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THE IMPACT OF THE "SPUTNIK"

ON THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE OF THE U.S.A.

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THE IMPACT OF THE "SPUTNIK" ON THE ENGLISH

LANGUAGE OF THE UNITED STATES

by

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This paper was originally written in March,
1958 and delivered at a meeting of the Shev-
chenko Scientific Society Study Center in
Chicago on September 12. A magazine article
by Arthur Minton titled "Sputnik and Some of
Its Offshootniks"* appeared in the meantime.

The majority of Minton's "-nik" formations
were duplicated in my material. To avoid
needless repetition an alphabetical list of
his formations follows. The balance of this
paper is devoted to other formations which
he does not present and to an exposition of
my partial disagreement with Minton's explana-
tion of the phenomenon.

Minton's list included:

1. but-nik

2. dot-nik

3. enough-nik

4. flop-nik

5. goof-nik

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28. <u>fras-nik</u>, (The New York Times, Dec. 15, 1957, p. 1)
the name of a homemade rocket designed and built by a
New York youth, Dennis Frasca;

29. <u>hoax-nik</u>, (The Milwaukee Journal, Dec. 7, 1957, p. 1)
used as a term for a false alarm about sputnik;

30. <u>jet-nik</u>, (The Milwaukee Journal Comics, Dec. 4, 1957)
a proposed name for an automobile with a seat ejector;

31. <u>jut-nik</u>, (Newsweek, Nov. 25, 1957, p. 16) was proposed
as a name for the first man-carrying missile sent into
space, but

32. <u>nut-nik</u>, if we should disparage him.

33. <u>snuff-nik</u>, (Time, Nov. 11, 1957, p. 58) a Soviet treat-
ment for Asian influenza to be taken like snuff;

34. <u>bottle-nik</u>, (Newsweek, Nov. 18, 1957, p. 2) proposed
as a name for an American sputnik which was still in a
"bottle-neck" of production. The explanation of this fact
and the mutual accusations of the Democratic and Republican
parties gave commentators and cartoonists the material for:

35. <u>smug-nik</u>, (The Chicago American, Jan. 6, 1958, p. 12).
So Drew Pearson designated the explanations of former
secretary of defense, Charles Wilson. The cartoonists
filled outer space with gloomy:

36. <u>gop-niks</u>, (Time, Nov. 18, 1957, p. 15) on the one hand
and gleeful:

37. demo-niks, on the other.

Following the successful launching of Sputnik II
with its now famous dog passenger came such "-nik"
formations as:

38. dog-nik, and the onomatopoetic

39. whuff-nik,

40. light-nik, and

41. spoof-nik, (The Milwaukee Journal, Dec. 4, 1957, p. 1)
used a headline which read: "Whatnik with beepnik, red
lightnik is just somebody's idea of a spoofnik and this
hoax-nik made a lot of trouble for the police."

Failure with the Vanguard rocket in Florida brought
a small avalanche of still more "-nik" formations. Among
them are: (Time, Dec. 16, 1957, p. 10)

42. dud-nik,

43. puff-nik,

44. sputter-nik,

45. sam-nik -is kaput-nik, (Time, Dec. 16, 1957, p. 12)

46. pfft-nik.

In addition, the 1957 Christmas season increased the
formations with:

47. saint-nik, (New York Times, Dec. 25, 1957, p. 1) was
provoked by the wish to substitute a sputnik for Santa
Claus' reindeer, and

48. yule-nik, (New York Journal-American, Dec. 23, 1957,

p. 4), assured no "Wulenik test seen."

49. ped-nik, (Milwaukee Sentinel, Dec. 18, 1957, p. 1) a
revolving toy sputnik powered by a foot pedal.

Soon, such "-nik" formations invaded advertising and
in the program of the New York Building Congress (December,
1957) one can notice:

50. saf-nik, in an illustrated advertisement of Warner
Construction,

51. cat-nik, with the caption "don't ever be a catnik
(catnick); use Safeway's new sputnik (sputnick)."

52. US-nik, the future American missile pictured in an
advertisement and captioned "You never have a goofnik or
kaputnik when you do business with MacNutt Electric."

Also noted were:

53. tit-nik, a lady riding on a missile, apparently a
"titbit (tidbit) of girl."

The "-nik" formations are also used in other seman-
tical spheres:

54. swim-nik, (Newsweek, Jan. 21, 1958), this is a Musco-
vite open air swimming pool heated with warm water;

55. sport-nik, (New York Times Magazine, Jan. 17, 1958),
a horse racing enthusiast in Moscow.

Among the most recent formations are:

56. Uncle-Sam-nik, (Milwaukee Sentinel, Feb. 2, 1958, p. 2)
a U.S. satellite was thus referred to by an English paper
in Argentina.

57. <u>smooch-nik</u>, (American Weekly, Feb. 9, 1958, p. 13), a kissing date in the teenage vernacular.

58. <u>milk-nik</u>, (Milwaukee Sentinel, March 6, 1958, p. 1), is a rocket-like machine used for experiments with milk at the University of Wisconsin.

59. <u>phon-nik</u>, in the student language of Marquette University the term means "a fellow with false ambitions."

60. <u>church-nik</u>, thus was called a rocket model (Milwaukee Journal, March 9, 1958) used by an Episcopalian minister during his sermon.

61. <u>belch-nik</u>, "sputnik special with heroic power" in a cartoon of the (Journal American, Aug. 7, 1958, Chicago.)

62. <u>beat-nik</u>, member of the "Beat Generation," a term coined by San Francisco newspapers; cf. This Week Magazine, Sept. 28, 1958, and Look magazine, Aug. 19, 1958.

63. <u>bell-nik</u>, "stomach ache," a term I learned from my students.

