

From the nursery to the desk: Models and modes of foreign language learning in Russia as reflected in literary texts

Kapitolina Fedorova,¹ Natalia Tšuikina²

Abstract. This article examines different models of foreign language learning, both with and without formal instruction, as they are depicted in Russian literature across various historical periods. It explores the underlying ideas about language acquisition and the attitudes towards different foreign languages reflected in these literary representations, and observes how these ideas correlate with changes in language use over time. Four general models of language learning are identified: the “aristocratic” model, which conveys a natural multilingualism and hierarchy of languages; the “school” model, which highlights pedagogical violence and inefficiency; the “bookish” model, representing self-teaching; and the “everyday acquisition” model, which portrays non-prestigious multilingualism. The data for this study were collected and analysed using the Russian National Corpus, with subcorpora created for different time periods and genres. A focus was placed on searching for collocations of key lexical terms, including various derivatives of the verb ‘*uchit*’ (‘to learn’ or ‘to teach’) and the noun ‘*uchitel*’ (‘teacher’), alongside the word ‘*yazyk*’ (‘language’). This approach allows for a comprehensive exploration of the changing perspectives on language learning and multilingualism in Russian cultural and literary contexts.

Keywords: foreign languages learning; language ideology; Russian literature; social stratification; teaching practices

Introduction

The ability to acquire and use more than one language can be seen as fundamental for human beings; it enables communication between individuals belonging to

¹ School of Humanities, Tallinn University, Uus-Sadama 5, 10120 Tallinn, Estonia; e-mail: kapitolina.fedorova@tlu.ee

² School of Humanities, Tallinn University, Uus-Sadama 5, 10120 Tallinn, Estonia; e-mail: natalia.tshuikina@tlu.ee

very different groups and the exchange of information between communities divided by vast distances in both space and time. Throughout history, human societies have been multilingual: “It is hardly likely that monolingualism was the norm except among particularly isolated social groups or in remote areas” (McKitterick 1989: 7; see also Pavlenko 2023). Moreover, trade, migration, and cultural exchange required communication across languages, and multilingual individuals served as mediators in this process, even if the majority of the population stayed monolingual. Naturally, such persons did not necessarily have to be “perfect bilinguals”, nor were they expected to know these other languages “perfectly”, the whole idea of perfect language competence, most likely, being “a quite modern idea” (Braunmüller, Ferraresi 2003: 3). For millennia, we may assume, learning foreign languages occurred, and was perceived, as a natural phenomenon, something that simply happens in the process of communication, and not that different from the way children acquire their mother tongue(s). From a semiotic perspective, this process can be understood as the acquisition of a new cultural code, embedded in social practices and transmitted through interaction rather than through explicit description.

However, and rather early in human history, at least in some cases, language learning started to be treated as a controlled process demanding, on the one hand, conscious effort on behalf of the learner and, on the other hand, some interference from professionalized individuals – language instructors, or teachers. Language teaching emerged alongside education as such: the first known schools – Sumerian ones – were established around 3000 BC, and their primary goal was to train scribes and to teach Sumerian to those who were speakers of other languages (Van De Mieroop 2016: 123–125). In Ptolemaic Egypt, tax exemptions to teachers of Greek were introduced to foster Greek literacy (Clarysse, Thompson 2006: 52–54), which means that language teaching had already become a profession, a way to earn money and obtain a social status. Naturally, professional language teaching was closely related to predominant use of standardized “high” language varieties, such as Latin in Europe, or Church Slavonic in Russia, in the Middle Ages. At the same time, institutionalized teaching of vernaculars also took place, which is confirmed by the growing production of dictionaries, phrasebooks and all kinds of textbooks over the ages; gradually, language teaching “began to acquire the status of a bona fide subject in the schools now catering to the upper and upper-middle class elite” (McLelland 2017: 46).

What we know from the studies on the history of language learning and teaching (McLelland, Smith 2018), though, can differ from images and stereotypes on how languages were transmitted in particular cultures, not least of all as a result of the specific ways in which this process was represented in literature.

From a semiotic point of view, literary texts do not merely reflect educational practices but function as modelling systems that construct and transmit culturally salient ideas about language, learning, and multilingualism. Literary depictions of language learning not only reflect historical realities but also influence cultural perceptions of multilingualism and education, contributing to the formation and persistence of semiotically encoded models of language acquisition. Like any other detail of a novel or a short story, description or mere mention of a certain practice can serve as a narrative device or a tool for character development, or simply as socio-cultural background, which still contributes to the formation and maintenance of certain beliefs and norms. To rephrase: in the context of language learning, it means that by analysing representations of teaching and learning practices in works of literature, we can reveal language attitudes and ideologies of certain groups and time periods, which can long outlive the phenomena that gave rise to them.

In this article, we aim to show how different models of foreign language learning, both with and without formal instruction, were represented in Russian literature in different periods; what ideas about the process of language acquisition and what attitudes to different foreign languages were behind these representations; and how these representations function as semiotic models that correlate with broader changes in language use and cultural hierarchies. The literary texts we analysed included both fiction and non-fiction and covered the period from 1750 to 2025. The data were collected and analysed using the Russian National Corpus (<https://ruscorpora.ru>), by making subcorpora for different time periods and genres and searching for different collocations of the relevant lexical terms such as various derivatives of the verb '*uchit*' ('to learn' or 'to teach'), or the noun '*uchitel*' ('teacher'), with the word '*yazyk*' ('language'). Selected examples were checked to exclude cases of metaphorical usage of the terms and analysed qualitatively (discourse analysis) and quantitatively (comparison between frequencies of usage). All quotations are given in the form they appear in the corpus, indicating the work and year of writing, but without reference to a specific edition.

