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The Belarusian Language: the History and the Present¹

The formation of the Belarusian literary language is attributed to the 14th – 16th centuries when the written language on Belarusian territory absorbed the specific local phonetic, lexical, semantic, and grammatical features. The Belarusian written language of the ancient times was forming on the basis of the written heritage of the Eastern-Slavic language and the living dialects of the former Drygavichy, Kryvichy, and Radzimichy tribes. The old Belarusian literary language reached its highest level of development in the 14th – 16th centuries when it became the official language of the Great Principality of Lithuania and was used in the most important spheres of social life. Chronicles, diplomatic correspondence, magisterial work, legal provisions and state documents were officially registered as well as belles-lettres, scientific and religious literature was written in that language.

However, by the end of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th century, the scope of the use of the old Belarusian literary language had gradually diminished. Under the new political and social-economic conditions of Liublin Union (1569) the application of the Belarusian language was considerably restrained, and Warsaw Confederation of 1696 substituted Polish for it. The Belarusian language remained only in the Uniate Basilican schools and local dialects.

The appearance of a new Belarusian written language and the formation of a new Belarusian literary language is connected with the revival of the Belarusian nation and the liberation movement in the Russian Empire of the 19th, early 20th centuries. Since the written tradition had been interrupted,

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the spoken variant became the paramount source for the making of the new (modern) literary language as the language of fiction.

In the early 20th century Belarusian printing used two graphic systems: Roman (in its Polish and then also Czech variants) and Cyrillic (the so-called 'grazhdanka' or 'Russian') alphabets. Initially, some editions used to be issued in both Roman and Cyrillic alphabets ('*Nasha Niva*' started to use one alphabet - 'grazhdanka' – only after 1912). With time Cyrillic alphabet started to prevail and became the main Belarusian graphic.

At that time the distinguishing features of Belarusian alphabet were established (letter *ŷ*, letters *i*, *uu* replaced *u*, *uy*, etc.), and orthography was unified. Phonological principle for vowels and morphological principle for consonants utterance were gradually introduced and put to practice in Belarusian book printing. Lexicography and phraseology grew considerably, words and phrases from classic languages and literatures were adopted, and the process of producing social, political, scientific, technical, and agricultural terminology began. The generally practiced speech characteristics were revealed and established in the works of writers who represented different dialects. The grammatical means of the language were gradually enriched and developed. The word-building capacity of the Belarusian literary language was enlarged, some grammatical categories acquired new forms (non-declensional nouns, non-transitive adverbial participle), structural types of the Simple Sentence and the Compound Sentences became more varied, grammatical connections in word-combinations and complex syntactical constructions became more complicated.

Despite the restricted conditions for its functioning, the absence of commonly established orthography, graphics, and grammatical norms, by 1917 the Belarusian literary language had already possessed the necessary level of development to present the ideas of people in many spheres of their life.

The young Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic actively participated in the process of cultural construction in spite of the difficult economic conditions and the lack of national intellectuals in the post-revolution period. The Second Session of CEC BSSR (July 15, 1924) passed a Resolution *On Legislative Enactment in the Realization of National Policy*, which gave start to the process of planned Belarusianization. The programme included the organization of educational establishments with the native language of instruction, the development of national literature, the publication of Belarusian books, comprehensive scientific research, the introduction of the national language in the state, party, trade unions, cooperatives, and military structures. In accordance with the Constitution of BSSR (1927), the Belarusian language was declared to be 'the prevailing language of communication in state, professional, and public establishments and organizations'.

The wide range of social functions of the Belarusian literary language called for the immediate elimination of pronunciation discordance and the establishment of common orthography. To set the grammatical-orthographic norms it was necessary to establish a standard grammar of the Belarusian language. As is generally known, the attempts made before the 1917 Socialist Revolution proved to be fruitless.

The dialects of central Belarus (mostly the central districts of Minsk region and to some extent those of the Eastern districts of Grodno region) which embodied most vividly the specific features of the Belarusian language made the basis for the working out of literary norms. The important fact that outstanding Belarusian writers of late 19th and early 20th centuries (Kupala, Kolas, Biadulja, Tseotka, Gartny, and Dunin-Martsinkevich) had their origin in central Belarussia may have been a decisive one.

