

Language Management and Language Problems in Belarus: Education and Beyond

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This article provides an overview of the sociolinguistic situation in Belarus, the most russified of the post-Soviet countries. It summarizes language policy and legislation, and deals in more detail with language management and selected language problems in Belarusian education. It also contributes to the work on language planning by applying Jernudd's and Neustupný's Language Management Theory, particularly the concept of the language management cycle, to analysis of sociolinguistic issues in Belarus.

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Introduction

Belarus (or Belorussia/Byelorussia) became independent in 1991 with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Its independence was not welcomed with much enthusiasm by the population that had strong emotional and cultural ties with Russia and the Soviet Union. Starting in 1994, this attitude resulted in political changes, which returned the country to the Soviet patterns of government, economy, social life, and linguistic development. The majority of the population of Belarus prefers to use Russian, although they declare to be ethnically Belarusian. Nevertheless, Belarusian is not limited to a minority group, members of the Russian-speaking majority also use it for symbolic functions. The language is still an obligatory subject in all Belarusian schools and has the status of a state language alongside Russian.

This situation is a result of sociohistorical processes which have taken place in the Belarusian territory and which we will describe briefly in the Historical Background section. The following sections deal with language use and language-related identities; current language management in Belarus in general; and language management and language problems in Belarusian education. Before we proceed to these topics, however, we will present our theoretical framework.



Map Belarus (Source: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bo.html>)

Theoretical Framework

Our theoretical framework draws on the Language Management Theory (LMT), originally developed by Björn Jernudd and Jiří V. Neustupný (1987) (see Nekvapil (2006) for a recent overview). LMT is a theory related to what Joshua Fishman (1972: 140–50) called ‘behavior toward language’. LMT presupposes a processual five-stage model of such behavior:

- (1) a *deviation* from communication norms appears in an interaction,
- (2) participants may *note* the deviation,
- (3) they may *evaluate* it,
- (4) on the basis of their evaluation, they may create an *adjustment ‘plan’*,
- (5) and may *implement* this ‘plan’.

LMT is also a theory of language problems. Any negatively evaluated deviation can be considered an individual language problem. As a societal phenomenon, a language problem can be defined more narrowly as ‘systematic or too many deviations from expected generated speech such that interactive adjustment routines cannot overcome the negative evaluations of those deviations’ (Jernudd, 2000: 12). In our present analysis, we deal with the second type of language problems, and use especially the following two premises of LMT:

- (1) Language problems are experienced and/or presented by social actors themselves, and cannot be defined as such universally. When speaking about

language problems, it thus matters who experiences something as a problem and why.

(2) LMT focuses not only on the institutional, organized management of language (use) and its influence on individual discursive practices. It also focuses on ways in which individuals manage ongoing discourse and language choice. Moreover, in the course of the management process (see above), (non)institutionalized social networks can be activated and deactivated, so that discourse ('micro') management may melt into organized ('macro') management and back again – a *language management cycle* can develop (Nekvapil, 2008). Not all language management takes the form of a language management cycle, of course, but we will focus on this theoretical concept here; its main feature – the interaction between the 'macro' and 'micro' language management – is our main concern throughout this paper.

A note should be made about our use of the word 'discourse'. When used in relation to the LMT, it simply refers to produced speech or text in general. However, in a discussion of identity formation and language managers' accounts of their actions, 'discourse' should be understood as historically developed and socially shared ways of speaking/writing about particular topics.

Historical Background: Two Discourses on Belarusian

Two main discourses on Belarusian have historically evolved on the territory of present-time Belarus. The first discourse that has stigmatized Belarusian as a 'peasant' language may have its origins in the nineteenth century, when Belarusian territory was part of the Russian Empire. Russian-speaking and Yiddish-speaking populations dominated urban areas and Belarusian-speaking majority inhabited the countryside. The word 'Belarusian' thus became synonymous with '(backward) peasant'. Although Belarusian was developed as a multifunctional standard language during the 1920s, Stalin's purges in the 1930s severely afflicted the newly created Belarusian-speaking elites. World War II losses further devastated Belarus. The processes of reconstruction and modernization that took place after the war were accompanied by the influx of Russian-speaking specialists and members of the military, and by mass migration from the countryside to the cities. This migration, combined with negative stereotypes of Belarusian and relatively low institutional support for it, led to a shift from the 'rural' Belarusian to Russian, the language of education, technology, and communist ideology. The Belarusian language was folklorized and depicted as part of Belarusian rustic heritage in school textbooks, a portrayal that deepened the stigmatization of Belarusian as a useless, peasant language. In contrast to Ukrainian in western Ukraine, Belarusian has not been urbanized anywhere in Belarus, which may be one of the reasons why language behavior in Belarus did not change after 1990 as much in favor of Belarusian as it did in Ukraine in favor of Ukrainian (on the situation in Ukraine, see Bilaniuk & Melnyk, 2008).

The second discourse, which links Belarusian to the ethnic and cultural heritage of the country, has its origins in the national revival that took place in Belarus in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when intellectuals started supporting Belarusian in order to improve the situation of Belarusian

peasants. Frantsishak Bahushevich, for example, appealed in 1891 to Belarusians: 'Do not relinquish our Belarusian language, so that you [as a nation] will not die!' and reminded them about the legacy of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, where a variety of their language had even been used in state administration, legislation and literature.

These revivalist ideas returned to public life in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 1990, Belarus passed the Law on Languages proclaiming Belarusian a single 'state language'. In this period of *second national revival* or *Belarusification*, the top-down support for Belarusian became interlinked with social reforms. The economy suffered a downturn, and although part of the population still supported the changes, others who considered them too dramatic or negative, or those who condemned the very fall of the USSR, perceived the promotion of Belarusian as an unnecessary enforcement. When Aleksandr Lukashenko, the new president and a representative of this latter group, initiated a referendum in May 1995, over 83% of the voters (54% of all those eligible) answered the question 'Do you agree to grant the Russian language an equal status with Belarusian?' in the affirmative. Thus, the May Referendum *de facto* reestablished the dominant position of Russian from Soviet times. More than 75% of the voters approved of the return of some of the Soviet state symbols, supported economic integration with Russia, and granted the president the authority to dissolve the Parliament (<http://www.rec.gov.by/refer/refer1995.html>). The president has gradually monopolized the executive, legislative, and judicial powers. The government stabilized the centrally-planned economy, but began to disadvantage and marginalize private enterprises and the media, exercise censorship, restrict freedom of movement, and suppress political opposition to which the most active advocates of Belarusian belong (for more details on the historical development of the sociolinguistic situation in Belarus, see e.g. Ioffe, 2003; Smolicz & Radzik, 2004; Zaprudski, 2007).

