

The History of the French Language in Russia

Summary of key findings:

- Language (the varieties that are used, their functions, the domains in which they are used, their distribution among social classes and between genders, attitudes towards them and so forth) has more importance for the study of social, political, cultural and intellectual history than the relative paucity of scholarship on it in these fields would seem to suggest. Building on some pioneering work by such scholars as Robert Evans (who was a member of our project's Advisory Board) and Peter Burke (who in September 2012 delivered the keynote lecture at our international conference in the University of Bristol on 'The French Language in Russia'), we have shown through our multidisciplinary history of French in Russia that language use there was inextricably bound up with social, political and cultural practices, ideas, values and movements.
- The conventional assumption that the pre-revolutionary Russian noble class habitually spoke French, which is to be found in much scholarship about Russia and about bilingualism in general, is simplistic. Research undertaken by the team, including study of a large number of primary sources in Russian archives (GARF, RGADA, RGIA, RGVIA, Tver' regional archive) and libraries in Russia and elsewhere (RGB in Moscow, RNB in St Petersburg, the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris), suggests that patterns of linguistic usage in pre-revolutionary Russia were in fact complex, varying not only from class to class and setting to setting but also from one social group to another within the same class, from family to family, from one family member to another or even – in the case of individual speakers – from communication with one interlocutor to communication with another, and – very importantly – from one historical period to another. We have therefore produced a far more nuanced account of the phenomenon of francophonie in Russia than we believe has been provided before.
- Besides examining actual linguistic usage among various social groups at different times and in particular written genres and linguistic domains, we have also made a close study of attitudes towards language use and of debate about language and its supposed and/or desired characteristics and functions. We emphasise that, for many reasons, perceptions of the nature of a language and the implications of choosing a particular language when more than one language is available change over time. Attitudes towards the use of French by the social elite of cosmopolitan outlook in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Russia, for example, were not necessarily the same as those adopted by members of the mid-nineteenth-century intelligentsia, who had been subjected during the Romantic period to a cultural nationalism which closely linked language with nationality, ethnicity and popular culture. We must therefore be aware of the social, cultural and intellectual background against which observations about language and its use are made. We must also beware

of taking imaginative literature and tendentious thought as reliable accounts of social and sociolinguistic practice.

- We have explored the interplay of French and Russian in Russia from the mid-eighteenth century to around the mid-nineteenth in a pair of volumes of c. 100,000 words each under the overarching title *French and Russian in Imperial Russia*. Volume 1 is sub-titled *Language Use among the Russian Elite* and Volume 2 is sub-titled *Language Attitudes and Identity*. These volumes were published by Edinburgh University Press in their series on Russian Language and Society in summer 2015. They were co-edited by Derek Offord (the Principal Investigator on the project team), Vladislav Rjéoutski (a post-doctoral research fellow in the project team from 2011 to 2013 and now a researcher in the German Historical Institute in Moscow) and Gesine Argent (a postdoctoral research fellow in the project team from 2012-2015 and now Research Fellow and Manager at the Princess Dashkova Russian Centre at the University of Edinburgh), together with Lara Ryazanova-Clarke of the University of Edinburgh. Each volume contains twelve chapters by an international team of contributors (based mainly in Russia, France and the US, as well as the UK), together with an introduction and conclusion. Eleven out of the 28 chapters/introductions/conclusions were authored or co-authored by Offord, Argent and Rjéoutski. As their sub-titles suggest, the volumes focus on language use and on perceptions of the effects of language use respectively.

- Our findings challenge notions and attitudes to which many nineteenth-century Russian writers gave currency and which have remained influential in studies of Russian history and culture. One such notion is that bilingualism and biculturalism were destructive both to the Russian social fabric and to the personal well-being of the francophone nobility. They were not only symptomatic of social division, it has been argued, but also indicative and even to some extent a cause of the dissociation of the elite from their native soil. We question this assumption about the tendency of bilingualism to divide and estrange what had supposedly been an organic community before the westernisation of Russia.

- We also emphasise that knowledge of French in Russia had types of impact which might widely be regarded as positive, although they have not often been presented in that light, if any attention has been paid to them at all. French was a lingua franca that made possible communication with foreigners, the language of a civilising court, the language by which Russia presented itself to Europe and the vehicle for the introduction of Enlightenment ideas. It was the language of a new polite society, in which women for the first time played a prominent social role in Russia. It was a preferred medium for certain types of amateur literary production that flourished in aristocratic society, before the professionalisation of literary activity. It was a source of self-respect and an international sign of status among the noble estate through which western innovation chiefly flowed into Russia. French served too, of course, as a linguistic model for the development of the Russian literary language. Even as a phenomenon which the emergent literary community and intelligentsia resolved to resist, the use of French was productive: as consciousness of nationhood grew in the Romantic period after the Napoleonic Wars, the pervasive presence of French stimulated native cultural creativity. From the point of view of social, political and cultural history, then, the development in the course of the eighteenth century of a community of Russian men and women who had an active written and oral command of French, or at least a good reading knowledge of it, was a key factor in the westernisation and modernisation of Russia.

