
The Russian Contributions to the English Language: a Case of OED Record

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Abstract

The paper looks at Russian contributions to the English language, which are in evidence of the Third Edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED3)*. With the number of 402 loanwords the Russian language figures among the twenty-five most prolific language sources of word-borrowing in the vocabulary of modern English (Durkin, 2014). This survey is an attempt to produce a far fuller language profile of Russian investigating *OED*'s data further. In addition to the loanwords, it also looks at those lexical items in *OED3*, which appeared in English under the lexical influence of the Russian language – namely, loan translations or calques, semantic borrowing, proper names of Russian origin and their derivatives. By performing a number of advanced searches on *OED Online*, additional subsets of ‘Russianisms’ were generated and carefully examined. The paper concludes that the total number of the Russian contributions to the English language exceeds 1000 lexical items and the input of the Russian language to the lexicon of modern English should be assessed as more prolific.

Keywords: OED; etymology; lexical borrowing; loan translation; semantic borrowing; Russian

1 Russian Loanwords on *OED Online*

According to Philip Durkin, chief etymologist of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the Russian language figures among the twenty-five most prolific language sources in its input to the vocabulary of modern English (Durkin 2014: 350). However, as stated in Podhajecka (2006) Russian words have not received much attention with scare papers on Russianisms concentrating mainly on a single aspect of the borrowing process (Podhajecka 2006:123). In her recent monograph Podhajecka (2013) examines how Russian words have been recorded in major English dictionaries, including the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Wild (2014) remarks that “although some aspects of its methodology and analysis are questionable, this book presents an interesting and readable history of Russian loanwords in English [...]” (Wild 2014:323). However, Podhajecka’s survey is limited to loanwords proper, excluding other types of lexical borrowing and is based on the data of the Second Edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989).

Meanwhile, the Third Edition of the dictionary (*OED3*) has undergone many changes since its major revision, which started in 2000 and is still in progress, including reappraisal of the etymology, appearance of newly added words and senses and what is more important, the publication of the updated data on *OED Online* (www.oed.com) (see Simpson 2002; Simpson 2014). Thus, the language profile of Russian in the *Oxford English Dictionary* would not be full without exploring the dictionary’s data on *OED Online*, which is a powerful tool for generating information on loanwords from various languages, including Russian.

At time of writing, the tool's Advanced Search options give 402 words with 'Russian' as 'language of origin'. These are the words which the dictionary states entered the English vocabulary directly from Russian. The etymological tagging is done by means of using a tag '< Russian' in etymology section, where the symbol '<' showing development or borrowing from Russian.

A new visualization option 'timelines' available on *OED Online* enables us to have a look in graphical form at a number of words first recorded by the *OED* within different time periods. According to the *OED3* data, there is no evidence for the occurrence of Russian words in English before the period 1500-1550. The first links between Muscovy (as Russia was known at that period) and England established only at the sixteenth century and before that time no word-borrowing from Russian had occurred. Figure 1 shows there were several spikes in borrowing from Russian (see Figure 1).

In the earliest period (1550-1600) 32 loanwords made its way to the English lexicon: they are words relating to the domain of measurement (*pood, verst*), animals (*losh, olen*), minerals (*nefte, slude*), consumables (*kvass, obarni*), coins (*rouble*), costume and fur trade (*rubashka, shuba*) and leather-making (*saffian, saffian leather*). Closer inspection shows that the spike happened between 1590 to 1599 and all loanwords of this period come from a single source - the book by Giles Fletcher *Of Russe Common Wealth* (1591).

The next acceleration in Russian word-borrowing happened in the period 1780 to 1789, when the names of the peoples in Siberia were first recorded (e.g., *Aleutian, Chuckchee|Chukchi, Koryak, Vogul*, etc.). In the period 1880-1889 a few earth science terms are in evidence (*dolina|doline, parma*). From 1920 to 1929 predominately Soviet terms (*agitprop, Cheka, Gosplan, kolkhoz*, etc.) were borrowed, albeit scientific terms continued to appear (*karyotype, solonchak, solonetz*, etc.). In period 1950-59 Soviet terms, everyday objects and food terms increase in number, as do the terms relating to mineralogy and chemistry (*karpinskyite, kryzhanovskite, nenadkevichite*).

