

Introduction

Why is Russian word element (root, prefix, suffix) study so important?

Those who have not yet studied Russian often believe learning the Cyrillic alphabet looks difficult. In reality, the alphabet is not difficult at all! Or maybe Russian declensions and conjugations will prove to be the major impediment? Not easy, but definitely learnable. How about Russian grammar in general? Typically Russian grammar requires at least two years of formal study, but most of the important points of grammar can be learned within that time.

What most students of Russian lack at the end of a thorough course of study is an adequate vocabulary. When they read Russian printed material or watch a Russian TV news program, a greater problem than alphabet or grammar is the mountain of still unfamiliar words.

Fortunately, in one important way learning Russian vocabulary can be easier than you might expect. Russian, far more than English, is an *agglutinant* language ('glue' and 'agglutinant' share the same root). Simply stated, **Russians form thousands of words by 'gluing together' in various combinations a comparatively few productive roots, prefixes, and suffixes.**¹ When these word elements are mastered, the task of acquiring a large vocabulary becomes less daunting.

In English, agglutinant word elements primarily derive from Latin and Greek (Latin: *trans-form-ation*; Greek: *meta-morph-o-sis*). Common roots borrowed from Latin include **dict**: *predict, prediction, predictable, predictability, diction, contradiction, dictionary*, or **clude**: *include, exclude, conclude, preclude*. But in English this agglutinative process is much less commonly utilized than in Russian.² Most of our frequently used English vocabulary words derive from Germanic (Old English and Scandinavian), a much less agglutinant language group.³ In general, an English speaker tends to perceive vocabulary items as fixed and indivisible elements, not variable through combining prefixes and suffixes with roots.

On the other hand, Russian is highly agglutinate. Take for example the Russian root **вал**, *pile*. This one root is used to form approximately 170 Russian words with meanings both literal and abstract/figurative. A few examples follow:

вал	<i>earthen wall</i> (a pile of dirt)
валить	<i>throw down</i> (pile down)
валище	<i>heap</i> (a large pile)

¹ One way linguists classify languages by type is as isolating, agglutinating, and inflecting languages. Isolating languages, like Chinese and Vietnamese, feature words consisting of only one word element (a morpheme). Agglutinating languages, like Turkish, Hungarian, Finnish, and Japanese, often form words through combining two or, often, more word elements. Inflecting languages like Latin and Greek use variable word endings, vowel alternations, and consonant mutations to distinguish meaning. Russian, like many languages, combines important parts of all three types, but Russian makes much greater use of agglutinative and inflective potentials than does English.

² As an illustration, compare the English translation with the Russian original of Father Zosima's teaching on religious ecstasy from *The Brothers Karamazov* (part 2, book 6, chapter 3). Italicized words indicate those in which word element analysis could promote understanding for a student studying English or Russian. We note only one minor example in English, but thirteen instances in Russian:

When you are left alone, pray. Love to throw yourself on the earth and kiss it. Kiss the earth and love it with an *unceasing*, consuming love. Love all men, love everything. Seek that rapture and ecstasy. Water the earth with the tears of your joy and love those tears. Don't be ashamed of that ecstasy, prize it, for it is a gift of God and a great one; it is not given to many but only to the elect. (see Norton Critical Edition, p. 301)

В *уединении* же *оставаясь*, молись. Люби *повергаться* на землю и лобызать её. Землю целуй и *неустанно, ненасытимо* люби, всех люби, всё люби, ищи *восторга* и *иступления* сего. *Омочи* землю слезами *радости* твоя и люби сии слёзы твои. *Иступления* же сего не *стыдись*, дорожи им, ибо есть дар *божий*, великий, да и не многим даётся, а *избранным*.

³ Derek Offord, *Using Russian*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 203.

валу́н	<i>boulder</i> (rock pile)
вва́лить	<i>hurl into</i> (pile into)
взвва́лить	<i>load up onto</i> (pile up onto)
завва́л	<i>blockage</i> (a blocking pile)
обва́л	<i>landslide</i> [снежный обвал: <i>avalanche</i>] (a pile all around)
перевва́литься	<i>roll over</i> (pile over onto)
подва́л	<i>basement</i> (space from under which dirt was piled up)
провва́литься	<i>collapse; fail an exam</i> (fall through into a pile)
разва́лина	<i>ruin</i> (that which has fallen apart into a pile)
сва́лка	<i>garbage dump</i> (things piled together)

Notice that each of these Russian words contains the same root, **вал**, combined with various prefixes and suffixes. On the other hand, the English equivalents for these words as generally found in the *Oxford English-Russian Dictionary* all have different roots, although they can be paraphrased using the English word ‘pile.’

