Sputnik and Some of Its Offshootniks

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On October 4, 1957 a man-made earth satellite was put into orbit by the Soviet Union, and on November 3 a second, larger satellite was put into course. It is reported that the Soviets called the first satellite *Sputnik* and that this name is an abbreviation of *Iskustvennyi Sputnik Zemli*, translated "Artificial Fellow Traveler Around the Earth."[1] Almost immediately after the first launching the word *Sputnik* (or *sputnik*, the form that will be used in discussion here) came into wide use in English.[2]

Ten weeks or so after the orbiting of the first satellite and its cognomen, Clarence L. Barnhart announced that *sputnik* would be included in the 1958 *Thorndike-Barnhart Comprehensive Desk Dictionary*, with the definition "An earth satellite." A newspaper report of this lexicographical event referred to the entry of *sputnik* as "the fastest acceptance and into-dictionary print ever recorded by a foreign word."[3] Thus with the launching of the satellite the Soviets achieved not only a scientific triumph but (possibly more to their surprise) a philological coup in the penetration of English and other languages by *sputnik*.

On the radio I hear *sputnik* usually pronounced ['spʌtnɪk], occasionally ['spʊtnɪk]. One announcer said ['šputnɪk].

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[1] *Every Week* (Middletown, Conn.), Oct. 21–25, 1957, p. 50/1.

[2] Even more, according to one source, "The word sputnik has entered every language." ("The News of the Week in Review," New York *Times*, Nov. 10, 1957, p. E 1/1).

[3] John G. Rogers, "Sputnik Soars Into Type In a U.S. Dictionary," New York *Herald Tribune*, Dec. 18, 1957, p. 17/1–2. Also reported in this news story were the views of two other lexicographers, David Guralnik of *Webster's New World Dictionary* and S. Stephenson Smith of Funk & Wagnalls. Both seemed to hope or expect that *sputnik* would be entered in 1958 editions of their dictionaries. They expressed uncertainty whether the word would be listed as a lower-case generic term or an upper-case name for either of the orbiting satellites.

The word was soon used in combinations. The first satellite came to be called Sputnik I, the second Sputnik II.[4] A new, stiffer stand on the part of the Soviet Union became known as sputnik diplomacy.[5] In at least one periodical Russia was referred to as Sputnik Land.[6] A sense that the orbiting of the first sputniks marked the beginning of some sort of new era is reflected in the terms *post-Sputnik* and *pre-Sputnik*;[7] the adjective *after-sputnik* is also recorded.[8] A session of Congress was said to be called the "Sputnik Congress."[9] The impact of the satellites was definitively summed up in *the Sputnik Age.*[10]

The rapid widespread employment of *sputnik* was surely due to something more than the sensational character of the object denoted by the word. An impression or two as to the nature of that "something more" may be worth giving. The word *sputnik*, then, has – or had, when it first burst on the hearing and sight of Americans – a somewhat humorous quality. To many persons it might appear to be a tidbit of dialect comedy; and indeed a similar syllable, represented in Roman characters as *-nick*, has a place in such a

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[4] For both terms see, e.g., "Sputnik I Rocket Is Seen Here," New York *Herald Tribune*, Nov. 25, 1957, p. 3/2.

[5] Details of this diplomatic posture are given in "Soviet Exploits Its New 'Sputnik Diplomacy'" by Harry Schwartz, New York *Times*, Oct. 20, 1957, p. 4 E/1–4. An embroidering of the theme is seen in the title of an article by Gertrude Samuels, "Russia's Smile-and-Sputnik Diplomats," *New York Times Magazine*, Dec. 1, 1957, p. 26.

[6] (Heading) "Russia Today;" (subhead) "A Visit to Sputnik Land," *Current Events* (Middletown, Conn.), Nov. 4–8, 1957, p. 68.

[7] The first of these was used in, e.g., "Roscoe Drummond Reports," New York *Herald Tribune*, Nov. 25, 1957, p. 19/1–2. This column had the subject heading "Post-Sputnik Washington Has New Mood Of Urgency." The first sentence of the text proper also referred to "post-Sputnik Washington." An adverbial use of *post-Sputnik* was found in an editorial, "Nixon and the Crisis," *ibid.*, Dec. 3, 1957: "He has defeated the pinch-penny economizers, who, even post-Sputnik, are still..." In "Workable ICBM Seen in 2 Years" (*ibid.*, Dec. 18, 1957, p. 1/3) Rowland Evans Jr. mentioned "pre-Sputnik cuts in the Strategic Air Command."

[8] "The 'after-sputnik' story of the United States missile program was a mixture of success and failure." (*Our Times* [Middletown, Conn.] Jan. 6–10, 1958, p. 109/2).

[9] "This session now being called the 'Sputnik Congress' may produce a lot of political sputtering." (*Life*, Jan. 13, 1958, p. 20).

[10] Editorial, "Any One for Shakespeare?," New York *Herald Tribune*, Jan. 27, 1958.

