:

- (35) Ты не могла бы мне конспект одолжить?
- (36) ... ты не можешь мне дать переписать лекцию?
- (37) Вы не могли б мне дать книгу на пару вечеров?

In contrast, heritage speakers often resorted to the impersonal modal *можно* in conjunction with the word *пожалуйста*:

- (38) Можно мне, пожалуйста, посмотреть конспект урока?
- (39) Можно я, пожалуйста, на несколько часов возьму и перепишу конспект?
- (40) Можно мне, пожалуйста, пролистать и скоро вернуть?

The illocutionary force of utterances (38) – (40) is clear, and the hearer by all means understands the speaker's intent. Therefore, heritage speakers have achieved their communicative goal, having properly expressed their communicative intent. Yet a native speaker cannot help but notice some discrepancies in the structure of these requests. First, the use of the impersonal *можно* in conjunction with *пожалуйста* is unnatural in the baseline.²³ Second, the impersonal *можно* transforms the heritage speakers' utterances into requests for permission, rather than for a favor, which does not quite correspond to the imposed context. Of course, one can assume that the heritage speakers' decision is justified in the second situation by the difference in the interlocutors' social status (instructor vs. student), but their use of this form in the first situation is harder to explain.

What dictates this communicative behavior among heritage speakers? In answering this question, we will consider the use of *можно* and *пожалуйста* separately. In our opinion, two factors are responsible for the inappropriate use of *можно*. First, the socialization of heritage speakers into the communicative norms of Russian occurs in a narrow family circle where, as children, they have

²³ Of course, constructions with *можно* and *пожалуйста* are encountered in the baseline, as well, but they are usually used with nouns, not verbs: *Можно мне стакан чая, пожалуйста?* Note the placement of *пожалуйста* at the end of the request.

more occasions to ask for permission than for favors, which may lead to the overuse of *можно* in their adult lives. Second, heritage speakers are simultaneously socialized into an English-speaking environment where the modal verbs “can/could” (alethic modality) and “may” (deontic modality) are interchangeable in many requests. Heritage speakers may conclude that the impersonal modal form *можно* (deontic modality) in Russian is the equivalent of the English modal verb “can/could,” which is routinely used in indirect requests in English. As a result, in heritage Russian *можно* ceases to denote a request for permission and, in conjunction with *пожалуйста*, becomes a conventionalized formula for polite requests.

With regard to the use of *пожалуйста*, its expansion is probably associated with the functional reduction in heritage Russian, described above. Heritage speakers often lack the linguistic formulas available to competent native speakers: they are known to have problems with idioms and other non-compositional expressions (Polinsky 2000; Montrul 2008). Therefore, they are quite unsure in their linguistic competence. When formulating a request, they intuitively understand that it will put the listener in an awkward position (requests are examples of the so-called “face threatening acts,” Brown – Levinson 1987) and that the situation requires their special care. In the absence of a repertoire of conventional morphological tools to increase politeness (subjunctive, negation or idiomatic expressions), heritage speakers resort to the most obvious strategy: the use of the “safe” lexical politeness marker—*пожалуйста*. They employ this marker even in indirect requests, which is unusual for baseline Russian:²⁴

(41) # Ты не можешь, пожалуйста, дать мне конспект?

Finally, a comparison of utterances (35) – (37) with utterances (38) – (40) points to another difference between the requests formulated by native speakers and those formulated by heritage speakers. The latter orient their requests toward the speaker, i.e., toward themselves (90% of heritage Russian requests in our study) whereas the former (i.e., native speakers) are mainly oriented toward the hearer (60% of requests by native speakers in our study). Attention to oneself is fully in line with Anglophone speech behavior (Wierzbicka 1991), which,

²⁴ It should also be noted that in conventional English requests, *please* is very often used in conjunction with the modal *can/could* (and is placed directly after these verbs); this fact also clearly affects the heritage speakers’ decision to use the Russian *пожалуйста* after the modal *можно* in indirect requests.

in contrast to Russian speech etiquette, is based on the expression of the speaker's needs.²⁵

Thus, second-generation Russian immigrants are in fact able to perform routine communicative tasks, such as requests, albeit deviating from the linguistic norms of the baseline. At the same time, they experience difficulties both in producing and understanding speech and, of course, differ greatly from their peers who grew up and went to school in Russia. Yet not all is lost for them: an ever greater number of students in American institutions of higher learning who grew up in Russian-speaking families evince a desire to study Russian and improve their language skills (Kagan – Dillon 2010; Carreira – Kagan 2011).²⁶

A direct consequence of the interest second-generation immigrants take in their family language is that a growing number of them enroll in Russian-language courses in colleges. In response to such demand, a growing number of universities have established “Russian for Russians” courses. There is now a textbook designed specifically for Russian heritage students (Kagan et al. 2003), and their presence in the classroom requires that instructors radically alter their customary methods of teaching Russian as a foreign language (see Geisherik 2008 for a review of new pedagogical problems arising from this demographic change in the classroom).

