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Easy language in Russia

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Frank & Timme
2021

Mustajoki , A , Mihienko , Z , Nechaeva , N , Kairova , E & Dmitrieva , A 2021 , Easy language in Russia . in C Lindholm & U Vanhatalo (eds) , Handbook of Easy Languages in Europe . Easy - plain - accessible , vol. 8 , Frank & Timme , Berlin , pp. 439-466 .

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/349569>

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Easy Language in Russia

1 Introduction

Russia is the largest country in the world in terms of area, with a population of 142 million people. Russia has always been a multilingual and multi-ethnic state. According to the latest population census (Statistics 2010), Russia has representatives of 193 ethnic groups and 277 languages. About 90% of Russia's citizens speak Russian as their native tongue, whereas 80% are ethnic Russians; although the notion of a native speaker is often unclear because of the great number of bilingual people in the country.

Bilingualism in Russia is often asymmetric: Russians do not speak minority languages, but representatives of other languages speak Russian. Among the most spoken languages are several Turkic languages (e.g., Tatar, Chuvash, Bashkir). Ukrainian (East-Slavic language) and Chechen (North-Caucasian language) also have more than one million speakers. The status and position of minority languages have gone through various phases. On the one hand, russification has frequently been both a state action and families' own decision (Pavlenko 2011). On the other hand, during the Soviet time, the state, with the help of an army of linguists, standardized dozens of languages (Comrie 1981, Alpatov 1997). The general language policy supported bilingualism: Russian was one official language, being the lingua franca of the whole state, and the major language (*titulny yazyk* 'title language') of each Soviet republic was their second official language (Mustajoki 2019).

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 meant a decline in the status of Russian in the former Soviet republics. Russian only has the status of a state language in Belarus and is regarded as an official language in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Russian still serves as the lingua franca in many regions of con-

temporary Russia, for example, in Tatarstan and Dagestan. In recent decades, increasing numbers of Russians have emigrated to Western countries (Comrie et al. 1996, Vakhtin et al. 2010, Ryazanova–Clarke 2014, Mustajoki et al. 2019). This new situation has introduced varieties of Russian. According to the traditional view, there is only one standard variety of the language. However, it is obvious that the Russian used in official documents in, for example, Kazakhstan, or as the lingua franca in Dagestan, has gradually diverged from what is known as ‘Moscow Russian’ (Mustajoki 2013, 2016, Moser 2020).

In order to understand the present state and future of Easy Language in Russia, some special features of the country have to be taken into consideration. First, in Russia *gramotnost*, the ability to write correctly according to the norms of the codified standard language, has always had and continues to have a very high status, being one of the most significant characteristics of a cultivated person (Mustajoki 2019). An interesting manifestation of this attitude is the huge popularity of a competition called *totalny diktant* (total dictate) which is an open test for everyone who wants to determine whether they know the subtleties of the orthographic and linguistic norm of the Russian language. The same attitude is shown in the enormous concern over the degeneration of the Russian language. As a rule, the main objects of concern are the unnecessary usage of foreign (usually English) loanwords and the usage of vulgar language. This issue is frequently discussed on TV and radio, as well in social media. The issue of ‘bad language’ is rooted in the Russian tradition of differentiating two categories of native speakers: those who are able to speak the normative standard language (*nositel literaturnogo yazyka*) and those who are not (*nositel prostorechiya*, ‘vernacular speakers’). In this context, a pedantic attitude toward normative rules, including punctuation, overrules the readability of texts and if the issue of clarity and readability of texts arises, people with higher education are used as a benchmark. Problems in understanding texts by other people are passed over by arguing that it is merely the result of poor learning and can be repaired by improving teacher education.

Another possible obstacle to launching the idea of Easy Russian is linked to notions of ‘Russian mentality’ or the ‘national spirit’ of Russians. Social-cultural studies tend to deny the existence of country-specific differences, but on the other hand, a great deal of research evidence confirms diversity in certain

features between people from different cultures. The phenomena cannot be applied to individuals; it is only true on a certain probability level. In practice, all studies of Russians claim that the Russian culture differs from most Western cultures in its priority of the collective or individualistic orientation of people's thoughts and behaviour (see, e.g., Larina et al. 2017). This may affect people's attitudes towards the need for simplified text for certain target groups. The general opinion may reflect the collectivistic world view in assuming that people with problems comprehending official texts always have someone nearby who is able to explain the main information to them. In a country with an individualistic orientation, people tend to think that every single citizen should be able to comprehend all information distributed by authorities. This is seen as one of the bedrocks of equality among people. In a collectivistic country, people rely more on assistance from their social network. This, however, is merely a hypothesis and should be verified by research. However, if it is true, it could explain many aspects in the development of Easy Language in Russia.

