

**«Не трожь молодежь!»:  
A Portrait of Urban Youthspeak and the Russian Language  
in the 21st Century**

*Thomas J. Garza*

As the reality of a shattered Soviet empire began to enter the collective Russian consciousness in the early 1990s, the effects of a multiplicity of previously forbidden global influences began to emerge in virtually every arena of the new post-Soviet society, including within the Russian language itself. From mass media to commerce to politics, the language began to show the effects of the assimilation of previously unfamiliar lexicon and situational usage, as well as of the introduction of non-Russian neologisms in substantial numbers.

Conversely, certain words, phrases and usages that had long been a part of the language in the Soviet period were used sparingly, or even discarded entirely; notably, words like «товарищ», «гражданин», «профсоюз» and others became increasingly less attested in the language of post-Soviet Russia. Like a kind of early indicator of the massive changes emerging in the society of the new Russian Federation, the language underwent marked and profound changes in the last decade of the twentieth century, as previous linguistic shifts seemed to pale in comparison. Vladimir Shaposhnikov in *Русская речь в 1990-х* contends:

В языке постоянно происходят меньшие или большие изменения. Общество должно постоянно их отслеживать, чтобы знать свой язык и преподавать его адекватно – именно как живой и развивающийся. Ныне – эпоха больших изменений. Их интенсивность в языке такова, что следует пояснять и уточнять сам термин «современный язык». <...> [Я]зыковое существование России самых последних лет <...> рассматривается не в отрыве от предшествующих периодов языка, но в прослеживании общей линии языкового развития, в обнаружении предыдущих явлений. (5)

This notion that the term «современный язык» must necessarily refer to the post-Soviet period could not be more salient than when applied to the speech of

*Russian youth*<sup>1</sup>— a demographic population that, in virtually any contemporary society, is frequently most suggestible in its appropriation, use, and innovation of language. Earlier research in Russian youth speech (Skvortsov, Kopylenko, Patton, Bushnell, Pilkington 1994b) has suggested that the development of an autonomous, internally intelligible argot has played a significant role not only in the linguistic restructuring of Russian in the late-Soviet period, but also in the political and social developments that occurred during the same period.

This paper contends that the marked developments in the speech of young urban Russians, or “youthspeak,” occurring since the collapse of the Soviet Union and continuing to present day constitute a distinct linguistic phenomenon within contemporary standard Russian, frequently manifested through adoptions of non-Russian, often English, lexical items. Further, a survey of some of the possible sources of these changes to the language will indicate specific fields of usage in which the greatest innovations in youthspeak are taking place. In particular, in addition to obvious fields of youth culture in which neologism would most frequently occur (i.e., rock music, clubs, television, university, etc.), this paper examines three arenas in which substantive linguistic transformations are occurring, in large part due to the significantly large participation of young Russian in these fields: technology, business, and politics. These three fields represent areas in which Russian urban youth are both highly participatory and instrumental in facilitating shifts in language use that have been documented in the longitudinal study outlined below.

### **Background: Profiling Post-Soviet Russian Youth**

Most of the occurrences and trends in language use cited below, including all specific instances of new usages, are taken from the results and findings of an ongoing longitudinal study of the social, political, and cultural behaviors of urban Russian youth<sup>2</sup>. Begun more than a decade ago, first with grant support from the Ford Foundation in 1996, and then into the 2000s with continued funding from the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Texas, the process of collecting questionnaire, interview, and cultural artifact data from Moscow and St. Petersburg youth was initially aimed at creating ethnographic portraits of

---

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this discussion, “youth” is defined as individuals between the ages of 16-30, as posited in Patton (272), giving a full generational scope to the group and covering the period from secondary school, possible conscription, possible university education, and early employment.

<sup>2</sup> For a more complete description and discussion of this research project, see Garza.

the social and cultural mores of Russian young people in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Soon, however, ancillary findings concerning idiosyncratic language use in certain fields, and primacy issues between Slavic and non-Slavic lexicon, began to emerge from the various data, as well.

The current socio-linguistic portrait of the state of language and use among contemporary Russian youth is based on interview and questionnaire information culled from over eight hundred Russian residents of Moscow and St. Petersburg between the ages of sixteen and thirty, male and female, largely from secondary school and university environments, but as such from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. The open-ended nature of the questionnaire informed the content and details of the follow-up interviews, which in turn revealed sources of social and cultural realia to be investigated or collected. These sources included films, books, magazines, clubs, bars, television programs, local hangouts, etc.

