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The Fate of the Belarusian Literary Language over Half a Century

Losy białoruskiego języka literackiego na przestrzeni pół wieku

Лёс беларускай літаратурнай мовы на працягу паўстагоддзя

ABSTRACT: This article aims to outline the development of the Belarusian literary language from its beginnings before the period of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, through its rebirth in the 19th century, and its flourishing in the period from 1905 to 1916, and in the 1920s, as well as immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Most of this work concerns the various attempts of Russian leaders (and in time Lukašenka) to demean and assimilate the language, and the poets who vigorously resist this process. It asserts that by using the language they all help to keep this element of national consciousness alive, including those who with word-creation and experiment seek to advance the language's further progress.

KEYWORDS: Belarusian literary language, origins, repression, assimilation, protests, word-creation, experiment.

The early period of the Belarusian literary language goes back to beyond the Statutes of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the language of which was described by the distinguished Norwegian linguist Christian Stang (1900–1977) as “middle Belarusian”, implying, of course, an earlier period [Stang 1935: 122]. When the present writer, under the inspiring supervision of Professor Robert Auty (1914–1978), first entered the field of Belarusian studies, there was no question in our minds but that the 19th-century writers, whose vocabulary I attempted to describe and analyse [McMillin 1973] were early representatives of the resurrected literary language, although, of course, its use was forbidden by the Tsarist government during the entire length of this period, the ban being lifted only in 1905. At that time texts were hard

to obtain, many of them published in various forms by ethnographers like Pavel Shpilevskii (1823–1861) and Petr Bessonov (1828–1898), for instance. Belarusian dictionaries were also scarce, the main exception being that of Ivan Nosovič, who, voluntarily or not, called the language a dialect [Носовичъ 1870; Насовіч 1984].

In the 20th and 21st centuries the fate of the language fluctuated violently from the early newspapers, “Naša dolia” (1906) and “Naša niva” (1906–1915), through a period of relative liberalization in the first half of the 1920s before the rise of Stalin put an end to national strivings. “Naša niva” was first printed in Latin and Cyrillic script, a duality that was described as an unnecessary collision by distinguished linguist Nina Miačkoŭskaja [Мечковская 1998]. Another duality was between two orthographies rather than scripts: Taraškieviča and the more official Russified Narkomaŭka. This phenomenon is discussed in a comic verse by Usievalad Ścieburaka (b. 1981), in which he suggests that he and his friends enjoy mixing them [Ўцебурака 2013: 25]. Anka Upala (b. 1981) uses deliberately anachronistic humour in *Siaredzina*, boldly claiming Vikienci Dunin-Marcinkievič (1808–1884) as a brother, saying that the Taraškievič orthographical system was not compulsory for either of them. In her opinion, the language of the street, the vox populi, was the only true guide to language, expecting that various prominent poets (M. Bahdanovič, A. Pushkin and O. Mandel’shtam) would turn in their graves [Упала 2012: 85].

In the 1920s there was a liberation, even flourishing, of the language before Stalin came to power. As an example of this period is the work of the Instytut bielaruskaj kułtury (Inbielkułt, 1922–1928), predecessor of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences, which published in addition to monographs, thematically arranged journals, all of which were in Belarusian, and some also included items in Hebrew, Polish and other languages. In its last year before the organization was liquidated, “Zapisy addziela humanitarnych navuk” appeared in 1928, with all articles in Belarusian. This was indeed a period for the language comparable only to that immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union before Aliaksandr Lukašenka came to power.

In the post-war period there ensued a period of assimilation (by Russian), although when moderate free speech became more possible several writers wrote in praise and defence of their native tongue, amongst them Ryhor Baradulin (1935–2014) in *Maja mova*, of which these are the final lines:

І будзе мне сэрца грэць
 Кожным ашчадным словам,
 Бо як жыта спрадвечная
 Беларуская мова!
 [Барадулін 1984, 1:138].

With more extrovert passion were Jaŭhieija Janiščyc (1948–1988) in *Mova* and Nina Škliarava (b. 1947) in *Mova maja*:

Памру за цябе без энку
[Янішчыц 2000: 100].
Мова мая! Мой ратунак!
[Шклярава 1971: 6].

London was not inactive in expressing concern for the language in the 1970s and 1980s, publishing or republishing documents that were extremely rare or completely unknown in Soviet Belarus: the earliest was a samizdat *Letter to a Russian Friend* about the increasing assimilation of the Belarusian language in the 1970s; the second was *Listy da Harbačova*, an appeal to a plenary meeting of the Central Committee of the USSR in 1987, which, unsurprisingly, received no reply; the third was a bilingual document, *Nacyjanaŭnaja mova u sacyjalistyčnaj dziaržavie: Dakumient ab stanie bielaruskaj movy u Savietskaj Bielarusi*. The latter document includes an interesting article for studying the fate of the Belarusian language: *The Rebirth of the Byelorussian Language: Programme of the Byelorussian Language Commission of the Byelorussian section of the Soviet Cultural Foundation* [Anon. 1988: 20–38].

