

XIXth Century Attitudes to Byelorussian before Karski

BY

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The XIXth c produced a good deal of scholarly interest in Byelorussia, a territory that had throughout the XVIIIth c suffered the most abject material and cultural conditions. The only literary role of the language in the XVIIIth c had been a rather negative one in the so-called "school dramas"; here the main players spoke in Polish, and the peasants in Byelorussian as a form of buffoonery to amuse the educated audience. At the beginning of the XIXth c., however, with the anonymous travesty of the Aeneid, and with writers like Barszczewski, Czeczot and Rypiński showing that Byelorussian could be a literary language in its own right, there began a revival of national pride within the country (flowering in the 1860s) and a growth in interest from outside. True, the peasants when asked who they were would still say *tutejšyje* (the people who live here), or when asked what language they spoke would still reply "*tutejšy*" (the one spoken here), but amongst the educated people there was a new atmosphere, despite the official attempts to suppress any kind of national consciousness.

Russian and Polish ethnographers found Byelorussia a rich source of hitherto unrecorded material, whilst linguists were confronted with the problem not merely of describing the language but also of placing it within the general Slavonic framework. They had to decide to what extent Byelorussian could be regarded as an independent language and to what group of languages it belonged, or whether it was just a dialect or corruption of, for example, Russian, Ukrainian or Polish. It has now long been accepted that Byelorussian is a member of the East Slavonic group of languages (the others being Great Russian and Ukrainian), having been formed after the separation of these three languages which had formerly comprised Old Russian; it seems obvious to us now that the language is akin to Polish principally in its vocabulary, but that grammatically it is clearly East Slavonic. In the last century, however, there were many conflicting ideas on the subject and the general picture is a confused one. It was not until Karskij, that Byelorussian studies were placed on a really sound footing, and that an attempt was made to consider the language in all its aspects, rather than on the basis of inadequate or inaccurate facts.

Great variations exist in the terminology used by XIXth c students of Byelorussian, which often makes it difficult to understand their

exact viewpoint. For example, some used the word *narečije* in its present Russian meaning of dialect, whilst others would call Great Russian a *narečije* of the "General Russian" language (in modern terminology, the East Slavonic group of languages). Thus the fact that a writer called Byelorussian a *narečije* did not necessarily mean that he thought it any less of an individual entity than for example Russian; some writers, however, like Maksimovič¹ or Nadežnik² used *jazyk* as a quite distinct conception, whilst for Wiszniewski³ *narečije* and *jazyk* seem to have been almost synonyms. An important factor in the question of terminology, particularly as interest in Byelorussian became more widespread, was the political one. For the greater part of *Белорусы* E. Karskij uses the term *narečije*, although it is clear that he regards Byelorussia as a separate entity, with its own individual history, literature and language; this is less strange if we recall that in official circles there was not even admitted to be a Byelorussian dialect, let alone language: the preferred term was "the way of speech of the inhabitants of the North West region of Russia." Špilevskij's grammar of 1853⁴ and Niedziecki's of the following year were rejected by the Academy of Sciences, since, it was said, dialects could not have grammatical categories of their own, and, in any case, Byelorussian was quite possibly not even a dialect. This opinion gained considerable weight from the prestige of Potebnja, who followed Sreznevskij in declaring that "there is not a single feature in the Byelorussian dialect which is not repeated somewhere or other in Great Russia"⁵; this became by extension a denial of Byelorussia as a separate entity, and, being taken up by Sachmatov and Sobolevskij, two other outstanding Russian scholars of the period, it gained wide acceptance, as well as official backing. Thus it is that one must approach the writings of XIXth c scholars with some caution.

On the whole Byelorussia in the XIXth c attracted more attention from ethnographers than from serious linguists, and their comments on the language of the material they collected tend to be found in the introductions, where as often as not they stress the similarity of Byelorussian to Russian or Polish, depending on the nationality of their readers. These ethnographers of the early period did not approach the folk material from the point of view of its language, but rather its content, and often the material was carelessly recorded;

¹⁾ M. A. Maksimovič: *Малороссийские Песни*, Kiev, 1827.

²⁾ N. I. Nadezdin: «Великая Россия» in *Энциклопедический Лексикон*,

³⁾ M. Wiszniewski: *Historya Literatury Polskiej*, VIII, p. 460-1.

