

WILL THE REAL RUSSIAN LANGUAGE PLEASE STAND UP?

Jonathan Pool

(Prepared for the colloquium, "Ethnic Russia: Undergoing an Identity Crisis?", May 5-6, 1978, Columbia University, New York, N.Y.)

Summary of Remarks

1. Anecdotal Introduction.
2. Does a language have an identity? Yes, but usually not well-defined or explicit. Common types of identity: "national language", "official language", language of group X. In the Soviet Union, however, languages have explicit identities after decades of effort to define them.
3. The structure of Soviet linguistic identity. The identities of Soviet languages can be seen as having four components: ontological identity (what kind of language it is), associative identity (to whom it belongs), historical identity (what social and political roles it plays) and moral identity (how it should be treated).
4. Are Soviet languages experiencing an identity crisis? The importance attached to giving them identities makes them vulnerable to identity crises. There is evidence that Soviet languages are indeed subject to three kinds of identity conflict or confusion: (1) inter-component incompatibilities, (2) intra-component incompatibilities, and (3) conflicts over identity definition. The first problem is exemplified by languages whose ontological identity is "inferior" (e.g. unwritten languages) but whose moral identity is "equal" (all Soviet languages). An example of the second difficulty is languages with split associative identities, belonging to a Soviet nationality and a foreign nation or ethnic group. The third conflict is illustrated by debates over the historical identities of Soviet languages: the active versus passive role of

languages in history, the malleability versus of autonomy of languages, and for each language the question of whether its destiny is expansion, stability, or extinction.

5. Identity conflict and identity confusion in the case of Russian.

Russian illustrates these problems most sharply. Its ontological identities include: standard language and non-standard varieties (dialects); national language, Soviet lingua franca, and international language; native language, "second native language", non-native but non-foreign language, and foreign language. It has four associative identities, belonging to the Russian people, the Soviet people, the socialist community, and the world. Its historical identity is complex: it shares general questions about its role with all languages; in addition, it uniquely experiences the conflicting roles of medium of expression of Russian culture, medium of expression of Soviet culture, and medium of transmission of world culture to the Russian and Soviet people; it is defined as having both an integrative role (bringing cultures together) and an instrumental role (making the manpower market more efficient); it functions in contradictory ways by subjecting foreign elements to its own grammatical system when borrowing, but not always letting other languages borrow from it in the same way; and it has a wider gamut of hypothetical destinies than any other Soviet language, ranging from sole surviving world tongue to total disappearance. The moral identity of Russian is also in question: there are conflicts about whether to purify it, leave it alone, or implant elements from foreign and other Soviet languages; there is a tension between the demand that every citizen become fluent in Russian and the demand that no one be coerced into doing so; there is a contradiction between the principle that Russian has no more rights than any other language and the principle that Russian

will be used whenever communicators do not share a native language; and there are disagreements about the speed with which, and the extent to which, Russian should be promoted as a replacement for other native Soviet languages, and as a vehicle of world communication. These questions about identity, if they become salient, are sufficient to cause crises. Let us briefly explore three potential identity crises of Russian.

6. Potential crisis no. one: The Russianness of Russian. Most Soviet thinking projects and advocates an all-Soviet role for Russian, but the continuation of its nationally Russian features. Native speakers will become a smaller proportion of its speakers, but native speech will still dictate the linguistic standard. Further standardization, based in part on new technologies of speech measurement, will even widen the gap between correct Russian and what non-native learners can achieve. Some Soviet specialists are aware of this problem and advocate that norms of correctness and the demands made on non-native learners be relaxed; recent empirical studies reveal that native-like Russian among non-native speakers is extremely rare. These trends, if they continue, may help prevent an identity crisis. Full resolution of this conflict, however, would at least require (1) the policy proposed by Shcherba of making the effect on non-Russian learners a primary basis for new decisions about the rules of standard Russian, and (2) the education of the native-Russian-speaking public to accept as correct the ethnic varieties that will crystallize if the use of Russian expands.

