

Courseware Reviews

Gary Smith
College of William and Mary

Russian HyperTutor: A Complement to Russian for Everybody

William J. Comer
Department of Slavic
Languages and
Literatures
University of Kansas
at Lawrence

Russian HyperTutor, developed by George Mitrevski, is available from TechKnowledge, P.O. Box 32, Auburn, AL 36831-0032. Telephone: (205) 887-2917. Program requires Macintosh model SE or higher, 2 megabytes of RAM and a hard disk; and HyperCard version 2.0 or higher, or HyperCard Player. It is shipped on 9 high-density diskettes and, when fully installed, occupies almost 11 megabytes. Price: \$50 for individual copy; \$250 for a site license with unlimited number of users. Version tested: 1.5.

Russian HyperTutor (RHT) is a welcome addition to the growing list of foreign language software programs. It combines the innovative aspects of some of the most recent free-standing tutorials, such as Transparent Language, with the easy integration that one expects from a courseware package. Based on the commonly used first-year Russian text, *Russian for Everybody* (American ed. by Robert L. Baker, 1984), *Russian HyperTutor* is an excellent computerized tutorial, containing supplementary explanations and exercises, divided into 35 chapters or lessons. The direct connection with a popular first-year text makes the package extremely attractive and guarantees that users will find a direct correlation between their textbook and the program.

"The direct connection with a popular first year text makes the package extremely attractive, and guarantees that users will find a direct correlation between their textbook and the program."

Installation follows the regular Macintosh "drag and drop" procedures, and users who have a basic familiarity with the Macintosh will be able to use the program effectively with very little additional training. Navigation through the program is most effectively done by mouse; and, as with most hypermedia, the program allows the user to move easily through the stacks, jumping from topic to related topic, from the tutorial to reference tables or exercises. The program requires no special training in HyperCard for effective use, although those familiar with HyperCard can easily personalize the stacks, since they are shipped unlocked from TechKnowledge, Inc. This last fact simultaneously presents a potential problem, however, for schools and campuses installing the program on a network, since they will have to take

measures to assure that legitimate users and hackers do not accidentally or intentionally tamper with the program. Documentation consists of a six-page description of the program with instructions for installation and explanations of RHT's main features. I found the documentation more than adequate, easy to follow, and very candid in warning institutional users as to some security issues.

As mentioned above, *Russian HyperTutor* is based on the text *Russian for Everybody*, and it consists of a HyperCard stack to accompany each of the textbook's five introductory lessons and 30 main chapters. At all points in the lessons the language learner has available a number of on-line resources including: a Russian-English and English-Russian glossary with a complete listing of forms for every Russian lexical item, grammar tables, an electronic notebook, and a "print card/field" resource.

The screen design is quite pleasant, and the cards never seem overcrowded with text. Each card is divided into two parts: the left-hand third of the card is reserved for illustrative graphics and for highlighting special information, such as paradigms and model sentences. The right-hand two-thirds of the card holds the text fields for explanations, exercises, etc. The on-line resources, as well as the navigation tools, are located in rows along the top and bottom of the cards, and are easily accessible. The Russian font included with RHT is clear and easy to read; and the keyboard arrangement of the Russian letters is simple to learn since it mimics the Latin letter arrangement (i.e., Cyrillic *ф* is on the same key as the English *f*). If the student gets confused about the location of a Russian letter, s/he can access a Russian keyboard layout (that appears in an external window) through HyperCard's GO menu.

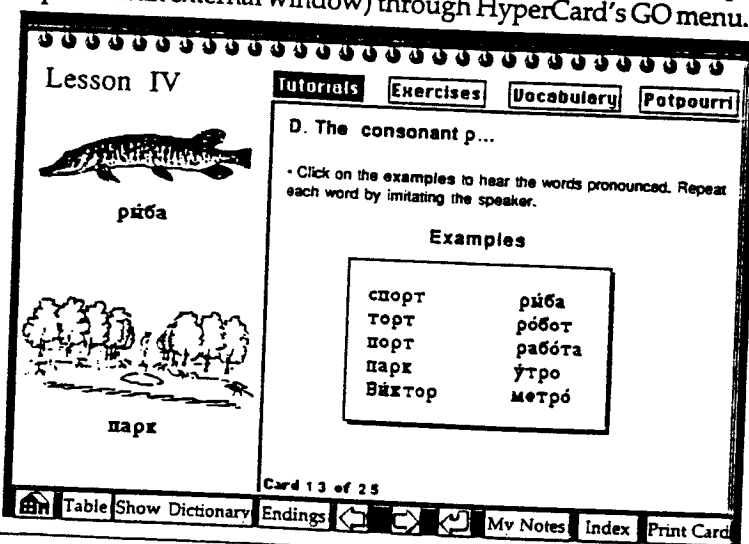


Figure 1.

Structure of the Lessons

The materials in each chapter are divided into four sections: Tutorial, Exercises, Vocabulary, and Potpourri. The Tutorial section highlights certain grammatical and lexical areas introduced in the textbook. The explanations here, while thorough in detail, are meant only to supplement the main text; sometimes the same material is presented, but approached from a different angle. For example, the textbook introduces Russian verb conjugation through the rather technical "one-stem" system; RHT covers the same topic in a simpler, less linguistic manner. The complementary balance between the Tutorial's and the text's grammar explanations works to the users' advantage—they can pick the explanation which best corresponds to their way of processing grammatical information.

