

THE PROBLEM OF USING THE BELARUSIAN LANGUAGE

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The language situation in Belarus today can be characterized as multilingual with Belarusian-Russian official bilingualism. Having enjoyed a rather short period when after the 27 July 1990 declaration by the parliament of the sovereignty of Belarus and the adoption of the 1990 law “On languages in the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic [4], the Belarusian language functioned as the sole state language of Belarus, active belarusization and noticeable shift to Belarusian especially within governmental and educational spheres slackened. But at the May 1995 referendum 83,3% of the people of the Republic of Belarus voted for Russian as the other state language on a par with Belarusian. Since that time as explicitly expressed by Article 17 of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus “The state languages of the Republic of Belarus are Belarusian and Russian languages [2].

With legalized bilingualism, when both Belarusian and Russian are official, the country’s authorities do not create conditions for a real equality between these languages. Russian is being promoted at all levels of leadership, which actually violates the law on bilingualism.

According to the 1999 Belarus Census, the Belarusian language is declared as a “language spoken at home” by about 3,686,000 Belarusian citizens (36.7% of the population) as of 1999. About 6,984,000 (85.6%) of Belarusians declared it their “mother tongue”. Other sources put the “population of the language” as 6,715,000 in Belarus and 9,081,102 in all countries. [3].

According to a study done by the Belarusian government in 2009, 72% of Belarusians speak Russian at home, while Belarusian is used by only 11.9% of Belarusians. 29.4% of Belarusians can write, speak and read Belarusian, while only 52.5% can read and speak it. According to the research, one out of ten Belarusians does not understand Belarusian.

The comparison of the figures obtained in 2009 to those of the 1999 censuses tells of an obvious decline in the communicative rank of Belarusian. Ignoring the discrepancy of the figures we must admit that there is a definite fluctuation of Belarusian to a markedly lower status than Russian. Today Belarusian is the language of titular nation used in all the documents (passports, acts of birth and death, currency, stamps, etc) but it is losing its ground in actual communication to Russian which is the most widely used language in all communicative spheres.

Such social problem of using the national language facing society in our country today has historic, cultural and other reasons. Among them:

1. The government doesn’t pay much attention to using of the Belarusian language. For example:

- a great number of schoolchildren who were initially taught in Belarusian start being taught in Russian after moving up to a certain form.
- Belarusian-speaking children are often rejected the right to be taught all subjects in their mother tongue at school.
- Some school administrations impede establishing of classes with instruction in Belarusian on parents’ requests.
- There is almost no opportunity to receive a higher education exclusively through the medium of the Belarusian language in any field of study.

- A Belarusian-speaking child was diagnosed as mentally retarded by a kindergarten speech therapist for not knowing names of several objects in Russian.
- The Ministry of Education doesn't issue textbooks and other educational materials in Belarusian for a number of school subjects.

2. Culture, communications media and new technologies

- All the Belarusian TV channels broadcast mainly in Russian in spite of numerous protests of Belarusian speakers.
- The absolute majority of state and local administration bodies' web pages don't have Belarusian versions.
- Just 8.5% of books have been published in Belarusian in the 2000s. At the same time the First deputy minister of information claimed that the Ministry is not satisfied by this amount.
- An attempt to fine a newspaper for using one of the Belarusian spelling's versions was made [1].

3. Many Belarusian speakers tend not to speak their mother tongue when there is a probability of being confronted or misunderstood by Russian speakers [5].

In terms of reasons mentioned above we can admit that the status of a language, its wealth and international recognition is not defined by itself, but rather by its carriers. A language may be most beautiful and mellifluous-yet, when its carrier nation is lacking in national honor, is not sufficiently educated, is lazy and indifferent to its own legacy, then nobody will respect its language. For example, the prestige of English was created by Americans themselves. Therefore the fate of Belarusian depends on the success of the Belarusian people. If it manages to create an effective economy, original culture, developed science, or if it begins to treat with dignity all that has been achieved until now, then respect to itself and its own history will re-appear — and the native language will experience an inevitable comeback.

In order to improve the situation of using the Belarusian language, the following objectives are to be attained.

1. The number of speakers is to be increased.

For example, all secondary school pupils should be taught in Belarusian in order to speak the language fluently upon graduation. The number of subjects taught in Belarusian should be increased.

2. Facilities for the Belarusian language use are to be created

- Family is the most solid foundation for the language use.
- Businessmen should be explained benefits of using Belarusian. For example, companies should be encouraged to service in Belarusian and to use packing with inscriptions in Belarusian.
- Belarusian is to be used at every place of work.
- To create more Belarusian-medium internet sites.

3. Attitudes to the Belarusian language are to be improved

The demand for the wider use of the Belarusian language should come from the speakers themselves. The number of those who know the Belarusian language is by far larger than the number of its speakers [5].

In conclusion, as David Marples noted in 1999, "For Belarus, national development without the native language, especially under the shadow of a much larger Slavic neighbour with a lengthy historical tradition as an empire, was virtually impossible".

And it is still not possible today. Being the cornerstone of Belarusian identity, the Belarusian language protects the nation from Russian expansion and Russification. On the other hand, Belarusian makes Belarusians feel European. It is a very important tool for democratization [1].

Literature

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