Journal des traducteurs

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Light on the language of Soviet Russia began to be shed by a series of bilinguals that started coming out around 1930. The Russian-English was known as Boyanus-Müller. In latest guise it now blossoms forth as Smirnitsky, and the name of Simon C. Boyanus (d. London, July 19, 1955) is no longer given. I here pay tribute to him as a pioneer, scholar, and gentleman, with whom I held converse during my stay in Moscow, 1932-1934. The immediate goad which took me there was an item in Moscow News, purchased in New York, announcing formation of a dictionary publishing house in the Soviet Capital. I sent my "American English for the Educated Foreigner", developed in teaching Soviet engineers at Amtorg, ahead. On arrival I was told the manuscript could not be published as its substance was "an apology for the American bourgeoisie". As for the house that was to put out dictionaries, the project had been abandoned. The latter circumstance helps explain on the personal side why I latched on to Moscow News during my two-year stay, and on the lexicographical why Soviet specialized dictionaries for the next two decades were to be a pretty shabby lot.

Even at the present date, no matter how you slice the Russian-English kolbask you still get only three pièces de résistance for current translator use. The rest is filler.

In the list which follows Russian publishers are represented by the Academy of Sciences, the Encyclopedia Publishers, a revived Publishing House of Foreign-Language Dictionaries, scattered industries and professions. In detail or in toto the assortment is nothing to shout from the rooftops about. The list simply reveals that in recent years Russia has produced specialized bilinguals which are better than those which preceded. As output of what we like to imagine a coordinated society they hardly bespeak any coordinated effort.

The list also includes American publications. These are in even worse stead. Russian does not offer any match for the De Vries (German, Ahoy VII), or Sel (Spanish, Ahoy VIII), or the Polligota (Portuguese, Ahoy V). Yet millions of dollars are poured on our side into Russian Institutes at universities, the universities proper, the codified and touted Translation Machine, Defense translation contracts, and the whole fanfare of pretending to keep tabs on everything Russian. Once the Department of Commerce received half a million for a "crash" Russian translation project. Lexicographically alone this is a piddling sum against the $3,500,000 Merriam-Webster required to launch its Unabridged III. Where does any equivalent dough for our vaunted Russian program go, then? Probably into the deadhead translation machine.

To those who wield the funds, workers in Russian are entitled to address a demand that attention be paid to their needs, as well, when giant sums are expended upon the machine. For one thing, vocabularies devised for the machine might be assembled for availability to the human translator, who at present juncture is better equipped than the robot to make continuous use of them. On the other hand, in exploring areas where the Soviets and the United States could cooperate, this one of dictionary—
making should be given thought. There is room here for a concerted Soviet-American effort vastly greater than the nibbly tries thus far made in dictionary collaboration.

The three basic aids to which I referred in the beginning are specifically these:


I and II are of Soviet and III is of American origin.

* * *

Before we take up the gamut of bilinguals we have earlier described as filler, let us first examine some of the monolinguals that are available in Russian.

IV DAL', Vladimir. Tolkovyj Slovar' Velikorusskogo Yazyka. 4 vols. Total 2700 pp. Reprint by the State Publishing House of Foreign and National Dictionaries, Moscow, 1955, of the 1882 edition. (N. Y. Public Library has the 1909 edition). Dal' was over three score and ten when he died in 1872. Thus between the author’s lifetime and entrenchment of the Soviets there intervened a fecund half-century of Russian creativity in letters, the theater, science, technology, sociology, politics, which provides a fallow field for intensive lexicographical exploitation. To what extent the impressive 16-volume Slovar sovremennogo russkogo literaturnogo yazyka, Academy of Sciences, Moscow-Leningrad, 1961, had mined this wealth only diligent consultation can reveal. Yet few can indulge the dollars, shelf-space and time which possession and use of such a set involves. Consequently we must turn for help to a smaller work of recent date, to wit:


For current usage I checked pokâ. In its classical meanings pokâ occupies 45 lines. A further entry then reads: (Nu) pokâ (prostorechnoe slovo, vyrazhenie) = do svidaniya.

For politics I checked trotskism, found:

trotskism, -a. m. vrashdënéne markšsmu-leninfsmu techënie v rabochem dvizhëni, raznovâdnost' meneshëvism. [A tendency in the labor movement hostile to marxism-leninism, a form of menshevism.]

trotskist, -a. m. Posledovatel' trotskism. [A follower of trots(y)ism.]
trotskistskii, aya, oe. -[adj.] fr. trotskism, trotskist. Trotskistskaya oppositsiya.

Trotskistskie лозунги. [Trotskyist (trotskyist) opposition, Trotskyite slogans.]

[Webster III provides 15 lines, 5 entries, cross-reference to Stalinism, Titlism.]

For science I turned to yâdernyi, found:

yâdernyi, aya, oe. 6 lines. Yâdernyi reaktor [nuclear reactor] and yâdernaya fizika / nuclear physics / total 5 lines together.

[Webster Unabridged III devotes 50 lines, with 6 cross-references, to the word nuclear.]