In Russian the 228 most productive roots occur in approximately 20,000 words, an average of nearly 90 words per root.⁴ Can you think of *any* root used in English capable of forming 90 words?

However, two cautions are important. Many times the non-native speaker of Russian will be unable to accurately determine the meaning of a Russian word without context. For example, *сва́лка* or *разва́лина* out of context would probably be unclear to most students.

Yet in context, a knowledge of these words’ root and affixes (prefixes and suffixes) will promote understanding: *Они́ ве́рят, что комму́низм оказа́лся на сва́лке исто́рии.* (They believe communism has ended up on the garbage dump of history). Or, *Мы с интере́сом смотре́ли на разва́лины анти́чного хра́ма.* (We were looking with interest at the ruins of the ancient temple).

Further, with certain words, such as *произноше́ние* (pronunciation) in Russian (or the word *understand* in English), meaning has evolved greatly over time. Today it is best simply to learn such words’ definitions without attempting to derive meaning through analyzing roots and prefixes.⁵

Having acknowledged certain difficulties in deciphering meaning through word element analysis, we nonetheless affirm that knowing productive Russian word elements is a powerful tool for students of Russian. Students’ understanding of nuances will grow exponentially as they invest effort in learning Russian roots, prefixes, and suffixes.

What is the best way to learn Russian word elements and vocabulary?

No doubt the best way is through birth to a literate, patriotic Russian mother. Lacking that or other extensive in-country contact with the language, what is the second most effective approach?

We believe when appropriate material is well organized, defined, and illustrated in adequately full context, students can learn Russian word elements and develop a rich vocabulary faster than in any other way.

In this text we have decided against including entire stories illustrating roots in a “natural” context. This is an enjoyable but inefficient approach. In a given story, certain word elements will occur, but many others will not. The student must read hundreds of pages of text in order to encounter the most frequently used word element inventory.

In *Leveraging Your Russian* we show roots in the context of full sentences, a context in which the most information about word elements’ meaning can be given in the least space. Further, we illustrate each root through several words in adjacent sentences, facilitating comparisons and enhancing memory.

What is this book’s underlying methodological assumption?

In Boris Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago*, Tonia Zhivago explains the difference between Lara and herself:

⁴ А. И. Кузнецова и Т. Ф. Ефремова, *Словарь морфем русского языка*, Москва: Русский язык, 1986, с. 1122.

⁵ Similarly, in certain instances in any language, contemporary meanings diverge markedly from those of an earlier time: the rape [kidnapping, abduction] of Persephone; God is no respecter of persons [God esteems all equally]; and Christ’s passion [suffering].

“I was born to make life simple and to look for sensible solutions; she, to complicate it and create confusion.”⁶ In our book, we attempt to follow the *Tonia Tendency* to simplify and look for sensible solutions. **Our priority is for simple explanations and high frequency usage.**

Thus, we have decided against providing a more comprehensive treatment, such as found in Townsend, Gribble, and Cubberley,⁷ particularly valuable for graduate students. **Our focus is on the most productive word elements, leaving the more sophisticated, exceptional, and esoteric for later study. This book’s orientation is more immediately practical, less theoretical or scholarly. All is designed and ordered to be user-friendly to the student of Russian. Our work is not an exhaustive exercise in historical or comparative linguistics.**⁸

Our emphasis will be different. To illustrate, we will consider the basic and variant forms of the Russian root for “light,” **льг** (**лєг**, **лєѳ**), and examples of the prefixes and suffixes utilized to “glue together” twenty-seven simple (non-compound, non-declined, non-conjugated) words used in contemporary Russian, including **льгбѳа** (*perk*); **облєгчѳть** (*to facilitate, lighten*); and **лєгкѳсть** (*easiness, lightness*).

In this book we have included Russian examples and English translations for 550 roots which occur in approximately 20 or more words each. We feel that, in most cases, the energy required to memorize meanings of roots used less frequently could be equally well expended in merely learning the root’s relatively few words in common usage.⁹

In summary, through utilizing the practical methodology of *Leveraging Your Russian*, we believe students will rapidly enlarge their Russian vocabulary, enabling them by degrees to read and understand, but also ultimately, to write and speak with greater fluency and precision.

Who will benefit from this book?

