

Midterm

SLAV 540

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68; 12022 H.E.

Long format

Question

Alphabets and other writing systems are often changed from the top down (a decision is made by an authority to enact a change). Why are such changes made and what effects, positive, neutral, or negative do such changes have on the societies that are affected by them?

Response

I wonder where he is. It's already been more than half an hour and he is still not here. Everyone knows it. Everyone should know it. It is the unspoken rule in our society that you are never to be late to a tea party, especially to the one you are invited to.

This is not too big of an issue. At the end of it all, I am the one who asked him to come over on such short notice, all because I need his help with my upcoming linguistics midterm. I have to write an essay about top-down changes made to alphabets and languages, and also how such a change reflects on communities that are affected. I am positive that he knows the answer.

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I hear knocks on the door. The door handle slowly goes down, the door was left ajar, so there is no need to turn the handle. I would think it is just a formality to announce one's arrival.

'Ha! You're finally here, please come on in,' I said excitedly after waiting for his arrival.

'My apologies for being a little bit late, Sandy. They had a building construction and closed off the short routes.' I could hear a little bit of sadness in my long-awaited guest's voice.

'No need to worry about it all! I have everything ready for us, Cheburashka'

'Thank you,' Cheburashka smiled. 'I see we have some tea here with sweets. Oh! Is that one of those Japanese rolled cakes?'

To which I proudly replied, 'This is a tea party, after all!'

'Delicious! Did you want to talk to me about something? It sounded fairly urgent on the phone,' he looked at me curiously.

'You are the greatest sociolinguist I know. I was interested in talking to you about some of the historical top-down changes enacted by elected officials on alphabets and how those affected relevant societies,' I said so quickly, so it doesn't sound like a loaded question.

'That's a loaded question, Sandy,' oops. 'Is this for a course or something? Either way, I would love to talk about it,' awesome!

'I'll try to start and go from what I know, so please do correct me if you feel the need to. Languages are like people, they are being born, they breathe, evolve, develop themselves, and naturally die or come to their final resting place. Speaking of the Slavic world, there were many liberal policies that aimed at bringing minorities and people from the periphery to acquire Russian and educating them. In class I remember, it started as far as in 14th century with Stefan Permskij, who was establishing written languages for previously illiterate Finnic people,' is what I remember from our first lectures.

'That's good, but ask yourself, were the changes and language education always so liberal and slow in nature?' Cheburashka leaned closer as if he were quizzing me. He definitely was.

'Well, no! Think of Peter the Great and all of the reforms that he brought, especially to Russian...'

He caught the awkward silence, 'What did he do exactly?'

'I hoped you could explore that area a little bit more,' I said.

'Why sure. As you just mentioned right before, unfortunately, not all language changes and enacted policies were so liberal and open to multiple languages. Many policies, especially in the history of Russia were called top-down, meaning the changes were less natural and more forced into rules, whether they are for political or practical reasons. You mentioned Peter the Great, so why don't we start with him? Peter was proclaimed as *Emperor of All Russia*. He implemented sweeping reforms aimed at modernizing Russia, ranging from industrialization, shipbuilding to clothing styles and heavy taxes or beards. During his whole modernization period, he realized that not only does Russia need to modernize its equipment and thinking, but also its language.'

He took a sip of his tea with a small bite from the rolled cake.

'If you were to tell a shipbuilder to construct plans that are similar to Western alternatives, which have parts that one has never seen, therefore not even have a word for it, wouldn't that be a problem? Peter started sponsoring education on all secular lines. He opened schools. Translation of books written in western European languages was actively supported. Most of all, the Russian alphabet was modernized and at the same time borrowed (sometimes adapting) words from foreign languages. In essence, importing all of the technical terms required for new machinery, made Russian applicable in describing new developments and ongoing modernization efforts. Observe that this didn't happen naturally. It was a big pressure from the top of the government to mirror Western culture and make the language adopt the sweeping changes brought by his reforms,' he regurgitated it as if he were reading it from a book.

'I see! Even if top-down changes sound a little bit harsh, they were the catalyst for the Russian Empires evolution into one of the most powerful nations in the world. The language and alphabet changes united people all across Russia. Streamlined printing process, such that any Russian citizen from an the entire region can read and understand the latest developments of the industry, the navy, victories of the Russian army, thus bringing Russia and Russian people from medieval times into modernity,' it was exciting to see how this seemingly small change in vocabulary and alphabet can propel an entire society into a new era. I remember he called it the "civil type",

which abandoned the medieval calligraphy tradition and moved onto Westernized typefaces. This allowed the usage of Russian printing machines.'

'Now you start seeing it,' Cheburashka said as if he were a proud father looking at his son. 'Was this the only time there was such a change to the language? he asked me quickly.

'Of course, there were more! The other big-time for language modernization and changes from the top brass were during the Soviet era.'

'Exactly, sounds like home to me, go on!' He started chewing one of the chocolate chip cookies I had on the table.

'I had to read an old Russian text from the 19th century and I must say the words looked super goofy. There were weird letters like Greek θ , Latin i , and "myaghkii znak" with a line strike through. The most egregious of them all was almost every word ending with "tverdyi znak".'

'They did look goofy because they actually came from Greek!' Cheburashka apparently likes chocolate chip cookies. ' θ , i , came straight from Greek and were later replaced with "ph" and "i". In medieval Russian, "tverdyi znak" signaled a sound that was long gone, as it disappeared from the language entirely. However, it was still written at the end of almost every word—'

'But isn't that wasteful? I imagine all the ink that is used to type up a letter that just doesn't contribute or do anything,' I interjected rudely.

'Of course and this is one of the big reasons why in 1918, Bolsheviks that just came to power launched a reform of Russian orthography as part of a bigger project to increase mass literacy. The letters that you don't seem to like very much was removed from the language, you could say "by force", everyone had to follow the new standards. Naturally, from a cost-benefit viewpoint, the orthographic forms meant economies of scale: the reduction of redundant signs generated savings in metal type, typesetting labor, ink, and paper [Marc Greenberg]'

'I would assume that the changes weren't driven purely out of economical interests, but also more of ideology development and literacy education. If I look at it, fewer letters, and a simpler structure would ease up the language acquisition, which would allow people to learn it at a faster pace, therefore increasing the educated and literate portion of the population,' I was quiet proud of myself to see the connection there. 'This is a self-revolving cycle, where even such a small change to the language produces more educated

people, educated people take care of everything else. The Bolsheviks aimed at solving what seemed almost an impossible challenge - plant the seed of socialist ideology into the minds and hearts of a divided population, consisting of a minority of literate elite and an overwhelming majority of underclass peasants and workers with little literacy or even none whatsoever.'

'The effects that this successful adoption had on people and the Soviet society should be left for another time, the least we can say is that it was grand,' Cheburashka was pouring another cup of tea.

I happily realized, 'Thank you! I think I have everything I need for my midterm.'

'Are you already kicking me out?' he asked grinningly.

'What are you talking about? I could never!' I was flabbergasted.

'I'm just kidding, say, have you finally watched KonoSuba?' he said picking up another one of those fluffy Japanese cakes.

'It's funny you mention it...'