Social models of language learning in Imperial Russia

In studies on language didactics, particular attention is paid to the development of teaching methods (grammar-translation, direct, audiolingual, communicative, task-based, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), etc. – see e.g. Richards, Rodgers 2014). There is much less emphasis on the social conditions and organization of teaching, and, unsurprisingly, much more is known about all

kinds of institutionalized teaching, where documents and textbooks are available, while informal practices can be studied only through their mentions in memoirs and other (literary) texts. The history of teaching methods, however, cannot be totally distinguished from the reality and practicalities of teaching: declarations and recommendations of methodologists do not necessarily correspond to what is happening inside, and especially outside, of classroom.

Most importantly, the description of different methods as consequently substituting each other in a historical continuity is misleading, as is a strong association of similar practices with the same teaching ideology. This becomes particularly clear if we view language teaching through the semiotic lens proposed by Juri Lotman – namely the distinction between a “culture of rules” and a “culture of texts” (Lotman 2000: 418). A culture of rules privileges explicit norms, codification, and conscious mastery of abstract principles, while a culture of texts relies on immersion in meaningful semiotic material, where rules are not taught directly but inferred from use. These two modes of cultural transmission are not successive stages but coexisting and competing models, unevenly distributed across social contexts and institutions.

From this perspective, the opposition between grammar-translation and direct or inductive approaches reflects not a historical replacement of one “method” by another, but the dominance of different semiotic regimes of language acquisition. The so-called direct method, advocating for treating second language learning as similar to first language learning, is usually presented as an innovation introduced in the second half of the 19th century and opposed to the grammar-translation method (Richards, Rodgers 2014: 11–14); its promotion in Russia is connected to the necessity of practical use of modern European languages and was heavily influenced by western language didactics of that period (Mirolyubov 2002: 21). However, in actual language teaching, the direct approach was used for centuries, in particular to make children of the elite fluent in different languages by assigning speakers of these languages as their caretakers. This way of teaching was not supported by any methodological theory or specially designed teaching materials: “The manuals of mother and foreign tongues did not differ much from each other and books in original languages were used to study” (Protassova 2018: 199). Theoretical foundations and didactic strategies were introduced later, as a reaction to poor results achieved by students in state schools when formal instruction in foreign languages (German, French, English) became habitual and, at the same time, turned into an object of severe critique (Mirolyubov 2002: 16). The heavily criticized grammar-translation method also became institutionalized and theoretically supported after many centuries of its natural development as a practice of teaching ancient languages, Latin and Greek, on the basis of classical

texts. In reality, though, both approaches, inductive (from examples to discovering rules) and deductive (from learning rules to applying them), always co-existed, “but never on an equal footing” (Kelly 1969: 34).

Even if we put aside theoretical conceptualizations, different practices of language teaching were used alongside each other but not equally, since they could be associated with different social settings, actors, and even languages. In the same years, as most middle-class children were struggling with Latin or German grammars in gymnasiums, lower classes were not expected to get formal education in foreign languages. That did not, however, necessarily mean that they were monolingual: they could acquire languages in multilingual settings in communication with their speakers, for example when trading with indigenous people in Siberia, or interacting with Chechens and Circassians during military service in the Caucasus. The aristocracy, on the other side of the social spectrum, tended to raise their children as multilingual in several European languages, hiring native speakers as their teachers and often relying more on acquisition through everyday communication than on formal lessons. Thus, e.g. in the tsar’s family, English nannies were employed to take care of the Romanov children from birth (Zimin 2011: 61). Moreover, one and the same individual could face opposite teaching approaches in different life situations.

If we compare different social models employed for second language teaching and learning in Russia of the Imperial period, there are two oppositions we can use to distinguish them. The first one is related to the difference between the natural acquisition of language in the process of communication and the conscious teaching of language as an academic subject, reinforced by theoretical knowledge. The second opposition is between the presence and the absence of institutionalized educational settings and demands: languages could be learned as part of education, regardless of the learners’ actual wishes and needs, or voluntarily, simply because one needed them. The combination of these two oppositions gives us four theoretically possible typological models, all of which are represented in Russian literary texts but, as we will see, rather differently. These four models are:

- “aristocratic”, or home teaching model. Languages are learnt through communication (not excluding formal lessons) with specially hired teachers/caretakers who are preferably native speakers of target languages (natural communicative acquisition in artificially created educational settings);
- “school” teaching model. Languages are taught as a school subject, mostly through the grammar-translation method and using textbooks. Teachers are not expected to be native speakers of target languages (conscious teaching of language as an academic subject in educational settings);

- “self-taught”, or “bookish” model. Languages are learnt by individuals with strong motivation who use textbooks, dictionaries and grammars, and can occasionally attend some formal classes and/or test their skills in communication (conscious learning of language as a subject without educational settings);
- “everyday” acquisition model. Languages are learnt in the process of real-life communication with native or proficient non-native speakers, often in the absence of any formal language descriptions and dictionaries (natural acquisition without educational settings).

Each model can be seen as a unique set of conditions, roles, and language attitudes: in the first two, language teachers are separate actors, more or less professionalized, while the other two put the figure of the learner in focus; models two and three treat language as knowledge, as something that has to be studied, while the first and the fourth models present it rather as a skill to be mastered through practice. And, interestingly, learning different languages can be associated with different models and, inevitably, with higher or lower social prestige – while the first three models focus on modern European languages, the fourth model is represented commonly as applied to acquiring minority languages of the Russian Empire.

The “aristocratic” model: natural multilingualism, hierarchy of languages, and comic inversion

As a regular practice, inviting foreign teachers to educate children of the nobility became popular, and then ubiquitous, in the second half of the 18th century, several decades after introducing formal foreign language teaching in state-run educational institutions, e.g. the Noble Infantry Cadet Corps in St. Petersburg, established in 1731 (Rjéoutski 2018). This process coincided with the establishing of French as a dominant language among Russian nobility, which, although it paralleled the increase of France’s power in Europe and especially its cultural scene,³ had a more extreme character in the Russian Empire than anywhere else: “There was no nation in Europe, Diderot observed, which was Gallicizing itself more quickly than the Russian nation, both with regard to language and practices” (Offord *et al.* 2018: 97). A Frenchman who visited Russia in the 1790s put a stress on the way the French language was transmitted to the Russian nobility: “[T]he Russians, almost all brought up by Frenchmen, develop a pronounced predilection for [France] from their childhood” (Offord *et al.* 2015: 25–26) This mention of

³ The preference for French in Russian history was, at least partly, related to personal choices and biographical trajectories of some people in power, such as Empress Elizaveta I, or figures prominent in literary circles, such as Kantemir and Trediakovskij (Offord *et al.* 2018: 97–99).

