Russian Pidgin Languages

Dieter Stern

This overview article provides short portraits of the known and documented Russian Pidgin Languages. The basic outlines of their social history is sketched, and the most prominent grammatical features are presented. The introduction puts the three pidgin languages with which the article deals (Taimyr Pidgin Russian, Russenorsk, and Chinese Pidgin Russian) into a broader perspective and briefly discusses the general sociohistoric preconditions for the emergence of Russian-based pidgin languages. Russian appears to be the only Slavic language that has served as a lexical base language for the emergence of pidgin languages. It thus joins the ranks of the European colonial languages (above all Portuguese, English, and French) that have given rise to this particular type of contact languages from the early modern period onward. Pidgin languages usually emerge out of the contacts of groups that have no prior knowledge of one another's languages in order to facilitate basic forms of communication. Pidgin languages are radically simplified compared to their source languages (lexifier and substratum) and are, in the beginning at least, communicatively impoverished. Until recent years, it has been claimed that pidgin languages and creole languages never adopt functionally intact grammatical morphology from their lexifier. This claim has been shown to be untrue, owing to Peter Bakker's (2003) research on a broad sample of pidgin languages, including many with non-Western-European lexifiers. Taimyr Pidgin Russian counts among the pidgin languages that have preserved part of the grammatical morphology of the lexifier intact. Pidgin lexicons tend not to be mixed. Almost all pidgin languages have a very pronounced lexical bias. One of the very few exceptions to this is Russenorsk, the lexicon of which includes a roughly equal proportion of Russian and Norwegian entries, and the Harbin variant of Russian Chinese Pidgin, with a mixed Russian-Chinese lexicon. Pidgin languages are also said to arise under conditions of social inequality, but at least two Russian pidgin languages (Russenorsk and Chinese Pidgin Russian) seem to contradict this claim. Additionally, the low prestige commonly imputed to pidgin languages seems not to hold for Russenorsk (Broch and Jahr 1983).

Russian pidgin languages (RPL) are pidgin languages with a significant share of Russian entries in their lexicon. This definition allows for the inclusion within the group of the dual-source pidgin Russenorsk (Trudgill 1996). A further requirement for qualifying as an RPL is accordance with established definitions of pidgin languages in general. This qualification is necessary in view of the many claims put forward for the existence of Russian-based pidgin languages that are based on spurious evidence. In some cases, it can be shown that the language in question is not a pidgin at all. Such is the case, for example, of Transtundra Christian Russian (Smith 1995: 480), which is the native language of the Russian settlers on the Taimyr Peninsula, known as Transtundra peasants (*zatundrennye krest´jane*). Similarly, Buryat Russian (Stern 2002: 7–8) and Kamchatka Pidgin (Reinecke et al. 1975: 621; Holm 1989: 620; Smith 1995: 363; Wurm 1996: 983) appear to be, from the little that is known about them, restructured native dialects of Russian settlers, the so-called *starožily* 'old settlers' (the *gurany* of Buryatia and the *kamčadaly*, respectively). In other cases, such as with Koryak Russian Pidgin (Smith 1995: 363), it is doubtful whether the lexical base is Russian rather than Koryak or even Itelmen. There is possibly something to be said in favor of there having been a Russian pidgin in the Volga region (Stern 2002: 7–8) and another one in the Caucasus (Kozinskij 1973: 38), although ultimately the evidence proves insufficient to qualify them as true pidgins. The prior existence of Alaskan Pidgin Russian (Holm 1989: 620–621; Wurm 1996: 983) is deduced from Russian loanwords in a number of indigenous languages of Alaska and the northwest coast of America. As for the Chukotka Pidgin Russian trade language (Wurm 1996: 982–983; de Reuse 1994: 328; Maslova and Vaxtin 1996: 1000), a close rereading of its only source, Adolf E. Nordenskiöld's travel account (1882, 373, 404), leads to the conclusion that in fact there never was a Russian-based contact language in use on Chukotka. Recent cases of language use in the context of cross-border trade such as the Finnish-Russian jargon described by Elena Perexval´skaja (2008) and the language practices of Chinese-Russian shuttle traders may be labeled jargons or prepidgins at best, and it remains a matter of debate whether circumstances are favorable to their pidginization in the long run (Stern 2016: 509–516).

