

YES and NO: Universal Ideas in Language Specific Configurations¹

Dmitrij Dobrovol'skij

Russian Language Institute,
Russian Academy of Sciences
Volkhonka 18/2
119019 Moscow

dm-dbrv@yandex.ru;

Dmitrij.Dobrovolskij@assoc.oeaw.ac.at

Irina Levontina

Russian Language Institute,
Russian Academy of Sciences
Volkhonka 18/2
119019 Moscow

irina.levontina@mail.ru

Abstract

Even the most general and seemingly universal ideas have a unique representation in every single language. In this paper, we analyze the Russian words *да* 'yes' and *нет* 'no', as well as their English and German correlates. We show that these words behave differently from language to language. As empirical basis, we took two Harry Potter books by J. K. Rowling (*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* and *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*) and their German and Russian translations. Many of the cross-linguistic differences discussed in the paper go back to the language specific properties of the discourse structure.

1 Introduction

It is well-known that even the most general and seemingly universal ideas have a unique representation in every single language. In this paper, we analyze the Russian words *да* 'yes' and *нет* 'no', as well as their English and German correlates. We will show that these words behave differently from language to language even in their central readings. Let us start with an example.

In 2008 Barack Obama won the United States presidential election under the slogan "Yes, we can!". From the linguistic point of view, it is remarkable that this seemingly so simple a sentence cannot be adequately translated into Russian, at least not in all possible contexts. The stumbling block here is the word *yes*. In English, we can easily imagine a dialogue, such as – *You cannot do it!* – *Yes, I can*. Its literal translation into Russian would be quite unacceptable. Cf. – *Вы этого не можете!* – *Да, могу*. The correct answer here is: – *Нет, могу*. Incidentally, in German it is also not possible to use the word *ja* 'yes' in such cases. There is a special word *doch* (something like the combination *нет да* in Russian). Compare *Doch, ich kann es*.

Hence, Obama's formula *Yes, we can!* cannot be translated into Russian by *Да, мы можем*. In certain cases, the correct translation would be *Нет, мы можем*. Compare passages like *They say, we are not ready, we cannot. Yes, we can!* The literal translation *Нам говорили, что мы не готовы, что мы не можем. Да, мы можем* would lack any coherence. However, if a refrain of this kind was translated differently from context to context it would lose its slogan nature. The simplest way to avoid such difficulties is to omit *yes* translating *Yes, we can!* by *Мы можем!* But the *yes* at the beginning of the sentence is very important. First, it makes the utterance dialogic, and second, it carries a strong positive attitude. Hence, to simply omit *yes* is not possible.

What is important is not only the question whether or not the given words are equivalent in principle, but as to how they really function in discourse. This question cannot be answered without using parallel corpora. It is obvious that using as empirical data contexts from various Russian, English and German

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text sources which are not identical in content would obscure the results because many other factors play a role in this case and it is not possible to take all of them into account. Also self-constructed sentences as linguistic data have obvious restrictions. Thus parallel corpora seem to be the best starting point for our cross-linguistic analysis. As an empirical basis, we took two Harry Potter books by J. K. Rowling (*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* and *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*) with their German and Russian translations (for Russian we have two translations at our disposal – see below Russian1 and Russian2).² It turned out that, as expected, *yes*, *ja* and *да*, as well as *no*, *nein* and *нет* function mostly as equivalents. On the other hand, in many cases these words do not coincide (about 20% for NO and about 30% for YES). Often *нет* ‘no’ is translated in a different way even though the respective English or German phrase with *no* resp. *nein* is acceptable. We distinguish several cases of cross-linguistic non-parallelism. Let us mention some of them.

2 Corpus Evidence

Some of these discrepancies are due to colloquial variants of YES and NO, existing in every language (e.g. *да* ‘yes’ – *ага* ‘aha’ – *угу* ‘uh-huh’, etc. in Russian). Cf. (1).

- (1) English *Nah, I'm all right, thanks, Ron.*
German *Nö, komm schon zurecht, Ron.*
Russian1 *Да нет, все в порядке, спасибо, Рон.*
Russian2 *Не-а, все нормально, спасибочки, Рон.*

Some other phrases contain different synonyms of YES and NO, and therefore they are not parallel. Cf. (2).

- (2) English *“I don ' t think so,” said Snape, smiling coldly.*
German *„Das kommt nicht in Frage“, sagte Snape kalt lächelnd.*
Russian1 – *Нет, я так не думаю, – сказал Снейп, холодно улыбаясь.*
Russian2 – *Ничего подобного, – заявил Злей, холодно улыбаясь.*

Non-parallel phrases are characteristic of the situation when YES and NO are optional in some of given languages. Cf. (3).

- (3) English *“Harry Potter's giving out signed photos!” “No, I'm not,” said Harry angrily, his fists clenching.*
German *„Harry Potter verteilt Autogrammkarten“ „Nein, tu ich nicht“, sagte Harry wütend und ballte die Fäuste.*
Russian1 – *Тут Гарри Поттер раздает фотографии с автографами! – Не раздаю, – зло сказал Гарри, сжимая кулаки.*
Russian2 – *Ничего подобного, – сердито сказал Гарри, непроизвольно сжимая кулаки.*

These cases of non-parallelism are rather trivial. However, there are some fundamental grammatical differences between the words for YES and especially for NO in different languages. We will mention two of them.

The Russian *нет* ‘no’ can be used in contexts like *Я тоже нет* ‘Neither am/do I’; *Я заплатил, а он нет* ‘I paid, and he did not’; *Почему бы и нет* ‘Why not’; *Разумеется, нет* ‘Of course, not’; *Я думаю,*

² We used the Regensburg Parallel Corpus (ParaSol). Our search strategy included three iterations: we looked separately for *yes/no*, for *ja/nein*, and for *да/нет*. From this perspective, it is not so important for our aims that the original text is an English novel. We are aware of the fact that translations will not necessarily reflect pure native language intuitions. But if the translator uses a word different from the word used in the original text (a word that is not a standard equivalent), this provides even stronger evidence for the idea that there are relevant cross-linguistic differences in this field.

что *нет* 'I think not' etc. English *no* and German *nein* are not used in these phrases, they are replaced with *not*, *neither* and respectively *nicht*. So, it is a special reading of the Russian word *нет* which corresponds neither to the English *no*, nor to the German *nein*. Cf. (4-6).

- (4) English "Definitely **not**," said George, sniggering.
German „Ganz bestimmt **nicht**“, sagte George wiehernd.
Russian1 – Ну конечно же, **нет**, – добавил, хихикая, Джордж.
Russian2 – Ну в коем случае, – хищно ухмыльнулся Джордж.
- (5) English Scabbers has been fighting, **not** us.
German Krätze hat gekämpft, **nicht** wir.
Russian1 Скабберс дрался, мы **нет**.
Russian2 Это Струпик дрался, а не мы.
- (6) English "Of course **not**," said Hermione briskly.
German „Natürlich **nicht**“, sagte Hermine energisch.
Russian1 – Конечно, **нет**! – оживилась Эрмиона.
Russian2 – Разумеется, **нет**! – живо отозвалась Гермиона.

The second constructive discrepancy is connected with the structure of disjunctive questions in different languages. Every language develops special means of expression in this domain, e.g. all possible kinds of tag questions in English. Cf. (7-11).

- (7) English You haven't been fighting, **have you**?
German Ihr habt euch nicht geschlagen, **oder**?
Russian1 Вы не дрались, **нет**?
Russian2 Вы не дрались, **нет**?
- (8) English Harry didn't know whether to laugh **or not**.
German Harry wußte nicht recht, **ob** er lachen sollte.
Russian1 Гарри не знал, смеяться **или нет**.
Russian2 Но Гарри не понимал, смеяться ему **или нет**.
- (9) English You do want to investigate Malfoy, **don't you**?
German Ihr wollt doch Malfoy aushorchen, **oder**?
Russian1 Вы хотите допросить Малфоя **или нет**?
Russian2 Вы хотите допросить Малфоя **или нет**?
- (10) English I mean, it'd just go right through you, **wouldn't it**?
German Ich meine, es würde einfach durchfliegen, **oder**?
Russian1 Книга ведь просто пройдет сквозь тебя, **разве нет**?
Russian2 ...я хочу сказать, он ведь прошел сквозь тебя, правильно?
- (11) English You won't tease him, **will you**?
German Aber ihr zieht ihn doch damit jetzt nicht auf, **oder**?
Russian1 Вы же не будете дразнить его, **ведь нет**?
Russian2 Вы не будете его дразнить? **Нет**?

As the examples show, also in Russian *нет* is not a mandatory part of disjunctive questions, cf., for instance, example (10) where *правильно* 'right' is used as a question tag.