Frenchmen as the main teachers and caregivers for Russian children is revealing. For several decades the task of educating the future elite was transferred, at least in the eyes of society, to foreigners; thus, hiring foreign teachers became a default situation and significantly impacted the image of childhood in Russian literature and culture in general.

In fact, learning foreign languages, and especially French, was perceived as a basis of any education, and could sometimes leave little room for anything else: “His education is limited to learning two or three foreign languages and the basic principles of all sciences, taught by some hired teacher” (A. Pushkin, *O narodnom vospitanii* [On national education], 1826).⁴

The ability to speak French was equivalent to good upbringing and education, and the earlier it was achieved, the higher the social status of the young person supposedly was in the so-called good society, with French words and expressions being interiorized the same way as manners and gestures:

I now know that the “dexterity” and “courtesy” of a society woman are nothing more than the ability to effortlessly recite what has been memorized. And here is the rule for this dexterity and courtesy: “Dress, position your legs, hands, and eyes as instructed by Madame the Frenchwoman, and never give your tongue a moment’s rest – while remembering that French words must be the only sounds produced by this living keyboard, which is activated solely by frivolity”. (A. Nikitenko, *Dnevnik* [Diaries], 1826)

‘Madame the Frenchwoman’ (French governess) is an important actor in the process, as is ‘monsieur’, or the French tutor. The French words ‘monsieur’, ‘madame’ and ‘mademoiselle’, originally used to address men and women (distinguishing between married and unmarried ones as concerns the latter), underwent serious phonetic and semantic changes in Russian and became not only nominations for French nationals, or even foreigners from the West in general, but also the names of specific professions. ‘Mus’ye’, ‘madam(a)’ and ‘mamzel’ are an indispensable part of the Russian lexicon in the second half of the 18th and the first half of the 19th centuries, the same way the houses of the noble families could not be imagined without the French teaching staff:

Thus, the landlord’s house grew along with his family, and when he ended up with a great many children, along with various madams and mademoiselles, his house took on that fantastical appearance that so astonishes passing travellers. (V. Sollogub, *Seryozha*, 1838)

⁴ This and all other examples are given in our translation into English, K. F., N. T.

Moreover, an attempt to change this order could be frowned upon by good society and became a cause for gossip and disapproval, as the following quote from Faddej Bulgarin shows:

Listen to what they're saying about you in town: that in your youth you have changed so much that you've cast aside all corsets and finery; that you run the household like a German housekeeper; that you take bread out of the mouths of French madams and tutor your own children yourself; that you read books incessantly, like a Pharisee, and receive scribblers and men of letters in your home instead of casual visitors; that you neglect visits and return calls, thereby harming your husband, on whom – God forgive! – you dote like a dove! (F. Bulgarin, *Istochnik spletnoj*, [The source of gossip], 1833–1843).

In another example of non-mainstream educational choice, Alexander Veltman's story "Erotida", the character's decision to educate his daughter himself, without help of *madamy* and *mus'yu*, is a clear evidence of his eccentricity: "I will not entrust her," he would say to his wife, 'neither to a madame nor to a monsieur'" (A. Veltman, *Erotida*, 1835).

In addition to refusing to hire French teachers, the character chose the exotic Greek name Erotida for his daughter and, after the death of his wife, raised her with some negligence to gender stereotypes, giving her such "boyish" toys as guns and soldiers and taking her with him everywhere. Such cases are evidently represented as exceptions confirming the unwritten rule: children of noble families should be brought up and taught by French speakers.

Some changes in this preference for foreign teachers are attested in the late 1830s, for example, in Mihail Lermontov's unfinished novel *Knyaginya Ligovskaya* ('Princess Ligovskaya'):

Here in Russia, French madames have somewhat gone out of fashion, and in St. Petersburg, they are not kept at all... [...] Lizaveta Nikolaevna was left without a madame entirely – she learned French from her mother, and even more from the guests, since from early childhood she spent her days in the drawing room, sitting beside her mother and listening to all sorts of chatter... (M. Lermontov, *Knyaginya Ligovskaya* [Princess Ligovskaya], 1836–1837)

Still, as the quote shows, native-like proficiency in French was achieved through real-life communication with similarly proficient speakers. Other languages, though, could be learnt in a more formal way. Thus, for example, in the following quote Russian, German and Italian are taught by visiting teachers, while French is introduced with the help of a *madame* brought from Paris to stay permanently with the family:

Teachers came here to give them lessons: Feofan taught Religious Instruction and Russian literature; Osterman taught the German and Italian languages, as well as History and Geography. For the French language and the fine arts, a madame and teachers were invited from Paris (A. Bezymennyi, *Staraya povest'*. [An old tale], 1832)

French, then, was associated with less academic and more casual learning through (artificial) creating of a language environment, and other languages required more rigorous methods:

My language teachers followed opposite methods. When I learned to read, the German tutor began drilling grammatical rules into my head, while the French tutor, caring little for grammar, made me memorize as many words and expressions as possible. (F. Bulgarin, *Ivan Ivanovich Vyzhigin*, 1829)

The analysed contexts demonstrate that having French speakers as resident teachers taking care of children most of the time was so common that there is a lot of evidence that the words 'teacher' and 'Frenchman' were perceived as synonymous. Thus, in Ivan Turgenev's play the character, after hearing about a teacher taking a boy for a walk immediately decides that he is French:

Natalya Petrovna: He went for a walk with the new teacher...

