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 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, treskaR, tiksa oN 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: *DaR, daR - mojaR kopomR altsammaN, davaR po skipN komN.* ‘Yes, yes - I’ll buy all of it, come on board.’ The speaker adapts his own language *moja kopom* and switches to Norwegian *alsamma, po skip kom.*
Nor: Spasiba! har, I mokka, har, I groppa? *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, da! Davai po skip kom, brat, po tjei driki. *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 pokorna! Tvoja betalom for 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 pudof seika 1 pud moki. *Five poods of pollack for one pood of flour.* This is Russian.

Nor: Dorgo, dorglo Rusmain! prosjai! *Expensive, expensive, Russian - goodbye!* The speaker uses Russian words without any sentence structure.

Rus: Nietsjevo! sjetri - gall! *Okay! four - and a half!* This is Russian, except for the focus of the message, which is in Norwegian.

Nor: Davai fir - nietsjevo verrigod. *Make it four, okay, good.* Apart from the interjections davai and nietsjevo, this is Norwegian.

Rus: Brat! Kuda moja selom desjevli? Grot djur mokka po Rusleien dein or. *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 niet sainferdi spreki. *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, moja niet lugom, djur mokka. *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 tvoja kopom - davai fir pud; kak tvoja niet kopom - son prosjai! *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, nietsjevo brat, dava kiali po dek. *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-
Norwegian 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 I 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 languages seems to have originated from under-analysis of linguistic data, the putative grammar of Russenorsk appears to result from linguistic over-analysis. 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 versego (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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