

Salvatore Del Gaudio

The Language Situation in the District of Loeŭ (Belarus¹)

Introduction

The present contribution provisionally concludes a 'trilogy' devoted to the description of the social and sociolinguistic factors determining the language (dialect) use and selection in the rural areas set across the Ukrainian-Belarusian border and very close to the Russian Federation¹.

More specifically, the current study focuses on the analysis of the language situation in the western part of the district Loeŭ (Region of Homel', Belarus²), paying particular attention to the use, distribution and speakers' evaluation (perception) of the local dialect(s) in relation to other language varieties. It is worth reminding that by 'local dialect(s)' is meant the traditional, rural dialect usually spoken by older (70-90 years), non-mobile informants with a poor level of schooling in a specific inhabited point. The plural 'dialects', thus resembling the Belarusian and Ukrainian dialectological traditions (cfr. Bel. *mjascovy havorki*; Ukr. *hovirky*), may indicate the dialectal micro-system of one or more neighbouring dialectal units/inhabited communities (Del Gaudio 2015b: 17). This predominantly oral speech is disappearing or evolving under the steady influence of language acculturation, standardization processes in favour of the standard languages, especially Russian in the case of Belarus². Intermediate stages of dialectal development towards Russian may give place to hybrid formations and/or to more stable mixed varieties with cross-regional features.

The area under research, considered in its entirety, also includes the adjoining district of Homel' (Region of Homel', Belarus²) and most of the former district of Ripky² (Region of Černihiv, Ukraine). Geographically, the Dnipro / Dnjapro (Bel. Дняпро́) functions as a

¹ Some formal and content overlappings with preceding articles are, in certain points of the present paper, unavoidable. This is due to the fact that all these contributions deal with correlated thematic aspects and they can be regarded as integrating components of a single, larger study. I would also like to thank the Humboldt Research Fund for its support.

² A recent administrative reform (18th July 2020) has abolished many of the existing Ukrainian districts, among them the district of Ripky. The latter has been incorporated in the larger administrative-political unit of Černihiv which also gives the name to the entire region. For ease and for the sake of comparison, however, we shall occasionally use this denomination. Cfr. <<https://www.minregion.gov.ua/press/news/novi-rajony-karty-sklad/>> (latest access: 08.04.21).

natural barrier separating the district of Loeŭ from that of Ripky. This territory represents a mere segment of the much larger Polissian macro-region³ which, due to its size, is neither linguistically (dialectally) nor ethnographically completely homogeneous.

The language situation of this cross-border area has rarely been object of sociolinguistic research in either western European or East Slavic linguistic traditions for a series of correlated reasons, e.g. national and linguistic-cultural stability of already established geo-political borders etc. Specific language questions have traditionally been the domain of East Slavic dialectology⁴ and / or ethnolinguistics (folklore)⁵.

The district of Loeŭ acquires a specific dialectal and sociolinguistic significance. Here, just as in the other two aforementioned rural districts, different standard and non-standard language varieties alternate and interact according to a series of interrelated variables and situational contexts.

It was already pointed out (Del Gaudio 2018b: 84) that the varieties spoken throughout this territory are: a) the local dialects⁶; b) the three standard East Slavic languages (i.e. Belarusian, Ukrainian and Russian⁷); c) forms of mixed speech which carry different denominations⁸ in connection with the country where they are spoken.

³ With a surface of over 200,000 square kilometers, the low land Polissia (Bel. *Palesse*; Rus. *Poles'e*; Pol. *Polesie*) embraces most of northern Ukraine and southern Belarus³ as well as some of the south-western Russian regions and a small part of north-eastern Poland (western of the river Buh/Byr). For more details, see: <<http://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?linkpath=pages%5CP%5CO%5CPolisia.htm>> (latest access: 28.04.21).

⁴ Cfr. Durnovo *et al.* 1915, Buzuk 1926, Hancov 1928, Avanesaŭ 1964, Žylko 1953, Bevzenko 1985, lately Del Gaudio 2013a, 2018b, just to mention a few.

⁵ For an overview of ethnolinguistic studies on Polissia (Rus. *Poles'e*), see: Tolstaja 2017.

⁶ Belarusian dialectology classifies these dialects as the uttermost south and south eastern extensions of the middle and southwestern Belarusian dialects (Blinava, Mjaceł'skaja 1980: 205). On the other hand, in Ukrainian dialectology they represent the uppermost extension of eastern or, more exactly, north-eastern Polissian dialects, also known in the traditional Russian and Soviet (including Ukrainian and Belarusian) specialist literature, as 'transitional' from Ukrainian to Belarusian (Del Gaudio 2017: 66-67). The analysis of the features characterizing these border dialects are already the object of a parallel linguistic study which is still underway. A description of the most distinctive features of the Belarusian border dialects, especially in relation to other mesoletic varieties, will be omitted here for two basic reasons: a) the elaborated data are still very limited at present; b) their exemplification would by far exceed the mere sociolinguistic approach chosen for this paper. For an overview, see: Del Gaudio 2013a, 2014.

⁷ One could further distinguish between 'national' and regional varieties of Russian along with regionalized varieties of Belarusian and Ukrainian. This additional differentiation, however, would further complicate the already complex picture of these areas. Moreover it will deserve further research which goes far beyond the scope of the present study.

⁸ It is worth reminding that this mixed speech based on the vernacular of the respective ethnic languages with the addition of (presumed and / or real) Russian elements along with a number

The analysis of data and their comparison with previous results will be preceded by an outline of the methodological design and by a short account of relevant benchmarks characterizing language use in the district of Loeŭ. However, unlike earlier studies, aspects of the generalized language situation of Belarus' and Ukraine will only be contextually discussed.

1. *Methodological Design*

The bulk of dialectal and sociolinguistic interviews in the district of Loeŭ was carried out in early autumn 2017 and, to a very limited extent, in late spring 2018. These periods facilitate personal contacts with a community outsider for a number of social and psychological reasons: relatively good weather; term time for educational institutions; longer days; possibility of meeting people outside their homes and in the fields etc. As in the case of the district of Homel⁹ but unlike the Ripky area, the actual field work had to be chiefly concentrated in only one phase ('expedition'). This choice was conditioned by a series of organizational and bureaucratic factors⁹ which regulate the research access to the border territories, especially in times of international tension due to the Ukrainian-Russian geopolitical and military conflict (2014 to date). Notwithstanding these limitations a certain degree of participant observation on generalized language habits (e.g. language selection in situational contexts, linguistic landscape etc.) had been possible during previous scholarly visits to Belarus'.

The logistic base and starting point for the collection of both dialectal, social and sociolinguistic data was the small village of Byvalki which is situated at approximately the same latitude as Radul', a small settlement in the former district of Ripky (Ukraine)¹⁰.

Three local informants (two women and a man)¹¹, previously instructed about the research aims, supported my dialectal and sociolinguistic expeditions to other rural villages

of hybrid forms is generally known as *Trasjanka* in Belarus' and *Suržyk* in Ukraine. Some Ukrainian linguists adopt the designation of "Ukrainian-Russian *Suržyk*". Avoiding here the long-lasting terminological discussion about the appropriateness of using these 'terms' of popular scientific origin [which have already found their way even into authoritative Belarusian and Ukrainian language encyclopedias and publications], I will follow the already established practice of recent research on the topic. Therefore the linguistic terms "Belarusian Russian Mixed Speech" (BRMS) and "Ukrainian Russian Mixed Speech" (URMS) will have a more specific usage in line with the Oldenburg sociolinguistic school (cfr. Hentschel 2017: 18). On the other hand, the more common designations of *Trasjanka* and *Suržyk* will alternate with the former definitions when referring to general aspects of these varieties or to publications in which these 'terms' are already established. On the terminological issue, also see: Del Gaudio 2015a: 215-216.

