

RUSSIAN AS A POSTCOLONIAL INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE*

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The concept of “indigenous language”, topical in 2019 and at this conference, is not at all obvious. As even a preliminary research shows, this term does not get a comprehensive definition. The English-language Wikipedia, supposedly a result of the world’s collective intelligence, defines “indigenous” based on the term “native”: “An indigenous language or autochthonous language is a language that is native to a region and spoken by indigenous people.” One finds a similar definition in a UNESCO document (Bühmann and Trudell 2008) referring to a well-known author (Spolsky 2002).

Of course, some cases are more obvious than others. For example, Basques are an indigenous ethnic group in the Pyrenees, and the Basque language is definitely indigenous to that area. At the opposite end of the scale, the Turkish population in Germany is not indigenous to that area (country). There are many cases lying in between these two extremes. Will be Native Americans, forced by the US government to move to Oklahoma in the 19th century, considered indigenous there? Are the Yakuts indigenous to the northeastern Siberia if they only arrived there a few centuries ago? Can one consider Russians an indigenous population of modern Central Russia, assuming that East Slavic groups arrived in the first millennium from the west to this area, then populated by Finnish and Baltic peoples? All of these complicated questions suggest that the lack of clear definitions of “indigenous”, pointed out above, is not at all incidental. Attempts to draw boundaries of the category “indigenous language/ethnic group” are quite problematic and even dangerous. In the current social context, it makes sense only to separate the most obvious cases of non-indigenous languages (ethnic groups) and to consider all the others indigenous to an extent.

Then, most non-indigenous languages (ethnic groups) would be those that result from migrations in the first (or first-second) generation. Another relatively clear case is those languages (ethnic groups) that spread in the last five centuries as a result of deliberate colonization and became newly dominant in certain territories. These kinds of colonial languages are generally considered non-indigenous as well. English has been spoken in Australia for over two hundred years, but such a duration did not make the native speakers of English an indigenous people of Australia, nor English an indigenous language. This is clear from the modern Australian discourse in which English is set apart from the indigenous languages/ethnic groups inhabiting Australia before the colonization – see for example Inquiry 2012. So, it appears that the term “indigenous” presupposes the notion of “non-dominance”. Icelanders are rarely spoken of as indigenous, because they are and have always been a dominant ethnic group in Iceland.

Our paper focuses on a more complicated case – Alaskan Russian. Along with other European powers, Russia was expanding its territory, but unlike British, French and Portuguese, the Russian colonization was terrestrial, except for the North American case. Russian possessions in North America were called *колонии* ('colonies'), which was not the case for the Siberian lands. In the 19th century, the Russian population was dominant in Alaska with respect to more numerous indigenous ethnic groups. Still, after the sale of Alaska in 1867, the status of Russian was (though slowly and gradually) undergoing a dramatic change in the context of the new dominance of American English. Eventually Russian became a *postcolonial* language: an erstwhile colonial language that lost its dominance to a newer colonial language. At a certain point Michael Krauss (personal communication) suggested including Russian in the category of Alaska’s native languages. We compare

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Alaskan Russian with other languages having undergone similar transformation (Afrikaans, Cajun French, Portuguese in Macao, and some other cases). Our goals include determining the category of post-colonial languages, creating their typology and searching for shared structural and functional features.

Modern Alaskan Russian is a unique blend of various external influences upon the Russian base. In addition to early Aleut, Eskimo and Athabaskan influences that have appeared during the original colonial stage, there is a number of specifically postcolonial features, resulting from the loss of connection with the metropole after 1867 and from the new English dominance. In particular, these postcolonial features are:

- preserved archaic features of the 19th century Russian, having evanesced from Continental Russian during the 20th century;
- independent local innovations, not found anywhere in Continental Russian;
- English influences acquired by the modern speakers, born in 1920s and 1930, who were growing in the situation of Russian-English bilingualism.

References

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