Now let us briefly mention some other interesting cases of cross-linguistic contrast on the YES/NO-domain. *Yes* is used in English, when one asks someone to repeat a phrase. In German we would rather say *Wie bitte?* ‘≈ Pardon?’, *Was?* ‘What?’ – and in Russian *A?* ‘≈Eh?’, ‘≈What?’, *Что?* ‘What?’, *Как?* ‘How?’. YES and NO words also behave differently as end-particles in the languages in question (cf. Levontina, 2000; Левонтина, 2000). Compare (12).

- (12) English *Another Weasley, eh?*
German *Noch ein Weasley, **nicht wahr?***
Russian1 *Еще один Висли, **да?***
Russian2 *Очередной Уэсли, **так?***

Nein is often used in German to express astonishment, which is less typical of English and hardly possible in Russian. Cf. (13).

- (13) English *“Uh-oh,” said Ron, jabbing at the Invisibility Booster.*
German *„O nein“, sagte Ron und hämmerte auf den Knopf für den Unsichtbarkeits-Servoantrieb ein.*
Russian1 – *А, черт!* – *Рон снова ткнул пальцем в кнопку невидимости.*
Russian2 – *Ой,* – *сказал Рон, хватаясь за исчезающий.*

It is obvious that in this field there is a lot of cases requiring further detailed research.

3 Some Reasons for the Observed Cross-Linguistic Differences

In this paper it is not feasible to analyze all relevant cross-linguistic differences and their semantic foundations in detail. However we wish to discuss a number of them.

One difference between the three languages under consideration is quite evident. We have already mentioned it in connection with the Obama example. These languages express the idea of disagreement in basically different ways. The YES-NO-system is binomial in English and Russian (*da/yes* and *нет/no*), and trinomial in German: besides *ja* and *nein*, there is a word *doch*.³

Interestingly, the affirmative and negative words are distributed differently in English and Russian. The English *yes* can (differently from the Russian *da* ‘yes’) be used not only for confirmation, but also for denial. Cf. the example we began with (*Yes, we can*). Hence, the Russian equivalent of German *doch* would be *нет* ‘no’, and the English one would be *yes*.

Let us consider a very apt example. In “Winnie the Pooh”, Piglet insisted that the inscription on his broken door plate *Trespassers W* bore the name of his grandfather. The English text goes on like this:

- (14) English *Christopher Robin said you couldn’t be called Trespassers W, and Piglet said **yes, you could**, because his grandfather was.*

Compare the Russian version by Boris Zakhoder (15).

- (15) Russian *Кристофер Робин сказал, что не может быть такого имени – Посторонним В., а Пятачок ответил, что **нет, может, нет, может**, потому что дедушку же так звали!*

Naturally enough, the German translation reads:

- (16) German *Christopher Robin sagte, man könne nicht Betreten V heißen, und Ferkel sagte, **doch, das könne man**, sein Großvater habe ja so geheißen.*

³ In this regard, French is similar to German: The French word *si* is used within the YES-NO-system in the same way as the German *doch*.

The analysis of our data shows that in contexts of this type *yes* systematically correlates with *нет*, *no* with *да*. Compare the following examples.

- (17) English “*No, sir, nor with me, sir,*” said Mr Borgin, with a deep bow.
German „*Nein, Sir, bei mir auch nicht*“, sagte Mr Borgin mit einer tiefen Verbeugung.
Russian1 – *Да, сэр, и не для меня, сэр, – подтвердил мистер Борджин с глубоким поклоном.*
Russian2 – *Разумеется, сэр, и не я тоже, – с глубоким поклоном подтвердил мистер Борджин.*
- (18) English “*No,*” said Harry, getting into bed.
German „*Nein*“, sagte Harry und stieg ins Bett.
Russian1 – *Да, – ответил Гарри, забираясь в постель*
Russian2 – *Не болит, – согласился Гарри, забираясь в постель.*
- (19) English “*This is a girls’ bathroom,*” she said, eyeing Ron and Harry suspiciously. “*They’re not girls.*” “*No,*” Hermione agreed. “*I just wanted to show them how er – nice it is in here.*”
German „*Das ist ein Mädchenklo*“, sagte sie und musterte Ron und Harry mißtrauisch. „*Das sind keine Mädchen.*“ „*Nein*“, stimmte ihr Hermine zu, „*ich wollte ihnen nur zeigen, wie – ähm – nett du es hier hast.*“
Russian1 – *Этот туалет для девочек, – сказала она, подозрительно оглядывая Рона и Гарри. – А они – не девочки. – Это точно, – согласилась Эрмиона. – Я только хотела им показать, как здесь мило.*
Russian2 – *Это туалет для девочек, – заявила она, с подозрением воззрившись на мальчиков. – А они не девочки. – Не девочки, – согласилась Гермiona. – Я просто привела их взглянуть, как тут... интересно.*

