

Profanity, purity and politics — the battle for the Russian language

A law banning swear words in the arts in Russia has come into effect in July 2014. Maryam Omidy discusses the implications.



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From 1 July 2014, the words khuy (cock), pizda (cunt), yebat (to fuck) and blyad (whore) — a smutty quartet known as mat — will be banned from use in the arts in Russia. Violators of the law face fines of between \$70 and \$1,400 depending on whether they're an individual, an official or an organisation. This isn't the first time that the state has intervened in this manner — the Soviets too attempted to dispense with foul language to preserve the beauty of Russian. Add to this law a legislative debate in the Duma on banning foreign, mainly English, loanwords last month, as well as a crackdown on independent media, and you start to sense the presence of a much more pernicious effort to restrict both information and language.

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Together, the law on profanity and the bill on foreign words serve as a two-pronged attempt to cleanse the Russian language in order to ensure its “purity”, a moral crusade that dovetails with President Vladimir Putin’s ideological hopes to create a “national and spiritual identity” for Russia. Now in his third term, Putin is hard at work on his legacy. Within Russia this meant the adoption of a culturally conservative stance and a raft of regressive laws such as the criminalisation of “gay propaganda”. In foreign policy terms, the most obvious manifestation was the annexation of Crimea, a move which has seen his rating skyrocket at home.

With the ban on swearing, which includes books, film, music, theatre and popular blogs, Putin has the spiritual side of things covered. Films containing expletives won’t receive general distribution, and copies of DVDs, books or CDs will come sealed and labelled as obscene. Yet the law is so hazily worded that it is not known which cursewords are out and which are in — what counts as profane will be determined by an expert panel, making effing and blinding a risky business. The loss will be felt. Swearing in Russian is a linguistically productive exercise; by applying prefixes, infixes, suffixes and different combinations of the four words, khuy, pizda, blyad and yebat can be used to express pretty much anything, and in a surprisingly eloquent manner.

Russian poet Alexander Pushkin is known for his liberal use of swearwords

The professed thinking behind the law is that such a ban will not only ennoble Russian culture but also position Russia as the antithesis of the decadent west. A ban on foreign words meanwhile can be seen as a form of linguistic protectionism, intended to safeguard Russian culture from external influences, thereby helping advance Putin’s second pillar of nationalism.

Russia is certainly not the first country to react defensively to the hegemony of English. Last year, French philosopher Michel Serres called on his fellow citizens to go on strike in protest against the “invasion” of English words. This March, Gambian president Yahya Jammeh announced plans to throw off the shackles of the colonial past by discontinuing the use of English as an official language. Because of what it represents — imperialism — the dominance of the English language is a sore point for many across the globe.

"Equating the Russian language with Russian identity is a fallacy"

Anyone who’s read George Orwell’s 1984 will be well versed in the politics of language. Real-life attempts to limit language can often seem to resemble Orwell’s fictional tongue Newspeak — in essence a mind-control tool designed to restrict free thinking. The idea of language shaping opinion can be traced back to American linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf, who, in the early 20th century, proposed that language preceded thought. According to this model, the grammar and vocabulary of a certain language determines its speakers’ cognition and behaviour. Although, Whorf’s claims have been largely debunked — his theorising about Native Americans’ conception of time has been shown to be well wide of the mark — his ideas have experienced something of a renaissance in recent years, albeit without such dramatic claims. Unlike Whorf, contemporary researchers no

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longer think that if a concept is non-existent in a certain language then speakers will be unable to grasp it. It is, however, widely accepted that language effects one's perception of the world. For example, some languages such as Guugu Yimithirr, spoken by Australian aboriginals, use cardinal points (north, south, east, west) instead of terms such as "left" and "right" when it comes to directions. As a result, speakers of these languages have developed an almost compass-like set of cognitive skills when it comes to navigation.

Our use of language is deeply political. It's the difference in language between the Obama government's Countering Violent Extremism and the Bush administration's War on Terror, which essentially refer to the same thing. With regards to Russia's pivot towards language, there are several points of tension. Firstly, the very critics who are quick to decry acts such as a ban on English loan words as nationalist or even xenophobic are often the same people who lament the homogenisation that comes with globalisation. The defence of one appears to be acceptable and the other not, even though the sentiments behind protecting one's own culture — be it language or your local butcher — can often emerge from the same place.

The fact is that the world's languages are disappearing and fast; the oft-cited figure is at a rate of one every two weeks. With each one, a culture is lost along with its customs, its ways of seeing the world, its humour. Yet what's tragic about Russia's rhetoric regarding language preservation is that it doesn't extend to the others in danger of extinction on its territory. According to the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, there are more than 100 languages in Russia that are vulnerable, definitely endangered, severely endangered or critical endangered. Most of these are in Siberia and the Caucasus. Many are at death's door because of government neglect, others because of the supremacy — not of English — but of another language closer to home: Russian.

Despite the wealth of other languages in Russia, for the majority of the populace, it's the Russian language that's an indispensable part of their identity. With 58% of Crimea's population identifying as ethnic Russians, Ukrainian repression of Russian culture and language was one of the justifications put forward for the annexation of the peninsula this March. Equating the Russian language with Russian identity is, however, a fallacy; Kazakhstan offers an example of a country where Russian is an official language and widely spoken but the majority of the population is ethnically Kazakh and identifies as such.

"If they ban mat totally, what else is there left for us to do? We'll just have to fuck on the stage"

Then there's a second point of tension. On the one hand, the desire to preserve languages and their cultural heritage is a highly commendable endeavour — it is the reason why languages such as Manx, Livonian and Cornish have been brought back from the brink of extinction. But so too is seeing beauty in the evolution of living languages. This turns Whorfian philosophy on its head by demonstrating that thought too can shape language. Don't have a word for a new concept? That's okay, because you can create one. It is this mutable nature of language that makes it so poetic

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whether those changes come in the form of coinages, portmanteaus, bastardisations or, even loanwords, a fact that drives purists mad. English has certainly been enriched by words borrowed from other cultures, including Russian — just think of apparatchik, tsar, bolshy, pogrom, gulag and pavlova. For its part, Russian has appropriated thousands of Turkic, French and German words. Each new word encapsulates a very precise cultural reference and imparts a greater level of nuance to the language which it slips into. To cite Mark Twain this is important because, “The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug.”

But there’s more. Each new iteration of a language, each new hybrid, creates a new culture, representative of a new era, which in turn produces new types of knowledge and new bodies of literature, music and art. Thus is the resilience of language and by association, human nature. In 2009, Chinese censorship of vulgar online content led to the creation of the Grass-Mud Horse meme, a term which sounds almost identical in Chinese to “fuck your mother”. A lexicon of censorship-circumventing euphemisms and homonyms soon followed. While this sort of resistance discourse is praiseworthy, it’s a sorry state of affairs to be in in the first place. The impact of today’s swearing ban is yet to be seen, but if Russia’s musicians are anything to go by, they won’t stand by in silence. “If they ban mat totally, what else is there left for us to do?” said Sergei Shnurov, frontman of rock band and swearing powerhouse Leningrad. “We’ll just have to fuck on the stage.”

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