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Communicating local culture through a global musical show

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Abstract

The paper explores translingual and transcultural practices in the popular vocal contest “The Voice Russia”. Drawing evidence from three multilingual performances in “The Voice Russia”, it examines the strategies employed by the participants to express local cultures through global music. Three patterns of mixing languages in multilingual performances are shown to link to the structure of popular songs.

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1. Introduction

Recent developments in globalization have generated new theoretical discourses that describe hybridity, fluidity and diversity in communication (Canagarajah, 2013, p. 33), as well as re-formulation and re-signification of local structures and cultural identity in terms of modernity (Park, 2010). In popular music, transculturation and hybridity reveal themselves in “new practices of cultural and performative expression” (Shim, 2006, p. 26), in which music performers use global forms as resources in the reassertion of their local identities and construction of their own cultural spaces. Musically, analysts describe emergence of such hybrid musical styles as Georgian folk-jazz/rock fusion – a mix of jazz/rock music with traditional Georgian vocal polyphony (Ninoshvili, 2009), and “lukthung” – a mix of traditional Thai tunes and vocal techniques with modern Western musical instruments, dress and stagecraft (Jirattikorn, 2006). Lyrically, a number of hybrid forms of language contact are widely observed in popular music

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and hip hop, including code switching and code mixing (Davis and Bentahila, 2008; Chan, 2009; Alim, Ibrahim, and Pennycook, 2009; Terkourafi, 2010; Gritsenko and Dunyasheva, 2013), and writing original compositions in the English language (Mattar, 2009; Chik, 2010; Aleshinskaya and Gritsenko, 2014).

The vocal competition “The Voice Russia” provides a rich source of material for the investigation of translingual and transcultural practices in the globalized popular culture (Gritsenko and Aleshinskaya, 2015), primarily due to its wide geography of participants from the republics within the Russian Federation to the CIS states and countries of the far abroad. The main three languages used in the show are English (the global lingua franca of popular music), Russian (the local lingua franca), and Italian (the lingua franca of classical music and opera) (Aleshinskaya, 2013). In addition to these languages, musical performances incorporate other local languages, which are native to some contestants: French, Spanish, Portuguese, Ukrainian, Georgian, Azerbaijani, and so forth. Translingual and transcultural practices in “The Voice Russia” may take various forms, the most interesting of which are observed in multilingual performances. Here the term “multilingual” is used as a quantitative value to indicate that the given musical performance comprises two or more different languages, as opposed to a monolingual song containing only one language. In multilingual songs, the performers mix lyrics (verses, choruses, fragments of verses and choruses) in different two (or more) languages and in different melodic forms. For example, in one of the Season 2 battle rounds (2013) Georgy Melikishvili and Nodar Revia inserted a traditional Georgian polyphony at the end of Mikhey Jumanji’s hit in the Russian-language “Tuda” (“Somewhere”); in the Season 4 knockouts (2015) Maria Katz combined Louis Armstrong’s “What a Wonderful World” with a Soviet-time hit in the Russian language “How Wonderful the World Is”. By mixing languages and music, arranging fragments in particular patterns and using visual means like background videos and dress, the contestants create new indexical meanings and express their multiple cultural identities (Gritsenko and Aleshinskaya, 2015).

This study aims to show how multilingual performances combining various languages (Russian, English and/or other languages like Tatar, Romani or Hebrew) with various melodic patterns and forms, musical arrangement, visual effects and/or types of dress become a medium for communicating local cultures in a popular vocal contest. The paper also argues that strategies of mixing local and global cultures in hybrid performances are related to the general structure of popular songs, as switches between the languages are regularly patterned and normally occur at the opening of a particular section of the song.

2. Theoretical framework and study material

The paper is guided by research on translingual and transcultural practices (Canagarajah, 2013; Back, 2015) and pop song structure (Appen and Frei-Hauenschild, 2015).

The term “translingual” refers to the dynamic interactions between languages (Canagarajah, 2013, p. 8). The use of the term “transcultural” allows to expand analysis to include other non-linguistic aspects of communication such as music, visual images, and behavior (Back, 2015, p.11). The notions of translingual and transcultural practices incorporate the notion of plurality, context, and practice (Back, 2015). In transcultural practices local and global meanings are produced as “a result of border crossing and transcultural movements, rather than a strictly localized adaptation of a global resource” (Higgins, 2009, p. 12). The focus of this study is on the communicative strategies that make up translingual and transcultural practices in the musical show “The Voice Russia” and connect local and global cultures through music. These strategies appear to be linked to the structure of popular songs.

According to Appen and Frei-Hauenschild (2015, p. 2), song forms provide “an impetus for interpretation on the semantic, symbolic, and functional levels”, as meanings are more or less assigned to certain formal models. The simplest song structure is a strophic or simple verse form (AAA), in which one formal component (A) is repeated several times with different lyrics but to the same music. This form is common in traditional folk music and blues. Pop songs typically consist of several verses and a chorus. The verses remain more or less identical with respect to harmony and melody but are differentiated by lyrics. The chorus entails a pragmatic contrast to the verses, rhythmically, melodically, lyrically, harmonically and/or dynamically, and it is usually of a greater emotional intensity than the verse.

Androutsopoulos (2010) differentiates between several common patterns of mixing languages in German hip hop: switching between the frame and the body, between the chorus and verses, between the verses (stanza-external), and inside the verses (stanza-internal). Patterned switching between languages in particular sections of a

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