

## Book Review

**Lenore A. Grenoble & Jessica Kantarovich.** 2022. *Reconstructing Non-Standard Languages: A socially-anchored approach* (IMPACT: Studies in Language, Culture and Society 52). Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins. ISBN: 9789027212573 (hardback), xiii, 354 pp. €99.00/\$149.00.

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The book under review is intended to document the process of a sociolinguistic reconstruction of under-documented, non-standard historical varieties, demonstrated by Odessan Russian and several Russian lexifier pidgins. This broad perspective is reflected in the title, which emphasizes the reconstruction process, rather than the specifically Russian component of the investigated varieties. The book consists of seven chapters subdivided into three parts. Part I (ch. 1–3) is of a theoretical and methodological nature. Part II (ch. 4–5) contains the sociolinguistic reconstruction of Odessan Russian and three Russian lexifier pidgins. The authors aim to not just describe the linguistic systems as such, but “the social conditions of their use” (p. xii). Part III (ch. 6–7) uses the data from Part II for a discussion of methodological issues that can be generalized beyond the Russian context into the wider field of historical sociolinguistics.

Odessan Russian was a non-standard variety of Russian spoken between 1880 and the 1970s, but attested most strongly around 1900, in the then multilingual city of Odessa.<sup>1</sup> Especially the Yiddish substrate was an important factor; the variety and its stereotype are indeed mainly associated with Odessan Jews. Since approximately 1970, this variety of Russian has become moribund; only a few speakers (or rather, “rememberers”) survive in America. The stereotype remains active in popular culture, though. Russian lexifier pidgins refer to contact varieties spoken in trade settings and border regions between roughly 1750 and 1917. None of these varieties are spoken anymore; they are documented largely in fictional dialogues from literary prose and in works written by Russian explorers. The stereotypes that persist even today give the book a methodological impetus: “to what extent can stereotypical speech be critically analyzed and incorporated into a linguistic reconstruction?” (p. 7).

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<sup>1</sup> I follow the authors’ use of place names in the form in which the speakers of the investigated varieties would have referred to them, e.g. *Kiev* and *Odessa*, rather than the Ukrainian forms in current use (p. xii).

Chapter 1 (“Socio-historical linguistics and language contact”, pp. 3–26) contains introductory considerations. The authors reason that, as variation is the norm in any linguistic community, it must have been the norm in the past, too. Reconstructing this socio-historical variation is the main burden of the book. The theoretical framework unites contact linguistics with variationist sociolinguistics. In the absence of a large corpus with a sizable number of tokens, the authors are forced to argue for the value of a qualitative analysis (pp. 21–22). A comprehensive dictionary of Odessan Russian, combined with literary sources by authors with first-hand knowledge of the variety, makes up for the lack of rich data and current speakers. Pidgin data is more problematic; yet, it represents “well-intentioned attempts by contemporary observers to faithfully represent the pidgins” (p. 24). While it is possible to criticize this method of data collection, it is obvious that if we choose to discard these data, any research on these non-standard varieties becomes impossible. The “bad data problem” (a term the authors regrettably do not use) should not preclude us from researching low-prestige and under-documented varieties.

Chapter 2 (“The Russian Language Empire”, pp. 27–67) begins by describing how the political construct of the Russian Empire was reflected in language policies that created and consolidated Russian as an imperial language, thereby displacing or marginalizing less dominant languages. Territorial expansion, followed by migration of Russian speakers and the implementation of policies strengthening the position of Russian led to a strong ideology which regards the standard language as the only acceptable form of Russian, all other varieties being dismissed as bad and inferior.<sup>2</sup> Due to high rates of illiteracy persisting even into the early twentieth century, non-standard varieties such as Odessan Russian were unlikely to be documented by the speakers themselves.

