Smile and Laughter in Russian Culture and Language

Alexei Shmelev

Moscow Pedagogical State University & The Institute of Russian Language (Russian Academy of Sciences), Russia

Abstract: Unlike many other cultures, the Russian culture encourages loud laughter (*xoxot*) and more often than not discourages smiles (*ulybki*). The paper presents linguistic evidence for such attitude: etymology (*ulybat'sja* "smile" from the word for scull with allusion to bared teeth), the use of the words for laughter and smile in the present-day Russian discourse, the role of laughter and smile in the Russian linguistic model of the world, etc. It is consistent with the strong emphasis that the Russian culture places on sincerity and open expression of emotions. In addition, it is consistent with the whole system of the Russian non-verbal etiquette (e.g., it is not good to meet a stranger's eyes with your eyes; if it has happened by chance, you should turn off your eyes rather than smile).

This attitude often leads to cross-cultural miscommunication (a typical American smile may seem non-natural and false to many Russians while foreigners who are involved in communication with Russians sometimes find them rude, impolite, ill-mannered).

Introduction

Many foreigners visiting Russia often notice that Russians (especially people living in big cities) smile much less than the majority of people (both from the West and the East). It is not typical of Russian people to give a smile in return. Russians do not smile at strangers; they smile only at their fellow people.

These observations have led some foreign observers to conclusion that the Russians are rude, impolite, ill-mannered and non-hospitable.

Specialists in cultural anthropology suggest that it is not the question of impoliteness or unfriendliness (Proxorov & Sternin, 2007, p. 145—155; Sergeeva, 2007, p. 92—94). Unlike many other cultures, the Russian culture encourages loud laughter and more often than not discourages smiles. Russian people do not smile out of politeness. Quite the reverse, many Russians

consider bad to smile without any significant reasons. In accordance with this attitude, a constant polite smile shows people's insincerity, closeness and unwillingness to show real feelings.

This attitude is consistent with the whole system of the Russian non-verbal etiquette (e. g., it is not good to meet a stranger's eyes with your eyes; if it has happened by chance, you should turn off your eyes rather than smile).

In what follows, I will provide linguistic evidence for such attitude. My approach rests on the assumption that the semantic analysis of linguistic units denoting non-verbal semiotic behavior is a gateway into the non-verbal etiquette.

To understand what role some words play in a language system, a good way is to compare their meaning with the meaning of their closest counterparts in other languages. Therefore, to see what is specific to the "Russian" attitude towards smile, it may be helpful to compare the Russian words for smile with their counterparts in some other languages.

Smiling and laughing

We begin with the nature of smile as a specific facial expression. Smiling is the voluntary raising of the corners of one's mouth. The mouth of a smiling person looks like the mouth of a laughing person; since the reason to laugh normally lies in a pleasant feeling (amusement, delight, etc.), a smile also conveys a message that the smiling person feels "something good". True enough, there are special kinds of smile or laughter revealing mixed feelings (bitter smiles, sardonic smiles, sarcastic laughter, etc.); however, there is always some "good" feeling underlying a smile or laughter even though it may be mixed with "bad" feelings.

One may think of laughter and a smile as two levels of showing good spirits. Charles Darwin (1955 [1872], as cited in Wierzbicka, 1999, p. 190) stated the link between "laughing" and "smiling" as follows: "Between a gentle laugh and a broad smile there is hardly any difference, excepting that in smiling no reiterated sound is uttered... the habit of uttering loud reiterated sounds from a sense of pleasure, first led to the retraction of the corners of the mouth and of the upper lip and to the contraction of the orbicular muscles; and that now, through association and long-continued habit, the same muscles are brought into slight play whenever any cause excites in us a feeling which, if stronger, would have led to laughter; and the result is a smile."

Many languages have closely related words for "laughing" and "smiling": consider French *sourire* "to smile" (from *sous* "under" and *rire* "to laugh"), German *lächeln* "to smile" (adding "diminutive" suffix to *lachen* "to laugh"), Polish *u ś miech* "smile" (from *ś miech* "laughter"). One may conclude that for speakers of those languages, there is no sharp distinction between smile and

laughter; they think of smiling and laughing as closely related activities: a smile is a "weak laughter" of a sort.

English lexically distinguishes smiling and laughing as two different activities. However, it is worth mentioning that the English word *smile* has the same origin as the Russian word for "laughter".

Russian is probably the only language that distinguishes three levels of showing good spirits (and being not serious):

- *ulybnut'sja/ulybat'sja* "to smile", *ulybka* "smile";
- *smejat'sja* "to laugh", смех "laughter";
- *xoxotat'* "to laugh (loudly)", *xoxot* "(loud) laughter".

