

Understanding the Kremlin: it's the words, stupid

Angus Roxburgh

It is notoriously difficult to understand Vladimir Putin. When he says: “We have no troops in Crimea”, it turns out that he actually means: “I personally ordered the annexation of Crimea.” When he says: “Russia is bombing Isis”, he means: “Russia is bombing anyone who is trying to unseat President Assad.”

The trouble is, we sometimes don't understand Russians even when they do say what they mean. The stereotype is of a sullen, unsmiling nation – gruff, rude, and a tad untrustworthy. After 40-odd years of studying them, I suspect that while some of that may be true, our perception of Russians as people is also skewed by their language, and the way they speak it.

It's not just vocabulary or odd constructions that can make Russian difficult for foreigners. I remember on early trips to Moscow as a student being taken aback by how brusque or peremptory they could sound when, for example, asking me to do something. That's because I was not yet attuned to the inflexions of their speech.

“Shut the door!” sounds incredibly rude in English, especially when written down and the intonation of the voice cannot be heard. We tend to couch our commands in a string of modal verbs and questions: “Could you shut the door, please?” “Would you mind ...” But to the Russian ear the direct imperative does not sound impolite.

Indeed, they have two different forms of the imperative to provide even greater subtlety. “Shut the door!” can be “Zakroy dver” or “Zakryvay dver”. The latter apparently sounds more polite to a Russian – or more urgent, depending on how it's said.

Imagine how this can affect politics.

Many people will remember Hillary Clinton's faux pas in 2009, when she tried to break the ice in US-Russian relations by ceremoniously presenting Russia's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov with a gift – a button marked “reset”. “We worked hard to get the right Russian word,” boasted Clinton. Spoilsport Lavrov immediately retorted: “You got it wrong.”

The Americans had written “peregruzka” instead of “perezagruzka”.

But Lavrov's attempt to explain (in uncharacteristically poor English) only deepened the misunderstanding. He told Clinton: “That means ‘overcharge’.” To which Clinton laughed and said, “Well, we won't let you do that to us!”

Presumably she thought Lavrov meant “overcharge” in the sense of “charge too much money” – but in fact the word means “overload” and has nothing to do with money at all.

Sometimes misunderstandings – if the political will is there – make no difference, or can even help to dispel tensions.

For example, in 1995 after a summit with President Bill Clinton, Boris Yeltsin poked gentle fun at reporters who had poured cold water on hopes for a successful meeting. He said: “You predicted our meeting today would fail”, which the interpreter translated (not knowing how Yeltsin was going to continue) as “You were writing that today’s meeting was going to be a disaster.” Yeltsin then went on: “I would say that it was you who failed.” The interpreter foolishly decided to stick with the ill-chosen word “disaster” and translated Yeltsin’s gentle rebuke as: “Well, now I can tell you that you’re a disaster,” – much stronger and more comical than Yeltsin had intended. Clinton was convulsed with laughter for a full minute, wiping tears from his eyes and hugging Yeltsin in appreciation of this witty joke – which in fact Yeltsin had not made. Yeltsin himself looked completely baffled, wondering why his wry comment had provoked such a wild reaction.

If the political will to understand isn’t there – and that is the case with almost anything that Vladimir Putin utters – then it can be much more serious.

Last year, for example, there was an outcry as the world’s press reported that Putin had called for talks on “statehood for the south-east regions of Ukraine”. In fact he called for no such thing. Putin used the word “gosudarstvennost”, which has two distinct meanings: “statehood” (meaning independence) and “the state system” (meaning the structures and organisation of a state). The clue to understanding which he meant came in the preposition that followed it: “in”, not “for” or “of”. Had he meant “statehood” in the sense of independence he could not have used the preposition “in”. The full phrase he used, correctly translated, was “talks about the political organisation of society and state in south-east Ukraine”, in other words he was talking about decentralisation, not statehood. (He also said he had just been discussing such reforms with Ukraine’s President Poroshenko – and self-evidently Poroshenko had not been discussing the possibility of independence for south-east Ukraine with him.)

But why let grammar get in the way of a good story?

Sadly, the teaching of Russian is dwindling at British universities, fewer than 20 of which now offer it, and mostly only in conjunction with other subjects. One would have thought that in these days of rising tension with Russia, we need all the experts we can get.

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