

Grammatical Changes in Modern Literary Byelorussian

BY

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I must first explain how I came to study Byelorussian and thus show you that I do not claim to be an expert or specialist in this language. And so I beg you to excuse all the shortcomings of this paper, prepared as it has been during short periods literally *torn* from a life of extreme occupation, devoted now officially to the duties of filling the Chair of Russian and teaching that language.

From 1942 to 1955 I was Lecturer in Comparative Slavonic Philology at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies here in London, and after the war was over I decided to try and rectify a deficiency in the panoply of Slavonic philology which I had always keenly felt as a student at our School some years earlier. I had always regretted, when studying Slavonic philology from such works as Vondrák's *Vergleichende slavische Grammatik*¹ and Meillet's *he slave commun*,² that one did not get a clearer idea of the grammatical structure and vocabulary of the *individual* Slavonic languages. And I felt the same in particular about the separate East Slavonic languages when studying the history of the Russian language from K. H. Meyer's *Historische Grammatik der russischen Sprache*³ and other works. Of course these works had quite other aims and did not set out to give overall pictures of individual Slavonic languages. Nevertheless, as a student who had been interested in the comparative phonetics (the study of sounds) of the separate Slavonic languages and had spent some time in Yugoslavia after graduating and visiting Czechoslovakia, I felt the need for a work that would do this. And so, with great temerity, as I now see it to have been, but also with great idealism and sincere feelings of the brotherhood of the Slavs (feelings I have never lost or regretted) I set out to rectify this deficiency, as I felt it to be, and compose and compile a book which would at least attempt to give a sketch of each language.⁴ This sketch would consist of a brief historical introduction, the alphabet, orthography and pronunciation, the main features of its historical development from Common Slav, *characteristic* phonetic and morphological *features*, a concise summary of grammar or morphology, a note on

¹) W. Vondrák, *Vergleichende Grammatik der slavischen Sprachen*, 2 vols, Göttingen, 1924, 1928.

²) 2nd edition, Paris, 1934.

³) Volume 1, Bonn, 1933.

⁴) *Guide to the Slavonic Languages*, London, 1951.

the difficult question of word order with enclitics for those languages which use them in morphology (this is an important problem in mastering the *spoken* language), and finally a few texts for reading practice.

My idea was to start the book with a brief sketch of Old (Church) Slavonic as an essential hinge or link in the comparative study of one, or more, other Slavonic languages after the study of the student's first Slavonic language, even if that is his mother tongue. The crucial part of each section or chapter dealing with a particular language was the part dealing with its historical development from Common Slav followed by an explained list of its characteristic phonetic and morphological features. Through these lists of features the individuality of each of these closely related languages was high-lighted and its claim to be regarded as an independent language was established. It proved that some of the Slavonic languages have more unique features in their phonetics and morphology than others, but that each of them, when one considers also the features shared with one or more other Slavonic language of the three main groups (East, West and South Slavonic), has quite a sufficiency of features to be regarded as separate language, quite *apart* from literary and cultural considerations.

How did Byelorussian fare when judged by such criteria? By and large I found that while literary Byelorussian had relatively few phonetic (and even fewer morphological) features which are peculiar only to Byelorussian, it has a few commonly recurring features, such as *akanie*, the differentiation of *i* and *y* (ы), and the identical pronunciation of original *e* and *ě* (*yat'*), in common with Russian and a large number of mainly phonetic features in common with Ukrainian. Nevertheless the few uniquely Byelorussian phonetic features, such as *dzekanie* and *cekanie*, the *jakanie* (pronouncing of pretonic *je* as *ja*), and the pronunciation of original *v* after a vowel (tautosyllabic *v*) as bilabial *ū* (ў), are so all-pervading and occur so frequently that they immediately and distinctly mark out Byelorussian as an individual Slavonic language. And this is apart from any consideration of its markedly different morphology and, last but not least, *vocabulary*.

Strongly debated problems of orthography had been settled in Byelorussia by the Decree of 28th August, 1933, promulgating the adoption of the proposals of the Byelorussian Academy of Sciences in Minsk; and these proposals were largely accepted by Byelorussians in Poland and elsewhere. As far as I can see, they in no way altered the mainly phonetic character of the spelling of Byelorussian, nor did they falsely represent the characteristic features of spoken Byelorussian.

However, writing, as I was, my chapter on Byelorussian in 1948 in England soon after the war and having to base myself entirely on material which I had collected in Yugoslavia (from *Poland*) before the war, when neither of these countries had close diplomatic or commercial relations with the Soviet Union, I was in some difficulties, and I am bound to confess I worked with great temerity! I

was basing myself mainly on two works: B. Taraškievič's school grammar of Byelorussian, published in Vilna in 1929, and R. Astroŭski's *Беларускі правапіс* published also in Vilna in 1930. There were no other books available then; and at that time the Soviet Union did not export books in languages other than in Russian, least of all grammars!

