

ON RUSSENORSK

Frederik Kortlandt

The concept of mixed language has recently gained some popularity, to my mind for no good reason. It is unclear how a mixed language can be distinguished from the product of extensive borrowing or relexification. I therefore think that the concept only serves to provoke muddled thinking about linguistic contact and language change. Note e.g. that Munske adduces German as an example “because the author is a professor of German linguistics and because the phenomenon of language mixing can be explained better in relation to a language on which a large amount of research has been done than, for example, in relation to pidgin and creole languages” (1986: 81).

Peter Bakker and Maarten Mous claim that “extreme borrowing never exceeds roughly 45% of the lexicon, whereas in some of the mixed languages discussed the proportion of ‘foreign’ lexical elements is closer to or over 90%, and this figure is the same whether one counts types or tokens. There do not seem to be languages with a proportion of borrowed items between 45% and 90%, so that there is no continuum between languages with heavy borrowing and mixed languages” and that “in the mixed languages most of the core vocabulary tends to be foreign” (1994: 5). When we look at the short text in Bakker’s prime example of a mixed language, Michif (1994: 28-30), we find the following distribution of French and Cree items.

– French elements: *un vieux* ‘an old’, *un matin* ‘a morning’, *ses pièges* ‘his traps’, *une tempête* ‘a storm’, *pas moyen* ‘no way’ (2x), *son shack* ‘his cabin’ (2x), *le vieux* ‘the old’, *d’un gros arbre* ‘at a big tree’, *une bonne place* ‘a good place’, *le loup de bois* ‘the timber wolf’, *le loup* ‘the wolf’ (4x), *sa bouche* ‘his mouth’, *son bras* ‘his arm’, *dans la queue* ‘by the tail’, *par la queue* ‘by the tail’.

– Cree stems: ‘trap’ (2x), ‘wake up’, ‘be sick’ (2x), ‘want-go-see’, ‘leave’, ‘be busy’, ‘bad-weather’, ‘find’ (2x), ‘be lost’, ‘walk’ (2x), ‘play out’, ‘sit upright’, ‘die’ (2x), ‘think of’, ‘see’, ‘run’, ‘wait for’, ‘look at’, ‘come-thus-run’, ‘sit’, ‘open’ (2x), ‘want-take’, ‘push forward’, ‘take from’, ‘pull inside out’, ‘run back go home’.

– Cree words: ‘and’ (3x), ‘still’, ‘this’ (4x), ‘meantime’, ‘there’ (2x), ‘here’, ‘it is said’, ‘that’ (2x), ‘where’, ‘again’.

– Cree affixes: 50 instances (12 prefixes and 38 suffixes). It is clear that Bakker’s prime example does not fulfil his own criteria of mixed languages and that we are simply dealing with heavy borrowing of French nouns into Cree.

French articles and possessives are treated as prefixes which were borrowed together with the head noun.

In the following I shall discuss another example of a mixed language, viz. Russenorsk, a pidgin which was spoken by Norwegian and Russian fishermen along the Arctic coast of Norway in the 19th century. Our major source of information on this language is Broch & Jahr 1984; other important contributions are Lunden 1978 and Peterson 1980. Note that Russenorsk was a ‘seasonal’ language, not used continuously throughout the year but only during part of the summer fishing season (Lunden 1978: 213). It cannot therefore be compared with a natural language but illustrates the process of language mixing in a situation where creolization never had a chance.