There are also varieties within each level. In what follows, I will briefly discuss each of those levels.

Russian terms for smiling

Etymologically (Fasmer 1973), the verb *ulybat'sja* "to smile" (and the corresponding noun *ulybka* "smile") goes back to the word for scull (with allusion to bared teeth). The etymology itself shows that smiling is not always welcome: bared teeth usually will not win any favors.

Since smiling is a voluntary facial expression, it may be counterfeit. Unlike the Anglo-American culture, which values and encourages the display of good feelings that one may not necessarily feel, the Russian culture values "iskrennost" "sincerity", which consists in saying and showing what one really feels (and not saying or showing that one feels something that one does not really feel). It comes as no surprise that the Russians treat smiles with suspicion: sincere, open smiles are opposed to forced smiles and phony grins. Consider:

> Я холоден, как мороженое, и мне стыдно. Когда входит ко мне дочь и касается губами моего виска, я вздрагиваю, точно в висок жалит меня пчела, напряженно улыбаюсь и отворачиваю свое лицо.
> I am cold as ice and I am ashamed. When my daughter comes in to me and touches my forehead with her lips, I start as though a bee had stung me on the head, give a *forced smile*, and turn my face away. (Anton Chekhov, translated by Constance Garnett)

One has to be in very high spirits to have the right for a smile. The reason of a smile should be clear to others. If they do not understand the reason or consider it insufficient for a smile, they may break smiling and make a reproof, "What are you smiling at?" The Russian speakers may treat insincere, affected

smile as a kind of lie. Consider the following example:

> . . . сносить обиды, унижения, не сметь открыто заявить, что ты на стороне честных, свободных людей, и самому лгать, улыбаться, и все это из-за куска хлеба, из-за теплого угла, из-за какого-нибудь чинишка, которому грош цена. . .
> . . . you endure insult and humiliation, and dare not openly say that you are on the side of the honest and the free, and you *lie* and *smile* yourself; and all that for the sake of a crust of bread, for the sake of a warm corner, for the sake of a wretched little worthless rank in the service. . . (Anton Chekhov, translated by Constance Garnett)

Russian cultural scripts related to smiling reflect this attitude. Russians do not smile without reason. If a Russian person sees a stranger smiling at him/her, he/she is certain to seek the reason of fun. A smile need a proper time for appearing and should fit the situation from the point of view of the people around. Russian culture does not welcome a smile of self-encouraging, which seems unnatural. Consider:

> Иона кривит улыбкой рот, напрягает свое горло и сипит: 《А у меня, барин, того. . . сын на этой неделе помер》.
> Iona gives a *wry smile*, and straining his throat, brings out huskily: "My son. . . er. . . my son died this week, sir." (Anton Chekhov, translated by Constance Garnett)

Russian public opinion condemns smiling near people having serious problems or troubles (illness, personal problems, and so on); people may treat it as a sign of *Schadenfreude*. There is a verb in Russian that denotes a kind of smile associated with *Schadenfreude* or jeer, namely *uxmyl"nut" sja/uxmyljat'sja* "to smirk, to grin" (the corresponding noun is *uxmylka* "nasty grin"). The verb (as well as the corresponding noun) has clear negative connotations.

Another special kind of smile is denoted by the verb *usmexnut'sja/usmexat'sja* "to smile ironically, to grin; to give a laugh" (the corresponding noun being *usmeshka* "ironical smile, grin"). It refers to a smile or a short laugh expressing mixed feelings; it may include irony, bitterness, sarcasm, hate, etc. Typical collocations with these words are *gor'ko usmexat'sja* "to smile bitterly", *ironicheski usmexat'sja* "to smile ironically", *krivo usmexat'sja* "to smile wryly", *nedobraja usmeshka* "hostile smile" (Galich), etc. Consider also the following examples from *The Captain's Daughter*, a Russian famous historical novel by Alexander Pushkin:

(1)《. . . ежели хочешь, чтоб Маша Миронова ходила к тебе в сумерки, то вместо нежных стишков подари ей пару серег》. Кровь моя закипела. 《А почему ты об ней такого мнения?》—спросил я, с трудом удерживая свое негодование. 《А потому, —отвечал он с адской усмешкою, —что знаю по опыту ее нрав и обычай》.