⁴⁾ P. A. Špilevskij: *Заметки белорусца о белорусском ЯЗЫКЕ*, 1853. N. B. that his other work was *Словарь белорусского НАРЕЧИЯ составленный II. III. 1845* (My capitals — A. B. McM).

⁵⁾ A. Potebnja: *Два исследования о звуках русского языка*, Voronezh, 1866, p. 71.

not until Karskij produced his first collection⁶ were Byelorussian folk songs recorded with the accuracy necessary for true linguistic analysis. Writers like Narbutt and Jaroszewicz, and, indeed, almost all the Poles in the first half of the century, including the most distinguished of them all — Adam Mickiewicz, concurred with the view of Linde⁷ that Byelorussian was a dialect of Polish: this dialect they called *kryvicky* or *kryvičansky*. Even later on, Perwolf was content with merely quoting "the greatest Slavonic scholar of the XVIIth c", the Croat Jurij Kryžanič, that "Byelorussian far from being independent is a mere variant, or corruption of the Polish."⁸ Rypiński, too, living in emigration in London and Paris stressed that the language linked Byelorussia with Poland rather than Russia, and devised the term "White Ruthenian" instead of "White Russian", in order to emphasise to the foreign press the difference between "White-" or Byelo-Russians and "Great-" Russians. Although a fervent patriot, Rypiński did not attach a great deal of importance to the language, and even laments that the people "nie chcieli nawet nauczyć się języka Polskiego."⁹

Jan Czeczot, on the other hand, referring alternately to the "mowa Słowiano krewicka" and the "Krewicki dialekt", comments on its closeness to Great Russian, as does P. A. Giltebrandt¹⁰. The ethnographer before Karskij that paid most attention to the language was undoubtedly P. Bessonov, who in the introduction to his *Белорусские песни*, (Moscow, 1871) stresses the individuality and independence of Byelorussian, pointing out that the »частность подречий не мешает здесь основному единому типу, отличному везде не только от Польского, но и от современного Великорусского языка, и от Малорусского наречия«. Rather like Karskij half a century later, however, he goes on to state that Byelorussian lacks the resources ever to become a true literary language — a prediction that history has shown to be false. Wiszniewski in his history of Polish literature¹¹ also lays stress on its independence, despite strong affinities with Polish; nonetheless he includes some Old Byelorussian literature amongst the Old Polish.

J. C von Adelung, a completely impartial observer, wrote at the beginning of the century, "Sie haben eine eigene, aber noch sehr unbekannte Mundart, welche mit dem Polnischen vermischt sein

⁶⁾ E. F. Karskij: «Белорусские песни села Берёзовца, Новотрудского изезда, Минской губернии», in *Русский Филологический Вестник*, VII, 1884 and VIII, 1885.

⁷⁾ S. B. Linde: "O języku białoruskim" in *Pamiętnik Warszawski*, 1815.

⁸⁾ Josef Perwolf: *Славянская взаимность с древнейших времён до XVIII века*, St. Petersburg, 1874.

⁹⁾ A. Radwan Rypiński: Introduction to *Niaczyścik*, 1856 edition.

¹⁰⁾ P. A. Giltebrandt: *Сборник памятников народного творчества в Северо-западном крае*, вып. I, Wilno, 1266.

¹¹⁾ M. Wiszniewski: *op. cit*, p. 460-1.

soll"¹². He realised that that the Byelorussians were ethnographically quite distinct from the Great Russians and the Ukrainians, but went even further from the truth than his Russian and Polish counterparts by declaring that they were not even Slavs at all.