⁹ Required institutional invitations, visa, circulation permits etc.

¹⁰ More precisely, the urban-type Ripky is positioned about 23 km south-east of Radul'.

¹¹ I wish to express my gratitude for the support and assistance during the interviews to Andrjanec Halina Borisovna (sociolinguistic questionnaires), Dubacova Valjancina Ivanaŭna and ajcec Pryhara Aljaksandr (dialectal expeditions).

of the same district and to the southern periphery of the town of Loeŭ. Besides personal field notes (ethnographic / traditional dialectological approach), dialectal data were audio recorded with semi-structured interviews and some degree of elicitation techniques. On the other hand, social and sociolinguistic materials, particularly relevant for the present discussion, were mainly acquired by means of a previously prepared questionnaire. The structure and the contents of the questionnaire(s) resembled the pattern already used for the Ukrainian survey¹² (first stage of the project) and the district of Homel' (second stage). The questionnaire structure and its contents will be illustrated in § 3. One hundred questionnaires were also distributed among a number of pre-selected small rural settlements (see: TABLE 1). About thirty sociolinguistic interviews had to be completed and recovered *in absentia* by one of the local informants who assisted me in late spring 2018. It is well known that a questionnaire is used with the purpose of assembling social and sociolinguistic data in a relatively short time (cfr. Milroy, Gordon 2003: 52). This proved to be particularly convenient in an area where there exists a series of 'bureaucratic' hindrances and local people are not always so keen to give a stranger information about personal and national identity, work / profession, social and language behaviour.

The small corpus of collected data was stored and elaborated with the help of Microsoft Access (a Database management system).

2. The District of Loeŭ: Geo-Linguistic Context

The district of Loeŭ (Bel. *Loeŭski raën*, created in 1926) is one of the 21 districts making up the region of Homel'¹³. It is situated in the south-eastern part of the region and borders the following districts: Homel' (Bel. *Homel'ski raën*)¹⁴ in the north-east, Brahin (Bel. *Brahinski raën*) in the west, Rëčica (*Rëčycki raën*) in the north-west and for a small part with Chojnicki (*Chojnicki raën*) also in the north-west. At the same time the district of Loeŭ is separated from the region of Černihiv (Ukraine) and, more specifically, with the former district of Ripky by the rivers Dnipro and partially Sož. The main administrative-economic and cultural centre is the town of Loeŭ located on the right bank of the Dnipro at approximately the same latitude of the Ukrainian village of Zaderijivka (Ukr. *Zaderijivka*, also object of research) and about 100 km south-west of the city of Homel'¹⁵.

¹² The questions were translated from Ukrainian into Belarusian and adapted to the needs of Belarusian respondents.

¹³ It is worth remembering that the region of Homel' is one of the six and largest regions making up the Republic of Belarus'. It is situated in the south-eastern part of Belarus', bordering Ukraine in the south and south-west and the Russian Federation in the east.

¹⁴ This is not to be confused with the region and the city of Homel'; the latter is considered to be the 22nd administrative unit and main political-administrative centre of the entire region, being endowed with a special status.

¹⁵ For a more detailed account about the district of Loeŭ, see: <<http://loeŭ.gomel-region.by/by/>> (latest access: 02.05.21).

According to the 2009 census, the ethnic component of the district of Loeŭ was made up by 92.9% Belarusians, 4.4% Russians and 1.84% Ukrainians. As to the native language (Bel. *rodnaja mova*): 87.05% of the inhabitants claimed Belarusian as their ‘mother tongue’; 11.6% opted for Russian and 1.35% indicated other languages. Of these 63.43 % said to use Belarusian in familiar settings and 32.54% Russian¹⁶. It is clear that these figures, as often remarked in similar studies, did not consider further variability and, under the tag ‘Belarusian’, also local dialects and, to a good extent, the BRMS (‘Trasjanka’) are to be included / understood. As pointed out by Kittel *et al.* (2018: 133) “[...] halten die meisten Sprecher die WRGR für eine Variante des Weißrussischen, was sich in den Zensus-Erhebungen ‘beschönigend’ für das Weißrussische niedergeschlagen haben konnte” (also, Hentschel, Kittel 2011).

Even though at this stage of research we do not have access to any quantitative data, participant observation (autumn 2017) confirmed that Russian, or its debated Belarusian variety (B-Russian)¹⁷, tended to dominate the language habits and the linguistic landscape of the centre of Loeŭ. The situation in the small district centre, especially in regard to the linguistic landscape, contrasts with that of Černihiv (Ukraine) but it reflects the generalized language attitudes of Homel’. The language situation of the Loeŭ surrounding periphery and further rural areas is less homogeneous as the data illustrated below reveals (cfr. § 3.), with a likely minor degree of Russification compared to the district of Homel’¹⁸. Also in this case, it can be spoken of as a sort of ‘polyglossia’ consisting of three sometimes overlapping layers: a) an official and ostensible asymmetric Belarusian-Russian bilingualism, with a clear-cut dominance of Russian over Belarusian; b) forms of Belarusian-Russian mixed speech whose peculiar features still need to be studied, especially in relation to the local dialects; c) rural dialect(s). As it will emerge in § 3., older people (especially over 75) in small rural villages still retain, to a great extent, their local dialect, even when addressed in Belarusian, Russian or Ukrainian. People of the middle generations (36-65) tends to speak B-Russian with additional local features with strangers and / or outsiders, using, presumably, the BRSM among themselves and in informal, non-controlled conversations as emerged in similar studies (Kittel *et al.* 2010). This point, however, remained unobserved during field work due to the relatively limited time spent in the place and also because it went beyond the immediate scope of research, prevalently directed to the acquisition of dialectal data.

¹⁶ Cfr. <<https://archive.is/20120523225241/belstat.gov.by/homep/ru/perepic/2009/itogii.php>> (latest access: 02.05.21).

¹⁷ The typical variety of Russian spoken in Belarus’ or ‘Belarusian Russian’ (also known as Russian ‘natiolect’) has been studied by a number of linguists both in Belarus’ and abroad during the last fifteen years. Among the most recent publications we can mention: Woolhiser 2012, Del Gaudio 2013b, Zeller, Sitchinava 2019 etc.

¹⁸ This statement based on personal observation needs to be verified and requires further field research.

3. *Language Situation in the District of Loeŭ*

The results of field research (autumn 2017; spring 2018) will be examined in this section. The analysed data will be compared with previous outcomes derived from parallel sociolinguistic studies conducted in the districts of Ripky (Ukraine) and Homel' (Belarus').

Most interviews with related questionnaires were conducted in the villages listed in TABLE 1. A small number of questionnaires was also distributed in the southern periphery of the town of Loeŭ (district centre). The essential geo-historical facts about each rural village were noted down during field-work or, alternatively, derived from the *Encyclopedia About Towns and Villages in the Region of Homel* (Marcèleŭ 2005) and, occasionally, from the Belarusian wikipedia¹⁹.

The questionnaire contained 40 questions. These were approximately structured in blocks of 10 questions. The FIRST segment concentrated on generic aspects and on the social characterization of informants, for example: nationality, place of birth, sex (gender²⁰), education, residence, mobility etc. More exactly, the first seven questions concentrated on such independent variables such as nationality, place of birth, sex, age etc.

The SECOND portion of questions was about the level and duration of school instruction / education, employment and / or retirement and the degree of mobility. Only two questions (respectively 10 and 12) were about the language of teaching at school.

The THIRD block and more relevant set of questions (18 to 30) focused on individual language use, perceptual assessment and characterization of the local dialect, first and / or native language in relation to other language varieties.

The FOURTH group of questions (31 to 36), asked for a) language and self-identification (e.g. Belarus', the region, the village etc.); b) language selection and the situational contexts: work, colleagues etc.; c) language use in the media or social media, e.g. internet etc.