Language Use and Identities

Let us now look at the linguistic and ethnic characteristics of the current population of Belarus. Table 1 shows the data on 'nationality', 'native tongue', and 'language usually spoken at home' according to the 1999 Census.

The discrepancy between the high percentage of Belarusian as a 'native tongue' and low percentage of Belarusian as a 'language usually spoken at home' is striking. It is due to the fact that mainstream discourses continue to characterize Belarusian as a 'native tongue' (*родная мова*), including in schools where children have been taught for decades that Belarusian is their 'native tongue', irrespective of the fact that many of their families meanwhile shifted to Russian.

Answers regarding the 'language usually spoken at home' also may not adequately reflect the real language use because the Census did not include the widespread category of 'mixed Belarusian-Russian language'. According to a 1999 survey carried out by Schröder (2004), which includes that category and is representative of the whole population of Belarus, 65% of respondents stated

Table 1 Population by nationality, native tongue and language usually spoken at home (1999 Census)

	<i>Nationality (ethnicity)</i>	<i>Native tongue</i>	<i>Language usually spoken at home</i>
Belarusian (%)	81.2	73.7	36.7
Russian (%)	11.4	24.1	62.8
Polish (%)	3.9	0.7	0.2
Ukrainian (%)	2.4	1.1	0.2
Other (%)	1.1	0.4	0.1
Total	100% (10,045,237 inhabitants)		

Source: Ministry of Statistics and Analysis (2001: 259, 303).

that they spoke Russian at home, 25% reported Belarusian and 9% a mixed Belarusian-Russian language. A 2007 survey that asked about the 'language predominantly used in everyday communication' found that almost 57% of the respondents communicate in Russian, 7% in Belarusian, 17% in both Russian and Belarusian, and 19% in the 'mixed language' (IISEPS, 2007). These are, however, self-reports and it seems to us that the percentage of those who really use only Belarusian in everyday life is somewhat lower (cf. also Ioffe, 2003), and on the contrary, Belarusian-Russian mixing – also known under the pejorative folk name 'trasianka' – is a more widespread practice (on 'trasianka' see Hentschel & Tesch, 2006; Liskovets, 2002; Miachkoŭskaia, 2007; Tsykhun, 2000).

A distinguishing feature of Belarusian-Russian bilingualism is the typological and genetic closeness of the two East Slavic languages and resulting similarities. For instance, Bial'kovich (2005) compared Belarusian and Russian versions of the text of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and found that 27% of functionally and contextually equivalent (in the interlingual sense) morphemes had identical graphical forms, 37% were similar in form, and only 36% were completely different. Due to the similarity between the two languages, mutual comprehension between them is possible albeit limited; 'semicomprehension' (Haugen, 1966), due to interlingual differences, may also take place. Respondents of Sloboda (forthcoming) and others we have spoken to reported that Russians from Russia and Russian-speaking Belarusian children have problems understanding Belarusian. The adult inhabitants of Belarus do not appear to have communication problems if they passed through the Belarusian system of bilingual education. Mutual comprehension allows for receptive or 'non-accommodating' bilingualism (Bilaniuk & Melnyk, 2008), i.e. the practice in which speakers who prefer different languages use their respective languages in conversation and understand each other. This practice is common in Belarus, although accommodation occurs as well. Urban speakers of Belarusian can accommodate more easily because they also have good command of Russian. In contrast, on the part of Russian-speakers the inability to speak Belarusian is frequent.

Linguists as well as non-linguists had long considered the Belarusian countryside a bastion of Belarusian, but traditional dialects undergo russification, a process that was reported throughout the country as early as Soviet times (Mikhnevich, 1985: 22–59). Rural inhabitants themselves do not usually consider their spoken language ‘Belarusian’ but ‘mixed Belarusian-Russian’ or ‘simple/plain’ (Sloboda, 2006; Woolhiser, 2001, 2003). They typically attribute ‘Belarusian’, i.e. standard Belarusian, to educated people, particularly writers, radio presenters, teachers of Belarusian, etc. ‘Russian’ has attractive urban connotations for them (cf. Sloboda, 2006; Woolhiser, 2001). In urban areas, speaking Russian is usually the norm and does not evoke any specific identities or evaluations. In contrast, dialectal Belarusian gives away a ‘villager’, and standard Belarusian indexes a so-called ‘nationally conscious’ person. The ‘nationally conscious’ (*свядомыя*) are a minority group of people who perceive Belarusian as a ‘core value’ of the Belarusian national identity as well as of their personal identities (cf. Smolicz, 2002). Many of these people are opposed to President Lukashenko’s regime, so speaking standard Belarusian, especially by a young person, tends to index an ‘oppositionist’. Standard Belarusian spoken by an older person may index a language professional, e.g. a writer or a philologist. Russian-speaking people often note standard Belarusian spoken in public as a deviation from communicative norms. Their evaluations of its use in public may vary from indifference to disrespect and animosity. At present, however, there seems to be a shift from negative reactions toward more tolerance and occasionally even appreciation (Burlyka, 2004; Ioffe, 2003; Sloboda, forthcoming).

