

SOME LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF THE RUSSIAN MILITARY IDIOM

Translation is the broader framework for this discussion, but with particular emphasis on a number of linguistic features that are characteristic of the Russian military culture. First a few words about the translation art itself. Indeed, the eminent Russian translator, critic and author of children's books Kornei Chukovsky viewed translation as a high art that demanded fidelity to every nuance of the original. Translation thus can be described in a number of ways, but essentially it is a process that involves the transfer of coded information from one language to another for purposes of human communication, while preserving linguistic equivalency as much as possible. This definition would include meaning, style and context as essential components of the translation process as it moves from source language (SL) to target language (TL). As a preliminary example, this translational phenomenon is illustrated in administrative position titles as they are referenced between two different political and cultural systems such as the United States and the Russian Federation. For example, in the American military context it occurs in the substitution and alternation of the term "secretary of defense" for the Russian lexical counterpart «**министр обороны**» (literally, "**minister of defense**"). Similarly, «**председатель комитета начальников штабов вооружённых сил США**» is expressed as "**Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff**" as compared with the literal rendering of "chairman of the committee of U.S. armed forces chiefs of staff." The result, of course, is not full linguistic equivalency between the two code-units, but the message nonetheless is properly conveyed to conform to the circumstances of the respective target language political and cultural setting. This is what the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) refers to as *congruity judgment*, i.e., when the translator must be able to choose the equivalent expression in the TL that both fully conveys and best matches the meaning intended in the SL.

The Russian military idiom, which is similar in style to scientific and technical language, presents special challenges in translation. I have attempted to group and categorize these specialized terms and phrases in the interest of making them somewhat more transparent for deeper analysis. In the process I have isolated the following categories:

Military Commands

Military commands in Russian frequently are given in the infinitive form rather than as a standard imperative construction we encounter in conventional usage:

Examples: «Начать стрельбу!»	→	“Commence firing!”
«Прекратить стрельбу/огонь!»	→	“Cease fire/firing!”
«К десантированию приступить!»	→	“Prepare for airdrop!”
«Оставить корабль!»	→	“Abandon ship!”
«Держать курс!»	→	“Steer the course!”; “Maintain course/heading!”
«Примкнуть штыки!»	→	“Fix bayonets!”
«Перископ поднять!»	→	“Up periscope!”
«Флаг спустить!»	→	“Lower the flag!”
«Докладывать глубину!»	→	“Report the depth!”
«Приготовиться к грому!»		“Prepare for bomb impact!”
«Зарядить оружие!»	→	“Load the weapon!”
«Разрядить оружие!»	→	“Clear the weapon!”

Urgent commands may be even more succinct:

«К бою!» → “Charge!” “To Battle!”

«В воздух!» → “Scramble aircraft!” (ground command to launch air defense fighter aircraft)

«К погружению!» → “Prepare to dive!” “Dive!”
(submarine operations)

«Отставить!» → “As you were!” (drill command)

«Всплывать!» → “Surface!”, “Take her up!” (submarine operations)

Specialized Compound Nouns and Other Nominal Forms

Contemporary Russian military literature abounds with nouns that are combined, truncated or abbreviated to produce new stylized word forms. This type of compound nominal has been around since before the 1917 Russian Revolution, and they were used extensively in official bureaucratic language during the Soviet period (e.g., *профсоюз*, *вуз*, *Госплан*). The examples that follow take on several forms such as adjective-substantive, substantive-substantive, etc.

Examples: **фотокинопулемёт** → **gun camera**

медсанбат (медицинский санитарный батальон) → **medical battalion**

минзаг (минный заградитель) (МЗ) → **minelayer;
minelaying
ship/vessel/device**

комбат (командир батальона) → **battalion commander**

автотопливомаслозаправщик (АТМЗ) → **fuel and lubricant
truck/vehicle**

адглаввсеобуч → **administrative department of the main
directorate for universal military training**

(административный отдел главного управления всеобщего военного обучения)

армветврач → army/military veterinarian

артхимснаряд → chemical artillery shell

Акаэшка (АКМ) → “АКМ” – improved Kalashnikov assault rifle

зушка (ЗУ/зенитная установка) → antiaircraft gun

урка (УР/установка разминирования) → mine-clearing device/equipment

энша (НШ/начальник штаба) → chief of staff

эргешка (РГ/ручная граната) → hand grenade

Participles and Participial Forms

Participles and participial forms are especially common in Russian military literature and they in turn result in a somewhat ponderous syntax. Moreover, these participial forms occur rather frequently as substantives in adjectival form as is evident in the following style commonly found in military literature:

Поскольку на занятие привлекаются разные категории военнослужащих, отличающиеся по уровню подготовки, в плане проведения занятия на каждый этап указывается, что должны выполнить молодые солдаты, старослужащие и специалисты, прибывшие из учебных подразделений.