A further issue that may influence the development of simplified language forms derives from the specific features of Russian. Russian grammar is rather complex with a rich morphology. Nominal declension involves six cases and verbs have a special aspect category. Standard written Russian traditionally prefers rather complicated syntactic structures. This is a complicated starting point for the simplification of language. Moreover, although Russian has been used as a lingua franca for centuries, scientific or practical interest in 'lingua franca Russian' is much lower than that in English as a lingua franca. Only few studies have researched this issue; for example, works on Dagestan Russian (Daniel and Dobrushina 2013, Daniel et al. 2011), but the overall attitude to non-standard language varieties is disregarding or negative.


2 Historical perspectives

The history of Easy Language in Russia (and other countries) has two different lines: the history of the 'Easy Language' concept and the history of the idea of compiling simplified texts for special audiences. The former is only beginning to find ground in Russia, while the latter has a longer tradition.

The *Encyclopedia of the Russian language* has a chapter called *Prostoy yazyk* (Simple language), written by V.M. Zhivov (Encyclopedia 2020). In fact, it does not really resemble the contemporary notion of simple language. In the historical context, 'simple language' has meant attempts to write in a language of the people, which was Russian, as opposed to Church Slavonic, which was widely used in written texts. Elena Vähäkuopus (2020) described the history of simple language in Russia in her presentation in an online Conference on 'Education for children and adults with special education needs: methodology, theory' organized by Belorussian specialists in this field. She referred to famous Russian writers as advocators of a 'simple language'. Leo Tolstoy (1937: 286) wanted to describe life to non-educated people in a simple folkish (*protonarodnyi*) language, and Anton Chekhov (1889) was of the opinion that the language of literature 'should be simple and graceful'.

The other line of history of Easy Language follows languages created for a certain group of people who are unable to use standard verbal language. In Russian, as in many other countries, Sign Language has been one of the earliest forms of this. Russian Sign Language was created already in the 19th century. Today, Russian Sign Language has an official status and is regulated by a norm. It has its own morphology, syntax and vocabulary. About 121 000 people know Russian Sign Language (Statistics 2010). It is used in both personal interaction and official settings. The Law on the *Protection of Persons with Disabilities in the Russian Federation* (1955) obliges state offices to also provide information in Russian Sign Language (Law on Invalids). Training in the use of sign language is provided to teachers, social workers, doctors, i.e., those who may work with deaf people (both children and adults). The specialist profession of *surdoperevotšik* (surdotranslators) translate from Russian to Russian Sign Language and vice versa. They receive their education in universities and on special courses. Some TV programmes and films have subtitles or sign translations.

The Law on the *Protection of Persons with Disabilities in the Russian Federation* covers also blind people and people with impaired sight. Several forms of protection and help are provided for them: books in Braille, audio texts, special libraries. Since 2016, the Law has obliged state offices to ensure that all the information on their websites is also accessible to people with impaired sight. The state standard dictates that all illustrations should be accompanied

by descriptions, and should apply a simplified design, large-scale script and modest line width. Today, for example, most university websites also have such a version, denoted by the  symbol.

3 Current situation

The concept of Easy Language is still rather unknown in Russia, in terms of both research and practical solutions. General traditional words describing easily readable text are *dostupny* (accessible) and *ponyatny yazyk* (understandable language). For Plain Language, the most used expression is *prostoy (russki) yazyk* whereas for Easy Language, two terms are used: *ljogkyi* and *yasny (russkii) yazyk*. *Ljogky* literally means ‘easy’ and *yasny* ‘clear’. However, this terminology is still unstable. Various activities that aim to distribute Easy Language do not necessarily use these terms.

This description of the current situation of the Easy Language concept in Russia begins at the highest level. Although the main aim of authorities is to improve people’s ability to speak and write according to the norms of the codified standard language, there is also a clear tendency towards measures that will lead administrative language closer to the ideal of Plain Russian.

