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Introduction: The commodification of Russian around the world

Sebastian Muth and Lara Ryazanova-Clarke

This special issue is dedicated to the commodification of Russian – the language whose global sociolinguistic behavior had been increasingly attracting scholarly attention (Isurin 2011; Laitin 1998; Pavlenko 2008; Pavlenko et al. forthcoming; Ryazanova-Clarke 2014). When the disintegration of the Soviet Union became imminent in the early 1990s, a collection of papers on this subject would have been highly unusual. In fact, following the breakup of the USSR and the Eastern Bloc, sociolinguists, linguistic anthropologists, sociologists and historians alike would have hardly predicted that in the years to come, Russian would emerge as a global language with an inherent commercial value. This came as even more of a surprise given that throughout the 1990s the Russian economy was in decline, politically motivated derussification took place in many successor states of the former Soviet empire, limiting the use of the former Soviet lingua franca in virtually all domains, the status of Russian as a second or foreign language declined and geopolitical constellations ensuring Russia's influence abroad were on the wane.

All this changed since the turn of the century as the Russian economy enjoyed unprecedented economic growth, the country became one of the top investors of capital around the world (Myant and Drahokoupil 2011; Panibratov 2012) and a popular place for work migrants from many post-Soviet countries (Federal'naia Migratsionnaia Sluzhba 2012; Zadorin 2008). Suddenly the Russian language emerged as a truly global phenomenon responding to the demand created by the rapidly growing Russian wealthy classes who were keen to bank, shop, get medical treatment and educate their children abroad, and by the sways of Russian mass tourism transforming places from the streets of London and Milan to the beaches of Thailand and Vietnam. Following the flow of Russian capital, the Russian language arrived in many European

countries and further afield affecting linguistic landscapes, service sector and the language teaching industry in the new locations.

The study of Russian as a commodity taps into the field of enquiry in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology that emerged along with the onset of the age of late capitalism and globalization (Giddens 1991; Harvey 1989; Holborow 2015; Pujolar 2007), and that shares the view that languages and speakers may be vested with an inherent exchange value on the global marketplace. Contemporary discussion of language commodification advances that in the global neo-liberal capitalism the link between language, territory and political, cultural and national identities – something that was posited by the major ideologies of language in modern period -- becomes disconnected (Duchêne 2009; Park 2011; Urciuoli 2008). To describe this shift in linguistic perceptions, Heller and Duchene propose the contrasting notions of ‘pride’ and ‘profit’ as they discuss the conditions under which language is recast from being framed in political or national terms, to being understood as a manifestation of capital (Heller and Duchêne 2012).

The commodifying effect of global capitalism on language has far-ranging implications, highlighting both tensions between linguistic practices and ideology as well as the need to find answers to economic conditions and transformation through specialized services tailored towards a particular group of speakers within competitive global economies. Heller (2003, 2010) illustrates how the phenomenon of commodification occurs in a number of key sites of globalization in which language emerges as a symbolic capital becoming a resource with an exchange value -- tourism, marketing, language teaching, translation, communications, performance art and so on. As a commodified item language appears in essentially two distinct expressions, as ‘the means of work process’ – that is, in the actual production of specific linguistic resources, and as a ‘the product of labor’ – that is the actual tertiary sector industries.

(Heller 2010, 104). On the one hand, language performs in the key sites as a marketing argument that provides an additional value to a particular service that can be offered in the language of consumers; and, on the other, language itself becomes a working tool. In this way, language and its individual linguistic resources have proved to be essential for opening up new markets, raising global competitiveness and producing distinction.

The general common ground does not however preclude the theory of linguistic commodification from facing certain challenges, and the exploration of Russian commodification in this issue goes some way to reveal those. For one, as the commodification of languages and speakers is largely governed by market forces it appears to be in a constant state of flux with some markets in decline and new ones opening up – the instability which has not yet been sufficiently addressed. Furthermore, more research is required to account for a growing evidence that the shift to ‘profit’ has not fully displaced identity symbolism of language, producing complex patterns of intertwining and conflicts with the discourse of ‘pride’ as well as forming imitational discourses. Finally, as we consider the recent political developments in Russia, the specific and changing political conditions have proved to be more crucial for linguistic commodification than might have been acknowledged so far. Following the crisis in Ukraine, the consequent sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation by most of the Western world in 2014-2015, and the ensuing economic downturn, the earlier earned positions of Russian in the world are dramatically changing before our eyes and it once again proves to be a challenging endeavor to talk about the language’s commercial value and global spread. The reduction in Russian-speaking tourism, trade and general utilization of Russian throughout the world vividly demonstrate how fragile and prone to changes linguistic commodification is, while also showing that pinning commodification to particular geographical locations can only be construed as a transient and context dependent phenomenon.

