

RUSSIAN DECLENSION AND CONJUGATION:

**A STRUCTURAL DESCRIPTION
WITH EXERCISES**

Maurice I. Levin

Slavica Publishers, Inc.

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RUSSIAN DECLENSION AND CONJUGATION:

To my family

PREFACE

The aim of this book is to present the essentials of Russian declension and conjugation as succinctly, yet as completely, as possible in the hope of demonstrating the fundamental simplicity and order to be found in Russian grammar. The material presented in this book was originally used in a course on the structure of Russian for teachers and beginning graduate students at Indiana University in 1965, and it has been undergoing continual expansion and revision since that time. While the book may best be utilized at that level, it has also been used at several universities in courses of advanced language study and has been found to be an effective tool for reviewing and solidifying a student's understanding of declension and conjugation.

Since this book is designed for use at various levels, there may be times when the exercises are too simple for one level or too difficult for another. For this reason, the instructor will have to be ready to make adjustments in either direction by explaining those exercises that create difficulties and by eliminating or expanding those that are not sufficiently challenging.

The book is divided into two major parts: declension (Chapters 2-5) and conjugation (Chapters 6-8). Chapter 1 presents an introduction to structural (i.e., simplified morphophonemic) transcription that is crucial to an understanding of the presentation of declension and conjugation. (Therefore, until the material of that chapter is clear, no attempt should be made to proceed beyond it.) In presenting declension and conjugation, the major attempt has been to demonstrate the order and regularity in Russian grammar, in the hope that once it is clear what is *regular*, the student will no longer need to be told what is *irregular*. (Chapter 9 does contain a catalogue of the major irregularities in both the noun and the verb, but in a sense the student ought to be able to do that on his/her own.) A second, more important, goal is to show that a great deal of what is often considered irregular in Russian grammar is not irregular at all, but only badly presented.

Much of the material in this book can be found in other sources (see acknowledgments below). There are, however, two major contributions which the book offers: (1) this material is brought together in a single volume; and (2) the treatment of noun and adjective stress patterns represents a new synthesis based on previously unobserved relationships. There is also a fuller listing of irregularities in imperfective derivation than has been available up to now, and the analysis of the fill vowel in declension is both simple and complete, yet reasonably free of exceptions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The presentation of structural transcription in Chapter 1, as well as the basic notion of a single set of declensional endings, owes a great deal to Morris Halle's "Essay on the Relationship between Russian Sounds and Letters," in B. A. Lapidus and S. V. Shevtsova, *The Learner's Russian-English Dictionary* (Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press [c. 1963]), 681-88. The treatment of conjugation and of imperfective derivation is based largely on the work of Alexander Lipson as it appears in his textbook, *A Russian Course*, 2nd prelim. ed., (Cambridge, Mass.: Slavica, 1974). I have also made use of certain concepts outlined by Charles Townsend in his treatment of the verb in *Russian Word-Formation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970). To both Lipson and Townsend I am indebted not only for ideas borrowed from their works, but also for a great deal of stimulating discussion on the presentation and analysis of Russian grammar.

I would also like to express considerable gratitude to Charles Gribble for his advice and encouragement. I am also grateful to Frank Ingram, Michael Launer, Anny Newman, Lawrence Newman, and Rodney Sangster for using these materials in various stages of completeness and for their many useful comments about them. Other valuable suggestions have come from Robert Beard, Richard Brecht, Catherine Chvany, Dan Davidson, Joseph Lake, Michael Rosenbush, and Robert Rothstein, and to all of them I express sincere gratitude. A special note of thanks is also offered to Dean Jeremiah Allen of the University of Massachusetts for his assistance.

Most of all I would like to thank all of my students for the many valuable suggestions, corrections,

and opinions which they have offered over the past dozen years that these materials have been used in the classroom. To all of them I express my warmest appreciation.

