

A Soviet language problem

The bulk of the armed forces of the Soviet Union are non-Russian, and according to the Soviet military newspaper *Red Star* this poses a problem 'that everyone has known for years, but which no one has wanted to admit: the breakdown of language training among minorities'. Language training for minorities means training in the use of Russian, the link language across all the republics of the USSR, and of major importance in maintaining the efficiency and cohesion of the armed forces (which are also a significant factor in enabling young Soviet citizens to get to know each other and to see something of their vast homeland).

Soldiers from such republics as Uzbekistan or Georgia may have little or no Russian at all when conscripted for their period of military service, and formal language training in the average military unit tends to be an after-hours affair, organized by the political officer with the help of soldiers who are native users of Russian.

Some military units may have up to 30 distinct nationalities in them, with the number of conscripts from Central Asia increasing all the time as the non-Russian birthrate remains high while the Russian rate continues to fall. Commanders try to spread the ethnic mix evenly across their units, but groups inevitably coalesce in which fluent users of Russian are in the minority. However, such matters run two ways. As Paul Quinn-Judge of the *Christian Science Monitor* notes (23-9 Mar 87): 'The chances of finding a Russian fluent in another Soviet language are slender: Only 4.7 percent of all ethnic Russians fall into this category, according to official statistics.'

• There are a number of parallels between the spread and use of the Russian and English languages. We would be glad to hear from readers with information about, and comments on, such parallels. *Ed.*

High decibel levels in the Holy Land

Visitors to Israel evidently comment from time to time on the noisiness of its citizens. According to the *Jewish Chronicle* of 13 Feb 87 there may be some justification in these comments. Two professors at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, David Tanne and Sarah Japhet, have just completed a study for Itzhak Navon, the Minister of Education, on just how Modern Israeli Hebrew is spoken. According to the *Chronicle*:

'They found that Israeli speech is incoherent, loud, screeching, screaming and unpleasant to the ear. Their findings apply not only to the men and women in

the streets and stores, but also to teachers, lecturers, children, youth – and even to broadcasters on radio and television.'

As a result, the two academics are launching a special course at the university, and are recommending that the Minister of Education introduce 'the culture of speech' as a school subject. The *Chronicle* does not report on how the screech factor was established, or what the norm for non-loud speech in Israel or anywhere else might be. It would be interesting to know what other languages and societies the Israelis were compared to, if any.

NCTE task force

Stephen N Tchudi, professor of English at Michigan State University, has been appointed by the Executive Committee of the National Council of Teachers of English to chair a Task Force on the Future of the Council. Over the next two years, this panel will study NCTE today and make recommendations for changes in its structure and functions, to meet the needs of the membership and the English teaching profession for the next twenty years.

Fifteen persons active in NCTE will be appointed to serve on the task force. A wide range of issues will be examined by the group, among them these: Should the Council devote far more of its resources to activism related to the teaching of English? Should the Council decentralize itself to place its resources closer to the people it seeks to serve? Has the Council a sufficiently broad appeal to teachers, and if not, how should it act to broaden its appeal? Should the Council work to unify the various associations concerned with the teaching of English and the language arts? What is the significance of changing demographics of American society for the Council and its programs and functions?

The National Council of Teachers of English is a professional U.S. organization made up of more than 55,000 teachers and supervisors of English at all levels of education (headquarters, Urbana, Illinois). Its aim is to improve the teaching of English and language arts in the nation's schools and colleges. The Council's task groups carry out a variety of projects to enhance the teaching of English.

For information about the NCTE, contact: Diane Allen, Public Relations Associate, National Council of Teachers of English, 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801, U.S.A.

Where there's a Will

There is always something new to report on William Shakespeare.

• From the Associated Press, Nov 86: 'A "miserable-looking" notebook found with the stored underclothes of an aristocratic English family contains the earliest known extracts from William Shakespeare's work, Sotheby's reports. The notes apparently were jotted down by a theatergoer in about 1600, said Roy Davids, manuscript expert at the London fine arts auction house. "This is the most important notebook or anything to do with Shakespeare's dramatic work that has ever been auctioned," he said.' It was estimated that the vellum notebook, 11½ by 8 inches, would bring in about

£150,000/\$213,000.

• From the *Observer*, 14 Dec 86: 'Shakespeare, the acknowledged master of the English language, also had an extraordinary grasp of medical science, according to a new study just published. In 37 plays, he mentions practically all the diseases and drugs of the day and some of his descriptions could not be bettered by a modern doctor, says Dr Aubrey Kail, author of *The Medical Mind of Shakespeare* [William & Wilkins, £39.95]. Health Correspondent Annabel Freeman adds: 'He [Shakespeare] even justified the custom of medical note-taking, making the doctor in *Macbeth*, who is observing the sleepwalking of

Lady Macbeth, remark: "Hark! She speaks. I will set down what comes from her, to satisfy my remembrance the more strongly."'

• From Reuters, Feb 87: 'American actor and director Sam Wanamaker has won a 17-year fight with local officials to rebuild William Shakespeare's Globe Theatre on its original London site. The council of the borough of Southwark gave permission Feb. 2 for Mr. Wanamaker to start planning his £13 million sterling (\$20 million) project on the south bank of the River Thames. "I faltered a lot of times but I never gave up hope," Mr. Wanamaker told reporters. "I always believed we would win in the end."'