The contributions to this special issue emerged from the papers given at the Invited Colloquium on Commodification of Russian at the 20th Sociolinguistic Symposium held in Jyväskylä (Finland) in June 2014. Developing the ‘pride’ and ‘profit’ paradigm and taking into considerations the challenges discussed above, the articles to follow aim to explore the global spread and patterns of Russian language commodification within different geographic and social contexts and political economies of the post-Soviet sphere and beyond. The papers investigate markets for Russian language production established in economic environments and locations including Lithuania, Estonia, Cyprus, Finland, Italy, Montenegro, India and other places, and examine how meanings are constructed and value attributed for Russian seen as a commodity in those locations. In addition, the question of cleavages and complex intertwining between the tropes of ‘pride’ and ‘profit’ is addressed as Russia’s own attribution of values to the Russian language is examined in a number of transnational discourses.

The issue opens with Aneta Pavlenko’s article in which the author takes a broad scope, tracing commodification of Russian over a period of a decade - between 2004 and 2014 and across multiple European locations. Exploring the re-entry of Russian into the global economy she argues that as the increase in wealth in Russia has produced the moneyed classes and expanded demand for international tourism, so has the tourist business in those countries discovered that Russian visitors were generous consumers and became available to meet their requirement for linguistic accommodation. Pavlenko highlights a major commodification contradiction that some Russian-friendly linguistic behavior is performed despite a negative view of Russian as a language associated with imperial oppression, or indeed a negative view of Russians themselves. The contradiction produces a cognitive dissonance, but seems to nevertheless be usually resolved by financial gain.

The two following papers deal with commodification of Russian in the land of its former linguistic foes – the Baltic states of Lithuania and Estonia -- which after the collapse of the Soviet Union had applied the radical forms of nationalizing language policies and became officially monolingual. Sebastian Muth's paper focuses on medical tourism in Lithuania, and on the process of adjustment of Lithuanian healthcare industry to Russian-speaking customers. Lithuania has positioned itself as a quality but affordable healthcare location for the post-Soviet states and capitalized from marketing its Soviet cultural and historical heritage and an ability to provide service in Russian. Based on the ethnographic fieldwork at three Lithuanian healthcare providers the article demonstrates how this sector negotiates the state monolingual language policy and the prevailing discourse of national pride, and use marketing arguments to privilege Russian speakers in healthcare employment. A similar contradiction is explored in Maimu Berezkina's article in relation to the Estonian public sector. Berezkina demonstrates that despite the overt monolingual language policy there is a growing de-facto accommodation of Russian in the public service, both on its virtual spaces and in offices. This has implications for employment as the knowledge of Russian becomes a required resource and provides advantages for bilingual applicants.

As Neelakshi Suryanarayan's article shows, commodification of Russian spreads far beyond the European continent. She studies the location of Yashwant Place market in the Indian capital Delhi, which has become a largely Russian-speaking trading place. The article examines, through the histories of individual shops and career trajectories of their owners and employees, how in the market located in close proximity to the Russian embassy and frequented by Russian tourists, speaking Russian to customers grew to be an added value. Furthermore, the article addresses the question how much Russian and what kind of Russian is spoken in the stores, providing an insight into a local 'Yashka-pidgin' developed in this famous market.

Finally, Lara Ryazanova-Clarke returns the discussion to Russia by examining how the pride and profit values are attached in Russian dominant discourse to the Russian language in the transnational contexts. Ryazanova-Clarke argues that the peculiarities of Russian capitalism and the transnational role that Russian played historically as a language of a vast empire have affected the current official representations of Russian. Using the discourse analytical perspective the paper examines several transnational contexts and argues that while Russian is regularly attributed the value of economic profitability this value often turns out to be imitational, intertwined with the transnational pride value linked to Russia's urge to expand its influence and control in the neighboring territories. The case study of the Ukrainian crisis testifies that commodification of closeness between Russian and Ukrainian was used by Russia as a soft power gesture in order to attract Ukraine to the Russian sphere of influence, but when the Ukrainian nation rejected the offer commodification turned to weaponization.

Thus, as the contributors of this special issue hope, the exploration of the commodification of Russian will not only expand the field by providing a number of case studies for a relatively newly commodified language but will also enrich the field by its addressing some of its challenges. In commending this special issue to the readers we would like to thank Aneta Pavlenko for providing impetus for this publication by initiating the Invited Colloquium on Commodification of Russian.

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