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The Language of the Rusins of Bessarabia in the Works of the Pre-Revolutionary Ethnographers

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***Язык русинов Бессарабии в трудах
дореволюционных этнографов***

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The Rusinian language of the Carpathian-Dniester lands was the official language of the Moldavian Principality until the beginning of the 18th century. It had a considerable impact on the development of the Moldavian language. There are approximately 2,000 East Slavic adopted and loan-words in the basic wordstock of the modern Moldavian language. Bukovina, a region of compact settlement of the Rusins became the centerpiece of the principality founded along the lines of the Old Russian principalities in the second half of the 14th century. In 1774 a larger part of Bukovina was incorporated into Austria, and the territory between the Prut and the Dniester rivers named Bessarabia was included in the Russian Empire in 1812.

In one of my works I cited the information on the Rusins of Bessarabia, which had been gathered by researchers of the imperial period, concerning their distribution, size and the time of their arrival to the province. In my opinion, not less interesting are the descriptions of the local characteristics of Bessarabian Rusins' spoken language in the works of Russian researchers, published in the second half of 19th – early 20th centuries. Language, as we know, is not only an

integral part of the culture but also one of the most important factors determining ethnic identity.

In one of his letters from Bessarabia (Novoselitsa, November 29, 1848), I. S. Aksakov wrote: “But how delighted I was moving from Moldavians to Rusnaks. Here in this part of the Khotyn County, most of the population are Rusnaks, same as those who live in Bukovina and Galicia; they speak a lot more correct Russian than the Little Russians do”.

By the way, the fact that “the Rusinian language is closer to the Great Russian language than all the Southern Russian dialects” was noted by V. I. Kelsiev during his travels across Bukovina and Galicia (The author called the Bukovina Rusins “Rusnaks”).

A. I. Zashuk stated that the Rusins speak “Southern Russian, a little different from the Little Russian language”. S. V. Potocky backed this opinion.

A. S. Afanasiev-Chuzhbynsky believed that the language of the Rusins of Bessarabia was “a specific dialect of Little Russian which adopted some Moldavian and Turkish (very few) words, but that dialectal form was very old and did not undergo further transformations”. He also drew attention to the fact that “the postpositive is placed before the verb, but they do not use it now in Little Russia”. “A Rusnak says, *-sia smiati* (to laugh), *sia khvaliti* (to praise oneself), *sia turbovati* (to worry). The postpositive is used in the same way in conjugations: *ya sia nasmiav* (I laughed), *vin sia pokhvaliv* (he praised himself)”. This feature was also noted by P. P. Chubinsky and P. Y. Nestorovsky.

Some words were pronounced with rearranged letters. P. Nestorovsky also mentioned it).

The instrumental singular feminine often has the form *-ou* instead of the ending *-oyu*, for instance, *rukou*, *nogou*. P. Chubinsky and P. Nestorovsky mentioned it too. It should be noted that this form was preserved in some villages in the north of Moldavia until the 1960s.

A. Afanasiev-Chuzhbynsky noted that Rusins replaced purely Little Russian words with Rusin words in Little Russian songs. The researcher also wrote about the influence of the Moldavian language over Rusin.

P. Nestorovsky registered crisp, and sometimes firm, pronunciation of consonants and vowels in the dialect of Bessarabian Rusins, very different, in his opinion, from the “smooth and melodious Southern Russian”.

The Rusin sound *u* often sounds just as firm as the Great Russian *u*. The matching of the sounds *u* and *u* that exists in the Little Russian language has not been observed in Rusin. The researcher points out that the *u* is a completely separate, independent sound in Bessarabian

Rusins' dialect as well as in the Lemko dialect. *Мышь* (mouse), *сыр* (cheese), *рысью* (at a trot), *мы* (we), *ты* (you) and a number of other words are pronounced in the same way as in the Great Russian language.

The researcher also points out that the language of the Rusins of Bessarabia contains a lot of borrowed words from the other languages: Polish, Moldavian, Great Russian and, probably, some words of Turkic and of unknown origin.

During the First General Census of the Russian Empire in 1897, the language of the Rusins of Bessarabia was not separated from the Little Russian language. In the official statistics the Rusinian language was categorized as Little Russian due to a close similarity between the Rusin and "the real Little Russians' dialects". That was why Russian languages were subdivided into Great Russian, Little Russian and Byelorussian in the table "Distribution of Population by Mother Tongue" in the "Groups and Languages" column. In the "Little Russian" column there is a reference: "including those who indicated Rusin as their native language". There were 64 such people registered in towns and villages. This fact allowed the Ukrainian scholars in Moldavia to assert that "in the late nineteenth century Rusins in the Khotyn County were involved in the overall process of consolidation of the Ukrainian nation, due to which they lost the sense of belonging to an ethnic group and acquired an all-Ukrainian identity. According to the 1897 census, the Rusins were numbered among the Ukrainians, and only 64 people identified themselves as Rusins". These scholars ignored the fact that the census was conducted in respect of languages but not ethnicity, and the Ukrainian language was not mentioned in it. In my opinion, a small number of the Rusinian language native speakers specified in the census is likely to indicate the level of education of the census takers who, due to the low literacy of the population (the population identified themselves as the Russians/Rusins), filled in the census forms at their own discretion.

For example, I happened to see completed census questionnaires in the National Archives of the Republic of Moldova. It was registered in one of them that the Rusnak family (6 people) (v. Ataky, Soroka County, Bessarabia), M. A. Bela (an Austrian subject born in Chernovtsy, Bukovina) and a certain P. N. Statsiuk (born in Snigorovka, Barsukovsky District, Kremenetsky County, Volhynia Province) designated their native language with the "R." which just meant Russian. Thus, a number of Rusins could probably indicate Great Russian as their mother tongue.

It was noted in a lot of research papers that at the beginning of the 20th century, even at the most conservative estimate, more than

270,000 inhabitants of Bessarabia considered themselves to be Rusins.

Therefore, most of the imperial era researchers classified Bessarabian Rusins' language as belonging to one of the Little Russian branches. However, they noted its peculiarities and originality, some surviving old forms and its similarity with the Great Russian language. The researchers mentioned the fact that the language of the Rusins of Bessarabia was heavily influenced by the Moldavian, Polish and Russian languages.

Unfortunately, so far no research has been conducted on the dialects of the population (Rusins and their descendants) in the north of today's Moldova. This topic is only partially addressed in several research papers.

The process of globalization leads to major changes in culture, to its unification and the destruction of cultural identity and traditional values. Currently, the Rusin native speakers in Moldova are the older generation, living mainly in small villages. Their number is decreasing yearly.

Nowadays, the research into linguistic peculiarities of local dialects in the villages of the North of Moldova and publishing the Rusin dictionary become increasingly pressing.

Keywords

Bessarabia, Bukovina, Moldova, Rusins, Rusnaks, Rusinian language.

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