

Heritage Voices: Language – Russian

About the Author: Anissa Sorokin



My name is Anissa Sorokin, and I am a graduate student at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. I was born and raised in the Washington D.C. suburbs, the only child of a Russian father and an American mother. My paternal grandfather's family is originally from St. Petersburg, but in the 1920s when my grandfather was small, they moved to Istanbul to escape growing Communist influence in Russia. There was a fairly large Russian community in Istanbul during the 1930s and 1940s, where my grandfather met my grandmother, who is of Latvian and Russian descent. They were married and lived in Istanbul for a while, but came to America with their two sons—my father and my uncle—in 1957. Although he was born in Istanbul, my father's first language was Russian, since that was what my grandparents spoke at home in Turkey. They always encouraged him to remember his Russian heritage. Perhaps that was part of the reason why my parents also agreed that it was important for me to learn Russian.

While my mother spoke to me in English, my father spoke Russian. I was fairly comfortable with both languages when I was little, but when I began to go to school, English quickly became the language of choice for me. I did attend a special Russian school on Saturdays at our Russian Orthodox Church, but I hated the oniony smell of the church hall and was scared of the harsh teacher. So, my father decided to take on my Russian education himself, and in the evenings we would work on everything from vocabulary, to cursive, to grammar. It was a mixed blessing—some days were triumphs, like the day I finally could sing the Orthodox creed (“*Veruyu*”) in Slavonic (the language used in Russian Orthodox church services). Other days were disasters, like the time my father, exasperated by my inability to navigate Russian's complex conjugation system correctly, demanded, “Doesn't it just sound wrong to you?” Unfortunately, it did not. Maybe that is what separates heritage speakers from native speakers—things that native speakers can take for granted will not always be clear to us.

Though I was frustrated with Russian, I chose to take it in high school because I thought it would be easy. Unfortunately, I only become more aggravated with learning the language, because I knew so much about some things, like vocabulary and pronunciation, but so little about others, like the case system. The book we used was not meant for heritage speakers, so I usually found myself either extremely bored or hopelessly lost. In college, I had planned to test out of one semester of Russian, but as soon as I finished the placement test I knew I had

done poorly on the grammatical elements and would find myself in the same situation I had been in during high school. So, I decided to take Italian instead.

Sometimes I think about taking a Russian class and trying to learn it formally again, but it seems like such a painful process. These days, I generally only use Russian with my father and grandmother, or sometimes I pick up a magazine in Russian and try to practice reading. As strange as this may be, I often feel like my relationship with Russian is like a relationship with an ex-boyfriend: Sometimes I want to go back and make things work out between us, but another part of me thinks that perhaps we just were not meant to be together and reminds me of why we broke up in the first place. Still, who knows what the future holds? There is always the likely chance for reconciliation.

Lost (and Found) in Translation: Language and Culture

The story is told to me this way, since I was too young when it happened to remember it: When I was very small, my mother, father, and I were in a Hallmark store around Christmas. Apparently, I wandered out of the store, got lost, and was found by two nice ladies who helped reunite me with my frantic parents. When my parents asked me where I had gone, I told them I had just been looking for my father. He had left me at my mother's side, saying he was going to look at the *igrushki*. Interestingly, in Russian, *igrushki* can mean two things—toys, or Christmas ornaments. As a child, I was only aware of the "toy" meaning, and realizing that there were no toys in the Hallmark store, I set out for the toy store to find my father. In doing so, I became lost. I cannot help thinking that if I had been a native Russian speaker instead of a heritage speaker, that incident might never have happened. But that is the funny thing about Russian—very often it makes me feel lost, but somehow I find myself again.

Still, as I got older, some things did become clearer to me, especially the fact that being half Russian can mean more than just speaking another language. Sometimes, important cultural events make me feel connected to my heritage. For instance, the Russian Orthodox religion is important to me, and I recently had a wonderful Russian wedding in the church where I was baptized.

