



When Language Meets Politics: the Language Discrimination in Belarus and the Reform of the Orthography

Lidia F. Mazzitelli (Sapienza University of Rome)

The fortune of the Belarusian language has always been tightly connected with the political destiny of Belarus, which since 14th century and until 1991 has never been an independent State, but always lied under Lithuania, Poland and Russia. During its history the Belarusian language has been frequently discriminated, and replaced in public life with Polish or Russian. The present peculiar socio-linguistic situation in Belarus (where the official languages are Belarusian and Russian, but where the majority of the population speaks Russian or the “*trasjanka*”, a local variety which blends elements of Russian and Belarusian) is mostly a result of that.

Nowadays Belarus is ruled by the dictator A.R.Lukashenka, whose government’s linguistic policy explicitly discriminates Belarusian. Moreover, Belarusian is now identified as the “language of the opposition” and it is often used as a symbol by politicians of the opposition to show their contraposition to the Russian-speaking members of the establishment.

Politics played a very important role also in the reform of the Belarusian orthography. Nowadays, two main orthographical systems are used to write the Belarusian language: the so-called “*narkaumaka*” and “*tarashkevica*” or “classic orthography”, both based on Cyrillic alphabet. The *narkaumaka* is the result of an orthographical reform, led in 1933 by a special Commission, whose work has been strongly influenced by political reasons: namely the goal of the reform was to make the Belarusian orthography (and even morphology) become closer to Russian. The new system became the official one in 1934, and it is still; moreover, in 2008 the Parliament approved of a law, in accordance with which the use of classic orthography is legally punishable.

Nowadays the future destiny of Belarusian language is still uncertain, but it is clear that is and will be bound with political destiny of Belarus.

References:

- Aničanka, U., Sučasnaja belaruskaja mova I perspektyvy jae razviccja, in: Belaruskaja mova. Šljahi razviccja, konteksty, perspektyvy. Materyjali III Mižnarodnaha Kanhresa Belarusistau “Belaruskaja kul’tura u dyjalohu civilizacij”, Belaruskij kniazbor, Minsk 2001
- Basjuk, I., Sil’čanka M., Ab dzjaržaunym statusie belaruskaj movy u historyi Belarusi, in: Belaruskij historyčny časopis, 1/1999, p.3- 9
- Bembel’, A. Rodnae slova i maral’na-estetyčny pragres, Association of Byelorussians in Great Britain, London 1985
- Dzincevič L., Belaruskaja mova: sučasny stan i perspektyvy, in: Naša Slova, 4 (740), 25-01-2006
- Gutschmidt, K. Sprechenpolitik und sprachliche Situation in Weissrussland seit 1989, in: Heidelberger Publikationen zur Slavistik.A, Linguistische Reihe- Band 10: Die sprachlichen Situation in der Slavia zehn Jahre nach der Wende. Beitrage zum

Internationalem Symposion des Slavischen Instituts der Universitaet heidelberg vom 29. September bis 2. Oktober 1999, Peter Lang Verlag, New York-Oxford-Wien, 1999

- Michnevič, A.Ja. Belaruskaja mova. Encyklapedyja. Belaruskaja Encyklapedyja imja Petrusja Broŭki, Minsk 1994
- Sjameška, L. Poblemy norm i kadyfikacyi belaruskaj litaraturnaj movy, in: Jezyki Slowianskie 1945-1995. Gramatyka-slownictwo-odmiany, Wydawnictwo Sw.Krzyya w Opolu, Opole 1995, pp. 21-28
- Stankevič, S. Rusificacyja belaruskaj movy ŭ BSSR, Navuka i tehnika, Minsk 1994
- Šakun, L.M. Narisy historyi belaruskaj litaraturnaj movy, Džaržaŭnae vučebna-pedagagičnae vydavectva Ministerstva Asvety BSSR, Minsk 1960
- Trusau, A., Mesca i roli ruskaj movy u gramadzki žycci Belarusi, in: Belaruskaja mova. Źljahi razviccja, konteksty, perspektyvy. Materyjali III Mižnarodnaha Kanhresa Belarustau "Belaruskaja kul'tura u dyjalohu civilizacij", Belaruskij knižbor, Minsk 2001
- Various Authors, Anjamenne. Z kroniki zničennja belaruskaj movy. Gudas, Vilnius 2000
- Žuraŭski, A. Poblemy norm belaruskaj litaraturnaj movy, Navuka i Tehnika, Minsk 1993