There are three known languages meeting the necessary requirements for being classified as an RPL: Russenorsk (RN), Chinese Pidgin Russian (CPR, of which there are three distinct varieties; see below) and Taimyr Pidgin Russian (TPR, also known as Govorka). Of these, only TPR owes its origin to Russia's colonial spread into Siberia and other parts of northern Asia. It appears that slightly restructured old settlers' dialects (e.g., the Russian of Russkoe Ust´e) and in one case a mixed language (Copper Island Aleut [CIA]) are the more typical outcome of colonial encounters throughout Siberia and beyond. RN and CPR emerged on the very fringes of the Russian Empire as cross-border trade languages, with CPR acquiring additional functions as time went by. Although sufficient documentation exists only for these three languages, claims have been put forward that there

must have been a much higher number of RPL, which happen to have gone unnoticed (Wurm 1992; Wurm 1996; Belikov 1997). Building on an earlier argument by Isaak Šaevič Kozinskij (1973), Perexval´skaja (2008) suggests that there might have been a pan-Siberian colonial pidgin, the remains of which are still to be seen in CPR. The specific circumstances of Siberian colonization, however, which basically took the form of exploitation by fur-hunting Russians (*promyšlennye ljudi*) and tax officials (*služilye ljudi*), must be judged to have been unfavorable of pidginization (Stern 2003: 78–81).

Taimyr Pidgin Russian

TPR is a colonial-frontier pidgin that used not only to facilitate contacts between Russians and the native peoples inhabiting the Taimyr Peninsula (the Nganasan, Enets, Evenki, and Yakut, as well as the Nenets on the western fringe of Taimyr) but also for communication among these indigeneous groups. The Yakut, Evenki, and Enets, especially, entered into symbiotic relationships with Russian fur-hunters and settlers to form a new ethnic group, which became known as Dolgans, whereas the Nganasans kept aloof, thereby maintaining an ethnolinguistic divide, across which TPR was used well into the 20th century. TPR was still spoken and remembered until recently by elderly individuals. It is not known when and from which kinds of contacts TPR actually originated. The earliest attestations date from the last third of the 19th century (see Stern 2012: 559–564). TPR was discovered and described for the first time only in the 1980s by uralist Evgenij Arnol´dovič Xelimskij (1987; 2000). Further extensive research was conducted by Dieter Stern (2005a; 2009; 2012).

The use of TPR appears to have been seasonally restricted to the winter half of the year, when all ethnic groups (nomadic and half-sedentary) were forced by the severe weather conditions to remain in close proximity to one another along the Khatangskii trakt (Khatanga tract) as well as along the right bank of the Yenisei River. Bands of Nganasans would exchange news, play cards, etc. with their Dolgan neighbours during protracted visits, known as *gostevanie* (Stern 2012: 217–222). This was also the preferred time of the Russian traders of Dudinka for organizing dog-sleigh caravans with merchandize to be sold to the indigenous population along the Khatangskii trakt and the west bank of the Yenisei (Stern 2012: 193–204). Despite efforts to introduce knowledge of Standard Russian from the 1930s onward, TPR survived Soviet collectivization. From the 1950s onward, the natives of Taimyr were forced to settle down in the two mixed Nganasan-Dolgan tundra settlements of Ust'-Avam and Volochanka. Within these settlements, TPR facilitated contacts between older-generation Nganasans and Dolgans.

