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## WHAT DO ADS ADD TO THE CLASSROOM?

Russian advertising, although barely 20 years old, has proved to be very culturally specific and, for that reason, it makes a useful cultural addition to all Russian classes with a cross-cultural orientation. First, it can be used in courses such as international business, international marketing, ethno-cultural psychology, or communication studies. Second, it may be used in the language classroom to illustrate grammatical and lexical differences between the students' native language and Russian. It can also provide a great illustration of modern verbal culture, such as literature, political discourse, and jokes. This article analyzes the possible application of Russian advertising in both types of classes and provides sample assignments to co-ordinate them with the language classroom. Specifically, the following issues are addressed:

- *How to use advertising in Business classes so American students can see the differences between Russian and American advertising.*
- *How to use advertising in language classes to show the structural differences between Russian and English languages, how these differences affect ads, and which advertisements may be used effectively in student tasks.*

## WHAT DO ADS ADD TO THE INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS CLASSROOM?

Russian President Vladimir Putin's recent signing of a federal law regulating advertising provoked a shocked response from students in my International Business class, particularly in terms of the following bans:

- Beer advertising is prohibited from 7 am to 10 pm on TV; from 9 am to 12 pm on the radio.
- Advertising is prohibited during children's programming.
- The duration of television advertising is restricted to no more than 20% of station air time.

Why were US students shocked by these new guidelines? The answer is cultural difference, things that we, as educators, are constantly challenged to reveal to our learners.

During the first stage of ad market development, most Russian ads were a simple adaptation of those made for a Western market, and their "foreign-ness"

was a part of their initial attraction. However, it soon became evident that the Russian market required its own strategic approach. Though the amount of Western or Western-style advertising in the Russian market is still huge, today almost all advertising vehicles—TV commercials, outdoor billboards or press ads—present clear, culturally relevant images, associations, and meanings (Six, “Successes” 110–16). Recently, Russian advertising has received much attention because of huge market growth. Indeed, Jeff Stewart, a managing director for Russia and Ukraine at the market research firm Ipsos, was taken aback by the advertising market in Moscow: “I haven’t seen anything like it in the West, or in the rest of Eastern Europe or Asia for that matter. There is only one place in the whole of the United States that has anything even comparable to the advertising intensity all across Moscow, [that is] Times Square” (Walker).

Part of advertising’s attraction as course material is that it has proved to be very culturally oriented, not completely accepting Western models and ways, but rather adapting them to Russian culture. To help students understand how Russia’s culture is likely to affect advertising, we will first discuss cultural dimensions useful for differentiating Russian and American advertising (Six, “Advertising” 152–55).

#### COMMUNICATION: HIGH-CONTEXT VS. LOW-CONTEXT

Initially described by Edward and Mildred Reed Hall, cultural context has become one of the most important dimensions of teaching cultural awareness. This concept describes the extent to which external environment, situation, and nonverbal behavior are used in creating and interpreting communication. American advertising is low in context—expressive and direct—whereas Russian advertising is high in cultural context—more indirect and subtle. Russians place much greater emphasis on shared cultural references implicit in the communicative event. Therefore, in order to understand the meaning of the Russian ad, the viewer must know a lot about nonverbal behavior, the style of communication, and the situations of communication. For example, literature is an essential part of Russian culture in general and verbal culture in particular. Indeed, it is not unusual to see citations from literature used in commercials. In the Russian commercial for MTC (Moscow Telecommunication Company), a young man is talking on his cell phone with a student sitting in a classroom apparently getting ready for an oral exam in literature. To help him get prepared for his oral answer, the young man takes a book from the bookshelf and tells his friend: “Aleksandr Blok. Write it down”:

*The night. The street. Street-lamp. Drugstore.  
A meaningless dull light about.  
You may live twenty-five years more  
All will still be there. No way out.*

*You die. You start again and all  
Will be repeated as before:  
The cold rippling of a canal  
The night. The street. Street lamp. Drugstore.*

Narrator: “We do everything not to lose a single word. Moscow Tele Communications (MTC). People talk...”

This poem resonates with Russians because of its very particular style that emphasizes the value of every word, thus making the text and the slogan meaningful.