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Maurice I. Levin

January 1978

ADDITIONS AND CORRECTIONS

(↓ denotes lines from the top of the page and ↑ denotes lines from the bottom of the page.)

| <u>Page</u> | <u>Line</u> | |
|-------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 35 | 1↑ | Delete ЎГОЛЬ from this group, except as an optional variant of a fixed stem stress pattern. |
| 40 | 3↑ | For the <i>G sg</i> form "кpугá" read "кpýга". |
| 66 | 4↓ | For "sobácij" read "sobáčij". |
| 70 | 4-5↓ | For "disyllabic endings of the singular" read "disyllabic endings of the nonfeminine forms of the singular". |
| 131 | 5↑ | For "-kus-áj+" read "-kús-ivaj+". |
| 131 | 1↑ | For "-xvat-áj+" read "-xvát-ivaj+". |
| 140 | 17↑ | For "бepcëз" read "бepcéз". |
| 154 | After line 2↓ | add: "15. živo-pis-á+/živo-pis-ová+". |
| 154 | At end of note 6 (on -iđ+) | add: "when prefixed with <i>pri-</i> , the <i>j</i> of the stem - <i>jđ</i> - truncates everywhere except in the infinitive]." |

CONTENTS

| | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Preface | v |
| I STRUCTURAL TRANSCRIPTION | 1 |
| Definition 1 Basic sound units 2 Consonant plus vowel 3 Consonant not followed by a vowel 10 Signs of separation 12 Conclusion 14 | |
| II NOUN STRESS | 15 |
| Introduction 15 Fixed stress 15 Shifting stress 16 Anomalous stress 18 <i>u</i> -retraction 19 End stress 22 Zero ending 22 Gender constraints 23 Exceptions 24 | |
| III NOUN DECLENSION | 26 |
| Table of endings 26 Nonfeminine declension 27 Nonneuter declension 28 Feminine declension 29 Plural 30 Fill vowel 33 Exceptions 35 Base form 36 | |
| IV ADJECTIVE DECLENSION | 46 |
| Table of endings 46 Long form 47 Short form 49 Stress 49 Fill vowel 50 Base form 51 Special problems 55 Stress summary 58 Conclusion 59 Comparative 60 | |
| V PRONOMINAL ADJECTIVE DECLENSION | 63 |
| Table of endings 63 Introduction 64 Suffixed type 64 Stress 67 Nonsuffixed type 69 Stress 70 | |

| | | |
|------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| VI | CONJUGATION | 72 |
| | Introduction 72 Table of prefixes, suffixes, and endings 73 Base form 76 Verb types 77 Basic rules of combination 79 Consonant mutation 81 Stress 82 Verb type analysis 83 Summary 97 Stress summary 98 Imperative 101 Stress 102 | |
| VII | VERBAL ADJECTIVES AND VERBAL ADVERBS | 108 |
| | Introduction 108 Present active and passive verbal adjectives 109 Imperfective verbal adverb 109 Stress 110 Past active verbal adjective 111 Stress 112 Perfective verbal adverb 112 Stress 113 Past passive verbal adjective 115 Stress 115 | |
| VIII | IMPERFECTIVE DERIVATION | 120 |
| | Introduction 120 Distribution of suffixes 120 Note on prefixation 122 Summary 124 Comments on the vowel <i>o</i> 125 Irregularities in imperfective derivation 128 | |
| IX | IRREGULARITIES | 138 |
| | Nouns ending in <i>-m̄ta</i> 138 <i>Singularia tantum</i> 139 <i>Pluralia tantum</i> 139 Indeclinable nouns 140 Declension of surnames 140 Plural stem different from singular stem 141 Irregularities affecting isolated case forms 144 Nouns with two sets of plural forms 150 Miscellaneous irregularities in the noun 152 Irregularities in the verb 153 | |
| | Index | 156 |
| | List of exercises | 158 |
| | A note on sources | 160 |

CHAPTER ONE

STRUCTURAL TRANSCRIPTION

The declension of Russian substantives (nouns, adjectives, and pronominal adjectives) can be shown to be a simple phenomenon when viewed not in terms of the Russian orthography (spelling system), but in the light of a system of transcription which will be called *structural transcription*, or ST. There are certain features, hidden or distorted by the orthography, which are much more easily explained and understood when treated in the framework of the ST.