3.1 Plain Russian at the highest administrative and legal level

Although the Easy Language ideology has gained little attention until now, Plain Russian has obtained resonance and strong support at the highest administrative and legal level. The Presidential Council on the Russian Language, chaired by Vladimir Tolstoy, advisor to President Putin and the President of the International Association of Teachers of Russian Language and Literature (MAPRYAL), has an authoritative position in Russian language policy, and thus plays a decisive role in the development of Plain Russian at the system level. Below is the statement on this issue given by Sergey Kuznetsov, a member of the Council and Vice President of MAPRYAL. It has been shortened and adapted to the goals of the present publication.



Photo 1: Meeting of the Presidential Council on the Russian language (Kremlin.ru, Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International).

‘Consolidation and development of the social status of the Russian language stands at the very centre of attention of the Russian state policy (Law on Languages, Law on Education). The object of the policy is the part of the common national language which is manifested as its fullest in official, administrative, educational, scientific and media texts. At the same time, the Russian language unites Russian society and lays the foundation for Russian culture and statehood. For the outside world, the Russian language is also a symbol of Russia, alongside the coat of arms, flag and anthem.

This variety of Russian can be characterized as a state *makrostil* (macro style or variety) of the Russian language, which builds, together with the language of belles-lettres and the spoken language, the codified nationwide standard language. Dialects, jargons, vernacular and some others are non-codified varieties of the Russian language.

A specific characteristic of the state macro style is its simplicity, which enables its readability among maximally broad layers of the population, and stylistic neutrality. According to the Law on Languages, this variety of the Russian language should be exploited in all relevant spheres of social and administrative life, including education, legislation, the economy, healthcare, culture, sports, and mass communication. It aims to create a joint platform for interaction

between politicians and the public, teachers and students, doctors and patients, and administrators and representatives of civil society.

The research literature has identified some features of this macro style. Texts written in this style should be clear, correct, concrete, precise, and logically structured (Kropatsev et al. 2019). These characteristics make the macro style a ‘simple (or plain) Russian language’ in the same spirit as in President Barack Obama’s Plain English initiative in 2010. The advantages of such a language are obvious. It is understandable to a maximally broad circle of people and reduces the number of communicative failures. In addition to this, it increases the efficiency of social interaction and reduces the expenses of the state to interaction with citizens in such a multinational and multicultural country.

In the age of rapidly increasing digital information, it is more important than ever before that all people are able to collect necessary information and utilize it to solve practical problems. The state level macro style is generally more concrete and exact as a variety of the language of belles-lettres and does not include such associative and personal elements as the codified spoken language.

Until now, research on the Russian language has concentrated on varieties other than the national macro style. More attention should be paid to the wide usage of the national macro style, including interaction with immigrants and the citizens of multilingual Russia. This objective is widely supported in the Council. Tests should be created for assessing the readability of various types of text.

The characteristic features of any texts should be: (1) correctness; (2) logical course; (3) exact use of terms; (4) use of unambiguous structures; (5) avoidance of unnecessary words and pleonasms. These qualities prevent comprehension discrepancies. The ability of the author to take into consideration the future readers of texts plays a crucial role in interaction. Therefore, much attention should be paid to education and training. To write in a simple understandable language is a demanding task because “simple” does not mean “primitive”. The author should master all the norms and rules of the national macro style and be able, within that context, to create texts that fulfil the demands of the particular interactional setting. The texts should be so informative that their readers are able to comprehend them without external assistance.’

As the statement shows, the Council outlines the principles that should be applied when simplifying the language used in the Russian administration. It does not take a concrete stand on the differentiation between Plain Language and Easy Language but refers mainly to Plain Language.

A practical realization of the Plain Russian ideology is the portal of state services¹. For the purposes of the website, certain rules have been set for the simplification of texts: specific terms and abbreviations, bureaucratic language, complex syntactic constructions, and complicated contents should be avoided. Wordings should be only as complex as is necessary for the solution of the problem at hand. The development of the site is an attempt to solve the readability problem citizens have when they read official information. The outcome is something that could be regarded as a guidebook for Plain Russian.

