Manifestations of "Bilingualism" in Contemporary Belarusian Prose[1]

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1. Belarusian Bilingualism?

During the 2025 celebrations of the International Mother Language Day, Maksim Ryžankoŭ, Belarusian foreign minister, described Belarusians as "lucky twice" because they had "two native languages, both of which have the constitutional status of state languages" (SB.by 2025). He continued by noting that the Belarusian language is the "basis of peace and national unity, for which Belarus has been famous for centuries" (SB.by 2025). However, the current state of Belarusian language in Belarus seems to contradict Ryžankoŭ's (as an official discourse producer) idealistic and unconflicted framing of the situation.

The linguistic question in Belarus has a number of historical, political and cultural roots. Lewis, presenting Belarus as a "latecomer" (2019, 23) in the mother-language-driven nationalist movements in Eastern and Central Europe of the 19th – early 20th centuries, states that Belarusian nationalism "had peculiar origins in the gaps between national and social identity, and was coloured to a substantial

[1] The article follows the author's keynote presentation at the conference "A New Babel: Multilingualism, Translingualism, and Translation in Contemporary Literature" (Verona, 26 May 2025).

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extent by external forces" (Lewis 2019, 23). Among the external forces in the first half of the past century one could mention the Polish-Russian relationships before and after the collapse of the Russian Empire, the multiethnic nature of the territory with Jewish communities often forming the urban majority, two world wars, or Stalin's purges among national intelligentsia. Thus, as Lewis concludes,

> it was only after the Second World War, and particularly during the Thaw period with its newly permissive atmosphere, that Belarusian culture entered a relatively unproblematic formative phase, albeit within Soviet ideological constraints (Lewis 2019, 25).

The abovementioned constraints, operating at the level of regional administration, education and culture policies, had a profound influence on the very concept of Belarusian statehood (which in some respects translated into post-Soviet, Lukašenka-era national ideology):

> According to this concept, the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) was the first state in Belarusian history; Belarus allegedly had no tradition of statehood before 1917, or immediately after, and was under Lithuanian, Polish, and Russian subjugation during most parts of its history (Kotljarchuk et al. 2023, 6).

As in other former Soviet republics, a strong national revival movement emerged in the late 1980's, promoting the idea of Belarusian sovereignty within the USSR, and, later, of a nation-state after the collapse of the Soviet Union. New language legislation was introduced in 1990, declaring Belarusian the only state language and promoting its use in various social domains. Hence, as Bekus notes, between 1991 and 1994, Belarus became a "nationalizing state" (Bekus 2023, 99) with several "nation reprogramming projects":

> One was related to language identity, which was set to be recast in terms of the "one nation – one language" mode that would have made Belarusian an official language of the country, limiting the official use of Russian (Bekus 2023, 100).

The language-driven nationalizing project was not, however, universally accepted. Instead, it was often met with apprehension, amplified by open public debate in a now censorship-free press. As Zaprudski notes:

> Some negative stereotypes about Belarusian nurtured in previous times could be felt at full force during a newspaper debate in the early 1990s. Thus, some publications qualified Belarusian as ''a language of writers,'' ''a home-bred, non-ubiquitous dialect,'' ''a Russian dialect of the Polish language,'' or ''a dialect of Russian'' (Zaprudski 2007, 107).

This situation contributed to the growing popularity of Aljaksandr Lukašenka, who capitalized on public apprehension about language and national policies during his first presidential campaign. He offered his future voters a more "Soviet" model of the state, with the Russian language retaining its function. After being elected president in 1994, he initiated a referendum on several issues, one of which concerned the status of Russian in Belarus. The referendum, held in 1995, granted Russian, alongside Belarusian, the status of a "state language," which ultimately led to the decline in the use of Belarusian in almost every sphere of life, from education to political communication. The status of Belarusian suffered from the lack of support in the official discourse, where it was frequently presented as the language of the nationalistic opposition. These processes have profoundly influenced the linguistic and national identity of Belarusians (see Ioffe 2003, Bekus 2014, Rudling 2015), by many of whom Belarusian is not perceived as a means of communication or an anchor of national self-awareness but rather a symbol with different degrees of positive and negative sentiments. Bekus summarized "the sociolinguistic reality" in contemporary Belarus, "in which the prevailing