What the young soldiers, senior service personnel and specialists who have arrived from the training units must accomplish is indicated in the lesson plan for conducting the training exercise at each phase, inasmuch as various categories of service personnel who are at different levels of training are involved in the exercise.

Other examples of this phenomenon follow:

ведомый → **wingman**

ведущий → **flight leader**

военнообязанный → **person subject to military service**

военнопленный → **POW**

главнокомандующий → **commander-in-chief**

демобилизированный → **dischargee; ex-servicemember**

допрашиваемый → **person being interrogated**

допрашивающий → **interrogator**

заряжающий → **loader (on crew-served weapons)**

инструктирующий → **briefing officer**

обучаемый → **trainee**

уволенный → **one who has been discharged from military service**

уклоняющийся от призыва → **draft dodger**

Prefixes, Suffixes and Real Fixes

The subtle nuances of Russian prefixes present a special range of challenges for the military translator or interpreter whose glosses potentially impact the decision-making processes in an operational environment. Flight scenarios provide an excellent example:

вылет → **sortie; flight/mission departure; takeoff**

залёт → **flight with brief landing enroute; mission/sortie**

налёт → **air strike; air raid; air attack; sortie; logged flying time (required to maintain proficiency)**

недолёт → **undershot/short (artillery); undershooting the runway**

облёт → **flyby; fly around (space operations); familiarization flight; checkout flight (following maintenance); buzzing (a ground location or at a vessel at sea)**

перелёт → **flight (to a specific destination); cross-country flight; round-trip flight; overshoot/overshooting (runway/artillery)**

полёт → **flight; flying; mission**

прилёт → **(flight) arrival**

пролёт → **overflight; flyover; flying over; flyby; transit; span; aisle; bay; miss (a target)**

разбег → **takeoff roll/run (aircraft)**

пробег → **landing roll/run; rollout (aircraft); mileage (vehicles)**

Or perhaps consider the operational implications of transposing the Russian prefix “с” and the prefix “раз” in the following examples relating to ground forces:

развёртывание → **setting up (operations/communications prior to the beginning of an exercise); deployment; fielding (troops); scanning (radar operations)**

свёртывание → **tearing down (at the end of an operation/exercise); building down (weapons/weapon systems)**

Another group of nouns is formed by suffixing standard substantive forms to denote persons such as **пулемётчик** = **machinegunner** or a more esoteric word such as **рэмбовик** = **member of an airborne assault unit** (from the fictionalized super soldier RAMBO).

Other examples of this phenomenon follow:

алькаедовец → **member of al Qaeda**

беглец → **AWOL person; deserter**

вертикальщик → **VTOL pilot**

вертолётчик → helicopter pilot

десантник → paratrooper; member of airborne forces

допросчик → interrogator

заменщик → newly arrived replacement

зенитчик → anti-aircraft gunner

разведчик → intelligence agent; agent; intelligence officer; intelligence analyst; reconnaissance scout; scout; spy; spy plane; reconnaissance aircraft

рэбовец → electronic warfare (EW) specialist

сверхсрочник → re-enlistee; career military person

спецназовец → member of Spetsnaz (Special Forces)

сухопутчик → member of the ground forces

тихоокеанец → member of the Pacific Ocean Fleet

черноморец → member of the Black Sea Fleet

Abbreviations

Standard abbreviations without further expansion are common in spoken and written discourse among all branches of the Russian armed forces:

Examples: **ОМП (оружие массового поражения)** → **WMD (weapons of mass destruction)**

ОМУ (оружие массового уничтожения) → **WMD**

ГСМ (горюче-смазочные материалы) → **POL (petroleum, oil and lubricants)**

ПЛАРБ (подводная лодка, атомная, ракетная, баллистическая) → **SSBN (U.S. Navy) (nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine)**

