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The Russian Language in France

From the Russian community to the national education system

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Historical introduction

The appeal of the Côte d'Azur for the Russian immigrant community was due to its image as a vacation resort prevalent in the Russian national mindset. Before the 20th century, few Russians residing in France declared that they were immigrants in official documents (only 4 such cases were recorded between 1825 and 1870) (Kleinmann 2003: 153). In the second half of the 19th century, many Russians came to this region to spend the long winter months. Most of them belonged to gentry and the bourgeoisie. Their coming to the area may have been directly linked to an important political decision. After Russia's defeat in the Crimean War (1855), which banned Russia from sailing its ships in the Black Sea, the new Tsar Alexander II obtained a permission of King Victor Emmanuel of Piedmont-Sardinia to open a naval base in the Bay of Villefranche-sur-Mer, near Nice. The Dowager Empress Alexandra Feodorovna, the recent widow of Tsar Nicholas I, moved to Nice then, which drew other Russians to the Coast. The imperial family and its court turned Nice into a place of privilege. They were eager to mingle with the courtiers of the European monarchs, including Queen Victoria of England and the Queen of Holland. The rich cultural life of these Russian families was one of the most important social phenomena in the region (Nechaev 2008). Many musicians and artists came to Nice to perform. One of the cultural centers of the French Riviera in the 1870s and 1880s was the estate of Valrose (the current headquarters of the Nice Sophia Antipolis University), which belonged to the Russian Baron Paul Georgievitch von Derwies (1825–1881). Luxurious and carefree life of the high society gradually came to an end with the beginning of the First World War.

The Russian community changed little by little in the early 20th century, and especially after the revolution of 1917, when those leaving Russia no longer sought a holiday resort and entertainment but shelter for their exile. The most émigrés heading to France left Russia between 1919 and 1922, during and after the Civil war. According to some estimates, there were

approximately 150,000 Russian refugees throughout France at that time. Different sources cite different figures; e.g., some claim that there were 32,300 newcomers in 1921 and between 82,900 and 98,500 in 1931 (Kleinmann 2003: 152). In the city of Nice, there were 2,077 refugees in 1926 (Charles, Laurent 1972: 39 cited in Pietri 2004: 94). Most of them were 'White Russians', opponents of the new regime. One could find former officers of the tsarist army and soldiers of the 1916 Expeditionary Force, fugitives from famine, artists, and members of the gentry. Many of them declared to have no formal profession. Driven by the need to earn a living, Russian refugees found jobs in the metal industry in Moselle or Normandy, and in the auto making industry in the factories of Renault and Citroën in the Paris region (ibid.). On the Côte d'Azur, most of the new immigrants were representatives of the liberal and artistic professions.

With the massive influx of Russian families, several questions arose concerning the daily life and education of the children¹. One of the main concerns of the parents was teaching of the Russian language to protect their cultural heritage, especially because many of them believed that they would not stay long in exile and would eventually return to Russia. Many people among the gentry and the bourgeoisie feared assimilation. The first middle and high schools founded by *émigrés* in which classes were taught in Russian opened in Paris in 1920 and in 1929 (Nicolini 2005: 499). In Nice, in October 1925, the Alexandrino school for the Russian community opened its doors under the patronage of the Grand Duke André (Ellis 1988: 175-178). This private school, similar to a middle school and high school, educated around 50 resident and semi-resident students, all of them from bourgeois and aristocratic Russian families, which happened to reside at the Côte d'Azur. The school was funded by student fees, but over half of its students benefited from scholarships which covered almost 50% of their tuition; foreign donations, e.g. from the USA, are mentioned (Nicolini 2005: 497-498). The curriculum was similar to other secondary schools of that period, except without either Greek or Latin, and with classes taught exclusively in Russian² by teachers who taught in Russian before the Revolution. Students aged 7 to 9 attended preparatory classes in this school and later finished off their studies with a baccalaureate. The French baccalaureate was always awarded after the exams, which took place in Paris.

All the exams always took place in Paris, where, since 1919, the Russian Academic Group, created by the decree of the French government, issued an equivalent to certain categories of Russian diplomas. At the same time, a *Lycée Russe* (Russian secondary school) was established in Paris, where students received an equivalent of French baccalaureate; students who desired to obtain the equivalent of French baccalaureate had to sit for the exams in Paris at the *Lycée Russe* (Ellis 1988: 177). In 1933, six students finished their studies but did not travel to Paris to obtain the equivalent diploma. Due to financial constraints, the Alexandrino school closed its

doors in 1934, and its students were absorbed into French middle and high schools.