majority of Belarusians use Russian in their daily life, while claiming Belarusian to be their native language" (Bekus 2023, 100). However, as noted earlier, Belarusian officials continue to present the situation as one of "ordinary bilingual" (Bekus 2023, 103). In reality, as Zaprudski concludes, the relationship between the two state languages is strongly disproportionate, resulting in a situation of "replacive bilingualism", in which the dominant language (Russian, in this case) steadily displaces the population's mother tongue (Zaprudski 2007, 114). The official narrative is also contradicted by numerous everyday experiences of individuals who report discrimination or lack of acceptance due to their use of Belarusian. In 2021, civic activist Alina Nahornaja published a book titled *Mova 404*, which she later translated into English (*404 Language Not Found*). A recurring theme across many of the accounts is a conscious shift from Russian to Belarusian, described as the most common path by which one begins to use the language in everyday life. The book compiles dozens of stories from those who made this deliberate linguistic choice and encountered a variety of consequences – from criticism by family members ("Why don't you speak normally?") to rejection by public officials:

> There were two women [in the passport office] who looked at my documents in Belarusian and burst out laughing, then looked at me and asked: "Why not in Chinese?" […] "Well, because we have two state languages, and I chose one of them".
> – Actually, Russian is our main language.
> – What do you mean, where is it written?
> – Well, yes, there are two state languages, but the main one is Russian, so documents like this aren't accepted anyway (Nahornaja 2024, 174).

The linguistic situation in Belarus is further complicated by the presence of a hybrid linguistic phenomenon known as *trasjanka*[2] – a "semi-language" that

[2] The word itself means a mixture of hay and straw.

Tlostanova identifies as the consequence of the hybridization of post-Soviet everyday culture (Tlostanova 2004, 319). This phenomenon, not so dissimilar to Ukrainian *surzhyk,* was closely tied to the processes of urbanization, as many speakers of various Belarusian dialects moved from the countryside into towns. According to Gapova, *trasjanka* became "the folk speech of the first generations of urban residents, residents of small towns, or the rural 'nomenklatura'" (Gapova 2008, 53). Bekus situated *trasjanka* within the framework of postcolonial theory:

> Starting with trasianka as a "borderland" between Russian and Belarusian, the whole complexity of linguistic practice of Belarusians represents a variation of what Homi Bhabha called a "third space of enunciation" (Bekus 2014, 48).

In his definition of *trasjanka*, the renowned Belarusian poet Ryhor Baradulin emphasized its distinctly Soviet character, noting that it bears a kind of "trademark": "Зроблена ў СССР. Рамонту не падлягае" ("Made in the USSR. Not subject to repair") (Sloŭnik svabody 2000, 215). However, *trasjanka* is not always viewed as a strictly negative phenomenon, as it can serve as a "gateway" for those attempting to switch from Russian to Belarusian in their everyday communication (Hrodna Life 2018).

2. The Language(s) of Belarusian Literature. The Cases of Marcinovič and Filipenka

It is hardly surprising that the question of language choice has become one of the central issues in the Belarusian literary space as well. Synthesizing the points discussed above, it can be argued that contemporary Belarusian culture – and literature in particular – is defined by pronounced bi- or even multilingualism, operating on two main interconnected levels. The first is linguistic: the coexistence and interplay of two codified languages, Belarusian and Russian, alongside the gradual incorporation of *trasjanka* into literary texts. The second level is

ideological: the literary field encompasses both pro-government and oppositional discourses, as well as a spectrum of ambivalent or intermediary positions that navigate between competing ideological and political narratives.

2.1. Linguistic Complexities

In the literary development, the first years of independence reflected the ideological and identity crossroads of the period. They were marked by the coexistence of an older generation of Soviet-era classics (such as Vasiľ Bykaŭ, Maksim Tank, Ivan Šamjakin, among others) and a younger generation of authors seeking to address the ideological and aesthetic void caused by the Soviet cultural model. The latter introduced experimental, postmodern approaches to writing, represented by authors like Aľherd (Alhierd) Bacharevič, Adam Hlobus, and Sevjaryn Kvjatkoŭski. This period was also characterized by a profound shift in the status of artists and the everyday conditions of literary life. As Lewis notes:

> In the Soviet period, a small core of academics, writers, musicians, etc. had maintained the autonomy of Belarusian language and culture. Perhaps paradoxically, at that time these cultural elites all worked for the state, even if their public activities were sometimes antithetical to the Soviet project: they belonged to centrally funded writers' and artists' unions, published in state-owned journals and publishing houses or exhibited in state-owned institutions. After 1991, that material support was largely withdrawn and the state-funded monopoly on culture vanished. Contemporary Belarusian literature, literary criticism, music and art are, to a great extent, financially and administratively independent. […] Thus, alternative Belarusian culture operates in a state of politicized opposition, with limited resources, exposure and access to distribution networks (Lewis 2019, 243-244).