My wedding was so different from the traditional kind of weddings seen on T.V. or in the movies, with guests in pews as the bride walks down the aisle often to Mendelssohn's Wedding March or Pachelbel's Canon in D. My husband and I were married in an ornate church with gilded onion-shaped domes, surrounded by icons, incense, and hymns sung (both in English and in Russian, at our request) by an acapella choir. Our groomsmen held heavy crowns above our heads during the ceremony to symbolize that when a couple is married, they become the king and queen of their own little kingdom of home, which they rule with the help of God. Later, our hands were bound together with an embroidered cloth, and we took our first steps as husband and wife around a table that held a cross and the Gospel (the first four books of the Bible's New Testament) to symbolize that faith would be at the center of our marriage. Russian traditions had a place at the reception, too, as guests frequently clinked their silverware against their glasses and shouted,

"Gor'ka," which means "bitter," as a call for the bride and groom to kiss and make things "sweet." The wedding was beautiful and certainly an important cultural event for me, but other times, it is everyday things (like sitting down to watch the Russian news or soap operas with my grandmother, finding pickled mushrooms and smoked fish in the pantry instead of Wonder Bread and Doritos, or being reminded not to whistle if there is an icon hanging nearby) that make me remember I have Russian heritage every day, not just on special occasions. Sometimes it can be fun to feel a bit different.

On the other hand, there is also a feeling of responsibility that follows with my being half Russian. I feel compelled to keep the language and culture alive in my family in some small way, but I do not always feel well-equipped to do so. While most people probably face difficult choices about how much of their family's past to weave into the present and propel into the future, heritage speakers occupy a particularly complicated space in their families' histories, serving as both a link to the old and a bridge to the new. I do not know if my children will care about things like my grandfather's old home in St. Petersburg or the ability to recite the Russian alphabet, but I want to at least give them the opportunity. Perhaps if they ever find themselves feeling lost, small fragments of a past they have never known will help them find their way home again.

[View family photos.](#)

About the Russian Language

Status and Speakers

Russian is the most widely spoken member of the Slavic branch of the Indo-European language family (National Virtual Translation Center [NVTC], 2007). This family also includes close Eastern Slavic cousins Belarusian and Ukrainian, as well as Bulgarian, Croatian, Czech, Polish, Serbian, and others. Russian is thought to be the most geographically widespread language of Eurasia (*Slavic Languages*, 2007). Once the official language of the Russian Empire and subsequently an official language throughout the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), it continues to be a *lingua franca* for the region, used routinely in matters of commerce and diplomacy (LanguageHelpers.com, 2007; NVTC, 2007). It is also one of the six official languages of the United Nations (United Nations, 2007), indicating and cementing its status as an international language of political and economic importance. The United States has recently restated its belief in the importance of Russian language competency to international matters of commerce, diplomacy, and understanding by naming Russian a “critical need foreign language” in the National Security Language Initiative (U.S. Department of State, n.d.).

It is estimated that there are approximately 150 million first-language speakers of Russian and 270 million Russian speakers worldwide (Crystal, 1987; Gordon, 2005). Naturally, this population is more concentrated in certain areas than in others: Russian is the sole official language of Russia and an official language of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan as well (LanguageHelpers.com, 2004; NVTC, 2007). It is also spoken in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Canada, China, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Georgia, Germany, Greece, India, Israel, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Mongolia, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uruguay, the United States, and Uzbekistan (Gordon, 2005). The 2000 U.S. census indicates that there are over 700,000 Russian speakers in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). The Modern Language Association provides an [interactive language map](#) that displays data on the population of Russian language speakers by geographic area within the United States.