The idea of a more understandable administrative language has also gained resonance through the systematic work of RANEPА² (The Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration). This huge state-owned institution organizes courses and compiles tutorial videos for civil servants to train them to be more customer-oriented when dealing with citizens. Among the active users of these services are young governors, who have experience in communicating on social media.

A further aspect of national macro style comes from the Law on Languages of nations in the Russian Federation of 1991. According to this Law, national republics have the right to use their own main languages besides Russian in education and administration. Later Laws have somewhat narrowed the role of local languages (Oding et al. 2019, Law on Education), but on the whole, the republics themselves can decide to develop their languages towards an Easy or Plain Language variety if they consider it useful.

3.2 Societal and legal context

State-level legislation is a central tool in governing Russia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, thousands of laws were enacted. From a

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1 Gosuslugi, gosuslugi.ru

2 RANEPА, <https://www.ranepa.ru/eng/>

Western perspective, many of them are very modern, reflecting a neoliberal, market-oriented society. This suggests a good legal foundation for the development of language formats for special groups. The Law on education, the Law of invalids and the Law of languages outline the legal basis for practical solutions for these activities. In addition, in April 2020, the national standard (GOSTR 52872-2019) came into force, which maintains that information available in electronic and digital form should be accessible to users with disabilities as part of the general public. The standard also sets a level of comprehensibility for texts: the 'level of basic general education' (nine grades of secondary school) and takes into account a wide range of disorders and related disabilities, including mental illnesses. When understanding a text requires a higher level of education, according to the GOSTR, 'additional explanatory content or a text version accessible to users with disabilities must be provided' (GOST 2019).

However, two things should be borne in mind. First, a new law or order does not change the administrative habits and mindsets of state officials overnight. This is true everywhere, but in a country the size of Russia, it is even more of a cold reality. Second, in comparison to, for example, Scandinavian countries, Russian laws are often very detailed and exact. Russian and Finnish enterprises' reports on their financial status differ greatly. The Russian reports are usually very long and detailed, and finding the main information in them is difficult, whereas the Finnish ones are short but more reader friendly. This is due not only to differences in traditions but also to differences in the demands of legislation.

3.3 Stakeholders

Many **government agencies** in the Russian Federation (educational institutions, healthcare institutions, etc.) use various sets of guidelines and instructions for creating an accessible environment (see e.g., Medvedeva et al. 2017, Methodical guide 2016, Zhavoronkov et al. 2015, Checklist 2018). Translation into Easy Language (i.e., the easy-to-read format) is also mentioned in the Bank of Russia's working group's road map for improving access to financial services among people with disabilities, people with impaired mobility, and the elderly (Action plan 2020).

Today the question of accessibility, both for visitors with intellectual development issues and people with sensory and motor disorders, is a matter of concern for some Russian **cultural organizations**. Several of the largest Russian museums have cultural programmes that make special provisions for these groups, the most important element of accessibility being texts written in simple or Easy Language. These organizations also lean on experience and approaches from abroad.

Some organizations have concrete plans to provide easy-to-read texts. The **Association of Translation Teachers** is actively co-operating with various partners in order to boost knowledge on this issue. The field of teaching Russian as a foreign language has rich experience in determining the linguistic units that should be acquired at different levels of learning. The ideology behind this procedure is rather similar to that of Easy Language.

4 Target groups

More than ten million near-native Russian-speakers live permanently in Russia. Official and other information is seldom available on a large scale in their native languages. The situation is even worse in terms of the almost equally high number of immigrants, legal and illegal. The number of people at both ends of the age scale, youths and elderly people, is tens of million. There are no official figures on the number of people with intellectual or cognitive disabilities, but it is clear that it reaches tens of thousands. Each of these target groups has its own reading problem profile. In addition, there are also always substantial individual differences. In such a situation, the creators and standardization workers have to content themselves with a certain average reader or a small set of readers.

5 Guidelines

The country does have instructions and guidelines. However, currently it has no generally accepted standards for writing this type of texts, nor compe-

tent specialists who are able to accomplish this task. A number of individual non-profit organizations that specialize in working with people with mental disabilities are basically forced to take action and adapt materials independently, based on personal experience and vision, or on guidelines developed for other languages. For an illustration of the Russian guidelines, see Appendix 1.