There is no space to quote or even list the many protests about the language since Lukašenka (illiterate in both Russian and Belarusian) took power and did his best to minimize the status of the national language, closing almost all the schools and colleges using Belarusian, his attitude being epitomized by one of his many notoriously stupid remarks: “Nothing sensible can be said in Belarusian”, which, incidentally, has not stopped him occasionally addressing the nation in his version of this language, to emphasize the country’s potentially fragile autonomy from Russia.

A few examples of literary protests should give an idea of the fierceness of responses by contemporary poets. First, *Mova* by Hanna Novik (b. 1990) is passionately indignant:

Распляжылі. Патрушчылі.
Знявечылі. Забыліся.
Аскепкі неўміручыя
Усё-ткі зліцца сіяцца
Пакуль не могуць. Множацца
І ў сэрцы колюць дзідамі.
Аж покуль дыхаць можацца,
Не забывай радзімую.
[Новік 2010: 31].

Ihar Kulikoŭ (b. 1988) describes bitterly a writer's position in Belarus with a prose poem, *U pierapiskach nasieŭnicva, nie kažuču...* Here is the third stanza:

Казалі, што ты разумова адсталы і доўга не пражывеш,
што сядзеш на голку, ў турму або, ня дай
божа, паткнешся ў баптыстыя. Але
насамрэч цікавіў ты іх ня болей, чым нейкі
там Банглядэш, Зымбавэ, родная мова,
гомасэксуалістыя.

[Кулікоў 2011: 25].

It is not only officialdom that causes anguish to Belarusian speakers: Hanna Komar (b. 1989) describes in *Zamova* how a Russophone boyfriend affects her:

...праз высокі ціск
з носа майго
сочыцца мова
і пэчкае твае белыя кашулі.
[Комар 2016: 23].

More criticism of the Belarusian language by her friends is to be found in the ironic *Bielaruskaja mova II* by Valzhyna Mort (b. 1981), from which the following two short excerpts come:

Твая мова такая маленькая,
што яшчэ й размаўляць ня ўмее

Гэта не мова,
Бо ў ёй няма аніякай сыстэмы.
[Mort 2008: 106].

Zmitrok Kuzmienka (b. 1980) describes in *Ja майчу...* a cruelly damaged bird as an image for his native tongue:

А ў мяне на шматкі
Часам сэрца парвацца гатова:
Тая птушка ў бядзе –
Гэта ж родная мова мая.
[Кузьменка 2012: 80].

Alieś Baranoŭski (b. 1989) in his *Rodnaja mova* writes despairingly of his barren native land. Here are the opening four lines, the second of which, whilst undoubtedly referring to his own country's various wavering positions, might equally well be applied to Lukašenka's fellow dictator, Vladimir Putin, in his comments on Ukraine:

Пустазеллем парасла зямля.
Пішуць зноў гісторыю нанова...
Самая магутная мая,
Шчырая і ветлівая мова!
[Бараноўскі 2013: 34].

In an indignant poem Z. Kuzmienka writes about people who look down on the Belarusian language:

Хто прыдумаў такі,
быццам, бедная
наша мова?
Хто такое сказаў,
што яна непрыгожа гучыць?
[Кузьменка 2012: 59].

The poet was clearly thinking of those who had forgotten Mickiewicz's famous remark about the beauty of the Belarusian language, calling it "the most harmonious and least changed of all the Slavonic languages" [Мицкевіч 1955, v. 16: 230].

Admiration for the Czechs who were very successful in keeping alive and modernizing their language as a basic element of national consciousness is reflected in the work of two young poets: *Parohi (trypcich miesta)* by Alieś Jemialianaŭ-Šylovič (b. 1987) and Kuzmienka's *Češkim budzicieliam*. It may be recalled that the prominent poet Larysa Hienijuš (1910–1983) in 1937 fled political persecution to Prague, and that the first Belarusian printer, Frańcišak Skaryna (1490? – 1551?) published two of his biblical translations in that city in the middle of the 16th century. Whilst the two above young poets admire the Czechs, their poems also include fierce criticism of their own country. *Parohi* contains, as well as the wish to die in Prague and an encomium to the Czech language, a bitter ending addressed to the dedicatee, Maks Ščur (b. 1977):

Дружа, хіба не чуў ты пра
тое, што ў роднай краіне
паэтам на'т пасля смерці
не даюць грамадзянства!
[Емельянаў-Шыловіч 2013: 12].

Z. Kuzmienka, realizing how the Czechs have arisen from centuries of oppression (clearly thinking of a comparison with his own country), ends his poem with an enthusiastic description of arising from one's knees. Here are the first and last two stanzas: