

УДК 802

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CHANGES IN RUSSIAN LEXIS

A living language gradually transforms itself over time. In fact, as the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure noted “time changes all things: there is no reason why language should escape this universal law”.

Linguistic changes usually take place slowly and they can only be noticed after several decades.

Although linguistic changes occur in the syntax and in the phonetic system of a language, it is in the field of vocabulary that the principal changes can be observed. This is because the vocabulary reflects social, political and economic changes. Therefore, the appearance of new concepts and new institutions during periods of social and political upheaval require new words.

The Russian language is no exception. According to some linguists during the 20th century the Russian language underwent three periods of lexical changes and in each period these changes were motivated by social political and/or economic changes. The first period occurred between 1900-1920. During these years Russia witnessed not only technological developments but also rapid political changes (Revolution of 1905; First World War 1914-1918) which were reflected in the Russian vocabulary: some words were discarded from active use, new words were added, others underwent semantic transformation.

The second period occurred between 1930-1950. These years were characterized by the dictatorship of Stalin and the Second World War. During this period, with the tightening of Stalin’s regime, the number of words borrowed from other languages decreased.

The third period occurred between 1980-1990. During the mid-1980s Russia underwent great political, economic and social changes (Perestroika), which were reflected once again in the vocabulary. For example, pre-Soviet economic lexis and religious terminology were reintroduced into the language. Words associated with the Soviet period fell out of active use, existing words acquired a new meaning (semantic derivation). The rate of borrowed words increased.

It must be pointed out that the Russian language is still undergoing lexical changes. The media plays an important part in this process. New loans usually appear first in newspapers or on television and radio. For example, it is possible to find Anglicisms in any Russian newspaper or in the news, while the old Marxist and bureaucratic terms are disappearing. As a result the Russian language nowadays is much different from the language of the 1970s [1].

According to linguists this does not mean that the Russian of thirty or forty years ago was “better”, it simply means that Russian is not the same as it was. As Jean Aitchison (1991) pointed out “language change...is natural, inevitable and continuous, and involves interwoven sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic factors which cannot easily be disentangled from one another”.

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