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TRANSLINGUALISM: COMMUNICATIVE BRIDGE OR “CULTURAL BOMB”?

By Uldanai Bakhtikireeva, Olga Valikova, and Jeannete King

The generating of translingual discourse in modern meta-socium suggests that it is a “measure” of intercultural cooperation of the highest level, when cultures do not displace each other, but interact effectively. Such text is always multidimensional both in terms of form and content. But can we qualify this phenomenon as totally positive? There are different opinions on that question in modern science. Few of them are represented in this discussion. We’ve talked to Jeannete King about translingual literature, its complicated “essence” and points of view of translingual writers. The original discussion is available at <https://latlab.wordpress.com/2016/12/10/translanguaging-in-russia-russian-as-a-communicative-bridge-for-minority-languages-and-cultures/comment-page-1/#comment-11>

Key words: Transculturation, Translingual practices, Intercultural cooperation, Bilingualism

1. ON THE PROBLEM OF TRANSLANGUAGE PRACTICES IN RUSSIA: THESIS

According to 2010 Census, 97% of Russia’s multicultural speakers prefer Russian language to their native in usual communication and in professional and creative activities. At the same time a high variety of minority languages are endangered. In this situation translingual practices of non-Russian writers, who create their text in Russian, become a transmission mechanism for saving cultures.

A shortlist of their names, which continues to grow even today, proves that this is a significant cultural phenomenon in the entire post-Soviet space: Kyrgyzstan (Chingiz Aitmatov, Sherboto Tokombaeva), Kazakhs (Olzhas Suleimenov, Askar Suleimenov, Anuar Alimjanov, Murat Auezov, Auezkhan Kodar, Aslan Zhaksylykov), Belarus (Vasil Bykov and Ales Adamovich), Georgia (Chabua Amirejibi, Alexander Ebanoidze), Moldova (Ion Drutseh), Bashkortostan (Anatoly Genatullin), Ossetia (Ezethan Uraymagova, Gaito Gazdanov, Ruslan Totrov), Lakia (Efendi Kapiev), Chuvashia (Gennady Aygi), Uzbekistan (Timur Pulatov, Uchkun Nazarov), Azerbaijan (Chingiz Huseynov, Maqsd and Rustam Ibragimbekov), Ukraine (Vitali Korotych), Chechnya (Elbrus Minkailov, Issa and Timur Kodzoev), Ingushetia (Idris Bazorkin, Bagaudin Zyazikov), Karachay-Cherkessia (Isa Kapaev), Tajikistan (Timur Zulfikarov), Chukotka (Yuri Retheu), Khanty-Mansi (Uvan Shestalov), Nivkh (Vladimir Sangi), Tatarstan (Guzel Yakhina), and many others.

The problem of minority languages transmission and even survival is very significant for Russia. Its Linguistic landscape is represented by more than 275 languages. At the same time only one language dominates — Russian is preferable for 97 percent of speakers.

Meanwhile many languages are in a vulnerable status. So, only one dialect of Karaim language has survived, and even serious measures as the educational program by UNESCO *Spoken Karaim* to strengthen its position doesn’t help in this case. Archi, Bashkir, Kumandin, Chulym, Shor, Tofalar, Tuvan, Chelkan, Teleut languages listed as endangered; Soyot language died out.

Languages, like organic forms of the Earth, are involved in natural selection, but this selection exacerbated by globalization. Nowadays, linguistic frequency of deaths has been reaching a record level — about 2 languages die every week.

With language death we lose unique world view and way of understanding the reality around us. For example, in Selkup language there is a “backstage” category of sentence, when speaker is putting into verbal construction the meaning of his own presence or absence in some situation; In Archi language there are no hyperonyms. For instance, usual, common word “sheep”, that describes a domestic animal, doesn’t exist in Archi, because for Archi people all specific features of this animal are important. That’s why they use 50 special words for sheep inside of one common.

Archi, who’s population is about one thousand people, is one of rare examples of speakers, preferring their own language in all life aspects. They are not going to use Russian for getting into a privileged language community.

We can observe the totally different situation in case of other cultures. The most widespread phenomena in the post-Soviet space are bilingualism and translingualism.

We are faced with **the question**: what is translingualism? Should we put plus or minus in front of the term and the phenomenon? Is it a forced transfer to another language, contributing to the weakening of the mother tongue — or it is positive cooperation with another culture?

The answers are ambiguous. Most of minority languages in Russia have a recreated writing. There is a paucity of special literature for children and teenagers. Home language is absent in the system of Education. Young people from all over the Russian space choose Russian language for further successful integration in professional area. Many of them suppose that their own languages are uncompetitive.

Writers from diversity of cultures also prefer Russian, but here the situation is more positive. Literary bi- and translingualism in the process of language and culture transmission is the topic of our interest.

