The Apple of Discord: Belarus(ian)

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The past 2023 is full of memorable dates for Belarusian linguistics in the field of standardization of the language: 105 years ago, in 1918 in Vilna, Branislaŭ Taraškievič published the first grammar of the Belarusian language; 90 years ago, in 1933, the first reform of the Belarusian language took place; 15 years ago in 2008, the Rules of Belarusian Orthography and Punctuation were once again clarified and approved by the Law of the Republic of Belarus.

Each event was an essential milestone in forming the Belarusian language standard. However, the Belarusian language spoken by modern Belarusians can hardly be called homogeneous (Hentschel/Gerd/Kittel 2011, Ramza 2017). Throughout its historical development, the Belarusian language has been subject to the linguistic influence of neighboring Slavic languages, which exhibit a higher degree of standardization (Bunčić 2013, Grenoble 2015). Consequently, this interplay has led to significant variability in spoken Standard Belarusian. The relationship between Belarusian identity and Belarusian as the language of communication continues to be complex and ambiguous, as evidenced by the population censuses of 1989, 1999, 2009, and 2019. Many Belarusians declare Belarusian as their native language despite not using it daily.

In my presentation, I will analyze the variability of modern Belarusian, which remains in a dynamic process of stabilization. There is a growing movement dedicated to revitalizing and promoting Belarusian. This movement, however, involves renewed contention between the norms of Narkamaŭka and Taraškievica. The renaissance (as well as contention) is evident in digital spaces.

The research is corpus-based, utilizing transcripts of TV quizzes, YouTube videos, Instagram posts, and comments as primary sources. To conduct this analysis, I employ the software MAXQDA, which allows for a detailed examination of the language's variability and the dynamics between the different norms.

The working hypothesis is that the use of the Belarusian language varies depending on the communication context (registers). Specifically, TV and YouTube hosts predominantly use Narkamaŭka, while Instagram authors lean towards Taraškievica. It is intriguing to observe the linguistic preferences of the audience (quiz/interview participants, as well as Instagram commenters), whether they gravitate towards Narkamaŭka, Taraškievica, or opt for a mixed Belarusian-Russian speech ("Trasjanka").

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