In the pre-revolution period the Belarusian literary language under the influence of central-Belarusian dialects acquired such specific features as non-dissimilative akanje (exaggerated pronunciation of [a]), hardened *p*, labials before *i* and in post-position, vowel gradation, fricative [r], etc. In the process of developing literary norms in the post-revolution period the adoption of most typical features from other dialects took place. For example, at the first stages of formation of the national literary language the south-western dialects played an important role by introducing such verb forms as *нясе, косіць*, and some nominal forms to the literary standard. Later on the north-eastern dialects having much in common with the Russian language and its dialects, gained importance.

The work on developing and establishing standard rules in grammar and spelling was started. Five grammar books were issued in 1918, with Tarashkevich's *Belarusian grammar book for schools* as the most authoritative among them. Based on material of living folk speech, pre-revolution publications and scientific research in the field, the grammar book by Tarashkevich was rather consistent in defining grammatical features of the Belarusian language and formulating its spelling norms. It became the teaching aid to refer to by the follow-up textbooks and research in the Belarusian language.

However, the grammar book as well as the textbooks based on it failed to precisely define all the characteristic features of the Belarusian language and to finally state the standards in grammar and orthography. There was an active discussion on the standardization of the Belarusian literary language in 1920. The *Proposition for Simplification of Belarusian Orthography* was issued in 1933. On the basis of that Proposition the Council of People's Commissars of BSSR passed the Resolution *On the Changes and Simplifications of Belarusian Orthography*, which for the first time in the history of

the Belarusian language legally stated the definite standards of the Belarusian orthography and grammar.

The new historical reality substantially influenced the vocabulary and phraseology of the Belarusian literary language. The vocabulary was enriched by the building of new words and word combinations on the basis of its own vocabulary, borrowings from other languages, and by assimilating the experience and wealth of the speech of the people. In that period the working out of national terminology was started – 24 publications on Belarusian scientific terminology were issued between 1922 and 1930, providing a solid basis for creating new textbooks and manuals in different spheres of knowledge as well as promoting further activity in lexicography.

After the October Revolution the system of styles of the literary language changed substantially. While before 1917 the Belarusian language fulfilled a limited range of social and cultural functions, now there appeared an exigency of embracing all the spheres of state and administrative office work, education, science, culture, etc. The scientific, business, functional, and other styles of Belarusian literary language as well as journalese started to develop.

The efforts of the best representatives of Belarusian literature, science and culture brought the literary language of the late 20s and early 30s to a high level. The success could have been even greater but for the political oppression that strangled the process of Belarusianization. By the end of 1930s instruction in many Belarusian schools had been conducted in the Russian language, the native tongue was gradually ousted from the majority of the spheres of social and cultural life of the country. Forced bilingualism made Russian the only ‘official’ language in Belarus.

The social-political life of the second half of the 20th century in Belarus, just like in other parts of the former USSR conforms to the notions ‘soviet epoch’ and ‘post-soviet’ (the epoch of the national-state independence). According to the changes that mark the speech practice of the Belarusian people, the post-war history of the Belarusian literary language in the following periods can be defined as: 1945, early 50s, late 50s, early 80s, late 80s, 90s. Each of the periods had a dominant feature that to a certain degree marked the specifics of the social-cultural and speech orientation of the society and the character of the active processes in different spheres of speech activity.

As a matter of fact, up to 1980s the policy (sometimes implicit) of ousting the Belarusian language from different spheres of social life was employed. At that time certain measures were taken by the authorities to standardize and unify language norms at the lexical, grammatical and other levels (the Resolution of 1957). The standardizing activity was mostly characteristic of the Institute of Linguistic Science named after Ya. Kolas of the

Academy of Sciences, and the linguistic chairs/departments of the leading establishments of higher education in Belarus. Their efforts resulted in the creation of Belarusian academic grammar books, the publication of trend-setting (explanatory, spelling, etymological, etc.) dictionaries. An attempt was made to further standardize Belarusian orthoepy (the new rules have not been approved yet).

On the other hand, the catastrophic limitation of the communicative functions of the Belarusian language at the beginning of the 21st century hindered the development of the spoken forms of the national literary language which usually stands for the oral speech practice of educated society and which is considered to be a prestigious social-stylistic variety of a national language.

Nevertheless, the Belarusian literary language is subject to the processes of unification of lexical-grammatical and morphological forms, active vocabulary enrichment with assimilated and own innovative resources. In spite of the barriers that hinder the functioning of the Belarusian language on the part of the state institutions, there is a growing movement in the society for providing the language of the indigenous title nation with the first and foremost functions in the social life of the Republic of Belarus.

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