Following Olaf Broch, Lunden lists three salient features of Russenorsk which are frequently quoted in the literature:

(1) the use of *moja* and *tvoja* as 1st and 2nd sg. personal pronouns,
 (2) the use of the preposition *po/på* as a general marker of oblique relations,
 (3) the development of a verbal marker *-om*, e.g. *kapitan paa kajuta slipom* ‘the captain is asleep in his cabin’. Since these features serve as a kind of shibboleth, they may reflect “a case of speaking “the way foreigners speak”, rather than speaking “the other man’s language””, as Lunden puts it (1978: 215). It follows that we must distinguish between a person speaking his own language, a person simplifying his own language in order to make himself understood, and a person trying to use his interlocutor’s language. We should therefore expect to find six components of Russenorsk, depending on the nationality of the speaker and his three types of linguistic performance. The effort which goes into “speaking the way foreigners speak” beside “speaking the other man’s language” accounts for the fact that both partners may believe that they are actually speaking each other’s language. I shall now test this hypothesis by analyzing a dialogue recorded by A. W. S. Brun, cited and translated by Peterson (1980: 253f.), and reproduced by Broch & Jahr (1984: 130f.). The speakers are abbreviated as Nor[wegian] and Rus[sian]; unambiguous Norwegian and Russian words are indexed by subscript N and R while German, Dutch, English and ambiguous words remain unmarked (in accordance with Peterson 1980); the orthography follows Broch & Jahr (1984) except for *æ* and *aa*, which are replaced by *e* and *o*.

Nor: *Kjøp_N I_N seika, treska_R, tiksa o_N balduska?* ‘Are you buying pollack, cod, haddock, and halibut?’ The speaker uses his own language, except for the fact that the fish names are apparently language-independent.

Rus: *Da_R, da_R - moja_R kopom_R altsamma_N, davai_R po skip_N kom_N.* ‘Yes, yes - I’ll buy all of it, come on board.’ The speaker adapts his own language *moja kopom* and switches to Norwegian *altsamma, po skip kom*.

Nor: *Spasiba_R! har_N I_N mokka_R, har_N I_N groppa_R?* ‘Thank you! Do you have flour, do you have grain?’ The speaker uses his own language, except for the word of thanks and for the names of the commodities he wants to purchase.

Rus: *Da_R, da_R! Davai_R po skip_N kom_N, brat_R, po tjei_R driki_N.* ‘Yes, yes! Come on board, brother, drink some tea.’ The speaker clearly tries to speak Norwegian, though the interjections *da*, *davai*, *brat* are Russian.

Nor: *Blagdaru_R pokorna_R! Kok_R tvoja_R betalom_Nfor_N seika?* ‘I humbly thank you! What are you paying for pollack?’ The speaker now tries to adopt the simplified language of his interlocutor, *tvoja betalom* echoing *moja kopom*, but the main verb and focus of the message is still Norwegian *betalom for seika*.

Rus: *Pet_R pudof_R seika 1 pud_R moki_R.* ‘Five poods of pollack for one pood of flour.’ This is Russian.

Nor: *Kor_N i_N tykje_N e_N de_N laga_N? I_N mo_N gjer_N de_N billiar_N!* ‘How the hell is that figured out? You have to make it cheaper!’ This is pure Norwegian.

Rus: *Kak_R sprek? Moje_R niet_R forston.* ‘What did you say? I don’t understand.’ Again, the speaker adapts his own language and uses verbs from the language of his interlocutor.

Nor: *Dorgo_R, dorglo_R Rusmain_N - prosjai_R!* ‘Expensive, expensive, Russian - goodbye!’ The speaker uses Russian words without any sentence structure.

Rus: *Nietsjevo_R! sjetiri_R - gall_N!* ‘Okay! four - and a half!’ This is Russian, except for the focus of the message, which is in Norwegian.

Nor: *Davai_R fir_N - nietsjevo_R verrigod_N.* ‘Make it four, okay, good.’ Apart from the interjections *davai* and *nietsjevo*, this is Norwegian.

Rus: *Njet_R, brat_R! Kuda_R moja_R selom_N desjevli_R? Grot djur_N mokka_R po Rusleien_N dein_N or_N.* ‘No, brother! Where can I sell it cheaper? Flour is very expensive in Russia this year.’ The speaker adapts his own language and substitutes the Norwegian verb, then switches to Norwegian in the second sentence.