The written responses from the questionnaires, the transcripts of the interviews, and linguistic material contained within the artifacts collected or visited were compiled and analyzed based on frequency, context, and usage, resulting in the original portrait of new Russian youthspeak on which this paper is based. What was discovered — even in the initial years of the study — was that the youth of post-Soviet Russia were clearly developing their own idiolect within Contemporary Standard Russian, which incorporated a host of neologisms relevant to quite specific spheres of usage, and an unprecedented incorporation of foreign loan words, especially from English, into their speech. Today, work on the survey continues with new questionnaire and interview data being collected annually, adding to and updating the ever-evolving portrait of urban Russian youth culture and language in the 21st century.

For the purposes of this discussion, certain definitions and parameters necessary for the development of a sociolinguistic portrait of post-Soviet youthspeak must be explicated:

- Why “post-Soviet”? The period after the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union and the administrations of Boris Yel'tsyn and Vladimir Putin demonstrate much more linguistic variance in the language of young Russians than during Gorbachev's period of *glasnost*. This period is marked by unprecedented social, political, economic, and cultural transformations — not all received positively — during the time of ongoing military incursions in Chechnya, which further isolated and alienated Russian youth from the greater social fabric.

- Why urban? The bulk of the University of Texas research data were gathered in Moscow and St. Petersburg, since the impact of post-Soviet reforms and changes is most immediately palpable and visible. As many of the lexical transformations in youth language come in the form of neologisms borrowed from Western languages, and the bulk of contact with the West in terms of business, finance, culture and tourism occurs in the capital cities, these metropolitan areas were featured.

- Why “youthspeak”? Both new lexical items and new uses ascribed to existing words show a clear direction of movement toward much more Western, i.e., English-based, transformations of the Russian language. As Russian journalist Jana Lepkova noted in her 1998 commentary on the state of local youthspeak:

«Вообще, конечно, послушать, как мы разговариваем, – уши начинают свертываться в аккуратные трубочки. И виновато в этом совершенно безграмотное использование разных оригинальных слов на разные оригинальные буквы (105).

More recently, Russian scholars, such as Khristjuk, have added to the discourse concerning the quite distinctive phenomenon of assimilating foreign loan words that is characteristic of youthspeak:

Молодёжная речь отражает неустойчивое культурно-языковое состояние общества, балансирующее на грани литературного языка и жаргона. <...> Жаргон – английский сленг, французское арго – явление, характерное для языкового развития (2).

### **Importing the West to Russia**

In the forward to the Russian edition of *A Slang Encyclopedia of the Moscow Tusovka*, Klyne and McLovsky note with some irony the long history of Russia’s complex encounters with the West:

Вся история России являет собою упущение шансов. Русские упустили шанс жить хорошо, как шведы, когда рабили их при Полтаве; жить как французы – разбив их при Бородино; жить как турки; разбив их на Шипке; жить как японцы – Цусима; жить как немцы – после Сталинграда...(3).

Russia's love-hate relationship with all things Western, most notable during Peter the Great's attempt to build a Western capital in the form of St. Petersburg, was certainly in evidence during the Gorbachev years as newly relaxed regulations concerning media, press, and culture brought unprecedented exposure of Western "products of culture" to a Soviet audience eager to sample them — and with them, the language associated with them. Jean Baudrillard in his *Simulations* wrote of the "Disneyfication" of world cultures in the early 1980s<sup>3</sup>, a particularly negative view of American cultural imperialism in the age of globalization:

The objective profile of America, then, may be traced throughout Disneyland, even down to the morphology of individuals and the crowd. All its values are exalted here, in miniature and comic strip form. Embalmed and pacified. Whence the possibility of an ideological analysis of Disneyland: digest of the American way of life, panegyric to American values, idealized transportation of a contradictory reality (24).

Baudrillard's pessimistic, yet accurate, view of the Disneyfication of world cultures certainly has its 1990s and 2000s analogue — at least as far as Russia is concerned, but in the form of the "McDonaldsfication" of the former Soviet Union, especially in connection with Russian youth, new Western influences and language use.

When the first *glasnost*-era McDonald's restaurant opened in Moscow in 1989, more than just the "McMenu" (Биг Мак, Хеппи Мил, чизбургер, Мак Флурри, etc.) quickly became part of the new Russian lexicon<sup>4</sup>; with the mapping of the McDonald's culture onto the Soviet reality, even the employment process was imported and transplanted in order to train young Russians for a McJob. In this connection, essential McSpeak, such as the obligatory transaction closing function of "Have a nice day!" — banal and linguistically neutral in a

---

<sup>3</sup> Baudrillard's critique is particularly appropriate and even premonitory, given that it was published a full decade before the opening of Euro Disney outside of Paris in 1992.

<sup>4</sup> Significantly, even the Russian version of the McDonald's name is characteristic of the often linguistically vacant lexical items that result in "McDonaldsfication": «Макдоналдс» carries neither the familial designation of "Mc," nor the possessive form "'s" of the original. The result is an onomastically meaningless word in Russian, useful only to designate the restaurant brand.