On Thursdays, the day when the French public schools were closed, the students in the Russian School received orthodox religious instruction. This religious school, affiliated with the Orthodox Church, was founded around 1930 by the priest Alexandre Eltchaninoff and Mrs. Nathalie Tomiloff, and in the beginning instructed up to 70 students. In addition to catechism, the students studied Russian language and literature as well as Russian history, and geography. These classes continued after the war of 1939-1945, and in the 1950s there were still around thirty students. (ibid.: 178). Today, these classes focus mostly on the catechism.

There were 27 voluntary associations and institutions that represented Russian culture in the Alpes-Maritimes between the wars. Some of these associations tried to persuade French authorities to start teaching Russian language in French public schools. They made efforts to improve education of Russian children in general, provide better recreational opportunities for them, such as summer camps, educational excursions, and other quality entertainment. They also tried to improve conditions of the Russian teachers.³

The private schools were also involved in language, religious and cultural education of the Russian youth. However, these schools were short-lived. They had trouble obtaining steady and sufficient funding and they were short of qualified staff (Nicolini 2005: 517). In the course of decades, the structure of Russian education in France underwent many changes, and the political face of the émigrés is changing as well. Today, for the children of the last, fourth, wave of Russian émigrés, the Russian language continues to be taught in associative 'schools',⁴ Orthodox parish schools, public secondary schools, and universities.

Russian in French public school

In France, like other living languages, Russian is taught in middle and high schools. In 1947, two years after the end of the war, the *agrégation* examination,⁵ a competitive examination for the recruitment of public high-school teachers, included the Russian language for the first time. The reason was that for the first time Russian was introduced in the system of secondary education. The recruitment process did not offer a consistent number of vacancies (e.g., one or six in different years). Between 1947 and 1960, 133 Russian teachers passed the *agrégation* exam and began to teach in high schools and later at French universities (Chervel 1993, 2015). In 1950, the national system of education launched CAPES,⁶ another exam to recruit high-school and middle-school instructors (Chervel 1993: 209-210). Since 1952, the format of CAPES was unified, and the Russian exam began to test the same skills as the English, German, Arabic, Chinese, Spanish, Hebrew, Italian, Dutch and Portuguese exams.

The late 1990s and early 2000s were a bad time for Russian language in French schools. The political instability and the economic crisis in Russia discouraged students, and Russian classes began to shrink. Between 2001 and 2016, 32 teaching positions were cut at French universities.⁷ The future of the Russian CAPES and *agrégation* exams continues to be threatened. They were offered every other year throughout the early 2000s, and they were even completely suspended from the system in 2009. The situation has gradually improved after the mobilisation of the French Association of Teachers of Russian, AFR,⁸ and the visit of the then French President Nicolas Sarkozy to Moscow in September 2008. Currently, the exams are held like before the crisis, and in 2017, there were four additional teaching positions available. In 2017, Russian was taught in 195 public middle and high schools and in 31 private French middle and high schools in metropolitan France.⁹ The Russian language is part of the Mandatory or Optional language programs. It is also offered in European and International classes and is taught remotely by the National Centre for Distance Education (CNED), which certifies validates skills in Russian at the baccalaureate level.¹⁰

Russian at the University

The teaching of Russian at French universities is inextricably linked to the teaching of other Slavic languages, and political events either give impetus to interest in the Russian language and culture or adversely affect attitudes and repel potential students. Since the Napoleonic campaign in Russia in 1812, Russian has been taught at the School of Modern Oriental Languages in Paris (currently the Institute of Oriental Languages, INALCO), and the position of the Chair of the Russian language was created 60 years later, in 1876. The Chair of Slavic Language and Literature, presided over by the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz, existed at the Collège de France since 1840. It was only after the signing of the Franco-Russian Alliance, a military, economic, and cultural agreement that lasted from 1892 to 1917, that the Chairs of Slavic languages were created in Lille and at the Sorbonne.¹¹

In Southeastern France, university-level education in the Russian language began after the World War II when Russian classes opened at the Mediterranean University Center (CUM) in Nice. In 1965, the Russian program was launched at the new University of Nice, with no more than 10-15 students attending. Half of them were emigrants' children¹². Furthermore, in the post-war years Russian courses came to be taught at the former University of Aix-en-Provence, where a chair with two positions in Slavic languages and Literature (Polish and Russian) was created in 1956. In 1958, a prominent French linguist and Slavist Paul Garde began his academic career in that department. In 1956-1957, there were only 8 students who applied to study the Russian language, but in the following years, as the role of the USSR in the political affairs began to grow and the Soviet Union evolved into a superpower, a greater number of students were

willing to learn Russian to make a career reach out in the 'golden age' of university teaching. At the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, the faculty of Aix had more than 200 enthusiastic students specializing in Russian studies (Biletska 2011).

