

THE FUNNY SIDE

Written for "The Listener" by E.D.

OF LEARNING RUSSIAN

THOUSANDS of people in Britain are studying Russian. In Government offices in Whitehall notices invite civil servants to spend their spare time studying Russian "for the advancement of their careers." Board of Trade foreign staffs have been urged to learn "the language of the future." Special classes for them are being held every night. Boys at some of Britain's famous public schools have also taken up Russian.—*Cable message.*

NEW ZEALAND some time ago appointed an envoy to Russia and doubtless the prospective candidates for the position secured a copy of *Teach Yourself Russian*.

As one newspaper remarked, "He, the envoy, will have to face an unknown tongue." He will. Time is short and Russian very long. The first thing to do is to learn the funny square letters jumbled up with our own familiar ones, caps and small type all mixed up regardless. It is disappointing, however, to find that our familiar B doesn't say B in Russian—it says V; and H says N, while R turned the other way round scornfully says Ya! So the "funnies" are really easier to remember than our own old friends because one can find resemblances between them and familiar objects. The sign for *sh*, for instance, is like an old-fashioned corset.

Probably the amazing jumble of Roman and Greek letters is the outcome of requests sent in old Slav days to the other countries, asking them for free samples of letters. These would be put in a bag till there were sufficient to represent the sounds and then fitted together to form existing words as drawn from the bag. Hence that capital T in *pot*, which incidentally is *rot*, meaning mouth, not pot meaning pot.

The learned professor from Kiev University who writes *Teach Yourself* points out that Russian presents no difficulties as regards pronunciation, as from one side of Russia to the other pronunciation is the same, whereas in England one can hear "Sugar," "sugah" and "shuggar" in the same town.

You Stick Things On

The Russian language is what I believe is called agglutinative. You take a simple three-letter word and then stick heads and tails on it to show number, gender, case, etc., until it spreads half-way across the page.

Once I had a "bed-sit" in Kobe next to that of a Russian *émigrée*, and when she had a visitor I wondered what they could have to say from 8 p.m. till midnight. The wall was paper thin, but I knew no Russian, all my spare time being absorbed by the necessity of learning to say such things in Japanese as "Under-mountain-street where going is? honourable please." Or "Stamps five sen twenty-piece."

The widow of a pre-Revolution noble would pop in, for instance, to tell my neighbour (who told me next day when she came for her English lesson), "My dear, this will make you scream. At the dance last night that *canaille*, that filthy *poogals*, that impossible, the miserable Soviet consul, had the effrontery to ask me to dance. *Me! da da! Ya*, the widow of a Russian count!"



"Ya Billa Bee" (Yei Bogu!)



"Tot Ta To"



"Pavka!"

I know now why they had not yet said it all when the great temple bell boomed at midnight.

Some Tasty Bits

Although I have only reached Lesson 10 I have browsed through *Teach Yourself* and found some tasty bits. For example, in a list of polite sentences such as "Excuse me," "Kindly bring me a fried egg," I find *Yei Bogu* (By God) and *Podi von* (get out); useful of course, but on the first night in a strange hotel even more necessary would be "where is the — bathroom?"

Then in turning the leaves one comes to the verb *to give* (*dati*). I can imagine the joys of the boys "at some of Britain's famous public schools who have taken up Russian," when they come to the future of *dati*. It goes, "*Ya dam, tei dashi, on dast, mei dadim, vei daddity, oni dadoot.*"

When one fails to get at the reason for a phenomenon one obviously must invent one for oneself and as I can't find any book to tell me why the good, simple, old Slav language came to be burdened with the truly terrible Russian grammar of to-day I've thought out a reason. Now in primitive Slav times I imagine one said briefly "big black bad wolf chase man. Man run house, bang door." That is perfectly clear; but in present-day Russian with the full complement of genders, cases, numbers, tenses, aspects, diminutives, etc., it would fill a quarter of a page. If ever I visit Russia I'm going my own gait: no model factories, but straight to the backblocks to find out whether the Russian peasant talks all this grammar. For instance, when Ivan from his warm bed on the stove calls to Verka on a "twenty-below" morning to "go feed the old black cow and give the ten little swine their swill," does he say all these grammatical trimmings? I do know that the English farm labourer who has been learning grammar at school since about 1870 says: "I seen you steal them turnets as sure as I sot 'ere. You done it," whereas his Russian brothers never even went to school before the Revolution. So how could they speak all this grammar!

