

## INSIGHTS INTO IDIOMS OF THE RUSSIAN LANGUAGE

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### INTRODUCTION

The knowledge of idioms in another language can greatly enhance someone's understanding of that person's culture and contribute to better intercultural communication. This has been especially true for me since I moved to Kyiv, Ukraine five years ago. I have taught over 20 college level courses at Kyiv Theological Seminary since 2003 and I have learned several idioms which my students use regularly.

Most people living in Ukraine are bi-lingual. They speak both Russian and Ukrainian languages. I learned Russian since I would have students from Russia and other former republics of the Soviet Union. Due to my experiences in Ukraine, this paper will be limited to idioms in the Russian language that are used by Ukrainian people. During my first year of teaching in Kyiv, I learned the greatest of all idioms in the Ukrainian culture. The idiom is "Моя хата с краю, Ничего не знаю [Maya hata scrayoo, neechovo nee znayoo]." This famous phrase literally says, "My hut is on the edge of the village, I know nothing." For those of us who are old enough, we probably get a picture in our head of Sergeant Schultz from the 1970s sitcom Hogan's Heroes who always said, "I know nothing...nothing... nothing." This is not far from the actual meaning intended from this idiom. Many Ukrainians over the years have shared that the true meaning is that, "We desire to be left alone. Go ahead and do what you want to do and I will pretend that I know nothing." This phrase reveals a true Ukrainian mindset.

Throughout the past 1000 years of Ukrainian history, the country had been under the control of many different governments. The country has been under its own rule for only 20 years out of 1000 years (personal communication with Natasha Bochko, November 15, 2007). But then, the culture went under a major revolution in 2004.

The Orange Revolution broke out in November of 2004 while we were living in Kyiv. The whole world watched as one million people peacefully protested the results of the presidential election. The people gathered in the center of the city for weeks. One day when we were walking through the tent city which had developed due to the crowd in the center, we saw a cardboard sign with a new variation of the same Russian idiom. This time it said something a little bit different. It read, “Моя хата **не** с краю, **моя хата на Майдане** [Maya hata **nee** scrayoo, maya hata na Maidanye].” This famous phrase had been changed to say, “My hut is **not** on the edge of the village, **my hut is on Maidan, the Center Square.**” The meaning was clear for everyone involved with the Orange Revolution that a culture change was taking place. The Ukrainian people were now saying, “We are not going to let other people control us. We will now have a voice in our government” (personal communication with Ruslan Khmyz, January 10, 2005). A Ukrainian magazine editor wrote:

It is clear that the 2004 events will be inspiring Ukrainians for decades. The Maidan spirit and values will be passed on from one generation to another. Our posterity will no longer be offspring of the exterminated, oppressed generation but of the generation of free, proud and self-respecting people. They will not berate themselves, complain and ask others for advice. (Senchcenko 2007:25)

Recently, the President of Ukraine gave an interview to a national newspaper. “Yushchenko considers the orange revolution has become one of the stages of understanding of the Ukrainian nationality” (Yushchenko 2007:par.1).

A proper understanding of a culture’s idioms will greatly enhance intercultural communication. This paper will give an introduction into the insights that can be learned by studying idioms of the Russian language.

### THE CHALLENGE OF TRANSLATING IDIOMS

A good definition says that “idioms are semantic entities whose constituent words do not, as a rule, suggest the actual meaning, or do so misleadingly and only up to a certain extent” (Arany-Makkai 1996: v). Thus, the translation of one culture’s idioms to another culture’s language can be a great challenge.

The most common form of text translation is literal translation. Translators would not consider using this form of “word-for-word” translation for idioms because of the obvious errors that would occur. Mechanical translation (MT) is also a term used in regard to computer literal translation. John Hutchkins wrote, “Scarcely a month goes by without somebody repeating the story of the MT system which translated the Biblical saying ‘The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak’ into Russian, which was then translated back as ‘The whisky is strong, but the meat is rotten.’ If this is not quite as you remember it then that is understandable. Perhaps you heard that the back translation was ‘The vodka is strong, but the steak is lousy’ ” (Hutchkins 1995:par. 1). Thus, the literal translation of idioms is not an option for good translators.

As an example, there are many idiomatic expressions in English such as “the cowboy kicked the bucket” or “the room was at sixes and sevens” that should not be translated literally.

If someone, who doesn't know that these are idioms, rushes unsuspectingly to the dictionary and looks up each word, he or she will get strange paraphrases that don't make any sense, such as ‘the cowboy's foot came into collision with a pail’; ‘the room was [probably arranged according to the numbers] six and seven.’ But these sentences do not have the meanings. As most Americans know, they mean ‘to die’ and ‘to be very messy,’ respectively. These meanings, however, are by no means obvious to a foreigner. (Arany-Makkai 1996: v)

The focus of the translator needs to be on conveying the meaning of the idiom from the original culture to the culture of the audience. This can most effectively be done by trying to find “functional equivalence” in translation. “Due to linguistic and cultural diversity, exact equivalence is very hard to achieve, especially in the translation of idioms, since they are heavily culture-laden .... If translated literally, the version will be meaningless, if translated liberally, the version will lose the original flavor” (Sharpe 1999:par. 6). Many translators try to find a cultural equal in regards to the idiom. Many cultures have idioms that are similar to each other, but the translator needs to have extensive knowledge of both cultures to find “functional equivalence.”

An example of this can be found in many languages, including English in comparison to Chinese.

...the form of an idiom also carries meaning, and lexicographers should not abandon form every time they come across an image. For example, the English idiom "kill two birds with one stone" is similar in meaning to the Chinese idiom "shoot two hawks with one arrow". They both mean "achieve two things at one stroke." The image in an idiom is also a sign, carrying informative or expressive

or aesthetic function which should not be ignored. Therefore, translating "kill two birds with one stone" as "shoot two hawks with one arrow" is desirable in that it keeps much of the original flavor without causing obscurity, or losing the vivid imagery. (Sharpe 1999:par. 7)

The student who desires to grow in intercultural communication will seek the knowledge which can be gained through finding "functional equivalence" in the idioms of a culture. I have personally discovered great benefits in discussing the meanings of idioms with my Ukrainian and Russian students in Kyiv. "Idioms can be a very rewarding aspect of language study, offering a fascinating glimpse into ways of thinking that are unique to a particular language community" (Gray and Georgeoliani 1997: ix).

#### IDIOMS FROM UKRAINE

Spending time discussing the meaning of idioms with my students at Kyiv Theological Seminary has been a joy for me. In November 2007, I asked my second year Bachelor degree students to share with me the most common idioms from the Russian language which they use. After much heated discussion, they agreed on the following list. The literal translation, the English functional equivalent and actual meaning is discussed with each idiom (personal communication with Kyiv Theological Seminary youth ministry students on November 10, 2007). Some truths are also discussed in regards to how to use this idiom in the context of Ukrainian youth ministry.

If the equivalent idiom given is correct, it gives an image which helps to cross cultural differences. The goal is correct intercultural communication so that the idea is expressed. If the idiom needs to be explained in detail, the idiom has lost the image it was

trying to create. Yet when the communicator can find an equivalent idiom, the image is retained.

С кем поведешься, от того и наберешься

The literal translation of this Russian idiom is “With whom you hang out with, from him you receive.” The English functional equivalent idiom given is “He who lies down with dogs, gets up with fleas” (Abbyy Lingvo 2007). The meaning of this idiom explained is that those whom you spend a lot of time with – they will influence you and you will become like them.

This idiom is especially helpful when discussing youth ministry cross culturally. Another interesting discussion happened when we back translated the English idiom literally concerning the dog and its fleas. In this instance, the meaning was retained and the image assisted in intercultural communication.

One of the students at Kyiv Theological Seminary, Anatoly Voloshin, did a study on the rollerblader sub-culture in Kyiv. He found that there were a lot of similarities between each of the young men simply because they spent a great deal of time together. The sport of rollerblading brought this group together, yet their other interests also were similar. For example, many of the young men also enjoyed graffiti as an art form. He concluded that they were a perfect example of this idiom, “With whom you hang out with, from him you receive” (personal communication with Anatoly Voloshin on March 15, 2005),

Как аукнется, так и откликнется

The literal translation of this Russian idiom is “How the echo is done, so is the response.” The English functional equivalent idiom given is “As the call, so the echo” or “Do as you would be done by” (Abby Lingvo 2007). Ultimately, this idiom is identical to the Golden Rule of scripture, in which Jesus said, “In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (KJV Matthew 7:12). It is interesting that this principle and idiom is found in many of the world’s false religions as well:

Baha’i Faith - Lay not on any soul a load that you would not wish to be laid upon you, and desire not for anyone the things you would not desire for yourself. (Baha'u'llah, Gleanings)

Buddhism - Treat not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful. (The Buddha, Udana-Varga 5.18)

Confucianism - One word which sums up the basis of all good conduct....loving-kindness. Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself. (Confucius, Analects 15.23)

Hinduism - This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you. (Mahabharata 5:1517)

Islam - Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself. (Muhammad, Hadith)

Judaism - What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. This is the whole Torah; all the rest is commentary. Go and learn it. (Hillel, Talmud, Shabbath 31a) (McKenna 2007:par. 1)

A cross cultural communicator who uses this Russian idiom will warm the hearts of those he is communicating with. When I say, Как аукнется, так и откликнется [Как

ayooknetcyā, tak ee otkleeknetcyā], my students smile because I have shown them love in learning their cultural idioms. Further discussion can be held on how this idiom relates to scripture and to other religions. The questions should be asked: Why is this idiom used in other religions? Does this idiom have validity in other religions as it does in scripture? How is God's word greater than all the other idioms and proverbs?

Яблоко от яблоньки не далеко падает

The literal translation of this Russian idiom is “The apple from the apple tree does not fall far away.” The English functional equivalent idiom given is identical; “The apple does not fall far from the tree” (Abby Lingvo 2007). The English idiom or proverb probably comes from Russian origins according to several internet sites. This idiom has a double meaning in that it says that a child will be like its parent or that a child will someday return to his childhood home.

Probably applied most often now to someone with obvious failings, the saying asserts the problem was simply passed along from parent to child. The notion is similar to the older 'Like father, like son,' and 'Like mother, like daughter,' and seems to have appeared first in German. The American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson apparently was the first to use it in English when in an 1839 letter, he wrote that 'the apple never falls far from the stem.' But here Emerson used it in another sense, to describe that tug that often brings us back to our childhood home. (Flexner 1993:par. 2)

The previous idiom has its roots in scripture, but this idiom does not. To the Russian speaker, another negative image is often created with this idiom of a drunken father teaching his son how to drink vodka. In the Russian culture, there has been a fatalist atmosphere that says that a person cannot change.

As I teach youth ministry in Kyiv, these ideas go against the scriptural principle that Jesus can change people's lives completely. Human idioms are not inspired, yet God's word is inspired. The communicator can use the opportunity to use the idiom to discuss its validity according to scripture. According to the apostle Paul, Christ makes a person brand new when he is in Christ. Paul also says that this person's sins are no longer counted against him since he has been reconciled to God.

Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer. Therefore if anyone is in Christ, *he is a new creature*; the old things passed away; behold, *new things have come*. Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. (NASB 2 Corinthians 5:16-19)

#### Под лежащий камень вода не течет

The literal translation of this Russian idiom is "Under the lying stone, the water does not run." This particular idiom does not have an English functional equivalent (Abbyy Lingvo 2007). The meaning as it was explained to me by my Ukrainian students is that there are obstacles in life (the stone lying in the river) that must be moved in order for the proper events to happen.

One of my students gave me the example that the traditional church in Ukraine needed to change (remove the stone of tradition) in order to reach the young people of the country with the gospel of Christ (personal communication with Anatoly Yakobchik, November 10, 2007).

Another example of this idioms use can be found in the youth ministry of a Baptist church in the small town of Richitzya near the Polish border in Western Ukraine. Tanya Gordyoon is a third year student at Kyiv Theological Seminary and the leader of the church's youth ministry. The church is very traditional; for example, all girls (including single women) must wear scarves on their heads at any church function. Tanya had a few Christian youth in the church, but desired to reach their community for Christ. Two years ago, she decided to start a youth club by renting a hall in the town and send out invitations for this event. She was shocked that 80 non-Christian young people came the first time. It was a wonderful success, and they made plans to continue this new ministry. But then, this Russian idiom showed itself to be true. "Under the lying stone, the water does not run." The pastor of the church asked Tanya, "Why were there girls at your youth club not wearing scarves? Who gave permission for our Christian youth to be with these non-Christians?" Tanya cried when she shared this story with me.

Since that time, "the lying stone" has begun to move. Tanya was able to continue the youth club without the direct support of the church, but without opposition as well. A few young people from the club started coming to church and gave their lives to Christ. The pastor is still not supportive, but it appears that the stone in the river is beginning to crack (personal communication with Tanya Gordyoon, November 21, 2007).

#### Дважды в одну реку не войдешь

The literal translation of this Russian idiom is "You cannot go to the same river twice." The Russian - English dictionary did not have a functional equivalent idiom for

this idiom. Yet a similar idiom is said sometimes in religious circles; “You cannot have the same mountain top experience twice” (Abbyy Lingvo 2007). The Ukrainian students explained that the meaning of this idiom infers that life goes on, and it is not possible to relive the same special experience twice.