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, Belarusian is losing its social basis in the countryside. Therefore, ‘the nationally conscious’ in cities, as well as a part of the non-conformist youth, might become the only groups which use Belarusian on an everyday basis in informal spoken communication as well as on the Internet (cf. Burlyka, 2004). Nevertheless, others also use Belarusian sometimes, often as stylistically-motivated insertions in otherwise Russian discourse, and typically with the purpose to contextualize Belarusian ethnicity, literature, history or culture (cf. Mechkovskaia, 2002). In public, for example, Belarusian is often used during celebrations of official holidays and to index the nation in various documents, e.g. passports, banknotes, official letterheads, stamps, etc. It is also used on some public signs, e.g. on governmental buildings, in Minsk public transport (cf. Brown, 2007), on road-signs, some signs at post offices, in (book)stores and libraries. The use of Belarusian in public is usually limited to symbolic functions (Mechkovskaia, 2002). The accentuation of these functions then leads toward a ritualized use of Belarusian in public (Giger, 2006). Russian, or Belarusian-Russian mixing for some, predominates in all other settings, situations, and discourses. The use of Belarusian and Russian most often has the form of *non-parallel* bilingualism when texts are produced only in one language. Figure 1, which shows a section of the linguistic landscape of Minsk, the capital, demonstrates non-parallel bilingualism and the distribution of languages, in particular the national and ethno-cultural symbolic functions of Belarusian in public (cf. Key).



Figure 1. Front of a bookstore and a shopping center (former Masherova/Mashèrava Boulevard, Minsk, May 2005)

Key

No.	Language	Contents
1	Russian	<i>Bookstore Svetoch.</i>
2	Russian	Window signs with information on books sold inside: technology, medicine, accounting, law.
3	Russian	Window signs with information on books sold inside: various topics except for – see 4.
4	Belarusian	Window signs with information on books sold inside: <i>Anthology of Belarusian Poetry, Belarusian Fiction, Belarusian Exotics, Atlas of Belarus.</i>
5	Russian	Opening hours of the Bookstore Svetoch.
6	Russian	<i>Shopping and Exhibition Center Masherova.</i>
7	Russian	<i>Shopping and Exhibition Center Biurger</i> and a list of stores therein.
8	Russian	Advertisement of the Biurger Center, text saying: <i>Life without limits.</i>
9	Russian	Instructions for the use of the public phone.
10	Belarusian	Poster saying: <i>Happy Victory Day, 60 years.</i>

- 11 Belarusian Plaques with names of institutions – *Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Information of the Republic of Belarus* – and of publishing houses: *Higher School, National Education, Belarus and Fiction*.

A General Overview of Current Language Management Language Legislation

In contrast to all its neighbors, Belarus has not signed the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (as of 2007). Two articles of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus form the basis of the country's language legislation:¹

Article 17. The Belarusian and Russian languages shall be the state languages of the Republic of Belarus.²

Article 50. [...] Everyone shall have the right to use one's native language and to choose the language of communication. In accordance with the law, the State shall guarantee the freedom to choose the language of education and teaching.

Principles of the use of the state languages in the official sphere are explained in greater detail in the Law on Languages (No. 187-3/1998) (www.pravo.by). This law in its present wording stipulates that the state should ensure a general development and functioning of Belarusian and Russian in all spheres of life and create the necessary conditions for all the inhabitants of Belarus to acquire and fully command these two languages (Article 2). The law grants citizens the right to address any state authority in these two languages (or in some other language acceptable for both parties). The body of the state administration shall attend to the matter in question in Belarusian or Russian (Article 3). This formulation does not guarantee the right of citizens to have their submissions settled in the same language in which they were submitted. This is characteristic of the whole Law on Languages: the law establishes equality between both state languages on the one hand, and does not adjust their mutual relation on the other. A great number of articles state that a particular agenda shall be processed in Belarusian and/or Russian. For example, acts of the state administration are accepted and published in Belarusian *and (or)* Russian (Article 7), Belarusian *and (or)* Russian are languages of administration, documentation and relations between state bodies (Article 8), etc. In other parts of the Law, only the conjunction *or* is used: documentation for the elections to state offices is issued in Belarusian *or* Russian (Article 12), Belarusian *or* Russian are used in the areas of transportation, business, medical and common supply (Article 13), etc.

Explicit asymmetry between the two state languages is only found in one place: the law states that teaching in specialized secondary schools and universities proceeds in Belarusian and (or) Russian, but adds that teaching

Belarusian is obligatory in all educational institutions irrespective of their specialization (Article 24). Russian is not mentioned.

Other laws set out the rules for the use of languages similar to the Law on Languages. The Law on Citizenship (136-3/2002) (www.pravo.by) is worth mentioning because it stipulates that only a person who knows at least *one* (i.e. not both) of the state languages to the extent necessary for successful communication can become a citizen of Belarus (Article 14). On the other hand, judges as well as employees of the state and local administration are obliged to have a command of *both* state languages (Judicial Code, 139-3/2006: Articles 91, 94; Law on Languages: Article 4) (www.pravo.by). Their knowledge, however, is not tested in any systematic way (Siarheï Kruchkoŭ, personal communication).

Officials may not refuse a document written in Belarusian or Russian because of unfamiliarity with the language. Such behavior is subject to sanctions (Law on Languages, Article 5). The Code of Administrative Offences (194-3/2003) (www.pravo.by) includes a provision stating that ‘public discrediting or defamation of the state and other national languages, setting up of barriers and restrictions to their use, dissemination of language-based hostility – shall be punishable by a fine [...]’ (Article 9.22). Public discrediting of the state or other national languages or triggering language-based hatred is considered a criminal offence (Law on Languages, Article 6).

With the exception of legal regulation of Belarusian orthography, the current government does not appear to be planning any other substantial changes in the legislation on languages. Segments of the political opposition strongly insist on returning to Belarusian as the single state language (cf. Belarusian Popular Front, 2002), while others count on the political process or another referendum on this issue (cf. Aliaksandar Milinkevich at http://by.milinkevich.org//about/questions/data/ic_90/91208).

State Language Policy and Language Management

Despite the official equality of the state languages, the current language management of the Belarusian state is characterized by a tendency to marginalize Belarusian (for a good survey of the state language policy in the 1990s, see Zaprudski, 2002). This tendency is most likely based both on the one-sided interpretation of existing legislation in favor of Russian and on violation of this legislation by individual officers. The tendency is not articulated in any official policy document, but can be exemplified by a long series of individual cases.