The last three questions (37 to 39), once again, were about language (dialect). This time, though, respondents were asked to evaluate in percentage the use of the local dialect when they speak with either men or women and who, between men and women, more frequently uses the local dialect.

Adhering to the scheme of the two preceding pieces of research, all the fundamental language issues have been gathered in one single block, thus modifying the original structure of the questionnaire. This time, however, differently from previous contributions, questions 37 to 39, have been included in the block on "dialect and language use" (§ 3.3.). This change intends to simplify the analysis and comparison of language trends in order to attain a more effective discussion.

¹⁹ <<https://be.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ручаёўка>> (latest access: 10.04.21).

²⁰ From now on, we shall only use the term 'sex' for this variable since it best fits into a more isolated rural society which still keeps traditional values, e.g. self-identification and role subdivision.

TABLE 1. Villages in the district of Loeŭ (Belarus')

Rural settlements		Type of settlements	Population	Administration
Byval'ki	Бывалькі	village	802 (1999)	self-rule
Haradok	Гарадок	village	90 (1999)	dependent on Byvalki
Sinsk	Сінск	village	102 (1999)	administered by Byvalki
Dzjaražychy	Дзяражычы	village	159 (1999)	administered by Byvalki
Trascjanec	Трасцянец	village	99 (1999)	administered by Byvalki
Kaŭpen'	Каўпень	village	512 (1999)	self-rule
Krupejki	Крупейкі	village	583 (1999)	dependent on Kaŭpen'
Moħaŭ	Моħаў	village	359 (1999)	dependent on Kaŭpen'
Ručaĵoŭka	Ручаёўка	village	329 (2010)	self-rule
Dzimamierki	Дзімамеркі	village	226 (1997)	dependent on Ručaĵoŭka
Karpaŭka	Карпаўка	village	420 (1999)	self-rule
Abakumy	Абакумы	village	148 (1999)	dependent on Karpaŭka
Haminka	Хамінка	village	282 (1999)	dependent on Karpaŭka

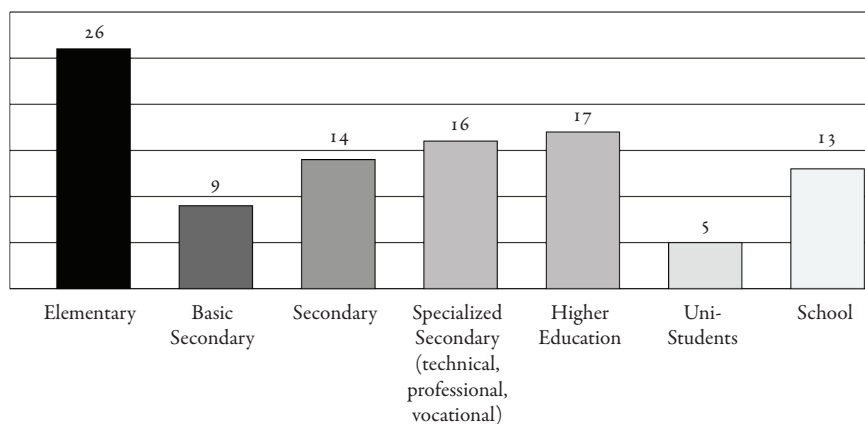
3.1. *Social Characterization: Nationality, Place of Birth, Age, Sex*

This section illustrates the first block of introductory questions. The absolute majority of respondents (96 out of 100) were born in Belarus' and originated from the surveyed area. Three female informants originally moved from the adjacent district of Ripky (region of Černihiv, Ukraine) and one was born in Russia. However, all had spent most of their life in this neighbourhood at the time of the interview.

AGE: the age of respondents ranged between 14 and 93 years: fifty belonged to the old generation (≥ 66); the other half was more heterogeneous, including the young, the middle and middle-older generation: ≥ 14 . The oldest respondent was a female aged 93 at the time of interview from Ručaĵoŭka, while the youngest were three teenagers (school) from Byvalki and Dzilaŭka.

SEX: in Loeŭ rural area female respondents clearly prevailed over the males: 78 vs. 22. The reasons for this gap, as amply discussed in the specialist literature, can be explained in terms of historical-demographic factors, especially in relation to the old population, and the higher degree of availability (retired) women have for social interviews (Del Gaudio 2020: 179).

GRAPHIC 1. Age and Education



■ Age: 72+	26
■ Age: 61+	9
■ Age: 42+	14
■ Age: 23+	16 17
■ Age: 17+	5
■ Age: 14+	13

3.2. Education, Language of Instruction, Occupation

This block of questions (№ 8 to 14) concentrated on such variables as education, language of school instruction²¹ and type of occupation.

Most respondents (**fifty-four**) were retired at the time of the interview. The other half can be roughly divided into two groups: 1) those who were working (**twenty-six**) and acknowledged different occupations, e.g. director, manager, nurse, teacher, driver etc. and 2) those who were attending either school (**twelve**) or university (**eight**).

The relation between age and education can be visualized in GRAPHIC 1: the graphic representation shows that pensioners (≥ 60) had generally elementary instruction which, in some cases, had not even been completed. A small group of **nine** people, whose age ranged between 61 and 85, just achieved basic secondary (“lower-middle”) education; **fourteen** completed secondary school (“middle education”); **sixteen** obtained a professional-technical instruction (“specialized secondary school”); **seventeen** received higher education (bachelor or more)²²; **five** were still university students and **thirteen** were still at school.

²¹ Except for the disciplines Russian language and literature, Belarusian is the language of elementary learning in many provincial schools.

²² It is worth noting that among the group who obtained higher education there was *one* ninety-year-old female respondent.

The limited schooling of the majority of older respondents is explained by the fact that these people were born between the two World Wars or just before the outbreak of the Second World War and, for a number of socio-economic reasons connected with the military conflicts, had a very limited access to education.

The most diversified level of education can be observed in the age group 23-65. This may range from basic secondary (one respondent) to secondary school (seven respondents) through specialized secondary (e.g. technical, professional and vocational schools) to (basic) higher education (e.g. university, college etc.), thus confirming the trend already reported for the district of Ripky and, partially, for the district of Homel' (Del Gaudio 2020: 185-186).

As mentioned above, younger respondents, between 14 and 22 years, with a clear prevalence of females over males (16 vs. 5), were mainly studying when the interviews took place. The number of female university students overtakes that of their male colleagues (5 vs. 2). These data are in line with the results of the 2009 all Belarusian census²³ and other recent studies (Kittel *et al.* 2018: 151).

This survey, just like those conducted in the districts of Homel' and Ripky (Ukraine) and other similar studies, confirmed that the level of education is, overall, directly proportional to age (Del Gaudio 2020: 185-186; Kittel *et al.* 2018: 150-152).

3.2.1. Population Mobility and Settlement Type

The majority of respondents (80%) was non-mobile or indicated limited mobility; this was mainly confined to the district or the region of residence. Some of the university students temporarily resided in Homel' or commuted to the city from the surrounding districts. All respondents claimed to have permanent residence in Belarus²⁴. Pensioners and children, as one might have expected, were essentially anchored to their village. A small minority of older respondents (12%) had spent from a few months to a few years outside the region of residence or abroad, for example in other former Soviet Republics. Two female respondents aged 60 had even been in Western Europe, accompanying children from the Čornobyl' (Černobyl') area to Italy and southern France for health / cure purposes. A more restricted number of 'real' dialectal speakers originated and spent most of their life in the rural villages whose population did not exceed 3,000 inhabitants.