Thus we have seen that the ethnographers produced widely varying views. The linguists too came to some curious conclusions about the origins and contemporary state of the Byelorussian language, but at least they all except Linde placed it within the East Slavonic group of languages. Linde, as a lexicographer, paid too much attention to the lexical rather than phonological and morphological aspects of the language; whilst the latter were clearly East Slavonic in character, the vocabulary had undergone a good deal of Polish influence in the XVIth and XVIIth centuries and made the language look more like Polish. Indeed, it may be said that Linde was prone to claim too much for Poland: he held for example that the *Литовский статут*¹³ was a Polish document with many foreign loanwords¹⁴. At the beginning of the century ideas about the grouping and development of the Slavonic languages in general were still rather vague, and, in addition, the information used by some of the scholars on which to base their theories was quite erroneous: for example, academician I. Davydov, writing in 1854¹⁵ was under the impression that in Byelorussia the Russian word »стол« was pronounced »стал«, »стул« or »стаў«; »волк« as »ваўк« or »вуык« etc. It is, thus, not surprising that completely contradictory opinions were being expressed throughout the first half of the XIXth c and even later. Kalajdovič looked on Byelorussian as a corruption of Church Slavonic, and in *O белорусском наречии*¹⁶ he gives examples of Byelorussian alongside Church Slavonic texts in order to show the »существенное отличие наречия от своего источников This view becomes less ridiculous when we remember that Kalajdovič's statements were based on a knowledge of the written, rather than the spoken language, and that, although the pre-XIXth c literary monuments were less dominated by Church Slavonic influence than were the Russian ones, nonetheless some Church Slavonic features could be found. At the time at which Kalajdovič was writing many scholars still grouped Russian with the South Slav languages, as a result of studying not the spoken but the written form of the language, where Old Bulgarian (Old Church Slavonic) elements were plentiful. Nadeždin, for example held that the typically East Slavonic feature of pleophony ("gorod" instead of "grad" etc.) came from Novgorod at a later date¹⁷.

¹²) J. C von Adelung: *Mithridates oder allgemeine Sprachenkunde mit dem Vater Unser als Sprachprobe in beynabe fünfhundert Sprachen und Mundarten, Zweyter Theil*, Berlin, 1209, p. 631.

¹³) s. B. Linde: "O statucie litewskim, ruskim językiem i drukiem wydanym", Warsaw, 1816.

¹⁴) I. Davydov: *Опыт общесравнительной грамматики русского языка*, 1854.

¹⁵) K. F. Kalajdovič in *Сочинения в прозе и стихах, Труды общества любителей русского слова при Московском университете*, ч. 1. Moscow, 1822.

¹⁶) N. I. Nadeždin, *op. cit.*

M. A. Maksimovič was basically interested in the Ukraine and its language and cultural heritage, and in 1827 he first stated the view that Ukrainian must be considered as a separate language rather than *narečije*¹⁷; he felt the same could be said for Byelorussian, and went so far as to claim that the East Slavonic languages were more clearly differentiated than the West Slavonic ones (Czech, Slovak and Polish). Ten years later Šafařík, although like Kalajdovič deriving the East Slavonic languages from Church Slavonic, also saw that they could be divided into separate entities; his division was into four: Great Russian, Byelorussian, Ukrainian and Novgorodian¹⁸. In the same year Nadeždin, again deriving the East Slavonic languages from Church Slavonic, likewise wrote that they could be divided into three separate languages¹⁹, although in a fuller article four years later²⁰ we come across the contradictory view that there were originally two main entities: Pontic Russian (Ukrainian) and Baltic Russian (Byelorussian) which merged to form Great Russian. Ideas were still very fluid at this time, and it is not unusual to find writers changing their views within a short period. Another later, writer who stressed the division into three was M. Kolosov²¹, although he denied Maksimovič's exaggerated comparison with the West Slavonic languages; he challenged the view of several scholars that Byelorussian was basically part of Ukrainian, finding it, if anything, closer to Great Russian.

Although it has long been generally agreed that there are three East Slavonic languages, in the earlier part of the XIXth c this view was far from universal: even great scholars like Sreznevskij and Potebnja did not regard Byelorussian as a separate language, the latter looking upon many features not common to Great Russian or Ukrainian as loans²²; Buslajev too saw no real difference between Russian and Byelorussian except in the vocabulary, much of which, he said, had been borrowed from Polish²³.

Many scholars found the language extremely similar to Ukrainian: Katajdoč, having derived it from Church Slavonic and characterised it as a mixture of Church Slavonic, Russian, Polish, German and Latin leaves it to "the subtlest philologist" to show the differences

¹⁷⁾ M. A. Maksimovič, *op. cit.*

¹⁸⁾ P. J. Šafařík: *Slowansky Narodopis*, Prague, 1842.

¹⁹⁾ N. I. Naleždin, *op. cit.*

²⁰⁾ N. I. Nadeždin: "Munderungen der Russischen Sprache" in *Jahrbücher der Literatur*, Band 95, 1841, p. 191-240.

²¹⁾ M. Kolosov: Обзор звуковых и формальных особенностей Русского Языка, Warsaw, 1878.

