

# Feminization of the Belarusian Language

BY

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**Harbacki, Uladzislaŭ.**

*Ab Feminizacyi Bielaruskaj Movy: Feminizacyja Nomina Agentis i Peŭnych Inšych Katehoryjaŭ Sučasnaj Bielaruskaj Movie: Ese.* belarusians.co.uk:

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This slim monograph, modestly described as an essay, by Uladzislaŭ Harbacki (pen name of Uladzislaŭ Ivanoŭ) is a pioneering work in the troubled world of Belarusian orthography and word formation. Its main focus is the feminization of a narrow linguistic category, namely *nomina agentis*: positions, titles, professions and types of work. By feminization should be understood the use of feminine suffixes. The book's main purpose is to suggest ways of resisting the ongoing Russification or colonization of the Belarusian language, which was especially strong between 1930 and the 1950s, when Belarusian linguists slavishly followed their Russian colleagues. Other major themes of the book are the choice between *narkamaŭka* and *taraškievica*, although neither has a particular influence on the feminization of the language as such. Also discussed is feminism itself, even though far from all present-day feminists are linguistically aware and consistent in their use of the female forms of *nomina agentis*.

As Harbacki points out in his Preface, the popular tongue (*narodnaja mova*) has many feminized endings, but the literary language, formed in Soviet times, is one-sided in this respect. It is preserved in the Academy of Sciences, which treats any non-academic challenge as treachery, and does its best to keep feminization out of the literary language, even though this goes against the aspirations of the *Naša Niva* period and of Jan Stankievič, one of the most prominent early Belarusian

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linguists ( pp. 11-15). The author does not pretend that his ideas are unimpeachable, but hopes to make his readers see the need for ‘gender equality’ in Belarusian, unlike Russian. Incidentally, his valuable Glossary of over 500 words contains only difficult and controversial ones, leaving aside simpler word formations that are not disputed in official or independent discourse.

The second section, ‘Feminist discourse’ (pp. 21-30), points out that feminists, dominated by Anglophone and Russian thinking, have no interest in the feminization of Belarusian (pp. 21-22). The false idea that the always patriarchal Russian language enriches Belarusian is, for this author, a form of colonization, although he admits that pure language does not automatically lead to democracy (p. 26). He contends that Belarusian always had a tendency to feminization in the past, and that this was preserved during the period of its complete neglect from the 17th to the beginning of the 20th centuries. Although this was, of course, no compensation for loss of nationality, nonetheless it saved Belarusian from the over-regulation characteristic of languages of an empire (p. 29). In this way the language of the Belarusian renaissance had a strong tendency to feminization (p. 30).

In the longest section, ‘Linguistic discourse’ (pp. 31-61), Harbacki discusses the two orthographies, seeing *taraškievica*, favoured by Stankievič and Jazep Liosik, as an ostensibly radical counter to dominant and patronizing Russification through calques, including those of feminine suffixes, epitomized by M. Ja. Cikocki’s retrograde *Stylistika bielaruskaj movy* of 1976, in which he described feminization as no more than a feature of colloquial style (p. 39). More perceptive was the historical study of M.A. Paŭlenka two years later, *Narysy pa bielaruskamu slovaŭtvareńniu. Žanočyja asabovyja naminacyi ŭ starabielaruskaj movie*, although he did not relate his research to the modern period (p. 45). A more recent linguist, Paval Ściacko in his *Kuĺtura movy* (2002), showed himself also in touch with the question of female nominal forms, and quite clear that they are far from confined to colloquial usage. Harbacki enumerates and debates the various suffixes used to create words for female persons in the past and the present, such as *-oŭk-a*, *-uch-a*, *-iuch-a*, and, most commonly, *-k-a*, suggesting at the same time that there is danger in excessively great freedom in word formation (p. 51). He also notes the reverse process in the masculinization of nearly thirty personal names of professions like, for instance, *dajarka* > *dajar* (p. 52). The last part of this section of the book treats neuter nouns (described here as *epiceny* with the suggestion that this word is shared with, amongst other languages, English although in the latter it refers only to people of both or neither sex). Harbacki, pointing out that neuter nouns are often overlooked, notes that they are not at present formed or fixed in Belarusian (p. 60). Nouns from verbs like *vynachodca* and *litaraturaznaŭca* are assumed by most people to be masculine, though they should, without exception, be neuter (pp. 55-56). Foreign loan words are also usually taken as masculine, reflecting, in Harbacki’s view, the

poor contemporary status of women in Belarus and, indeed, Russia.

The fourth section is described as 'Ethnological discourse' (pp. 63-65) and describes an expedition to the Viciebsk region to discover the linguistic formations found there that would seem to enrich the Belarusian language. Particularly interesting is his account of the linguistic usage of the (mainly Russophone) Old Believers, which exhibits a strong tendency to the essentially female nature of the Belarusian language, despite the fact that these dissenters are often thought to preserve old, pure features of Russian (pp. 64-65).

'Aesthetic discourse: Writers (male and female) on the feminization of the language' is the fifth section (pp. 66-70). The examples Harbacki gives of writers and works (mainly of the 1920s) are no less interesting for the women they portray than for the rich language and bold feminization of the names of professions, ranks and so on (pp. 66-67). In the works of Zarecki, Mryj and Harecki, for instance, there are no barbarisms like 'žančyna-urač'; the influence of Russian became stronger after World War II, but when the end of the Soviet Union approached, many writers, like Arloŭ, Ipatava and Rubleŭskaja, went against current linguistic norms and feminized many names (p. 68). The author considers that rural rather than urban origins tend to make writers use a richer language (although Arloŭ and Rubleŭskaja are both urban, but, of course, highly cultivated linguistically). He contends that the feminization of *nomina agentis* is natural to the Belarusian language, enriching and embellishing it (p. 70).

To summarize, Harbacki reveals the extent of Russification of the Belarusian language, and sees the feminization described in this monograph as part of Belarusian's resistance to colonialism. His Bibliography is up-to-date but naturally limited in view of the innovative nature of the study. This slender but carefully prepared and intellectually rich book may be obtained on application to the following address: 25, The Circus, 12, Highcross Lane, Leicester, LE1 4SN. It deserves a place in all Slavonic libraries, and should interest readers concerned with post-colonialism, feminism, and the future of one of the richest of all the Slav languages.

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