Thus is Minton's list supplemented by some 37 formations with many others surely in use in other sections of the United States.

III

Let us now evaluate this material.

1. Man's historical entrance into the space age created a wave of deep mortification and anger in the American public because it was interpreted as an indication that the United States had lost its leadership

in scientific discovery and advance. Thus, sputnik became a symbol packed with deep emotions and grim humor. As a result its Slavic suffix "-nik" acquired a reproductive power in America, based on analogy and the linguistic instinct of play (sputnik-peanutnik) and reproduction. The American talent of using "catchwords" for sensational advertising and press publicity played an important role in this expansion of "-nik."

2. The absence of purism, the ultra-strong tendency of European tongues to use only native home-grown words in the literary language, surely opened the gate to the suffix "-nik" infiltration into America and the sensational interest in all "sputnik" matters stimulated its expansion.

3. Semantically, the American "-nik" formations were originally connected with the sputnik as a satellite or with its form; now the function of the "-nik" suffix is apparently expanding semantically to all things Russian: snuff-nik, swim-nik, sport-nik, and beat-nik (who with his beard looks like a Russian). Note the following development in the meaning of sputnik: first, in an advertisement, (Prevention, January, 1958, p. 122) "Try our oranges - they are sputnik (Russian for 'Out of this world')": and "we may find ourselves confronted with a sputnik in the chemical, biological and radiological field, as we did in missiles." (Newsweek, Feb. 10, 1958, p. 25).

Here, sputnik means an "extraordinary achievement, surpris-
ing the world," Thus the Windsors presented Elsa Maxwell
with a cup upon which was inscribed "To Sputnik III."
(Newsweek, Feb. 17, 1958, p. 101). The teenagers call a
hot dog "muttnik" (American Weekly, Feb. 9, 1958, p. 13)!

4. In fact, the present phenomenon is the second
wave of the invasion of the Slavic "-nik" suffix into
the English language of the United States. The first,
although little known, has a remarkable background and
is connected with the Ukrainian, partly Polish, "-nik"
suffix which invaded Yiddish (originally a German dia-
lect) before World War I. Here are some characteristic
formations:[*] by analogy with the Ukrainian emotion packed
loan words in Yiddish like "paskud-nik," a disgusting
fellow, or professional names like "kwas-nik," a maker
or seller of a beverage from fruits, etc., were then
formed in Yiddish from the Ukrainian loan word "nuditi" -
to bore, "nud-nik" - a bore; from "latati" - to repair,
"lataut-nik" - a cobbler, a layer of patches, etc. The
Jewish immigration in the United States formed then with
this "-nik" suffix such words as "phud-nik" - a bore with
a Ph. D., or "no-good-nik" - a scoundrel.

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[*]cf. Nathan Ausubel, A Treasury of Jewish Humor (Garden
City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1956).

5. The quick reception of the term sputnik was in fact prepared by the many Slavic and Jewish family names in America with "-nik" as the telephone directory of any large city can indicate. There are some 14 million Americans of Slavic origin, surely at least a million with names formed by the suffix "-nik." Also among the Jews from Slavic countries such names are popular, cf. the name of the president of Bnai-Brith: Reznik (originally "butcher"). Thus every American met, in fact, "-nik" word formations in many family names before the sputnik event.[*]

6. The term sputnik soon became used in such combinations as: post-sputnik, pre-sputnik, and after-sputnik. A humorous highlight of the "-nik" craze was Russell Peterson's request that America send lovely she-sputniks not into outer space but to Moscow.[**] Mr. Peterson reasoned that such she-sputniks as Jayne Mansfield in the Russian capitol would help "take the luster out of the two Soviet sputniks." An American "institution" as deeply entrenched as the doughnut even fell victim to the "-nik" clamor when a Milwaukee bakery advertised them as "sput-nuts."

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[*]Minton's contention that some Americans could interpret sputnik in the way of a "folks etymology" associating "sput" with "sputter" and "-nik" with "nick" is unconvincing.

[**]cf. East Europe, VII (August, 1958), 6.

7. We have in Slavic languages a series of loan
suffixes from foreign languages which also became very
productive: for example, (by Gothic mediation) Latin
-arius, Greek -arios, in contemporary Ukrainian -ar,
or mediaeval German -unge, Ukrainian -unok. They can
be used for a comparsion with the invasion of the
sput-nik suffix into English. But these suffix loans
in Slavic required a long period of cultural influ-
ences on behalf of the lender nation respectively its
language. Also, the expansion of Latin and Greek words
and suffixes into European languages during and after
the discovery of classical civilization, the so-called
classical revival or renaissance, demanded a long period
of influences. Humanism and the vogue of classicism,
together with the new learning, achieved this expansion.
In the case of sputnik, one single epoc-making fact
backed by the modern media of mass communication achiev-
ed the same effect: the acceptance of the loan word and
the productivity of a foreign Slavic suffix in a Teutonic
language.

8. It is interesting to speculate whether the
successful launching of the American satellite will stop
the impact of the Soviet sputnik and its "-nik" suffix.
Their expansion is a case story for the illustration of

the fact of how historical events are filled in the
archives of a language. The language of a nation
includes in its vocabulary all its victories and de-
feats, successes and failures. Even if, through later
events, a word is erased, it is nevertheless "recorded"
in the vocabulary. That phenomenon occured in October,
1957 as the first Soviet sputnik roared into the sky.
Within the echo of that roar the word flashed into all
the world's languages and overnight became a universal
vogue word and loan word and its suffix started to
reproduce itself in the English language of the United
States. The Russian language and the Russian nation
is, in this case, receiving an unjust monopoly of credit
for an achievement which, in fact, is a "Soviet" multi-
national   achievement because collaborating in it
were many non-Russians (Armenians, Ukrainians, Jews,
Germans and other nationalities).

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