From the theoretical point of view, a valuable example of a systematized approach to simplifying language is given in the *minimizatsiya* (theory of minimums) of linguistic units. It was already very popular in Russia (or the Soviet Union) in the 1970s, especially in the sphere of teaching Russian as a foreign language. The general idea of the concept was to determine a certain minimum level of Russian which would provide elementary communicational skills. As pointed out by (Lukasik 2017), the most typical target of learning goals is vocabulary. Russian is no exception. Many lists such as ‘the 1000 most important words in Russian’ are available. However, the principle of *minimizatsiya* can be also applied to other units of language (Mustajoki 1980). Thus, morphological, derivational, syntactical, phonetical, and even cultural *minimums* are formed. The main selection criterion is naturally the frequency of a certain phenomenon in speech, but another central notion is significance for communication (*kommunikativnaya znatšimost*). Another criterion that could also be considered is the ease of the word or other linguistic unit in terms of learning. In grammar, this could mean a preference for productive and systematic features. In vocabulary, a possible application of this principle is learning a loanword known to the student instead of the original Russian word, for example, *week-end* is in Russian *vyhodnye*, but it would be much easier to learn the English loanword which is used in colloquial Russian (with various ways of writing *uik-end, uikend, vikend*).

Any tailoring of texts is a tool that reflects a general principle of human communication (Pierce-Grove 2016). Several terms are used to refer to this phenomenon, for example, *recipient design* (Newman-Norlund et al. 2009, Blokpoel et al. 2012, Mustajoki 2012), *audience design* (Sacks and Schegloff 1979, Bell 1984) or merely *accommodation* (Dragojevic and Giles 2014, Palomares et al. 2016). In practice, tailoring means instinctive translation from one language variety to another. If not concretely, at least in our imagination, we take a certain original as a starting point, to be adapted to the readership.

When writing for children, as a rule, the author translates from the standard language into ‘children’s language’, whereas when writing for the public, a researcher translates from scientific language into standard language.

6 Practical outcomes

This section considers various practical outcomes related to the idea of simplified language forms. Texts for educational purposes will be followed by some examples of informative texts. At the end, readability programmes and other technical solutions will be presented.

6.1 Literature for educational purposes

Simplified texts for children and foreigners learning Russian have a long tradition. In this context, the term *adaptatsiya* (adaptation) and *adaptirovanny tekst* (adapted text) are used. An adapted text is an authentic or new text that has been adjusted to the language proficiency level of the readership. Adapted texts are regarded as an element of primary education. The idea of adapted texts rests on the assumption that after this phase, children and foreigners acquire standard literary language skills that will free them from the need to read and listen to adapted texts.

The main sphere of adaptation has been books by famous Russian writers (Leo Tolstoy, Ivan Turgenev, Anton Chekhov, and others). A work of art (a novel or a story) is shortened, some storylines are cut, clarifications and comments are added to the text and, in the case of foreign students, translations of difficult words are provided. In this process of adaptation, the naturalness and authenticity of the Russian language, as well as the style of the author, should be maximally preserved. Russian publishing houses also publish adapted books for personal use outside classroom work.

In addition to literary works, other types of simplified educational texts are also compiled for teaching Russian as a foreign language. They comprise thematic texts or adapted excerpts from newspapers and periodicals compiled especially for this purpose. These texts are read and discussed with the teacher during

classes. They are often classified according to language proficiency level A1 to C2. Adapted texts familiarize students with written Russian and at the same time, offer them some knowledge of Russian society. Some simple texts (short notes, instructions and pieces of news) can also be provided without adaptation.

A further example of simplified language is demonstrated in books that are targeted at a certain age group but are not directly connected to schoolwork. There is a strong tradition in Russia, left over from the Soviet times, to publish well-written and -illustrated books, both fiction and non-fiction, for children and adolescents. A noteworthy example of this is the *Detskaya entsiklopediya* (Encyclopaedia for children) series, the volumes of which cover various fields of science and are often written by famous researchers. The positive attitude to this kind of dissemination of scientific knowledge has encouraged academic people to pay intensive attention to such kind of publishing.

The rich tradition of compiling texts and books for educational purposes in Russia should be utilized in the theory and practice of Easy Language in the future. Although the readership is different, the general idea of the adaptation of language is very similar: the authors of the texts have to think carefully about the needs of people who have problems with texts written in normal standard language.