Students who have studied Russian for at least one semester can profitably begin systematic **word element (root, prefix, suffix)** study. This book is intended to assist students at all levels of Russian build their vocabulary base through an expanding knowledge of important Russian word elements. **On pages 22–25 we provide lists of roots recommended for students at five different levels, beginning with the second semester of first-year Russian and ending with the second semester of third-year Russian.**

At each level we follow a **gradual, systematic approach**. Roots on the first list are among the most common. They probably will have appeared in more than one word during the first year of Russian study. Lists two and three contain roots often included in materials from the second year. Roots from lists four and five are more likely to occur during third-year study. For students at any level, including beyond the third year, *Leveraging Your Russian* serves as a reference work facilitating essential review of the Russian language’s most productive roots, prefixes, and suffixes.

Further, each root is illustrated through **several words** found in the context of **five or more sentences**. Students in their second semester of Russian study should focus on sentences marked by a ‘1’ under each recommended root. These are the simplest sentences. Those in second year Russian courses could add sentences 2 and, later, 3¹⁰; while third-year students should also examine sentences 4 and, finally, 5. **Relatively advanced students just beginning formal word element study through *Leveraging Your Russian* could profitably peruse all sentences of all roots in order.**

We have attempted to make the sentences under each root progressively more challenging: in a sen-

⁶ New York: Ballantine Books, 1991, p. 419.

⁷ Charles E. Townsend, *Russian Word-Formation*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968; Charles E. Gribble, *Russian Root List*, 2d edition, Columbus: Slavica Publishers, 1981; Paul Cubberley, *Handbook of Russian Affixes*, Columbus: Slavic Publishers, 1994.

⁸ These approaches might, for example, analyze the word *leverage* from our book’s title, ultimately reconstructing it as the Indo-European root **legwh*, “light.” The scholar may also discover that from this same Indo-European root the Russian *лєгкѳий* derives. The careful linguist working from the Indo-European **legwh* could establish and describe the historical sound changes and contemporary relationships between English ‘light’ and Russian ‘лєгкѳий.’

⁹ Thus, for example, we have not included the following roots which are in Gribble’s most comprehensive list of nearly 1000 Russian roots: *ал*, scarlet (8 words); *алк* (*алч*), hunger; greed (7 words); *берез* (*береж*, *бреж*), river bank (17 words); and *блев* (*блєв*) vomit (6 words). Further, a few roots producing more than 20 words were omitted when the meaning was considered of narrow utility or largely archaic; for example, *пряд* (*пращ*) spin, twist fibers into thread (38 words). On the other hand, some roots producing fewer than 20 words are included below when the words seemed varied and common in contemporary Russian: *хваст*, boast (16 words)

¹⁰ Generally sentences marked by a 3 illustrate a variety of prefixes and/or suffixes.

tence numbered 5, for instance, not only may the basic root appear in a mutated, truncated, or expanded form, but the meaning of the word may be less apparent. Evolutionary changes in the language have resulted in figurative, idiomatic connotations in many roots. **English translations of the Russian sentences are provided to help students immediately validate or revise their understanding.**

How should this book be used?

Leveraging your Russian may be used as part of a formal class or in independent study. In the classroom we have found the following to be among successful approaches:

While planning a course, the teacher locates on pages 22–25 the list of roots which would be most appropriate for a given semester/quarter. Having determined how many class periods may include word element study, the teacher divides that number into the number of roots to be mastered. Typically, students will then be assigned three to five roots per class period.

In preparing for class, students memorize the day's roots and their English equivalents. To help them remember the roots, students read the Russian sentences appropriate to their level which follow each root. Next, they analyze the italicized words containing the given root. Students should identify the root and establish the root's basic form, noting any mutations, truncations, and expansions. Finally, students identify any prefixes and/or suffixes, and attempt to determine what nuances these word elements contribute. Students should then compare their mental English translations with written translations found immediately below each root's Russian examples.

During class, the teacher may select for each root one or more sentences for brief discussion. For instance, in a certain sentence perhaps the root's form is particularly interesting or the prefix may deserve special comment. Students are to have read all assigned sentences before class and mark those discussed during class. As a small part of each test, teachers may choose four or so sentences from among all those marked since the last test, although other options exist. For example, a few of the discussed words could be placed in new contexts or new words containing assigned roots could appear in new sentences. In deference to students' and teachers' time pressures, we generally recommend the less complicated approach described above.

If test questions come directly from marked sentences (even so, more of a challenge for students than one might imagine), an occasional unmarked sentence might be included for extra points to reward the most diligent students. For each italicized word in a test sentence, students are to write the root in its basic form, the English meaning of the root, the prefix or suffix, the meaning of the prefix or suffix, and the meaning of the word in the sentence context.

As a rule, approximately five minutes during class should suffice for word element discussion. If done consistently over time, even this brief commitment will produce remarkable results, especially, but not only, in students' reading and listening comprehension skills.