7. Potential crisis no. two: The equality of Russian. Prima facie, the selection of any language as lingua franca benefits its native speakers at the expense of everyone else. This inequality is at the heart of the

language conflicts of many countries (Canada, India, Philippines, etc.), and it has led some governments (Switzerland, Yugoslavia, Ghana, the European Communities, etc.) to devise elaborate and/or inefficient language policies. It is striking that Soviet language-planning theorists have not attempted to measure, or even theorize about, the differential (economic, psychological, etc.) impact on Russians and non-Russians of the use of Russian as the Soviet lingua franca. The prima facie advantage of native Russian speakers may be unreal: it might be counteracted by the denationalization of Russian, by the intellectual loss in being monolingual, by economic subsidies, or in other linguistic and non-linguistic ways. But Soviet scholars have not explored these possibilities. Their assertion is either that the selection of Russian is ("obviously") inevitable, or that it is completely voluntary. Evidence for the former would consist of an evaluation of the several alternatives suggested by other models of language planning in multilingual societies and international regions, but this has not been attempted. Evidence for the second claim would require an operational definition for "voluntariness" and its measurement with regard to the adoption of Russian. This has not been done either, although some relevant evidence is available. In any case, inequality can be voluntary, as Lenin pointed out, so the two questions are in principle independent. Knowledge about the equality of Soviet languages could be gained from comparisons of the Russian-learning behavior of non-Russians with the behavior of the small (about 3%) fraction of Russians who learn other Soviet languages. Knowing who learns what language and why would help reveal the social relationships and popular identities of Soviet languages. But the bilingual Russian has been a major blind spot in Soviet research. Russian's role imposes costs and confers benefits on

each language group. Until these are studied, subjective impressions will be the best assessments of their magnitudes. If inequality emerged as a language issue, impressions of costs and benefits would probably diverge sharply and conflict might thus be serious.

8. Potential crisis no. three: The efficiency of Russian. Soviet language scholars mostly claim that social institutions are increasingly able to manipulate language and make rational language plans. Until now, Soviet language planners have assumed that (1) it is more efficient for the USSR to have a single lingua franca than not to, and (2) if one language already is spoken by a majority of the population and of the skilled manpower, and has major literatures in all fields, then it is most efficient to adopt that language as the lingua franca. As techniques for refining language policies and measuring their impacts are improved, it will become possible to evaluate these assumptions. If the rate of native-language change remains low and the relatively high natural increase of the non-Russian population continues, the learning of Russian will entail a continuing high cost for each generation of non-Russians. Whether the benefits exceed the cost will depend partly on the advantages of, and the population's tolerance for, geographical mobility. In general, it will depend on what Soviet citizens would do with resources if they withdrew them from the study of Russian, what everyone would gain from their alternative uses, and what everyone would lose from the resulting ignorance of Russian. The second assumption implies that Russian is the most efficient lingua franca if one is to be chosen at all. Its number of speakers and repertoires of manpower and literature argue for this. But the cost of learning Russian, if sufficiently greater than that of some other language, could counteract these advantages.

Soviet teachers claim the Turkic languages are easier for Russians to learn than vice versa. Research on synthetic human languages (primarily Esperanto) has generally found that a given proficiency can be attained in them in 1/5 to 1/15 of the time required in a non-synthetic language. Means for reforming Russian itself to decrease the cost of learning it as a second language may also be found. The cost of learning a closely related language may be enough lower that the use of more than one lingua franca (e.g. one Slavic language, one Turkic language, etc.) for broad sectors of the population, instead of or in addition to an all-Union common language, could increase efficiency. It seems unlikely now that any of these policies will be adopted by the Soviet authorities. But until now scientific tools for evaluating them have been missing, and Soviet sociolinguists and interlinguists are currently among the most active seekers of such tools. When available, they may permit a challenge to the current assumption that it is collectively rational and in the public interest for all Soviet citizens to learn fluent Russian. If so, a major component of Russian's identity, linking the Russian language with both individual advancement and Soviet patriotism, will be open to question and change.