One thing is immediately apparent is that there are only few loanwords from Russian that have entered the general English vocabulary and as Ph. Durkin notes "relatively few can be expected to be known by the average native speaker of English" (Durkin 2014:352). Analyzing the subset of Russian loanwords, we can also conclude that most of them are limited to technical and specialist registers (e.g., *jarovization, kok-saghyz, plyometrics*, etc.). In addition, as the analysis showed, a handful of the words are labelled as archaisms. Due to their archaic spelling some of the words may not even be recognized by the average native speaker of Russian (e.g., *obarny, ikary/icary, carlock*).

Another important remark to make is that the data represented in *OED3* shows how Russian has often acted as conduit for borrowing of words for languages inside and outside Russia. For example, we may find many names of the Finno-Ugric, Caucasian and Siberian peoples (e.g., *Abaza, Adjar, Adyghe, Cheremiss, Chuckchee, Ingush, Kabardian, Lesgian, Megrel, Nenets, Uzbek, Vepsian*, etc.) as well as the words referring to objects of their everyday life and food terms (*burka, parka, Saperavi, shashlik, yurt*, etc.), which are obviously not of direct Russian origin, but according to the dictionary made its way into English through Russian.

2 Exploring the Database in More Detail

However, it is arresting that a number of random look-ups on *OED Online* show that there are even more Russian words recorded in the dictionary. As a native speaker of Russian I was interested to find out why some Russian words were not displayed in 'language of origin' search. Was it the result of reappraisal of the etymology or of some inconsistencies in the data representation on *OED Online*?