We have been studying the texts of bilingual authors for many years and suggest that they are a “measure” of intercultural cooperation of the highest level, when cultures do not displace each other, but interact effectively. Such texts are always multidimensional both in terms of form and content. Interviewing different authors, analyzing their texts from interdisciplinary points of view we are trying now to create a “portrait gallery” of translingual writers for better understanding the process of cultural contamination.

Significance of the term ‘translingualism’ indicates a new quality of texts (including literary texts) that cannot be identified as ‘bilingual’ or ‘monolingual.’ Translingual text implies a lack of clear boundaries between the contacting languages, as well as specific integration of linguistic resources within the literary whole thing. Is ethnic culture lost due to a functional change to another language?

Obviously, it is not lost. Moreover, ethnic culture is transmitted to the outer space, i.e., expands the territory of its existence, through language vested with high functional authorities.

Returning to the metaphor of Humboldt, it can be summarized as the following: to remain ‘the spirit of the nation’, the language must be permanently filled with new ethnic content. The content does not displace or replace the original content, but are in synergy interactions.

These writers, who use language instruments of more than one verbal system, call themselves “nomads of semiotic spaces”.

Translingual Authors say that they use Russian, because

— The territory of its existence is larger;

— The audience is extensional;

— They use it for spreading their own native cultures out, they want to accumulate it and improve its vital potential.

During our work we meet them, interviewee, analyze their texts and try to understand: perhaps, translingual practices and revitalization of cultures are connected? In this case Russian language performs the function of storage for important elements of other cultures that will reborn once?

2. POINTS OF VIEW

Professor Jeannete King, University of Canterbury, New Zeland:

Thanks Olga and Uldanai, this is a very interesting topic. What a great project, talking to authors from other languages about why they write in Russian. Ngugi Wa Thiong’o from Kenya also writes about this. Initially he wrote in English, but then he changed to his native language, Gikuyu, as he felt that English was a cultural ‘bomb’. “But the biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against that collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland.” He wrote about this in his book ‘Decolonising the Mind’ in 1986. (See: <http://www.swaraj.org/ngugi.htm>). The authors you are interviewing seem to have a contrary view than that of Thiong’o. I wonder why you think that authors like Dana Giray are much more positive about writing in Russian, compared to Thiongo’s position.

Olga Valikova:

— Jeanette, thank you so much for comments. The tendency you have mentioned (switching to the native language) is increasing now in many post-Soviet countries: in Kazakhstan, Georgia etc. Writers from there feel that they should reborn the vitality of their own languages. Moreover, they refuse the dictates of the Russian language — it is a kind of reflection on “colonial times”. The feeling of loosing native culture is very painful in Kazakhstan, for instance. That’s why people from all social stratum (students, adults from different professional areas) choose English to Russian for integrating in world society But in Russia Russian-language is still positive. To be more objective I would like Dana Giray to answer your brilliant question (it’s really very important) in comment below. Hope she will do it soon!

Uldanai M. Bakhtikireeva:

— I and Ngugi Wa Thiong’o from Kenya have different positions. The Russian Empire was not the Empire of classical type. About this very accurately wrote Madina Tlostanova in her book “Living Never, Writing from Nowhere. Post-Soviet Fiction and the Trans-Cultural Aesthetics” (2004). I agree with her: the Imperial-colonial configuration of

Russia, the Soviet Union and the former Soviet Union primarily interested in trying to understand the basic features of the cultural imaginary, semiotic mechanisms and meta-metaphors, of a General geo-historical and geo-cultural logic, which altogether allow us to speak about the uniqueness of Russia as Empire. (...) Speaking in economic terms, the Russian distinction is expressed in quite different from the Western European, unique way of initial accumulation of capital, exactly, the use of own peasantry as missing overseas colonies, however, in failing to end to equate a relatively short historical experience of serfdom to slavery, as it existed in the colonies of the European powers, primarily Britain. Serfs usually were ethnically Russian people, not the minority and then to say that in Russia worked the same racial signifier as in the Imperial-colonial configurations of Western modernity (2004)” is not right. (For example, by the early XIX century the economy of Kenya was the slave trade). In this connection, to call the Russian language ‘as a cultural ‘bomb,’ I would not.