The students themselves are well aware that they need to master various registers of Russian, and they seek to improve their reading and writing skills. Below we give several examples of texts written by students of one of this article's authors. We will start with examples from the introductory “Russian for Russians” course, which aims to provide heritage students with basic literacy, to

²⁵ The attention to self in English-speaking cultures is further probed in a recent study of the Russian Diaspora (Isurin 2011); Isurin investigates the use of collective pronouns (e.g., “we” or “our”) vs. individualistic pronouns, such as “I” and “mine” in autobiographical narratives by monolingual Russian speakers, monolingual English speakers and two groups of Russian-English bilinguals differentiated by the degree of their integration in the American society. She finds that both groups of bilinguals have a clear trend toward producing self-oriented narratives (which is in line with the preferences of the English-speaking monolinguals), whereas Russian monolinguals are much more group-oriented.

²⁶ The desire to speak Russian is motivated by several factors: many want to make use of a final opportunity to communicate with their grandparents; others wish to visit Russia, to meet relatives living there, and to gain a better understanding of the country's culture, history, and language. Undoubtedly, the fall of the Iron Curtain and a more open world play a big role in this desire: why go to India when one can visit the country of one's roots? Many find it important to pass Russian down to their future children. And finally, some second-generation immigrants hope to use their knowledge of Russian in their future careers.

expand their vocabulary, and to develop their attention to morphological details and grammatically proper word combinations. One of the course assignments was a weekly blog post. Students could write three to four sentences on any topic. They were not allowed to use a computerized spell checker.

Example (42) is taken from the blog of a girl who came to the U.S. at the age of eight and spent her school years living with English-speaking foster parents. This girl learned to read and write in Russian on her own while in middle school, using a primer. As a freshman, she enrolled in a “Russian for Russians” course, which was her first experience learning Russian in an academic setting:

(42) Я хочу слышать любэ, я уже их давно не слышала! Я моем брата отдала все мое музыку. Я сейчас скучаюсь за его. Скоря я его буду видеть. Я хочу что бы экзамины закончелись что бы я могу мою семью видеть!

Example (43) is drawn from the blog of a student who came to the U.S. from Russia at the age of one. This young man first learned to read and write in Russian in the “Russian for Russians” course at the university:

(43) Раз я долго не добавлял к блогу, я буду сейчас в форме сказке. Довно назат, в африке был алигатар. Он был старьи и болной. Он жыл сам свбои под болшим дубом. Один ден в енваре, он решил то что иму надаела быт варике. Алигатар решил то что имк важно увидит другие континенти. Он сабрал все сваи вещи ну не знал как он будит потушествовать. Он решил построет лодку потому что он боялса висату. Он сабрал драва и гвозди и начел молотком роботат. Ну алигатар лубыл быт вхорошах условиях. По этому он начел строит и вану, и бану, и гамак, и всякие другие вещи.²⁷

It is easy to notice the many errors in these blogs. It is also easy to notice the similarities between their work and the writing of young Russian-speaking children who have yet to enroll in school. And, finally, it is easy to be overtaken by a profound pessimism about the state of the bloggers’ Russian.

The strong desire to notice mistakes in the writing of second-generation immigrants is, perhaps, unsurprising. One expects them to be much like their peers in the home country, and this expectation—motivated by the knowledge that they seem to be able to say and understand quite a lot—colors one’s perception of their proficiency in reading and writing. With these expectations in mind, one can easily give in to despair about language loss. But it is also worth recall-

²⁷ Many of the errors are certainly simple typos since these students have yet to develop the skill of typing in Russian. These blog posts were in fact intended to let students practice typing as well as writing.

ing how little these speakers were given: they did not attend Russian schools, they did not watch Russian television from morning until evening, they only spoke Russian with their peers 12% of the time, and even their parents could not pass the language down to them in its pure form. In fact, it is remarkable that their Russian has survived at all! If one looks at heritage speakers from a different point of view—how resistant is their language even when it is deprived of regular, abundant input—there are reasons for optimism. This optimism hinges on the fact that second-generation immigrant students make very quick progress in Russian language courses aimed specifically at heritage speakers.