6.2 Informative texts

The battle against COVID-19 has been a real test for societies; not only of their capabilities to exercise quick measures but also their dissemination of reliable information. Because the virus only spreads through people, it is extremely important that people correctly understand the authorities' recommendations and restrictions. Information comes to people through many channels: official documents, mass media, social media, friends, etc. However, the most reliable source of topical information in each country is the website of the Ministry of Health, also in Russia. A quick look at the website gives a positive impression of the accessibility of the required information. The texts on the website³ are written in fairly simple language and illustrations are used effectively.

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 3 Ministry of Health, <https://covid19.rosminzdrav.ru/>

Another example of an Easy Language text is the educational programme on the Pushkin Museum art collection for children living in orphanages and students of correctional and boarding schools.⁴

Informative texts clearly demonstrate the significance of illustrations. Because the aim of Easy Language is to guarantee the transfer of information to all people, pictures are often a relevant option for reaching a maximum number of readers. Therefore, besides the notion of Easy Language, we should consider the notion of **easy accessibility of information**, which includes all forms of multimodal communication.

6.3 Other projects

Russia has several organizations that perform active social work among people with special needs. One of these, the St. Petersburg Association of Parents of Children with Disabilities (GAOORDI), has been among the first in Russia to adapt their texts to the needs of people with intellectual disabilities. Working jointly with international and foreign organizations and supported by foreign grants, the Association has carried out several short-term Easy Language projects, such as the Independent Living manual, intended for people with special developmental needs who are planning to move to an assisted living residence (GAOORDI 2018).

The National Research University 'Higher School of Economics' in Moscow promotes an interesting line of research. It aims to create automated programmes for the simplification of texts for Russian language teaching and learning. One of the projects is linked to an electronic 'Russian as a foreign language' textbook (Sibirtseva and Karpov 2014). The authors of the teaching package used materials presented in the National Corpus of the Russian language in order to keep the topic of the texts as authentic as possible. The authors realized that the texts as such were too complicated for learning purposes, but their simplification by hand was too time-consuming a task. Consequently, the solution was to create an automated device for adapting the texts (Karpov

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4 Pushkin Museum, https://www.pushkinmuseum.art/visitors/accessible_museum/access/index.php

and Sibirtseva 2014). During the process of creating the programme, the authors compared authentic texts with texts simplified by specialists who teach Russian as a foreign language. All the methods of adaptation were systemized and, on this basis, a list of ways to characterize morphological adaptation was established. After this, another list was compiled for forbidden grammatical constructions, which should be adapted or cut. A special device was created for the adaptation of lexical units. In the selection of permitted lexical units, in addition to the frequency criterion, other factors were also used, such as the semantic closeness of the new word with the compensated word.

The results of the project have been utilized to compile the *Leksikator* web application. It is a resource for teachers and students involved in teaching and learning Russian as a foreign language. It enables finding the syntactic constructions that are too complicated for learners, and words that they may not recognize. The selection of the words is based on the lists of lexemes provided for various levels of learning. In addition to this, the programme analyses the text from the perspective of readability indexes. The aim of the programme is to give an objective estimation of the complexity of texts (Baranova and Elipasheva 2014).

A similar project is underway in the Pushkin Institute of the Russian language (Laposhina et al. 2018, Laposhina et al. 2019, Lebedeva et al. 2020), where a research group has produced an internet application called *Tekstometr*⁵, which measures various features of text complexity. The programme has two options: one for learning Russian as a native language, and the other for learning Russian as a foreign language. The application can also be used for measuring the readability of any text. According to *Tekstometr*, the examples given in the Appendix below have the following levels of readability: the original text can be understood by school children aged 13–15, whereas the simplified text can be understood by children aged 9–10. For the sake of comparison, *Tekstometr* was used to analyse a response to a reader's question on coronavirus on the website of the Ministry of Health. The result was that a master's level degree was needed to understand it.

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5 *Tekstometr*, <https://textometr.ru/>

7 Education and research

As mentioned above, the concept of Easy Language is in its early stages in Russia. A natural consequence of this is a lack of systemic education in the field. The first research projects are only beginning to emerge. The database of dissertations accepted in Russia does not have a single item on this topic (Committee on Higher Education 2021). The first scientific seminars and conferences on this topic have only recently been held. This is especially significant considering that the Russian language, with all its varieties, is one of the most researched languages in the world. However, some initiatives and aspiring research ideas in line with the Easy Language ideology are beginning to emerge. Many of them are oriented towards also solving practical problems. Below are some examples.