Nor: *Tvoja_R niet_R sainferdi_N sprek.* ‘You’re not telling the truth.’ The speaker imitates the simplified language of his interlocutor but the focus of the message is in Norwegian.

Rus: *Jes, grot sainferdi_N, moja_R niet_R lugom_N, djur_N mokka_R.* ‘Yes, it’s very true, I’m not lying, flour is expensive.’ The speaker tries to answer in Norwegian, adapts his own language and uses Norwegian words in the three foci of the message.

Nor: *Kak_R tvoja_R kopom_R - davai_R fir_N pud_R; kak_R tvoja_R niet_R kopom_R - so_N prosjai_R!* ‘If you want to buy - four poods; if you don’t want to buy - then, goodbye!’ The speaker imitates the simplified language of his interlocutor, but the focus of the message *fir* is still Norwegian.

Rus: *No_N, nietsjevo_R brat_R, davai_R kladi_R po dek_N.* ‘Well, okay brother, put the fish on the deck.’ This is essentially a Russian sentence.

When we evaluate the evidence, it is clear that there is a substantial difference in linguistic behavior between the two parties of the dialogue. The Nor-

wegian uses his own language; when he adopts simplified Russian expressions from his interlocutor, the focus of the message always remains Norwegian. The Russian on the other hand simplifies his own language for the sake of his interlocutor and switches to Norwegian all the time, the only exceptions being his first offer *pet pudof seika 1 pud moki* and his final consent *nietsjevo brat, davai kladi po dek*. There is no mixed language here but a dialogue between a Russian speaking foreigners' talk and limited Norwegian and a Norwegian speaking his own language and imitating the Russian's foreigners' talk. The focus of the messages is always in Norwegian, whether the speaker is Norwegian or Russian. It follows that Russenorsk is a variant of Norwegian with an admixture of Russian foreigners' talk.

While the concept of mixed language seems to have originated from under-analysis of linguistic data, the putative grammar of Russenorsk appears to result from linguistic overanalysis. The alleged nominal suffixes *-a* and *-i* (Broch & Jahr 1984: 43f., 63) are simply the Russian sg. and pl. endings which were borrowed as part of the names of the merchandise. When a Norwegian asks in Russian foreigners' talk:

Nogoli dag tvoja reisa po Archangel otsuda? 'How many days did you travel from/to Archangel to/from here?' (*nogoli dag* < *mnogo li dag*, R. *otsuda* 'from here'), the Russian says in Norwegian:

Ja po madam Klerck tri daga lige ne. 'I lay three days at Mrs. Klerck's.', with the regular ending *-a* after the Russian numeral *tri* (Broch & Jahr 1984: 113, 118). The adjectival *-a* is the Russian feminine and unstressed neuter ending which was borrowed as part of the adjectives. The verbal ending *-om* represents the Scandinavian hortative ending *-om*, not only because the preceding verb stem is usually Germanic and because over 50% of the instances are introduced by *davai* or *værsego* (Broch & Jahr 1984: 47), but especially because it is pronounced [um], as is clear from the manuscripts, and cannot therefore be of Slavic origin. There are only four Russian verbs in *-om*, viz. *kopom* 'buy', *robotom* 'work', *smotrom* 'see', *kralom* 'steal'; the isolated form *podjom* 'let's go' does not count because it is not attested in a sentence. Russian verb forms are usually imperatives or infinitives; the form *vros* '(you) lie' is not 2nd sg. but uninflected: *moja njet vros (lygom)* 'I do not lie'. Thus, there is no trace of Russian grammar in the language.

I conclude that Russenorsk is a variant of Norwegian with an admixture of Russian foreigners' talk and elements from the native language of the speaker. The concept of mixed language is misleading because there is a fundamental asymmetry between the two parties in the dialogue, both of whom essentially speak Norwegian. There is no Russian element in the grammar, which is Norwegian, though not limited by the standard language but full of pragmatic variation, especially topicalization. The attested material illustrates the regular mechanism of language change through imperfect learning.

References

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