After the end of the "nationalizing state" period, the Belarusian language, although marginalized as a language of everyday life, remained the primary language of "serious" fiction writing. At the same time, the segment of mass literature

became almost entirely dominated by Russian-language works, predominantly of Russian, but also Belarusian origin (Voľha Tarasevič, Voľha Hramyka, Hanna Aľchoŭskaja, among others).

At the turn of the centuries, according to Žbankoŭ, the cultural climate in Belarus was increasingly influenced by administrative and bureaucratic control overtaking the cultural life; the dullness, backwardness, and conformism of official culture, often marked by an "obsessive imitation of nationality"; the "expansion" of foreign mass culture; and the "partisan" nature of unofficial culture (Žbankov 2000, 145-147). The ideological stratification of literature was also mirrored in the creation of "official" and "alternative" institutions (such as writers' unions or literary prizes). This "status quo" – with periods of more intense censorship (2006-2010) and phases of "soft Belarusization" (2014-2019) –[3] held until autumn 2020, when mass protests and subsequent violent repressions by the state led to a radical shift. In 2021-2022, alternative writers' organizations (such as the Belarusian Writers' Union and PEN Centre) and independent publishers (Halijafy, Knihazbor, Januškevič) were dismantled. A significant number of leading Belarusian writers ended up in exile, including Svjatlana Aleksijevič, Uladzimir Njakljajeŭ, Saša Filipenka, Uladzimir Arloŭ, Andrej Chadanovič, Aľherd Bacharevič, Julija Cimafejeva, and others. In parallel, several exile publishing houses were established, publishing works predominantly in Belarusian (Gutenberg, Januškevič), and in some cases also in Russian (Mjane Njama).

The perpetual political polarization of the cultural and literary landscape in Belarus is closely intertwined with questions of language use. Although the use of

[3] In addition to the tightening of censorship and state control over the media and civil society, the first decade of the 21st century was marked by three presidential elections, with the 2006 and 2010 contests followed by mass protests that were violently suppressed. Many opposition figures and presidential candidates (among them M. Statkevič, U. Njakľajeŭ, A. Sannikaŭ) were arrested, and some were sentenced to years in prison. On the "soft Belarusization" period see Posokhin 2019.

Belarusian is often perceived as a marker of oppositional identity, this correlation is not absolute: for instance, the loyal Union of Writers of Belarus has among its members writers writing in both languages (Sojuz pisatelej Belarusi 2025). A more existential and persistently debated question within the (mostly "alternative") literary field concerns the cultural affiliation of Russian-language literature written by authors from Belarus. This question has sparked significant public debate, particularly during moments of international visibility – most notably, the discussions surrounding Svjatlana Aleksijevič's Nobel Prize, awarded in 2015 for her works written in Russian (Šaryj 2016, Jeŭraradyjo 2016). Controversies frequently arise in the context of literary prize nominations, as many awards exclude Russian-language works, prompting some to speak of the "discrimination" of Russian-speaking writers. Conversely, the 2015 "politically correct" decision to include both Belarusian and Russian-speaking authors into the PEN-centre "Book of the Year" prize has also met resistance. The then-head of the Belarusian Language Society Aleh Trusaŭ claimed that "ніякая рускамоўная літаратура ня будзе спрыяць разьвіцьцю беларускага духу, нацыянальнай ідэнтычнасьці, беларускай мовы" (Суhankoŭ 2015).[4]

Another dimension of this debate is the one that encompasses all former Soviet contexts, which have variously sought to overcome or resist the Soviet ideological and cultural models and where Russian-language literature has undergone significant transformation. On the one hand, it has developed new means of articulating the linguistic and cultural particularities of specific national contexts. On the other hand, a paradox has emerged: within national literatures such as Belarusian or Ukrainian, Russian – the language of imperial domination – has become a medium for articulating anti-imperial and anti-colonial ideas, as well as for exploring the foundations of new national and cultural identities. One of the popular

[4] "no Russian-language literature will contribute to the development of the Belarusian spirit, national identity, or Belarusian language". If not indicated otherwise, translations are by the author of this article.

terms to distinguish “Russian Russian” writings from the ones created in other contexts is “Russophonia”, which can be also applied to Belarusian writers writing in Russian:

> Eventually, the term “Russophonia” brings the attention to the performative acts of speaking Russian (and even speaking back to Russia), thus laying the ground for a new potential methodological orientation, with the aim to overcome contradictory ideological constructs based on ethnicity, nationality and territory. Most fundamentally, Russophonia highlights the self-conscious and autonomous nature of the performance that carriers of the Russian language are enabled to produce with their individual speech acts, finally switching the focus to the agency of these new cultural actors (Puleri 2020, 20).