For example, in September 2001, the Central Electoral Commission refused to accept ballot papers written in Belarusian (Smolicz & Radzik, 2004: 68). Judges have sometimes refused to hear a case in Belarusian (*ibid.*). A reader of *Nasha Niva* presented a particular case in her letter to the newspaper: complaining about injustice caused by Russians she wrote that ‘it was a moral abuse [...] when during the proceedings the judge was not able to understand which month I was born in – *studzen*’ [‘January’; *ianvar*’ in Russian]’ (Sudziloŭskaia, 2000). Cases have also been reported in which post-office employees refused to accept a telegram in Belarusian or in which hotel staff

did not accept a registration form filled out in Belarusian (Smolicz & Radzik, 2004: 68). A young Belarusian who did not fill in the customs declaration form in Russian and demanded a form in Belarusian was fined for disobeying requirements of the customs officer (Radio Liberty, 2007). The police are widely known for refusing to communicate in Belarusian, the use of standard Belarusian can be a reason for checking a person's identity, and with political oppositionists or detainees the police verbally prohibits its use (Ioffe, 2003: 1032; Luniova, 2007; Smolicz & Radzik, 2004).

Laws are almost exclusively issued in Russian. Between 1997 and 2000, only 9 out of 450 laws were approved in Belarusian despite the fact that, according to the former chairman of the Council of the Republic, the approval of laws in both languages would not mean any dramatic economic burden (Vařtovich & Liashkevich, 2001). Recently, the state administration restricted the use of Belarusian in the media, although, for example, Belarusian-language TV broadcasting still covers roughly 5–15% of Belarusian TV channels (Smatryčenka, 2005: 56f). Zaprudski (2000) concludes that the right of the Belarusian-speaking minority to access information is being infringed upon.

On the other hand, the state is still substantially subsidizing the literary production of the state publishing houses in Belarusian (Smatryčenka, 2005: 59). Sometimes, individual measures are taken in favor of Belarusian: e.g. a decision made by Hrodna (Grodno) City Hall (No. 336/1999) on the publication of legal norms in Belarusian and Russian; the recommendation of the National Bank that the banks should give their clients bilingual versions of forms and documents (Sharova, 2004); or the decision by the Constitutional Court (П-91/2003) to ensure actual equality of the state languages in services (<http://ncpi.gov.by/constsud/rus/resh/pr091-03.html>). This decision was, however, issued on the initiative of the Belarusian Language Society (2006), moreover, there has been minimal compliance with the measures. Activities of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as the Belarusian Language Society, Society for Belarusian Schools, etc., in support of Belarusian (petitions, correspondence with authorities, etc.) have a limited effect, as the state continues to constrain the NGO sector and civic initiatives in general.

To sum up, it cannot be said that the Belarusian state promotes an overt and unambiguous policy of russification and marginalization of Belarusian. At the same time, the corresponding tendencies are very noticeable and violations of the official policies occur systematically rather than accidentally. However, in particular cases, language management of some state institutions can act to the detriment of the Russian language users. In a Belarusian internet discussion on language problems, a Russian speaker criticized the fact that all the documents issued by the Ministry of Education are written, according to him, exclusively in Belarusian.³ Although not an adequate observation, his complaint implicitly aims at sometimes problematic fundamentals of the Belarusian state language policy, i.e. the non-parallel use of the two state languages and the assumption that all the inhabitants understand both of them. There may be a connection here with the language legislation that does not regulate the mutual relation between the state languages. For the most part, the laws leave language choice to individual authorities and officers, including President Lukashenko, a

representative of an officially bilingual country, who uses almost exclusively only one language, Russian.

Language Management and Language Problems in Education

Languages in the Educational System

The Belarusian system of education consists of three fundamental levels: pre-school, secondary, and higher education. Parents or caretakers of children who start attending pre-school facilities or secondary schools have the right to choose one of the state languages or a language of the national minority as the language of instruction (Law on Education, 95-3/2002: Article 5) (www.pravo.by). At present, this right is exercised in Belarusian, Russian, Polish, and Lithuanian.

In the school year 2005–2006, approximately 363,000 children attended kindergarten: 76% of this number attended Russian-language establishments, 13% Belarusian-language ones and 11% establishments with Russian- and Belarusian-language (or other-language) groups (Lozka, 2006). About 1.2 million children attended secondary schools: 77% of children were taught in Russian and 23% in Belarusian (Ministry of Education, 2005a). The number of schoolchildren taught in Belarusian is decreasing. Figure 2 shows the shift from Belarusian- to Russian-language education that started immediately after the May 1995 Referendum when Belarusian-language classes in bilingual schools started to close down and the schools transformed into exclusively Russian-language schools.

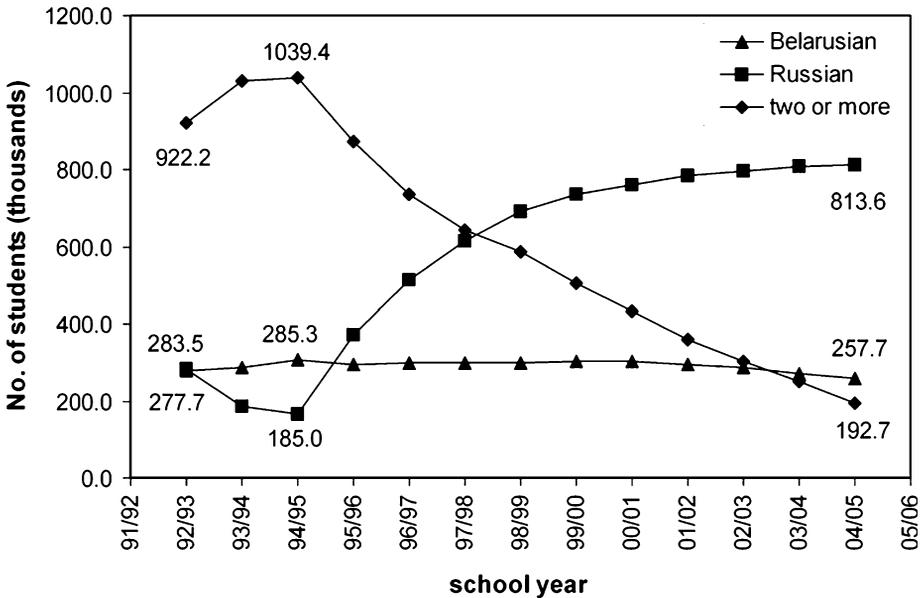


Figure 2 Students in secondary schools according to language(s) of instruction. Sources: Ministry of Statistics and Analysis (1994, 1996, 1998–2005)

As regards Polish and Lithuanian, in 2005–2006, 568 students were taught in Polish and 76 students in Lithuanian in the western part of the country. The number of students taught in Polish appears to be gradually decreasing (Ministry of Education, 2005a).