3.3. Dialect and Language Use

As stated above, all the points dealing with language, particularly in relation to dialect use, distribution, selection and assessment, focus of the present study, have been assembled

²³ <<https://belstat.gov.by/by/statystyka/demagrafichnaya-i-satsyyalnaya-statystyka/adukatsyya/>> (latest access: 02.05.21).

²⁴ Question 16 asked: "Калі ласка, укажыце, колькі часу ў цэлым Вы правялі / пражылі ў наступных краінах або колішніх савецкіх рэспубліках?" ('Please, specify how much time did you live / have you spent in one of the following countries of former Soviet Republics?' Translated by the author).

TABLE 2. Everyday Language

1	Belarusian (basically in a “pure” form)
2	LOCAL DIALECT
3	Russian (in a more or less “pure” form)
4	Belarusian with some Russian words
5	Russian with some Belarusian words
6	Belarusian with some Ukrainian words
7	Mixed language with a high occurrence of Belarusian, Ukrainian and/or Russian words
8	Other...

in this subsection. Central to this research were questions 18 to 23 and, to a more limited extent, questions 37 to 39.

Questions 18 to 23 directly addressed local speakers. These tried to elicit speakers’ judgements and evaluations (their perceptual characterization) about the language/dialect variety they use in everyday communication.

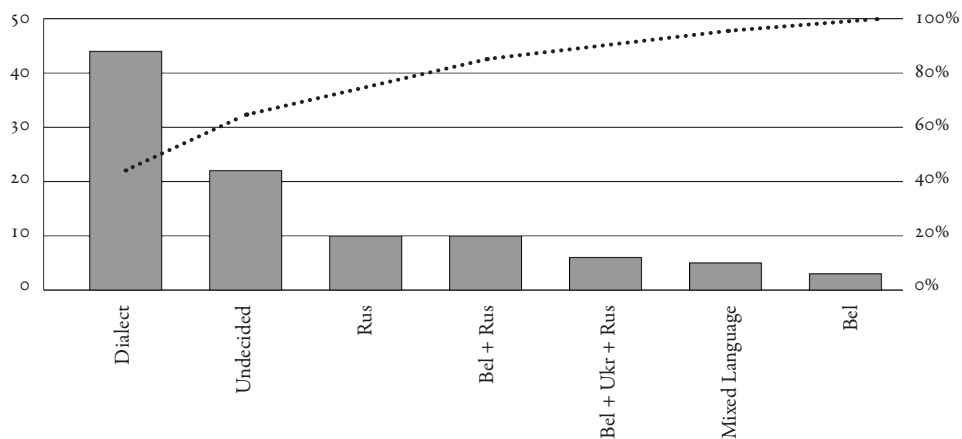
Question 18 was about everyday language selection. All the options to the question: “which language do you generally use in everyday life?” are well illustrated in TABLE 2²⁵: **forty-four** respondents acknowledged the local dialect as their primary language of everyday communication: **thirty-six** were between 66 and 93 years, and **eight** were between 15 and 65 (cfr. GRAPHIC 2). These results (44%) are closer to those obtained in the district of Ripky (49%) since the age range also includes respondents of the middle and young generations. On the other hand, a substantial variation in the use of dialect can be noted between the first two districts and that of Homel’ where only 13 to 15% acknowledged the local dialect²⁶ as their everyday language (cfr. Del Gaudio 2020: 188).

The relation between age and dialect use as everyday language revealed that also in the case of Loeŭ people of the older generation (66+) are more accustomed to the local dialect.

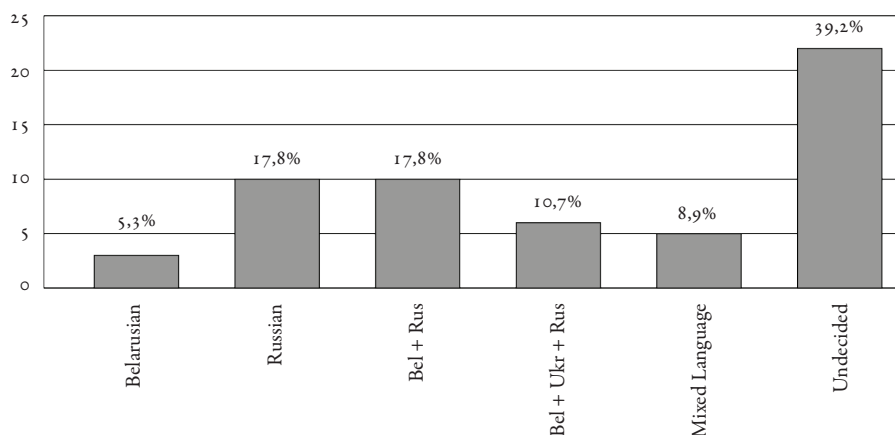
²⁵ The original question in Belarusian was: “Якую мову Вы, у асноўным, выкарыстоўваеце ў паўсядзённым жыцці?” (‘Which language do you generally use in everyday life?’). The options were: 1) Беларуская (у асноўным у ‘чыстай’ форме); 2) Мясцовая гаворка; 3) Руская (у асноўным у ‘чыстай’ форме); 4) Беларуская з некаторымі рускімі словамі; 5) Руская з некаторымі беларускімі словамі; 6) Беларуская з некаторымі ўкраінскімі словамі; 7) Змяшаную мову, з вялікай колькасцю як беларускіх, так і ўкраінскіх або рускіх слоў; 8) Іншая, а менавіта: ... (For the translation of these questions, see: TABLE 2).

²⁶ It should be remembered, however, that the survey could not be completed in the district of Homel’ for a number of hindrances. Otherwise, it is assumable that respondents claiming the local dialect as the everyday language would be higher but, according to our observation, less than in the Loeŭ area.

GRAPHIC 2. Every Day Language Use in the District of Loeŭ

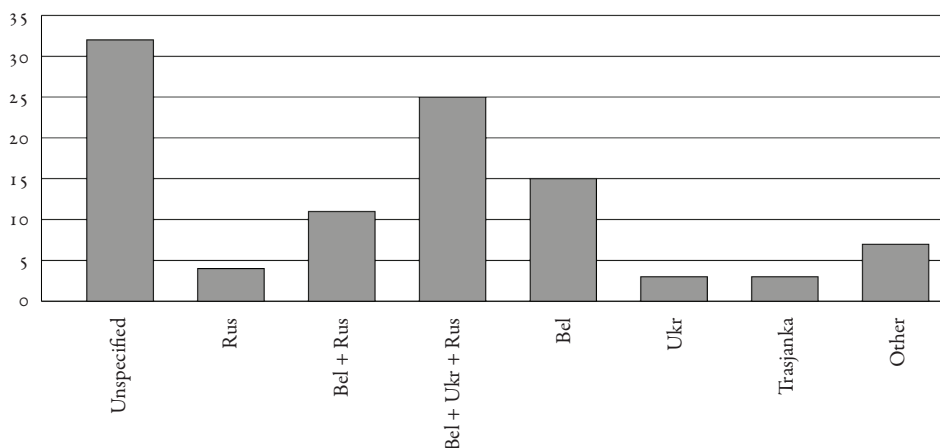


GRAPHIC 3. Language Use Except for the Local Dialect



The preferences about everyday language use, with the exclusion of the local dialect, (calculated on 56 persons), showed a more heterogeneous picture (cfr. GRAPHIC 3): **ten** respondents claimed they only use Russian as every day language (17.8%); **ten** respondents reported Belarusian and Russian (17.8%); **six** (not all originating from the nearby district of Ripky, Ukraine) said they were using Belarusian, Ukrainian and Russian (10.7%); **five** explicitly spoke of a mixed language (8.9%); **three** university students, most probably of the philological faculty of the university of Homel, acknowledged standard Belarusian as the main language of communication (5.3%) while the rest (**twenty-two**) was undecided or, most probably, tended towards a dialectal based mix (39.2%). The use of Ukrainian in the district of Ripky is not considerably higher since only 8% of the 100 respondents claimed to exclusively use standard Ukrainian as the language of everyday communication.

