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Preface

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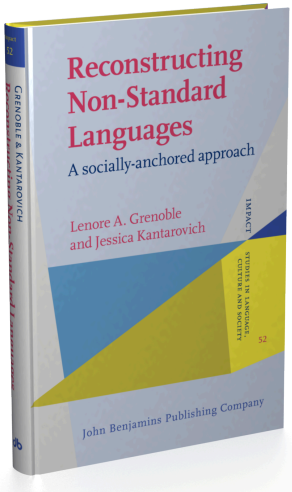

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Reconstructing Non-Standard Languages: A socially-anchored approach
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Preface

This book began as what seemed to be a minor project, looking at contact effects in Odessan Russian of the early 1900s, in particular in the Yiddish substrate. The questions turned out to be more complex than we had anticipated and, moreover, we were surprised by the lack of very basic documentation of a variety of Russian that is widely known, indeed canonized, in popular Russian culture. Odessans are known for their funny speech and an unstoppable sense of humor. Today, the variety is widely associated with modern comedians of the Odessa circle. Yet despite the fact that nearly every Russian seems to be able to imitate Odessan Russian speech, we could not find any recordings of Odessans speaking that way. To be sure, Odessa is a vibrant city today, with over a million residents of varying linguistic backgrounds. But the variety of Odessan Russian of interest here is considered to have a Yiddish substrate, and to be characteristic of the Jewish population of the city, a population that suffered considerably in World War II and was further depleted during the Soviet era by emigration. Since then, immigrations of Ukrainian and Standard Russian speakers to Odessa have changed the speaker community. When attempting to uncover descriptions of 19th-20th century Odessan speech, we found the speech reproduced in literary texts, tongue-in-cheek travelogues of a sort, humorous (pseudo-)journalistic accounts, songs, and jokes (in joke books, as individual jokes, jokes circulated on the internet, a multitude of jokes). But who were the actual speakers? How did they really talk? We found ourselves interested in studying a contact variety that, although apparently well-known, was in fact recorded primarily as a stereotype of itself.

Certainly, there were people living in Odessa when we started the project, as there are today. When we first traveled to Odessa in 2008, the people living there did not sound like the comedians who imitate Odessans, they did not speak like the characters in joke books or TV series (such as *Likvidacija* 'Liquidation') who purport to be "real" Odessans. Modern Odessan Russians either speak Standard Russian or a southern Russian dialect, as do many people living south of Moscow. In order to find people who spoke like the characters and stereotypes so well-known in Russian popular media, we traveled to Brighton Beach, New York, also known as Little Odessa. We concluded, as have others researching Odessan Russian, that the particular variety which was the foundation of comics and jokes was no longer spoken in Odessa. It has been replaced by a somewhat different dialect that

nonetheless maintains some of the features of the earlier variety. And Odessans in Brighton Beach agreed, assuring us that the language they knew as children could not be found in Odessa today, that it was gone – remembered piecemeal but not actively used – by emigrants like themselves.

This book arose out of an investigation into how Odessan Russian was used in the time when it was robustly spoken in Odessa, from the early 1900s until around 1970, when the Odessans we have met say it effectively ceased to be spoken in Odessa. It seemed at first an easy task. Odessan Russian is larger-than-life in Russian culture: it is arguably the best known, most frequently cited non-standard Russian dialect. But the variety we were looking for was no longer spoken in streets of Odessa; if anything, it is alive in the writings of early 20th-century Odessans, and the recollections of Odessan expats. As we dug into the material, we discovered how little actual documentation of Odessan Russian there is. Yet it lives on in popular imagination and is strongly associated with a carefree, happy kind of life that Odessa symbolized for so many.

Our pursuit of Odessan Russian led us to consider other non-standard varieties of Russian that similarly figure more on the literary page than in daily life. We turned our attention to Russian lexifier pidgins, which are captured in the speech of lively characters, anecdotes, and the notes of early Russian explorers. In the times of Imperial Russia, we find journalists reporting on these pidgins in much the same tone as the tongue-in-cheek accounts of Odessan Russian from the same time period. We thus became increasingly interested not only in reconstructing the linguistic systems but focused more on the social conditions of their use, and on reconstructing sociolinguistic variation from the data which is not exactly linguistic, but provides rich information about how non-users of these varieties perceived them.

The social conditions that produced Odessan Russian and Russian lexifier pidgins changed dramatically in the early Soviet period, and again in World War II. When trade and movement between different countries became more open in the post-Soviet period, new pidgins emerged on the China-Russia border, as people engaged in both economic and service trades. Now, the events of spring 2022 have once again changed the Ukrainian region irrevocably.

Place names in this book reflect the changes in history. Thus we write of the cities of *Kiev* and *Odessa*, as they were written by the people whose language we study. Where place names have changed over time, we use the version that was current at the time the language under analysis was spoken; we intentionally index the Imperial and Soviet periods with these spellings. This includes the city of Odessa itself, now commonly referred to using its transliterated Ukrainian spelling, *Odesa*. As a general principle, we use conventionalized English spellings for authors' names (*Babel, Jabotinsky*) except in linguistic examples, where we transliterate personal

names in accordance with the conventions we use for language data. These conventions are provided in Appendix B and we provide a fuller discussion in Section 1.6.

The discussion and analysis here are new and have not been published elsewhere. Earlier, preliminary versions of parts of Chapter 2 can be found in Grenoble (2015a); Chapter 3 in Kantarovich (2012); Chapter 4 in Kantarovich & Grenoble (2017); and Chapter 6 in Grenoble (2015b). Both authors contributed equally to the book, and have contributed to each chapter. That said, Grenoble was the lead author for Chapters 2, 5, and 6, and Kantarovich the lead for Chapters 3, 4, and 7. The first chapter was written and rewritten so many times that it is hard to identify a lead, and the book is truly the result of extensive collaborative work.

The book is divided into three sections. In the first section we discuss our theoretical approach and methodologies used in historical socio-contact linguistics, and provide a background of the issues of contact in the East Slavic languages, including discussion of two modern contact varieties spoken in Belarus and Ukraine today, most commonly known as Trasjanka and Surzhyk. We introduce the topic of the Russian Language Empire and its role in the spread of the Russian language. In the second section we discuss the linguistic reconstruction of Odessan Russian and Russian lexifier pidgins with the kinds of data we have available. The third section of the book turns to larger issues surrounding the use of literature as documentation. We analyze how we can extract information about language use, social networks, and variation from sources that do not explicitly document sociolinguistic aspects of language.