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And Who am I to Judge?

When I teach a class of Russian Heritage Speakers, I often feel as an intruder trespassing somebody's private territory – a territory of a family or even a nation. First, comments on commonly used local words and dialectic expression sometimes provoke students' resentment. Second, dealing with mistakes that students pick up at home can simply be embarrassing for them. As we teach the standard literary Russian, this sensitive ethical issue cannot be avoided, and keeping it in the dark does not help.

Some things are easier to discuss than others. For instance, local words for items or places (туфли [tufli] for ботинки [botinki], зала [zala] for гостиная [gostinaia]) can be explained as language variations across Russian speaking world. Students usually find such an explanation inoffensive, but how do we go about phrases that present an alternative grammatical structure, such as verbal government or a different choice of prepositions and prefixes – я за тобой соскучился [ja za toboj zaskuchilsa] instead of the standard я по тебе соскучился [ja po tebe zaskuchilsa], for example?

I have seen raised eyebrows and not so friendly looks on my students' faces as I attempted to correct expressions they constantly hear at home. A colleague of mine was once confronted by one of his Heritage students over the notorious preposition на [na] for the Ukraine: "And who are you to judge?" Maintaining integrity as a teacher, avoiding ambiguity at any cost, while trying not to hurt students' feelings proves to be an uneasy task to accomplish.

The diversity of dialects is of course not the only source of common misuse of standard Russian. Native speakers tend to be somewhat frivolous with lexical and grammatical forms in our colloquial speech, especially in conversations with close friends and family. We commonly would say, for instance, ну чего ты хочешь? [nu chego ty khochesh], чего ты ждешь? [chego ty zhdes], and I cannot imagine a situation when in the midst of some heated argument, parents would turn to their kids to explain the proper use of the Accusative over the Genitive in the phrases.

English language with its economical ways of expressing everyday needs becomes yet another source of the distortion of Russian. This is a common practice among Russian Americans to employ English structures literally translated into Russian. Phrases such as я беру хайвей [ja беру highway] instead of я поеду по хайвею [ja poedu po highwaju], я не знаю, если он придет [ja ne znaju, esli on priedet] instead of я не знаю, придет ли он [ja ne znaju, priedet li on], etc. are common examples of broken Russian – not to mention that there were times when such Rushglish was considered chic in some immigrant communities.

While educated Native Speakers always know when they misuse the language, Heritage Speakers do not. They just learn Russian the way they hear it at home, with all the mistakes their parents and family make. This is the primary and, in most cases, the only source of Heritage speakers' language acquisition, yet it does not have to become a source of their embarrassment in a classroom. Maybe it would help if the subject of dialectic variations and linguistic habits of Native Speakers is included in the curriculum and becomes a topic for an open discussions?

The column Psychology of Language learning of the AATSEEL Newsletter is intended to promote a dialogue for teachers of Slavic languages regarding the psychological aspect of language learning. Submissions for future editions of this column should be addressed to Valery Belyanin electronically to vbelyanin@gmail.com