This does not mean that in Russian the ethnically non-Russian writers didn’t write about it. For example, Murat Auezov (Kazakh) wrote in Russian: “27/VI/1978. I write in Russian, but not ‘in Russian’. Speaking and Writing in Russian — weapons of emerging national identity. The Pro-Russian party-state apparatus, inspired by the success of the linguistic assimilation of non-Russian components of the ‘new historical community’ does not until notice it. Can’t see that those of the tribesmen who etched a sense of historical optimism ...” (1978). But when I read all books of Murat Auezov I would like to say as that Madina Tlostanova: “Auezov is a classic border transcultural person who knows more than only Western or only Eastern, inside which occurs permanent the double translation, dialogue, and double criticism. (...) Finally, I should note its relationship with language. This is not a militant rejection of the Russian language in the spirit of Audrey Lorde, who wrote that it is impossible to destroy the master’s house using his tools (first and foremost, language), but rather (Abdelwahab) Meddeb’s trickster position of the writing in the language of the colonizer, but resorting to the labyrinth, Arabesque, permanent decentration and loosening of the sentences from the inside, so to the native speaker of that language it becomes not very comfortable. Or the position of Derek Walcott — of naming as the creation of symbolic or real “home” as the birth of the world anew in spite of cruelty or another Imperial language and culture, imposing their names and meanings on artificially deprived of voice, of the silent people. The whole book of Murat Auezov permeates decolonial anti-sublime. It frees the mind, consciousness, returns readers to the dignity, without which there can’t be respect to another in the broadest sense. Thus in this work, no negativity and post-colonial rage, by contrast, there is the creative moment of not a confrontation (resistance), but re-existence (re-existence — in the terminology of Colombian culturologist — Adolfo Alban-Acente). This (re)creation of positive life models, worlds and self-awareness, overcoming the imperfection and injustice of the world. This momentum is not denial, not of destruction, but the creation of something else, going his own way, taking the contradictions of the world and human perception of it” (2012).

I prefer the position of re-existence. Russian language or another “imperial” language I’m not defined as “enemy’s language” or “language of the colonizer”, or “cultural bomb”. For me Uldanai (Dana Giray) Russian is the language that gave me the opportunity to dive into the world of Abkhazians and Georgians, Ukrainians and Belarusians,

Moldovans and Chukchi, Mansi, and Nivkh, and other peoples of the USSR. I read the works of ethnically non-Russian Russian writers and learned picture of the world of other peoples, culture and their identity, it is my way to learn the world surrounding me. At the same time I did not cease to speak the language of parents and my ancestors. Any “Imperial” language gives each person to live consciously and worthily. The position of the victims is always easier, I think. In my practice I use the language of another nation more than the language of my parents and my ancestors. But it does not mean that I betrayed it.

I stand in solidarity with Murat Auezov, who writes that the situation of “marginalization” leads to the distinction of concepts such as “ethnic consciousness and national identity”. A truly creative person with a deep ideological position in the marginal situation ascends to the national consciousness, overcoming in itself the dual uncertainty of marginality. The person directs his efforts, does all his best to increase the position of national (ethnic, native) language even though in his private practice he would prefer that one which is better as a means of achieving his ideological goals (1997).

Jeanette, thank you! I and Olga would like to hope for further discussion of these tricky issues. Maybe soon we translate our articles into English and our view will be more fully disclosed.

3. CONCLUSION

Further linguistic studies of creativity in the language of another culture, including those represented in Russian, require new approaches, new logic, new understanding and description. And this is a scientific problem, which is still open in the Russian linguistics, but extremely valuable for disciplines of anthropocentric paradigm of the modern study of language: cultural linguistics, (etnopsyho) -linguistics, cognitive linguistics, ethnolinguistics, intercultural communication, political linguistics.

Separately, in the system of specific coordinates of particular discipline, none of them are able to solve the puzzle that they face thanks to ‘translingual’ texts. Multidisciplinary approach (and in the future — transdisciplinary approach) becomes the methodological basis. The present stage of development of linguistic science allows to study the complicated problems simultaneously on several levels, because it is a principle of the organization of knowledge based on the interaction of disciplines in solving problems, which can significantly extend the actual fullness of knowledge, its accumulation.

The question is still open — join us at <http://journals.rudn.ru/education-languages/> and share your point of view. Let’s find the milestones on the way together.

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ТРАНСЛИНГВИЗМ: КОММУНИКАТИВНЫЙ МОСТ ИЛИ «КУЛЬТУРНАЯ БОМБА»?

У.М. Бахтикиреева, О.А. Валикова, Ж. Кинг

Формирование транслингвального дискурса в современном обществе влечет за собой возникновение новых моделей межкультурной кооперации, в рамках которой разные семиотические системы не столько вытесняют друг друга, сколько интегрируются. Текст, возникающий в результате подобного взаимодействия, отличается многомерностью формы и содержания. Но можно ли квалифицировать феномен транслингвизма как исключительно позитивный? В науке существуют разные точки зрения по этому вопросу. Некоторые из них представлены в нашей дискуссии.

Ключевые слова: транскulturация, транслингвальные практики, межкультурная кооперация, билингвизм

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