
CONFERENCES

XIII MAPRYAL CONGRESS ON “RUSSIAN LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE IN THE SPACE OF WORLD CULTURE”, Granada, 13—20 September 2015

The XIII MAPRYAL Congress “Russian language and literature in the space of world culture” was held from September 13—20, 2015, in Granada, Spain. The Congress was organized by the International Association of Russian Language and Literature Teachers (MAPRYAL) and the University of Granada (Spain), and saw the presence of more than 1200 teachers of Russian language, literature and culture from 60 countries. This event takes place once every four years, and is the largest international forum for Russian-language philologists. Participants included Russian language teachers working at all levels of learning, literary scholars, linguists, students and graduate students, publishers, public figures, journalists and all those working towards the study and popularisation of the Russian language.

The official opening ceremony took place on 15 September, in the Palacio de Congresos in Granada but many delegates had arrived earlier to register themselves for this grand event and enjoy the beauty of the city. Participants from all over the world — Germany, Austria, China, USA, Netherlands, Kazakhstan, Finland, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Russia, Spain, Slovakia, Poland, India, Italy attended the conference, the delegation from Russia being the largest.

The Congress was opened by the Russian ambassador to Spain Yuri Korchagin, the President of MAPRYAL and Russkiy Mir Foundation Trustees Board Chairperson Lyudmila Verbitskaya and other dignitaries. Spain was represented by the Mayor of Granada Jose Torres Urtado, and the General Director of Higher Education of the Government of Andalusia Dolores Ferre Cano.

In her opening remarks Lyudmilla Verbitskaya heartily welcomed all the delegates and thanked them for assembling in such large numbers to discuss the role and future of Russian in today’s world. She spoke of the growing world-wide interest in the Russian language that has been observed over the last decade and maintained that those studying the language has doubled in recent years in many countries across Europe and even in countries such as Mongolia, India, Japan, China etc.

The Mayor of Granada, while welcoming the audience, recounted the unique beauty and regalia of Granada and invited the delegates to explore the city, even if they had to miss a few academic sessions. His speech was punched with many funny anecdotes, making the audience laugh and clap in appreciation.

Co-chairperson of the organising committee for the forum, Rafael Guzman Tirado, recalled the importance of the city of Granada for Russian-language teachers and said that the city is the centre of Russian-language teaching in Spain.

The opening ceremony was followed by the Plenary with presentations by three speakers.

In her plenary speech entitled “The role of language in society”, Lyudmila Verbitskaya lay emphasis on the importance of language in the lives of people not only as a means of everyday communication but also as a preserver of culture and values. Her speech was interspaced with famous quotations of Humbolt, Fortunatov and Shakhmatov on language and society. Further, while elaborating specifically on the Russian language, she informed the audience that Russian is spoken by about 200—300 million people in the world, out of which it is the mother tongue for about 160 million people and a language of communication for about 120 million. Lyudmila Verbitskaya also made a special mention on the active role that the Russki Mir Foundation has been playing not only in providing support to foreign teachers of Russian Language to enhance their teaching expertise and keep abreast of the changes that are taking place in modern Russian language, but also in creating new text books for the future generation. She informed that there are around 100,000 teachers of Russian language within the country actively working in imparting and preserving the richness of the language.

The second plenary speaker Aneta Pavlenko from Temple University, USA, delivered a speech entitled “Russian friendly: Russian language in the European sphere of services”. In her well-researched presentation, Aneta Pavlenko highlighted another aspect of language use, the study of which has gained importance in West European sociolinguistics: commodification of language and its manifestation in different spheres of the service industry. Drawing on her own field work and some other data, Aneta Pavlenko argued that forms of language are symbolic capital which turn into economic capital under various circumstances. In today's globalized world where there is free movement of people and commodities across nations, it is not only English, but other languages as well which acquire their own importance. Aneta drew the attention of the teachers to the significant place that Russian occupies in this aspect and urged them to take this into account in their teaching practice and research.

