

LANGUAGE PROBLEM IN THE BELORUSSIAN HISTORY

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The authors analyse some aspects of the language problem in the history and modern Belarus. The purpose of this paper is to define the role and place of the Belorussian language in the culture and art of Belarus in particular during the period of perestroika and formation of an independent state. The paper also presents a repetitive investigation which was conducted in Brest State Technical University. The results of this investigation show the interest of Belorussian students in the languages (culture) of neighboring nations.

Keywords: Belorussian language, official language, russification, belarusization policy, referendum, diglossia, bilingual situation.

Language problem in the Belarusian history

The mid 80-s and the beginning of 90-s is a transition period in the development of many countries in Eastern Europe. It's a period when the old habitual way of life was broken and a new one was attempted to be built. The process of democratization started in the mid 80-s has lead to the USSR disintegration and resulted in origination of a number of independent states. One of the most important tasks the young countries faced was the matter of national self-determination and choice of cultural development strategy. These countries were forced to search for their own state policy concept in the sphere of ideology and culture. It was essential for all of them (except the Baltic countries) to determine their attitude towards the soviet cultural heritage and the Russian language, a language of intercultural communication in the USSR. Besides, the importance of national languages in these republics was increasing rapidly, they were applied in mass media, education and science.

The history of language problem

Over the history the Belorussian language was strongly influenced by the Russian and Polish languages. Belarus itself was subject to polonization and russification. But in the 20th century there appeared possibility to develop Belorussian as a national language. In the Belorussian historiography this period (the 20–30s of the 20th century) is commonly called a period of belorusization policy. Later Russian was considered as a national language. In the 30s the activity of Belorussian as well as of other national communities' schools, papers, etc was stopped. In 1927 in the BSSR 7,7 % of all books and booklets were published in the languages of national minorities living in the Republic (i e in the Polish, Jewish, Lithuanian and Latvian languages), while in 1937 this number dropped to 0,6 %. In 1932 children were educated in 8 languages, while in 1938 only 2 languages were allowed in schools. In the 60-s the study of national languages was sharply reduced. In 1969 only 10 % of Minsk pupils were studying Belorussian. The Belorussian newspapers and magazines published in Belorussian were translated into Russian. This policy of

reduction in the usage of national languages affected not only the republics but also the RSFSR where in the 60s 47 languages were used in the system of education, while in 1977 their number was reduced to 34, and in 1982 – to 16 (Запрудский 1996: 193). In fact, in the 30s–80s of the 20th century the Russian language was used as the national language.

By the mid 80s the language situation in the BSSR was as follows: Russian-speaking towns and Belorussian-speaking rural areas. There were no Belorussian-speaking schools, professional or technical schools in towns. Higher education establishments of the Republic were Russian-speaking too. The Belorussian language as a school subject was introduced in the 3rd form; the history of Belarus was not even studied. In soviet times the scope of migration of village people to Russian-speaking towns was great, and the language of the migrants was considered as a language of marginals. Urbanization contributed to the “soviet people” formation which was supposed to be an overethnic formation. The process was supported by the state authorities in the following way – education in national languages was suppressed and considered to be of no prestige. Certain behavior stereotypes peculiar to the soviet people put an individual into average frames where there was no room for national and language originality. An individual had to be someone faceless “like everybody”. Scientists have made an attempt to compare the vocabulary of the Russian and Belorussian languages and have come to a conclusion that their similarity amounts 46–48 % at the minimum, and 75–80 % at the maximum. This fact helped the speakers of the two languages to understand one another but, on the other hand, it was one of the reasons for the Belorussian language being so weak when faced with the Russian expansion (A. Роголѣв 2001: 10).

The literary Belorussian language as well as colloquial was exposed to a strong pressure from the Russian language due to several language reforms. These reforms were aimed at making the literary Belorussian language similar to

the Russian language. Studying Russian was important in all the republics of the USSR and has lead to a situation when the Belorussian language was underestimated. In the mid 80s this problem became not only a linguistic but also a political one.

