Rolling and pitching in Russian

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Russian – English Translators' Dictionary: A Guide to Scientific and Technical Usage, 2nd Edn.
By Mikhail Zimmerman.
Wiley: 1984. Pp. 544. £31, $59.95.
Dictionary of Scientific and Technical Terminology: English, German, French, Dutch, Russian.
Edited by A.S. Markov *et al.*
Martinus Nijhoff: 1984. Pp. 496. Dfl.90, $34.50, £22.95.

DICTIONARIES, and technical dictionaries in particular, must surely be judged not only on the accuracy and contemporaneity of their contents, but also on how far they serve the needs of their intended users. These two volumes, very different in intention, differ too in their achievement of that aim.

Zimmerman's *Translators' Dictionary* has been a standby for the professional user since its first appearance in 1967. It is not a normal dictionary, listing not so much individual words and concepts, but the constructions linking them and the idiomatic turns of phrase which transform a piece of translationese into a readable text. Constructions are indicated by an example, usually a complete sentence, with the words in question printed in bold. Thus: "OTVERGAT' GIPOTEZU: By 1950, the tetranucleotide hypothesis **had been overthrown**, (or **ruled out**, or **rejected**)". This format is particularly helpful in coping with those Russian words which have a number of near-synonymous renderings. No less than seven examples are listed for "vrashchat'sya" in its various meanings of to rotate and to revolve, while for the derived phrase "vrashchat'sya vokrug osi" we have this splendid example: "Like an airplane, an insect can **roll around its longitudinal axis, pitch around a horizontal axis** perpendicular to its direction of flight, or **yaw around a vertical axis**".

A dictionary of this type cannot be employed without a good special-subject dictionary for the text in hand. In combination with such a work, however, Zimmerman's *Translators' Dictionary* has been proving its worth for almost 20 years. This new, updated edition will come as a boon to the younger generation of translators who, until now, have been obliged to work with library copies unless fortunate enough to inherit a copy from someone about to retire from translation.

In compiling their book, Markov and his colleagues have attempted to produce a "general purpose" dictionary, based on the vocabulary "pertaining to general study courses ... given in technical colleges irrespective of their specification". Revealing as this is of the broad nature of such courses in Russian colleges (opening at random, one observes, pp. 62–63, that students have to be conversant with such varied concepts as cloud-chambers, co-factors, cold-working and collapsars), the result is a somewhat confusing conglomeration. Too many concepts are included for the book to be of more than partial use to anyone but a professional translator, who would, presumably, prefer a specialized dictionary for each topic.

A more serious complication stems from the fact that English is chosen as the main language (with cross-references in the other languages). This raises the difficulty of the differences between British and American spelling, which has here resulted in some odd inconsistencies. Both "center" and "centre" are listed, "center/centre of gravity" occurs with both spellings, but "center rest" and "centre of curvature" occur only once. Moreover, "center" is rendered as "centrum" in Dutch, while "centre" can be either "centrum" or "middelpunt"; and although "center of gravity" is "gravetatiecentrum", "centre of gravity" becomes, for some reason, "zwaartepunt". The compilers also have a somewhat archaic view of English — was it really necessary to list "quicksilver"? — and seem to have a marked reluctance to list an adjective without a noun; thus, the adjective "mathematical" occurs six times, grouped with "expectation", "induction", "logic", "model", "pendulum" and "programming", although all the qualified nouns occur elsewhere (in some form) in the *Dictionary* and all are rendered by a straightforward noun + adjective construction (save for the German *Erwartungswert* which is allowed to drop its adjective).

The listing of complex phrases, though essential in a work such as Zimmerman's intended for the translator who has to pay attention to style, is unnecessarily cumbersome in a work meant for "scientists and engineers" whose need primarily is to read and understand professional material. It is particularly awkward in this book where the five-language format has led to crowding and illegibility which is further exacerbated by the generally cramped and unattractive layout. □

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Words, words, words

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Concise Science Dictionary.
Edited by Alan Isaacs, John Daintith and Elizabeth Martin.
Oxford University Press: 1984. Pp. 758. £12.95, $22.50.

THE world's best-known lexicographer, in defining the word "dull" for his *Dictionary of the English Language*, gave as an example "To make dictionaries is dull work". One test of a dictionary is whether this shows through in the reading of it: would anyone choose to read it for pleasure and education, or only as a last resort when baffled and irritated by an unfamiliar word?

Much depends on the enthusiasm of the compiler, and it is probably inevitable that a committee job such as the present volume will be less fascinating (though more reliable) than the idiosyncratic brainchild of a single author. The editors have, however, achieved their well-defined aim of providing a handy and readable book of reference for school and first-year university students, and for laymen who want to know the meaning of the commoner scientific terms. A *Nature* reader bemused by a title such as "Stimulation of 3T3 cells induces transcription of the c-*fos* proto-oncogene" will at least be able to look up "transcription" and "oncogene", plus about one word in ten of the text of the article itself.

There are over 7,000 definitions (which could, incidentally, have been augmented by omitting the spaces between entries); line drawings and tables are included where necessary, and there are useful appendices on units, fundamental constants and so on. One passes from "bark" to the "Barkhausen effect", and from "plate tectonics" to "platinum". The content is severely practical, so that although the quark is defined one looks in vain for the derivation of this intriguing word (it was, in fact, lifted from James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*). The philosophy of science is not covered, so that Occam's razor and other concepts of incalculable value to the budding scientist are not mentioned; reduction in the chemical sense is defined, but reductionism is not.

It is interesting to note how some ordinary English words are used by specialists in different disciplines for quite different purposes: "accommodation", for instance, has three distinct definitions in animal physiology, botany and animal behaviour. One may quibble about the relative emphasis given to different entries — a dictionary offers unlimited scope for quibbling — but this probably again reflects the multi-author genesis of the work. While Ohm's law clearly deserves the paragraph devoted to it, one may question whether the ohmmeter (a meter with which you measure ohms) warrants an entry of the same length. On the whole, though, I think the book will successfully fill an obvious gap in the market, and will find its way into the Christmas stockings of young scientists of ages nine to ninety. □

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