". . . If you want Masha Mironov to visit you at dusk, present her with a pair of earrings instead of tender verses." My blood boiled. "And why have you such an opinion of her?" I asked, hardly able to restrain my indignation. "Because I know her manners and morals from experience," he answered, with a *fiendish smile*. (Translated by Natalie Duddington)

(2)《. . . Так ли еще тебя пожалую, когда получу свое государство! Обещаешься ли служить мне с усердием?》 Вопрос мошенника и его дерзость показались мне так забавны, что я не мог не усмехнуться. 《Чему ты усмехаешься? —спросил он меня нахмурясь. —Или ты не веришь, что я великий государь? Отвечай прямо》.

". . . It's not to be compared to the favor I'll show you when I obtain my kingdom! Do you promise to serve me zealously?" The rascal's question and his impudence struck me as so amusing that I could not help *smiling*. "What are you *smiling* at?" he asked with a frown. "Don't you believe I am the Tsar? Answer me plainly." (Translated by Natalie Duddington)

. . . The bandit's question and impudence *made me smile*. "Why do you *laugh*?" said he, frowning. . . (Translated by Marie H. de Zielinska)

(3)《То-то! — сказал я Пугачеву. — Не лучше ли тебе отстать от них самому, заблаговременно, да прибегнуть к милосердию государыни?》 Пугачев горько усмехнулся. 《Нет, — отвечал он, — поздно мне каяться. Для меня не будет помилования. . .》

"That's just it!" I said. "Hadn't you better leave them yourself in good time and appeal to the Empress's mercy?" Pugatchov *smiled bitterly*. "No," he said; "it is too late for me to repent. There will be no mercy for me. . ." (Translated by Natalie Duddington)

(4)Пугачев посмотрел на Швабрина и сказал с горькой

усмешкою: 《Хорош у тебя лазарет!》[sarcasm]
Pugatchov looked at Shvabrin and said, with a *bitter smile*, "Fine hospital you have here!" (Translated by Natalie Duddington)

(5) Генерал велел нас вывести. Мы вышли вместе. Я спокойно взглянул на Швабрина, но не сказал ему ни слова. Он усмехнулся *злобной усмешкою* и, приподняв свои цепи, опередил меня и ускорил свои шаги.
The General gave word for us to be led away. We went out together. I calmly looked at Shvabrin, but did not say a word to him. He *gave a malignant smile* and, lifting his chains, quickened his pace and left me behind. (Translated by Natalie Duddington)
...He *smiled with satisfied hate*... (Translated by Marie H. de Zielinska)

As the examples imply, the words verb *usmexnut'sja/usmexat'sja* and *usmeshka* do not necessarily condemn smiling (as *uxmyl'nut'sja/uxmyljat'sja* and *uxmylka* do); however they usually refer to smiling that do not express "good feelings".

Laughter

The closest Russian equivalent of the verb to *laugh* is *smejat'sja* (the corresponding noun is *smex* "laughter"). The verb has three lexical meanings, namely:

1. "to make sounds from the throat while breathing out in short bursts or gasps as a way of expressing amusement"
2. "to make scornful fun of somebody or something (to laugh at)"
3. "to be not serious, to say in jest"

One can also recognize three respective readings of the corresponding noun *smex*. In general, the Russian culture encourages laughter associated with the first reading as an open expression of one's good emotion. However since laughter (referred to with the words *smejat'sja* and *smex*) may be associated with scornful fun or jest, it may also have bad connotations. The more so, laughter referred to with the words *smejat'sja* and *smex* may express mixed feelings: there are such expressions as *gor'kij smex* "bitter laughter" and *sarkasticheskij smex* "sarcastic laughter".

Another point is that the sound of laughter may be pleasant or unpleasant. The English speakers know this quite well since there are several verbs denoting varieties of laughter in English:

—*to chuckle* "to laugh quietly"
—*to chortle* "to laugh, showing pleasure and satisfaction (often at someone else's bad luck)"
—*to giggle* "to laugh repeatedly in a quiet but uncontrolled and childish way (often at something silly or rude or when you are nervous)"
—*to titter* "to laugh nervously, in a partly suppressed manner (often at something that you feel you should not be laughing at)"
—*to snicker*, to snigger "to laugh at someone or something in a covert or suppressed manner (often unkindly)"
—*to cackle* "to laugh in a loud, high voice, in a sharp or harsh manner (like a hen after laying)"
—*to guffaw* "to laugh loudly (like a horse)"

On can easily see that most of them are or may be disapproving (*to chortle*, *to giggle*, *to titter*, *to snicker/to snigger*, *to cackle*, *to guffaw*). It is worth noting that none of them is a basic term for laughter. Most of them refer to "sub-laughing" behavior; those denoting loud laughter have animal-like connotations.