At the end of each stage of the Tutorial section, the student can jump to related exercises or to previously covered material. There are a few minor difficulties with some of these branching choices. These "hot spots" are not always very clearly distinguishable from other text. While all the branching choices are in boldface type, not every word in boldface type on a card is a hot spot. The second clue for the user to recognize these hot spots is the change from the I-beam cursor to the browsing hand. This is a rather subtle change, and I suspect that users may wind up not taking full advantage of these dynamic linkages. (This will be even more likely if institutional users, following the advice in the installation instructions, lock all text fields. In HyperCard the normal cursor in locked text fields is the browsing hand; thus users will detect no change in the cursor as they move over the "hot spots.")

Following the Tutorial section (one long chapter contains some 40 cards), the user enters the Exercise section. This section deserves much attention for its breadth, variety, and creative way of "correcting" student input. In terms of breadth and variety, the exercise sections regularly include: cloze exercises on morphology, dehydrated sentences, translations from English to Russian, situational prompts, multiple-choice question and answer, a reading passage with questions, personalized questions and a composition assignment.

Several sets of cloze sentences focusing primarily on morphology usually begin this section. The blank in the sentence is indicated by a bullet (•); users move the cursor to that place, click and type their answer. When finished, users hit the return key, and the correct version of the "complete" sentence appears in a text box just above the exercise window. Users then compare their answer with the one given by the

computer. Thus, RHT's "correction system" provides the correct answer even though it does not check the users' input. Some might find this unsophisticated correction system a serious drawback. I think, however, that until the day a sophisticated parser of Russian becomes available, such a correction system is acceptable, especially since it has two distinct pedagogical advantages. First, it makes the users read a whole sentence every time they want to verify their answers. This means that during these exercises, they are continually being confronted with language at least at the sentence level rather than just at the level of isolated words. The second, and perhaps greater, advantage is that this kind of "correction system" frees the developer from the restriction of including only exercises that are easily machine-correctable. Indeed, Mitrevski exploits this and regularly includes exercises which allow for divergent and unpredictable student input. Instead of attempting to "correct" such input electronically, he invites the students to print out the exercise and bring it to class for correction and discussion. This provides a regular opportunity for the teacher to incorporate the students' work with RHT into the regular classroom activities and to verify the students' attendance in the language laboratory.

Although the exercises vary in format, I was a bit disappointed that they are not more communicatively oriented. The individual exercises consist mostly of unconnected simple sentences, demanding only grammatical accuracy. Without context and purpose, the sentences are rather unnatural, and they fail to train students to use language as a vehicle for meaningful communication. Even those exercises that seem designed to elicit meaningful information from the users (personalized questions, situations, and composition assignments) are not structured in a way conducive for students to express themselves in utterances beyond a phrase or simple sentence. One hopes that in future versions of RHT even the cloze exercises on morphology will at least be contextualized.

Following the Exercise section, the student has an opportunity to review and drill Vocabulary, working either from Russian to English or from English to Russian. One excellent feature of this section is that for the first five phonetics lessons and the first ten grammar lessons all of the vocabulary items have been recorded digitally by native speakers of Russian. When users click on a word in the vocabulary list, they immediately hear it pronounced. Included with the Vocabulary sections for the chapters with sound are dictation exercises. The students hear a digitally recorded word from the chapter's vocabulary list, and write it in a blank text field.

They can choose to replay the word as many times as necessary or click immediately to see the correct answer. For the phonetics lessons and for the introductory chapters, this sound component is very useful for fixing in the learner's mind the correspondence of pronunciation and spelling. I find the recorded vocabulary a very attractive feature of RHT, even though, out of space considerations, it had to be sampled at less than highest quality.

Each lesson closes with a section called *Potpourri*. In theory, this portion of the lesson contains cultural notes and comments on topics related to the grammar and themes of the textbook's lessons. Unfortunately, the *Potpourri* is undeveloped for a number of chapters. This, however, may be to the individual instructors' advantage, since in this section they have a place where they can easily add their own cultural notes and other materials.

The only real deficiencies that I find in the program are its lack of communicatively-oriented, contextualized exercises and the number of typographical errors. Most of the latter are easily recognizable as such and do not interfere with the author's intended meaning. There is, however, one error in the grammatical reference tables that should be pointed out since it seemingly confirms a commonly-made error. The instrumental case ending for feminine nouns terminating in a soft sign is given as "yu" and not "soft sign + yu (i.e., площадью instead of площадью).

On the whole, *Russian HyperTutor* should be an effective tool for beginning students to master Russian grammar, whether they are studying in a traditional classroom or completely on their own. The stacks give students opportunities for structured linguistic practice, and there is enough variety in the tasks to keep the students relatively engaged in learning the material. The packaging of attractive graphics, some animation, limited sound, clear explanations and a variety of exercises undoubtedly make *Russian HyperTutor* a valuable addition for the language laboratory. I look forward to future versions of the program that will include more graphics, complete, high-quality sound and more communicatively oriented language learning activities. ■

William Comer is Assistant Professor of Russian in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literature, the University of Kansas.