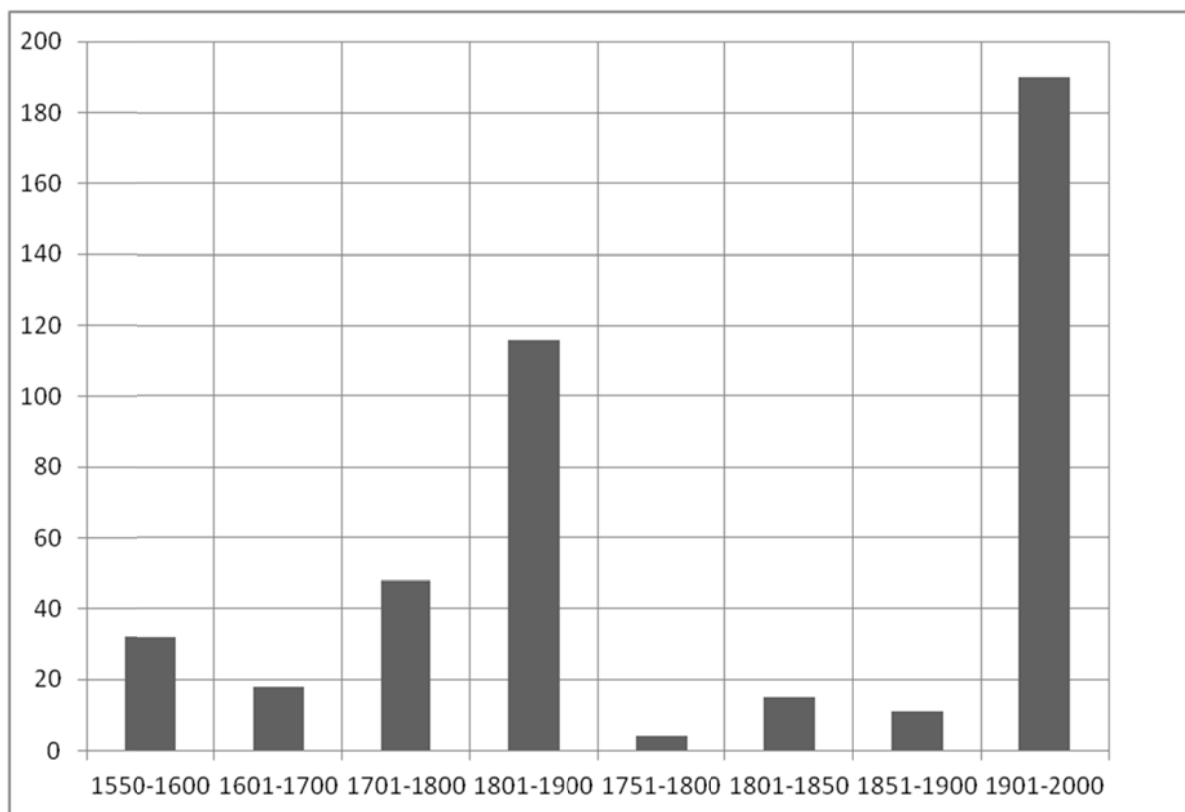


Figure 1: Loanwords from Russian as reflected by OED Online.

In addition, my objective was to identify as many words as possible to measure the overall asset and to give a fuller picture of the items, which have an indication of the lexical influence of Russian. In order to flag all cases where we might find any evidence of Russian influence in meaning or in appearance of a word in English, *OED Online* was explored further. Advanced Search Options available on www.oed.com enable us, in addition to ‘language of origin’ search, to browse the data in specific areas such as Headword, Definition or Etymology. My procedure has been to construct more searches with the search key terms ‘Russian’, ‘Russia’, ‘Soviet’, ‘Soviet Union’, and ‘Moscow’. The results presented in Table 1 show the number of lexical items found by implementing a series of additional searches (see Table 1).

<i>Advanced Search on OED Online</i>	<i>Number of lexical items identified</i>
‘Russian’ in Definition	222
‘Russian’ in Etymology	140
‘Russian’ in Headword	54
‘Russia’ in Definition	98
‘Russia’ in Headword	18
‘Moscow’ in Definition	5

‘Soviet’ in Definition	60
random searches for Russian proper names	42
<i>In total</i>	639

Table 1: Results of additional searches on *OED Online*.

One important point to note is that the generated results have been regarded with caution and carefully viewed. For example, a search for ‘Russian’ in an ‘Etymology’ subfield gives the result of 1171 entries where the term ‘Russian’ (e.g., *Bukharinism, factionalism, immunosorbent, Molotov cocktail, peasantization*, etc.) is employed. However, closer inspection showed that this number already includes the 402 Russian loanwords.¹ Secondly, it had all the ‘hits’ where the term ‘Russian’ was used but etymology was not clear or where the parallels with other Slavic languages were drawn (for example, the use of the phrase ‘compare with Russian ‘X’” may indicate an analogy to a Russian word, but the word itself may not be of Russian origin). Such cases were considered as false hits.

In the next step, I searched the database applying the filter ‘Russian’ and ‘Russia’ in a ‘Definition’, and that added 320 new lexical items to my list (e.g., *Cossack, lower depths, middle peasant, Palekh, Rayonism, telega, tula metal, Spirit-wrestlers, White Army*, etc.). The search for ‘Russian’ and ‘Russia’ in a ‘Headword’ subfield produced mainly the phrases and compounds with ‘Russian’ and ‘Russia’ used as a modifying word (e.g., *Russian dinner, Russian scandal, Russian roulette, Russian wolfhound, Russia linen, Russia sheet-iron, Russia calf*, etc.). Such cases were also treated together, as these lexical items appeared in the English lexicon to refer to specific Russian products and objects of everyday life, etc.

