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### **The Russian Language**

Today, we communicate beyond the national borders by e-mailing, chatting, blogging, web browsing besides speaking and writing. Effective communication with people of different cultures is especially challenging.

Same words can mean different things to people from different cultures, even when they talk the "same" language. The potential for misunderstandings increases. We can decrease these misunderstandings by means of studying foreign languages, foreign cultures and history.

Why is Russian important? Russian is one of the world's major languages. It is one of the six official languages of the United Nations, and it is the eighth most widely spoken language in the world. With around 155 million native speakers and around 260 million speakers in total if we include second language speakers. Even in a lot of places where it is not an official language. That's why Russian is important.

Russian is the most widely spoken language of the Slavic language family. The beginning of the Slavic language branch traces back to a language called Proto-Slavic which existed around 500 CE. Russian is written in the Cyrillic script which was created for the purpose of writing old church Slavonic. The spoken language existed alongside the literary language of Old Church Slavonic. It was a situation of Diaglossia (a state of being bilingual). After the end of Mongol rule in the end of 14<sup>th</sup> century the Old East Slavic area was split into two separate states: The Grand Duchy of Moscow to the East and The Great Duchy of Lithuania to the west. The Old East Slavic dialects in those two states began to split and develop in different directions:

1. In the West, Ruthenian language emerged with heavy Polish influence. Ruthenian dialects would later develop into Ukrainian and Belarusian.
2. In the East, Russian emerged with more influence of the Old Church Slavonic.

Modern Russian today is a result from kind of tug-of-war between Old Church Slavonic on one hand and the vernacular spoken dialects on the other hand.

During the rule of Peter the Great, from 1696 to 1725, the written language was pulled away from Old Church Slavonic. In order to increase literacy, he simplified the orthography of the written language, eliminating some letters, and some diacritics. His reforms were some of the first step in the development of modern literary Russian: the basis of Standard Russian today.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Russian underwent some small changes, mainly in orthography. But, by far, the most important thing to happen to the language was the creation of the Soviet Union. Universal schooling and the mass media spread modern Standard Russian and reduced dialects variation in Russian.

Russian grammar is quite complicated. Russian is a fusional language, meaning that suffixes and prefixes added to root words to show grammatical meaning. It can make a challenge for English speaker to deal with grammar.

Orthography.

Russian is written in the Cyrillic script. An alphabet consisting of 33 letters which were mostly developed from Greek letters. Some are the same as letters of the Latin alphabet, but some of the sounds are different.

#### Phonology.

##### Consonants.

There are 21 consonants in Russian. Though, 15 of them can be pronounced in two different ways. Either ‘hard’, or ‘soft’.

##### Vowels.

There are 6 basic vowels in Russian. But there is a lot of variation in the vowels, depending on the surrounding sounds and based on the stress pattern of the word. Vowels are often reduced when they appear in an unstressed syllable. This can make a challenge for English speaker to pronounce words correctly based on their spelling.

##### Nouns.

There are six noun cases in Russian, meaning that both the singular and the plural form of a noun can take six different forms, depending on their grammatical function in the sentence.

##### Adjectives.

Adjectives in Russian are quite complicated. They are inflected to agree with the noun they modify in gender, number and case. That means any particular adjective can have 24 different forms. You have to memorize two big sets of endings for nouns and adjectives.

##### Verbs.

The Russian language has 3 verb tenses: Past, Present and Future. That sounds straightforward. But Russian verbs are also distinguished by “aspect”.

Perfective future: Я напишу книгу (Ya napishu knigu) – I will write a book.

This sentence uses the verb with the perfective verb stem and is in the future tense.

But when we take the aspect into the account, the meaning is “I will write one specific book”. An action that will be completed.

Imperfective future: Я буду писать книгу (Ya budu pisat’ knigu) – I will be writing a book

This sentence uses the imperfective verb stem and is also in the future tense. The meaning of this one is more like “I will be in the process of writing a book, at a certain time in the future”

Or if we use the plural form of “book” then the meaning changes:

Я буду писать книги (Ya budu pisat’ knigi) – I will be writing a books

And that means “I will write numerous books”. A recurring action.

And in that case imperfective aspect indicates slightly different meaning.

##### Basic word order.

The most common word order is Subject-Verb-Object (SVO). But because of the case system the word order is much more flexible than it is in English. E.g:

The cat caught the mouse	The mouse caught the cat	caughtthe catthe mouse
Кошка поймала мышь	Мышь поймала кошка	Поймала кошка мышь
Koshka poymala mysh	Mysh poymala koshka	Poymala koshka mysh
The most common	Both technically correct, but less widely used in speech.	

##### Articles.

Like most Slavic languages, Russian doesn’t have any articles. That’s the reason that Russians drop the articles when they are speaking English.

##### How hard is Russian to learn for English-speaker?

According to the American Foreign Service Institute, Russian is a category 4 language.

The most difficult category is category 5 and that includes Japanese, Mandarin, and Arabic. That means that Russian is relatively difficult, but not the most difficult. Russian is a major global language that will be very useful if you spend any time in Russia or any other former Soviet Republics. So one's efforts will be well-rewarded.

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