Rakitin (to Natalya Petrovna): What teacher?

Natalya Petrovna: I even forgot to tell you... We hired a new teacher without you.

Rakitin: A Frenchman?

Natalya Petrovna: No... A Russian teacher. The princess will send us a Frenchman from Moscow. (I. Turgenev, *Mesyats v derevne* [A Month in the Country], 1850)

An interesting inversion of this association is presented in Lev Tolstoy's famous novel *War and Peace*. Nikolaj Rostov cannot see Napoleon as an equal to the Russian Emperor because Napoleon is French, and for Rostov 'Frenchman' means a teacher or an actor, someone socially inferior and not worth shaking hands with:

Rostov saw them talking and shaking hands with a smile (it offended him – he kept thinking that Napoleon, and every Frenchman for that matter, was either a teacher or an actor, and yet here he was, shaking hands with our sovereign), (Napoleon's smile was unpleasantly insincere, while Alexander's was warm and radiant). (L. Tolstoy, *Voyna i mir* [War and Peace], 1869)

French teachers, therefore, at least at the beginning of the 19th century, had a somewhat dubious status in society. On the one hand, as any other teacher, they

were treated as servants, people lacking a noble status and the dignity associated with it.⁵ On the other hand, they were seen as an absolute necessity, a staple of an aristocratic educational model. “Fetishization” of French education by Russian parents, especially those who themselves did not belong to the higher strata of the nobility, was heavily criticized and parodied in literature. In Denis Fonvizin’s unfinished comedy *Vybor guvernyora* (‘The choice of a tutor’, 1790–1791), the Slaboumovs (whose surname literally means ‘weak-minded’) preferred an uneducated French barber to a Russian officer. The final lines sound like a verdict:

Nelstetsov: Strange people! Tell me, what guides their thoughts and actions?
Seum: What guides them? Foolish arrogance. (D. Fonvizin, *Vybor guvernyora* [The choice of a tutor], 1790–1792)

Around the same time, Ivan Krylov stated in his satirical magazine:

I was very curious to know who would be the unfortunate one to end up with the French fugitive from the gallows as a teacher, and whether there would be parents foolish enough to entrust the education of their children to an almost illiterate rogue – one more likely to teach them how to pick pockets than to instruct them in virtue. (I. Krylov, *Pochta dukhov* [The spirits’ post], 1789)

More than sixty years later, in Vasilij Vonlyarlyarsky’s novel *Bol’shaya barynya* (‘The grand lady’), the character, aiming to hire a teacher to teach him the French language, still looks for a foreigner but finds himself faced with an impostor:

The French language teacher brought by Timoshka turned out not to be a foreigner, but simply a lisping fellow of about thirty-five, with red hair and freckles on his forehead and nose. His frock coat, buttoned up to the very top – that is, to the only remaining middle button – testified not so much to a lack of suspenders as to the complete absence of a vest. The teacher’s underclothes and shoes, both equally shiny with wear, matched the frock coat and made their owner resemble nothing so much as a dirty footman. (V. Vonlyarlyarsky, *Bol’shaya barynya* [The grand lady], 1852)

This plot twist revealing that the French teacher is neither a teacher, nor a French native speaker, seems rather popular in Russian literature. Besides Pushkin’s Dubrovsky, who exploits the role of a French tutor to enter a noble household, there are other interesting characters using this infatuation with French education

⁵ Cf.: “As a child he [Russian nobleman] was in the care and under the supervision of serf nursemaids, tutors, and servants. These serfs had no rights and very rarely any powers of discipline” (Raeff 1962: 298).

for their benefit. For example, in Alexander Veltman's novel *Salomeya*, the female protagonist, mistaken for a Frenchwoman, enters a household as a governess but gradually reverses power relations, becoming a family dictator:

Filipp Savich strictly ensured that everyone showed the new madame special respect. If Salomeya Petrovna said, "Servant, bring me water," all those present had to rush to fetch it, while everyone else had to be aware that madame was asking for water – otherwise, trouble! [...] Outsiders began shaking their heads, while the household servants and villagers understood that the true authority in the house was Salomeya Petrovna and that they should bow to her and consult her on all matters. (A. Veltman. *Priklyucheniya, pocherpnutye iz morya zHITEiskogo: Salomeya*. [Adventures drawn from the sea of life: Salomeya], 1848)

In a way, the dominance of the "aristocratic" model of foreign language teaching in Russian literature, even in the epoch when school education became more common than homeschooling, can be explained by its plot potential and other possibilities the comic images of *madama* and *mus'ye* provided; although, most certainly, inequality in the levels of representation of different estates also had a huge impact as the proportion of the nobility among both writers and their readers tended to be very high.

"School" model: pedagogical violence, inefficiency, and "dead" languages

As mentioned above, formal teaching of European languages was introduced in schools at the beginning of the 18th century and thus historically preceded the widespread adoption of the "aristocratic" model of teaching. However, in terms of literary representation, it mostly remained in the periphery, totally overshadowed by the latter. Interestingly, in some texts we can find some traces of the transition from one model to another. For example, in Nikolaj Zlatovratskij's memoirs, the narrator describes his schoolteachers very unfavourably but finds some nice words about his private French tutor, explaining his career trajectory as follows:

For practice in the German language, I had to visit our German teacher in the evenings; although little came of it, he did become somewhat more lenient toward me. For practice in French, the well-known and kindest old Frenchman, Monsieur Thiers, was invited to give lessons to me and my younger brother. He had been taken prisoner in 1812 from Napoleon's army, where, as a mere youth, he had been assigned as a drummer. Since then, he had wandered from one noble household to another as a tutor until he ended up in our town, where, in his old age, he

sustained himself by giving cheap private lessons. (N. Zlatovratskij, *Detskie i yunye gody. Vospominaniya 1845–1864* [Childhood and youth: Memoirs 1845–1864], 1908)

Here we can see an interesting contrast between two languages and two models: a French teacher, who used to be a home tutor, still comes to teach at his students' home, probably teaching both boys at the same time, and has a gentle approach; a school teacher of German makes the narrator to come to his place, and his teaching methods are dubious:

By the way, he taught in the most barbaric manner, forcing students mindlessly to memorize entire pages of useless verses or grammatical rules without any explanations. In my time, I don't remember a single student from the gymnasium who learned anything in this subject – unless he was German himself or had studied at home with a German tutor. (N. Zlatovratskij, *Detskie i yunye gody. Vospominaniya 1845–1864* [Childhood and youth. Memoirs 1845–1864], 1908)

This “barbaric manner” of teaching is presented as totally inefficient, and the narrator opposes it to homeschooling.