Finally, what adds to the complexity of the linguistic situation within the literary field of Belarus, is the fact that even the Belarusian-written body of texts is not linguistically homogenous and, in its essence, especially with the younger generation of writers, is also translingual. According to Ananka and Kirschbaum’s study (2017), contemporary Belarusian literature and culture are shaped by a performative understanding of national and linguistic identity. This performativity is reinforced by the linguistic flexibility of modern literary Belarusian, which navigates between the two normative orthography standards, *taraškevica* (used, for instance, by Bacharevič) and *narkamaŭka*, while actively incorporating archaic, regional, old-Slavonic, and even pseudo-Polish and Ruthenian elements, alongside lexical innovations. At the same time, as with using Belarusian on the daily basis, the decision to write fiction in Belarusian is also a conscious choice for most of the writers who initially read and start writing in Russian:

> У сваіх ідэнтыфікацыйных пошуках сучасная незалежная беларуская культура адмаўляецца ад (імперскай) рыторыкі пасіўнай прыроджанасці, якая прадугледжвае партыцыпацыйнае ўпісванне ў “вялікую і працяглую”, “доўгую і багатую” культурна-гістарычную памяць. […] Вольны пераход на беларускую

> мову, у паўсядзённым жыцці і на пісьме, разумеюць як выбар этычны. […] (мета)лінгвістычны і адначасова этычны акт валявой метамарфозы “ратуе” ад механістычнасці, характэрнай для гістарычна-эсэнцыялісцкіх афірматыўных ідэнтыфікацый (Ananka & Kirschbaum 2017).[5]

2.2. The Cases of Marcinovič and Filipenka

To illustrate how contemporary authors navigate the Belarusian (and broader) literary space(s), two prominent examples may be considered: Viktar Marcinovič, often regarded as the first “mass-elite” contemporary Belarusian writer, and Saša Filipenka, currently the most widely translated author from Belarus (apart from Aleksijevič). Marcinovič published his first novel (*Paranoia*, 2009) in Russian but later adopted a hybrid writing strategy: he began alternating the language of his novels while ensuring that a translation (prepared by an external translator) into the other language would be published simultaneously. For example, his 2014 novel *Mova 墨瓦* was written in Belarusian and translated into Russian by Lidija Michejeva, while his latest book, the novel *Revoljucija* (*Revolution,* 2020), was written in Russian and translated into Belarusian by Vitaľ Ryžkoŭ. This approach allowed Marcinovič’s works to gain visibility in the Russian literary market while also affirming his legitimacy as a Belarusian writer by publishing in Belarusian. In his Belarusian-themed novels, Marcinovič frequently engages with the country’s complex linguistic situation, which he connects to the idea of borderlands

[5] “In its search for self-identification, contemporary independent Belarusian culture rejects the (imperial) rhetoric of passive nativeness, which presupposes participatory inclusion into a ‘great and continuous’, ‘long and rich’ cultural-historical memory. […] The voluntary shift to the Belarusian language, both in everyday life and in writing, is understood as an ethical choice. […] the (meta)linguistic and simultaneously ethical act of a willed metamorphosis serves as a safeguard against the mechanistic nature typical of historically essentialist affirmative identifications”.

(prigranič'e – see Ghilarducci 2021). In *Mova*, he imagines a future Belarus ruled by a union of China and Russia, where the Belarusian language has been eradicated and transformed into a narcotic, sold illegally in paper packets containing fragments of Belarusian books. Crucially, the drug is said to affect only Belarusians. On the textual level, Marcinovič contrasts the primitive "language of the future" with highly poetic Belarusian passages:

> Тэкст быў рыфмаваны і дужа прыгожы. Я прачытаў яго першы раз, і не зразумеў прыкладна траціны слоў, пачаў чытаць другі раз – і тут мяне накрыла прыходам. […] Вось, што прачыталі мы з ёй. Падрыхтуйцеся, бо торкне:
> […]
> Бо сэрца дзяўчыны пад кужалем тонкім,
> як і сэрца найлепшых сыноў,
> гарыць то ж каханнем для роднай старонкі
> і спадчыны нашых дзядоў.
> […]
> Я ўсё спрабаваў учытацца ў няўцямныя словы кшталту «спадчына», калі пачуў, што стук майго сэрца робіцца гучнейшым, скарэйшым, заглушае клубную музыку і пераўтвараецца ў постук капытоў каня, які нясецца праз поле (Marcinovič 2014, 20–21).[6]

[6] "The text was rhymed and very beautiful. I read it the first time and didn't understand about a third of the words, started reading it a second time – and that's when the drug hit me. […] Here's what we read together. Brace yourself, because it's going to hit hard: […] For the heart of a girl beneath a fine homespun veil, just like the heart of the noblest sons, burns with love for the native land and the legacy of our forefathers. […] I kept trying to make sense of the strange words like 'spadčyna' ('legacy'), when I suddenly noticed the beating of my heart growing louder and faster, drowning out the club music and turning into the pounding of a horse's hooves galloping across a field".