ПЛАРК (подводная лодка, атомная, ракетная, крылатая) → **SSGN (U.S. Navy) (nuclear-powered cruise missile attack submarine)**

ВПП (взлётно-посадочная полоса) → **runway**

НТС (национальные технические средства) → **national technical means (e.g., satellite imagery)**

РЛС (радиолокационная станция) → **radar; radar site**

ДПА/ДПЛА (дистанционно-пилотируемый летательный аппарат) → **RPV (remotely piloted vehicle); UAV (unmanned airborne vehicle); UAS (unmanned aircraft system); drone**

ЗУР (зенитная управляемая ракета) → **SAM (surface-to-air missile)**

МБР/МКБР (межконтинентальная баллистическая ракета) → **ICBM (intercontinental ballistic missile)**

ПВО (противовоздушная оборона) → **AD (air defense)**

ППО (правила применения оружия) → **ROE (rules of engagement)**

РЭБ (радиоэлектронная борьба) → **EW (electronic warfare)**

American Military or Russian Military?

American and Russian military terms which appear in the Russian defense literature are not always congruent in expressing essentially the same operational concepts. This phenomenon often results from the organizational and doctrinal differences that exist between the two military and political systems. The following examples serve to illustrate:

air superiority (U.S. Air Force) → **превосходство в воздухе**

air supremacy (Russian Air Force) → **господство в воздухе**

AWACS (airborne warning and control system) (U.S.) → **АВАКС (самолётная система дальнего обнаружения и управления)**

AWACS (airborne warning and control system) (Russia) → **АК РЛДН (авиационный комплекс радиодозора и наведения)**

(VMS) navy (used by Russian sources to refer exclusively to foreign navies) → **ВМС (Военно-морские силы)**

(VMF) navy (used by Russian sources to refer exclusively to the Russian Navy) → **ВМФ (Военно-морской флот)**

antisubmarine warfare (ASW) (U.S. Navy) → **противолодочная война**
antisubmarine defense (Russian Navy) → **противолодочная оборона (ПЛО)**

mine countermeasures (U.S. Navy) → **противоминная борьба**
antimine defense (Russian Navy) → **противоминная оборона (ПМО)**

ПУСК! or ПОДЪЁМ! Missile or Rocket?

The Russian term **ракета** can be translated as both “**rocket** “ and “**missile** “ depending on its operational function. In U.S. military terminology the term “ **rocket** “ refers to an unguided projectile in flight, while “**missile** “ denotes a projectile with a post-launch guidance system that is employed as a weapon to strike a designated target. The distinctions are evident in the following examples:

артиллерийская ракета → **artillery rocket**

зажигательная ракета → **incendiary rocket**

авиационная баллистическая ракета (АБР) → **air-launched ballistic missile (ALBM)**
авиационный баллистический снаряд (АБС)

авиационная ракета класса «воздух-воздух» → air-to-air missile (AAM)

зенитная управляемая ракета (ЗУР) → surface-to-air missile (SAM)

крылатая ракета (КР) → cruise missile

крылатая ракета воздушного базирования (КРВБ) → air-launched cruise missile (ALCM)

крылатая ракета морского базирования (КРМБ) → sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM)

крылатая ракета наземного базирования (КРНБ) → ground-launched cruise missile (GLCM)

межконтинентальная баллистическая ракета (МБР/МКБР) → intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM)

противотанковая управляемая ракета (ПТУР) → antitank guided missile (ATGM) (*contemporary term «ПТУР» replaced obsolete term «ПТУРС»*)

ракета с разделяющейся головной частью с индивидуальным наведением боеголовок (РГЧ ИН) → MIRVed (multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicle) missile

More Russian Military “Esoterica”

Numerous other pitfalls such as esoteric jargon, slang, false cognates and neologisms await the neophyte military translator. They can be a distinct challenge for the uninitiated as the following examples attest:

Examples:

аэродром	→	airfield
вододром	→	training area with water obstacles
космодром	→	space center; space launch site/facility; spaceport; cosmodrome
танкодром	→	tank training area

беспилотка → RPV (remotely piloted vehicle);
беспилотник UAV (unmanned airborne vehicle);
 UAS (unmanned aircraft system); drone
беспилотчик
ДПА/ДПЛА (дистанционно-пилотируемый летательный аппарат)

вертушка → “chopper/whirlybird” (*slang for helicopter*)

