

Development of German Island Dialects in Russia (The Case Study of Dialects of the Russian Germans in Kirov Region, Russia)

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Abstract

The relevance of this work lies in the fact that the specificity of the formation and development of German island dialects in Russia, in particular in the Kirov region, is associated with the problem of studying linguistic stability in a complex imbalanced linguistic situation and interference. The aim of this work is to identify the development features of German island dialects in a foreign language environment. The following methods have been used to achieve this goal: field methods in collecting linguistic material; method of sociolinguistic questioning and interviewing of respondents; statistical and comparative analysis when correlating the studied dialect systems with other German dialect systems, with the Russian language and Russian regional dialects. It should be noted that the German island dialects of the Kirov region have peculiar linguistic features, including new vocabulary units, as well as involving the language of the surrounding majority.

Key-words: German Island Dialects, Mixed Dialects, Bilingualism, Language Systems Interaction.

1. Introduction

One of the primary tasks of the modern society is to preserve the languages spoken by national minorities, to study their historical development, and to ensure the future of these languages, since a language is a world whose death may become an irreparable loss for the speakers of this language and for the world around them. This article is aimed at studying the peculiarities of the historical development of the native language (dialects) of the Russian Germans living in the Kirov region as it virtually remains the only indicator of their ethnic identity at present.

2. Research Methodology

The methods used to achieve the goal are the fieldwork methods to collect the linguistic data; sociolinguistic interviewing; statistical and comparative analysis to correlate the examined dialect systems with other German dialects and with the Russian language and Russian regional dialects.

3. Results

The history of the Russian Germans includes two separate periods. The first one is the period of stability and continuous development which began with the large-scale German settlement in Russia in the 18th century and ended with the outbreak of World War II. The second period is the one of instability and interrupted development which began with the World War II and continues to the present day. The sociolinguistic communicative type of society of the Russian Germans during the first period of its development represented mono-national German settlements or “language islands” where the German language was used as a means of communication. There were two types of such settlements: “mother colonies” founded by settlers from Germany, and “daughter (secondary) colonies” founded by migrants from the mother colonies (Dinges, 1923). These settlements were different from each other. The linguistic difference between the numerous mother and daughter colonies involved exclusively the use of dialects. In fact, the daughter colonies demonstrated a more varied dialect mosaic than the mother colonies.

By 1940s, the German language islands could be found in Ukraine, the Crimea, the Caucasus, Central Russia, Siberia, and the Far East. According to Schiller, there were 2,042 German settlements in the Soviet Union at the end of the 1920s (Shiller, 1929, p. 67). The Volga German language island occupied the largest territory, and in 1924 the Soviet government named this territory the Volga German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (the Volga German ASSR). Thus, the Germans living in the USSR received a form of the national statehood and a territory.

The native language of the German colonists was the German dialect which was used in everyday communication. In addition to the dialect, most settlers knew the German literary language (which had some dialect coloring); it was learned at school and church. They also spoke Russian which was also learned through school and communication with the Russian-speaking population. In some territories other languages were also spoken, for instance, Ukrainian or Tatar. The Russian language exerted its influence on German starting from the first years of the Germans’ life in Russia; this influence was almost exclusively limited to the lexical domain – the Germans borrowed from

their neighbors the names of household items and names of other realia that they first encountered in their new homeland (Schirmunski, 1930, p. 114–115).

It can be stated that the German language islands were characterized by three types of language varieties: 1) a territorial dialect, i.e., a dialect variety of the German language, which was used as a means of communication; 2) German literary language which was close to standard German; a Russian-German variety; 3) the contact language of the local population – Russian, Ukrainian, Georgian, etc. The article will further discuss each of these types of language varieties.

One can find almost all German dialects among the territorial dialects in Russia; they have managed to retain their primary and secondary characteristics in the new linguistic environment. Germans migrated to Russia in groups, each time different territories were colonized (Stumpp described the process of settlement in more detail (Stumpp, 1972)). In accordance with the time and colonized territories, a number of German language islands gradually developed around Russia with settlers speaking different dialects including High German, Middle German, and Low German. Middle German dialects were mostly found in the Volga region. Southern German dialects were mainly spoken in Ukraine and the Caucasus (Schirmunski, 1930). However, it is difficult to say exactly what the territorial distribution of the dialects was, since there is still no any historical map of the geographic distribution of the German dialects in Russia. An exception is the atlas of dialects of the Volga Germans produced by Berend and Post (Berend, Post, 1997).