There are in Russian certain basic vowel and consonant sounds which are rendered, as in many languages, by the spelling system. However, like any spelling system, the Russian system for indicating these basic units is not perfect. In the discussion that follows we will compare the basic units (indicated in the ST by Latin letters) with the units of the spelling system (indicated by Cyrillic letters) in order to point out where the spelling system causes confusion. It will be important to distinguish at all times the basic units (consonant and vowel *sounds*) from the units of the spelling system (consonant and vowel *letters*).

It should also be noted at this time that the ST is not a phonetic transcription. A phonetic transcription is one which attempts to reduce to written form *all* of the elements in the sound system of the language, to approximate through written symbols exactly what is heard when a Russian utterance is produced. The ST, on the other hand, records the *basic* sound units, and the key word here is "basic."

A basic unit is a kind of abstract structural element, and every language is made up of a limited number of these elements. As stated above, the spelling system is the traditional method of recording these elements, but it is seldom a very efficient vehicle. In the case of Russian, the spelling system is more efficient than that of many other languages, and for this reason there will be many instances when it seems that the ST is not

unlike a system of transliteration. (Transliteration is a means of representing elements of one writing system by using those of another, for example, using Latin letters to render words or names that are normally written in a non-Latin system such as Cyrillic, Arabic, Hebrew, etc.) But since the spelling system does contain certain inadequacies and distortions, we will attempt to look beyond it at the structural elements, and the ST will provide us with the tool to accomplish this.

The Russian alphabet contains 33 letters: 10 vowel letters, 21 consonant letters, and 2 signs of separation. The inventory of basic sound units, however, totals 38 items: 5 vowel units and 33 consonant units. The consonants may be either hard or soft, and this distinction is crucial for an understanding of the relationship between the basic sound units and the letters that represent them.

The five basic vowel units and the ten vowel letters used to represent them are as follows:

| <u>Basic vowel units</u> | <u>Vowel letters</u> | |
|--------------------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| | <u>Group I</u> | <u>Group II</u> |
| a | а | я |
| e | э | е |
| i | и | й |
| o | о | ё |
| u | у | ю |

The thirty-three basic consonant units may be divided into two types, paired and unpaired. The paired consonants are those whose hardness or softness is independent of the environment; the unpaired consonants are those whose hardness or softness is predetermined either by the environment or by the nature of the consonant itself. It can be seen in the chart on the following page that in the case of the paired consonants a single consonant letter is used to represent either of two basic consonant sounds, since each related hard and soft pair is written with the same consonant letter. In the ST the softness of the paired consonants will be indicated by a hook (,) under the letter.

Basic consonant unitsConsonant letters

(Paired)

| | | | | | |
|---|----|---|----|---|---|
| d | ḍ | t | ṭ | Д | Т |
| b | ḅ | p | p̣ | Б | П |
| z | ẓ | s | ṣ | З | С |
| v | ṿ | f | f̣ | В | Ф |
| m | ṃ | n | ṇ | М | Н |
| r | ṛ | l | ḷ | Р | Л |

(Unpaired)

| | | | | | |
|---|----|---|---|---|---|
| k | g | x | К | Г | Х |
| š | ž | c | Ш | Ж | Ц |
| č | šč | j | Ч | Щ | Й |

The discussion of what happens when we combine basic units will be divided into two main parts: (1) consonant plus vowel; (2) consonant not followed by a vowel.

A. CONSONANT PLUS VOWEL

1. PAIRED CONSONANT PLUS VOWEL. The combination of a paired consonant plus vowel is rendered in Russian spelling in the following ways:

a. HARD PAIRED CONSONANT PLUS VOWEL. This combination is always written with the appropriate consonant letter plus a vowel letter from Group I.

| | |
|--------|--------|
| zavódu | завóду |
| voróta | ворóта |
| borodá | бородá |

b. SOFT PAIRED CONSONANT PLUS VOWEL. This combination is always written with the appropriate consonant letter plus a vowel letter from Group II.

| | |
|--------|--------|
| ṛeḏéḷu | недѐлю |
| ṭóṭa | тѐтя |
| ḷiṣé | лисѐ |

EXERCISES

Combining paired consonants and vowels.