взлётка → runway (*slang*)

военка → military uniform (*slang*)

видимость миллион на миллион → unlimited visibility (*slang*)

визуальная видимость → visual range

зона видимости → zone of visibility (*radar*); field of view;
communications pass (*space operations*)

приборная видимость → radar range

прямая видимость → line of sight (*communications*)

время «Ч» → “H”-hour; “Zero” hour
«Ч»
«Ч» час

дембель → discharge from military service; career military person (*slang*)

дембельнуться/дембельнуться → to be discharged from military service

дембельский → career military person (*slang*)

демобилизация (демоб) → “demobe”; discharge orders from military service

демобилизованный → dischargee; ex-servicemember

дислокация (войск/сил) → stationing/garrisoning (troops/forces); disposition

дислоцированный → stationed

дислоцироваться → to be stationed; garrisoned

перебазирование → redeployment; relocation
перебазировать → to redeploy; relocate

перебрасывать/перебросить → to rapidly redeploy by air
переброска → airlift; rapid redeployment by air

развёртывание → deployment; fielding
развёртывать/развернуть → to deploy; field

зелёный (“green”) → conscript from basic training to oath

салага → conscript from oath to 6 months

черпак (“scoop”) → conscript from 6 months to 1 year

котёл (“boiler”) → conscript from 1 year to 18 months

старик (“old man”) → conscript from 18 months to discharge

дедушка/дед/дедовский (“grandfather”) → “lifer” (career military person)

дедовщина → hazing/harassment of new recruits by career military personnel

игрище → war games

крещение огнём → baptism of fire

крылатая пехота → airborne troops

летун → “flyboy” (flier) (*slang*)

лифчик → ammunition (ammo) vest (*slang*)

мина-ловушка → booby trap

морпехи → marines

морская пехота → marines

ОГОНЬ ПО СВОИМ → “friendly” fire

пластит → plastic explosive

Подъём! → Liftoff!

показуха → “dog and pony show” or “canine and equestrian performance” (*slang*)

Понял! → Roger!

Приём! → Over!

Пуск! → Launch!

радиоэлектронная борьба (РЭБ) → electronic warfare (EW)

радиоэлектронная защита (РЭЗ) → electronic counter-countermeasures (ECCM)

радиоэлектронная маскировка (РЭМ) → electronic denial and deception (EDD)

радиоэлектронная разведка (РЭР) → signals intelligence (SIGINT); electronic intelligence (ELINT)

радиоэлектронное подавление (РЭП) → electronic countermeasures (ECM)

радиодезинформация → communications deception

радиолокационный → radar

радиообмен → radio traffic

радиотехнический → electronic; SIGINT; radio (equipment); radiotechnical

рулежка → **taxiway (slang)**

свой-чужой → **Identification Friend or Foe (IFF)**

самолёт-невидимка → **Stealth aircraft**

«Стелс»

«Стелт» *(now more commonly used than «Стелс»)*

малозаметный летательный аппарат

невидимка

самолёт-невидимка

техника «Стелс/Стелт»

черемуха (“bird cherry”) → **tear agent (used for crowd/riot control)**

штаб → **headquarters (HQ)**

штаб-квартира → **headquarters building**

эшелон → **echelon; flight level/altitude; assault wave; troop train; troop ship**

кибератака/кибер-атака → **cyberattack**

кибервойна → **cyberwar/cyberwarfare**

киберпространство → **cyberspace**

киберразведка → **cyberintelligence**

кибертеррорист → **cyberterrorist**

кибершпионаж → **cyberespionage**

As evidenced by these very graphic examples both in English and in Russian, the military profession with its specialized terminology and stereotypical syntax possesses its own highly stylized argot much like that of any other technical field. This jargonized military idiom characterizes both the spoken and the written language among armed forces around the world. This paper examined a variety of linguistic features that are characteristic of the Russian military idiom and views them in the context of their U.S. military analog.

My research is derived over many years from unclassified, open source military literature. My current database includes well over 100,000 contemporary Russian military terms, phrases and abbreviations with American English military glosses that encompass terminology employed by air, naval, ground, and space forces. A comprehensive *Russian - American English Military Encyclopedic Dictionary* is currently in progress as a derivative of the database. I welcome suggestions, comments and inquiries at c-dproctor@suddenlink.net.

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