As far as languages as subjects are concerned, both state languages and one foreign language are obligatory in all general secondary schools (Law on Education, 95-3/2002: Article 5). Several subjects are taught in Belarusian even in the Russian-language schools: Belarusian language and literature and the subject of 'My country – Belarus'. Belarusian history and geography had been taught exclusively in Belarusian until 2006. Languages of ethnic minorities are also taught as subjects. In 2005–2006, approximately 8,000 students studied Polish, Hebrew, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, or another language (Ministry of Education, 2006). All textbooks recommended by the Ministry of Education are published in Belarus, including textbooks for teaching the Russian language.

Graduation examinations at secondary schools and entrance examinations at universities include an obligatory exam in one of the state languages based on the graduate's/applicant's choice. The university entrance tests in other subjects have Russian- and Belarusian-language versions.

Concerning public universities, in 2005–2006, 54% out of approximately 325,000 students studied in Russian, 2% in Belarusian, and 44% in both languages (Ministry of Education, 2005b). The universities and colleges of the Ministries of Interior, Defense, Communications, Aviation, Sports and Tourism, the Presidential Academy of Public Administration, the Academy of Music, universities of information science and transportation are exclusively or almost-exclusively Russian-language establishments. A certain amount of Belarusian-language teaching can be found at the Belarusian State Economic University, the Academy of the Arts, multidisciplinary state universities, and some medical and technical universities. The greatest extent of Belarusian-language instruction is at the Belarusian State Pedagogical University, where the number of students who study in Belarusian almost equals the number of those studying in Russian (Ministry of Education, 2005b).

To sum up, Russian predominates in the Belarusian educational system as a whole, and the development proceeds towards further growth in Russian-language instruction.

Selected Language Problems in Education

In this paper, only a few language problems in education are described, namely those that concern the relation between the two state languages and appear most significant from the societal point of view. Attempts at adjustments concerning the use of other languages have appeared as well, e.g. authorities' refusal to allow a Polish-language school in Navahrudak (Novogrudok) (*Belorusskaia Delovaia Gazeta*, May 26, 1999), Roma representatives' requirement for education in Romani, (<http://naviny.by>, December 19, 2004) etc., however, these will not be addressed here.

Problems of the very existence of Belarusian-language schools and 'streams'

In various media, the 'nationally conscious' (see Section 4) – unlike the government – evaluate the decrease in the number of Belarusian-language schools very negatively. They even relate it to the question of the very existence of Belarusian in the future. Numerous 'nationally conscious' parents have been directly affected by the discriminatory actions of the government and the school administrations against the exercise of the right to choose the language of instruction. This right started to collide with the interests of the renewed state apparatus after the May 1995 Referendum. Critics mention cases when state officials instructed headmasters not to admit new students to Belarusian-language classes (Lozka & Khil'kevich, 2001), and when school administrators themselves restricted language choice. The following practices, for example, have been observed: the requirement for too high a number of students as a prerequisite to open a Belarusian-language class; misinforming parents preferring Belarusian about the date of class meetings so that they could not express their opinions; allocation of their children to different classes in such a way that the parents could be outvoted and the medium changed to Russian; providing false information which would persuade parents to withdraw their application for Belarusian-language classes; changing the medium without previous consultation with parents (Bulavatski, 1998; Maisenia *et al.*, 2000). Bulavatski (1998) provides two reasons for such language management:

- (1) School administration does not want to exert any effort and spend resources on teaching in two languages; they consider it a complication.
- (2) Most members of the school administration, including headmasters, do not use Belarusian themselves and do not have a positive attitude toward it.

The declining interest in Belarusian-language education in secondary schools is, however, chiefly motivated by a very limited use of Belarusian at universities. Parents and university applicants have often used this as an argument. To improve the situation, the Belarusian Language Society has been trying to found a national university with Belarusian as the exclusive medium of instruction, but without any success so far.

In 2001, the Ministry of Education issued *The Program of Additional Measures to Extend the Scope of the Use of Belarusian in the Educational System* (*Праграма дадатковых мер на пашырэнні сферы выкарыстання беларускай мовы ў сістэме адукацыі*) which among other things decreed that the network of Belarusian-language schools should be extended in cities and towns. While the implementation of the program somewhat ameliorated the situation, it has met with various barriers including unwillingness of the state administration and lack of interest from a sufficient number of parents. Processes extremely inconsistent with the program have even taken place, e.g. continuing closures of Belarusian-language classes. In numerous cities and smaller towns, such as Hrodna (Grodno) or Slonim, no Belarusian-language classes have been opened for several years. Under such circumstances, parents interested in Belarusian-

language education are confronted with the problem of finding a Belarusian-language school for their children.

Supporters of Belarusian, such as the Belarusian Language Society and Belarusian-speaking students, face a problem related to Belarusian-language 'streams' at universities. Namely, tertiary education in one of the state languages is legally ensured through organizing Belarusian-language and Russian-language groups or 'streams' (Law on Education, 95-3/2002: Article 32) (www.pravo.by), but Russian is the usual medium at the universities, so Belarusian has to be applied for (Belarusian Language Society, 2001). Therefore, either a sufficient number of students who prefer Belarusian have to apply or they have to outvote those in their group who prefer Russian. This is not easy to achieve, so, for example, at the Belarusian University of Medicine, the requirement for the minimum number of 15 students has not been met for three years (*Nasha slova*, March 29, 2006: 1). As an exception, Belarusian State Pedagogical University has extended the number of subjects taught in Belarusian. However, this happened on the top-down initiative of the University Board, not based on students' demands (Lozka & Khil'kevich, 2001).