1. Rewrite the following forms in Cyrillic:

| | |
|---------------|-------------|
| a. ḏéṭi | f. poródi |
| b. múSORa | g. podúmaḷi |
| c. zánaṭi | h. ṣeṇála |
| d. naṛisálaḷi | i. rólosi |
| e. ḷúḷiṭe | j. upaḏóṭe |

2. Rewrite the following forms in ST:

| | |
|-----------|---------------|
| a. варѐли | f. литератýра |
| b. зовѐте | g. ребѐта |
| c. сѐмя | h. молодѐми |
| d. дѐди | i. лѐди |
| e. завѐды | j. полѐты |

2. UNPAIRED CONSONANT PLUS VOWEL. The combination of an unpaired consonant plus vowel follows a somewhat different pattern and may be summarized as follows:

a. VELAR PLUS VOWEL. Even though the velars (*k, g, x*) may be either hard or soft, they are classed as unpaired consonants because the hardness or softness is dependent upon the following vowel. That is, unlike the truly paired consonants which may be either hard or soft before any of the five basic vowel units,¹ the velars are always hard before *a, o, or u* and always soft before *e or i*. The only exceptions to this occur in a few marginal verb forms and will not materially affect the relevance of this statement for declension. Thus the combination of a velar with *a, o, or u* is always written with the appropriate consonant letter plus a vowel letter from Group I, while the combination of a velar with *e or i* is written with a consonant letter plus a vowel letter from Group II.

| | | | |
|-------|-------|------|------|
| noǵá | НОǴÁ | nógi | НОГИ |
| rúku | рúкy | ruké | рукé |
| múxoj | мúхOЙ | múxi | мúХИ |

Note that no hook appears under the velar consonant before *e or i*, since the softness here is automatic.

EXERCISES

Combining velar consonants and vowels.

1. Rewrite the following forms in Cyrillic:

- | | |
|-----------|-----------|
| a. goloví | f. nógu |
| b. bloxé | g. suxíŋi |
| c. púxa | h. visokó |
| d. ŝekí | i. kínuŋi |
| e. pókíŋe | j. dorógi |

¹Except that no hard paired consonant ever appears before the basic vowel *e* in words of native Russian origin.

2. Rewrite the following forms in ST:

- | | |
|-----------|------------|
| a. рѐки | f. дорѡге |
| b. городá | g. высокá |
| c. мѹхе | h. зáсухи |
| d. купѹте | i. пироги́ |
| e. ногáми | j. гуля́ка |

b. HUSHER PLUS VOWEL. The hushing consonants, or hushers (š, ž, č, šč), unlike the velars, are completely unaffected by the vowel that follows them, since they can only be hard (š, ž) or soft (č, šč). Like the velars, however, the combination of consonant plus the vowel *a* or *u* is written with the appropriate consonant letter plus a vowel letter from Group I, and the combination of consonant plus the vowel *e* or *i* is written with a consonant letter plus a vowel letter from Group II. The combination of husher plus the vowel *o* merits special attention.

In a root the combination of husher plus *o* is spelled with a vowel letter from either Group I or Group II.¹ In a declensional ending, however, the choice of vowel letter is dependent upon the place of stress. That is, if the *o* is stressed it is spelled with a vowel letter from Group I (o); if unstressed it is spelled with the corresponding vowel letter from Group II (ë). Note, however, that since in the latter instance we are dealing with unstressed position, the letter ë is replaced by the letter e.

¹A Group I vowel letter will be used in those instances when stress remains on that syllable in all forms of the paradigm or in all related words (i.e., words with the same root), e.g., шброх, чбпорный, шбры, etc. However, when stress moves to another syllable, either within the paradigm or in related words, then a vowel letter from Group II is used, e.g., шѐпот (because of шептáть), щѐлок (because of щелочнѡй), жѐлоб (because of the plural желобá), etc.