Yiddish word as *nudnick*, "tedious fellow,"[11] and in the humorous Yiddish-American word *nogoodnick*, applied to a qualifying person.[12] As to the first syllable of *sputnik*, it may suggest *sputter*.[13] Nor is some association with *spud* to be ruled out; the satellite would be conceived, rightly or wrongly, as a round or rounded object – that is, in shape somewhat like a potato.

When *sputnik* was thrown into the wear and tear of wide employment, one possibility that shortly came to the fore, in at least one source, was the reduction of the word to *Sputty*. Thus the headline, "British Say Sputty Is 160 Miles Up."[14] And the third-stage rocket that orbited separately from Sputnik I was called *Sput Junior* in a headline.[15] But besides any other qualifications, *sputnik* possesses a "suffix"[16] that lends itself to new formations, and such formations have been abundantly in evidence. The following have come to my notice:

MOUSENIK. 1958 New York *Herald Tribune* 1 Jan. Sec. 2, pp. 6/7 (UP) (headline) Boys' "Mousenik" Gets Off Ground – But Not Far (text) Eleven high school boys and a Roman Catholic nun finally managed to fire their "mousenik" rocket today, but with an artificial mouse. [A previous rocket had contained a live mouse.] *Ibid.* 4 Jan. pp. 3/7 (AP) (headline) Humane Society Gets Writ To

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[11] Alexander Harkavy, *Yiddish-English* [*and English-Yiddish*] *Dictionary*, 22nd ed. (New York, 195–). For assistance in locating this reference I am indebted to an aide in the Jewish Division of the New York Public Library.

[12] Someone who knows the subject may do the service of discussing other Yiddish or Yiddish-American formations in *-nick*, and the etymology of that syllable.

[13] Further substantiation of this point seems to reside in the quotation from *Life*, in note 9. Also, after the unsuccessful United States attempt to launch a satellite on December 6, 1957, Viscount Rothermere is said to have remarked that the United States "wound up with the sput without the nik." ("Rothermere: 'Sput,' No 'Nik,'" New York *Herald Tribune*, Dec. 7, 1957, p. 2/4). In his column "Along Madison Avenue with Kaselow" (*ibid.*, Jan. 28, 1958), Joseph Kaselow wrote, "The campaign (Grey Advertising) will be launched in March, and we hope it takes off better than most of the sputter-nicks in Cape Canaveral."

[14] New York *Daily News*, Oct. 11, 1957, p. 2/5.

[15] "Connecticut Team Sees Sput Junior," *ibid.*, Oct. 11, 1957, p. 2/4–5; also, "Something Is Tugging at Sput Jr.," *ibid.*, Oct. 16, 1957, p. 10/1–3.

[16] As a matter of convenience and because of the quasi-suffixial use of *-nik* in English coinages, I refer to *-nik* as a suffix, but without knowing whether the syllable is rightly so describable in Russian.

Stop Boys' "Mousenik" (text) The Humane Society today obtained a temporary court order restraining youthful Austin [Minn.] Rocket Society from using live mice in its "mousenik" space experiments.

WHATNIK. 1957 New York Daily News 7 Nov. p. 5/2–4 (UP) (headline) Whatniks Over Us? Science Grins (text) Scientists today wrote off the rash of "whatnik" sightings as tricks of vision or mirages...

Reports of more strange, unidentified flying objects zooming about the skies came from...

SPACENIK. 1957 New York *Daily News* 8 Nov. p. 18/1 (AP) (headline) Query Sanity of Spacenik [The story dealt with the filing in Kearney, Neb., of a "mental-illness complaint" against a man who claimed to have "visited a space ship parked on the banks of the Platte River and chatted with its crew for about a half hour before the ship rose and vanished."]

MUTTNIK. 1957 New York *Daily News* 8 Nov. p. K2/1 (letter from Frances Castellani) This deep concern over the dog in Muttnik is one big howl! [Sputnik II had been dubbed Muttnik in some quarters because that satellite carried a female dog. I am told that the same satellite has also been called Bitchnik.]

REBUTNIK. 1957 New York *Daily News* 20 Nov. p. 45/3 ("The Inquiring Fotographer"; response by Joseph A. Holl to the question, "What name would you suggest for the first U.S. earth satellite?") Since Sputnik was mostly a propaganda vehicle, I'd name ours Rebutnik and crowd it with more scientific gadgets.

SPOOFNIK. 1957 New York *Herald Tribune* 23 Nov. p. *3/8* (UP) (headline) Spoofnik Found In W. Germany – Even Has "Beep" [Report of the finding of a spurious sputnik]

SPUTNIK-PEANUTNIK. 1957 New York *Daily News* 26 Nov. (Editorial, "Just Give Us the Facts") [Sen. Lyndon B.] Johnson also hopes to keep this inquiry nonpolitical – and incidentally, isn't there some way to keep both Harry Truman and the Republican National Committee from playing sputnik-peanutnik politics,[17] at least for a while?