All extant textual attestations as well as sound recordings are from Nganasan speakers of the pidgin, so that any statement about its grammatical features is skewed to some extent. This is particularly true of TPR phonetics, which clearly reflects a Nganasan base. The lexicon of TPR is predominantly Russian, with occasional items from Nganasan and Dolgan. There is comparatively little evidence of otherwise typical pidgin strategies for extending the lexical base, like polysemic extension, paraphrasing, and lexical compounding (Stern 2012: 492–497). The basic word order of TPR reflects the general pattern of its substrate languages, which is strictly subject-object-verb (SOV). A most unusual peculiarity of TPR is the wholesale preservation of the verbal inflexions of its Russian lexifier. Russian nominal grammatical morphology, however, is largely absent and has been replaced by a simple contrast of uninflected bare nouns and adjectives for grammatical core relations and juxtapositional compounds with postpositional *mesto* 'place' for peripheral relations. More specific spatial relations are expressed by a range of postpositions (*rjadom* 'beside', *nisu* 'under', *birxu* 'above', *dalej* 'beyond', etc.), which may be followed by *mesto*, yielding *gora birxu* 'on top of the mountain' alongside *gora birxu mesto* 'on top of the mountain'. Gender and number are not expressed. The genetive/accusative form of the personal pronoun (*menja*, *tebja*, *ego*) has been generalized for all syntactic contexts. The loc.adv *tut* 'here' is also used as a demonstrative (alongside *ėto*) and as 3.sg personal pronoun (in subject position). The colloquial Russian conjunction *da* 'and' is added to preterite verbs to form converbs: *Tut mésta usól-da ósira balsój najdʲóm* 'Having left that place, we will find a huge lake'.

Russenorsk

RN facilitated barter trade between Russian merchants from the White Sea region and Norwegian peasant fishermen in northern Norway (Finmark, Troms). During the ice-free summer months, Russian merchants would sail in small vessels to northern Norway in order to barter grain for fish with the local population. Trade contacts became regular after the trade-and-frienship pact between Russia and Denmark-Norway was signed in 1782, but there is clear evidence that barter trade predates its legalization by decades, possibly dating as far back as the early 18th century (Broch and Jahr 1984: 23–25). RN must have made its appearance in the context of these

barter exchanges, but no definite date for its emergence can be given. First attestations of single words date from the late 18th and early 19th centuries (*Russmann* 'Russian', 1785; *krallom* 'steal', 1807). RN had its heyday throughout the entire 19th century and fell into disuse in the early 20th century, some time before the disruptive events of the October Revolution. Influences from another contact language, *borgarmålet*, have been discussed (Broch and Jahr 1984: 51–52), but documentary evidence on this language is too scanty for any definite conclusions. Solombala English (Broch 1996) appears to be a more likely candidate for having had an impact on RN, with which it shares salient features such as the generalized verbal suffix *-om*.

Olaf Broch published the main body of RN material (1930), collected from various written Norwegian and – to a lesser extent also Russian – sources, and provided a first in-depth analysis (1927a; 1927b). Ingvild Broch and Ernst Håkon Jahr were able to extend the text corpus (1981) and add new insights into the history and structure of RN (1981; 1984). RN is the only RPL that has acquired some notoriety within pidgin and creole studies. It has been time and again used as an illustration of the prepidgin stage of the pidgin-creole life cycle, although its classification as either prepidgin or stabilized pidgin remains a matter of debate. It is also known for the phenomenon of double illusion, i.e., the belief of the speakers of the pidgin on both sides to be speaking the other's language. RN has also been cited as one of the rare cases of pidgins emerging under conditions of social equality (starting with Broch and Jahr 1984: 21). Psycholinguist Dan Isaac Slobin (1979: 43–46) has used RN to illustrate what he thought to be the absolute minimal requirements for grammatical morphology of any language to be functional.

RN is one of the very rare dual-source pidgins. Its lexicon is made up primarily of Norwegian (appr. 47%) and Russian (appr. 39%) base items, many of them being synonymous (e.g., No *gammel* alongside Ru *stara* 'old'). There is also a small group of items from Dutch and English, which is suggestive of the influence of a nautical jargon. Like TPR, little use is made of compounding or other strategies to enhance the lexicon. The basic word order is subject-verb-object (SVO). Word order shifts to SOV if adverbials or additional arguments are being added. Neither nominal nor verbal inflexional morphology has been adopted from either lexifier. Instead a very basic differentiation is being made between nouns and adjectives, on the one hand, being marked by *-a* (*fiska* 'fish', *oreka* 'nut', *bela* 'white'), and verbs, on the other hand, being marked by *-om* (*betalom* 'pay', *robotom* 'work'). This differentiation, which is not applied strictly, appears to be an emergent feature. Despite some efforts, the origin of both morphological markers has not yet been determined conclusively (see Broch and Jahr 1984: 34 for *-a* and 35–36 for *-om*). More recently, a Fennic origin for *-om* has been suggested by Johanna Laakso (2001) and a maritime origin, leading back to the Cape Dutch Pidgin by Stern (2007). The preposition *på*, which has a double Russian and Norwegian etymology, is used as a generalized marker for peripheral case. The generalized forms of the personal pronoun are *moja* for 1st person, *tvoja* (alongside English *ju*) for 2nd, and Norwegian *han* for 3rd.

