

AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDY OF PRONUNCIATION OF  
STANDARD RUSSIAN

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ABSTRACT

The study produced on the basis of a computer version of Russian Derivational Dictionary [1]. Analysis of variation in the pronunciation of borrowings that contain hard or soft consonants followed by the vowel /e/ is presented. Some theoretical implications relevant to the linguistic system of Russian are considered.

Standard pronunciation in spite of its tendency to remain stable cannot but react to a constant change of the sound system. As a result, pronunciations formerly considered colloquial or dialectal, become fully accepted today. This constant sound change presents a problem for the description of the system, especially for prescribing a standard.

In recent decades we have observed the process of the emergence of a unified pronunciation standard. A number of its features owe their origin to the linguistic system.

Russian, as well as other languages with a long-standing tradition, has many borrowings from foreign languages; they amount to 10-20% of the whole lexicon.

Many of them constitute an integral part of the lexicon and are judged foreign only by origin. Examples: метр (metre), адрес (address), культура (culture). Most of them follow the sound patterns of the words of Russian origin but there are some whose pronunciation is somewhat different.

Of great interest to this study is the pronunciation of borrowed words containing hard or soft consonants before /e/. In words of Russian origin only soft cognates can occur in this position. Examples: /v'era/ вера (belief), /na stol'e/ на столе (on the table) etc. Hard consonants before /e/ in such borrowings as термос (flask), кафе (cafe) are, therefore, a new feature of Russian pronunciation, but they are, at the same time, the result of the process caused by the linguistic system of Russian. A combination of a hard consonant with /e/ is not an alien feature of Russian, on the contrary, it is a potential feature of the Russian sound system which is evidenced by such existing words as жест /žes't'/ (tin-plate), шесть /šes't'/ (six), мест /šest/ (pole) etc.

As any linguistic phenomenon, pronunciation of hard

or soft cognates before /e/ follows some rules. There exist factors that influence the choice of hard or soft consonants. These factors can be divided into three groups: 1) phonetic factors, among which the type of the consonant in question seems to be the most important. The position of this consonant as regards stress is also relevant; 2) morphological factors, i.e. whether the borrowed word has acquired declension paradigms in Russian; 3) lexical factors, i.e. the time of the borrowing and the degree of assimilation of the word in the Russian language.

As has been shown in special studies, the choice between hard and soft cognates before /e/ does not depend on the language from which the word has been borrowed. The choice seems to depend on such individual features as the level of education, age and place of residence of the speaker.

There are grounds to believe that pronunciation of borrowings with the vowel /e/ follows the rules different from those applied to the basic vocabulary. Great variation in their pronunciation makes the formulation of the rules especially difficult. They are more complicated than those applied for the words of Russian origin because they are statistically determined and require a lot of data on the pronunciation of each word. Therefore, the first stage of the study was to get an exhaustive list of the borrowings with hard and soft consonants followed by the vowel /e/.

The material for the study has been taken from Russian Derivational Dic-

tionary(2) that contains 110 000 words segmented into morphemes. The dictionary has a great number of borrowings. With the help of a computer a list of all entries with the vowel /e/ in the root has been made. It consists of 25 214 words, including borrowings. For further analysis only the latter have been selected. This final list includes 8 275 words in which 2 295 roots with the vowel /e/ occur; all the items have been arranged in alphabetical order. 1 057 roots are represented by one word in the dictionary, 804 roots occur in 2 to 5 words; one root (мерп) is represented by 355 words.

The list has been arranged as a card-index: it gives information on the time of borrowing, the language from which the word has been borrowed, the pronunciation of the word, the degree of its assimilation in the Russian language etc.

During the experiment each subject was asked to give his own variant of the pronunciation of every item in the list. All these pronunciations have been analysed and compared with the data in the card-index and with the information about the subjects: their age, level of education etc., as well as with the pronunciation of these words in the pronouncing dictionary [2].

#### Results

1) The choice of a hard or soft cognate before /e/ depends on the articulatory type of the consonant: about 80% of all the dentals before /e/ were hard consonants.

2) The frequency of occu-

rance of hard cognates is greater in stressed syllables.

3) Hard /s/, /r/, /n/, /m/, /f/ occur in words having no declension paradigms. Examples: фри́касэ (fricassee), амбре́ (scent), кашне́ (scarf), консоме́ (consommee), кафе́ (cafe).

4) More often a hard cognate occurs in words known to the subjects but seldom used by them in their own speech.

Thus, the experiment has demonstrated that the tendency for the occurrence of hard rather than soft consonants before /e/ in borrowings in present-day Russian seems to be very strong, and, I believe, it cannot be ignored in teaching standard pronunciation.

#### References:

[1] Worth, D.S., Kozak, A.S., Johnson, D.B. Russian Derivational Dictionary. New York, 1970

[2] A Pronouncing Dictionary of Russian. Ed. by R.I. Avanesov. Moscow, 1987