As these examples show, the Russian word *нет* shows profound differences from its English and German equivalents; cf. (Добровольский & Левонтина, 2009). These differences can be described in terms of scope; cf. (Богуславский 1996). Broadly, we can consider the English words *yes* and *no* to be oriented, above all, towards the inner scope, i.e. towards the propositional content of the utterance. On the contrary, the Russian words *да* ‘yes’ and *нет* ‘no’ are rather oriented towards the outer scope, i.e. they express agreement or disagreement with what has been said or even meant in previous utterances. This issue is connected not only with the meanings of these very words, but also with the dialogue strategies favoured by given languages. In English, we can say *You cannot do it – Of course, I can*. However, in Russian the dialogue: *Вы этого не можете – Конечно, могу* would sound incoherent. This example shows that not only the semantics of *yes* or *да* ‘yes’ is decisive, but, above all, the fact that a Russian speaker has to explicitly mark that he or she disagrees with the interlocutor by using words such as *нет* ‘no’ or *a vot i* ‘≈ and still’, *esche kak* ‘≈ and still’ etc. To put it another way, the dialogue strategy of expressing disagreement is lexicalized in Russian. Compare also examples (14-19) above.

4 Does the Russian *нет* have special additional readings?

If the problem consisted only of examples, such as those discussed here, it could easily be solved by a simple rule of syntactic nature. However, there are many other instances of non-coincidence between the usage of *нет* ‘no’ and its English and German equivalents. Such examples may look not quite convincing in every single case, but, in sum, they prove that here we are dealing with fundamental semantic differences.

One interesting group of contexts where we find clear differences between English and German, on the one hand, and Russian, on the other, consists of sentences which contain, so to speak, “reactions to the

unexpressed”. Compare examples (20-22) where authentic Russian sentences are presented with their literal translations which we produced as a linguistic experiment.

- (20) Russian *Нет, а что ты лезешь со своими советами!*
German **Nein, was kommst du mit deinen Ratschlägen!*
English **No, what do you come with your recommendations?*
- (21) Russian *Нет, а вам какое дело!*
German **Nein, was geht Sie das an!*
English **No, is it your business?*
- (22) Russian – *Вы опоздали. И юбка у вас слишком коротка. – Нет, а юбка-то здесь причем?*
German „*Sie kommen zu spät! Und Ihr Rock ist definitiv zu kurz.*“ „**Nein, was hat denn mein Rock damit zu tun?*“
English “*You come too late. And your skirt is definitely too short.*” “**No, what’s wrong about my skirt?*”

Here is a very apt example from N.V. Gogol’s “Dead Souls”, taken from the Russian-English parallel corpus developed as a component of the Russian National Corpus (RNC):

- (23) Russian – *Извинительней сходить в какое-нибудь непристойное место, чем к нему. – Нет, я спросил не для каких-либо, а потому только, что интересуюсь познанием всякого рода мест, – отвечал на это Чичиков.*
English “*A man had far better go to hell than to Plushkin’s.*” “*Quite so,*” responded Chichikov, “*my only reason for asking you is that it interests me to become acquainted with any and every sort of locality.*”

The translation of *нет* ‘no’ by *quite so* is not an accidental translator decision, but a reflection of systematic cross-linguistic differences in the semantic organisation of the YES-NO-domain. It is not possible to use *no* in English if the speaker basically agrees with the interlocutor. The Russian *нет* ‘no’ here denotes the denial of the unexpressed idea that Chichikov tries to derive benefit from visiting Plushkin. Thus we are dealing here with a “reaction to the unexpressed”.

A further non-trivial example (24) that we encountered in the “Dead Souls” refers to a situation in which the speakers use *нет* ‘no’ as an indicator of their own, not mentioned so far, hesitation or vacillation.

- (24) Russian *Письмо начиналось очень решительно, именно так: «Нет, я должна к тебе писать!»*
English *Beginning abruptly with the words “I MUST write to you!” the letter went on to say that*
<...>

In this case, neither the English *no* nor the German *nein* may be used.

Paradoxically, the Russian negation *нет* ‘no’ is often used in dialogue to express the full agreement with the interlocutor. The most suitable explanation goes like this: The speaker agrees with the interlocutor so eagerly that he/she wants to immediately take the initiative. This negation-word can be used in Russian colloquial speech with the function of turn-taking. Here are some examples of this special reading of *нет* (the same as in (20-22), Russian sentences were observed in real dialogues and then translated into German and English).