The fictional plot of *Mova* thus engages with the supressed part of Belarusian linguistic identity. Notably, the Russian translation adds a further dimension of linguistic interplay through code-switching between Russian as the primary narrative language and Belarusian in the "intoxicating" excerpts:

> Тут было что-то весьма необычное, что-то вроде фрагмента из Ильфа и Петрова, или Зощенко, такая же тяжеловатая сатира, то же подражание нечеловеческому казенному языку всех этих райисполкомов, комиссий и больших начальников с серпом и молотом вместо мозга. Вот этот фрагмент. "Як скончылася праца ў выканкоме, я самую пільную ўвагу звярнуў на тое, каб ісці дадому, разам з Крэйнай. У дачыненнях да яе я меў пэўную мэтавую ўстаноўку. Я трымаў курс бліжэй пазнаеміцца з ёю. Ідучы па вуліцы, я загаварыў з ёю ў самых вытрыманых тонах. Я жаліўся ей, што новаму чалавеку вельмі цяжка наладзіць жыццё ў мястэчку, і прасіў яе параіць мне што-небудзь добрае ў гэтым кірунку" (Martinovič 2014).[7]

Saša Filipenka finds himself in a different situation than Marcinovič, as his professional career, both as a journalist and as a writer, began in Russia, where he published his first novel, *Byvšyj syn* (*Former Son*, 2014), which later received the "Russkaja premija" (Russian Prize) for the best Russian-language book written

[7] "There was something quite unusual here, something like a fragment from Il'f and Petrov, or Zoščenko – a similarly somewhat heavy-handed satire, the same imitation of the inhuman bureaucratic language of all those district executive committees, commissions, and high-ranking bosses with a sickle and hammer instead of a brain. Here is the fragment: 'When the work in the executive committee was over, I paid the most careful attention to going home together with Krejna. In relation to her I had a certain purposeful intention. I was pursuing the course of getting better acquainted with her. Walking down the street, I spoke to her in the most restrained tones. I complained to her that it was very difficult for a newcomer to settle down in a small town and asked her to advise me something useful in this respect'".

by a non-Russian citizen. Paradoxically, the novel focuses on social, cultural, and political developments in Belarus under Lukašenka's rule (although no names are mentioned in the text itself).

One of Filipenka's strategies for performing his Belarusian identity in a Russian-language text is the use of exoticizing details – "sprinkles" – that function as subtle signals to alert potential readers to the author's origins. However, these signals may go unnoticed by readers unfamiliar with the specific cultural references they invoke. From the more obvious examples, one can mention the awakening of Belarusian subconsciousness of *Byvšyj syn*'s protagonist Cisk, who, recovering from a coma, initially mixes Russian and Belarusian. Filipenko also incorporates *trasjanka* to the speech of one of the secondary characters – a nurse – who appears to embody an internal conflict: while she represents a rough, down-to-earth, rural perspective on life, she is also capable of seeing beyond the official version of current events (namely, 2011 bombing in Minsk metro):

> – Ну и каму яны хочут мозги запудрить? Всем же ясно, каму гэта выгодно! Сейчас найдут врага. Ганьба! Якая страна – такой и теракт! Скажут, что во всем виновата оппозиция, которая хотела дестабилизировать ситуацию в стране! Ну эта ж ужо совсем в лоб! (Filipenko 2014, 46).[8]

Besides the obvious textual tools, such as code-switching inside longer passages of text, Filipenko also uses less obvious techniques, sometimes incorporating a single word that could potentially have an exoticizing effect. One example can be found in his 2022 novel *Kremuljator* (*Cremulator*), which is based around the life of the first director of the Moscow crematorium Pjotr Nesterenko. After being

[8] "Who are they trying to fool, huh? It's obvious to everyone who benefits from this! Now they'll find some enemy. Shame! The kind of country it is – such is the terrorist attack! They'll say the opposition is to blame, that it was trying to destabilize the situation in the country! That's just straight-up in your face!".

arrested during Stalin's purges, Nesterenko is interrogated by a KGB officer, and in one of the dialogues Nesterenko "slips" the word "šufljadka":