The search for terms ‘Moscow’, ‘Soviet’, ‘Soviet Union’ in a ‘Definition’ generated a new subset of words (e.g. *Blue Blouse, Center, Lubyanka, Moscowism, ASSR, actually existing, hammer and sickle, narcology, refusenik, spartakiad, social realism*, etc.). Finally, I also did a number of random searches for Russian proper names, and the search produced a number of derivatives and loan blends that were not listed in the previous subsets (e.g. *Amur, Altai, Tostoyan, Stanislavsky, Gorbymania*, etc.).

As shown in Table 1, I got the number of 639 lexical items which have an evidence of Russian influence in meaning or appearance in the lexicon of modern English. Additionally, one thing that is common for all these words is the absence of a tag ‘<Russian’ in an etymology section. Instead of it, the phrases ‘after Russian ‘X’, ‘probably/perhaps after Russian ‘Y’, ‘< the name of ‘X’” (where ‘X’ is a Russian personal name) are used. This probably explains the fact that the words from the generated subsets are not displayed in ‘Russian’ as ‘language of origin’ search as the etymological parsing of the dictionary data requires the use of the tag ‘< Russian’ in etymology section.

¹ ‘Language of origin’ and ‘Etymology’ searches are two different options to explore the data on *OED Online*.

3 Types of Lexical Borrowing

One thing is immediately apparent that the lexical items in the generated subsets belong to different types of borrowing from Russian. To give a few illustrative examples, it is worth comparing the following words:

- (1) '*peasantization, n.*' Either < peasantize v. + -ation *suffix*, or < peasant n. + -ization *suffix*, perhaps after Russian *okrest'janivanie* < o-, prefix forming verbs and nouns denoting process or completion + *krest'jan-*, stem of *krest'janin* peasant + -ivanie, suffix forming nouns denoting process (New entry, September 2005)
- (2) '*factionalism, n.*' < factional *adj.*¹ + -ism *suffix*. In sense 2 after Russian *frakcionnost'* (1906 or earlier in this sense, but brought into prominence by a resolution (drafted by Lenin) of the 10th Congress of the Russian Communist Party in 1921) (Updated entry, September 2014)
- (3) '*theremin, n.*' < the name of its inventor, Léon Thérémin (b. 1896–1993), Russian engineer (Not updated entry)

In the first example (*peasantization*), we deal with a *loan translation* or *calque* on Russian. In the second example (*factionalism*) *OED3* states that sense 2 of the word appeared after Russian *frakcionnost'* and we deal with the *semantic change in meaning* or *semantic loan*. The last term '*theremin*' is an example of eponymous word derived from the personal name of Russian engineer Léon Thérémin.

Loan translations or calques are defined by Ph. Durkin as borrowing situations "in which the newly created word to some degree 'translates' the compositional elements of the foreign-language word" (Durkin 2014: 164). For instance, the word '*peasantization*' probably appeared after Russian word *okrest'janivanie*, consisting of the stem *krest'janin* (peasant) + -ivanie, suffix forming nouns denoting process.² Other explicative examples from *OED3* are the words *Decembrist* and *minority man*, which are calques on Russian *Dekabrist* and *Menshevik* (both types of lexical borrowing are in evidence of *OED3*):

- (4) '*Decembrist, n.*' < December n. + -ist *suffix*, after Russian *dekabrist* (Updated entry, September 2008)
- (5) '*Dekabrist, n.*' < Russian *dekabrist*, < *dekabr*' December (Not updated entry)
- (6) '*minority man, n.*' [after Russian *men'shevik* Menshevik n.] (Updated subentry, March 2002)
- (7) '*Menshevik, n.*' < Russian *men'shevik* (1903), lit. 'member of the minority' < *men'sh-* (stem of *men'shij* minor, also found in *men'sinstvo* minority, and cognate with classical Latin *minor*) + -ev- connective element + -ik, suffix forming nouns (Updated entry, September 2001)

However, we should note that it may be quite difficult to refer particular examples to the category of loan translations or semantic borrowing, as there are a lot of borderline cases. As Ph. Durkin points out:

