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Freedom and *Svoboda*: What Does Freedom Mean

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I was in a café called “The Tea Hut,” one of a million hole-in-the-wall tea shops tucked in amongst canals in downtown St. Petersburg. “Tea shop?” you may ask. Here’s the thing – any American can tell you that Russia is different than the United States, but might support this statement with a skewed set of data; this American would sooner equate Communism, winter’s chill, chess, oligarchs, Putin, or vodka with the Russian Federation before they would tea. But even the most miscreant business oligarch will sit down to tea before making a deal on the black market. Although other cultures may not know it, tea plays a huge role in the daily and social lives of Russians. When we can overlook such an intrinsic part of Russian culture, who, then, can we expect to know about the basic differences between the American and Russian understandings of “freedom”?

It was in this seedy café that I first understood the difference. I sat in a wicker chair, sipping tea and playing checkers with my tutor. In a darker corner of the room some teenagers were taking hits off a hookah, a communal tobacco pipe, and a young couple at the table next to us unabashedly made out. “PDA,” I muttered to Sergei.

“What was that?” he said. I explained the taboo that surrounded public displays of affection in the United States. “Oh...” – I could hear the ellipsis in his voice – “Many things are different in America.” I made a move on the checkers board and asked him to elaborate. “You have so many restrictions about how to behave, but still say that it is ‘freedom,’” he responded. (S.N. Mikhailov, personal conversation, Dec 3, 2007)

But wait; is it possible that the same word in two languages actually has two different meanings? O’Grady et al. believe so: “There is no reason to believe that human beings in different linguistic communities have different conceptual systems. But there is ample evidence that languages can differ from each other in terms of how they express particular concepts” (2005, p. 212). He compares English and Inuktitut as an example; while English has words like “snow,” “slush,” and “sleet,” Inuktitut contains words such as “falling snow” and “drifting snow” (213). This process of individual languages expressing the same concept in different manners, lexicalization, is a fundamental part of linguistics and semantic theory.

Even speakers of the same language can disagree about word meanings. In contrast to Gertrude Stein’s famous words that a rose is a rose, there are many cases when words can relate to “fuzzy concepts” (O’Grady et al., 2005, p. 210). Let’s continue to think about Stein’s quote. If native English speakers hear the word “flower,” do they automatically picture a rose, or a daisy, or a tulip? If one of those types of flowers is a quintessential example of the general word “flower,” where does that leave the others? A way to think about fuzzy concepts is to picture electron orbitals around a nucleus. Let’s say a rose is a speaker’s version of the archetypal flower. A daisy or tulip resembles a rose more closely than does a bird of paradise, so it will be in a much closer orbital than the bird of paradise, but that does not preclude the latter from being a flower. As Fromkin et al. relate, “Speakers of a language implicitly agree on meaning, and children acquiring the language must simply

learn those meanings outright” (2007, p. 186). Individuals can not even depend on deriving objective meanings from dictionaries, because the latter utilize paraphrases and restatements, rearrangements of words to explain concepts, assuming the user already has some control of the language (187). Words change meaning over space and time, and language speakers of a community acclimate to the way in which words are used in that society.

The average American individual intrinsically understands “freedom” as a collection of limited personal liberties. The cultural standpoint is that people are free to do what they will and to exercise self-determination, but not to the extent where their actions would impinge upon the rights of others; Americans do not, for example, consider themselves free to murder any one whom they could overpower. I said as much to Sergei and, if only I had previously memorized passages from On Liberty, would likely have quoted the philosopher John Stuart Mill at him: “The sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection” (Mill, 2005). Mill further expounds this theory, which he calls the harm principle, by qualifying that “the only part of the conduct of any one, for which he is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute” (Mill, 2005). In the eyes of that one individual, what is democracy without its underpinnings of “freedom”? The phrase “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” is not located in any legal documents that summate American government, but Americans have tied the concept of democracy to the belief of limited freedom in their mental lexicons.

Sergei listened to my less-eloquent explanation of Mill’s harm principle before leaning onto the table (and crowning himself in the checkers game). “That is different than *svoboda*.” We typically translate *svoboda* into English as

“freedom [independence]” from something (Apresjan 1992, p. 136). One way in which it is defined is as “the opportunity to act in any field without restrictions, prohibitions, without hindrance” (Evgenieva, 1999, p. 52). The Russian cultural connotations of *svoboda* contradict Mill’s harm principle because of this definition. If Russians have the capability to overpower and kill another, they have the right to do it; the victim’s freedom to live does not supersede the freedom to kill. “This should not be confused with legal or moral indictments against murder,” Sergei hastened to add, “It only means that *svoboda* contains no semantic connotations of limit.”

This understanding of *svoboda* plays a large role in the political arena. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, most of Russia’s major industries fell into the hands of oligarchs, businessmen “who control sufficient resources to influence national politics” (Gurieva & Rachinsky, 2005, pp. 131-132). An economy primarily controlled by oligarchs radically differs from Communism, where nominally all citizens held an equal portion of goods. The Russian populace generally tolerated the shift because of *svoboda*; those who had the capability to gain power did, acting fully within their rights. We see an example of this in Pavel Lungin’s film *Tycoon*. (This title, by the way, shows the fickleness of translation – the Russian title is *Oligarkh*, but since *Tycoon* says in one word what *Business Oligarch* says in two, it is the former in English.) During an opening scene of the movie the oligarch of the title, Platon Makovsky, states that the government seeks to put him on trial because: “Here, in Russia, I am trying to live as a free man.” Lungin and his creative team did not make up the scenario; when Vladimir Putin assumed the presidency in 2000, he only fought against those oligarchs who opposed his government (Gurieva & Rachinsky, p. 146). In this case *svoboda* in the Russian context is literally incompatible with democracy, seeing as an oligarchy, by definition, can influence politics towards the interests of that minority.

Sergei is a professor of language pedagogy and English, which is why he knows the difference in meaning between “freedom” and *svoboda*, why he can throw around terms like “semantic connotations,” and how he understood my attempts to describe lexical semantics in Russian. It may also describe how he was able to trump me so soundly at checkers. The average Russian, though, has not studied John Stuart Mill and, asked what *svoboda* means, would likely respond with a blank stare, then *byt’ svobodnym*: “to be free.” An oligarch may read translations of English treatises on freedom in his free time, but would likely be as ignorant to the harm principle as the average American is to the meaning of *svoboda*. We can certainly understand one another, given the opportunity to say our piece over a cup of tea, but coming to an understanding does not mean reaching an agreement. Can we expect the same type of democracy that we enjoy in the United States to take hold in Russia? How can it, when their culture comprehends one of the basic principles of democracy differently? Speakers of one language cannot dictate how another language’s speakers should define, lexicalize, and realize their version of

“freedom;” neither, then, can any one civilization, be it Greek or Roman, Eastern or Western, American or Russian, enforce its brand of democracy upon other peoples.

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