GRAPHIC 4. About the Local Dialect



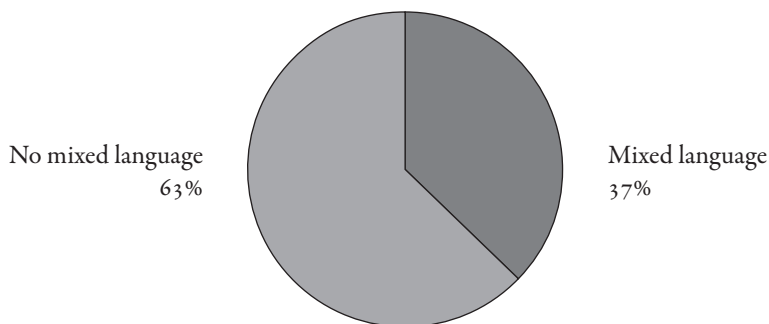
In question 19 respondents were asked, especially if they acknowledged themselves as dialectal native speakers, to provide a short description of their dialect (in concealed relation to Belarusian, Russian and Ukrainian) and to label it²⁷ (cfr. GRAPHIC 4).

The most frequent answer was simply “*mjascovaja*”, literally ‘local’, i.e. local dialect. As it was observed in the previous pieces of research, older dialectal informants, on the whole, seemed to be more aware of the similarity between their local dialect and Ukrainian, Russian or both languages. In fact, **twenty** respondents (20%), mainly belonging to the old generation (age: 74+) with the addition of **five** of the middle-older generation (age range: 39-67) associated their dialect with Belarusian, Ukrainian and Russian. The picture becomes looser when the entire age range is considered: **eleven** respondents (age: 14 to 67) claimed that their dialect is just similar to Belarusian and Russian; **fifteen** (age: 16-81, among them the absolute majority was between 42 and 72 years) correlated their dialect only to Belarusian; **three** speakers (two teenagers from Byvalki and a forty-two year old female with higher education from Loeŭ openly spoke of “Trasjanka” (BRMS); **three** (age: 66-76) associated it with Ukrainian and **four** (age: 37-69) with Russian. On the other hand, **thirty two** respondents, covering a wide age range: 14 to 80, could not provide the interviewer with a concrete answer. Finally, a smaller group saw either no similarities or just reasserted the word “dialect”.

In this survey, in contrast to the data obtained in the districts of Ripky and Homel, the similarity with the language of the neighbouring country, in this case “Ukrainian” was mentioned thrice. It should be reminded that Ukrainian respondents of the same age

²⁷ The Belarusian question was: “Ці можаце каротка расказаць пра вашу гаворку?” (‘Can you shortly tell about your local dialect?’ Translated by the author).

GRAPHIC 5. BRMS “Trasjanka”



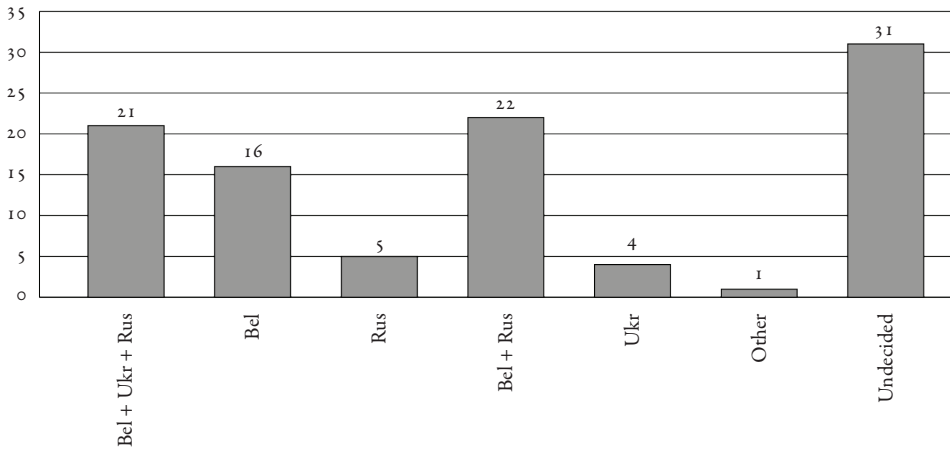
group in the district of Ripky barely associated any formal-structural similarity with Belarusian or, we can add, its varieties (Del Gaudio 2020: 189). As clearly illustrated above, a high degree of uncertainty can be noted in the perceptual attempt at defining the local dialect. In other words, about a **third** of local speakers of different age groups had difficulties in describing the affinity their home dialect shares with other related varieties and standard languages²⁸. Moreover, a certain degree of reticence was observed in the use of the word “Trasjanka”: only three respondents assimilated their speech to the Belarusian-Russian mixed speech (BRMS) and spoke frankly about it.

This cautiousness was confirmed by the next yes/no question (20) in the use of the mixed speech “with the addition of Ukrainian and Russian words”²⁹. Here (cfr. GRAPHIC 5), **sixty three** respondents out of one hundred (63%) denied the use of the mixed speech altogether, even contradicting their previous answers (question 19). Almost all typical dialectal speakers who had acknowledged the existence of Belarusian, Ukrainian and Russian elements in their local dialect (which our parallel dialectal study confirms to be true) categorically avoided this definition. As assumed, most respondents who admitted the use of the mixed speech as one of the main communication means belonged to the young and middle-old generations, in particular they were between 14 and 64 years of age, thus making up 25% of the affirmative answers. It should be pointed out, however, that quite a few respondents between 66 and 75 years of age (12%) also recognized themselves in this category.

²⁸ The speakers’ difficulty in assessing and describing their home dialect (perceptual dialectological approach), differentiating it from related forms of language mix is also confirmed by dialectal studies still underway. If some distinctive / formal criteria have been suggested to distinguish Ukrainian from other related varieties, e.g. Ukrainian-Russian language mix (cfr. Del’ Gaudio 2015a), the same, at the present stage of research, cannot be said for Belarusian.

²⁹ The exact question was: “does it happen that you sometimes speak a mixed language containing Belarusian, Ukrainian and Russian words?”

GRAPHIC 6. Dialect Similarity



It must be said, however, that the ‘traditional’ dialectal vernacular increasingly tends towards forms of language mix with a strong Russian component. These changes mostly concern young people’s speech. At the current stage of research it is difficult to prognosticate whether this process is more or less advanced than on the Ukrainian side of the border.

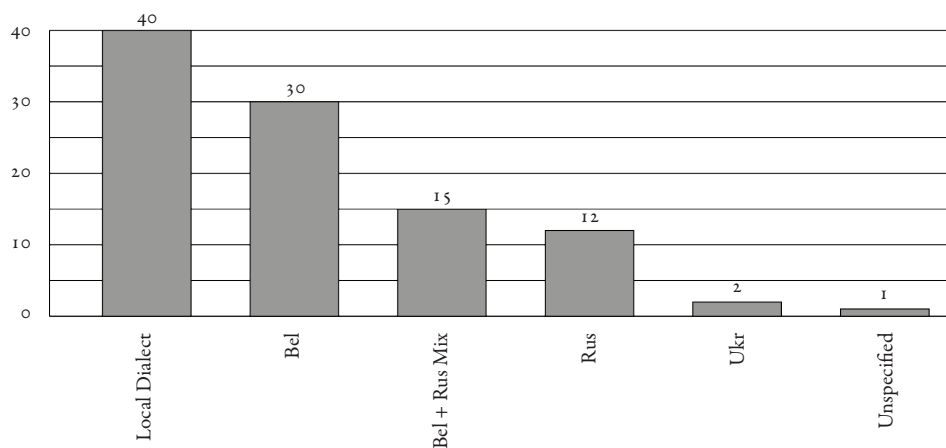
The subsequent question (21 “which of the following options is true of the dialect you speak”) aimed at completing the issue about the degree of similarity the local dialect has with the languages spoken in the border region, namely Belarusian, Ukrainian and Russian.