I have the impression that Taraškievič's grammar was based on sound and quite orthodox principles and was not 'ultra-nationalistic', but gave an honest description of the language, not seeking to perpetuate linguistic features of certain dialects just because they were uniquely Byelorussian. His description of the grammar seemed to be clearly borne out and illustrated by all the literary texts I was able to get hold of and read at that time. (I was finally able to get a few from the Soviet Union.)

Nevertheless, when I started working on the second edition of my book in 1965 (very intermittently, I must confess!), and even more when, a few months ago, I was finally able to see the first volume of the new Academy grammar of Byelorussian, *Граматыка беларускай мовы* published in Minsk in 1962, I had the surprise of my life! I observed that many of the morphological features quoted by Taraškievič, often differing from the corresponding forms in Russian, had disappeared from the grammar, and even one or two forms, similar to those in Russian, were given which had not been quoted before by Taraškievič. I will now go through a list of the most striking and inexplicable examples, and as I am unfortunately little acquainted with modern spoken Byelorussian, I would most warmly welcome your comments and questions after the lecture. I realize that it is possible that this latest grammar is based on norms of morphology taken from a different group of dialects. However I would be interested to hear the comments of those who have a practical and/or native speaker's knowledge of the language.

Starting with the declensions of nouns, in the so-called neuter n-stems of the type *імя'* — 'name' we now also have alternative "reduced" forms, without the syllable -en- in the plural, as well as in the singular, e. g.: N. A. *і мі, імённы*, G. *Імяу, імён (аў)*, D. *і мям, імёнам*, I. *і мямі, імёнамі*, L. *і мях, імёнах*. These are given without any special commentary or explanation as to their origin or stylistic value.

Masculine nouns ending in -a, such as *ста́раца* are now given as having alternative endings in the Dative, Locative and Instrumental singular. E. g.: D. L. *ста́рацэ (-сцэ) суддзю' (-і) саба́ку*
I. *ста́рацам суддзём (ею) саба́кам*
'village head' 'judge' 'dog'

Most remarkable is the replacement of the endings -ом and -ох for the Dative and Locative plural respectively of all masculine and neuter o/yo-stem nouns by the endings -ам and -ах as in Russian and most of the other Slavonic languages. This is brought out when these endings are stressed, e. g.: *стол ста́лам, -а́х, пясо́к пяска́м, -а́х*,
'table' 'sand'

дождж дажджám, -áx, 'rain'	брат братám, -áx, 'brother'	лось лася'м, -я'x, 'elk'
плячó плячám, -ax, 'shoulder'	пóле паля'м, -я'x. 'field.'	

In the declension of cardinal numerals, the form адной — 'one' now replaces аднэй in the feminine Gen., Dat., Inst. and Loc. sing.

The former *alternative* forms for the oblique cases of два, дзве Gen., Loc. masc. двух, Dat. двум, fem. дзвюх, дзвюм now entirely replace the forms двох, дзвёх, двом, дзвём.

Numerals ending in the 'soft sign', of the type пяць — 'five', now decline Gen., Dat. and Loc. пяці, Inst. пяццю instead of пяцёх, пяцём, пяцма́, and the word for 'forty', сорок now has a common form for all oblique cases: саракá insted of сараку' for Gen., Dat. and Loc. and саракма́ for Inst.

In the Collective Numerals forms such as Gen. два́ x, чацвяры'x are preferred to два́га, чацвяро́х.

In the declension of the pronouns, most notable is the replacement of the form of the Gen., Dat. and Loc. sing. fem. of the word for 'that', той (Nom. sing. masc), by a form also той instead of a form тэй.

In the declension of сам — 'self endings with i replace those with ы, e. g.: Inst. and Loc. sing. masc. самі́м instead of самым and in the plur. Gen., Acc, Loc. са́міх instead of самых, Dat. самі́м for самы'м, Inst. самі́мі for самы'ми

In the possessive adjectives, in the Gen. and Dat. sing. masc. forms like ма́тчынага, ма́тчынаму — 'maternal, of mother' replace the shorter forms ма́тчына, -ну.

With the Prepositions three important changes may be observed. According to my former observations, на meaning 'over, along, after, by' could only be followed by the Locative case. Now it can also be followed by the Accusative, with the meanings 'up to' and 'for (to get)'; and also by the Dative (in the singular only!) with the meanings 'along, according to' and also, distributively, 'each', e. g.: 'one each' — па аднаму́.

Some of the most striking changes of flexional norms seem to have taken place in the conjugation of the verbs. In the Present tense in the second person plural the personal ending *when stressed* is -це́ and no longer -це, e. g.: несяце́, сядзіце́, маўчыце́, not несяце, сядзіце, etc.