#### PERSONAL ORIENTATION: COLLECTIVISM VS. INDIVIDUALISM

Many educators who teach culture use Hofstede’s four cultural dimensions: power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity vs. femininity. Of these four, the one that differentiates American and Russian culture the most is the collectivism vs. individualism dimension. Russians are very concerned about being accepted by the group, about friendship, social contacts, and equality. In a team environment, even less motivated employees will work harder if their peers do, and a peer’s opinion of a person’s performance matters more than that of management (Fey et al. 51–52). Russian advertising reflects the profoundly collective values of Russian society. A clear example is the success of beer advertising, a highly competitive product with a 20% increase in annual sales since the 1998 financial crisis. In extremely successful advertising campaigns, the Russian beer brands Klinskoe, Zolotaia Bochka, and Tolstiak positioned themselves as drinks to be consumed with friends (Aleksandrov, *Khroniki* 72–77, 91, 103–08). The images in these advertisements are very specific, and they impress on the viewer the value of communication, friendship, and the collective. Zolotaia Bochka is advertised as beer for a company of friends: “Надо чаще встречаться” (“We have to get together more often”). Some humorous beer slogans appropriate the rhyming sound of proverbs, the traditional reflection of a society’s collective wisdom. For example, we find this in the Bochkarev beer slogan “Лучше пиво в руке, чем девица

вдалеке” (“A beer in hand is better than a girl far away”), or Starii Melnik beer’s “Зима без пива, что Гибралтар без пролива” (“A winter without beer is like Gibraltar without a strait”).

To return to the question of why beer was banned from TV advertising, the answer lies in the popularity of the aggressive beer advertising. Russia today has more than 100 brands of beer, available almost anywhere at any time. Half-litre bottles are lined up at fast-food stalls and in street kiosks alongside bottled water and cartons of fruit juice. The advertising strategy, based on commonly shared cultural values (collectivism, the importance of friendship and social contacts), was so effective that beer consumption soared, inciting the young to drink beer. On one hand, it precipitated the restrictive measures in beer advertising, but on the other, it proved the effectiveness of using cultural references in advertising, and illustrates the effectiveness of culture-specific references for international business and communication classes.

Likewise, the traditional values of the collective are expressed in the slogan “Вместе” (“Together”) for a new brand of cigarettes “Наш характер” (“Our character”) from Iava Zolotaia. In contrast, individualistic appeals to prestige and high social status found in American advertising provoke negative reactions with Russian listeners (Matveeva).

#### TIME ORIENTATION: PAST–FUTURE

“In general, cultures are either future-orientated or past-orientated. That is, activities in the present are either designed to influence future events or likely to be influenced by past events” (O’Hara-Devereaux and Johansen 61). Russian advertising is largely past-oriented with frequent references to history, historic values of the past, prominent historic figures, popular fairy tales, proverbs, folklore and traditions, including the heroes, images, and values of the Soviet period. As the national identity of Russia has been under attack since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the importance of the country’s global position is still a current issue, Russian advertising reflects the society’s desperate desire to find its new place by adhering to old values. In Russia one can find “1812” cigarettes referring to the Russian Army’s defeat of Napoleon (Aleksandrov, *Khroniki* 286–87). Names of other brands utilizing prominent historical figures are Peter I cigarettes, Peter the Great coffee, and Stepan Razin beer. Three Bears beer refers to images of a fairytale, and Tri Bogatiria (“Three epic heroes”) beer draws on folklore.

Some ads use the image of the famous Russian poet of the first half of the 19th century, Aleksandr Pushkin, a very important figure in the national culture. His image, however, is used for advertising products that have

little connection either to him or to his poetry. Viktor Pelevin, a very popular contemporary Russian novelist, calls this overemphasis on past cultural values the “pseudo-Slavic aesthetics” (“ложно-славянская эстетика”) in his famous novel *Generation П* (published in the US as *Homo Zapiens*). The novel humorously describes the style and manner of early Russian advertising and, apart from its literary value, can serve as an interesting cultural commentary.

#### ICON: VERBAL VS. VISUAL

Russia is a country where the verbal is much more important than the visual, and the most successful TV commercials are those built on successful verbal slogans (Aleksandrov, “Vse Protiv”). While American advertising texts primarily describe product attributes, Russian advertising texts call attention to the verbal images (Morozova 10–12). After a slogan or advertising text is introduced, a consumer goes through three stages: perception, remembering, and then involvement. Morozova argues that in Russia the verbal image is extremely important in the first stage and only partially important in the second. Product attributes take on importance in the final phase, involvement, when the consumer decides to buy the product. Slogans that have both a verbal icon and a promotional message are the most effective.