American commercial context — entered into the Russian language as the grammatically correct, but functionally suspect ““Хорошего вам дня!”

With more than 180 McDonald’s restaurants now in forty Russian cities, although this is a fraction of the total number of stores worldwide, McDonald’s Russia does more volume per store than any other country in the world (Adamy). Significantly, it is Russia’s youth who staff the vast majority of service positions in the country’s McDonald’s, and it is they who became the purveyors not only of burgers and fries, but also of McSpeak from the early days of operation. Today, the majority of urban youth surveyed see the lexicon and usages indigenous to the McDonald’s Russia environment as part of the greater Russian language. Just as visitors to EuroDisney’s Space Mountain (De la Terre á la Lune) consider the attraction to be their own, Russians asking for «филе о фиш», «Мак Маффин», or «Мак Завтрак» now perceive these items to be products of Russian culture, both materially and linguistically. It was not entirely unexpected, then, that since 1995, the morning news on Moscow’s official Первый канал closes its program with the phrase ““Хорошего вам дня!”

In terms of Baudrillard’s critical model, McDonald’s is certainly not the proverbial disease in the transformation of Russian youthspeak, but rather only a symptom. In many respects, McSpeak is not simply a phenomenon itself, but rather the face of things to come as young Russians come into contact with specific environments of rapid language change. It must be noted that such environments are ideally suited for intense linguistic modification, especially the creation of new lexical entities, in the native language. In the case of post-Soviet Russian, however, the assimilation of neologisms occurs from other non-Russian languages into Russian, giving the appearance that the language is becoming more “foreign” oriented.

As much blame as can be placed on McDonald’s for all of the world’s cultural ills, reinventing the language of Russian youth is not solely their fault. They did not create and impose “McRussian” on a captive audience; rather, a ready young consumer was poised to innovate and assimilate a language of social and cultural change. The same can be said of a number of sociolinguistic environments in which Russian youth have been instrumental in language change in the past decade. The late 1990s were, indeed, a period of significant development in Russian youthspeak in these particular environments.

### **Youthspeak: Then and Now**

In terms of commenting on the accelerated development and changes within a language system, the speech of young people is particularly appropriate for

scrutiny. As Patton points out, “Youth slang is employed to add expressivity to speech while indicating solidarity with either the younger generation as a whole or a particular ‘in-group’ (272).” These “in-groups,” or *tusovki* in Russian youthspeak, have historically played the role of vanguard in the innovation and development of the language throughout modern Soviet and Russian history (Rayport 59). It is worth noting, however, that the development of youth slang from the late Soviet period differs significantly from that of the contemporary period in its primary source material. Patton accurately indicates:

Thus slang, an expressive stylistic component of the colloquial standard, contains restricted and unrestricted varieties according to its social sphere of usage. Contemporary [ca.1980. TJG] Russian youth slang includes certain types of suffixal derivatives, metaphorical usages and borrowings from foreign languages and jargons, especially criminal jargon (275).

In contrast, post-Soviet youthspeak from 1991 to the present appears to draw much less significantly from criminal jargon, so-called «блатной язык»<sup>5</sup>, and in a much more aggressive way derives its basic components from foreign — especially English — borrowings and revisions of original Russian meaning of established usage.

One of the first demonstrable periods of youthspeak influence was in the 1950s and 1960s during the peak of the Khrushchev thaw, when a large influx of English words were adopted into Russian, especially by university-age students: The simple lexicon of English was incorporated into Russian speech via words such as «шуз, шузы» (shoes), «гирла, гирлы» (girl, girls), вач (watch), and through the culturally rich, though forbidden, lexis of the Beat movement and the spread of rock music: «рок-н-ролл», «бути-вуги», «джайв», and «вит» all became part of the Russian youth parlance throughout the period.

Most influential in this linguistic use was a group of young urban Russians called «стиляги», or “the styling ones” (from the word «стиль»), based on the fashion, lifestyle, and accordingly, the used of language they adopted. Dressed in wide trousers, narrow ties (famously orange), pointed shoes, and jackets, the «стиляги» of the 1950s were the hip, modern precursors to post-

---

<sup>5</sup> The impact of «блатной язык» on youthspeak in the 21<sup>st</sup> century may yet see a resurgence as it did in the 1960s and 1970s, with the emergence of the so-called «шансон» genre in popular music, once again bringing this lexicon and usage into the consciousness of Russian youth. See Skachinskij for use of this jargon in the 1980s.