In the compound Future form of Imperfective verbs, characterized by the suffixed auxiliary verb -му, -меш, -ме, etc., and which the Academy grammar says is to be found in literature as a reflection of a feature of southern Byelorussian dialects (»У мове мастацкай літаратуры часам знаходзіць адлюстраванне такая асаблівасць беларускіх гаворак, як ужыванне сштэтычнай формы будучнага часу») we now have the forms рабш́ьму, рабш́ьмеш, -ме, -мем, -меце, рабш́ьмуць etc. instead of рабі́цьму, рабі́цьмеш, ... рабі́цімуць (like Ukrainian).

Both the compound Future Perfect form, e. g. я буду пайшо́ўшы — 'I shall have gone' and the compound Pluperfect tense, e. g. я быў

зрабі ўшы — 'I had done', (both compounded with the Past Gerund), are characterized as dialectal by my informants in the Instytut Movaznaŭstva of the Byelorussian Academy of Sciences.

In the Past tense the verb нёсці — 'to carry' now has masc. нёс and the fern., neut. and plural forms now stress the *first* syllable, e. g.: нёсла — fem. and neut.!, нёслі plural.

Most notable is the replacement of the form in -ма for the 1st person plural of the Imperative mood by the form of the 1st pers. pl. Present, e. g. not нясёма, — 'let us carry!', бярэ'ма, — 'let us take!' but нясём, бяром with or without the auxiliary давай (-це) for Perfective verbs. This in particular seems to me to be a clear link with Russian, Bulgarian and Macedonian usage, as opposed to that in Ukrainian, Serbo-Croatian, Slovenian and all the West Slavonic languages.

In the *second* person plural of the Imperative the ending -і це is now preferred to the very old ending -ёце which goes back to a Common Slav form exemplified in O.C.S. -éte, e. g. O.C.S. несьте.

Perhaps the most remarkable change of all to be observed in the Academy grammar is the restoration of the literary and somewhat archaic *Present Participle Passive*, which until recently could have been said to have survived in Russian alone of all the Slavonic languages, no doubt under the influence of Church Slavonic and Lomonosov's *Россійская Грамматика*.⁵ The Academy grammar states that it occurs mostly in learned publications and in journals and newspapers. It states: »Гэты дзеепрыметнікі ў сучаснай беларускай літаратурнай мове з'яўляюцца *малаўжывальнымі*. Пэўнае пашырэнне яны маюць у навуковым стылі і ў мове газет і часопісаў; часам жа яны пранікаюць і ў мову мастацкіх твораў«.

The following example are given: »Чуўся трэск *узрываеых* дошчак, звон разбітага шкла«: М. Лынку, *Векапомныя дні*. »Як толькі ўспыхнуў агеньчык, з мора пачуўся *заглушаемы* шумам хваль працяглы свіст«: Э. Самуйлёнак, *Будучыня*. »Значна палепшылася якасць *апрацоўваемай* паверхні, павысілася стойкасць інструментаў«: Звязда. *Ствараемыя ў агні рэвалюцыі* Саветы складаліся з прадстаўнікоў рабочых, сялян і рэвалюцыйна настроеных салдат«: *Весці АН БССР*. »У кастрычніку 1917 г. рабочыя і сяляне Расіі, *кіруемыя* партыяй *большавікоў* на чале з У. І. Ленным, скшлі ўладу памешчыкаў а капіталістаў ... «: *Весці АН БССР*. It is remarkable that not one example is given from a verb of the -i- category (Second Conjugation)!

The Infinitive of two verbs now differs from forms given in earlier grammars: 'to sing' is now пець and not пяць and 'to blow' is дзьмуць and not дуць.

In conclusion, I would like to say that I believe that no amount of morphological alterations can ever reduce, let alone obliterate a language, for languages are based not only on "grammar" but also (and far more) on phonetics (local or regional accents and intonations), local vocabulary which characterizes and builds up a national language.

⁵) St. Petersburg, 1757.

age, and on a national literary and cultural tradition which creates both poetry and prose, — both that created by the people as traditional oral poetry, songs and folktales, and that created by its great writers. These express the deepest thoughts, feelings and aspirations of a nation, and are among its greatest treasures; but these are treasures that cannot be stolen or taken away or destroyed.

On the other hand, I see no harm in uniformity between languages in such matters as punctuation, the use of capital letters, transcription of foreign names, etc. And differences artificially created or specially sought out from obscure dialects and sanctioned and enthroned in official grammars are, to my mind, to be deprecated. The written language should faithfully reflect the living, spoken language of the people, as the great Serbian reformer, Vuk Karadžić taught. Then it is a useful, efficient and also beautiful means of communication, which is what language is, and a true reflection of the whole of human life.

What interests me is: how far do the forms I have described and enumerated truly reflect the spoken language of the Byelorussian people?