> памятные артефакты перекочевали в шуфлядку к товарищу Ежову, которого тоже, как вы знаете, кончили…
> – Что такое шуфлядка?
> – Когда я служил в Барановичах, так называли выдвижной ящик стола… (Filipenko 2022).[9]

"Šufljadka" draws interest, because presumably, the author sought to elaborate on the fact that the protagonist had served in the military in Belarus, where his noble, pre-revolutionary Russian became "infected" with Belarusian. Among various possibilities, Filipenko selected a word that is frequently cited as a prominent lexical marker of Russian in its Belarusian spoken variant (Somin 2020), thereby preserving a temporal link to contemporary linguistic discourse.

The other example comes from Filipenko's latest novel *Slon* (*Elephant*, 2025), where Pavel, one of the protagonists, is described as "единственный из всех абитуриентов, писал на *десятку* вступительное сочинение на философский факультет".[10] Although "desjatka" is a Russian word, it signals a different "referential reality," as it is specifically the Belarusian educational system that employs a 10-point grading scale.

On a broader note, *Slon* continues a recent trend for Filipenko, whose books have increasingly been published in Belarusian translations – as was the case with *Byvšyj syn* (*Byly syn*, 2024) and *Kremuljator* (*Kremuljatar*, 2024). The newly

[9] "The memorable artefacts ended up in Comrade Ježov's šufljadka, who, as you know, was also offed... – What is a šufljadka? – When I was serving in Baranoviči, that's what we called a pull-out table drawer...".

[10] "unlike any of the other applicants, he got a 10 for his entrance essay to the philosophy department".

emerging demand may be attributed to the growth of the post-2020 diasporic community with a stronger national, Belarusian language-centred and often anti-Russian component in its identity, which got only stronger since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. For Filipenko, this marked the first instance of working in parallel on an authorized translation, which required significant adaptation on his part to tailor the novel to the Belarusian language.[11]

3. Post-2020 Sentiments: Hanna Jankuta's *Čas pustazeľlja*

The crackdown on the 2020 protests and the following wave of state repressions, followed by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, brought the linguistic complexities of Belarusian society and literature to a new level of sensitivity. These shifts were reflected in the works of established authors – most notably Bacharevič's *Peratrus u muzei* (*Raid in the Museum*, 2023) and *Papjarovy holem* (*Paper Golem*, 2024) –, as well as in the writings of younger, "millennial" authors, who approach the subject from the perspective of a distinct new sensibility. Among them is Hanna Jankuta, who is also active as a literary theorist and as a translator from English and Polish into Belarusian. In 2021, after the start of repressions against the 2020 protesters, she left Belarus and currently resides in Poland. *Čas pustazeľlja* (*Barren Times*), her first novel, was published in 2023. She is also the author of the poetry project *Kanstytucyja* (*Constitution*, 2022, a poetic commentary on Belarusian constitutions and the pitfalls of its applications in real life), five children's books, as well as numerous articles and essays on

[11] In various interviews and presentations, one of which I personally attended, Filipenko has emphasized that it was "always" important for him to publish Belarusian versions of his works. However, he recalls being discouraged by a "well-known Belarusian publisher", who questioned the need for such editions when "everyone has already read the Russian version". According to Filipenko, the success of the first print run of *Byly syn*, which quickly sold out, proved that publisher wrong (personal notes).

literature and feminism. Her children's books about the cat named Šprot are rare contemporary examples of that genre in Belarusian.

Genre-wise *Čas pustazeľlja* falls into the category of autofiction, which reflects a broader trend toward increased attention to individual experience, intimacy, and sincerity, while also incorporating elements of modernist writing. According to Dix, "because it has the capacity to modulate between individual voice and collective experience, autofiction has the capacity to operate as a form of testimony or witness-bearing with regard to past cultural and/or political struggles" (Dix 2023, 8). In this respect, *Čas pustazeľlja* is a distinctly Belarusian book, shaped by post-2020 sentiments: the bitter realization of political defeat after the protest movement was violently suppressed; a paradoxical form of nostalgia, in which an emigrant may still be able to visit the country yet lives in constant fear of repression; the abrupt shift – from being among the most pitied and supported communities to being labelled a co-aggressor after February 2022 – and the resulting feeling of collective guilt. Naturally, these sentiments are not universally shared but resonate more strongly within the émigré community and among "inner emigrants" who remain in Belarus. Another prominent and recurring theme in the novel is the reflection on language and one's cultural and linguistic identity, which informs the novel's partial multilingualism: Jankuta employs code-switching and code-mixing, incorporating Russian, as well as Polish and Ukrainian, depending on the situational pragmatics and the emotional proximity to the depicted events or characters. According to Radaelli's classification of literary multilingualism, in Jankuta's writing the multilingualism qualifies as "manifest", as the presence of multiple languages is "immediately perceivable" (Deganutti 2024, 604). Furthermore, the narration is enriched by a persistent layer of metanarration, in which the author-narrator reflects on her own writing process and creates the impression that the reader is witnessing the very moment of the book's creation.