The modern language situation in Belarus

It was necessary to save the Belorussian language as a part of the Belarusian culture. In 1990 the language law was passed. The Belorussian language was proclaimed the state language, but it didn't limit the use of the Russian language as a language of international communication. The languages of the national minorities were guaranteed the right of free development. In practice a lot had to be done to see this law fulfilled in different spheres – to create terminology dictionaries in all the fields of knowledge, to transfer secondary, professional and higher education into Belorussian as well as in the sphere of administration. The year 1990 was a crucial year in the history of the Belorussian language. On 20 September 1990 the “State programme of the development of the Belorussian language as well as the other national languages in the BSSR” was passed by the BSSR Council of Ministers. All administrative paper work was transferred into Belorussian, the number of Belorussian schools and classes increased. The Belorussian language was proclaimed the official language, but the Russian language was guaranteed free usage as a language of international communication (Качанюўскі 1994: 154). This reform was not unambiguously perceived by the population, and after a referendum held on 14 May 1995 the Russian language received an official status too. 83,1 % of the population expressed their wish to give this status to the Russian language. As a result the sphere of usage of the Belorussian language in special and scientific literature, in the spheres of education and mass media was strongly narrowed.

Table 1. *Number of schools according to language of learning*

	1995/1996	1999/2000	2000/2001
Cities and towns			
Schools where education is conducted in one language			
Belorussian language	14	31	40
Russian language	375	730	776
Schools where education is conducted in two or more languages	800	462	412
Rural areas			
Schools where education is conducted in one language			
Belorussian language	3015	2816	2782
Russian language	219	417	425
Schools where education is conducted in two or more languages	384	158	121
In the country as a whole			
Schools where education is conducted in one language			
Belorussian language	3029	2847	2822
Russian language	594	1147	1201
Schools where education is conducted in two or more languages	1184	620	533

Table 2. *Newspapers in the Republic of Belarus*

Year	1990	1995	2000
Belorussian language	135	210	202
Russian language	89	284	408

According to Table 1, we can see that most Belorussian schools are situated in rural areas, while their number in towns and cities is rather small (in the school year 2000/2001 the number of Belorussian schools amounted 40, whereas the number of Russian schools was 776). In 1995–1999 16 Belarusian schools were opened in towns, while the number of newly-opened Russian schools was 355. Moreover, the number of pupils studying in rural schools is usually small as compared with town classes. Therefore, 304,7 thousand pupils go to schools with the Belorussian language of education (2 822 schools), and 759,6 thousand pupils go to schools with the Russian language of education (1201 schools) (Statistical Chronicle – Статистический ежегодник 2001: 157).

In the early 90s the number of newspapers, magazines and books published in Belorussian greatly increased, while a reverse process was seen after the referendum.

According to Table 2, we can see that 135 Belorussian and 89 Russian newspapers were published in 1990, compared to 210 and 284 newspapers, accordingly, in 1995, and in 5 years (2000) the number of Belorussian newspapers was two times less than Russian (202 and 408, accordingly) (Ibidem, 189).

Without denying the priority of the economic sphere, the authors consider the problem of the national language and culture much more essential for the existence of an independent state. In the period of its formation it is important to create a national idea where one

of the main roles is to be devoted to the native language.

The independence of Belarus was proclaimed in 1991. Over the 15 years of independence the cultural life considerably changed. Historical periods, unconnected with the USSR, are actively studied. Architectural monuments, used for social and storage purposes in the BSSR, are reconstructed. New museums and theatres are opened. Taking all these facts into consideration it is hard to foresee the development of the language situation in Belarus. We think that the present status of the Belorussian language is unacceptable. The reasons for this situation are the following: political orientation on Russia, an unclear language and cultural state policy.

Nowadays there are several approaches on the problem of the Belarusian language as an official language in Belarus. Although the language situation is rather complicated, the Russian language is unlikely to be viewed as the only official language used with time. In comparison with the 1980s the sphere of using the Belorussian language has been considerably extended. The authors of *The strategy of the Belorussian language development in the 21st century* S. Zaprudskij and A. Anisim claim that the modern Belarusian language exists in 3 variants: literary, dialect and a mixed language based on the Belorussian language. Those who use one of the three variants are considered to be native speakers of the Belorussian language. According to the poll of 1999, 37 % of the population in Belarus use the Belorussian language in their private life. However, the figure could be much larger if we took into account the users of the dialect and mixed variants. The poll also shows that 74 % of the population regard Belorussian as their native language. The scientist U. Egorychev supposes that bilingualism with the Russian language dominance prevails in Belarus and it's necessary to achieve the language balance (Ягорычэў 2001: 6). Diglossia can be viewed as a way of further development of the language situation. It means that one language is used in one sphere of communication, while the second

language prevails in other spheres. As an example we can name the usage of Russian and French by the nobility in the 18–19th centuries. But for all that one language is always viewed as lofty, and the other one – as ordinary. Such a situation was also typical of the Belorussian language as against the Russian language in the 30–80s of the 20th century.