The answers substantially reflect the results obtained in question 19 (“about your dialect”): **twenty one** respondents, mainly older than 66 years, confirmed that they speak in a dialect which equally resembles Belarusian, Ukrainian and Russian; **sixteen** belonging to different age groups (16-81) just indicated Belarusian; **five** said Russian; **twenty two** saw an equal share of Belarusian and Russian in their speech but four respondents acknowledged a stronger Belarusian component; **thirty one** interviewees could not give a definite answer; **four** respondents found affinity with Ukrainian and **one** did not perceive any similarities at all. These data are represented in GRAPHIC 6.

In the foregoing points, particularly in graphic 4 and 6, it has emerged that primarily older speakers perceive a similarity of their local dialect as well as with Ukrainian. Older villagers’ perceptual evaluation probably relies on the fact that their dialectal varieties, particularly if compared with those of the middle and younger generations, have been less intensively affected by the strong standardization wave and process of convergence, especially towards Russian. In addition locals used to move more freely than today across the respective state borders during the Soviet period (and earlier in the Russian Empire), thus enhancing the communication possibilities with speakers living on the other side of the dialectal continuum³⁰. This constant interaction contributed to assure a more stable

³⁰ This aspect will be dealt with in a separate study.

GRAPHIC 7. First Language (L1)



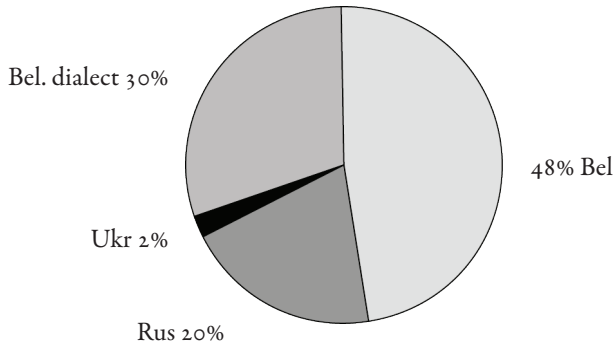
and consistent linguistic character to the dialects spoken across the borders. The gradual increasing in divergence between the so called ‘transitional dialects’³¹ and their perception by their respective speakers undoubtedly depend on a number of factors such as a) school instruction accompanied by a more capillary diffusion of standard languages, b) growing mobility to large urban conglomerates or even emigration to other European countries, particularly in the last two decades, c) mass-and social media etc. The process of divergence in the micro language situation of these three contiguous areas began to change more rapidly after 1991 (e.g. the proclamation of Independence of both the Republic of Belarus’ and Ukraine) but it has become even sharper since the mid-2000s with the increased prestige of Ukrainian on its side of the border. Moreover, as already argued, both Ukrainian and Russian, although in different domains, exert a certain influence on local dialect(s) in the district of Ripky. On the other hand, in the districts of Loeŭ and Homel’ the *de facto* ‘roof-language’ is only Russian. Nevertheless, personal observation and some of the obtained data seem to suggest that the Belarusian-based varieties (including the BRMS) are slightly better off in the district of Loeŭ than in that of Homel’. However, this last point deserves further quantitative research.

Questions 22-23 asked about “which language/ dialect/ mixed speech locals began to speak as “first language”³² and in which situational context (home, school, work, street etc.). The selection followed among these languages: Belarusian, Ukrainian, Russian, lo-

³¹ The appropriateness of this conceptual characterization of these dialects will be re-examined in a separate study.

³² In general terms both definitions can be regarded synonymically as the first language a child begins to speak (= L1). However, in the case of Belarus’ and Ukraine the *native language* or *mother tongue* (Bel. *rodnaja mova*; Ukr. *ridna mova*) usually refers to the language of the (dominant) ethnic group of belonging rather than the language an individual began to speak first in the

GRAPHIC 8. Native Language



cal dialect, mixed Belarusian-Russian, mixed Belarusian-Ukrainian and / or other. The answers allowed more than one option. As is visible in GRAPHIC 7, **forty** respondents claimed dialect as L1; **thirty** Belarusian; fifteen the BRMS; **twelve** Russian – probably in its national or, more exactly, regional variety; **two** Ukrainian and **one** was undecided.

If we compare the above data with those obtained from the thematic related question 30: “Which language(s), besides those already mentioned, do you consider native?” (GRAPHIC 8)³³, the difference is remarkable, especially in connection with the options Belarusian (48%) and local dialect (30%). These results showed inverted positions compared to what had emerged in the previous graphic (7).

As already mentioned, such a discrepancy in favour of Belarusian as mother tongue (cfr. Bel. *rodnaja mova*) is not surprising (cfr. § 2.) and it is perfectly in line with the outcomes derived from analogous works (cfr. Zeller, Levikin 2016). It is well known that change in speakers’ attitudes can be explained in terms of national, cultural and psychological associations connected with the idea of the ‘national’ language³⁴ and state loyalty. Similar results about the language of the titular nation can in fact be found in the two parallel studies conducted in the districts of Ripky (Ukraine) and Homel’ (Belarus’). Moreover, the concept of what is to be understood under first language (L1) remains somehow vague for the average speaker.

domestic environ. Therefore ‘mother tongue’ is usually associated with a marker of ‘Belarusianess’ or ‘Ukrainianess’ and, as we shall see, this subtle opposition may bring about different results.

³³ Original question: “Якую мову / якія мовы, апрача вышэйназванай, Вы лічыце таксама сваёй роднай мовай (-амі)?”. The proposed options of the list were shortened and restricted to the following four: 1) local dialect (on a Belarusian base), 2) Belarusian, 3) Russian, 4) Ukrainian.

³⁴ In the Belarusian and other linguistic traditions, the term national language may be used synonymously with official and / or standard. Here the semantic inverted commas underline the role of Belarusian as the language of the Belarusian nation associated with specific cultural-historical and ethnic values which are *not* shared by all speakers alike.

The data reported in this subsection once again confirmed the higher degree of variation in language selection between the more isolated rural settlements and the urban centres. In Loeŭ and, even more manifestly, in Homel', Russian dominates most of the communicative spheres and all public domains in both its varieties (i.e. the more common B-Russian and the more controlled standard Russian specific to highly educated social groups). In small rural communities, local speakers, at least among themselves, may still speak the local dialect along with a gradience of mixed varieties. The use of standard Belarusian remains confined to isolated speakers of the middle-younger generations with a middle-higher education level and whose profession and/or university degree is directly connected with the Belarusian language and culture. In the adjacent Ripky area, as mentioned in other articles, the use of standard Ukrainian, although still limited and with an uneven distribution, is definitely more consistent, at least among young professionals. The social-political circumstances of the last five or six years and the outbreak of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict (2014 until today) has certainly given an impulse to the use of Ukrainian. Whether the relatively recent Belarusian social and political upheavals and anti-government demonstrations started in August 2020 will affect the further course of language policy and related language issues cannot be excluded. A sudden change could take place in case an unexpected turning point should occur in favour of more 'democratic' forces. But even in such a hypothesis, cultural changes always reach rural peripheries with a notable delay³⁵.