While framing her narrative self, one of the first things that Jankuta points out is her accent in Russian:

> І. кажа, што я размаўляю па-руску з акцэнтам. Не ведаю, ці мае ён рацыю, а калі мае, то адкуль у мяне акцэнт. У дзяцінстве я размаўляла па-руску, гэта мая першая мова, бо я нарадзілася ў рускамоўнай сям'і – звычайнай, менавіта рускамоўныя сем'і для Беларусі – звычайныя (Jankuta 2023).[12]

However, this accent is not something she is immediately aware of – it is pointed out by someone close to her, yet still an outsider. Hence, one could argue that she still perceives this part of her linguistic identity as a natural one. At the same time, she offers an ironic sociolinguistic commentary by referencing Russian as the typical "norm" in Belarusian society – an idea that, as previously mentioned in relation to Nahornaja's book, as well as the idea of the conscious switch to Belarusian, often in a symbolic, identity-seeking impulse:

> У маім досведзе пераход на беларускую магчымы толькі пасля сур'ёзных намаганняў і доўгіх рэфлексій, разваг пра тое, што і чаму я выбіраю. Выбар «рускасці» ж даецца па дэфолце, па змоўчанні, для яго не трэба ніякіх высілкаў. У нейкім сэнсе цябе да яго падштурхоўваюць – абставіны, вонкавыя ўплывы. А калі ты пераходзіш на беларускую, то неўзабаве заўважаеш, што яна – твая адзіная спадарожніца (Jankuta 2023).[13]

[12] "I says that I speak Russian with an accent. I don't know if it's true, but if it is, then where did I get it? I spoke Russian as a child, it is my first language, because I was born in a Russian-speaking family, a typical one, as it is a Russian-speaking family that is typical for Belarus".

[13] "In my experience, switching to Belarusian is only possible after serious effort and long reflection – thinking about what I am choosing and why. The choice of 'Russianness', on the other hand, comes silently, by default; it requires no effort. In a sense, you are pushed toward it – by circumstances, by external influences. But when you switch to Belarusian, you soon notice that it becomes your only companion".

The depicted linguistic shift can also be viewed through a colonial lens, in which Russian, as the language of the "metropole", is universally accepted and perceived as part of Belarusian identity. In this context, conscious linguistic choice becomes a means of reclaiming the suppressed part of one's identity and distinguishing oneself from the oppressor or colonizer. However, by choosing Belarusian Jankuta's narrator doesn't push the Russian out of her identity but rather assign a different pragmatic function to it, almost a different part of her personality. At the same time, a peculiar paradox emerges in Jankuta's depiction of linguistic adaptation in exile: Russian and Polish, both "colonizing" languages, influence one another, yet neither intrudes upon the safe "Self-space" reserved for Belarusian:

> Мы гаворым не так, як рускія, значыць, мы не рускія. Мне здаецца, што я ўжо доўгі час павольна і неўсвядомлена намагаюся размежаваць унутры сябе беларускасць і рускасць, вылучыць з вакольнай няпэўнасці беларускасць як нешта самастойнае […] Цяпер, калі я гавару на рускай мове, то заўважаю, што выкарыстоўваю ў ёй польскія канструкцыі, і наадварот. […] Таксама я разумею, што гавару па-руску без нейкіх асаблівых пачуццяў. Гэта проста мова, сродак камунікацыі. Магчыма, таму, што я размаўляю на ёй пераважна з украінцамі. З аднаго боку, гэта можа паказваць, што тут, у Польшчы, я ўспрымаю рускую мову як бяспечную. Гэта наша «лінгва франка», універсальны пасярэднік. Але з іншага, гэта таксама пра дыктат мовы. Я заўсёды папярэджваю, што разумею ўкраінскую, проста не гавару на ёй, і, нягледзячы на гэта, частка маіх суразмоўцаў застаецца пры рускай мове (Jankuta 2023).[14]