Currently, we are witnessing another decline. Students specializing in Russian studies are fewer and fewer in France.¹³ This is largely due to cuts in teaching positions in secondary education. Students who do not see viable career opportunities in education prefer to choose careers in business. Already in the early 1990s, after the fall of the USSR and the opening of the Russian market to the West, the proportion of students majoring in Russian studies and those who choose it in the framework of LEA (Applied Foreign Languages), studying Russian together with some other language or languages as a tool useful in other fields, such as law, economics, or management, is growing. This tendency, related to the commodification of the language, is common to many countries. Teaching the history of Russian language and literature is now conducted at just a few large universities, such as Paris IV Sorbonne, INALCO, Lyon 3, Toulouse, Bordeaux, Lille, and Aix-Marseille.

It is, therefore, the LEA students that make up the largest student body of Russian-language learners in France. Currently, Russian is taught at many French universities (except for Corsica and overseas departments), with 25 universities having at least one chair position.¹⁴ However, some other universities offer Russian courses taught by non-tenured faculty.

Russian Preservation Policy

The Russian community in France is still very active. One report suggests that at least 298 Russian periodicals were published in France between 1917 and 1940.¹⁵ The Parisian Russian community published the first issue of the paper 'Russkaja mysl' ('Russian thought'), during the 1947 Easter holidays. For more than 50 years (April 19, 1947 – March 2, 2006), it was the main weekly of the Russian émigrés in France, with publications by notable figures, such as I. Shmelev, I. Bounine, N. Berberova and many others. The paper was in opposition to the Soviet regime. This was manifested even in the use of pre-revolutionary orthography standard prior to the reform of 1918. Surprisingly, for almost 30 years after the reform, the newspaper stuck to this policy, and only on October 2, 1956, 'on the demand of the young readers' who were unfamiliar with the pre-revolutionary orthography, the newspaper began to follow the new standards. The newspaper played an important role in the life of the Russian community in France. It informed the readers about activities of the Orthodox associations and parishes, made announcements about Russian-language schools and classes, and cultural events. The paper covered world events, kept the readers abreast of events in Russia and other countries of the diaspora, and presented itself as a general interest paper dealing with both political and cultural subjects. The newspaper also published excerpts from the novels of

émigré writers, as well as interviews with personalities sharing news about the Russian diaspora (see also Lobodenko-Senani 2010). Having become a biweekly (122 p.) at the beginning of the 21st century, the paper relocated to London. Although it still bears the same title, the publication no longer relates to the original version and now represents a "European press organ". The circulation of the paper is 23,000 copies and each issue is 122 pages (<www.RussianMind.eu>).

New immigration waves launched new periodicals. One is a bilingual monthly 'Perspektiva/Perspective', published since October 2003 by the Franco-Russian Association 'Perspectives' of Marseille. Each issue is 20 pages, circulation is 9,800 copies (www.jfrp.fr). This publication illustrates the life of Russian associations in France, discusses Franco-Russia relations, devotes a page to historical and legal affairs, and offers a page of classified ads. The magazine 'Monako' ('*Monaco*') is also published in Russian in the Principality of Monaco. This periodical is intended for the affluent readership of the leisure class of the Côte d'Azur and deals mainly with issues related to the economy of the region. Today, AFR, the French Association of Teachers of Russian (www.afr-russe.fr), serves as the mouthpiece for the instructors of Russian in France.

Russian schools provide complementary instruction. Students from Russian-speaking or bilingual families attend them on Wednesdays and/or Saturdays, when there are no classes in French public schools. The contingent includes ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, Belarussians, Moldovans, Kazakhs, and others, who maintain children's interest in Russian. For example, the 'Solnyshko' ('*Little Sun*') school of Nice welcomes more than 200 children every year (www.alliancerusse.fr). Since 2010, this school has played a leading role in the coordination of Russian education in France by participating in European projects and by organizing an annual conference on childhood bilingualism (Solnceva & Protasova 2017).