The third Plenary speaker's speech was dedicated to literary translation as a means of literary influences and borrowings in another literature. Zhen Tiu from Shanghai University of Foreign Languages, China, talked concretely about the Chinese experience and illustrated how Chinese literature benefited through the translated works of Pushkin and other writers of XIXth century. Chinese literature imbibed new ideas and trends which gave birth to new styles and genres in Chinese literature over a period of time.

The Congress agenda covered 14 research areas, including Modern Russian language and sociolinguistic aspects of research, Russian culture and globalization, Systemic-structural analysis of Modern Russian language, Diachronic and synchronic aspects of research, Language, mind and culture, Modern Russian lexicography; theory and practice, Communicative pragmatic aspects of research, Russian language in intercultural communication, Methods of Russian language teaching, Comparative study of Russian and other languages, Translation as a tool for intercultural dialogue, Russian in World Wide Web, Russian literature and the world literary process and Methodology of teaching Russian literature: theory and practise. Each session was overflowing with

participants and the halls were full. In many sessions, because of the large number of presenters and the paucity of time, the delegates were asked to cut short their presentations and emphasize just the key points.

The roundtable sessions also witnessed large participation and active discussions. Eight roundtable sessions were spread over two days and were devoted to topical issues of functioning of Russian language in the contemporary world. Russian language in the Bologna process, Distance teaching and learning, Russian in the system of bilingual education, Theory and practice of language textbook writing, Russian phraseology in the contemporary world were some of the topics that were covered. Of special interest to both literary scholars and all Russian language enthusiasts was the roundtable discussion, 'Contemporary Russian literature in the context of the XXI century,' anchored by the prominent Russian writer, philologist and literary historian, Alexei Varlamov.

A number of cultural events added extra flavour to the Congress. A monument to Alexander Pushkin was unveiled in the public garden of the University of Granada on September 15, the opening day of the Congress. Other interesting exhibitions were also on display. 'Russia in the library'; 'Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekhov; Sergei Yesenin and Federico Garcia Lorca: Russian Slavists in exile', 'Pushkin and Spain', 'Memorable places of Augustine Betancourt in St. Petersburg,' etc. were a treat for the viewers and opened up new aspects of each theme respectively.

Musical performances were another highpoint of the Congress. Galina Trofimova, a professor at the Peoples Friendship University and a renowned piano artist enthralled her audience in both the concerts she gave on different days. The famous Russian singer Oleg Pogudin was the surprise element and mesmerized the audience with his voice and his songs. In addition, there was also a performance by the orchestra of the University of Granada.

Soon it was time for the concluding session. Lyudmila Verbitskaya took to the floor and summed up the results of the many working groups and general assembly discussions of the forum. In her speech she cautioned the audience about problems that the world of Russian language teaching is likely to face in the coming years. She said that while there are more than 273,000 teachers of Russian language and literature in the world, this impressive figure is accompanied by the more worrying statistic that the average age of these teachers is around 50. She suggested that MAPRYAL should establish a youth-wing of the organisation which would actively work towards attracting more young people into the profession and supporting them later in their endeavours. She thanked all the teachers who had assembled for the Congress for taking the effort of coming from faraway places, and above all, for loving the Russian language and working hard to preserve it and pass on the legacy to the future generations.

The closing ceremony ended with the conferring of a special award to one of the greatest legends of Russian language teaching Serafima Alekseevna Khavronina from the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia, whose book 'Russian in Exercises' is used by teachers and students all over the world. Marking her 85th birthday, it was indeed an emotional moment for her as well as the others present in the hall. The standing ovation and continuous applause was indeed a befitting tribute to her.

Lyudmila Verbitskaya was unanimously re-elected to the post of President of the MAPRYAL and the location of the next conference, which will take place in Kazakhstan, was announced.

Finally, the Congress ended with an evening banquet. The venue for the farewell dinner was perfect with the beautiful lawns leading into a spacious hall. The tables were laid out lavishly with seating arrangement for everyone to relax and enjoy the company of the others. Food, drinks, laughter, chatter, music, dance, and the constant clicking of photographs — it was indeed a perfect way to say goodbye to the XIIIth Congress of MAPRYAL with promises to meet once again in Kazakhstan for the XIVth festival to celebrate Russian language, literature and culture.

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