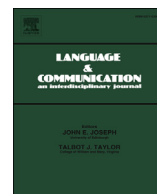




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Language practices and language ideologies in the popular music TV show *The Voice Russia*



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the diverse communicative practices of the popular TV show *The Voice Russia* and highlights the role and function of language ideologies in Russian popular music. We argue that language choice in songs is guided by two sets of ideas—the ideologies of pop music professionals, who have a strong English bias, and the popular beliefs held by the audience, who support the integrity of the Russian language and culture. Analysis of multilingual songs which combine lyrics and music from different countries (and cultures) reveals the role of language alternation as a resource of meaning making and an instrument for constructing ethnic, local, and glocal (transnational-but-localized) identities.

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1. Introduction

Popular culture and popular music are areas of social life profoundly affected by globalization. Their impact is manifested, among other areas, in ‘the global diffusion of a similar range of programme types on TV—news and current affairs programmes, soap operas, ‘reality TV’ shows’ (Fairclough, 2006, p. 87). *The Voice (Golos)* is a local version of a global musical TV show which enjoys great popularity in Russia. It is an important part of the Russian pop music landscape and a salient example of glocalization (Robertson, 1995)—the creative appropriation of global cultural flows involving reflection on and reaffirmation of local cultural forms and values.

As a popular entertainment show, *Golos* covers not only the performance of musical product (songs) but also other related language practices, such as rehearsals, show hosting, and conversations between coaches and contestants. Different aspects of the show are discussed by TV viewers on the internet. This provides ample material for studying the discourse of the show as a ‘complex arena of practice’ (Fairclough, 1995b, p. 185) in which ‘social knowledge and social reality are produced, reproduced, and transformed through a variety of special genres’ (Androutsopoulos, 2009, p. 43). Language practices in popular music have become the object of academic inquiry as a result of ‘acceleration of the sociolinguistic interest in [...] the socially meaningful’ (Coupland, 2007, p. vi). A number of recent studies of language alternation in popular music, especially in rap lyrics, raise questions about identity construction, the politics of language, and simultaneous processes of globalization and localization (Alim et al., 2009; Davis and Bentahila, 2008; Terkourafi, 2010). Several works have addressed the symbolic use of languages in popular music where the national (ethnic) language (e.g., an Asian language) can ‘convey a sense of “Eastern-ness”, “locality”, “conservatism”, “collectivism”, “us-ness” and so forth’, while English and/or other foreign languages ‘convey a sense of “Western-ness”, “globality”, “modernity”, “individuality”, “otherness” and so forth’ (Chan, 2009, p. 109). Mixing languages and language varieties in music also serves as a medium of social ideology and can express a political

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stance; for example, switching between indigenous languages and (African) American English in rap expresses opposition to the dominant ‘English-as-official language’ policy in Nigeria (Omoniyi, 2009).

In Russia, all these topics are fairly new. The prime focus of research, to date, has been on language hybridization and the functions of English in Russian popular music (Aleshinskaya and Gritsenko, 2014; Eddy, 2008; Gritsenko and Dunyasheva, 2013; Proshina, 2010). In this paper, we aim to explore the language practices of *Golos* through their links to language ideologies ‘as an interpretive filter of the relationships between language and society’ (Woolard and Shieffelin, 1994, p. 62). We address the pragmatics of language choice in the songs and highlight the conflict between professionals’ opinion and popular beliefs, which motivate such choices at various stages of the show. We analyze multilingual performances that combine lyrics and music from different countries (or cultures) and describe the role of language alternation as a meaning-making resource and an instrument for constructing local, national, and transnational identities.

2. Research setting

The musical show *Golos* is part of the internationally syndicated show *The Voice*. The aim of the show is to find, through a series of contests (or rounds), a new singing talent—a versatile vocalist, who will be granted a contract with an international record company. Contestants are given professional advice by four expert coaches, who also act as the judging panel. All coaches are successful performing artists in various genres.