My Theory About the Grammar

Well, here is my theory as to how the grammar came to be. In the distant past a few of the young Slav intelligentsia took a trip to Rome and Greece.

Their home-coming was an event. They had shaved off their beards and donned togas, which however had to be discarded for four pairs of pants as zero weather approached. Of course they were invited to speak all over the country and the main burden of their message was that the simple Slav language must be brought into line with the cultured and high-toned *Yazoiks* of Europe, such as Latin and Greek. So they decided on a grammar based on the Latin. All other matters were shelved for 50 years. The babel of voices shouting opinions as to whether *peevo* (beer) was to be masculine or feminine, and why *derevo* (a tree) should be neuter when it was a living thing with a spirit in it, must have reached from Kiev to Moscow. Of course there would be the usual dyed-in-the-wool Conservative party howling that there had been no call for all this grammar fancy-work before these know-it-alls had gone to Rome and got their beards cut.

Oni Billee Bee!

The construction of the verb *to be* probably came on the last day before the Yule holidays. The *Chels* were impatient to get off to a wolf hunt, the big sleigh was outside, so everyone piled in and the verb *to be* was framed *en route* to the accompaniment of *peevo* and *vodka*. The sun shone, the runners squeaked on the dry snow, the horses tossed their heads and amid riotous merriment the future tense of the verb *to be* was born. Here it is phonetically.

"Ya Bill Bee
Ya Billa Bee
Tei Bill Bee
On Bill Bee
(whack at the near horse)
Mei Bill Bee
(Giddap Andreil!)
Voi Bill Bee
Oni Billee Bee"
(Yei Bogu!)

Here the sledge had hit a pine tree and the whole assembly slithered off into a snowdrift.

That Evening and the Next Day

There was a dance in the evening and doubtless it was there, still under the influence of *peevo*, that the declension

of *tot* (that) was decided on. One can see the good men pounding round in their high felt boots, wagging their beards as the *skreepka* (was ever better name for a fiddle?) favoured with a mazurek-like measure. Here it is, as I am learning it in *Teach Yourself*:

Tot ta to
Tovo toi tech
Tomoe toi tem
Tom toi tech

It was the day after when the sky had that bitter, steely "forty-below" look, and when even if you sit on the stove you can't get warm, noses were blue, icicles hung from moustaches and acerbities flew, that the afore-mentioned *dam, dashi* conjugation was framed.

"Pleasing Diminutives"

In spite of all the grammar, however, there is a friendly folksy flavour about Russian, an intimacy and cosiness that the cold and severe influence of Rome left untouched.

As the writer of *Teach Yourself* says, "It abounds in pleasing diminutives." If, for instance, your sweetheart's name is Paul you can call him Pavlik, Pavochka, Pavluska or Pavonika. But if you hear he is going with another girl you send back his presents with a curt, "Pavka!" which "gives the name a sense of disdain."

And so to my unknown brother student of Russian—the New Zealand envoy of whom the newspaper said "... It will tax the powers of the best-equipped candidate who can be found for the position" — I have pleasure in saying "On Bill Bee," and if even now you are at a loss for a word in your maiden speech in Russian, just fill in with *Yei Bogu* ad lib.

"THE RANK OUTSIDER," one of Nat Gould's fast-moving turf stories, has been transcribed for radio. It will be presented from 12B every Thursday, Friday and Saturday at 8.45 p.m., starting on April 19.