Russian verbs denoting various sounds of laughter are not so numerous: *fyrknut'* "to produce a chortle", *xixikat'* "to giggle", *gogotat'*, *rzhat'* "to guffaw" (and the noun *gogot* "guffaw"); they tend to disapprove unpleasant laughter as well, e.g.:

> Ей было стыдно, горько, и она за миллион не согласилась бы говорить в присутствии посторонней женщины, соперницы, лгуньи, которая стояла теперь за картиной и, вероятно, *злорадно хихикала*.
> She felt ashamed and bitter, and would not for a million roubles have consented to speak in the presence of the outsider, the rival, the deceitful woman who was standing now behind the picture, and probably *giggling malignantly*. (Anton Chekhov, translated by Constance Garnett)

However, it is common to refer to various sounds of laughter using the universal words smejat'sja and smex with additional comments (quite often with no disapproval). E.g.:

> (1) Самый *звонкий и гармонический* смех раздался над ним.
> *The most ringing and harmonious of laughs* resounded above him. (Nikolai Gogol, translated by Isabel F. Hapgood)
> (2) Чуть что, так и зальется *голосистым смехом*: ха-ха-ха!
> For the least thing she would go off into a *ringing laugh*—"Ha-

ha-ha"! (Anton Chekhov, translated by Constance Garnett)

(3) Не переваривaю я и отрывистого смеха Лизы, которому она научилась в консерватории...
I cannot tolerate the habit of *spasmodic laughter* Liza has picked up at the Conservatoire...' (Anton Chekhov, translated by Constance Garnett)

(4)...неприятный, дребезжащий смех, каким в водевилях смеются генералы: хе-хе-хе
... an *unpleasant cracked "He, he"*! like the chuckle of a general in a vaudeville (Anton Chekhov, translated by Constance Garnett)

The Russian verb *xoxotat'* and the corresponding noun *xoxot*, for their part, are basic terms for laughter, which have no counterpart in English (and probably in any other language). They refer to loud and unrestrained, full-blown laughter, which is regarded with no disapproval. It has no animal-like connotations; people do not perceive it as rude or coarse (in contrast to the *guffaw*, the alleged counterpart of *xoxot*). A typical collocation with the noun *xoxot* is *zdorovyj xoxot* "healthy burst of laughter". Both males and females perform the laughter referred to with the words *xoxotat'* and *xoxot* (in particular, it is a typical female behavior, again in contrast to "guffaw"). The nouns *xoxotun* (masculine) and *xoxotun'ja* or *xoxotushka* (feminine) refer to people who often laugh in this way; they imply a positive attitude to the person.

The words *xoxotat'* and *xoxot* are not used with reference to mixed feelings: such collocations as **gor'kij xoxot* (cf. *gor'kij smex* "bitter laughter", *gor'kaja ulybka* "bitter smile") or **sarkasticheskij xoxot* (cf. *sarkasticheskij smex* "sarcastic laughter", *sarkasticheskaja ulybka* "sarcastic smile") are hardly acceptable. The laughter denoted by the words in question expresses sheer merriment, and the Russian culture views it positively (cf. Wierzbicka 1999: 220).

Conclusion

As we have seen, smiling is under suspicion in the Russian culture; the verb *smejat'sja* and the noun *smex* generally express positive attitude towards laughter, but this is not always the case; and the laughter denoted by the words *xoxotat'* and *xoxot* is generally viewed positively. This attitude is consistent with the strong emphasis that the Russian culture places on sincerity and open expression of emotions. However, it may lead to cross-cultural miscommunication: a typical American smile may seem non-natural and false to many Russians while foreigners who are involved in communication with Russians may find them rude, impolite, or ill-mannered.

References

Fasmer, M. [Vasmer, M.] (1973) *Etimologicheskij slovar' russkogo jazyka* [Etymological dictionary of Russian], vol. 4. Moscow: Progress.

Proxorov, Ju. E., & Sternin, I. A. (2007) *Russkie: Kommunikativnoe povedenie* [Russians: Communicative behavior]. Moscow: Flinta; Nauka.

Sergeeva, A. (2007) *Russkie: Stereotipy povedenija, tradicii, mental"nos"'* [Russians: Stereotypes of behavior, traditions, mentality]. Moscow: Flinta; Nauka.

Wierzbicka, A. (1999) *Emotions across languages and cultures: Diversity and universals*. Cambridge; Paris: Cambridge University Press; Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme.