

DEVELOPING 3+/4 READING AND TRANSLATION SKILLS FOR PRESIDENTIAL NEEDS: A SUMMARY

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The Cuban Crisis led to the establishment in 1963 of a "Direct Communications Link" between the Heads of the US and Soviet governments. Erroneously perceived as a red telephone on the President's desk, this "hot line" to Moscow, termed MOLINK for short, currently consists of a number of identical fax machines installed at both ends of a set of circuits checked day and night every hour on the hour by an exchange of test messages composed in the language of the sender. Each team manning the US terminal is made up of military personnel headed by a commissioned officer functioning as the "Presidential Translator" on duty whose primary job is to render into English all messages received and to transmit to the President via secure lines the contents of any communication addressed to him by his Russian counterpart. Presented herein is the summary of an article dealing with the selection and development of Presidential Translators responsible for the hot line. The article discusses various approaches used in the training program, and examines a number of the problems encountered at different stages in the process.

Nominees for the translator positions are tested for language proficiency by a standing panel of Russian language specialists drawn from several interested government agencies such as the State Department. Primary among these is the Defense Language Institute (DLI) which is charged with the initial in-house training and the subsequent on-the-job development of the selectees. The mission of the panel is to determine in the oral part of the exam whether the candidate can read and translate adequately ILR level 2+/3/3+ Russian expository prose on various topics without using a dictionary. Its primary task is to ascertain whether the errors committed are due to vocabulary and structural difficulties, lack of experience in translation, or general inability of expressing oneself in English on a level equivalent to the original. In the latter case rejection must be automatic, since no provision is made in the program for the development of English language proficiency. However, time can be set aside during training for addressing and correcting some of the inadequacies in the other factors. Appropriate probing techniques to differentiate cause of error are therefore imperative and are covered in the article. At the end of the twelve weeks regularly allowed for full time instruction, the panel is reconvened to determine progress and to discuss, along with the DLI instructors responsible for training MOLINK personnel, the type and frequency of the forthcoming on-the-job development program best suited for the needs of the newly certified Presidential Translator.

The majority of MOLINK translator candidates began their study of Russian in DLI's 47 week basic Russian course in Monterey, California. A minority were trained in other government language programs, while a few studied the language as college undergraduates. Most of the candidates for the job received additional training in advanced language courses, and a certain percentage completed Russian area programs at the Marshall Center in Germany or as graduate students in various US universities. Some of the recent selectees had also improved their oral communicative skills while serving as liaison officers with Russian speaking troops in Yugoslavia or the CIS.

Government courses in general, and military courses in particular, are usually intensive and mission driven. The MOLINK course is no exception. Its mission reduces to: "You get twelve weeks (stretchable to 15, in special cases) to train personnel to produce quality English language translations of Russian texts dealing with any situation, whether technical, military, political or economic, whose contents might be essential to the resolution of an international crisis." In other words: here are twelve weeks to produce Russian to English translators of all sorts of materials that might very well be couched in level 4 language. Instruction must therefore proceed along two lines: 1) develop translation skills and 2) raise reading proficiency where possible to a 4, or if not, at least to handling level 4 material satisfactorily with the help of dictionaries, i.e. essentially to the 3+ level—further improvement during on-the-job training being understood.

The problems requiring special attention in the twelve week MOLINK training course can be divided into two groups: 1) those common to most students regardless of previous training and 2) those conditioned by the individual's background. The most prevalent deficiency among all students is their unfamiliarity with the requirements of good translation. This largely stems from what could be termed a rigidly observed avoidance of translation at intermediate and basic levels in American language pedagogy. The historical reasons for it are well known, but when the need arises, what apparently is commonly tolerated is a loose, haphazard rendition of the contents that evidently becomes habitual and is perceived by the renderer, even at relatively advanced levels, as *comme il faut*. In an inflected language like Russian, functional sentence perspective not only assumes the role of the article, but replaces a broad set of other devices peculiar to English. Consider the role of word order in the following sentence:

В Нью-Йорке мотоцикл встретишь редко, а вот в Европе, которая гораздо ближе к нам, мотоциклы любят. (In New York you'll seldom see a motorcycle, while in Europe, which is much closer to us, they simply love motorcycles.)

There is, of course, more than one way to render the Russian adequately, style and overall context being the final arbiters for properly conveying the nuances. However, to do so, one needs to know the underlying reasons for the Russian sequencing. Experience shows that that is generally not the case. The question also arises as to how much are problems with word order due to the fact that texts at lower levels are normalized to an SVO sequence, and in that connection, how much does such normalization contribute to problems in dealing with case endings in semantically complex structures? After all, if sentences are all SVO, one can by and large overlook the endings and fail to develop in a timely fashion, the knack of using case as the primary guide to understanding. Even in those instances when the nuance of the original is understood, as can be ascertained by proper questioning, time and again the incoming student has no idea of how to go about expressing it in English. Russian structures are based on a different set of principles than their English counterparts. Consider, for example:

Я видела, как ты ехала домой с матерью. (I saw you riding home with Mother)

Or should it be "with your mother?" What allows Russian to dispense with pronominal adjectives, when they are a must in English? In our experience, the underlying principle is seldom known, thus encouraging the omission of the modifier. Development of an understanding of principles of this type plays a role in raising proficiency both in reading and translation, and time is devoted to them in the training program as specified and discussed in the article. Russian modals also assume a different set of postulates. When the distinguishing elements are not pointed out, the basic difference is only vaguely sensed, and instead of using the full range of their context to determine English equivalents, a sizable group of Russian modals is reduced repeatedly even by clearly ILR 3 readers to "it is necessary" in English, which sounds awkward more often than not, if not outright wrong. Thus, "Вам бы надо это прочитать" ("You ought to read it") appears over and over as "It is necessary for you to read it"). Consider the following sentences involving an interaction of word order and verbal aspect that are equivalent to the ones that are regularly present in the final stages of the MOLINK pre-admission oral to those examinees that are clearly doing well:

Они и этот вопрос обсуждали. (They discussed that issue as well)

И они этот вопрос обсуждали. (They, too, discussed that issue.)

Этот вопрос они и обсуждали. (That was the very issue that they discussed.)

We have yet to test an examinee who could tolerably translate all of these and all of the following four sentences that involve an interplay of modals, word order, and verb aspect. Yet none of them, or any of the previous ones, can be rated above a 2+:

Они могут на следующей неделе не уезжать (They don't have to leave next week.)

Они могут на следующей неделе не уехать. (They might not leave next week.)

Они на следующей неделе не смогут уехать. (They won't be able to leave next week.)

Они не могут на следующей неделе не уехать. (They can't help but leave next week.)

Another difficulty regularly encountered involves the use of dictionaries. This problem is augmented by the current proliferation of new vocabulary and the semantic expansion of already existing words. In our opinion, acquaintance with unfamiliar reference materials and the acquisition of new skills in its choice are proper tasks for this level of instruction. However, what we find disturbing, is the inability, or even inordinate difficulty, in selecting the proper contextual meaning in both bilingual and monolingual dictionaries by using the clues provided in the examples given. Could this be due to the fact that at lower levels texts are excessively glossed and skills in the proper use of dictionaries inadequately developed? An associated problem that is background related comes from a lack of training in structural analysis. If one cannot break down a word into its inflectional and semantic components, one not only has to rely on the dictionary more than otherwise required, but also one lacks the essential tools for coming up with a

solution when glosses and definitions given do not seem to fit the context. Those of our students with degrees in technical fields, such as those conferred by military academies or colleges of engineering for example, who received their training in Russian after joining the services, do not have the cultural references so important in higher level texts, which are clear to those who have taken undergraduate courses in Russian history and literature. They need supplementary instruction during the program in spotting them and in becoming acquainted with the sources that can clarify their implications.

The relatively short twelve week in-house program thus has to cover both what we consider to be deficiencies, as well as new skills that an R3 reader needs to acquire for reading and translating ILR 4 material. What facilitates successful results, in addition to freedom in selection made possible by the structure of the pretest, are the following teaching conditions. Only those officers who have expressed an interest in the program are nominated for participation; for those who have made the choice, successful performance is important to the participant's career. Military officers are generally disciplined, dependable, and accustomed to following instructions; foreign area officers, from among whom the MOLINK translators are recruited, are additionally used to intensive, language related programs, with 4-5 hours a day of classroom performance and an additional 5-6 hours of daily homework. Further, all sessions are one-on-one, maximizing active participation throughout the training period.

The primary means of instruction is based on oral translation of constantly updated, mission related expository prose, organized by subject matter into ten volumes, with articles arranged within each approximately in increasing difficulty stylistically and with each volume calculated for four sessions of four hours of recitation. Fridays are reserved for sight translations of short articles, designed to tax progressively the student's developing translation skills and to prepare him/her for the post-training panel exam. The extra two weeks allow the instructors to cover deficiencies revealed during the pre-training exams and, as training progresses, to introduce new approaches to vocabulary building and structural analysis and to familiarize the student with an expanding body of reference materials. In addition to oral work, written translations on related subjects are prepared, criticized, and discussed on a weekly basis, and short exercises supporting structural information are assigned as the need arises. (The article, which this FPD summarizes, devotes considerable attention to the composition of each volume and to specific problems connected with it.)

Translation, when used judiciously in conjunction with other methods of instruction, is a powerful and efficient device for solving specific problems related to the expanding process of language acquisition. In our opinion, this tool has been unduly neglected and deserves to be systematically introduced into the language teaching curriculum from its very beginning.