The problem of 'Belarusianness' of Belarusian-language schools

The categories of 'Belarusian-language school' and 'Russian-language school' are treated as isomorphous in various statistics. However, as early as the 1980s, some experts and people employed in education criticized the fact that the use of Belarusian in the Belarusian-language schools is more limited than the use of Russian in the Russian-language schools. For example, Kuntsevich (1999) pointed out that in numerous Belarusian-language schools, Belarusian was only used during classes; Russian was used during the breaks, on notice boards, in paperwork and partly even in teaching (pp. 141f). Moreover, until the beginning of this century, Belarusian as a subject in Belarusian-language schools had been assigned fewer hours compared to Russian in Russian-language schools.

The fact that some subjects in a number of Belarusian-language schools are taught in Russian and numerous teachers of Belarusian use it only when teaching is a continuing object of criticism (Labovich, 2006; Lozka & Khil'kevich, 2001). 'Nationally conscious' teachers and some others see the problem in the consequences such behavior has for the attitudes of children toward Belarusian. In classes, teachers lead children to respect and love their 'native tongue', but by switching into Russian outside classes 'they demonstrate that Belarusian is useless and its disappearance is a fact' (Bulavatski, 1998: 104). In such situation, children develop a language inferiority complex (Mian'koŭ, 2006).

Problems of language choice

At universities, students have the right to determine the language of instruction. It is, however, the lecturer who initially chooses the language of instruction and most often it is Russian. According to Miliashkevich (1999), many lecturers do not have any respect for Belarusian and do not find motivation to spend efforts on preparing lectures in that language (*ibid.*). In addition, those lecturers who do teach in Belarusian and are the only ones at their department who use this language attract their colleagues' attention, which they may experience as discomfort (Savitskaia, 1999: 84). Students'

evaluations of a lecturer's choice of Belarusian vary, but in the majority of cases, students are tolerant with respect to Belarusian and Russian (Miliashkevich, 1999).

The lack of specialized literature in Belarusian has been frequently used as a discursive argument against giving lectures in this language. Miliashkevich (1999) points out that at the time of *Belarusification*, the lack of literature in Belarusian led to attempts at writing the missing books. After the May 1995 Referendum, however, such efforts have been extremely sporadic. Even the state school administration has shown awareness of the lack of Belarusian terminology, but the government does not take any measures to solve this problem. In contrast, in 2006 the Ministry of Education issued a mandate allowing the teaching of Belarusian history and geography in Russian-language schools in Russian and spent resources on preparation of the necessary textbooks. This aroused indignation among the 'nationally conscious' population. The Ministry justified this step using the 'parents' requests' argument (cf. below), as well as the argument that the teaching of these subjects exclusively in Belarusian contradicts the 1996 revision of the Constitution. Interestingly, only a few years earlier the Deputy Minister of Education wrote that to teach Belarusian history in a 'non-native tongue' was 'immoral' and that it would be taught in Belarusian irrespective of whether somebody liked it or not (Dylian, 2001). The government and the state administration including the president often use two discourses that sometimes contradict each other: the nationalist discourse (state protection of the 'native tongue', i.e. Belarusian) and the free-language-choice discourse (reflected in the Constitution and the Law on Languages).

'Technical reasons' also often serve as justification for the non-use/non-acceptance of Belarusian. For example, in relation to the university entrance testing, the state-owned newspaper *Belaruskaja Niva* gives the university applicants the following advice: 'In order to speed up the processing of application forms and the issue of certificates, they should be filled out clearly, without any mistakes and only in Russian' (Siomkina, 2006). There has been evidence from the testing process itself that staff instructed applicants to fill out registration forms in Russian (Petrykevich, 2005). In its decision (No. П-91/2003) on inequality of the state languages in services, the Constitutional Court mentioned that social insurance cards and bank cards are issued only in Russian for technical reasons (<http://www.ncpi.gov.by/constsud/rus/resh/pr091-03.html>). However, the state does not take the initiative to find software solutions, e.g. for bilingual databases, and simply adopts existent Russian programs. Several computer tools for Belarusian have been developed by members of the Belarusian Language Society and by individuals (Kruchkoŭ, 2003).

Some restrictions on the use of Belarusian in education may stem from the connection Belarusians make between this language and the 'opposition'. For example, one of the participants in Sloboda's (forthcoming) study, who indeed participated in political protests, used Belarusian in lectures at one of the technical universities. The head of his department recommended that he stop lecturing in Belarusian. The Iakub Kolas National Humanities Lyceum, in which Belarusian was used as the medium, is another example: the state

authorities closed it down in 2003 due to the involvement of the staff in political activities.

Other types of restrictions on the use of Belarusian also appear. For example, one of the authors of this article witnessed a situation when a department secretary at the Belarusian State Pedagogical University asked a lecturer who had filled out the *Model for the Educational Standard of Tertiary Education* form in Belarusian to rewrite it in Russian because 'they [i.e. probably education authorities] have asked us to do it'. Thus, although the state has declared that restrictions on the use of the state languages are illegal and that it has created conditions for the freedom of language choice, regulation of language choice does occur.

The reproductive mechanism: The 'parents' free choice' argument

'Parents' freedom of choice' or 'parents' wishes/requests' is a frequent argument of the state apparatus for not undertaking any activities to support the spread of Belarusian in education. In 2000, the Minister of Education stated that the retreat of Belarusian from the schools 'had to be understood as legitimate and justified because the establishment of classes and groups according to the languages of instruction proceeded in conformity with parents' wishes' (Strazhev, 2000). However, the year before he said that the Ministry 'created necessary conditions to ensure the actual right to choose a language of instruction' (Strazhaŭ & Khil'kevich, 1999). Members of the state administration sometimes present themselves as not having the power to influence the process of language choice, but their statements indicate that they realize that they have and use this power ('create conditions', etc.).