Soviet youth's «золотая молодёжь», influenced by the clandestine influx of Western music, films, fashion, and speech from Great Britain, Europe, and the U.S. Finding solace, hope, and companionship in their own reimagining of the Soviet «коллектив», the «стиляги» joined ranks into their «тусовки», or “in-crowd,” often simply to «тусоваться», or hang out<sup>6</sup>. It is precisely this intense, often exclusive social interaction that fosters the active production of a unique and particular language of the Soviet «тусовка» during this period of relatively relaxed cultural restrictions: youthspeak of the Khrushchev Thaw.

Significantly, the «стиляги» return — both in look and in function — during the Gorbachev era in the mid-1980s with more liberal regulations of radio stations, television, and film, was part of a larger movement toward cultural openness. Retro musical groups, such as “Bravo,” “Televizor,” and “Sekret,” contributed to the look and language of the updated «стиляга» style. In addition to the opening of broadcast media, the popular press takes over Russia during the late 1980s. Among a plethora of various publications, ranging from hard news journals to hardcore pornography, new youth-oriented magazines proliferated on newsstands in the urban areas. Journals such as the slick and glossy *OM*, a kind of Russian language melding of *Gentleman's Quarterly* and *Details* magazines in the West, and *Ptjuch*, a young Russian's lifestyle guide in the vein of *Spin* or *Rolling Stone* magazines became handbooks for urban life, culture, and language use in the Russia emerging in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

In tandem with the glossy print publications *OM* and *Ptjuch*, a variety of inexpensive weekly journals aimed at Russia's school-age youth began to flood the market during the same period. Magazines such as *Cool*, *Cool Girl*, *Rovesnik*, *Vse Dela*, and *Molotok* provided the younger generation with simple, but effective, images and texts of popular culture, social conventions, and — once again — innovative language use. In addition, Russian language editions of popular Western fashion and culture publications for young people, such as *Cosmopolitan*, *GQ*, and *Vogue*, appeared and also quickly found a reading public. By the early 1990s, as influential as these print media are in introducing and propagating language change among Russia's New Youth, they pale in comparison to the massive cultural and linguistic impact of a singular media phenomenon in post-Soviet Russia: MTV Russia.

---

<sup>6</sup> For a much more detailed discussion of the «тусовка», see Rayport and Pilikington (1994a and 1994b).



### The Russian Music Television Generation

Based in part on the growing urban youth club scene (emergent from the Soviet «дискотека» subculture of the late 1980s), and the thriving proliferation of the MTV franchise in the U.S. and throughout Europe, Russia made its first foray into the Russian-language all-music video television programming in 1993 with the premiere of popular «Музыкальное Обозрение», or «МузОбоз» program on Moscow's Channel 4. Hosted by the youthful and enigmatic TV personality Ivan Demidov, the early years of Russian music television immediately began to contribute to Russian youthspeak, as Demidov's role quickly changed from the familiar «ведущий» to the neologism «ви-джей» (VJ, or "video jockey" from MTV in the U.S.); other new lexical items such as «ХИТ» «ХИТЫ» (hit songs), «чарт» (music charts), «ВИДИК» (music video clip), soon entered the language, as well. As the monolithic monopoly of the «Мелодия» recording industry finally gave way to competition from diverse domestic recording labels, Russian rock groups began conceptualizing their work both in terms of recording music and filming an accompanying video. These conceptual videos began to grow in number and quality, and so did the impact they had on the cultural mores and language of youth.

Lyrics of many popular songs were embedded with dozens of new uses of Russian lexis and the addition of neologisms from a variety of non-Russian languages. Some of these words had been in use among youth in decades past, but were popularized into regular usage via song lyrics and music videos, such as «бузить» (from "booze," meaning to act the fool, make too much noise: «Прекрати бузить, а то получишь!»), «круто» adj. «крутой» (cool, tough «крутой парень» «Круто!»), «прикол» adj. «прикольный» (awesome, brilliant), «чума» lit. plague (cool, fantastic), «наезжать» lit. to drive over (to chew out, reprimand: «На меня завуч наехало.»), «свалить» (to leave (уйти), "I'm outta here": «Девчонка оказалась ужасно скучным типом, и я тихо свалил оттуда.»), «шоколад» (sheer delight, bliss: «Я купила новую юбку. Просто шоколад!»), «развести» (to make somebody do something: «Я хочу развести начальника на прибавку к зарплате»), and «нулёвый» (completely new: Он появился на концерте во всём нулёвом.». As the 20<sup>th</sup> century came to a close, Russian youth looked toward their favorite musical groups and VJs for cues on language use, as well as for fashion; if a VJ or lead singer said it, so, too, would they.

