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RUSSIAN IN CONTEMPORARY WORLD: SITUATION AND PERSPECTIVES

**РУССКИЙ ЯЗЫК В СОВРЕМЕННОМ МИРЕ: СОСТОЯНИЕ И
ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ**

Abstract:

The world function of Russian at the Soviet time had three aspects, which can be designated as «language of Lenin», «language of Gagarin» and «language of Dostoevsky». The situation changed abruptly after the victory of the USA in the “cold war». The world role of English increased still more and the world role of Russian decreased. I do not know a contemporary Russian thinker whose ideas are popular in the world. Nowadays I know no such figure in the humanities and the scientific success of Russia is not so impressive as earlier. Some contemporary Russian writers are known in the world but I do not think that somebody outside Russia can study Russian for reading their works in original. The chances of “the same country as others” are less than the chances of a large country and especially of a superpower. However, there are two groups of countries where this role of Russian (as its world role) partly preserves. The first group includes the countries where the Soviet experience can be perceived positively: China, Vietnam, and Laos. The second group includes the

countries with the traditional perception of Russia and Russian as «windows to world», the example is Mongolia. Pragmatic reasons and psychological habits can preserve the use of Russian. The role of Russian as the regional language of culture is preserved now but it is decreasing everywhere except Belorussia. If Russia wants to preserve its world role it must show principally new achievements and not the copies of achievements of the other countries and not the great achievements of the past.

Keywords: Russian, world language, regional language of culture, language of contacts, language of minorities, pragmatic reasons, psychological habits, linguistic policy

Introduction

The Russian language was one of the main world languages until 1991. Now its international role is decreased but not disappeared. The contemporary situation is investigated in the article.

Methods

The methods of sociolinguistics are used in the article.

Results and discussion

There are four basic functions of a language outside its main territory. 1) function of the world language, 2) function of the regional language of culture, 3) function of the language of contacts, 4) function of the language of minorities. Not every language has all of these functions; Russian has all of them but their dynamics and perspectives are not equal.

The world function of Russian at the Soviet time is well known. It had three aspects, which can be designated as «language of Lenin», «language of Gagarin» and «language of Dostoevsky». The situation changed abruptly after the victory of the USA in the «cold war». The world role of English increased still more and the world role of Russian decreased. The main reason of this fall is rarely mentioned in the contemporary Russia but it was defined at the time of the conference of International associations of teachers of Russian and of the Russian literature in Verona (2005): «erosion of the communist ideology and the Soviet model. Russia does not personify the great utopia now. It became the same country as others».

The communist ideology was not the only influential ideology spread from Russian thinkers. The ideas of Bakunin, Kropotkin, and Lev Tolstoy were popular in the world in the 19th century and in the beginning of the 20th century. The communist ideology exists in many countries until now and even the Stalin's work "Marxism and Problems of Linguistics" is known in Japan, India and some other countries. However, I do not know a contemporary Russian thinker whose ideas are popular in the world.

The success of Soviet science (especially the success in space investigations) forced many people to study Russian. For instance in the 1960th almost all the students of the science in Japan tried to study this language. Even in the humanities the names of Bakhtin, Propp, Shklovsky, Vygotsky were well-known in the world in spite of all the iron curtains. Nowadays I know no such

figure in the humanities and the scientific success of Russia is not so impressive as earlier. However, I think that this component of the world significance of Russian suffered least of all and the Russian sciences and humanities have chances of revival.

The Russian literature especially the literature of the XIX century was popular in the world and its glory exists until now. Some people in Russia think that the Great Russian literature of the XIX century is the only real value of our country. However, the different sides of the process are correlated. In Japan only two works of Pushkin, two plays of Gogol, one play of Chekhov and a book of a little known writer S. Maximov were published in the 1990th. There were no publications of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky for these years. True, some years ago the new translation of “Karamazov Brothers” was published but the translator adapted the novel to the habit of Japanese readers: he abridged the book and even wrote some new chapters. Some contemporary Russian writers are known in the world but I do not think that somebody outside Russia can study Russian for reading their works in original.