In 2018, an interdisciplinary and international research and practice project named ‘Translation into Easy and Plain Languages in Russia’⁶ was launched under the auspices of the Association of Translation Teachers. Its goal is to consolidate and organize the experience, processes, and procedures of writing in and translating into both Easy Language (*yasny yazyk*) and Plain Language (*prostoy yazyk*) (see Nechaeva in press). The project team comprises both association members and external participants, including experts in Easy and Plain Language from Germany Krishna-Sara Helmle (the founder and owner of Textöffner® – Translation Company and Consultancy for Easy-to-Read and Plain Language) and Professor Andreas Baumert (Hochschule Hannover, working group on developing the DIN Standard for Plain Language). The team has developed and refined a set of basic rules for translating into Easy and Plain Russian, and the results of their work have been evaluated by partner organizations, published as scholarly articles, and presented at thematic conventions such as the Inclusive Dialogue conference in January 2020.

On October 13th, 2020, the International Plain Language Day, the ATT project group organized the first International Round Table entitled ‘Translation into Clear and Simple Languages: Foreign Experience and Prospects in Russia’. The event was attended by representatives of the German Institute for Stand-

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6 The Translation into Easy and Plain Languages in Russia project, <http://translation-teachers.ru/ourprojects/plainrussian/>

ardization (DIN), in particular, the new working group on the development of the *Einfache Sprache* (Plain Language) standard, as well as the CEO of the Textöffner® translation agency, experts in Easy Language from the University of Hildesheim, and representatives of Russian government agencies and the press. Speakers from non-profit organizations specializing in assisting people with disabilities shared their experiences and perspectives on the topic. The round table discussion provided new impetus for further developing the project.

Knutov and his colleagues (2020) from the Higher School of Economics studied the complexity of legislative texts from the last 30 years. It appeared that general complexity, for example, the length of sentences and paragraphs, had grown over the course of time. A characteristic feature of legal texts is an exceptionally low number of verbs: only 6.7% of words are verbs (Knutov et al. 2020). In an interview in the *Kommersant* newspaper, one of the authors, Sergey Plaksin, expressed his concern over the complexity of legal texts that should be understandable to people. He said that the language of many laws is more complex than Kant's philosophical texts. He claimed that legal texts are not accessible for ordinary citizens and may even be too difficult for many lawyers (Kommersant 2020).

When investigating the accessibility of Russian texts, it is important to bear in mind the richness of the Russian morphology. This raises the question of whether some morphological forms are more difficult than others for people with an incomplete command of the language. A further question is whether the answer is related to the minimization of linguistic materials used in teaching materials. As regards vocabulary, the frequency of words based on standard texts is a good estimate of their easiness on a large scale. In fact, people's knowledge of words varies greatly depending on their different life experiences. If researchers try to approach this question by referring to their own knowledge, they easily fall into the trap of a cognitive bias called *common ground fallacy*, which makes us to think that other people know the same things as we do (Mustajoki 2012). Therefore, it is important to carry out research on which lexical and grammatical features slow down or hinder people's comprehension.

In 2019, a survey at the Altay State Pedagogical Institute made some interesting findings. The aim of the study was to research the extent to which foreign students comprehend university sites that are addressed to them. First,

native speakers assessed the text from the perspective of potential comprehension problems. According to them, more than 43% of the words belonged to a group of words potentially difficult for foreign students. Next, the foreign students themselves read the texts and assessed their difficulty. It appeared that the most difficult expressions belonged to administrative jargon, a typical feature of such texts.

An essential general question is whether problems in comprehension are caused by an unknown word or an unfamiliar concept. A master's dissertation at Helsinki University (Sammalkorpi 2006) suggested that the misunderstandings that arose between foreign customers and clerks in an employment office, as a rule, derive from an unknown concept connected with the Finnish administration rather than from language proficiency problems. The interaction was between a Finnish clerk and a Russian customer, in Russian. Such results can also be relevant in a Russian environment when a Russian administrator meets a client with non-perfect language proficiency.