The introduction of the Chinese language in the Minsk Gymnasium (secondary school) No. 23 serves as an illustration of such a contradiction. Belarusian media have been reporting on the intensification of economic collaboration with China for some time; this development should have had planned consequences for language teaching as well (Maradudina, 2005; Wang Qian, 2002). In August 2006, the president publicly announced that 'the graduates [of secondary schools] should be fluent in one European language or in Chinese' (<http://www.president.gov.by/press25740.html>). Minsk City Hall offered the opportunity to teach Chinese also to the Gymnasium No. 23. Its headmaster accepted the offer and the school staff pursued activities to arouse parents' interest. The staff was very active, even beyond the scope of the Ministry's recommendation (Kirsanova, 2006). However, the article published in the *Nastaiŭnitskaia Hazeta* [Teachers' Gazette] presented the whole process of the introduction of Chinese in this secondary school as a mere response to parents' wishes (Kirsanova, 2006). There was no mention of the stimulus produced by the government and staff activities. According to the Language Management Theory, it is ideal when language problems are identified in discourse (on the 'micro' level), then solved on the level of organizations ('macro' level), and the adjustments are implemented back in discourse. Interestingly, the author of the article in the state-owned newspaper tried to present the case of Chinese in the Gymnasium No. 23 as an ideal language management cycle, where the government meets the people's wishes. However, in reality, the original stimulus came from the government

and school staff ('macro' level), not from the parents' discourse management ('micro' level) (cf. Figure 3). That is, ideal language management cycle is not only a theoretical construct but was also an emic concern in this case.

Laitin (1993) showed that in India, migrant parents choosing a language of instruction were sensitive to the signals 'from above', rather than influenced by their 'language loyalty'. The same holds true for Belarus: the government and school staff stimulated parents' interest in Chinese and earlier the government had also taken measures to support the teaching of other foreign languages. These activities from above, which were, according to government representatives, 'in the interest of the state' (Palstsiuk, 2000: 178f), stand in marked contrast to the absence of effective support for Belarusian, the 'native tongue' and a state language. For example, the implementation of the government's *Program of Additional Measures* for Belarusian (cf. above) and a 2004 recommendation of the National Bank to provide forms and documents in Belarusian (Sharova, 2004) have failed. The language management cycles in these two cases have not been completed in their implementation phase (see Figures 4 and 5, phase 3). The cause of these non-implementations seems to lie in the orientation of the implementing administrative and bank personnel not to the 'micro' level, where the language management was initiated, but to the signals 'from above' – the government high officials' preference for Russian. The orientation to the signals 'from above' might also combine with economic priorities, Belarusian not being one of them. As a result of this widespread phenomenon, for example, only 61% of a representative sample of parents from Minsk would include Belarusian – the 'native tongue' and a state language – among compulsory school subjects (i.e. 39% would not), and as few as 14% would favor it as the language of instruction (i.e. 86% would not, due to its perceived uselessness) (Jeantheau, 2003: 253, 258). The government then uses parents' wishes that the government itself created as a justification for not effectively supporting Belarusian.

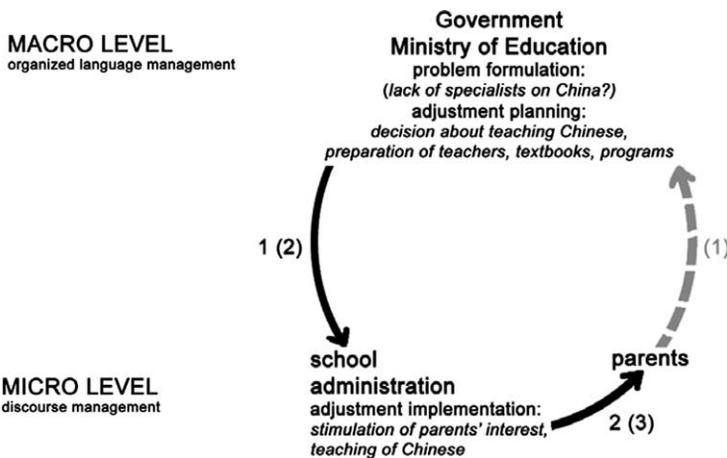


Figure 3 Incomplete language management cycle: Chinese (simplified). Note: Numbers in brackets indicate the alleged order of activities, whereas numbers before brackets indicate their real order.

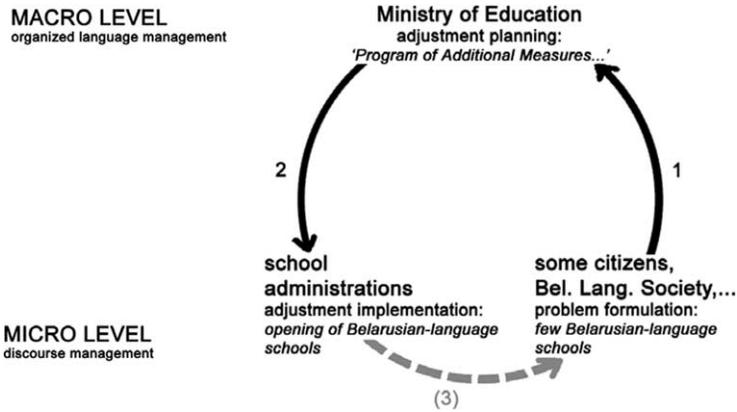


Figure 4 Incomplete language management cycle: Belarusian in education (simplified).

Language users' problems due to education

As we have already remarked, non-parallel bilingualism is common in Belarus, i.e. there are texts that have only a Belarusian language version. Immigrants who have not gone through the Belarusian system of education, however, usually know only Russian, as they most often come from other post-Soviet countries (Ministry of Statistics and Analysis, 1998–2005). Since there are no special compulsory courses in Belarusian for adult immigrants, with the exception of university students, this group of inhabitants may have problems with understanding Belarusian. Even a secondary school student born in Russia reported having problem with understanding a textbook on Belarusian history (Radio Liberty, 2006). This is in contrast to the claim of the former Deputy Minister of Education that such problems in this subject should not arise because Belarusian is taught in all schools (Dylian, 2001). Further examples of the lack of understanding of Belarusian on the part of not only immigrants, but also Russian-speaking Belarusians, suggest that there is indeed a problem of 'semicomunication' (Haugen, 1966). To overcome this problem, more effective bilingual education (possibly using a bilingual

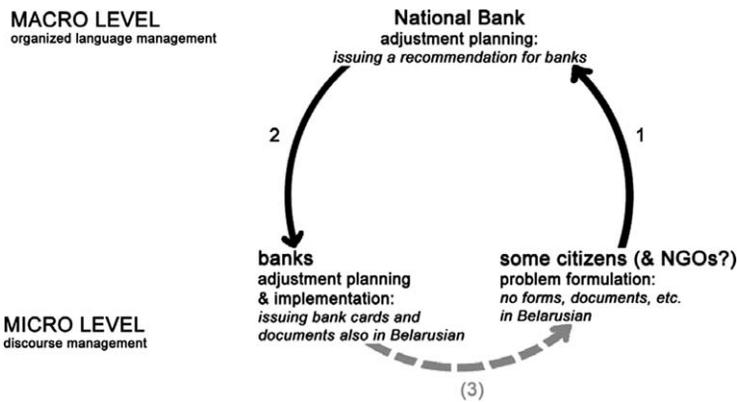


Figure 5 Incomplete language management cycle: Belarusian in banks (simplified).

medium) and sometimes more good will on the part of interlocutors (cf. e.g. Sudziloŭskaia, 2000) are needed.