In fine, these 4000 pages do not respond to translator needs. To raise the general
level of output, the State Scientific Publishers of the Soviet Encyclopedia luckily have come forward with a notable physics job. Of a prospective set of four or five volumes only one volume is off the press, though, namely:

VI FIZICHESKII ENSIKLOPEDICHESKII SLOVAR'. Tom I A-D. 664 pp.
Good paper, good print, illustrations bibliographical references for all major entries. If the other tomes of this Encyclopedic Physics Dictionary live up to the promise of Volume I, and if the complete set comes out in seasonable time, the megalexer working on physics should here have a translation aid that truly serves his purpose.

* * *

And now for the compartmentalized bilinguals. These make translator sense only when backstopped, we insist, by general reference works, principally:

(a) a Webster-style Unabridged in one big volume in the language proper.  
(b) a life-size Polytechnic bilingual that embraces all the technological sciences.

The 4-volume slovar' described in V is no fitting answer to (a), and although E. A. Carpovich is reportedly engaged on (b) one must wonder how satisfactory a job will be forthcoming unless the necessary kind of money is provided for research and for the kind of published book that is needed.

Meanwhile, the multiplicity of bilinguals is their indictment. Encomium is due every individual laborer in the vineyard, every compiler proper, and those about him who provide encouragement, assistance, publication, distribution. But the System, as Establishment, by which they are engendered only adds to the hectic climate enveloping USA-Soviet language relations. The helter-skelter with which language materials are spawned betrays a method or lack of one which on our side may be labeled stumblebum, on the Soviet side kustarnyi or po vegetarianskii. Whether kustarnyi or stumblebum, neither, approach is in keeping in a machine age in which the translation machine may become viable any day.

Odds are the machine's megalexing will at all times demand close human-megalexer attention. It will want the ministrations of the human megalexer editorially. The human editor will then require aids (a) and (b) no less acutely, indeed very much more acutely, than today's megalexer who types or dictates his product in only relatively small amounts.

Residual sanity dictates that for large-scale megalexing, whether human, machine or post-machine human, this dispersed material must be pooled into the manageable aids I have indicated in (a) and (b). Consequently, every dollar and ruble which the Foundations, Scientific Boards, Learned Societies, or Governments put into the translation machine, stop-gap glossaries, or actual translation, is in part a dollar or ruble down the drain, unless some proportion of it is set aside for quick readying of an All-Russian Unabridged India-paper volume and a full-sized Science and Technology Russian-English bzw English-Russian dictionary that really meets specifications.

As currently the megalexer must nevertheless cater to the Establishment on its own unreasoned terms, its recourse is necessarily to existing partial compilations whose true aim must be to supplement an Unabridged unilingual and a complete technological bilingual, not to pinch-hit for them. In this awareness, let us see what the presses have given us.


While VII to X do not exhaust the list of the few Russian-English aids published in Russia, they may be taken as fair sample. The English-Russian list is much longer. English-Russian can serve the into-English translator in reverse when the translator is at home in the subject. The fact remains that the specialized bilingual in absence of a comprehensive technological bilingual is a makeshift and when it is used in reverse its make-do character is re-emphasized. Such second-remove materials for the translator into English are these:


The medical field affords the following Russian-English assist:


This side the water, for medicine we encounter:


Author Jablonski has been associated with the National Library of Medicine, Wash., D.C., and author Levine with the U.S. Health Service. In the medicine I have had to do from Russian this volume proved of meager help for lack of entries. It is neatly printed and bound, contains 422 pages, and is priced at $11.00.


Other material our side the water includes:


This approach in collaboration sharply raises the question whether for translator, researcher, student, scientist, technologist, interested reader or subject specialist, language, which is or can helpfully be lopped into non-communicating compartments in this way. I say yes, if a non-specialized comprehensive science and technology volume is also to hand. Hence momentarily, in the language man's view, No.
XXII is an amiable international boondoggle. If, however it can be made to trigger off a program of comprehensive volumes such as we take our stand for, it can come to possess genuine validity as an act of USSR-USA collaboration in hewing a path through the jungles of linguistic lichen with which we presently have to contend.


In 1968 New York University's Committee for Russian-English Technical Dictionaries issued a closely printed 39-page report [40c in stamps, Professor A. F. Hubbell, Galatin House, NYU, New York 3, N.Y.] prepared for the National Science Foundation by A. F. Hubbell, Aaron Bakst, Natasha Artin, Susan Shuff, 39 consultants, and some 200 "responding organizations". This array vividly demonstrates concern over the dictionary problem in many quarters. But a Dictionary Foundation has yet to be created to grapple with the problem full time, day in day out, through the all the shifts, swells and eddies of the language tide.

What happens commercially is illustrated in the case of a reprint of the once invaluable Louis Segal book "New Complete Russian-English Dictionary, 4th ed. Printed in Gr. Britain, 1959. 1016 pp." Bearing this same 1959 dateline the book is also issued by a N. Y. publisher. Regrettably, there is no indication of copyright date, which raises the question whether the publishers are not concealing a true dateline for the sake of sales.

Foundation funds supplied en gros and collaboration full-scale with Russia in a rational dictionary-making program would signify at least the attempt to do more than make polite gestures toward meeting the two nations' reciprocal lexicographical needs. Such an all-out program started in earnest would be cause for the translator to cry not just Ahoy but Yo-Ho! 2

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