- In exploring the function of French as a means of transmitting European culture to Russia and bringing Russia into European civilisation we pay particular attention to education, as a means both of developing language skills and of inculcating knowledge and values, and to lexicography and translation, as means both of transmitting new concepts and of developing and enriching the vernacular. Our preliminary findings on language acquisition in eighteenth-century Russian education were published in a cluster of four articles edited by the research team. Two of these articles were authored by one of the team's members, Rjéoutski. This cluster, together with the team's foreword, is available in the inaugural number of an online journal, *Vivliofika: E-Journal of Eighteenth-Century Russian Studies* (URL: <http://vivliofika.library.duke.edu/>).

- Besides presenting the case for a more positive view of the impact of Franco-Russian bilingualism in Russia than has previously been fashionable, we also question whether Russia is such an exceptional historical and cultural case as it has often been assumed to be. The notion of Russian exceptionalism, which is closely bound up with unease about westernisation and the attendant cultural nationalism of the nineteenth-century literary community, has been pronounced in Russian culture itself (especially in classical Russian literature) and also in a twentieth-century tradition of scholarship about Russian culture (in particular, the tradition associated with Yuri Lotman). It was partly in order to engage with this notion that we organised, during the calendar year 2012, a seminar series devoted to the history of the use of French in other European countries. By this means, we have attempted to place the history of Russian francophonie in a broad European context, revealing the existence, *mutatis mutandis*, of similar linguistic influences, social and cultural phenomena and anxious debate in many European countries from the late seventeenth century to the early twentieth. Our findings on the pan-European background to our study of language use in pre-revolutionary Russia have been published in a book of c. 160,000 words, *European Francophonie: The Social, Political and Cultural History of an International Prestige Language* (Peter Lang, 2014), the first volume in a new series on Historical Sociolinguistics. This book contains fourteen chapters and a conclusion, including chapters on medieval England, Piedmont, Italy more generally, the Netherlands, Prussia, Bohemia, Spain, Sweden, Poland, the Romanian Lands and Turkey, as well as Russia.

- The Russian exceptionalist argument was often supported by a claim that the Russian people were peculiarly receptive to other cultures and that they therefore possessed a universal breadth of vision and understanding. Tolstoi and Dostoevskii are proponents of this point of view, which found expression, for example, in *War and Peace* by the former and the famous Pushkin speech delivered by the latter in 1880. The claim is strikingly similar to that which was made in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries for the French language – namely that its naturalness and clarity endowed French with 'universalité' and that this language (together with the culture for which it was a vehicle) was bound, indeed entitled, to spread. The research team have therefore investigated the possibility that the Russian discourse on universalism owes something to long and close familiarity with the French language and the discourse about its qualities.

- In examining the history of French in pre-revolutionary Russia, we have not lost sight of the fact that French was only one of the foreign languages used there; English, Latin and particularly German also had important roles at certain times. By building a complex picture not merely of the use of

French across a wide chronological span and social range but also of the larger pattern of foreign-language use in pre-revolutionary Russia, we have been able to identify differences in the functions of these various foreign languages on Russian soil and to define the social and cultural functions of a prestige language (in this instance French), which may serve, but does not always necessarily serve, as a lingua franca. In order to provide a broad illustration of foreign-language use in Russia during the long eighteenth century we have edited and published a cluster of four articles on the subject in the major US journal *The Russian Review* (vol. 74, no. 1). The introductory article in the cluster, establishing a framework for the subject and providing an overview, was written by the research team (Argent, Offord and Rjéoutski). The other three articles, on the use of German, French and English, were written by other scholars in the field of Russian studies (Kristine Dahmen, Wladimir Berelowitsch and Anthony Cross).

- On a broader plane, we believe that our work, as an extremely far-reaching study of the history of a foreign language in a major European nation, provides insights of general use in fields of sociolinguistic interest such as bilingualism and multilingualism, language choice and code-switching, gender and language use, lexical borrowing, standardisation, linguistic purism and language attitudes, as they are reflected in metalinguistic discourse (talk about language).

Finally, we have now completed an overarching co-authored monograph which brings together all our findings on the subject. Entitled *The French Language in Russia: A Social, Political, Cultural, and Literary History*, this monograph is in press with Amsterdam University Press and is scheduled for publication in August 2018 in their series on Languages and Culture in History.