One of the issues that arises interest is whether the standard varieties of German dialects have retained their original form, or they have mixed with other dialects. For instance, the dialects spoken in Franco-Swabian settlements in Ukraine have undergone an intensive process of dialects mixing (Schirmunski, 1931, p. 93). Upper-Hessian dialects spoken in the secondary colonies in the north of Ukraine have not retained their primary characteristics either as they fell under the influence of the neighboring settlements which were stronger both economically and culturally (Sokolskaja, Zinder, 1930, p. 348). Today it is no longer possible to find an answer to the question of how intense the processes of dialect mixing were and what patterns they followed. In any case, it is obvious that the theory of dialect mixing and levelling developed by Schirmunski does not apply to all the dialects of the Russian Germans. Schirmunski himself emphasized the fact that the theory can be applied to only the North Bavarian and Low German dialects which had retained their primary characteristics (Schirmunski, 1976, p. 495).

Another German language variety used by Russian Germans was standard German or the national variant of the German language (Standardsprache) which was used in Russia from the very beginning as a language of instruction in confessional schools and later after the 1917 revolution it

became a formal or official language used in different institutions and documents (Eisfeld, 1992, p. 55).

The Russian language did not exert a significant influence in the first period of the German language development in Russia. However, after the revolution it gradually becomes a leader in terms of external cultural communication and develops from a contacting (neighboring) language to a language that “covers” not only German, but also other languages in Russia (for more details on the theory of language covering (Löffler, 1994, p. 63)).

Assessing the use of these language variants in communication, the researchers were unanimous in the opinion that the Russian-German dialects, most likely, were not considered prestigious. Jean-François Bourret, for example, compares the Volga Germans with the Bretons describing dissatisfaction of the Germans with their dialect, which was regarded as the language of peasants or a language of a lower rank. He compared them with the Bretons who were almost ashamed of their language. For the Bretons, a possibility to study the standard French language was a real reward for their social progress; the same can be said about the Volga Germans who studied the Russian language. Bourret considered a low prestige of the German dialects to be the reason why the Russian language became the language of instruction which later led to the creation of numerous schools where teaching was conducted in Russian (Bourret, 1990, p. 150).

It should be noted that the peculiarity of the development of the German island dialects spoken in Russia is that they are of a mixed character, since each colony had migrants from different regions of Western Europe. It is therefore no coincidence that the problem of language mixing is at the center of attention of modern German dialectology. The early dialectological studies of the language of the Russian Germans was the linguistic situation in the mother colonies, since the secondary colonies and the situation there were often unstable, especially in the period from 1925 to 1941. The process of language leveling began in the secondary colonies only in the 1950s. At present, the so-called old secondary colonies in Siberia and Central Asia seem to be more stable in terms of the use of the German language. They were founded at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, and their German population was not deported during the World War II. It is not surprising therefore that the dialectological expeditions undertaken after 1956 by Edig studied these secondary colonies (Edig, 1967).

Three types of secondary colonies are usually distinguished: 1) old secondary colonies which have existed for about 60–70 years by the beginning of the study, and they are still undergoing the process of dialect leveling; 2) mixed settlements that appeared in the eastern regions of the former USSR as a result of deportation; they were founded in the 1940s -1950s and are characterized by high heterogeneity; 3) the so called “central settlements” which appeared later as a result of the former USSR

policy aimed at integrating small “unpromising” villages (in the 1970s), where we can observe the process of formation of a common means of communication on the basis of very different dialects (Rosenberg, 1994, p. 147).

The German settlements situated in the Kirov region cannot be included into this list as they are characterized by the numerical predominance of the Russian-speaking population. They did not come in sight of the language island dialectologists for a long time. However, this fact makes the study of the German dialects spoken in such settlements have particular scientific importance. There is scarce research in the field of linguistic stability in a linguistic situation which is complex and unbalanced and is subjected to interference.

As for the German dialects spoken by Russian Germans of the Kirov region, the changes that occur in them in modern conditions are not only due to the development of their system, but also due to direct or indirect influence of a foreign language spoken by the majority of the population. The changes in German dialect systems taking place at present primarily result from the fact that their role as the main means of communication has been weakening. The Russian language has increasingly been used along with them. The transition from the German dialect used as the main means of communication to the use of the Russian language inevitably leads to development of some peculiar dialect features. When a second language is included into the act of communication, it creates a more complex linguistic situation, since two languages are functioning in the same environment. On the one hand, it is the autochthonous language – the German dialect, and on the other hand, it is the borrowed language of the environment. This linguistic situation characteristic of all German language islands in modern Russia is associated with the fact that some part of the linguistic community can, along with speaking their autochthonous language, carry out an act of communication using a different or “secondary” language in certain situations. This linguistic situation is known as bilingualism.

Shtab in his work “Sociolinguistic study of the language of the Germans in Kazakhstan” suggests the following models of opposition, into which the German and Russian languages enter under the conditions of bilingualism of Russian Germans (Shtab, 1990, p. 7): 1) Model 1 – the opposition of the German literary language and the Russian literary language; this model is typical of well-educated ethnic Germans; 2) Model 2 – the opposition of everyday spoken Russian and the German literary language (or language close to the standard); this model is typical of the rural educated Germans for whom German is functionally the second language even in their everyday life; 3) Model 3 – the opposition of the German literary language together with the German dialect and the Russian literary language; this model is a variant of Model 1 supplemented with fluency in the native

dialect; 4) model 4 – the opposition of everyday spoken Russian and the German literary language together with the German dialect: Model 2 is complemented with the native dialect, along with this the everyday language does not compete with the dialect, i.e., peculiar dialect features are not so obvious; 5) Model 5 is the most common – it represents the opposition of the local dialect and everyday spoken Russian.

