

A nighttime photograph of a European city, likely Prague, featuring a large Gothic cathedral with multiple spires and a prominent square tower. The city is reflected in a body of water in the foreground, where several boats are docked. The sky is a deep twilight blue, and the city lights create a warm glow against the dark buildings.

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**Focus on: Science and Technology**  
**Featured Languages: Slavic**

# Labels, Tags, Stickers, etc.

By Igor Vesler

Historically, Soviet society remained behind the “Iron Curtain” for more than 70 years—a period in which many human innovations were made. And while the Soviet military-industrial complex managed to keep up with the West in the arms race, the domain of everyday Soviet life remained almost entirely isolated from its Western counterparts. Both these phenomena were reflected in the Russian language.

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Language, whether in spoken or written form, is one of the most revealing indicators of the interaction and interpenetration of cultures. At the same time, it serves as a sort of “infrastructure” for these processes. The modern Russian language contains entire lexical strata whose borrowings date from the Tartar–Mongol invasion. From the time of Peter the Great, German and Dutch “newcomers,” who were later supplanted by the “French,” discovered the Russian language, and had a significant influence on Russian speech and writing. As industrial English-speaking countries came to the forefront, loanwords from the English language became more and more common. However, these terms related mainly to the scientific, technical, and business lexicon, since in everyday life, Russia still remained isolated from Western civilization and its quotidian experiences. The penetration of even a few such customs was too rare a happenstance for them to take root in the Russian language. In other words, the “linguistic infrastructure”—that is,

the everyday, standard linguistic formulas and lexicon that are associated with customary manners that evoke adequate, systematic reactions—did not take shape.

In the 1980s, with the breakup of the Soviet Union, the situation changed radically. For more than a decade now, the post-Soviet space has been open, by virtue of the habit of speaking mainly in Russian, to a mass influx of goods and services from around the world—from dubious Chinese articles to European and U.S. satellite TV dishes and investment services. The penetration of “everyday civilization” into the consumer vacuum, against the backdrop of the decay of education systems and general culture (phenomena inherent in societies in transition), give birth to linguistic atrocities under these conditions. And by this I do not mean merely advertising molds or behavioral rituals that sound odd or even mysterious to the average *babushka* on the street (For example, *Наши бонды—это самая высокая маржа!!!* [“our bonds carry the highest margin!!!”] or *Мудрый Маркетинг и Менеджмент* [“Wise Marketing and Management”—M&M is the name of an advertising agency and is also a candy brand]). A style was developed and is flourishing—a style that owes, above all, to the mechanical, soulless borrowing and transposition of the “linguistic infrastructure” of Western culture into Russian (Ukrainian, Kazakh, etc.) society. This phenomenon can easily be explained and has several roots.

First, a product comes to market incomparably faster than the lexical and semantic locus of the concepts that describe it. For example, *памперсы* (Pampers) are no longer a novelty on the Russian market. But in Russian, this is just one more foreign word that has not sunk any tenacious roots (there are still no word-forming models, stable word combinations, etc.).

Secondly, the more dynamic the area of penetration and the less ceremoniously this phenomenon proceeds, the more pronounced the results will be. For example, the creeping penetration of industry-specific English-language terminology into Russian was set in motion by the advent of the first computers and software in the 1970s. But the real breaking-open of the Russian language has been wrought by the Russian Internet. In just a few years, Internet terms (previously exclusively English-language in origin) have proliferated with word forms, word-forming and word-changing models, and groups of near-synonyms.

That is, they acquired the formal rights of citizenship (for example, the words *клик* [“to click,” an old Russian word meaning “to hail” or “to call,” which also reflects the nearly homonymous English “click”]—*в два клика* [double-click]—*кликнуть* [the verb from *клик*, which is equivalent to the verb *щёлкнуть*]—*каждый, кликнувший на этом баннере* [“everyone **who has clicked** on this banner...”). There also has been a contribution from machine translation systems—the source of the mysterious “Orwellian

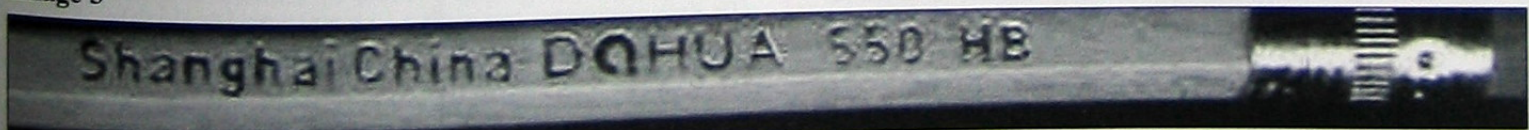
Image 1



Image 2



Image 3



new-speak,” wherein every word taken separately makes sense, but the meaning of the entire sentence often is elusive.

Third and finally, there is the traditional failure to pay heed to the “linguistic infrastructure” (and indeed, to culture in general) under the conditions of the post-Soviet market. This is yet another reason for the mechanical transposition of foreign linguistic advertising tools into the Russian-language environment. Quite often, we may not even apply the word “translation” to the text that we see on the labels of products on the shelves of Russian stores, or in the instructions for the puzzling *средство для витализации волос* (“hair vitalizer,” or more simply, “hair tonic”). This article gives a few typical examples of faux pas encountered in recent translations, as a caution both to hack translators and to those “penny-wise-but-pound-foolish” clients who order translations from whoever happens by.