Question 23 asked for the place locals began "to speak the local dialect or, alternatively, the mixed speech". The options were: at parents' home, nursery school / school, university, college, technical schools, street, work, other. More than half of respondents indicated the parents' home as the place where they first began to acquire both the dialect: 60% (age range: 66 to 93) and the mixed speech 30% (age range: 14 to 65). A percentage could not be assigned to the above mentioned situational contexts because of the limited number of answers (about 10%). Nonetheless we plan to return to this point in a further stage of research. The picture is similar to the one obtained in the district of Homel' and in the Ripky area (Ukraine) but in contrast to what had been reported for Ripky, no one marked the options: college and/or university as the place where they began to speak either varieties.

Additional points concerned with language – although less relevant for the present research – were questions 33 to 39 (with the exception of 34). The full range of answers is unavailable for questions 33 and 35 to 38 and therefore the data reported below are incomplete. For this reason the data reported below can only give a partial view of the real language selection³⁶.

³⁵ This can be seen, for example, in the replacement of sign posts on the Ukrainian side of the border where, until our personal observation (early Summer 2020), the old nomenclature was partially kept despite the fact that a Ukrainian law on place names had been passed in 2016 and most Ukrainian towns had completely re-named their streets.

³⁶ We are planning to complement / supplement the missing data in a subsequent research.

Question 33 directly asked respondents to assess a sort of gradiency scale of which language and/or variety they select when speaking with people of different ages: a) older than 65; 35 to 65; 18 to 34; teenagers and children. A relative majority (30%) indicated dialect as the variety most frequently used when they address older people, especially over seventy years of age. This outcome is in line with previous research. Russian is used by 10% of respondents with the old generation while no answer was given for Belarusian and mixed speech. On the other hand, 25% of respondents indicated mixed speech as the usual variety when turning to people between 35 and 65 or even younger; 15% Russian and 4% Belarusian in its standard form. This ratio contrasts with the results obtained in the district of Homel' where the percentage of those using Russian with all age groups is significantly higher: 60% of the total. The trends indicated above differ, at least to a certain extent, with the data obtained in the Ripky area where, as is known, standard Ukrainian occupies a somewhat better position than standard Belarusian, and Russian is more evenly distributed along the different age groups (cfr. Del Gaudio 2020: 192-193).

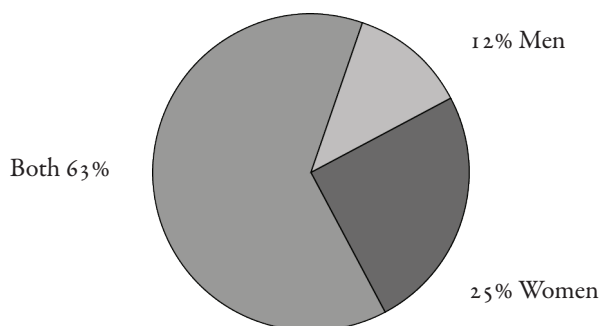
Questions 35 and 36 can be seen as a countercheck and, at same time, a deepening of question 23 since they tried to establish in further detail which language people select in 1) educational institutions (35) and 2) in a work environments (36). The choice in both cases implied: Belarusian, dialect, Russian, mixed speech with a triple distinction: mixed speech more similar to a) Russian; b) Belarusian; c) Ukrainian.

As for the language used in educational institution, in particular at school (question 35), we obtained the following (partial) results: dialect 5%; Russian 10%; Belarusian: 40%; BRMS 10%. The overwhelming use of Belarusian is obviously true only for some rural realities where the number of schools with Belarusian as the main language of instruction is territorially better rooted compared to middle and large urban settlements. This finding is confirmed by similar studies, although their statistical data refer to the period 2009-2010 (Kittel *et al.* 2018: 150)³⁷. Belarusian in the district of Loeŭ seems to enjoy a slightly fairer distribution, at least officially, than in the district of Homel' where Russian covers larger space in educational institutions. However, students at school, just as on the Ukrainian side of the border, tend to speak the mixed speech and/or Russian among themselves and in informal situational contexts.

Questions 37 to 39 conclude the block on language issues. In questions 37 and 38 respondents were asked to indicate which language variety among Belarusian, dialect, Russian and/or mixed speech they select when they speak with the opposite sex: men with women and women with men and, subsequently, to assign a percentage. On the other hand, question 39 simply asked to assign a percentage to those, between men and women, who, in the respondents' opinion, more frequently use the local dialect as the main communicative source. Questions 37 and 38 were only partially answered while all respondents answered question 39 (cfr. GRAPHIC 9). A clear majority of respondents (63%) specified that both men and women

³⁷ Also, see: *Tavarystva belaruskaj školy*, <<http://news.tut.by/society/246883.html>> (latest access: 03.05.2021).

GRAPHIC 9. Dialect Use Between Men and Women



make equal use of the dialect; 25% indicated women as more often turning to dialect, and 12% answered men. By and large, these answers reflect the results previously obtained in the districts of Homel' and Ripky. In the latter district, however, the absolute majority of respondents claimed an equal use of dialect between men and women, and only an insignificant percentage claimed that men more often turn to the local dialect in everyday communication.

3.4. *Media and Language Selection*

Questions 24 to 29 can be interpreted as a kind of semi-distractors since they asked about the relation between language selection and people's habits, preferences in the choice of TV programmes, reading materials, internet and social media.

Russian clearly prevails over Belarusian in the mass and social media. Belarusian covers no more than a small percentage of the communicative space³⁸. This is, at least officially, in evident contrast with the Ukrainian situation where teenagers and students have access to a relatively high percentage (75%) of Ukrainian broadcasting and internet sites³⁹.

As to the language of TV (question 25), the absolute majority of respondents (80%) stated that they regularly watch television. A small minority, made up of students and very old people, (20%) affirmed they do not watch television at all. The choice of programmes, especially for those respondents who live in the proximity of the Ukrainian border, is rela-

³⁸ A specific law regulating the 'quotas' in broadcasting activities is most likely inexistent. The only recent data are on the percentual use of Belarusian in press, journals and books in the period 1918-2018 (cfr. Rasinski 2019), <https://belinstitute.com/sites/biss.newmediahost.info/files/attached-files/2019-2-18%20Mova_Rasinski_FINALIS.pdf> (12.06.2020). Noteworthy is the fact that this page is not yet available or it has been deleted (latest access 02.05.2021).

³⁹ Cfr. Article 24 on the *State Language in Broadcasting Activities (TV and Radio)* (Ukr. Державна мова у сфері телебачення і радіомовлення), <<https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2704-19>> (11.06.2020).

tively ample. These people have simultaneously access to Belarusian, Ukrainian and Russian channels. However, Russian continues to be the most popular choice even in the district of Loeŭ with 56% of preferences; Belarusian follows with 44%. One needs to differentiate between those interviewees who sporadically search for broadcasting in Belarusian (16% of 44%) and those who more constantly claimed to be watching Belarusian programmes (30%). The preference assigned to Russian is also a direct consequence of the limited number of programmes in Belarusian. Belarusian state channels mainly broadcast in Russian, Belarusian is mainly confined to some commercials and news⁴⁰. Among the aforesaid respondents, 12% of the interviewees admitted to frequently listening to and/or watching programmes and films in Ukrainian⁴¹ and 10% rarely. The percentage of those choosing broadcasting in Ukrainian significantly differs from the situation witnessed so far in the districts of Homel' and Ripky in relation to Belarusian (cfr. Del Gaudio 2020: 195). Relying on these data, it can be said that Ukrainian enjoys a somewhat higher prestige in Belarus' than Belarusian in Ukraine. This may depend on a series of factors: a) the more consistent number of real speakers of Ukrainian; b) its longer and more consolidated literary and journalistic tradition; c) the territorial extension of the state and, last but not least, d) the fact that Ukrainian enjoys the status of the only official language of the neighbouring country.