In 1998, through an agreement with BIZ Enterprises, MTV Russia began broadcasting in the larger cities in Russia. With even younger, hipper, and more widely watched VJs, such as attractive twentysomethings Anton Kamola and Olga Shelest hosting popular daily programs like «Бодрое Утро!»,, MTV Russia

soon established itself as the cultural icon and information source for a generation of Russians eager to become more global. In 2008, over 730 Russian cities and towns receive the MTV broadcasts, and although competition with other music video stations, such as «МузТВ» and programming on TNT, and the proliferation of MP3 players as a source of musical entertainment, rock music videos continue to act as a source of new and evolving language use among Russia's youth.

Between MTV Russia, and youth-oriented popular press, Russia's urban youth at the end of the 20th century is bombarded with an entirely new cultural environment in which to discover, experiment with, and use new lexicon, largely from the West. Although a modicum of Youthspeak draws directly from native Russian sources, English has recently made significant headway in the large areas of business and commerce, as well as in technology, and even in the political arena, where in many cases, English terminology has replaced extant Russian or Slavic words with the same meanings. As Maximova points out, the access to and influence of worldwide communications — press, radio, and television — makes Russian speakers aware of new English words, many of which will, sooner or later, penetrate their language. Many words relating to western contemporary technology are becoming part of the vocabulary of the world's languages, including Russian (209).

### **From the Internet to iPods**

Following closely after the primarily youth-oriented spaces of nightclubs, rock concerts, and the university, no other field of language use has become more youth-dominated in the post-Soviet era than that of computers and technology. The rise of the technological base and use of personal computers in Russia since 1991 with the fall of the Soviet Union — like so many of the post-Soviet changes — was unprecedented. This is not to say, however, that the Soviets were not computer or technologically literate before that time. On the contrary, cybernetics was a highly developed field in the country, with the Soviet Union actually leading the way in many areas of technological development, such as machine translation and artificial intelligence. Thus, Russia already had terms such as «ЭВМ» or «электронно-вычислительная машина» (computer), «магнитная лента» (magnetic tape), and «вычислительная техника» (computer science). Since 1991, however, the language has become filled with all too familiar English-based terms to accommodate a new accessibility of computer technology: «компьютер» «персональный компьютер», «диск» «дискета», «принтер» «лазерный принтер», «файл», «монитор», «фонт»

«фонты», «Макинтош», «ПиСи<sup>7</sup>», «флэш драйв», «чат» «чат рум», «блог» «блоггинг» «блоггер», «Гугль» «гуглить», etc.

And, as in the rest of the West, this terminology is no longer relegated only to specialists in the computation or data processing fields. As more consumers attain the financial means to obtain the technology, young Russians across the country are increasingly computer literate and dependent on daily online communication. The spread of computer literacy in Russia is aided, especially in the major cities, by the proliferation of Internet cafés and wireless Internet access in many public facilities, such as restaurants, cafés, bookstores, and coffee houses. Publications, such as Levin's «Интернет для чайников» (*Internet for Dummies*) and Lojanich's «Жизнь online: Просто как 2Х2», are sold widely to a young market eager to master the technologies as quickly as they appear on the market.

Further, in the current mood of economic boom, spurred by rising oil prices and increasing energy demand, Russian marketing has certainly taken note of the growing youth population with increasing amounts of disposable income. In late 2005, a new twenty-four hour cable television channel, O2 TV, was launched, with programming catering exclusively to young Russians. Available in over 160 Russian cities and with fourteen million subscribers, the channel advertises to its viewers that it presents «телевидение для адекватных людей» Touted as the "first youth television channel," the channel operates in tandem with a sophisticated interactive website [<http://www.o2tv.ru>], which features live chatrooms, blogs, and streaming videos, all aimed at an increasingly tech-savvy younger generation of Russians.

Technospeak is not relegated exclusively to the world of computers. Young Russians are also the dominant users of cell phone and digital technology in the urban centers, and the use of related language has developed alongside. Thus, the appearance of the Slavic-rooted «сотовый телефон» (cellular telephone) was quickly supplanted with the more international «мобильный телефон» or «мобильник». Youth-oriented dating services now offer both meeting online via Internet, as well as «под кастинг» individual presentations. As young Russians learn to use the new tools of technology toward their own personal advancement, many of them are finding themselves using the technology and relevant language in the world of business and commerce.

---

<sup>7</sup> More recently, the term «ПиСи» has been replaced by the Latinate form "PC" in Russian use. This follows other common assimilations of acronyms, such as CD, DVD, SMS, etc.

### **Impact of Business and Commerce**

Another influential factor in the development of Russian youthspeak since the 1990s has been the explosion of financial and business enterprises in the country. As degrees in business administration and finance have only been granted since the mid-1990s, it is once again Russia's youth who are quickly assuming the leading roles in the emerging Russian business market. Promoted largely through business weeklies, like «Коммерсант», «Деловые люди», and others, the language of business and commerce now permeates the Russian news and, after the crash of the ruble in August 1998, the lines in most supermarkets and shops. As the Russian stock market — populated primarily by young men — continues to play a role in the country's economic future, new meanings to old Russian words take hold: the bull market «бык» of the past several years has given way to the bear market «медведь» of today.