It is evident that the up-to-date status of the Belorussian language can be explained by the country's expansion by the neighboring countries over many centuries, and it is now that we can change the situation giving possibility for the language to develop and spread. The law offers equal rights to both languages. But in practice the right to use the Belorussian language is restrained in all the spheres of country's life and activities. The problem of a bilingual situation is not new at all. Of 176 countries of the world only 121 countries have one official language. In 41 states, including Belarus, Belgium, Ireland, Finland, two official languages are declared by the constitution. Three countries use three official languages, and Singapore has four. So, as we can see, the example of Belarus is not unique, but the second state language is usual for the former colonies. To some extent this fact can also be related to Belarus.

The interest in the languages of the neighboring states

Integration processes take place all over the world: European countries are being united; the new unions and commonwealths appear based on the old ones. Every European state finds its own place and role in the new geopolitical environment. As many researchers state, the main factors uniting countries and nations include not only economic interests but also general values, including cultural ones. Language similarity is also an important factor in the process of integration. Thanks to its geographical position between Poland and Russia Belarus is a natural integrating link on the social and cultural "East–West" way.

Table 3. *Interest in languages (culture) of neighboring nations (%)*

language	very great	great	small	no interest
Russian	48,4	39,7	9,4	2,5
Polish	10,8	31,4	40,0	17,8
Ukrainian	3,0	14,9	52,1	30,0
Lithuanian	1,6	6,2	26,4	65,8
Latvian	0,7	3,9	24,1	71,1

The fact that Belorussians really see their place on the “East–West” but not on the “South–North” way is considered rather interesting and requires explanation. We would like to draw your attention to a sociological investigation conducted by the authors in 1993. Thousands of young people in Brest and Grodno regions were asked to answer the question “The knowledge of what languages to your mind will be most helpful in your life?” The question concerned the languages of the neighboring countries. According to the answers, the Russian language (76,3 %) dominated, followed by the Polish language (31,8 %). Only a small amount of respondents thought of the Ukrainian (2,2 %), Lithuanian (2,4 %) and Latvian (1,0 %) as required in their life.

Interest in the language also means interest in the history and culture of the nation. Our investigation has shown that 57,1 % of the respondents know well the Russian culture, 36,4 % are interested in the Polish culture and 17,0 % of the respondents are attracted by the Ukrainian culture. Interest in the neighboring Baltic countries is rather small. 7,1 % of young people are attracted by the Lithuanian and 3,0 % by the Latvian culture. So, study of the history, culture and language of the neighboring countries by the young Belorussians had an evident Russian and Polish orientation.

In 2004 a repetitive investigation was conducted at Brest State Technical University to find out the interest of young people in the languages and culture of the neighboring countries. 436 respondents took part in the poll. As the results show, during the last 11 years the situation hasn't changed (see Table 3).

Conclusion

Finally, we would like to state that the above data were obtained in the western part of our country, which is situated close to Poland. Nevertheless, interest in the Polish language and culture is explained not only by the geographical position. For example, Brest region has a common border also with the Ukraine, but this country is not of great interest for Brest students. Poland ranks second preceded by Russia and followed by the Ukraine, though the Ukraine is closer to Belarus from the historical and ethnical point of view, and the culture and language of these countries have much in common. To our mind the matter is that for Belorussians Poland is associated with Europe. It is a country where integration processes are evident, all-European standards and values are being introduced. So, such an attitude towards Poland is at the same time an attitude towards West European civilization, its model of social development.

As for evident Russian orientation of Belarus which we can see after the formation of the Belorussian State it can be explained both by an economic dependence of Belarus on Russian resources and by the language and cultural closeness of the Belorussian and Russian nations. It is natural that the Russian language dominates in literature, education, mass media and private communication.

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KALBOS PROBLEMA BALTARUSIJOS ISTORIJOJE

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Autoriai analizuoja kai kuriuos kalbos problemas aspektus Baltarusijoje. Straipsnio tikslas yra apibrėžti baltarusių kalbos vaidmenį ir reikšmę Baltarusijos kultūrai. Autoriai itin daug dėmesio skiria pertvarkymo ir nepriklausomos valstybės formavimosi periodui. Jie pristato sociologinį tyrimą, atliktą Bresto valstybiniam technikos universitetui. Šio tyrimo rezultatai liudija apie Baltarusijos studentų susidomėjimą kaimyninių šalių kalba (kultūra).

Reikšminiai žodžiai: baltarusių kalba, oficialioji kalba, rusifikacija, baltarusinimo politika, referendumas, diglosija, dvikalbė situacija.

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