Chinese Pidgin Russian

CPR started as a trade pidgin, known as the Kyakhta trade language (*Kjaxtinskoe narečie*), which was in use in the twin towns of Kyakhta and Mai-mai-cheng on the former Chinese-Russian border (now in Outer Mongolia). It is generally believed that the pidgin emerged right away with the initiation of trade by the Treaty of Kyakhta in 1727, but there are strong indications that until the latter part of the 18th century, Mongolian was the preferred medium of interethnic communication in Kyakhta (Stern 2005b). With the collapse of the Russian-Chinese tea trade in the early 1860s and the annexation of the Russian Far East in 1858, there occurred a functional shift from trade to colonial pidgin, giving rise to the Ussuri variant of CPR. A third variant came into being with the construction of the Chinese Eastern Railway (1896–1900) in Manchuria and the founding of Harbin. The Manchurian variant of CPR (Jabłońska 1957; Jabłońska and Lyovin 1969) served both as construction-site pidgin to facilitate communication between Russian and Polish engineers and the Chinese workforce and as a domestic pidgin in use between the Russian and Polish bourgeoisie of Kyakhta and their Chinese manservants. With the dissolution of the Russian emigré community in Harbin starting with the foundation of Manchukuo in 1932, and the expulsion of the Chinese from the Soviet Union in the late 1930s, CPR lost its remaining functional domains and went extinct.

Egor Fëdorovič Timkovskij (1824) was the first to identify the Kyakhta dialect as a trade language in its own right. The first grammatical treatment is by Semën Ivanovič Čerepanov (1853). In the 1920s, sinologist Aleksandr Grigor´evič Šprincyn undertook a field study of CPR, including recordings on phonograph wax cylinders, but due to his being arrested in 1938 and large parts of his materials being destroyed during World War II, he was never able to accomplish his ambitious project (Šprincyn 1968). Work on CPR was again taken up by Elena V. Perexval´skaja, who built her monogenetic argument for a pan-Siberian pidgin largely on insights into CPR (2008). A recent extensive overview of CPR was written by Roman Shapiro (2012).

All three variants of CPR share basic features, though the Manchurian variety seems to stand somewhat apart. Whereas CPR in general displays a clear Russian lexical bias, the Manchurian variant appears to have a mixed lexicon with a roughly equal share of Russian and Chinese items. Furthermore, the Manchurian variant does not seem to partake of the Altaic features found in the other variants. Its word order is SVO in accordance with Chinese rather than SOV in the Kyakhta and Ussuri variants (Bakich 2011: 28). The latter clearly points to an Altaic substrate, most probably Mongolian. Somewhat similarly to RN, *moja*, *tvoja*, *naša*, *vaša*, and *ego* (for sg and pl) have become the generalized forms of the personal and possessive pronoun (though for 2sg *tibi* is also quite frequent). There is no functional inherited case or gender morphology. The preposition *za* appears to mark oblique cases. In some of the data, it appears, however, to take on the function of a topic marker. A desinence *-i*, reminiscent of the stem of many Russian verbs or the Russian imperative singular, serves as a generalized verb marker. Tense can be indicated by adding either *esa/esi* (prs), *bylo* (pst), or *budu* (fut) to the verb. An element *la* referring to prior events is regularly added not only to verbs but also to other word types, typically at the end of a phrase. The form has a double etymology deriving from both Russian pst-*l(a)* and from the Chinese inceptive particle *le* (Shapiro 2012: 23). For the Ussuri variant, Johanna Nichols (1986) argued that *esa/esi* or *est´* is used to indicate evidential mood.

Dieter Stern

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