In this arena, though, the majority of terms are distinctly English based. For most Russians, the terms sounded as foreign as “Sputnik” did to most Americans in 1957. These words are now evident in a variety of environments and their use is no longer marked as “foreign” in contemporary Russian. English cognate terms such as «аудитор», «бартер», «брокер», «ваучер», «инфляция», «гиперинфляция», «дилер», «дистрибьютер», «инвестор», «консалтинг», «маркетинг», «менеджер», «риэлтер», «траст», «фьючерс», «холдинг» can now be encountered outside the realm of the business world in newspapers, advertisements, and the evening news. And, of course, new Russian yuppies in business now park their «иномарка» (foreign-made car), usually a «Бумер» (BMW) or «Мерс» (Mercedes-Benz), not in a «стоянка для машин», but in «паркинг» (parking lot), and then make deals not over «комплексный одед», but rather at «бизнес ланч». Most linguistically symbolic, perhaps, is the penchant among Russian youth surveyed, instead of «зарабатывать деньги» in the New Russia, they prefer «делать деньги».

### **Politics and Putin**

The 2000 election of Vladimir Putin used the media in unprecedented ways in terms of reaching various constituencies, especially young voters. Harking back to the 1996 election campaign of Yel'tsyn, the Putin campaign once again initiated a program to attract the youth vote very reminiscent of the Clinton era “Rock the Vote” campaign in the U.S. Indeed, both the Yel'tsyn and Putin camps used youth-oriented television to promote their «Голосуй, или проиграешь» and «Выбирай, или проиграй» slogans, featuring rock musicians imploring youth to go to the polls.

The last decade in Russia has seen an unprecedented rise in the active participation of youth groups in the political arena. Groups such as the pro-Putin/Medvedev “Nashi,” and the much more liberal “Yabloko Molodëzh” have transformed the Russian political spectacle and, in the process, have changed the way in which young Russians talk politics (Blum; Dulman). Linguistically, the 2000 presidential campaign marked significant shifts in the Russian language, many of them originating in the youth activities. Again, some terms entered the language as non-Russian neologisms, such as «пиар» (PR), «рэйтинг» (rating), and «поллинг» (polling), while others appeared as English calques, replacing existing Russian terms: «праймериз» replaced the earlier terminology «предварительные выборы» before the election, while later in his first term, «саммит» appeared in lieu of the phrase «встреча на высшем уровне» from the Gorbachev era.

### **Yel'tsyn and “Russian Only”**

It seems only fitting that a contemporary Westernizer-Slavophile struggle in post-Soviet Russia should be met with a strong response from the Russian head of State. Thus, just at the time in which young Russians were filling their speech with non-Russian neologisms, Russian President Boris Yel'tsyn in June 1997 called for “declaring war for the Russian language.” The Russian head of state was addressing a meeting of the Council for Culture and Art in St. Petersburg, and called for the establishment of a special commission to help bring “the present-day Russian language close to that of Pushkin, at least purify it.” Yel'tsyn declared that he felt indignant at seeing “all of Moscow flooded with advertisements in foreign languages,” and added that a ban would probably be imposed on the use of any other language but Russian in advertisements. “It is our holy duty to preserve the purity of the Russian language,” the President said (Trost, 18-19). By 1998, all store fronts, advertisements, and billboards in Moscow and St. Petersburg were required to have Russian appear prominently, even if alongside the original non-Russian language.

### **Rock Music Responds**

In 1997, at the height of Yel'tsyn's pro-Russian-only stance, one of Russia's premiere rock bands, Spleen, released a tongue-in-cheek song called «Англо-русский словарь», which demonstrated the English code switching in conversational youthspeak, reminiscent of the brief influx of English in the late 1950s. In the 1990s, however, as the Spleen song illustrates, the use of English in Russian youthspeak is more than just a linguistic fashion statement:

Мой поезд едет в Стамбул – это «кул».  
Но денег нет на обед – это «бэд».  
Кто мне покажет стриптиз – тому «кисс».  
А кто покажет кулак – тому «фак».

Давай, лама, давай,  
Давай открывай свой англо-русский словарь.  
Давай, лама, давай,  
Давай открывай свой англо-русский словарь.