[17] *The American Thesaurus of Slang*, 2nd. ed. (1953) defines peanut politics (Sec. 858.1) as "petty or corrupt politics."

GOOFNIK; STALLNIK; LATENIK (*SPAETNIK*[18]); WHEN-NIK; IF-NIK; OOPS-NIK; GOOFNIK. 1957 New York *Herald Tribune* 7 Dec. (heading of an editorial) Goofnik Blows Up (text) On Thursday, after the much-ballyhooed United States satellite firing was postponed again, a Mexico City paper began referring to it as a "Stallnik." In Vienna, the anti-Communist "Welt Presse" dubbed it a "Latenik" (Spaetnik) . . . .

But on Friday, when Latenik blew up in the face of its makers, the American people scarcely knew whether to cry or to laugh . . . . By mid-afternoon the irrepressible American character had asserted itself on the laughing side. New names were being offered on all sides: "When-nik," "Ifnik," "Oops-nik," and perhaps the aptest one of all, simply "Goofnik."

ENOUGHNIK; KAPUTNIK; STAY-PUTNIK; FLOPNIK; PUFFNIK; PHUTNIK. 1957 New York *Times* 8 Dec. p. 36/4 (headline) Enoughnik of This (text) Headlines in the British newspapers reflected public feeling on the failure of the [U.S.] rocket [fired on Dec. 6]. New words were coined by headline writers as follows: [list] Kaputnik – Daily Express. Stay-Putnik – News Chronicle. Flopnik[19] – Daily Herald. Puffnik – Daily Mail. Phutnik – Daily Mirror and Daily Sketch.

HUTNIK; BUTNIK; DOTNIK; PUTNIK; PHUTNIK; YUTNIK. [A large placard in the lobby of the Central Branch of the Young Men's Christian Association, 55 Hanson Place, Brooklyn, N.Y., seen Nov. 21, 1957, listed, under the heading "Division Leadership," the names of persons engaged in the Central Branch's 1958 financial campaign. Preceding each personal name (or in some cases two names) was the name of one of the "divisions" in reference. Each such division name was followed by a raised dot (or dash in one case) and then by a formation in *-nik*. Thus: Special Gifts · "Sputnik;" House Dept. · "Hutnik;" Business · "Butnik;" Dormitory · "Dotnik;" Physical – "Putnik;" Program · "Prutnik;" Youth · "Yutnik."]

[18] An Associated Press dispatch from Vienna had reported that "Several non-Communist papers here have taken to calling the American satellite the 'Spaetnik,' which in German means late Sputnik." ("U.S. 'Moon' Hangs Low In Eyes of Foreigners," New York *Herald Tribune*, Dec. 6, 1957, p. 8/3–4). It appears that English is not the only language in which the combinatory powers of *-nik* are realized.

[19] A dispatch from Moscow, dated December 8, stated that "Some papers spoke of a 'flopnik.'" ("Soviet Press Still Jeers 'Flopnik,'" *ibid.*, Dec. 9, 1957, p. 2/8).

SPOTNIK. 1957 [*Our Times* (Middletown, Conn.), Dec. 2–6, reproduced (p. 89) a cartoon by Burck in the Chicago *Sun-Times* (date not specified) showing a presumptive President Eisenhower at the bedside of a sick NATO, who is saying, "I Keep Seeing Spotniks Before My Eyes." Two earth satellites are orbiting above the patient.]

SPEEDNIK. 1958 *Current Events* (Middletown, Conn.) 6–10 Jan. p. 106 (pict. cap.) Speednik – Russia claims another "first" for this plane, the TU-114.

The dynamism of *sputnik* has been evidenced, then, not only in its quick apparent establishment in the English vocabulary, but by the combinations in which it has appeared and in the changes that have been rung on it. The whole word has appeared in such combinations as *Sputnik I*, *Sputnik II*, *post-Sputnik*, *pre-Sputnik*, and *sputnik diplomacy*. A number of new formations, most of them probably humorous nonce words, have been created by the replacement of *sput-* with some other element. The surrogate element is usually an established English word ("established" here including slang). The qualifier "usually" because of the special situation presented by the examples from the Y.M.C.A. placard. In those examples the initial syllable of each formation is based on the initial phoneme(s) of the name of the division in reference – or on the letter(s) representing the phoneme(s). And although the written form of each of the resulting syllables has been recorded as an English word, none of the resultants, taken as a word, seems to be used with established meaning. To take an extreme example, it can hardly be imagined that *Yutnik*, for the Youth Division, has in view *yut* as an obsolete variant of *yet*.

Most of the neologisms seem to be names, as *Sputnik* seems to have been in its Russian beginnings and in its first employments in English. The attributive uses of *sputnik* (or of combinations involving *sputnik*) is one aspect of the extension of *sputnik* beyond name status. A further functional extension has been noted in the adverbial use of *post-sputnik*. But it is probably the widespread use of *sputnik* as a generic term that operates most strongly against a solely onomastic status for the word.

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