²²⁾ A. Potebnja, *op. cit.*

²³⁾ F. I. Buslajev: *Историческая Хрестоматия*, Moscow, 1861, quoted Karskij, Белорусы, vol. I, p. 411.

between Byelorussian and Ukrainian²⁴. Bodjanskij²⁵ too saw the language as a mixture — this time of Russian, Polish and Ukrainian, but hardly distinguished it from the latter, like his predecessor in the field of Ukrainian studies Canon Mohilevskij, who in an interesting article of 1829²⁶, several times reprinted, had also denied Ukrainian's provenance from Polish, and shown Byelorussian and Ukrainian, which he did not attempt to distinguish, to belong to the East Slavonic, or Russian, group. Finally one should mention an early, but perceptive and important, study by D. I. Jazykov, who, although describing the language of Skaryna and Polackij as »варварщина и тарабанщина« recognised modern, popular («народный») Byelorussian as containing much of the old Slavonic language that had disappeared from Great Russian as a result of various influences like the Tatar invasion or the flood of South Slavonic scholarship in the XIVth c; it was, he said, the ancient language of Novgorod at the time of the Varangians preserved and »менее претерпел от формы польского языка нежели думают«²⁷. Thus, in some ways, he was the only writer of the early period to make clear Byelorussian's linguistic importance. Most of the other commentators spent too much effort on trying to make it fit into the framework of one of the "recognised" languages.

And finally, what of the aesthetic side of the language? Opinions were as varied as they had been on its formal aspects, but the majority of commentators found the language, or, as it seemed to most of them, dialect, extremely displeasing. In their descriptions the words "hodge-podge" and "corruption" appear again and again. The idea that the language was some sort of a corruption or distortion stemmed from the fact that it was, and still is, almost completely comprehensible to both Russians and Poles — a fact stressed by Giltebrandt and Kalajdovič on the one hand, and by Linde and Rypinski on the other. Bodjanskij, the expert on Ukrainian affairs (which makes his uncompromising opinion the more surprising) put the matter most strongly in 1865 when he wrote that the language was the «самая отвратительная смесь, какую только можно себе представить и какая когда-либо существовала на Руси, которой никто никогда не говорил и не говорите»²⁸. Dal' too states that in Smolensk — he seems uncertain whether to consider Smolensk a Byelorussian dialect — »акают до приторности«²⁹. And, to make

²⁴⁾ K. F. Kalajdovič, *op. cit.*

²⁵⁾ O. M. Bodjanskij: «Рассмотрение различных мнений о языке северных и южных Руссов», quoted M. Kolosov, *op. cit.*, p. 253.

²⁶⁾ "Rozprawa o języku ruskim", *Czasopis naukowy* (Lwów), 1829, 3, p. 56-87.

²⁷⁾ D. I. Jazykov, Энциклопедический лексикон, St. Petersburg, 1837, VIII, p. 568-9.

²⁸⁾ O. M. Bodjanskij: *O поисках моих в Познанской библиотеке*, 1865.

²⁹⁾ V. I. Dal': *O наречиях русского языка — по поводу Опыта Областного Великорусского словаря*, St. Petersburg, 1852, p. 55.

matters worse, if we are to believe Czeczot³⁰, despite the deficiencies of their native tongue, the Byelorussians "niezmiernie lubią rozmawiać."

On the other hand the Polish emigré Lach Szyrma in 1854, writing to Rypiński about his ballad *Niaczyścik* spoke warmly of the riches in the language, which he felt could profitably be assimilated into Polish³¹. But it was for Rypiński to put the matter in perspective, and to express the average Byelorussian's view:

"Nu, ja tabie i paju —
Prymi piesieńku maju!!
Moža heta nie piesn? Kaša?!
Da ūsio ž taki svaja — naša!!!"³²

³⁰) J. Czeczot: Introduction to 1844 edition of *Piosnki*, IX.

³¹) Devonport, 20th of March, 1854. Cytovič had said the same in 1843, but for Russian: »Слова два о языке и грамотности Белой-Руси«, Маяк, 1843, v. IX, bk. XVII, chap. V, p. 32-8. (Quoted Karskij, *Белорусы*, III, 3, 25).

³²) Appendage to Polish verse *Dla Artemiusza Weryhi. W imionniku*, 1860.