Even visual images can be perceived differently by Russians and Westerners. The most effective types of commercial video clips in Russia conform to the classical dramatic unities of place, time, and action. Russians prefer clips to be set in a single place, to fit within one timeframe, and to deal with one subject. Thirty-second video clips with quick changes of scenes are poorly received since they seem too chaotic for the Russian viewer. Instead, successful Russian advertising tells a story. It is sometimes a long story with a continuation, sometimes a brief story in the style of an anecdote, but it is always a consistent story, performed by an identifiable character, as in the story of Chappi, a dog-salesman with Georgian-type hospitality who invites other dogs to try Chappi dog food.

#### WHAT DO RUSSIAN ADS ADD TO THE RUSSIAN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM?

Teachers who plan to incorporate ads in the language classroom can find them in almost all mass media sources, and websites such as [www.creatiff.ru](http://www.creatiff.ru), [www.advi.ru](http://www.advi.ru), [www.adversti.ru](http://www.adversti.ru), and [www.sostav.ru](http://www.sostav.ru). Advertising reveals many things about Russian communication. It can teach how the advertiser uses language resources to attract the consumer to the product, what makes an ad memorable, and how these means may differ in Russian and English. Language-based assignments can include analysis of syntax, morphology

and word-building, lexicon and phraseology, phonetics and intonation (Six, “Advertising”).

Prior to analyzing the advertising texts, it makes sense to review the comparative history of the Russian and English languages so that the students are aware of many differences. English, in the course of its historical development, drew much influence from other nations that had significant contact with the culture of its speakers. The structure of the language simplified from the old synthetic language to a modern analytical language, more like Chinese than Latin (Finegar 98). One of the consequences of this change was a decrease in the number of actively used words. Although every foreign influence brought many new words into the language, to facilitate communication among peoples from different cultures, a limited number of words was used. The frequent use of this limited number of words brought about several changes to the English language. Words became more abstract, and although the English word stock (native elements and foreign borrowings) has always been large, only about 2,100 of them constitute 80 percent of English corpus tokens (Finegar 87). As words became more abstract, they became applicable to a wider range of concrete situations, and consequently understandable only through application of their context. They also became shorter, making them easier to remember. As words were simplified and shortened, many of them started to sound similar. The meaning of many basic words enlarged and incorporated new senses.

What occurred in English never happened to Russian, whose morphology is typologically very close to that of the oldest Indo-European languages. Noun and adjectival declension, as well as verb conjugation, have never disappeared. No matter how many speakers of foreign languages influenced Russian culture, the Russian-speaking community remained a relatively homogenous and united social entity with its own cultural, political, and economic integrity. The language structure developed and strengthened the agreement of almost all words in the sentence, one of the most important means of increasing reliability in transferring detailed information. As a consequence, the number of words of different registers and the number of synonyms increased. The coexistence of East Slavic and South Slavic forms brought doublet forms distinguished by register. Russian words convey the slightest nuances of meaning through a developed system of suffixes and prefixes and have a clear inner form, in which all morphemes are meaningful and contribute to the overall meaning of the word. In Russian, morphology became the main clue to grammatical relation and gave rise to the phenomenon of free, but largely pragmatically determined, word order and greater variety in sentence structure.

These cultural and linguistic differences have the following consequences in English-language and Russian-language advertising:

1. English advertising uses many abstract words, highly abstract phrases, and incomplete constructions that can be interpreted in many ways. Thus, it is the listener who connects the advertised product and the conveyed image and, in this way, English ads involve the buyer. Ambiguity is commonly used, as in “Just do it!” In contrast, because Russian words are more concrete and descriptive, the translation of many abstract slogans is either impossible, or results in clumsy foreign-sounding language use. Russian tends to avoid incomplete sentences, since incompleteness can result in ambiguity.

2. English uses questions and imperatives to identify a situation or problem in the advertisement. In Russian, questions and imperatives are used in their primary function as interrogatives and commands. Overuse of these structures is atypical and poorly received by Russians.