Problems in understanding Belarusian, however, are relatively infrequent. For example, Trusaŭ (2001) experimentally addressed over twenty sales assistants in a Minsk department store, using specifically Belarusian words, and only one young sales assistant asked twice before she understood. In contrast, *speaking* Belarusian causes more problems. To illustrate this point, let us mention a few examples. In a street survey by Radio Liberty, four respondents (presumably older people) said that they were Belarusian but did not speak Belarusian because they had not managed to learn it at school (Dubavets, 2002). One of the authors of this article met two students of linguistic disciplines who were incapable of fluent communication in Belarusian, in spite of being Belarusian and trying to speak Belarusian with him (a foreigner who might not understand Russian). Both students mixed Russian, Belarusian, and Polish. An employee of the Registry Office (ЗАТЦ) admitted in a newspaper interview that she was incapable of speaking Belarusian, i.e. to hold the wedding ceremony in Belarusian if a bride and groom require this (Astroŭskaia, 2004). As far as statistical data on self-reported language skills are concerned, 96% of respondents of Schröder (2004: 91–95) declared a passive knowledge of Russian, 88% its active knowledge, but only 81% declared passive knowledge of Belarusian and 58% its active knowledge. However, it is the 'nationally conscious' Belarusians, who first acquired Russian and have decided to start speaking Belarusian, who perceive the lack of productive competence in Belarusian as a serious problem. They not only have to overcome social-psychological barriers (psychological discomfort, negative reactions from relatives, friends and colleagues, etc.) but they also have to build needed vocabulary and acquire practical speech habits, in spite of the fact that they usually passed through the Belarusian bilingual education system (Sloboda, forthcoming).

Conclusion

The essence of the problems of language policy in Belarus seems to lie in the absence of the individual language choice in all the spheres of society. It can be related to the shortcomings of the legal state, legal certainty, and democracy in general in this country. Pletiukhov (1999), the chairman of the parliamentary commission for education, culture and science, said that the aim of the post-referendum policy of the state was 'to achieve actual bilingualism', including 'leveling out the inequality in the starting positions' of both languages (p. 31). The cases presented in this article, however, suggest that this has not taken place, the officially formulated language policy is often declaratory and the implementation of various adjustments depends on the willingness of people in power. Moreover, government officials often discursively mask the shift from Belarusian to Russian (Palstsiuk, 2000: 178f; see, e.g. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2007).

Language management by the state is directed primarily at cancellation of the restrictions on the choice of Russian, i.e. at achieving freedom *from* Belarusian. At the same time, it is carried out at the expense of Belarusian speakers who feel a lack of freedom *for* Belarusian. The 'parents' free choice'

argument combined with the unwillingness of the government and state administration to use Belarusian and to create not only the necessary but also sufficient conditions for its use (including economic and attitudinal ones) are barriers to the freedom to use Belarusian.

It is possible, however, that the present language management of the state sometimes also acts to the detriment of the speakers of Russian due to the prevalent non-parallel bilingualism. Nevertheless, the alternative of parallel bilingualism (i.e. laws, forms, road-signs, etc. in both languages) has not been articulated and the state continues to reproduce non-parallel bilingualism. Its language management could be summed up as an implicit attempt at the unrestricted use of Russian, total reduction of Belarusian to symbolic functions, and consolidation of such conditions. This brings about language problems for the Belarusian-speaking minority, who want to use Belarusian on an everyday basis. Thus, while for the overwhelming majority of Belarusians there is no doubt about their Belarusian ethnic identity nor about perceiving Belarusian as their 'native tongue', there is no consensus in the Belarusian society about the degree to which *everyday use* of Belarusian (especially in informal settings) should be part of that identity.

From a typological point of view, Belarus presents an interesting case of a country where the language of the ethnic majority is being lost in favor of the language of a neighbor state, which took possession of the country in the past. In this sense, Belarus is frequently compared to Ireland (e.g. Alpatov, 2000: 193–197). In spite of the evident parallel (Irish has a high symbolic value, but is used only marginally in everyday life, its use is often ritualized, it is one of the two official languages, but at the same time a minority language) there are important differences. While Irish and English are genetically rather distant and mutually completely unintelligible, Belarusian and Russian are closely related and mutually intelligible to a certain degree. This means that from the point of view of the language system of vernacular Belarusian dialects, Russian could easily function as their standard language. Thus, whether Russian or Belarusian shall be considered the standard language of an individual person who speaks a Belarusian dialect is more a matter of choice than of the nature of the language(s) involved. On the other hand, the necessary effort to understand Belarusian for native speakers of closely-related Russian is much lower than the effort for native speakers of English to understand Irish, so the potential for revitalization of Belarusian is higher in this respect (for details see Giger, 2006: 293–304).

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Notes

1. The Constitution, all legal codes and laws referred to in this article can be found online at URL <http://www.pravo.by>, and in print in the National Register of Legal Acts (*Национальный реестр правовых актов Республики Беларусь*. Минск: Национальный центр правовой информации Республики Беларусь, published since 1999).
2. According to the Law on the Social Protection of the Handicapped (418-3/2000, Article 19) the sign language also has the status of the 'state language' with respect to interpersonal communication, instruction and translation services.
3. User AK47 in the discussion 'Does Belarus need Belarusian?' 02-09-2006, 11:41, at <http://www.tut.by>.

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