Cultural events organized by local associations help to popularize the Russian culture in France. In Southeastern France, the Russian Festival at the Toursky Theatre in Marseille has been held since 1994 in partnership with Russian theatre companies, and the Russian Film Festival in Nice is held in collaboration with *Gosfilmofond*, the central archive of Russian and Soviet movies. This festival has been gathering hundreds of spectators since 2013, including both Russian and non-Russian speakers. Meetings with writers and poets, literary weeks, and commemorative events are organized by the association *La Maison de la Russie à Nice* ('*House of the Russia in Nice*'), which offers Russian classes for both children and adults, as well as French classes for adults, organizes a choir, and events for holidays and celebrations (<https://www.maisondelarussie.fr/>).

Features of Russian émigrés' language

Although Russians living on the Côte d'Azur remain in constant contact with the Russian language due to either family environment or through association and various cultural organizations in the region, the francophone environment which surrounds this population and the isolation

from the 'living' Russian have inevitable impact on the way they express themselves. The language of the first generation of émigrés who lived in France up till the end of the 20th century had a particular quality that was surprising for Russian speakers from Russia: the émigrés used a codified literary language where a Russian would use spoken language (Golubeva-Monatkina 2002: 273, 2018 ; Stangé-Zhirovova 1999). New generations of émigrés from the former USSR for whom Russian remained the primary language of communication had much more regular linguistic contact (through media and travel).

The children from the Russian community are bilingual, but their Russian skills are often restricted to oral ones. If they attend Russian classes in associative schools or participate in the programs of distant education (CNED), their Russian skills, including oral and, particularly, written skills, are similar to those of Russian-speaking students. However, if bilingual students do not study Russian during their school years, at the university level, they encounter serious difficulties, in particular in Russian grammar and spelling. Teaching Russian to this type of bilingual speakers is currently a major problem for Russian teachers. There are no programs geared to this group of learners, and few instructors are familiar with the methods and techniques developed for them in the language pedagogy.

Difficulties of bilingual students

To briefly illustrate the difficulties faced by bilingual students, we refer the reader to Figure 13.1. (Kor Chahine et al. in press).¹⁶

Although spelling errors are far more frequent among bilinguals (at the beginning of learning in level B1), these errors decrease progressively from

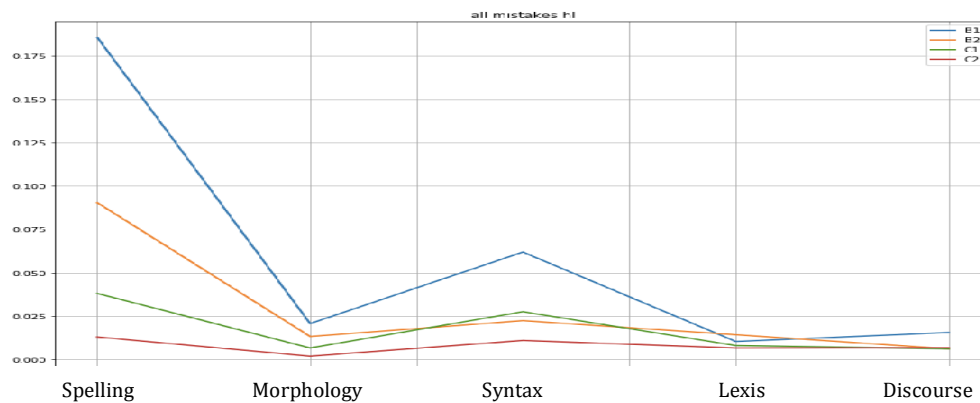


Figure 13. 1. Bilingual errors by level (top to bottom: B1 blue, B2 orange, C1 green, C2 pink)

year to year; by the fourth year (C2), the number and nature of errors drops and become similar to those made by Russian-speaking students in the metropolis.

Among the spelling errors, the substitution of letters is a very common mistake for both bilinguals and foreigners. Some typical errors include the following: **зноминитыми** B1 instead of **знаменитыми** 'famous', **ковото** B2 instead of **кого-то** 'somebody', **претприятие** C1 instead of **предприятие** 'enterprise' and so on. The omission of one or more letters in the final position is also a representative error that is made similarly by bilinguals and native Russian speakers. This error is probably due to a lack of attention when the learner focuses on the content rather than on the form. The final consonants are omitted the most often, because they are less 'audible', e.g., **Авто** B2 / **Автор** 'author', **которы** B2 / **который** 'who', **спроси** C1 / **спросил** 'asked', **имею** C2 / **имеют** '(they) have', **не** C2 / **нет** 'there is no'.