The success of Spleen's anglophile anthem seemed to validate the undercurrent of many other musical acts wanting to use English or anglicized Russian in their lyrics. Since then, dozens of performers have freely peppered their hits with English usages, or even added English-only songs to their repertoires. *Popsa*, or "lite rock" bands such as Smash perform entirely in English; others, such as the ubiquitous Dima Bilan pepper their concerts with English-language songs, some as popular as the Russian<sup>8</sup>. Adding fuel to the question "in which language should Russian rock music be performed?", boy-band impresario Igor' Matvienko suggested that while *popsa* music may be performable in English, Russian is not a suitable language for rock:

Русский язык, безусловно, не предназначен для таких стилей, как рок или рок-энд-блюз. Это направление на русском даже хуже, чем рок на русском. Это вообще завал. Этого категорически нельзя делать. У нас совершенно другая мелодическая культура(10).

In spite of Matvienko's protestations, non-Russian words continue to permeate the lyrics of popular rock songs in Russia. Indeed, most of the genre terms for Russian music are calques: «хип-хоп» (hip-hop), «рэп» (rap), «фанк» (funk), «хаус» (house), «транс» (trance), «джангл» (jungle), «электроника» (electronica), etc. In addition, many of the cultural terms associated with music culture are similarly cognate: «рейв» (rave), «чил-аут» (chill out), «хеппи энд»

---

<sup>8</sup> In the case of Dima Bilan, his biggest-selling hit song to date is the English-language "Never Gonna Let You Go," which was the runner-up in the 2006 Eurovision Song Contest, and prompted other acts to add English songs to their repertoires.

(happy end, as in a relationship), «файс контроль» (face control to get into a club), «пирсинг» (piercing), etc.

### Conclusions

One of the more disturbing effects of the development of a discernable youthspeak as part of a larger shift in the lexical and semantic scope of modern Russian was revealed in the data of the University of Texas study. As part of the questionnaire data gathered since 2000, when asked to mark words that were “Russian” in origin or “foreign” in origin, respondents — Russian students in the tenth and eleventh grades in various Moscow and St. Petersburg high schools — could not readily distinguish among the words, identifying neologisms of foreign origin as Russian. These included «паркинг», «компьютер» (computer), «супермаркет» (supermarket), «шоппинг» (shopping), and «саундтрек» (soundtrack). These student-respondents, would have been born during the *glasnost* period of Russia between 1985-1990, were never part of any official government-sanctioned youth organization such as the Young Pioneers or the Komsomol. To them, the vocabulary associated with computers is just as Russian as the propaganda slogans from the Soviet period.

This phenomenon of lexical assimilation of non-Russian neologisms into the linguistics consciousness of native speakers of Russian as “indigenous” lexicon will only continue to increase. The last decade in Russia has seen an unusual production and publication of specialized dictionaries addressing the constantly changing scope and content of Russian in general and youthspeak in particular (See, for example Elistratov 1994, 1995, 2005, Grachev, Il’iasova, Miroshnichenko, Nikitina, Novikov, Skachinskij). And ongoing research in the field, such as that by Ju. N. Nikitina, continues to underscore the interest in Russian youthspeak — even within Russia:

Русский молодёжный жаргон – как подсистема языка – представляет собой интереснейший лингвистический феномен, бытование которого ограничено не только определёнными возрастными рамками, как это ясно из самой его номинации, но и социальными, временными, пространственными рамками. Он бытует в среде городской рабочей молодёжи и отдельных более или менее замкнутых группах (12).

A 2003 propaganda poster by popular Russian graphic artist Bukheevy depicts the words *Не трожь молодЁЖь!* With the letters «ЁЖ» distorted to

depict a hedgehog, suggesting both the prickly nature of Russia's youth as well as its somewhat protected status in a developing New Russia. From the vantage point of linguistic development, Russia's youth embodies the increasingly global qualities of Russian as a world language. While some might see the recent development of Russian youthspeak as a movement in the direction of a loss of linguistic autonomy and authenticity vis-à-vis the importation of foreign loan words, others certainly view the changes in the language as symptomatic of the emergence of Russia and especially Russian youth as players in the world economies, politics, technology, and culture. With such potential in mind, perhaps a more appropriate modification of the poster slogan for the 21st century might read: «Не трожь молодёжь...она просыпается!»

