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Legitimacy of Russian English

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Abstract

The paper substantiates the argument that though oriented towards the British or American model in education, proficient Russian users of English speak Russian English, which is a variety within the family of world Englishes and cannot be associated only with stigmatized Ruslish spoken by uneducated communicators from Russia. As an exonormative variety, Russian English is characterized by a greater variability of standards, usually has certain traces of the Russian language native to its users, and is underpinned by the Russian culture and mentality. As such, it is used as a secondary means to single out Russian identity in intercultural communication.

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1. Introduction

With its global spread as the language of intercultural communication, English has reached the majority of the countries, acquiring an ethnic name and serving as a means of local culture expression to the international community. This has resulted in the emergence of new varieties of English, which occur in three circles as singled out by Braj Kachru (1985): in the Inner Circle, not only British and American Englishes, but also Australian, New Zealand, Canadian, Irish Englishes; in the Outer Circle, Indian, Philippine, Singapore, South African, Nigerian, Ghanaian, and other Englishes; in the Expanding Circle, German, Italian, Sweden, Finnish, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and other Englishes.

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While the status of Englishes in the Inner Circle is immaculate, varieties of the Outer Circle are still raising some questions about their standing, though fewer and fewer lately; however, legitimacy of the Expanding Circle varieties is an issue of great controversy and debate (for example, see Seargeant and Tagg, 2011; D'Angelo, 2013), although the argument that nowadays English belongs to all those who use it is rarely impugned. Heated debates, for example, take place every time I speak about Russian English at conferences held in Russia, for we are more inclined to accept other Englishes than our own. The old educational postulate that we study and speak British (or at least, American) English is in the minds of Russian teachers and learners who are still not ready to recognize that their English is none the less different from the model they teach or learn. In this case a variety is confused ex facto with a model of teaching, i.e. “a linguistic ideal which a teacher and a learner keep in mind in imparting instruction or in learning a language.” (Kachru, 1990a, p. 117). Though most schools in Russia are oriented towards the British English model, the output of the learning process does not coincide with its input. As B. Seidlhofer put it rightly: “...the English that is taught, it is usually not the English that is learnt, and... it is the English that is learnt that is put to use in international communication” (Seidlhofer, 2011, p. 194). I dare to claim that the output of Russian education is Russian English, which should not be regarded as a stigmatized phenomenon. Quite the other way around, Russian English is a variety characteristic of educated Russian users who are able to maintain English-language intercultural communication, especially when talking about themselves and Russian culture (Proshina and Eddy, 2016).

2. Russian English as a variety

To characterize Russian English as a variety, let us first regard the criteria that underlie this concept.

According to a linguistic dictionary, a variety is defined as “any form of a language seen as systematically **distinct** from others” (Mathews, 2003, p. 236). In general, Russian speech in English can be easily recognized by an accent, intonation, sometimes choice of words and collocations, word order or word forms. Distinctive features of Russian English have been characterized as traces of the Russian language transfer (e.g., *Mornings we usually spent at the beach, with the object fronting*; *International scientific journal “Philological Sciences (Scientific Essays of Higher Education)”*, with the substitution of the words *scholarly, research* by *scientific, science* of the more general meaning; ... *way to safety, constancy, tranquillity*, with asyndetical connection between the parallel parts of the sentence; *Poklonnaja mountain is the most significant monument constructed in honour of victory in the Great Patriotic War, with the expression the Great Patriotic War translated from Russian*). Distinctive features are also due to the fact that Russian English serves to express Russian culture and reflects Russian history (as is seen in the example above). Like other varieties of English, Russian English is sometimes characterized by creative innovations as they reflect a specific Russian worldview (*home task; groupmate; Palace of Culture; gubernatorial election*) and allow linguistic play on words (*We are not MaiDOWNS; Dyxless*, a novel by Sergei Minaev).

By pointing to the specific linguistic features that are attributed to Russian English we by no means claim that these features are typical of all Russian speakers of English. Any variety is generalization of the language of a speech community, with average indexes serving as distinctive features on this or that level of the language structure. As the representation of speech of the entire community, a variety is not homogeneous. To reveal this, the World Englishes Paradigm has borrowed the concepts of three lects from Creolistics, placing them along the bilingual cline, or continuum “both in terms of *proficiency* in English, and in its *functional* uses” (Kachru, 1983, p. 77): 1) acrolect corresponds to the near-native performance in a formal setting with the emphasis on observing rules of International Standard English; 2) mesolect is part of the continuum that is used by educated speakers of English in an informal setting or it may be characteristic of a formal setting when due to some reasons (fatigue, nervousness, or stress) educated speakers partly lose control over their speech; 3) basilect is typical of not well-educated users of English; therefore, basilect is associated with broken English. Normally, the description of distinctive features of a variety is based on the mesolectal part of the continuum that has most of the features, innovative and deviative from the norm. These linguistic features, viewed as typical mistakes in erratology (Grigoryeva, 2004; Shevnin, 2009), which is an ELT discipline, are just trends revealing the language potential development. But since they are productive and systematic, they are signposts of a certain variety, in our case of Russian English that is not a deficient form of the language but embraces all three lects of the continuum. Russian English includes acrolectal, mesolectal, and basilectal forms and usages depending on the user's proficiency, state of mind, and context of situation.

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