The syntax errors in Figure 13.1 also indicate a very clear progression throughout learning, but the most notable difference occurs between the first year (B1) and the other two years (B2-C1), when the number of errors in the two levels is almost identical. Most of these errors violate government and agreement, and are often motivated by the influence of the French language: **рассказать моей** поездке B1 *parler de mon voyage* 'to tell my journey' (the preposition *о* 'about' is missing), **меньше денег и время** B2 *moins de temps et d'argent* 'less time and money' (case error in the second noun), **договор дружбы и сотрудничество** B2 *accord d'amitié et de coopération* 'the friendship and cooperation agreement' instead of **договор о дружбе и сотрудничестве**, etc.

Regarding students learning Russian as a foreign language, morphology remains a weak point for bilinguals. Lexical and discourse errors are less common and are often influenced by either French or English, which is the first foreign language learned by French students.

Conclusion

Throughout the last two centuries, people from Russia migrated to France. The profile of the immigrants continued to change: while during consecutive waves of immigration of the 20th century Russian immigrants considered themselves to be expatriates, by contrast, at the beginning of the 21st century, in France emerged a new political community of Russian immigrants who shared patriotic sentiments toward Russia (cf. Bronnikova 2014). A strong Russian presence persisted throughout various milestones of the 20th and 21st centuries and influenced the teaching of the Russian language in France.

The Russian community on the Côte d'Azur (the second largest Russian emigration center after Paris; these are different types of immigrant population, cf. Guseff 2014; Nechaev 2008) makes efforts to preserve and develop the Russian language in everyday life and to improve its status in the French educational system. A greater number of bilingual children are growing up in bilingual families. Although some Russian claim that the landscape and climate there are preferable to Russian winters, many chose to settle in the French Riviera due to political factors or historical events.

Over time, Russian émigrés formed various cultural and educational institutions, and a community that plays a role in the preservation of the Russian language has evolved outside Russia's borders.

Notes

- 1 In France, free public schools for children aged 6 to 13 open in the early 1880s. In Russia, public schools did not really open until 1908 (Berelowitch 1978: 286).
- 2 The curriculum varied over the years, and this school might have taught over the course of its 10-year existence classes in Russian language and grammar, Russian and world history, geography, math, physics, Russian literature, French, English, philosophy and religion, the Old Testament, natural sciences, stenography and typing, accounting, music and singing, and dance.
- 3 Documents of the Departmental Archives (Pietri 2004: 56-57, 95-97).
- 4 The French 'associative schools' are classes organized by volunteers, which are supported exclusively by private funds and are neither supported nor recognized as educational establishments by the French government.
- 5 The *agrégation* is an exam to allow teaching in secondary schools in France. It was created by King Louis XV in 1766. (see Chervel 1993: 15).
- 6 Certificat d'Aptitude au Professorat de l'Enseignement du Second degré 'Secondary School Teaching Certificate'.
- 7 Document of the Ministry of National Education, Higher Education and Research, <http://cache.media.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/file/statistiques/17/2/Section_13_768172.pdf>.
- 8 See the interview of Philippe Comte, President of the Association Française des Russisants, AFR, at <<https://www.vousnousils.fr/2010/03/12/enseignement-du-russe-aujourd'hui-en-france-ou-en-est-on-231471>>.
- 9 Document of the Ministry of National Education, Higher Education and Research, <<http://www.sitac-russe.fr/spip.php?rubrique177>>.
- 10 Baccalaureate is France's national secondary-school diploma, similar to the British A-level.
- 11 <<http://www.inalco.fr/departement/etudes-russes>>, <<http://www.paris-sorbonne.fr/presentation-3067>>
- 12 Testimonial of Pr. Paul Garde.
- 13 For example, the Russian Section of the University Nice Sophia Antipolis has more than 220 Russian students enrolled in the LEA course every year (years 2015-2016-2017).
- 14 Among these universities are Aix-Marseille, Besançon, Bordeaux 3, Caen, Clermont Auvergne, Grenoble Alpes, Lille 3, Littoral, Lorraine, Lyon 3, Lyon ENS, Montpellier 3, Nantes, Nice, Paris (1, 3, 4 Sorbonne, 8, 10, ENS, INALCO), Poitiers, Rennes 2, Strasbourg, and Toulouse 2 (Document of the Ministry of National Education, Higher Education and Research <<http://www.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/cid116859/fiches-demographiques-des-sections-de-lettres-2016.html>>).
- 15 « Russes », *Des sources pour l'histoire de l'immigration en France de 1830 à nos jours*, Guide, Paris, BNF, 2006, p. 142; quoted in Lobodenko-Senani 2010: 10.
- 16 Figure 13.1 represents a percentage of errors at each level, and is based on the following statistics (words by level): B1 – 194, B2 – 986, C1 – 5,524, C2 – 10,568. Total corpus 17,272 words.

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