[14] "We speak differently than Russians, which means we are not Russians. I feel that for a long time now, slowly and unconsciously, I have been trying to separate my sense of Belarusianness from Russianness – trying to extract Belarusianness from the surrounding uncertainty as something independent. […] Now, when I speak Russian, I notice that I use Polish constructions in it – and vice versa. […] I also realize that I speak Russian without any particular emotions. It's just a language, a means of communication. Maybe

Jankuta interprets the paradox of Russian being perceived as a “safe” language by two oppressed nations in the context of emigration and exile as a symptom of the inherited linguistic dictate. In most cases, she even codes her communication with Ukrainians in Russian – something that, in her narrative, also signals a greater emotional and social distance. However, when the narrative calls for bridging this distance, she consciously “manipulates” language, a strategy she openly acknowledges in her metanarration:

> Едзем з бацькам праз горад, мінаем ці то лес, ці то парк, у якім хаваюцца старыя яўрэйскія могілкі. […] У дзяцінстве яны верылі, што надпісы падказваюць, дзе схаваны скарб.
> – І што, вы шукалі яго? – пытаю я.
> – Як яго шукаць – мова ж незразумелая.
> Насамрэч мой бацька не гаворыць па-беларуску, ён рускамоўны. Але я не магу перадаць тут яго словы па-руску, як словы кіроўцы маршруткі ці мытніцы, бо гэта адразу створыць дыстанцыю (Jankuta 2023).[15]

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that’s because I mostly use it to speak with Ukrainians. On the one hand, this might show that here in Poland, I perceive Russian as a ‘safe’ language. It’s our ‘lingua franca’, a universal mediator. But on the other hand, it’s also about the dominance – the dictate – of language. I always explain that I understand Ukrainian, I just don’t speak it, and yet some of my interlocutors still stick to Russian”.

[15] “We’re driving through the city with my father, passing what might be a forest, or maybe a park, where old Jewish cemeteries are hidden. […] As children, they believed the inscriptions hinted at the location of hidden treasure. ‘So, did you look for it?’ I ask. ‘How can you look for it – the language is incomprehensible’. In fact, my father doesn’t speak Belarusian, he is Russian-speaking. But I can’t reproduce his words here in Russian – as I would for a minibus driver or a customs officer – because that would immediately create distance”.

While depicting places such as this cemetery, Jankuta repeatedly references Google Maps ratings to validate or contrast her own emotional responses to them. One peculiar example cites a Russian-written review of the Jeľnja swamps: “Бал на гугл-картах: 4,9, – але негатыўны водгук таксама ёсць: ‘Не впечатлило вообще: однообразный пейзаж с низкорослыми деревьями’”.[16] Historically, the swamps carry deep symbolic weight in Belarusian cultural imagination – as sites of cultural origins, settings for folk tales and classic literature, and even scenes of partisan resistance during wartime. In this moment, Russian functions as a tool of dismissive judgment toward a space that is symbolically and emotionally Belarusian.

Russian is also present in Jankuta’s depictions of her stressful travels to Belarus, where it serves several purposes: reproduces the “real” linguistic situation in Belarus; creates an emotional distance (as opposed to Belarusian as it was in the case of the dialogues with the narrator’s father); when used in contrast with Belarusian, underlines the “decorative” function of Belarusian (“Мінаем краму ‘Парэчка’, а ніжэй: ‘Овощи, фрукты, ягоды’. Беларуская мова як аздоба”, Jankuta 2023).[17] Finally, it also echoes the émigré sentiment of the narrator when the steward in bus calls for the passengers to promptly take their seats while someone asks if there’s still time to leave the bus shortly: “Как хотите, но ждать никого не будем” (Jankuta 2023).[18]

[16] “The Google Maps rating is 4.9 – though there’s also a negative review: ‘Not impressive at all: monotonous landscape with stunted trees’”.

[17] “We pass the store Parečka [Black current], and below it: ‘Ovošči, frukty, jagody’ [Vegetables, fruits, berries]. Belarusian as decoration”.

[18] “Up to you, but we’re not waiting for anyone”.

4. A Brief Conclusion

Contemporary Belarusian prose, particularly that emerging within the new émigré community after 2020, is a dynamic space in which processes of self-reflection, reassembly, transformation, and the reinforcement of both personal and collective identities are actively unfolding. In this context, bi- and even multilingualism function not only as a reflection of these developments but also as their outcome. The Russian language, in particular, occupies an ambivalent position: while it is often rejected as a colonial legacy, it can simultaneously serve as a tool of decolonizing practises when appropriated in a critically conscious manner (as in the case of Filipenka). Within such literary practices, code-switching and code-mixing are not merely stylistic or playful devices; rather, they emerge as expressions of newly sharpened sensibilities toward one's own, always somewhat hybrid, Self.

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