One of the most common traps is homophony (i.e., coincidence in sound or pronunciation) between the name of a product and some inapt or even indecent word. Image 1 is an extreme case—a wrapper from candy made in Bulgaria by Nestlé and imported into Russia. In this case, a translation was deemed unnecessary—after all, it was already in Cyrillic. But the fact that, in Russian, *мура* (*mura*) is either a cat’s name (candy from cat meat?) or something akin to nonsense or balderdash never entered the exporter’s mind. But they did save on the translation!

Here are two more examples (see Image 2). In Russian, *Osel* is pronounced *осёл* (*osyol*, meaning “ass”

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Labels, Tags, Stickers, etc. Continued

Image 4



or “mule,” a synonym for stupidity and stubbornness), and *PEDRINI* sounds like slang for “homosexuals” (who traditionally have been treated with contempt in Russia). As a result, the advertising label “*PEDRINI are your irreplaceable little kitchen helpers*” takes on quite a racy tone.

Image 3 is a more cheerful example (a pencil from China).

It would appear that the popularity of these products is assured—what Russian wouldn’t buy them just to have a good laugh with his neighbor?

This is not to say that Russian exporters don’t also commit such blunders—*Drug* is a transliteration of the Russian word *Друз* (*friend*)—(see Image 4).

Here are some more interesting cases of associative connotations evoked by an ad (at least they were not fathomed by either the translators or the authors of the advertising text):

In Image 5, *травка* is directly associated with marijuana (“grass”), immediately producing the image of a drug-addicted cat.

Image 6 is another example of such a Freudian association.

Advertising texts (which in Russia are now called *слоганы* [“slogans”], a fine old Russian word) for radio, television, and outdoor advertising hold a separate place in the ranks of translation “accomplishments.”<sup>1</sup>

В НАШЕЙ ФИРМЕ МЫ

Image 5



Image 6



СТРЕМИМСЯ СОЗДАТЬ  
ИДЕАЛЬНОЕ СОСТОЯНИЕ ГАРМОНИИ  
(In our company, we strive to create an ideal state of  
harmony)

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**Labels, Tags, Stickers, etc.** Continued from p. 42

Evidently, the translator has no knowledge of situations in which harmony may be other than ideal, or the ideal may be inharmonious.

**(An ad-agency motto)**

НАША РЕКЛАМА РАССЛАБИТ ВСЕХ МУЖЧИН  
**(Our advertising will melt any man)**

The story goes that during a lecture on advertising practice, upon hearing this slogan a woman in the audience politely inquired: "And who needs a man who's been melted?"

ГОСПОДА ПРЕДПРИНИМАТЕЛИ, ОТДАЙТЕСЬ  
ПРОФЕССИОНАЛАМ!

**(Dear entrepreneurs, come across to the professionals!)**

The original reads: *Leave it to the professionals.*

**(A shoe company advertisement)**

МЫ ОБУЕМ ВСЮ СТРАНУ  
**(We cheat the whole country)**

The problem here is that in common slang *обуть* ("to shoe") also means "to swindle" or "to cheat."

ЖЕВАТЕЛЬНАЯ РЕЗИНКА ... ЗАЩИЩАЕТ ВАШИ  
ЗУБЫ С УТРА ДО ВЕЧЕРА

**(Brand X chewing gum protects your teeth from morning to evening)**

But at night you get cavities (KVN-96).

ПАРКЕТ ФИРМЫ ХХХ—РЕШЕНИЕ ПРОБЛЕМ ПОЛА

ПО—ШВЕДСКИ

**(Brand X parquet flooring is the Swedish solution to your sex problems)**

Freud again.

**(An advertisement for glue)**

У ВАС ВСЕ СКЛЕИТСЯ

**(Your whole body will stick together)**

Now there's something to think about!

These examples show that the translations were done not just unprofessionally, but by people whose native language is not Russian. But, once again, this is the client's mistake—and unfortunately, it's a mistake that is far too common.

Unfortunately, translated advertising materials, shipping documents, product labels, and so forth that are to be sent to Russia, Ukraine, or Kazakhstan usually do not undergo expert linguistic scrutiny on the part of U.S. exporters. Any textbook of international advertising gives examples of how one must take into account the realities and cultural specifics of the receiving country—from color scheme to the sound of advertising slogans set to music. But as for the new independent states, the appearance there of Western products and advertising that meet these requirements is more the exception than the rule. And this article is a cautionary reminder to both translators and customers.

**Notes:**

1. The examples of advertising slogans presented in this article were taken from the book "Слоган? Слоган! Слоган..." by V. V. Kevorkov (RIP-Holding, Moscow, 1996).

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**U.S. Government Assistance Programs for  
NIS Scientists** Continued from p. 57

grams that have been described represent billions of dollars of assistance. In addition to these programs, there are other programs that simply cannot be included owing to space constraints. For example, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency plays an integral role in the Arctic Military Environmental Cooperation Program, which addresses problems specific to the polar regions of Russia, the U.S., Norway, and other nations. This is another multimillion-dollar, multilateral effort to provide assistance to Russian scientists and engineers so that the legacy of the Soviet Union can be successfully managed.

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**The Translation Inquirer** Continued from p. 62

access to a beach, country club, and so forth for which entry fees are charged.

**(Sp-E 5-2000/11)** (abbreviations on school certificate): Patricia Courtney believes "E.P.M." to be "Education Pre-Military," and "U.S.E." to be "Unidad de Servicios Educativos." The latter is the name given to the Peruvian Ministry of Education's branch offices throughout the country, each of which supervises a number of local schools. Her proposed English for this is *Educational Services Unit*.

*Many thanks to all who gave permission to use queries, and who responded! You're all great!*

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