### References

- Adamy, Janet. As burgers boom in Russia, McDonald's touts discipline, *The Wall Street Journal OnLine*. October 16, 2007.  
[http://online.wsj.com/article/SB119248482397359814.html?mod=todays\\_us\\_page\\_one](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB119248482397359814.html?mod=todays_us_page_one).
- Baudrillard, Jean. 1983. *Simulations*. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman, trans. New York: Semiotext(e), Inc. and Columbia University.
- Blum, Douglas. Current trends in Russian youth policy, *PONARS Policy Memo*, No. 384. December 2005. pp. 107-111.
- Bushnell, John. 1990. *Moscow Graffiti: Language and Subculture*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.
- Dulman, Pavel. Moldězhnye dvizhenii i rossijskaja politika, *Rossijskaja gazeta*, August 11, 2005. pp. 1 and 3.
- Elistratov, V.S. 1994. *Slovar' moskovskogo argo* (material 1980-1994 gg.). Moskva: Russkie slovari.
- . 1995. *Argo i kultura*. Moskva: MGU.
- . 2005. *Tolkovyj slovar' russkogo slenga : svyshe 12000 slov I vyrazhenij, argo, kinemalogos, zhargony*. Moskva: AST-Press kniga.
- Garza, Thomas J. 2000. "Getting from Gorbachev to grunge: Constructing ethnographic portraits to introduce contemporary Russian culture," *The Learning and Teaching of Slavic Languages and Cultures*, O. Kagan and B. Rifkin, eds. Slavica Publishers: Bloomington, IN. pp. 61-80.
- Grachev, M.A. 2003. *Slovar' tysjacheletnego russkogo argo*. Moskva: Ripol Klassik.
- Khristjuk, Anton Nikolaevich. 2001. *Sovremennaja molodězhnaja rech'*: Norma



- ili antinorma*. Dissertacija. Moskva: Moskovskij Pedagogičeskij Universitet.
- Klejn, M. i T. McKlovski. 1997. *Argo-éntsiklopedija moskovskoj tusovki*. Moskva: Izdatel'skij tsentr.
- Kopylenko, M.M. 1976. O semantičeskoj prirode moloděžnogo zhargona, *Sotsial'no-lingvističeskie issledovanija*. Moskva: nauka. 79-86.
- Lepkova, Ja. 1998. Kruto govori! *Cosmopolitan* (Russian edition). February, 105-108.
- Levin, John, et al. *Internet dlja chajnikov*. Moskva: Vil'jams. 2006.
- Lojanich, A. A. *Zhizn' online: Prosto kak 2X2*. Moskva: Eskmo. 2008.
- Maximova, Tamara. Russian. In *English in Europe*. Manfred Görlach, ed. Oxford: Oxford Univeristy Press. 2002. pp. 195-212.
- Miroshnichenko, L.D. 2002. *Argo narkomanov*. Moskva: Anakharsis.
- Mokinenko, V.M. i Nikitina T.G. 2001. *Bol'shoj slovar' ruskogo zhargona*. Sankt-Peterburg: Norint.
- Nikitina, Julija N. Sotsial'nye i lingvističeskie svojstva sovremennogo ruskogo moloděžnogo zhargona. Dissertatsija. Moskva: Moskovskij Lingvističeskij Universitet. 2005.
- Nikitina, T.G. 2002. *Tolkovyj slovar' moloděžnogo slenga: slova, neponjatnye vzroslym*. Moskva: Astrel'.
- Novikov, V. 2005. *Slovar' modnykh slov*. Moskva: Zebra E.
- Patton, Frederick R. 1980. Expressive means in Russian youth slang," *Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 270-282.
- Pilkington, Hilary. 1994a. *Russia's Youth and its Culture: A Nation's Constructors and Constructed*. New York: Routledge.
- . 1994b, Tusóvka or tu-sovká? What does youth slang tell us about contemporary Russian youth culture? *Rusistika*, (9), 10 – 21.
- Pilkington, Hilary, et al. 2002. *Looking West? Cultural Globalization and Russian Youth Cultures*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Rayport, Jennifer S. Negotiating identity in a world turned upside down: Russian youth cultural practice in Leningrad, 1990-1991," *The Political and Legal Anthropology Review*: Vol. 18, No. 1, May 1995. pp. 57-62.
- Russkij jazyk ne prednachen dlja roka: Interv'ju s Igorem Matvienko, *Vechernaja Moskva*. 13 oktjabrja 2006. str. 10.
- Russkij mat: Antologija dlja spetsialistov i filologov*. 1994. Pod red. F.N. Il'iasova. Moskva: Izdatel'skij dom Lada M.
- Shaposhnikov, V. 1998. *Russkaia rech' 1990-kh: Sovremennaja Rossiia v iazykovom otobrazhenii*. Moskva: MALP.

Skachinskij, A. 1982. *Slovar' blatnogo zhargona v SSSR*. New York: YMCA Press.

Skvortsov, L.I. 1964. Ob otsenkakh jazyka molodëzhi, *Voprosy kul'tury rechi*. Moskva: AN SSSR. 45-70.

Trost, Kevin. (1998). "Russia's Federal Law on Advertising: Permanent Solution or Provisional stopgap?", *Wisconsin International Law Journal*. Vol. 16, No. 2. 529-550.