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Linguistic commentary #1

As a subject for this paper, I would like to explore the meaning of the Russian word *khaltoora* (халтура) in terms of the concepts introduced thus far in class, such as frequency of use, linguistic representation of national character, semantic scope, and semantic metalanguage. The word approximately means "a job done poorly" but represents much more than that alone. As with many other unique terms in a given language, the word also requires a sense of context in which it is used as well as some historical background and possible origins in order to be fully conveyed.

The word *khaltoora* in its forms as a noun, verb, adjective, adverb and other varieties, suggests a sense of disdain towards the results of a hurried, carelessly performed task. It would not quite equate to cheating, but rather to a deliberate dismissal of quality control. For instance, a prepared exam for a class could be called a *khaltoora* if it were not adequately designed to test the students; cheating on an exam, however, can never be called that term, even though a weak attempt at homework could. In the example above, it would probably be used judgmentally, which reminds one of the fact that direct judgmental and confrontational statements are allowed in the Russian culture. This is a very common use of the word (one would be essentially "cutting *pravda* into someone's eyes," a common Russian expression representing the importance of establishing truthfulness). However, it can also be used more neutrally. For instance, in a mystery novel by Marianna Bakonina published in 2000, the word is used in the following way: "У вас что, тоже зарплату задерживают и вы халтурите на казенном автомобиле?" which means "Have they delayed your paycheck as well and now you exploit (khaltoora verb form) the company car?" In this sense, there is no negative connotation at all, just a conversational jab. In another, more positive tone, author Victor Astafyef writes in his novel *The Jolly Soldier,* "Моя

шинель была из сукна настоящего! Канадского — они не халтурили. Хорошие они, видать, люди, производство у них хорошо налажено," or "My coat was made from real Canadian material – they didn't do a careless job (khaltoora verb form). They must be good people, then, and have a well-refined industry." Of course, this doesn't imply that *khaltoora* is a good thing, but only that its absence is quite remarkable. This begins to show that *khaltoora* is not only despised but is often expected as something normal.

Another example of this acceptance is from Ilya Ehrenburg in his novel *The Thaw*; here, the use of the word *khaltoora* gives a direct indication of how prevalent the notion really is in Russian culture: "Конечно, я халтурщик, но в общем все более или менее халтурят, только некоторые этого не хотят понять," or "Of course, I am a khaltoorshik (one who practices khaltoora), but overall, everyone more or less khaltooryat (practices khaltoora), only some people don't want to know it." Here, *khaltoora* is seen as something commonplace, something that everyone often does but probably not out in the open. Not only can the word be used in a friendly manner, but it can often be used jokingly as well. One could say, for instance, "Let's go and do [something] in a mischievously careless way," that is "давай пойдём и похалтурим." In this case, one would intentionally mess around, but with a sense of fun and enjoyment. These examples give some sense at the spectrum of the word, but how can *khaltoora* be formulated more precisely, without the use of connotation-laden English words?

The natural semantic metalanguage formulated by Anna Wierzbicka facilitates this goal tremendously. The word *khaltoora* can be roughly described as follows using the metalanguage: "Someone thinks: When I do something, people want this to be done well. Maybe I don't know how to do it well. Maybe I don't want to do it well. I will do it badly. I will do this because it is good for me now. After some time, people will say or think "this is bad."" This might be a basic thought process of someone who is about to do *khaltoora*, yet it doesn't quite cover the light aspect of the word when the matter is not work per-se, only the negative aspect. Instead of going more in depth into the matter, though, it might be more

useful to compare the word to its closest equivalents in American English and to speculate on the national differences that may account for the results.

When comparing the frequency of the word in Russian, compared to its English counterparts, it becomes apparent that the concept is more prevalent in Russian. *Khaltoora* comes up 557 times in the National Corpus of the Russian Language, while the verb form *khaltoorit'* comes up 166 times (the Corpus contains about 230 million words). When searching for a similar word "hackwork" in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (about 450 million words), however, the word comes up only 16 times, while the word "potboiler" in its singular and plural forms comes up 74 times. Of course, the words only partially relate in sense to *khaltoora*, so the list of equivalent words may possibly be even shorter, even considering that the word "trash" can also represent *khaltoora* on occasion. The fact that Russian even has a unique word for the concept, demonstrates that the concept is more prevalent culturally in Russia than in the United States. As mentioned before, *khaltoora* has a judgmental note to it in many of its shades of meaning. Perhaps it is too direct and accusational as a concept to be common in speech and writing in America. In Russia, however, it is completely normal for someone's work to be thoroughly and brutally evaluated. There is hardly any softening of feedback, and people are used to harsh criticisms, both one on one and even publicly. This may potentially relate to the idea of *pravda* (truth) as well, a concept that is of such paramount importance in Russian that it was discussed in lecture and covered by Wierzbicka. In that sense, terming someone's work as *khaltoora* is generally meant to be an accurate evaluation, unless of course it is done in gest. Thus when *khaltoora* is identified as such, the idea is that the truth needed to be said either as a reprimand or out of a sense of propriety. It's clear that words like *khaltoora* have a unique place in Russian, but where then did the term originate in the first place?

In its main modern sense, *khaltoora* only became popular in the middle of the 20$^{th}$ century in the Soviet Union, but was used long before in a completely different way. According to the Russian linguist

Serebrennikov in one of his works on language, the origins of the word cannot be pinpointed exactly, but are possibly derived from the church word *chartular* which was the term for a bookkeeper at a church or monastery as documented between the 11th to 14th centuries. As a side note, the Greek words *chartion* and *chartes* which mean papers and maps respectively probably predate the church terms since much terminology was borrowed when Russia adopted the Greek Orthodox faith. *Chartular* then apparently converted to *chaltular* or *khaltoolar* during typical mispronunciations of similar letter combinations. According to Serebrennikov, at some point, the verb *khaltoorit* became common in the church to describe hurriedly conducted and low-quality church services (especially funerals) that would allow the priest to cover more ground and collect more payment. According to the linguist, the next phase came with the adoption of the word by criminal groups which used it as a derogatory term to describe easy thieving associated with dead people who were about to be buried. It is in this sense of "easy, low-quality work" that it finally became incorporated into common and more modern use. The linguist points out that there have been attempts to eradicate the word from the literary language, but they were unsuccessful on account of its extreme livelihood. The key to its success was that the word is enjoyable to use and is similar in sound and appearance to more "proper" and solid-sounding words such as *literatura* (literature) and *prokuratura* (prosecutor's office).

In summary, then, we have examined several forms of the word *халтура*, considered several examples of its usage, attempted to formulate the concept in a neutral way, considered unique cultural reasons why the word may exist, and have looked at possible origins. Of course, a more extensive coverage would be needed to express and define the word thoroughly, especially via the use of the natural semantic metalanguage. Nonetheless, the hope is that the reader may have gained some insight concerning this specific occurrence and the Russian language in general.

## References


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