In ministry, the pastor encourages special spiritual encounters with a living God, but also reminds his people that they must transfer this to real life (personal communication with Kyiv Theological Seminary youth ministry students on November 10, 2007). Another way to say this is that we cannot live in the past.

Не плюй в колодец, из которого пить придется

The literal translation of this Russian idiom is “Don’t spit in the well from which you will drink out of someday.” The English functional equivalent idiom given is “Cast no dirt in the well that gives you water” (Abbyy Lingvo 2007). The meaning of this idiom is that a person should be careful about criticizing or doing wrong against someone or another group because he will need something from that person or group someday.

The Ukrainian students at KTS gave the example of young people in the church need to be careful of criticizing the church leadership because they will be a greater part of that same church someday. Another example given was that youth should be obedient to their parents because they may need their parents support again (personal communication with Kyiv Theological Seminary youth ministry students on November 10, 2007).

Расскажи кто твои друзья, и скажу, кто ты

The literal translation of this Russian idiom is “Tell me who your friends are, and I will show you who you are.” The English functional equivalent idiom given is identical; “Tell me who your friends are, and I will show you who you are” (Abby Lingvo 2007). Since the English equivalent of this idiom is identical, the meaning is easy to understand. We can often determine someone’s character by simply knowing who their close friends are. This is an important topic which should be discussed regularly in youth ministry.

#### Есть с одной тарелки

The literal translation of this Russian idiom is “Eating from one plate.” The English functional equivalent idiom given is “We are on the same page” (Abby Lingvo 2007).

When I first moved to Kyiv and began working with a translator I often used the English idiom, “we are on the same page.” This confused my translator because she did not understand my meaning. A good translator stops at this point and tries to clarify the meaning with the communicator. If the translator translates the English phrase literally into the Russian language, the meaning will not be conveyed. Yet if the translator translates the idiom with its Russian equivalent “eating from one plate” or “eating from the same plate,” the image is retained.

The matching English idiom has interesting origins related to the business culture of America.

In business meetings and college classes people often make copies of a single report and hand a copy to each person at the meeting. While they discuss the different points in the report, each person needs to be reading from the same page ("**on the same page**"). Everyone is "**on the same page**" when they are all following along and understanding the

basic idea that the group is sharing. "**On the same page**" has a further meaning of people being in basic understanding and agreement on something. Example: "Before we make any decisions today, I'd like to make sure that everyone is **on the same page**." People are "**on the same page**" when they look at a problem or a situation in the same way and agree on a course of action. Example: "Each of us has been busy with his own projects lately, so I called this meeting today to bring us all together **on the same page**." (GoEnglish.com 2007:par. 1)

When teaching youth ministry students at the seminary in Kyiv, it is vital for me as professor to make sure that my students and I are together. I cannot think of a better idiom to use when desiring proper intercultural communication than this idiom. It is a priority that "we are eating from one plate."

## CONCLUSION

Great practical insights can be gained by studying another culture's idioms. Not only will the study lead to better communication between cultures and languages, but it will also help the communicator understand the culture he is engaged with. It is the responsibility of the communicator to bridge the cultural gap. "Bridging different sociolinguistic contexts requires considerable research pertaining to the original communicational context. The new context spans considerable time and space and involves providing the missing pieces in order to allow that audience to make a proper inferences upon which they can act in response to the message" (Shaw and Engen 2003:118). Part of that research must be an understanding of a culture's idioms.

A guest lecturer from the United States came to Kyiv to teach a course at the seminary. He casually used the idiom "hole-in-one" referring to the success one would

have if he followed the principles which were just discussed. The Ukrainian translator looked confused at the statement, and was wondering whether she should translate the phrase literally or not. She decided to pause the lesson, and ask the lecturer to explain what he meant by “hole-in-one.”

“You know,” the lecturer commented, “what Tiger Woods does on a good day.”

“Who is Tiger Woods?” the translator asked.

“You don’t know who Tiger Woods is? Oh, that’s right, you’re probably not a sports fan. Ask the students to explain to you.”

The translator asked the students, and then responded. “None of us know who Tiger Woods is.”

“That’s all right. Just explain to them that Tiger Woods is the greatest golfer of all time!”

The translator paused again. “Sir, what is a golfer?”

“A person who plays golf.”

“And what is golf?”

The lecturer finally understood that he had used an idiom in a country where there was not even one golf course.

The knowledge of idioms in another language will greatly enhance understanding of that person’s culture and contribute to better intercultural communication.



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