The Russian Alphabet

Russian is written using the Cyrillic alphabet, which was developed in about the 10th century. It is based largely on the Greek alphabet but includes additional letters to represent sounds that do not occur in Greek. Old Church Slavonic, the predecessor of modern Russian, is still used for liturgical purposes and often uses an older form of the Cyrillic alphabet. Modern Russian, however, uses a standard set of Cyrillic letters that has been redefined over the centuries with the evolution of the spoken language (Ager, 2007). There are now 33 letters in the Russian alphabet, some of which are formed quite differently in the common cursive form (known as the *italic*) than in the printed form. Twenty letters are consonants; one, Й, is a semi-vowel (a letter that has qualities of both a vowel and a consonant, such as the English letter “y”) that most commonly operates and is therefore widely recognized as a consonant; ten are vowels (identified in red below); and two (the

hard sign Ъ and soft sign Ь) have no sound associated with them, but rather modify the sounds of adjacent letters in a word.

This is the print form of the Russian alphabet:

Аа Бб Вв Гг Дд Ее Ёё Жж Зз Ии Йй Кк Лл Мм Нн Оо Пп

Рр Сс Тт Уу Фф Хх Цц Чч Шш Щщ Ъъ Ыы Ьь Ээ Юю Яя

To see a comparison of the print and italic forms of the Russian Cyrillic letters and hear each of the letters pronounced, visit LanguageHelpers.com's [The Russian Alphabet](#). For a list of Russian phrases with accompanying audio, visit Omniglot's [Useful Russian Phrases](#).

Russian Language Education

Though Russian has been categorized as one of the less commonly taught languages (LCTL) in the United States, the 2009 national survey of foreign language instruction in Grades K-12 revealed that it is among the top 15 languages taught in U.S. schools, with programs operating at both the elementary and secondary school levels since at least the 1980s (Rhodes & Pufahl, 2009). However, the survey also revealed a statistically significant decrease in the number of Russian language programs in the decade from 1997 to 2008 (see the [executive summary](#) for more details). The list of Russian course offerings in the U.S. is still extensive. An online search of the *LCTL Course Offerings* database (Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition, n.d.) indicates that there is substantial Russian language instruction at the secondary and university levels, with 328 and 727 North American K-12 and post-secondary programs respectively having submitted Russian language program information to the database as of September 2010. And the *Heritage Language Programs Database* of CAL's Alliance for the Advancement of Heritage Languages (n.d.) includes a record of K-12 and community-based Russian heritage language programs. In addition, STARTALK offers a list of [Russian Teacher Programs](#).

In terms of Russian language education beyond North American borders, the National Virtual Translation Center (2007, p. 8) reports that Education in Russian is still a popular choice for many of the first and second language speakers of Russian in the former Soviet republics. For instance, 75% of the public school students in Belarus, 40% in Kazakhstan, and over 20% in Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Moldova receive their education entirely or primarily in Russian.

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Search for Russian heritage language programs in the Heritage Language Programs Database.

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The Heritage Voices Collection is designed to spotlight individual heritage language speakers and programs. The information presented does not necessarily represent the views of the Alliance for the Advancement of Heritage Languages or the Center for Applied Linguistics.



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Photo Gallery



Easter 2003: I am in the middle with my mother and father to the left and my cousin and uncle to the right. Traditional Easter food items, Pascha (pronounced "pas-ha") and Kulich, are in the middle of the table.



This is a picture from my wedding as the priest, holding the cross, leads Dave and me around the table, which holds the gospel book and our marriage icons.



Members of the Sorokin family having tea in St. Petersburg around 1913. My great-grandfather is on the far right.



The sign reads: "Sorokin family playing gorodki, Rumeli Hissar October 5 1952" [Rumeli Hissar is a suburb of Istanbul]

Gorodki (Russian: Городки, townlets) is an ancient Russian folk sport whose popularity has spread to Karelia, Finland, Sweden, Ingria, Lithuania, and Estonia. Similar in concept to bowling and also somewhat to horseshoes, the aim of the game is to knock out groups of skittles, or pins, arranged in various patterns by throwing a bat at them. The skittles are called "gorodki" (literally little cities or townlets), and the square zone in which they are arranged is called the gorod (city).