Russian remains one of the languages of UNO and many other international organizations and the number of states with official status of it even increased (Russia, Belorussia, Kazakhstan, and Kirghizia). However, the juridical status is not the leading factor: almost for all the Soviet time (until 1990) Russian had not any official status in all the countries of the world including the USSR.

Many people in Russia feel the decrease of the world role of Russian keenly but it is the objective situation. The possibility of increasing of this role depends on many reasons partly unpredictable: a great writer can appear in any country. However, the chances of “the same country as others” are less than the chances of a large country and especially of a superpower.

The function of the regional language of culture is not the same as the function of the world language. For instance, Portuguese is not the world language but its cultural role in some African countries remains significant. Usually such language is the language of the former colonizers or the predominant language of the disintegrated multinational state (situation of the USSR, Austro-Hungary etc.). Sometimes this function can remain for many years. For instance the best-known foreign language in Hungary is German although Hungary became the separate state more than hundred years ago (Russian preserves the second place and English occupies only the third one). Sometimes such language can preserve the predominance in communication as English in Ireland. However, its significance can disappear (except the inner communication of minorities) as it was in Finland after its separation from Russia.

The intermediate situation between the first and the second functions of Russian existed at the Soviet time in the countries of the socialist camp and in some Asian and African states. One of the effective means of spreading of Russian in Asia and Africa was the learning of specialists in the Soviet universities. After 1989-1991 this function decreased too especially in Europe. However, there are two groups of countries where this role of Russian (as its world role) partly preserves. The first group includes the countries where the Soviet experience can be perceived positively: China, Vietnam, and Laos. The second group includes the countries with the traditional perception of Russia and Russian as “windows to world”, the example is Mongolia. Of course English little by little

excludes Russian in these countries too but this process is not finished yet.

However, this function of Russian increased at the expense of the new states formed in 1991. In many of them the situation is not favorable for Russian but this function did not disappear at all anywhere. The primary idea to diminish the functions of Russian to the function of communication inside the Russian minority for several years was not realized anywhere maybe except Turkmenistan.

The elite of the predominant nations of the new states can have controversial feelings in respect to Russian. On the one hand the aspiration for national strengthening and for refuse from the Soviet and communist heritage gave birth to desire to limit the functions of Russian or even to forget this language. Some of the new states aim to be part of Europe, and the symbol of the united Europe is English. On the other hand pragmatic reasons and psychological habits can preserve the use of Russian. The national elite of the Central Asia and Transcaucasia republics knows Russian better than English or other Western languages. Besides the above-mentioned tendency to consider Russian as a “window to world” exists not only in Mongolia but also in the Central Asia and partly in the Caucasus. In Belorussia and in the part of the Ukraine Russian is the language of usual communication for all the population and it is more prestigious than Belorussian or Ukrainian although the situation in Ukraine is changing now.

Therefore the situation in the fourteen new states is not equal. One pole is Belorussia where Russian is prevalent as the language of everyday communication and culture. Such role of it is supported both by the state policy and by the traditions. The present situation in Belorussia reminds the situation in Ireland. The other thirteen states are characterized by the gradual drop of the use of Russian although the speed of this drop is not equal.

The other pole is not the Baltic Countries as many people think but Turkmenistan. There are no Russian universities there, only one Russian school exists, that is attached to the Russian embassy, and newspapers in Russian are practically absent. In 2004 only 100 thousand of the citizens of Turkmenistan from 4,8 millions knew Russian fluently but 4 millions did not know it at all. Apparently this country abandoned the Russian cultural space.

The situation in the Baltic countries was very critical in the first years after the proclamation of independence but now is partly stabilized. Specialists from Estonia speak that in the 1980th if somebody asks an Estonian about the road in Russian he or she can send his or her interlocutor to the opposite direction in good Russian. Now such situation is impossible: the everyday hatred of Russian went away. However many Estonians (especially the younger ones) can't answer in such situations because they do not speak Russian (but the majority of them speak English). Russian is excluded from the official sphere but its functions exist in business and in the international communication including the communication between Baltic countries. Probably the exclusion of Russian reaches the level that is unprofitable for the ruling nation and the situation has been stabilized. For instance the number of Lithuanian schoolchildren who prefer Russian as the foreign language is growing.

