

# Lexical variation in Belarusian Russian

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## Abstract

The paper deals with differences in distributional patterns of lexical variants in Belarusian Russian. The study, based on the data collected through an online questionnaire, has shown that Belarusian Russian is characterised by quite rich lexical variation - both national (country-specific variants) and regional (items specific of one area of the country). The comparative study of onomasiological profiles of different age groups showed several instances of lexical change. Besides, various methodological questions, i.a. combination of corpus and experimental methods in sociolinguistic studies, are discussed. Questionnaires are considered not only as sources of data, but also as a way to interact with society.

Key words: lexical variation, Belarusian Russian, pluricentric language, sociolinguistics.

## Object of study

Belarus has two official languages: Belarusian, which primarily serves as an ethnic symbol (its use in everyday communication is limited), and Russian, which is a neutral means of communication. Besides, Belarusian-Russian mixed speech (Trasyanka) is used (Hentschel 2017). The Belarusian variety of the Russian language (Belarusian Russian) has its specific features at all linguistic levels. However, native speakers are partially aware of these features, which leads to frequent discussions on the “specificity” of Belarusian Russian as a separate language variety (Goritskaya 2018). The situation is complicated by the lack of empirical studies of the variety.

The aim of the present paper is to find the distributional patterns of lexical variants in Belarusian Russian, based on the data collected through an online questionnaire.

## Methodology

Recently, text corpora have become one of the main sources for studying lexical variation. However, our research on the Belarusian variety of Russian demonstrates that existing corpora have some limitations. Among the main difficulties of corpus-based research are studies of polysemous lexical variants and homonyms, low-frequency items, etc. Moreover, corpora provide data on word frequency only, with no information on its referent. Besides, annotation of some corpora is not detailed enough, which results in lack of sociodemographic information on authors of texts, etc.

To complement corpus analysis, experimental methods, inter alia, questionnaires are used. We should take into account, though, that, contrary to corpus methods, questionnaires allow to investigate not the language itself, but the language from the speaker's perspective. However, the combination of several methods of analysis can provide more precise and reliable results.

The main part of our questionnaire consists of tasks where respondents are asked to name the objects in the pictures – everyday items (clothes, furniture, food, etc., cf. Iomdin 2014). Each question has a field for comments. Respondents can give more than one answer selecting words and expressions from the list and/or write down other variants in the field “other” or in the comments.

The questionnaire was spread through the internet. So far, we have collected about 1350 answers (1206 from Belarusian respondents, 90 from Russian ones, the remaining ones from other countries). To make sure that the variants are specific for Belarusian Russian, we have used a control group of native Russians (53 people).

## Results

To conduct our study, we have created onomasiological profiles (Geeraerts 2010: 832) for 20 concepts, including synonyms and near-synonyms (not only words, but also multi-word expressions), and calculated their relative frequency.

The study has shown that the number of items in the onomasiological profiles can vary significantly – from 4 (*porečka*, *krasnaja smorodina*, *smorodina* and one occasional use of the word *keljukva* ‘cranberry’ for ‘red currant’) to 24 (*vatnik*, *vatonka*, *telogrejka*, *fufajka*, *kurtka*, etc. for ‘cotton wool-padded jacket’, including different expressive units).

In communication, country-specific variants compete with “universal” variants found in different countries, neologisms are used alongside archaisms, high-frequency words coexist with low-frequency ones, loanwords (from Belarusian, English etc.) compete with original items, which demonstrates quite rich lexical variation.

In our quantitative analysis, we have obtained the following results. First, we defined the proportion of variants specific for Belarusian Russian within the onomasiological profile. The per cent of variants characteristic of Belarus fluctuates between 0.93% (*berik/bèrak/bèrki* ‘a children’s play’) and 84.17% (*zakatki* ‘pickles’) (median – 29.48%).

Second, we identified lexical items typical of Belarus in general and specific of one area of the country. The comparison of onomasiological profiles of native inhabitants and all residents shows the influence of migration on the language portrait of the modern city, therefore, to find out more about regional variation within the national, we considered the place where respondents spent their childhood, and not their current location. For instance, we have defined regions of Belarus with prevailing *stërka* (fixed in Russian dictionaries) or *stírka*

(not found in Russian dictionaries, characteristic of Minsk and several other cities only) variant for ‘eraser’.

Naturally, significant variation can be observed in the names of children’s plays (18 words within the onomasiological profile). Our study has revealed that *dogonjal’ki* dominates in all Belarusian cities, though there are several variants specific for a certain location (*kvač*, *kič*, *bèrak/bèrik/bèrki*, etc.).

Third, the comparison of onomasiological profiles of respondents from different age groups allowed us to make some assumptions on Belarusian Russian language change. Some variants specific for Belarus decrease in their frequency over time: for example, *štrok’sy* ‘corduroy pants’ (the descriptive multi-word expression *vel’vetovye štany* ‘corduroy pants is gaining its popularity), *gol’f* ‘turtle neck sweater’ (the percent of a more “universal” *vodolazka* is increasing), etc. And vice versa, there are variants, the frequency of which is rising. This, inter alia, is relevant for *šuffjadka* ‘drawer’ – one of the most salient markers of Belarusian Russian.

The qualitative analysis of comments points to the social meaning of lexical variation and provides an opportunity to study sociolinguistic awareness of speakers, as the respondents explicitly mention their associations with particular variants, share their emotions connected to words, discuss the “correctness” of lexical items, etc. Comments include data on peculiarities of usage of variants, associated with certain region, age, style of communication and other factors; influence of accommodation on usage of lexical variants, etc. Thus, metalinguistic comments supplement and/or confirm the quantitative data.

It is important to note that for a sociolinguist online questionnaire is not only a source of data, but also a way to interact with the society. For instance, in our study, several respondents expressed their gratitude for the opportunity to be heard and to have a look at their speech from outside.

## Discussion and conclusions

Despite the fact that the specificity of Belarusian Russian is often questioned, the findings of this study prove that, at least at the lexical level, this variety has its distinctive features that require further consideration.

First of all, within the onomasiological profiles, country-specific variants with various usage frequency are found, which points to differences in their significance: there are nuclear items used regularly as well as occasional nominations. The number of items in the onomasiological profiles also varies. Within the nucleus, it is quite similar for all concepts (2–4 words); differences are observed on the periphery that includes items with restricted usage.

Belarusian Russian is rather homogeneous. However, this study allowed to reveal several instances of regional variation within the national one and to refine the distribution area of some lexical variants. The comparison of onomasiological profiles from respondents of different ages showed that there

are both country-specific variants, which usage is shrinking and increasing over time.

As for the methodological aspect of this study, online questionnaires proved to be a valuable tool for sociolinguistic analysis. On the one hand, they provide (to some extent subjective) information on functioning of lexical variants in a language variety. On the other hand, such analytical instruments can influence the respondents, in particular, raise their level of sociolinguistic awareness. Awareness of structural features of a particular language variety is one of the key concepts in sociolinguistics (Babel 2016), and this is of great importance for Belarusian Russian, as this variety is at the stage of its development.

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