[...] we may prefer to say that we do not have borrowings at all but (in the case of semantic loan) semantic change or (in the case of loan translation) new words or phrases occur as the result of influence from synonymous word in another language. (Durkin 2009:138)

For instance, the term '*biomechanics*' shows that its sense 2 from theatre subject field is quite different from its sense 1, which refers to a branch of science. The semantic change in meaning occurred as a result of influence of the Russian term '*биомеханика*' introduced by the Russian dramatist Vsevolod Meyerhold:

- (8) '*biomechanics, n.*' [...] In sense 2 after Russian *biomexanika* (1922 or earlier in this sense;

² In the paper I follow the transliteration system of Russian words used in *OED3*.

introduced by V.E. Meyerhold (1874 – 1940), Russian dramatist and director.

2. *Theatre*. With *sing.* concord. A theory and technique of acting, developed in the early 1920s by Russian director and dramatist Vsevolod Meyerhold, which emphasizes control and economy of physical movement rather than psychological preparation, and uses precise, stylized, repeatable gestures and poses to evoke specific actions and emotions (Updated entry, December 2010)

Some other examples on *OED Online*, which show semantic influence from Russian are *commissar* (sense b), *fellow-traveller* (sense 2), *method* (sense f), *polyphonic* (sense 4b), *structuralism* (sense 4a), etc.

Another large group of words, which are in *OED3* evidence, are *Russian proper names* – both place and personal names. Proper names are usually excluded from the scope of general purpose dictionaries but in the historical dictionary of English as *OED* is their proportion is much higher. If we look particularly close at this type of words, we will see that in many cases Russian personal names serve as etymons, and in combination with derivatives and productive suffixes or as being an element in compound they developed many new words in the vocabulary of the modern English. To give a few illustrative examples, we may mention the words as *Chekhovian*, *Khrushchevism*, *Leninism*, *Lysenkoism*, *Machism*, *Nikonian*, *Ouspenskian*, *Stalinoid*, *Stravinskian*, *Nabokovian*, *Turgenevian*, etc. These lexical items appeared in the subsets generated by ‘Russian’ in Definition and ‘Russian’ in Etymology searches.

The methodology used for identifying the Russian contributions to *OED3* also generated many eponymous names. For instance, very many plants, minerals are named after their discoverers (e.g., *karpinskyite*, *kryzhanovskite*, *shcherbakovite*, *Perovskia*, etc.) or in honour of their inventors in a particular field of study (in some cases with proper names in the attribute position) (e.g., *Kalashnikov*, *Markov* (also *Markov process*, *Markov chain*), *Markovnikov*, *Pavlov* (also *Pavlov pouch*, *Pavlov’s dog*), *theremin*, *Tokarev*, etc.). In addition, there are many Russian place names and derivatives from them: *Amur*, *Altai*, *Kamchatkan*, *Kremlin*, *Kremlinology*, *Palekh*, *Volga* (also *Volga German*), *Ural*, *Zembla(i)an*, *Petersburg paradox* (also *St Petersburg paradox*, *Petersburg problem*), etc.

4 Conclusion

As already seen above, the subset of loanwords generated by ‘language of origin’ search does not give us the full picture of the Russian contributions to the vocabulary of modern English lexicon. Using the methodology of Advanced Searches, additional 639 lexical items have been identified and examined. As the survey showed, these subsets belong to the other types of lexical borrowing from Russian, namely, to loan translations, semantic loans, and proper names. This group of items together with the 402 loanwords from Russian gives us in total 1041 ‘Russianisms’ which are recorded in *OED3*. In addition, as the result of the ongoing revision, 61% of the entries have already been updated and 74 new entries have been added to the Russian dataset. In total, these figures are amazing and they present a very good reflection of the Russian contributions, which input to the lexicon of English thus should be assessed as more prolific. I also hope that *OED’s* efforts in improving the functionality of *OED Online* will eventually result in better coverage and representation of other types of lexical innovations in *OED3*, which for now are remaining quite a challenge to identify and investigate in the realm of etymology.

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