The exclusion of Russian in the Central Asia is slower especially in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan but its positions are gradually becoming worse. All the business correspondence in several districts

of Kazakhstan is transferred to Kazakh and all the speeches in the Tadzhikistan parliament are transferred in Tadzhik. However, this process is restricted by the insufficient knowledge of the ethnic languages by the national elite. The change of power in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 was accomplished by Kyrgyzes but its slogans were formulated in Russian.

The situation in the Transcaucasia is relatively stable and the position of Russian as the second language is strong. However, the Georgia's powers strengthened the measures against Russian after the war in 2008. One of such measures is the prohibition of songs in Russian in Georgian restaurants.

The Ukrainian situation is especially complicated because the population of different regions speaks different languages. Ukrainian prevails in the western part of the country and unlike the Baltic States, the hatred of Russian in the everyday life remains there. The situation in the other parts is different. The exclusion of Russian was accomplished (sometimes not completely) mainly in two spheres: the official sphere and the sphere of education until 2014. The Ukrainian schools are predominant even in the districts with the prevalence of Russian. The pupils and the graduates of such schools speak Russian in their everyday life but their only language of culture is Ukrainian. In February 2014 an attempt of the forced Ukrainization was accomplished, it was one of the causes of the civil war in Donbas; its population does not want to speak Ukrainian even in the territory controlled by the Ukrainian army.

The role of Russian as the regional language of culture decreased everywhere except Belorussia. If the borders of the states do not change the restoration of the former functions of Russian is not possible but the total oblivion of it is not possible either.

The function of the contact language is connected with the everyday contacts between persons who speak different languages. The spheres of such contacts are commerce, labor migrations, vacations etc. The communicative strategies in such situations are various: construction of some common language (pidgin), speaking in the third (usually the more prestigious) language or use of the language of one of the speakers. The number of world languages and the regional languages of culture is restricted but every language can become contact language.

This function of Russian was not significant at the Soviet time but grew since the second part of 1980th. The number of citizens of the USSR and then of Russia who temporarily left their country increased significantly, the main spheres are small commerce, unqualified labor; since the 1990th vacations in Egypt or Turkey became widespread. The majority of such persons speak only Russian (according to the data of sociological agencies only about 9% of the citizens of Russia speak English). They use different strategies; even the construction of the new Russian-Finland commerce pidgin is fixed. However, the part of their foreign partners begins to speak Russian. For instance the knowledge of Russian in China spread not only in the system of education but among small merchants who visit Russia or have business with Russian small merchants in China. There are about 500 thousand Chinese merchants who live in Russia and 1,4 million Russian merchants who visit China every year.

This is the role of the language of «the same country as others» as far as the role of the language of minority in the post-Soviet countries. These roles are increasing simultaneously with the decreasing of the role of Russian as the role of the language of one of great powers.

The function of Russian as a minority language is composed of two components. The first component is the function of the minority language outside the post-Soviet space. The emigration from Russia increased during two last decades and the attitude of emigrants to Russian is different: part of them use it inside his or her family but many of them want to forget this language.

The second component is the language of its native speakers in the new states formed in 1991. The feelings of these people (at least of the old and middle generations) were expressed by the Russian poet Boris Chichibabin (lived in Kharkov, died in 1994) who wrote shortly before his death: «I did not go from my homeland. Why I am deprived of it?» The problem of choice between preserving of the place of residence and preserving of the habitual surroundings including the linguistic ones is very complicated, the rigid language policy of the new rules and sometimes the arrogance of “Europeans” to “Asians” intensifies this complication. It is not easy to learn new language when person is not young and this language is not prestigious in comparison with Russian. This situation can lead to unpleasant results; we remember the fate of the Sudeten Germans in Czechoslovakia. On the other hand, many persons were accustomed to this situation for twenty years and the new generation knows only the post-Soviet situation. At any rate, Russian is stable as a minority language in the post-Soviet states unlike other countries.

Thus, Russian is becoming a language of «the same country as others» but it does not mean that its international role is over. If Russia wants to preserve its world role it must show principally new achievements and not the copies of achievements of the other countries and not the great achievements of the past.

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Contribution of the author. The author contributed equality to the present research.