3. Polysemy, homonymy, and onomatopoeic words are widely used in English slogans, product names, brand names, and other text advertising. In Russian, the use of such wordplay conceals the inner form of the word. The use of abstract, pure sound associations, such as the word *Schweppes*, is restricted by the tendency for the clear meaningful inner forms of words. Russians would prefer the word *Rossinka*, strongly associated with the word *rosa*. Russian uses sound forms to improve remembrance of the sentence structure and also to describe the image. Rhyme and rhythm are used more often than pure onomatopoeia.

The following types of activities are useful in helping language students understand the linguistic and cultural differences in Russian advertising.

#### *Assignment 1: Questions in Ads*

Analyze the sentence types of the following slogans and explain how the ads work. In your opinion, which of these slogans were the most successful and which were the least successful?

- (a) Кто идёт за Клинским? (*Klinskoe beer*: Who will go get the Klinskoe?)
- (b) Что ждут женщины России от порошка третьего тысячелетия? (*Procter and Gamble laundry detergent*: What do women of Russia expect from the detergent of the third millennium?)
- (c) У вас выпадают волосы? У вас уже лысина? (*shampoo*: Are you losing your hair? Are you bald already?)

Though at first glance Russian ads in the form of questions may look like English ads, not all of these questions produce the same effect. Students may be surprised to learn that the slogan “Who will go get Klinskoe beer?” was so popular that it increased sales of this brand of beer 2.5 times and made it the third most consumed beer in Moscow (Alexandrov, *Khroniki* 93–96). The demand for it so exceeded the supply that the manufacturer did not have time to label all the bottles that were sold. The TV commercial, which shows a group of young people deciding who will go to get the beer, was so successful that the company was accused of pushing young people into drinking and ultimately resulted in the 2001 ban against showing Klinskoe beer ads on TV. The success of the slogan may be attributed to the fact that it was intentionally addressed to a group of people and required interaction with, and a decision by, the group as a whole. Consumers felt directly involved in the action of the advertisement.

Slogans that were direct translations from English were much less successful. For example, English questions might contain presuppositions that are almost impossible to disregard if one is to properly interpret the text (Myers 49). In “What do women of Russia expect from the detergent of the third millennium?” the presupposition is that women of Russia are waiting for a new generation of washing powder. It appears that this particular presupposition did not work well with the Russian female audience, who does not expect any other miracles from the washing powder than what it is supposed to do—clean clothes. Whereas English questions such as “Are you losing your hair?” and “Hired or fired?” are interpreted more as naming a problem, in Russian they would not only require an immediate answer, but would be viewed as unpleasant questions to be addressed in public. In contrast, the presupposition in the question “Who is going for the Klinskoe?” implies that the group prefers Klinskoe to other beers and the question merely asks who is going to get it. Whereas questions in English ads may function as a way to introduce the problem or attract attention, in Russian the question is employed for direct meaning and its use as an attention-getter may alienate the consumer.

### *Assignment 2. Commands and Imperatives*

Analyze the use of commands in the following slogans and explain which are the most effective.

- Одевайтесь с комфортом! (*Lee jeans*: Dress with comfort!)
- Не дай себе засохнуть! (*Sprite*: Do not let yourself dry out!)

- Расправь крылья (*Sokol beer*: Spread your wings)
- Просто добавь воды (*Invite juice*: Just add water)
- Придай стиль здоровому блеску ваших волос! (*Pantene Pro-V hairspray*: Give a healthy shine to your hair!)
- Не тормози! Сникерсни! (*Snickers*: Don't slow down! Have a Snickers!)

In Russian, the imperative is too strong a method of attracting attention, and other means, such as exclamations, calls, and indirect word order, are generally preferred. In magazine ads, commands are 1.5 times more typical for English, and exclamations are almost 5 times more frequent in Russian (Medvedeva 125). These differences may be due to the different roles of syntax in attracting the listener. English does not have a great deal of variety in its sentence structure, and changing the purpose of the utterance has many additional functions. In English, advertisers use commands mostly because they create a personal effect, a sense of one person talking to another. The form of command is recognizable even without a speaking voice because it typically leaves out the subject “you.” American ads tell consumers to do things hundreds of times a day without saying please. Omitting politeness creates the feeling that the action will benefit the hearer, not the speaker, as in “Take a seat,” “Have some more cheesecake.” However, such commands sound pushy to the Russian listener. Moreover, almost any English imperative can be translated into Russian in two different ways using two different verbs. Thus, “call” may be a mild recommendation (Позвони!) or a very strong request (Звони!). The latter was seldom used in Russian until it started to appear constantly in translated commercials and grate on the Russian ear. Indeed, the negative attitude toward the overuse of imperatives in translated Western advertising has been discussed by many researchers (Medvedeva 123–24).