- (25) Russian – *Давай напишем статью вместе! – Нет, я тоже уже об этом думал.*

German – *Schreiben wir einen Artikel zusammen!* – **Nein, ich habe auch dran gedacht.*

English – *Let us write a paper together.* – **No, me too, I also thought about that.*

- (26) Russian – *Мы должны позвонить Пете.* – *Нет, правильно. А то он опоздает.*

German – *Wir müssen noch Peter anrufen.* – **Nein, richtig. Sonst kommt er zu spät.*

English – *We have to give a ring to Pete.* – **No, right. Otherwise he will be too late.*

Combinations such as *нет, правда* ‘no, right’; *нет, точно* ‘no, exactly’; *нет, конечно* ‘no, of course’; and even *нет, да* ‘no, yes’ (cf. *Нет, да, я согласен* ‘No, yes, I agree’) are very typical of Russian discourse, whereas combinations like German *nein, stimmt* ‘no, right’; *nein, ja* ‘no, yes’ or English *no, sure*; *no, yes* would violate the usage norms of English and German. Obviously, the reason for this is that *no* or *nein* has no phatic function, whereas this function is typical of the Russian *нет*.

In all instances of this kind, the Russian word *нет* ‘no’ interacts with the speaker’s ideas about the situation as a whole, rather than with the proposition. In other words, what is negated is not some already mentioned issues, but “the unexpressed”. Saying, e.g., *Нет, это уж слишком!* ‘No, it is too much!’, we do not give a negative answer to some question (nobody has asked us anything), but express our rejection of the discussed situation. In a similar way, utterances such as *Нет, ты представь себе!* ‘No, imagine!’ sound in many situations more natural than *Ты представь себе!* ‘Imagine!’.⁴ The speaker quasi objects to the very possibility that he or she meets with no sympathy from the addressee. So, here we are obviously dealing with a special, phatic reading of *нет*.

In our analysis of parallel corpora, we regard cases when the translator adds a word which is absent in the original text as being very significant. Obviously, good translators make use of such modifications only if they feel that the target-language utterance in question would sound not natural enough or show some lack of coherence without this additional word. Cf. (27-29).

- (27) English *Harry backed away. “I’m fine, thanks,” he said.*

German *Harry wich zurück. „Geht mir gut, danke“, sagte er.*

Russian1 *Гарри отпрянул. – Нет-нет, – сказал он, – все в порядке.*

Russian2 *Гарри понялся. – Со мной все в порядке, спасибо, – ответил он.*

- (28) English *“He’s in Gryffindor,” said Harry quickly.*

German *„Er ist ein Gryffindor“, sagte Harry rasch.*

Russian1 – *Нет, он из «Гриффиндора», – поспешил разубедить его Гарри.*

Russian2 – *Он из «Гриффиндора», – быстро сказал Гарри.*

- (29) English *I don’t believe it!*

German *Ist doch nicht zu fassen!*

Russian1 *Нет, вы подумайте!*

Russian2 *Не могу в это поверить!*

There is one more reading of the Russian *нет* ‘no’ that has no exact correlates in English and German, namely its use in imperative sentences. These cross-linguistic differences are especially obvious in the situation of repeated inducement; cf. (Левонтина, 1999). In case of an explicit refusal, the repeated demand often begins with *нет*, and it is normally inadmissible. Cf. the following example from the German-Russian parallel corpus (RNC).

⁴ Utterances such as *No, it is too much!* or *No, imagine!* are possible in English, but the function of *no* is here different from the function of *нет* in the corresponding Russian sentences. *No* bears a stress and is interpreted here as the expression of astonishment and not as a phatic signal.

- (30) German „*Kommen Sie mit!*“ wiederholte K. jetzt schärfer, als habe er endlich den Gerichtsdienner auf einer Unwahrheit ertappt.
Russian – *Нем пойдёмте!* – уже резче сказал К., словно наконец уличил служителя во лжи.
literally ‘No, come with me!’ said K. again, more sharply, as if he finally caught the officer in a lie.’
(Franz Kafka. Der Prozeß)

For more detail see (Добровольский & Левонтина, в печати).

5 Conclusion

Many of the cross-linguistic differences discussed above relate to the specific properties of the discourse structure. Thus, the Russian discourse is characterized by a hypertrophied coherence, addressing various levels of content, and focusing on interpersonal relationships between interlocutors, which they steadily profile in the course of conversation.

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