Question (27) about "the language in which people read the press and books" does not substantially alter the picture reported above, particularly with reference to Belarusian and Russian. In fact 60% of all respondents sometimes read a newspaper or a journal. People of the middle-older generation tend to read more regularly than the younger generations who make a larger use of internet and social networks. A small majority (40%) occasionally reads local papers and books in Russian; 28% claimed to read occasionally in Belarusian: what sort of literature, though, remained unspecified. It was objectively difficult to find Belarusian press in newsstands not only in Loeŭ but also in Homel'⁴². As to Ukrainian, 8% admitted to rarely turn to Ukrainian press. This last outcome slightly differs from the results of the districts of Homel' and Ripky where almost no one appeared to be interested in reading the neighbour's language.

3.5. *Nationality, Identity and Language*

For the sake of brevity, questions 30 and 31 about language and identity (self-identification) will not be examined here in detail. Nevertheless, after a preliminary assessment of

⁴⁰ The TV channel Belsat (Bel. *Belsat*, Pol. *Bielsat*) which broadcasts in Belarusian language is based in Poland. It covers most of the former USSR but it is unavailable in Belarus'. Other senders, e.g. euroradio.fm; radyë svaboda (Czech Republic) are also subject to contingent restrictions and are mainly addressed to an intellectual élite who often coincides with the political opposition.

⁴¹ These people probably have relatives in Ukraine, they could be of Ukrainian origin or they live in border towns along/on the opposite site of the river Dnipro.

⁴² Personal observation 2017-2018.

available data and on the basis of analogous studies, it can be stated that most respondents consider themselves Belarusians independently from the language they speak. A similar attitude to language and identity can be found in the district of Ripky (Ukraine) and Homel' (Del Gaudio 2020: 198). In contrast to the preceding Ukrainian survey, however, respondents did not directly express themselves about their identification with a specific ethnic-cultural identity such as for example: East Slavic, Russian, European etc. (question 32). In general terms all respondents recognized their belonging to the Belarusian nation. Question 33 about "the sense of 'Belarusianness' in connection with a series of related variables such as place of birth, Belarusian origin, citizenship, respect of the law etc." as for the district of Homel' was left unanswered by the large majority of respondents.

4. *Towards a Final Conclusion*

The analysis of the most essential aspects characterizing the language situation in the rural district of Loeŭ temporarily concludes a piece of research devoted to the language situation across neighbouring border areas.

The methodological design adopted for the collection of language (dialect) and social data in the district of Loeŭ (cfr. § 1.) does not substantially differ from the approach used for the adjacent areas of Ripky and Homel'. The main difference consisted in the time available for each concrete field situation and logistic-organizational circumstances (cfr. Del Gaudio 2018b, 2020: 178-179).

Hence the necessity of conducting in the future additional fieldwork on the Belarusian side of the border. However, despite the lack of additional social data and some informational gaps concerning a) the "relation between the local dialect(s) and the mixed speech"; b) "a more accurate perceptual assessment of the local dialect"; c) "language, nationality and identity", a certain degree of reliable generalization can be accomplished.

The language selection in the surveyed rural areas essentially rotates around the following varieties: a) the local dialect(s); b) the B-Russian with some local (regional) features that also would deserve a closer examination and c) forms of mixed speech (linguistically known as Belarusian-Russian mixed speech or, in some specialist literature as "Trasjanka"). The latter variety could also include Ukrainian features, more evident in the speech of the middle-older generations where the process of dialect shift towards Russian is still underway. This last point also requires further research.

The entire rural territory is therefore characterized by an overlapping of different language codes, whose realization depends on a series of more or less interrelated variables. The local dialect(s)⁴³ are chiefly spoken by the older generations (66+) and best preserved by the oldest respondents (75+). This age group tends to be more aware of the (structural-lexical) similarities with the neighbouring languages, e.g. Ukrainian, Belarusian and Russian. However, the strong urbanization waves which intensified in the second half of the

⁴³ They are still being analysed.

20th century in all the former Soviet Union, along with the constant process of intense standardization, especially in favour of Russian, have noticeably reduced the use of dialects, triggering a dialectal levelling towards standard forms. The local dialect(s), in the entire examined area, is no longer the main source of everyday communication as might have been the case until the end of 1950s, when the collection of most dialectal Atlases had been already completed.

The compared figures showed that about half of respondents select dialect in everyday life in both the rural areas of Loeŭ (44%) and Ripky (49%) but less consistently in the district of Homel' (26%). It should be pointed out that significant variation between the first two results and that obtained in Homel' partly depends on the lower number of questionnaires returned for the Homel' area. The language options of the other half of respondents, especially those whose age ranged between 36 and 65, disclosed a more complex picture. This is in fact the population layer that may use the full scale of varieties with a preference for mixed speech in non-formal contexts, e.g. family, friends, (also considering the variable education). The linguistic characteristics of the mixed speech, especially in relation to the local dialects, still need to be studied for the Belarusian dialectal area. On the contrary, for the Ukrainian side, as already argued, the attempt at drawing a line differentiating local dialects from language mix is somewhat less complex. At present, however, the differentiation between Belarusian local dialects and forms of mixed speech goes beyond the scope of this paper.

Speakers of the middle and, above all, younger generations (14 to 35), unless they have a specific philological-linguistic background or a well-developed language consciousness, are less aware of the Ukrainian component in the 'Belarusian' dialects and / or of the Belarusian component in the 'Ukrainian' dialects. Young generations, with a few exceptions, tend to assimilate their local dialect to the BRMS in Belarus' and to URMS in Ukraine. In addition, young speakers, contrary to the assessment expressed by the middle and older generations who are more aware of the Belarusian and / or Ukrainian features in their 'language', are inclined to associate their dialect or, more likely, mixed speech to the 'roof' languages of their respective 'national' areas: Belarusian and Russian or Ukrainian and Russian.

Russian remains for the entire border region the main language of interethnic communication and it is widely used in most semi-formal situational contexts with a different gradience of frequency and distribution between the Ukrainian and Belarusian districts. Yet, in the Ripky area a growing minority of well-educated young speakers consciously opting for the 'national' language tend to characterize the Ripky district over the last decade, whereas young language 'patriots' are definitely rarer and more isolated in the Belarusian part of the border.

As to language selection in mass- and social media, the following generalization is possible: the state languages (in the case of the Belarusian districts this is Russian) dominate in TV programmes, Internet, social media, press and literature. Nevertheless, a small minority of informants likewise watches Ukrainian TV in Belarus' and Belarusian TV in

Ukraine. On both sides of the border, though, one notes a tendency to avoid reading in the 'national' language of the bordering land.

Another common cross-regional discrepancy can be observed in the option about first language and native language (mother tongue). When the question is about the mother language, the number of respondents who chose Belarusian in Belarus' and Ukrainian in Ukraine noticeably increased, followed by Russian and local dialect(s).

The issues of language in relation to social and national identity have been marginally dealt with for the Belarusian districts in consequence of the limited number of answers.

The points discussed in this study will be further developed in a successive stage of research. This will be necessary in order to give a more comprehensive interpretation of the language situation of the entire border area.

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Abstract

Salvatore Del Gaudio

The Language Situation in the District of Loeŭ (Belarus')

The article describes the language situation in the rural district of Loeŭ in Belarus', focusing on dialect use, especially in relation to other language varieties. The study of this border region, separated from the former Ripky district in Ukraine (Region of Černihiv) by the river Dnipro, is part of a more extensive research project. The latter includes the segment of the Polissian geo-linguistic macro-region situated between Belarus' and Ukraine but not distant from the Russian Federation. Different language varieties co-exist in this border area whose use and distribution is determined by a number of related variables. The analysis and the illustration of data will be preceded by an outline of the methodological design and by a short account of the geo-linguistic context typifying the district of Loeŭ.

Keywords

Language Situation; Belarus'; Loeŭ District; Belarusian; Ukrainian; Russian.