The vocal contest is broadcast on the leading Russian television network Channel One across Russia and the entire post-Soviet space. Videos from Season 1 (October 2012–December 2012), Season 2 (September 2013–December 2013), and Season 3 (September 2014–December 2014), as well as interviews with the contestants and coaches, are available on the Channel One official website (www.1tv.ru/voice). *Golos* is currently one of the ten highest rated shows on Russian television. The audience share of the Season 3 finale on 26 December 2014 was 47.3%, which is an outstanding result for a TV show of this kind. In 2014, it won a prestigious TEFI award from the Russian Academy of Television for the best entertainment program in the category ‘Evening Prime’.

Contestants sing covers of famous songs from all over the world. Since the audience of *Golos* is multi-generational, the songs are selected to satisfy all ages: recent and old hits in various musical genres, folk songs, and popular songs from the Soviet era. In striving for the ‘best voice’ title, contestants go through four phases: a series of blind auditions, battle rounds, knockout rounds, and live shows (quarter-finals, semi-finals, and finals). In the first three stages, it is up to the coaches to decide who will progress to the next round and who will have to leave the competition. In the live shows, the audience chooses four finalists and vote for the best voice in the country.

Golos differs from other national versions of *The Voice* due to its international status. The Russian Federation is a multi-ethnic state, and some participants come from republics which have their own languages and cultures (e.g., Tatarstan, Chechnya, North Ossetia-Alania, etc.). The show also welcomes vocalists from different post-Soviet countries (Belarus, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kirgizstan, Latvia, and Estonia), even though most of these countries have their own national versions of *The Voice*. Finally, contestants from Europe, Africa, and America can also participate in *Golos*: for example, Season 2 (2013) featured vocalists from Italy, the Maldives, and the USA, and Season 3 (2014) had singers from Cameroon, Uruguay, France, and the UK. This diversity makes *Golos* a perfect setting to explore multilingual creativity in music (Gritsenko and Aleshinskaya, 2015).

Since the show is broadcast in Russia and targets a mainly Russian-speaking audience, the Russian language serves as a local lingua franca: it is used by all participants and forms a common base for interaction between contestants from different countries, including those from Europe and Africa. Songs performed in Russian are warmly met by viewers, and foreign vocalists choose them to show respect to the host country and to win the approval of the audience. Still, ‘the dominance of English in the popular music scene’ (Crystal, 2003, p. 101) is manifested vividly and in various forms. English is the predominant language of musical compositions; it is employed by coaches and local contestants to talk to foreign singers; and English terms and hybrid English-Russian forms are routinely used by contestants and coaches in informal professional communication and casual talk.

The show is not only multilingual and multicultural. It features different genres as well. With regard to the pop music domain, the term ‘genre’ can denote a type of music (musical genre) and a type of text (discursive genre). Musical genres, such as jazz, soul, funk, rock, pop, heavy metal, hip hop, and so forth, are characterized by specific techniques, instrumentation, context, subject matter, and social function. Discursive genres are linked to different types of domain-specific social activity: jam sessions, studio recordings, music CDs, music reviews, interviews, professional forums, academic publications, riders, contracts, etc. (Aleshinskaya, 2013, pp. 427–428). *Golos* provides an opportunity to explore different discursive genres. It includes an introduction of the contestants by the show host, contestants’ video presentations with fragments of rehearsals and key moments of the show, the actual performance of the song, and its discussion by the coaches.

3. Theoretical framework and study material

Research on language ideologies, understood as ‘particular views and beliefs about languages and their links to social, political, moral and aesthetic values’ (Johnson et al., 2010, p. 241), has gained considerable momentum in recent years. Ideology has become the crucial concept in the study of popular music, where different aspects of language are ‘ideologized’ (Androutsopoulos, 2010a) in multimodal performances foregrounding local diversity in the complex process of globalization.

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