The study of the linguistic situation in the Kirov region makes it possible to identify one more opposition of coexistence of the German and Russian languages. It is the opposition of everyday spoken German represented by the regional idiolect of local Russian Germans and the Vyatka dialect (a type of North Russian dialects). This opposition can be considered as Model 6.

The role of the second language in changing the system of the German island dialects is no less significant than the role of autochthonous diglossia. As for the degree of influence of one language on another, it is associated with the social functions of the contacting languages, i.e., the functions that they perform in various spheres of social life. Ethnic Germans use their native language (dialects) in everyday communication, and not only for family communication, but also as a means of communication among residents of the German settlement where they live. For the Russian Germans living in the Kirov region, Russian is the language used in written documents, social life, and at work. The social load of the language system is directly dependent on its functional load. In conditions of language contacts, the decreased social load of a language may result in a decrease in the number of components of the system of functions. In other words, a change in the social and functional significance of a language in terms of quantity may indicate qualitative disparity of interacting languages (Avrorin, 1975, p. 150).

In case of interaction of the German dialects and the Russian language, some elements of the foreign language (Russian) penetrate into the linguistic structure of the German dialects. This penetration can take place at all levels of the linguistic structure. However, every level has its specifics, which is reflected in the nature of the penetrating elements and in the response of the dialect system to this penetration. The lexical system undergoes the most significant changes; it is only to be expected and can be explained by the differences in its organization and the role it plays in the communication process. Differences at the lexical-semantic and syntactic levels hinder communication and mutual understanding to a greater extent than morphological or phonetic differences. At the same time, the changes and their intensity are associated with the peculiarities of the system at different levels. Thus, the changes in syntax are limited due to stability of the syntactic system itself, its resistance to penetration. Actually, there are no major syntactic differences between the systems of the German dialects, they have a lot in common. According to Schirmunski, the

syntactic structure of the dialects of the German language is characterized by a greater degree of uniformity than their morphological and phonetic structures (Schirmunski, 1956). The number of syntactic elements which have penetrated the German language dialects from other languages is quite small: they do not play a significant role in the system of the German language. Consequently, on the one hand, the syntax has fewer elements that impede communication, and on the other hand, the syntax itself is more strictly organized, more stable, therefore, there are insignificant changes in it and, as a rule, they are not associated with foreign language influence.

Differences at the lexical level may represent a serious obstacle to mutual understanding since they can be numerous and they relate to both the presence or absence of certain words (plane of expression) and the differences in the meaning of words (plane of content). Moreover, the lexical system is not as stable as the syntactic one, which contributes to the penetration of foreign language lexico-semantic units into the vocabulary of the Russian German dialects. Thus, variability of the lexical system is reflected both in the characteristics of the system itself, and in the functional properties of the language which determine the relation of the language to extra-linguistic reality (Baikova, 2012, p. 25).

As for the phonetic aspect, phonetic differences between the dialects disappear more intensively, which is evidenced by the noticeable disappearance of certain phonetic features in the island dialects over the last 30-40 years. Now the phonetic structures of the dialects which developed in different conditions and surrounding (imperial German dialects and migrant dialects) have some significant phonetic differences, although the now-different phenomena used to be identical in the past. It should be noted that higher variability of the phonetic aspect of speech is explained by its specifics which manifest themselves in a lower degree of penetration resistance of the phonetic system and a possibility for new words to penetrate the language bringing along new phonetic phenomena. It is also explained by dialect phonetic differences that do not refer to the phonetic system as a whole, but relate only to individual words or groups of words and represent the remains of some phenomena that previously were systemic in nature; Besides, there are some lingering phonetic phenomena that contradict the general trends in the development of the German language, for example, nasalization of vowels. Such phenomena usually become irrelevant for the language, according to Schirmunski (Schirmunski, 1976, p. 351–357).

As for morphological differences, they are quite rare and they refer to specific cases, therefore, even having a lower intensity of changes, they undergo leveling faster.

4. Conclusion

The German island dialects of the Kirov region have developed peculiar linguistic features. This process of development has been facilitated by the formation of new lexical units to nominate the phenomena of the surrounding environment, as well as by integration of the language spoken by the majority population. However, these peculiar features do not have a stable character, thus they are not reflected in the codified norm of the language. The language of the Russian Germans can be defined as a specific variety of the German language used by the national minority living separately in a foreign state. Such varieties of a language require a separate terminological analysis and representation.

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