The most successful use of imperatives in Russian advertising is to explain the way the product is used through concrete action (Morozova 62) or to humorously push the consumer into unusual action with the advertised product: (Просто добавь воды! Сникерсни! “Just add water!” “Have a Snickers!”).

### *Assignment 3. Ratio of Abstract and Concrete Words in Slogans*

Look at the ratio of abstract and concrete words in the following slogans. Why are these ads unsuccessful and how is their failure related to the abstract vs. concrete meaning of the words used?

- Великолепный вкус и защита от кариеса (*Orbits*: Great taste and a defense against cavities)
- Весело и вкусно (*McDonalds*: Fun and Tasty)
- Изменим жизнь к лучшему! (*Philips*: Let's change life for the better)
- Тэфаль всегда думает о вас (*Tefal*: Tefal always thinks about you)
- Будущее обретает реальность (*Goldstar*: Future becomes reality)
- Мы приносим хорошее в жизнь (General Electric: We bring good things to life).

All of the above slogans are direct translations from English and they consist mostly of highly abstract words, applicable to various concrete situations. In English, highly abstract words allow the ads to leave something out that readers or viewers must supply, thus making English-speaking customers active agents in interpreting the sentence and writing themselves into the ad (Myers 55). Unlike English, however, Russian poorly describes situations in which the meaning becomes clear only in specific surroundings. The predominance of abstract words decreases the effectiveness of the slogan in Russian. Morozova notes, in fact, that to be effective, the Russian slogan should consist of 80% concrete words (64). Moreover, the images of Russian advertising come mostly from concrete words applied to abstract situations. It is impossible to translate into Russian slogans such as: “Does she or doesn't she?” (Clairol), “Just do it!” (Nike), “Life tastes good!” (Coca-Cola), or “Let's change life for the better” (Philips). The latter, “Let's change life for the better,” was literally translated into Russian as “Изменим жизнь к лучшему!”; and soon after was converted into a joke: “Изменим жизнь к лешему!” The word “лучший” (better) sounds close to the word “леший” (devil), so in the joke the abstract Russian word was substituted with the more concrete one to jokingly turn the phrases into something like “To hell with such a life” (literally, “Let's change life for the devil”).

#### *Assignment 4: Product Naming*

What is the principle behind the naming of the following products? How does the Russian approach to product naming compare to the English-language approach? Пельмени «Дарья» (dumplings “Dar'ia”), сигареты «Мотор» (cigarettes “Motor”), сигареты «Пётр I» (cigarettes Peter I)

- лимонад «Тропикола» (lemonade “Tropikola”), йогурт «Ежевита» (yogurt Ezhevita)

- рис «Ангсрем» (Angsrem rice), бритва «Жиллет» (Gillet shaving razor)
- Coca-Cola, Pepsi-Cola, Dr. Pepper

In the Russian language, words do not easily accept new meanings. Russian words have very concrete meanings, and enlarging the meaning of the old word to incorporate new senses as is typical for English would require a longer time for social acceptance (Dimshits). Since creating a new name in Russian is more complicated than in English, borrowing is a more common way of naming the product in Russian advertising. The tendency to make the inner form of the words clear and “readable” does not allow the common English practice of abbreviations and onomatopoeia (“Dr. Pepper”). Examples such as Ezhevita yogurt and Tropikola lemonade are scarce and often poorly received.

#### *Assignment 5. Catchy Spelling*

Explain why catchy spelling in the Russian brand name “Пиво ПО РУСКИ” was viewed as a spelling mistake. Is deviation from standard spelling typical for Russian advertising? Why or why not?

In English, deviation from expected spelling is a common ways of naming. The complex sound/ letter correspondence helps to make brand names stand out: *Beanz, meanz, Heinz, Kwick store, Nite, Drive-Thru, Bar BQ, Kit-kat*. Such naming is impossible in Russian, given that the initial form of morphemes and traditional spelling are the primary means of revealing the inner form of the word.

#### CONCLUSION

Advertising is a valuable source of information about both the native and target cultures, providing as well rich material for understanding unique characteristics and typological differences in target and native language structures. Awareness of such differences is particularly productive and significantly stimulates foreign language acquisition.

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