Compare the texts above with the work of a student at a more advanced level. Like others, he grew up in the U.S., spoke Russian only at home, learned basic literacy on his own, and completed one advanced Russian language course for heritage speakers at the university. Here is an excerpt from one of his blog posts, required in a course on twentieth-century Russian literature:

(44) Я соглашусь с тем фактом что средний русский человек будет знать больше стихов наизусть чем тот же американец. Я даже смирюсь с предположением что русский может читать больше литературы чем американец, но я как гордый патриот, не готов уступить и полностью принять что у русских ближе отношения к поэзии чем у нас. КПСС считала что поэзию обязательно читать всем. Почему? потому что она легче за-поминается чем проза и потому что она более соответствует целям пропаганды.

Мои бабушки и дедушки тоже легко цитируют те стихи которые мы читаем, но не с особенной любовью к словам, а с простой гордостью что всё так помнят как будто готовы что бы кто то им пятёрку вручил. Я лично, в школе тоже некоторые стихи запоминал; конечно не в таком количестве как в Советском Союзе, но мы стихи тоже наизусть учили... Например, я никогда не забуду Роберта фроста “золотое таким не остаётся.” И ещё ежегодно, начиная с седьмого класса, мы в классе читали хотя-бы одно произведения Шекспира. И если он не великий поэт, тогда я даже не хочу знать поэзию.

The path from the language exemplified by (42) and (43) to the language presented in (44) cannot be traversed without effort, but (44) clearly shows that second-generation immigrants can be brought maximally close to the level of proficiency of their peers in the home country. Moreover, heritage speakers can achieve high levels of proficiency in the language much more easily than those studying Russian as a second language. Our efforts to help heritage speakers achieve that level must be based on a solid understanding of the structural and social characteristics of Russian in immigration, and we hope that this work brings us a bit closer to that understanding. We should not compare heritage Russian with the Russian of the metropolis. It is much wiser and more useful to isolate unique characteristics of the immigrant language and analyze their

properties in order to build a theoretical framework that would allow us to train teachers of Russian as a heritage language as well as to create educational materials that meet heritage speakers' specific linguistic needs. These steps will help us bridge the gap between the language of second-generation immigrants and that of their peers in the home country.

3. Conclusions

In the U.S. there is a rather large number of immigrants who speak Russian. Undoubtedly, this population is not uniform, and its language must be described with attention to each immigrant's place of residence in the U.S., the region or country from which he or she emigrated, his or her social and cultural position in American society, his or her degree of integration and assimilation, and other factors. Nevertheless, as discussed in this article, Russian speakers in the U.S. can be divided into two broad categories. This division is between two generations of Russian immigrants: the first generation and the second generation. The language of the first generation differs from that of the home country lexically and even grammatically, albeit only slightly. The language of the second generation (in our terminology, the language of heritage speakers) undergoes much more serious structural changes, sometimes making it strikingly different from the baseline—which, of course, cannot help but fascinate linguists.

A linguistic investigation of heritage language will shed light on many questions of modern linguistics, including the following: What does it take for a language to survive in the presence of another, dominant language? What grammatical structures are most susceptible to change under limited input? What are the principles governing these changes? Such an investigation would also allow us to revise our understanding of the native (or first) language as an indestructible monolith and explore the conditions that can destroy or preserve it. Thus, metaphorically speaking, the study of heritage language serves as a microscope that allows the linguist to examine the basic structure of human language at the "cellular level."

From a pedagogical point of view, a serious analysis of heritage languages is needed to find new ways of reviving and developing the linguistic competence of heritage speakers. For heritage speakers, the Russian language is connected to their memories of childhood, family relationships, and, we hope, to a future in which they can read Russian literature that their parents brought with them across the border. We would like to end with the words of another student, whose text we reproduce without corrections:

“Я думаю что моя любовь к чтению началось когда я был маленький. Моя мама и мой папа читали мне детские сказки каждую ночь по-русски. Я любил слушать и как сразу я мог читать, я сразу начал читать эти сказки (но по-английски). Моя семья любит читать и у нас много книг в доме. Мы привезли много из наше коллекции из России и мы здесь купили много книг тоже. В моей домашней библиотеке есть большая коллекция Русской классике как Чехов, Толстой, и Достоевский. Моя мечта читать эти книги по-русски.”

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