8 Future perspectives

As has been shown, the concept of Easy Language is not very customary in Russia, but interest in the phenomenon is increasing at the level of decision-makers and among researchers. Russia is a huge country, and it is quite possible that the authors of this chapter are not aware of all the initiatives in the field. The following challenges may hinder the further development of Easy Russian.

First, according to the Russian linguistic tradition, the Russian language has five 'functional styles', to use the Russian term. The spheres of usage are science, administration and business, media, oral interaction, and literature. They differ from each other considerably in their usage of vocabulary and syntactic structures. As noted in Kropatsev et al. (2019), the formal style, (*oficialno-delovoi*, language of administration and business) constitutes the core of the literary (standard) language as a language of the state. It is used in diplomacy, legislation, instructions and other official documents. It should be maximally understandable and neutral.

However, from the point of view of Easy or Plain Language, it is problematic that the norm of the Russian formal style is structurally extremely complex. It is replete with participial and gerund constructions, the passive voice, nouns derived from verbs, clichés, special terminology, and abbreviations. Texts written in such a language often need clarification and comments from experts. The problems in the style of Russian discourse are often brushed over by using the term *kantselarizm* (or *kantselarit*), i.e., ‘bad formal style’. However, the features of the formal style mentioned above are an essential part of it: they derive from the objective to be as unambiguous as possible. At the same time, this results in very complicated language which is far from people’s normal everyday language and therefore inaccessible to those who do not meet such language in their everyday working lives. As early as 1972, Nora Gal published a book called *Slovo zhivoe i mjortvoe* (Living and dead word), which became a bestseller. She wrote that, in most cases, it is better to replace an official word by a colloquial word, a long word by a short word, a complex word by a simple word, and an abstract word by a concrete word (Gal 1972). The book is still relevant today.

Second, an obvious challenge in the development of Easy Language in Russia, as in most countries, is the lack of readability research using experiments with informants of various types. Research conducted in different countries suggests, for example, that active constructions are more understandable than passive ones and short sentences are easier to comprehend than long ones. However, many questions remain unanswered, some of which are universal, others language-related, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

Third, a challenge for Easy Language (and Plain Language) work in every country is the heterogeneity of the target group. This is especially true in Russia, as described earlier in this chapter.

To conclude, the general impression is that a great deal of different activities are in progress in many organizations in different parts of the country. This became clear while compiling this chapter. Because a centralized body for the development of simplified languages is lacking, information on the issue has to be collected from different sources. In fact, many of the people and projects mentioned in this chapter were found accidentally through personal networks. In addition, the list of authors shows that they come from five different organizations and have very diverse scientific and practical backgrounds. It is more

than likely that many others exist but were not found by the authors of this chapter. Thus, the situation in Russia is very similar to that in other countries: the future of the development of simplified languages depends on both the enthusiasm of individuals and administrative decisions.

A recent example of the constantly emerging new initiatives around linguistic simplification: 12 research groups took part in a competition for the best programme for syntactic simplification of Russian texts, which was held at the computational linguistics conference *Dialog* in June 2021. On the whole, automated translations to Plain and Easy Language is a field in which Russia has potential.

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Appendix 1. An illustration of guidelines for Easy Russian.

Standard Russian	Easy Russian
<p>Банковская карта</p> <p>Специальный банковский инструмент в виде пластиковой карты с нанесенными на нее идентификационными данными, который позволяет распоряжаться деньгами со своего банковского счета.</p>	<p>Банковская карта</p> <p>Банковская карта это пластиковая карточка, которую может сделать для Вас банк. Банк может сделать для Вас банковскую карту, если Вы откроете в банке счет.</p> <p>Вы сможете оплатить банковской картой покупку в магазине или аптеке.</p> <p>Это значит, что Вам не понадобятся бумажные деньги или монеты.</p> <p>Специальный аппарат на кассе магазина возьмет деньги прямо с Вашего счета в банке через банковскую карту.</p>
<p>[Bank card</p> <p>A special banking instrument in the form of a plastic card with personal identification data printed on it, which allows you to take money from your bank account.]</p>	<p>[Bank card</p> <p>A bankcard is a plastic card, which a bank can make for you, if you open an account at the bank.</p> <p>You can use your bank card to pay for a purchase at a shop or drugstore. This means you do not need paper money or coins.</p> <p>A special machine at the counter takes the money directly from your bank account through your bank card.]</p>