What root and affix list has been used for this text?

A. I. Kuznetsova and T. F. Efremova's 1986 *Dictionary of Russian Morphemes* (see footnote 4 above) is an especially important book for those interested in the study of roots and affixes. This work contains the most exhaustive list ever published of Russian roots, prefixes, and suffixes, complete with variant forms and including an extensive list of words in which these elements occur. This dictionary makes it possible to grasp at a glance which word elements are particularly productive, in reference not to an individual word's frequency count, but to numbers of words derived from specific word elements. We have relied on this book extensively in *Leveraging Your Russian*.

However, in order to make Kuznetsova and Efremova's work more immediately beneficial to the English-speaking student of Russian, we have introduced the following modifications:

1. English equivalents for roots, prefixes, and suffixes are provided.

In this regard, an effort has been made to uncover underlying meanings of these word elements from which several related meanings may have evolved over time. We believe that by emphasizing the most inclusive core idea of each word element, students will better be able to remember and apply meanings. Thus, we assign the richly allusive prefix *za-* an inclusive core meaning of "beyond, behind," together with four variants of that meaning, rather than the dozen or more meanings given in some texts.

More specifically, for the root **нас**, George Patrick¹¹ provides the meanings *tend, herd*; C. Wolkonsky,¹² *pasture, herd, tending*; Charles Gribble, *tend, herd, pasture; store, supply*; and Charles Townsend, *tend, watch; save*. In this book, we give the general and more inclusive definition *providing security*. Or, for the root **греб** (**грѣб, гроб, граб**), Patrick gives *dig, grab*; Wolkonsky, *interment, burial, excavation; thievery, spoliation*; Gribble, *dig, bury; row; comb*; and Townsend, *dig; row*. Our definition is *dig by scraping*. Finally, for the root **кат** (**кач**), Patrick provides *roll, ride*; Wolkonsky, *movement of wheels, traveling, rolling; riding*; Gribble, *roll, slope, rock, swing, sway*; and Townsend, *roll*. We offer *glide (rock, roll, swing)*.

2. One root is selected as the basic form. Other forms are placed in parentheses as variants.

In Kuznetsova, none of the forms is designated ‘basic form.’ Each form of the root is listed separately in alphabetical order with all other variants in parentheses. In our root dictionary at the end of this book, we also list each head root and variant separately and in alphabetical order to assist the student searching for the meaning of a particular root form.

Our preference is to list the simpler form as the head root with variants in progression from most similar to the head root to least similar. Thus, for the root meaning *lie, lay* we list as head root *лєз* followed by the variants (**лєж, лѣж, лог, лож, лаг**). We typically list Russian forms before related Church Slavic forms: **волок** (**волоч, волак, влач, влек**) *drag*. **However, in keeping with the basic thrust of the book, if on the basis of frequency of usage we believe reversing the order will be more helpful to the student, we do so: плен (по.лон) captivity.**

As illustrated, in general we choose simpler consonantal head roots, expanding them through vowel insertions, as historically occurred when ‘weak’ (jer) vowels were replaced by full vowels: **гн** (**гон, ган**) *chase*, and **дл** (**дол**) *long*.

3. Unproductive root variants are omitted

In the interest of completeness, Kuznetsova lists *двиз* as a variant for the root **двиг** (**движ**) *movement*. **Двиз** occurs in only one word: *подвизаться to earn a living by*, while **двиг** forms 47 words and **движ**, 46 words. Rather than needlessly cluttering the student’s memory, **двиз** is left out of our root list.

4. Historically related roots still close in meaning are combined.

To help the student see relationships and recall meanings, closely related roots are listed together in the main root list, although in Kuznetsova they are separate. In our root dictionary at the end of the book, they also are listed separately. For example, in the section listing roots and giving example sentences, **мзд** (**мезд**) and **мст** (**мест, мец, мщ**) *avenge* are combined.

5. We use the *i-kratcoe* without parentheses.

Unlike Kuznetsova, who places a (j) in parentheses at the end of roots which preserve the *i-kratcoe* in some words, we use the *i-kratcoe* itself without parentheses. This *i-kratcoe* often drops according to truncation rule 1 given below. For ease of recognition, we list the letter as **й** (without parentheses) rather than (j). Therefore, we spell *do/put* as **дей**, not **де(j)**.

¹¹ George Z. Patrick, *Roots of the Russian Language*, New York: Pitman, 1974.

¹² C. Wolkonsky and M. A. Poltoratzky, *Handbook of Russian Roots*, New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1961.