In most other cases when school language teaching is described in detail, or simply mentioned, the same images of mindless drilling, useless efforts, boredom and fear prevail. Modern foreign languages were taught the same way as dead classical languages, without any connection with real communication, and this practice was closely associated with pedagogical violence. The schoolteacher was presented as a frightening figure and, unsurprisingly, teachers of Latin were the most striking and memorable in the gallery of these monstrous portraits:

Such virtuous behaviour soon attracted the attention of even the Latin teacher himself, whose mere cough in the hallway – before his frieze overcoat and his smallpox-scarred face even appeared in the doorway – struck fear into the entire class. (N. Gogol, *Ivan Fyodorovich Shpon'ka i ego tyotushka* [Ivan Fyodorovich Shponka and his aunt], 1831–1832)

– Do you remember, – Baklanov spoke up from the corner, – our Latin teacher at the gymnasium? He would grab you by the hair and start dragging you across the floor and then kick you in the chest on top of that. (A. Pisemsky, *Vzbalamuchennoe more* [The troubled sea], 1863)

“Dead” language teaching model corresponds to its cruel and ugly implementers whose main function is to create fear and repulsion, killing any wish to learn and use languages in real life. Moreover, even native speakers, once they get into

this system, become just as ineffective. For example, in his autobiographical story, Kornej Chukovskij, remembering the gymnasium where he studied in the early 1890s, describes his French teacher in the following way:

For several years, [he] did not teach us a single French word [...] There are seven or eight lucky ones in the class who have known French almost since infancy. With them, he chats in the friendliest manner and often laughs during the conversation, always raising his finger before making a witty remark. As for the rest, he pays no attention to them. (K. Chukovskij, *Serebryanyj gerb* [The silver crest], 1967)

In other words, in the school model, as represented in Russian literary texts, learning a foreign language was perceived not as something natural and almost inevitable, but as an almost impossible task. However, some rare individuals dared to take it upon themselves voluntarily.

“Bookish” model: self-teaching as a feat

Despite all the changes in language teaching ideology during the second half of the 19th century, such as the introduction of the direct method and the humanization of education in general, the grammar-translation method retained its power, especially in textbooks used for self-study of foreign languages. Chukovskij, expelled from his school, started to learn English by himself:

For this very purpose, I bought *Self-Teacher of the English Language* by Professor Meyendorf for a quarter at the flea market – a thick, tattered book from which (as I later discovered) about a dozen pages had been torn out.

This Meyendorf was clearly quite an eccentric because he constantly addressed readers with absurd questions like:

“Does the gardener’s two-year-old son love the granddaughter of his little daughter?”

“Do you have a one-eyed aunt who buys canaries and buffaloes from the baker?” (K. Chukovskij, *Serebryanyj gerb* [The silver crest], 1967)

Such examples, however, are rare, and even rarer are detailed descriptions of the learning process, such as Chukovskij provided. More often self-study of foreign languages is mentioned in passing, as a small detail explaining something about the character. One interesting example is found in Leonid Andreev’s story:

He himself had learned French through great personal effort and had attended Berlitz courses for pronunciation for a whole year. At the bank, he conducted

correspondence in this language. But for Yelena Dmitrievna, French seemed almost innate – light and effortless, like a birdsong. (L. Andreev, *Zhertva* [The victim], 1916)

The character managed to learn French to a rather high level but still perceived his own French as inferior to his future mother-in-law's French, most probably learned "in the noble way". Typically, the verb 'izuchit' is used in the text rather than 'vyuchit' or 'nauchit'sya' – it stresses an analytical and theoretical approach to language (language as an object for study) and not a communicative one (language as a skill).

"Everyday" acquisition model: non-prestigious multilingualism

A totally different strategy, the acquisition of languages through everyday communication without formal teaching, despite, undoubtedly, being the most common in a huge linguistically diverse country, is also absolutely marginal in Russian literary texts. Very few examples can be found where everyday multilingual communication is represented or problematized. Even fewer reflect the process of language teaching and learning. Pushkin in *A Journey to Arzrum* relays his dialogue with a young woman who evidently has picked up some basic Russian words and phrases in interaction with similar travellers:

A young Kalmyk woman, quite pretty, was sewing while smoking tobacco. I sat down beside her. "What's your name?" — ***. "How old are you?" — "Ten and eight." "What are you sewing?" — "Trousers." "For whom?" — "Myself." She handed me her pipe and began to have breakfast. (A. Pushkin, *Puteshestvie v Arzrum vo vremya pokhoda 1829 goda* [A journey to Arzrum during the 1829 campaign], 1836)

Her broken Russian amuses the narrator, and he uses it to create an image of a "beautiful savage". It is no surprise then that most cases of representing the actual process of language learning through communication can be found in various texts focusing on ethnographic experiences and encounters with all kinds of "savages". Probably, the most striking example is Konstantin Stanyukovich's story "Maksimka" in which a sailor, relying on his own stereotype of ungrammatical foreigner talk, teaches Russian to a black boy:

Luchkin pointed to various objects and named them, and whenever he had the slightest chance to distort a word, he did so – saying *rubakh* instead of *rubakha* (shirt), *macht* instead of *machta* (mast) – convinced that by altering the words in this way, they would sound more like foreign ones and be easier for Maksimka to learn. (K. Stanyukovich, *Maksimka*, 1896)

In most other cases, however, language issues are either fully ignored, or mentioned casually, and the process of learning remains behind the scenes. We may suppose that Bela in Lermontov's novel *A Hero of Our Time* was speaking with the titular character Grigory Pechorin in a way very similar to Pushkin's Kalmyk girl; however, her speech is conveyed in literary language, and only small remarks show that there used to be a language barrier:

Grigory Alexandrovich struggled with her for a long time; meanwhile, he was learning Tatar, and she was beginning to understand our language. (M. Lermontov, *Geroj nashego vremeni* [*A hero of our time*], 1839–1841)

The language in question was certainly not Tatar, or even Turkic (most probably, Bela was Kabardian), but they are all the same to the Russian-speaking officer – simply a barbaric vernacular, useful in some situations but not worthy of a name of its own. To teach Bela, Pechorin hires a multilingual woman to take care of her, while he himself also learns to communicate in “Tatar”. Again, the choice of words is revealing: he is not learning the language but learns to converse in it (*‘uchilsya po-tatarski’*).

Marginality of this model in the literature naturally tells us very little about the reality of language use and acquisition but a lot about what was and what was not considered as worth attention in the literary canon. The same is true about the choice of particular words to describe the situation of language learning.

Teaching ideology and language usage: linguistic evidence

Changes in the way people talk about certain phenomena, their choice of words and expressions, and semantic shifts in the meanings ascribed to those words, can reveal a lot about related changes in their thinking and beliefs. If we analyse the most frequent combinations of verbs derived from the root *‘uch-’* (‘teach/learn’) with language-related words, i.e. different expressions used to refer to language teaching and learning, and compare their use in different periods of time, we can see how differently this phenomenon can be conceptualized, and what semantic shifts happen, signalling changes in attitudes and language ideologies. Detailed

analysis of this topic is beyond the scope of this article; here we present only some observations on the particularities of word choice typical of the texts from the second half of the 18th and the 19th centuries (i.e. the same texts we analysed above) in contrast to modern usage in literary texts, to connect them with the images and concepts relevant for language learning representations.

By comparing usage frequencies of certain word combinations in subcorpora of literary texts written during two time periods, 1750–1900 (henceforth ‘the old corpus’) and 1995–2025 (‘the modern corpus’),⁶ we can identify significant changes in several words related to language teaching. First of all, it is important to note that in Russian the verb ‘*uchit*’ is ambiguous; it has two predicate meanings correlating with different semantic roles and demanding different cases for their respective arguments. ‘*Uchit*’ + accusative case’ means ‘to learn something’ while ‘*uchit*’ + accusative case of an animate noun + dative case/infinitive’ means ‘to teach something to someone’. Second, its first meaning can be expressed also by the reflexive verb ‘*uchit’sya*’ (literally ‘to teach oneself’) in combination with the dative case. Third, there are numerous derivatives made from the same root by adding prefixes (‘*nauchit*’, ‘*obuchit*’, ‘*vyuchit*’, ‘*izuchit*’ – perfective aspect), postfix ‘-*sya*’ (‘*nauchit’sya*’, ‘*obuchit’sya*’, ‘*vyuchit’sya*’), and changing the suffix and, consequently, the aspect (‘*obuchat*’, ‘*obuchat’sya*’, ‘*izuchat*’). Other prefixes can create more specific meanings (e.g. ‘*zauchit*’ – ‘to learn by heart’, or ‘*pereuchit*’ – ‘to teach someone to do something in a different way than before’), but the verbs above all refer to learning in general.

Collocations of the verb ‘*uchit*’ with the noun ‘*yazyk*’ (‘language’), therefore, can mean both someone’s learning the language and someone’s teaching the language to someone else. However, in the old corpus, the first meaning is marginal: out of 41 examples only six have the noun in the accusative case (‘*yazyk*’) while in all other examples it is in the dative case (‘*yazyku*’) which means that language is taught, not learnt. In the modern corpus, the same collocation occurs two and a half times more often (2.539 occurrences per million words vs. 1.005 in the old corpus) but it is due to the increase in the use of the accusative case of the noun: its share is 65% in the modern corpus but only 15% in the old one. In other words, ‘*uchit*’, when applied to language, used to mean primarily ‘to teach’ but now is predominantly used to refer to the process of learning a language. Similar developments are found for the verb ‘*uchit’sya*’ which demands the dative case – ‘*uchit’sya yazyku*’. This collocation has almost the same frequency in the old corpus (1.104) as ‘*uchit*’ + *yazyk*. In the modern corpus, however, it has a significantly

⁶ The subcorpora are of comparable size, slightly over 40 million words each; frequencies were calculated per million word occurrences.

lower frequency (0.473), being, consequently, five times less popular than *‘uchit’*. The verbs in the perfective aspect, *‘vyuchit’* and *‘vyuchit’sya’* demonstrate the same tendency: *‘vyuchit’ yazyk’* becomes more frequent (1.469, modern vs. 0.319, old), while *‘vyuchit’sya yazyku’* declines (0.100, modern vs. 0.858, old). Language, therefore, is turned into a direct object, something which is learnt in full, and not partly, as a skill. In modern usage, *‘nauchit’sya’* normally demands a verb (*‘nauchit’sya plavat’*, ‘to learn to swim’), not a noun.

Another significant difference is found in the use of the verb *‘izuchat’*, ‘to learn, to study something’. Its combination with the noun *‘yazyk’* becomes more than four times more frequent in the modern corpus (1.394 vs. 0.319). *‘Izuchat’* has an additional meaning of theoretical, analytical approach lacking in *‘uchit’* and *‘uchit’sya’*. And it cannot mean ‘teaching’, when language is studied, there are no mediators, only the subject, the learner, and the object, the language. Certainly, that does not mean that the figure of a language teacher disappears. It is, however, presented differently. Teaching the language nowadays is normally expressed through the verb *‘prepodavat’* which has an academic flavour: *‘uchitel’* (‘teacher’) works at school but in higher education a member of the teaching staff is called *‘prepodavatel’*, and this distinction in social status is very important.

Finally, there is a huge difference between the old and the new usage in regard to acquiring skills in particular languages. In Russian, when talking about speaking or writing in a certain language, an adverb derived from its name is used; it is built by adding the prefix *po-* and the suffix *‘-ski/i’*: *‘po-frantsuzski’* (‘in French’), *‘po-ital’yanski’* (‘in Italian’), *‘po-latinski/po-latyni’* (‘in Latin’), etc. Collocations of the verbs from the studied group with such adverbs also show an interesting chronological development. In modern usage, the phrase like the one used by Lermontov (*‘uchilsya po-tatarski’*) is possible only in colloquial speech as an elliptic form, omitting the necessary component, the second verb such as *‘govorit’* (‘to talk’), or *‘chitat’* (‘to read’), or *‘pisat’* (‘to write’). In the old corpus, on the other hand, we can find numerous examples of independent use of this collocation:

I was truly taken aback when I heard that our servant’s son was studying Latin [*uchitsya po-latyni*]; for the first time, my childish pride awakened, and something akin to shame stirred my little heart. (A. Sheller-Mihajlov, *Zhizn’ Shupova, ego rodnyh i znakomyh* [The life of Shupov, his relatives and friends], 1865)

If we consider all these changes together, we can suggest that they reflect the same tendency: language learning used to be conceptualized as practical rather than theoretical, and language was thought of less as an object for analytical study

and more as a set of skills acquired naturally. Later, however, this “naturalistic” approach was mostly abandoned, and language learning started to be represented as demanding conscious efforts and academic conditions, which corresponds to our “school” model. Certainly, here again real-life practices and policies can vary significantly and should not necessarily follow the mainstream approach. In reality, language teaching in schools can be organized very differently, as shown by the example of various language immersion programmes, such as in Canada, or the Baltic states. However, habitual ways of thinking tend to change at a slower pace, and a monolingual bias may be shared by both governments and indigenous populations even when actual multilingualism prevails in everyday communication (see Fedorova *et al.* 2025).

Concluding remarks

The transition to the institutionalized model of academic language teaching thus happened not only in social reality but also in its cultural and linguistic interpretation, and changes in typical language patterns confirm this shift. The ability to acquire and use multiple languages which used to be perceived as a natural phenomenon and a skill rather than knowledge, turned into a difficult task, and language itself was turned into an object of analytical study. In other words, monolingual ideologies became dominant and, as usually happens, “normalized to the degree that they become functionally invisible to those perpetuating them” (Bacon 2020: 173).

This change, however, did not happen instantly: it was preceded by a long period when wide-spread practices (teaching foreign languages in schools and acquiring language skills in everyday communication with other speakers) symbolically “lost” in literary representation to the elitist model of teaching through creating artificial conditions for natural language learning. The “school” model was represented as inefficient, and the “everyday” one was ignored as socially non-prestigious and targeting mostly local languages or employed by minority languages speakers to acquire Russian. The paradox of language teaching representation in Russian literary texts from the Imperial period was that it promoted a social model that was unavailable for most language learners as an ideal teaching method. In this sense, the emergence of a travestied image of a “false French teacher” who could be either not French, or not a teacher, or neither, is revealing: the aspirations of the lower social and cultural strata of the population to a prestigious model prove unattainable and are ridiculed, thereby strengthening its position as an ideal goal.

Later, when the aristocratic model became obsolete, others did not take its place. Teaching of foreign languages in the Soviet Union was in most cases very inefficient; at the same time, *de facto* multilingualism was very high among non-native speakers of Russian but it was achieved not so much by effective language teaching but rather through exposure to the main language of the state and strong pressure to acquire it (Fedorova 2012). However, this “real-life” language learning was not treated as a desired model; it was represented partly in memoirs of educators who used to work with indigenous people (such as, e.g. Amaliya Hazanovich’s book *Moi druzya nganasany* [‘My friends Nganasans’]) but remained marginal in mainstream literary texts. As a result, monolingual ideology associated with institutionalized and inefficient language teaching prevailed and was accepted as a norm.

Seen from a semiotic perspective, literary representations of language learning thus function not merely as reflections of pedagogical reality but as mechanisms of cultural modelling, selectively legitimizing certain modes of language acquisition while rendering others invisible. In this way, literature contributes to the persistence of dominant language ideologies long after the social conditions that produced them have changed.

References

- Bacon, Chris K. 2020. “It’s not really my job”: A mixed methods framework for language ideologies, monolingualism, and teaching emergent bilingual learners. *Journal of Teacher Education* 71(2): 172–187.
- Braunmüller, Kurt; Ferraresi, Gisella 2003. Introduction. In: Braunmüller, Kurt; Ferraresi, Gisella (eds.), *Aspects of Multilingualism in European Language History*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1–14.
- Clarysse, Willy; Thompson, Dorothy J. 2006. *Counting the People in Hellenistic Egypt. Vol. 2: Historical Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fedorova, Kapitolina 2012. Teoriya i praktika prepodavaniya vtorogo yazyka v sovetskih/rossijskih shkolah. In: Fedorova, Kapitolina (ed.), *Yazyk, obshchestvo i shkola* [Language, society, and school]. Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 248–273.
- Fedorova, Kapitolina; Tšuiкина, Natalia; Batrakova, Ekaterina 2025. “Estonian schools are the homesite of the Estonian language”? Language ideologies and discussions around teaching non-native speakers. *Slavistica Vilnensis* 70(2), 101–116.
- Kelly, Louis G. 1969. *25 Centuries of Language Teaching*. Rowley: Newbury House.
- Lotman, Juri 2000. Problema “obucheniya kul’ture” kak tipologicheskaya harakteristika [The problem of “teaching of culture” as its typological characteristics]. In: Lotman, Juri, *Semiosfera* [‘Semiosphere’]. Saint-Petersburg: Iskusstvo-SPB, 417–425.
- McKitterick, Rosamond 1989. *The Carolingians and the Written Word*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- McLelland, Nicola 2017. *Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages: A History of Language Education, Assessment and Policy in Britain*. London, New York: Routledge.
- McLelland, Nicola; Smith, Richard 2018. Introduction - establishing HoLLT: the history of language learning and teaching. In: McLelland, Nicola; Smith, Richard (eds.), *The History of Language Learning and Teaching. Vol. I: 16th–18th Century Europe*. Cambridge: LEGENDA, 1–19.
- Miroljubov, Aleksandr A. 2002. *Istoriya otechestvennoj metodiki obucheniya inostrannym yazykam* [The history of foreign language teaching methods in Russia]. Moscow: Stupeni.
- Offord, Derek; Argent, Gesine; Rjéoutski, Vladislav 2015. French and Russian in Catherine's Russia. In: Offord, Derek; Ryazanova-Clarke, Lara; Argent, Gesine; Rjéoutski, Vladislav (eds.), *French and Russian in Imperial Russia: Language Use Among the Russian Elite*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 25–44.
- Offord, Derek; Rjéoutski, Vladislav; Argent, Gesine 2018. *The French Language in Russia: A Social, Political, Cultural, and Literary History*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Pavlenko, Aneta (ed.) 2023. *Multilingualism and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Protassova, Ekaterina 2018. Teaching second languages at pre-school age: The Russian experience. In: McLelland, Nicola; Smith, Richard (eds.), *The History of Language Learning and Teaching. Vol. II. 19th–20th Century Europe*. Cambridge: LEGENDA, 196–216.
- Raeff, Marc 1962. Home, school, and service in the life of the 18th-century Russian nobleman. *The Slavonic and East European Review* 40(95): 295–307.
- Richards, Jack C.; Rodgers, Theodore S. 2014. *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. (3rd ed.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rjéoutski, Vladislav 2018. Native tongues and foreign languages in the education of the Russian nobility: The case of the Noble Cadet Corps (1730s–1760s). In: McLelland, Nicola; Smith, Richard (eds.), *The History of Language Learning and Teaching. Vol. I. 16th–18th Century Europe*. Cambridge: LEGENDA, 129–144.
- Van De Mieroop, Marc 2016. *A History of the Ancient Near East ca. 3000–323 BC*. (3rd ed.) Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Zimin, Igor' V. 2011. *Vzroslyj mir imperatorskih rezidentsij. Vtoraya chetvert' XIX – nachalo XX v.: povsednevnyaya zhizn' Rossijskogo imperatorskogo dvora* [Adult world of imperial residences, second half of the 19th century and early 20th century: Everyday life of the Russian imperial court]. Moscow: Tsentrpoligraf.

Из детской – за парту: модели изучения иностранных языков в России и их отражение в литературных текстах

В данной статье рассматриваются различные модели изучения иностранных языков, как с формальным обучением, так и без него, в том виде, в каком они представлены в русской литературе разных исторических периодов. Исследуются лежащие в их основе представления об усвоении языка и отношение к различным иностранным языкам, отраженные в этих литературных репрезентациях, а также то, как эти идеи соотносятся с изменениями в языковом употреблении с течением времени. Выделяются четыре общие модели изучения языка: «аристократическая» модель, передающая идею естественного многоязычия и иерархии языков; «школьная» модель, подчеркивающая педагогическое насилие и неэффективность; «книжная» модель, представляющая самообучение; и модель «повседневного усвоения», изображающая непрестижное многоязычие. Материал для исследования был собран и проанализирован с использованием Национального корпуса русского языка, при этом для разных временных периодов и жанров были созданы отдельные подкорпусы. Особое внимание уделялось поиску коллокаций ключевых лексических единиц, включая различные производные глагола «учить» (в значении 'изучать' или 'преподавать') и существительного «учитель», в сочетании со словом «язык». Такой подход позволяет всесторонне исследовать изменения представлений об изучении языков и многоязычии в русских культурных и литературных контекстах.

Lastetoast koolipinki: Vene võõrkeeleeõppe mudelid ja moodused kirjandustekstide peegelduses

Artiklis vaadeldakse nii formaalse õpetuse raames kui ka sellest väljaspool esinevaid erinevaid võõrkeeleeõppe mudeleid, nagu neid erinevatel ajastutel on kujutatud vene kirjanduses. Uuritakse kirjanduslikes representatsioonides peegelduvaid keele omandamise aluspõhimõtteid, suhtumist erinevatesse võõrkeeltesse ning seda, kuidas need põhimõtted seonduvad keelekasutuse muutustega aja jooksul. Tuvastatakse neli üldist keeleõppemudelit: „aristokraatlik“ mudel, mis väljendab loomulikku mitmekeelsust ja keelte hierarhiat; „kooli“ mudel, mis rõhutab pedagoogilist vägivalda ja ebaefektiivsust; „raamatulik“ mudel, mis esindab iseseisvat õppimist; ning „igapäevase omandamise“ mudel, mis kujutab prestiižita mitmekeelsust. Uuringu andmed koguti ja neid analüüsiti, kasutades Venemaa riiklikku korpusi ning luues alamkorpused erinevate perioodide ja žanrite jaoks. Kesken-duti võtmesõnade, sealhulgas verbi „*uchit*“ („õppima“ või „õpetama“) ja nimisõna „*uchitel*“ („õpetaja“) erinevate tuletiste ning sõna „*yazyk*“ („keel“) kollokatsioonide otsimisele. Selline lähenemisviis võimaldab põhjalikult uurida muutuvaid vaateid keeleõppele ja mitmekeelsusele vene kultuuri ja kirjanduse kontekstis.