Chapter 3 (“Sociolinguistics and the reconstruction of contact effects”, pp. 69–102) is again of a more theoretical kind; sociolinguistic terminology is introduced and discussed. Historical linguistics tries to reconstruct language as a system, but it is important to take sociolinguistic factors into consideration, too. This chapter presents an innovative methodology for reconstructing not just a linguistic system, but also its sociolinguistic usage. This is done by incorporating extralinguistic information from sources that would otherwise have been discarded as irrelevant in traditional linguistics. More specifically, this concerns the social networks of fictitious

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2 I must disagree with the authors’ contention that “[a] rigid standard for Russian began with the emergence of writing and literacy in Rus” (p. 33). This statement disregards the tremendous variation in vernacular writing that existed in medieval Rus’, most notably in the Novgorod birchbark letters. It is also claimed that “[e]arly writing taking place on East Slavic territory was based on Old Church Slavonic, a liturgical language created from South Slavic varieties. The development of a written form of Russian began from this base” (p. 36). Here, too, the authors focus too much on language history “from above”, neglecting the role of literacy “from below” in medieval Rus’.

novel characters for Odessan Russian and information from travelogues for the pidgins. The methodology remains somewhat abstract in this chapter, but becomes clearer when demonstrated in practice in the following chapters.

Chapter 4 (“Language contact and Odessan Russian”, pp. 105–178) presents the first case study. Odessan Russian began as a Jewish ethnolect with a Yiddish substrate, but subsequently spread to the non-Jewish lower-class population, thus becoming a sociolect. In a next step, it spread throughout the population of the city and thus became a regional variety. The primary source is a 1909 dictionary; in addition, literary works are used that were written by native speakers of Odessan Russian, mainly by Isaac Babel and Vladimir (Ze’ev) Jabotinsky. Fieldwork with émigré Odessans in Brighton Beach, NY, showed that most of them had retained at best a passive knowledge of Odessan Russian.

Phonology, especially prosody, is the most iconic aspect of the dialect, but also the most difficult one to reconstruct. The authors enumerate some iconic examples, mostly drawn from the 1909 dictionary. The second iconic feature is the lexicon, containing borrowings from Yiddish, Ukrainian and French. Expressive phraseology is also a salient feature that is relatively easy to reconstruct. The detailed discussion in the section on nominal inflectional morphology (pp. 144–150) will require concentrated reading for those unfamiliar with Russian, though every example is meticulously glossed. Syntactic structures deviating from standard Russian are explained as one of the most salient consequences of a Yiddish substrate (pp. 155–160). These substantial Yiddish substrate effects are due to the rapid Russianization of large numbers of Yiddish speakers through Russian-language education.

A lengthy section (pp. 161–178) is devoted to the methods used for reconstructing social networks. The authors are aware that the use of literary works for documenting linguistic variation in the past calls for caution. Stereotypes about ethnicity and class may cause exaggerated renditions of linguistic features. The authors argue that the biographical details of the two main authors they use (Babel and Jabotinsky) ensure “a faithful depiction of real phrases and features” of Odessan Russian in different social circles (p. 164). In addition, dialectal features are not just added up indiscriminately, but the characters and their interlocutors should be carefully distinguished according to who said what to whom, and also where and when (p. 167). This results in a distinction of characters according to the parameters of class and Jewishness. Based on Jabotinsky’s *The Five*, relationships between characters are tracked, which results in a social network scheme. In spite of all this, data collection in this chapter is not always transparent. A number of possibly iconic examples are given and discussed, but the dataset as a whole remains in the background. Despite the many words devoted to methodology, the discussion remains somewhat anecdotal. The analysis of some individual features is based on *hapax legomena* by just one character.

Chapter 5 (“Russian pidgins”, pp. 179–230) represents the second case study, also involving language contact with Russian, but set in a completely different context, viz. that of trade and colonial expansion into Siberia. The chapter focuses on three Russian-lexifier pidgins (Russenorsk, Kyakhta Chinese Pidgin Russian and Ussurian Pidgin Russian). Russenorsk (pp. 186–197) was spoken from the eighteenth century until the First World War to facilitate seasonal trade (fish and grain) between Russians and Norwegians. Nominal and verbal morphology are limited. The key source is a linguist’s analysis from 1927 and a collection of texts published in 1930, totalling a corpus of 400 words, of which 150–200 are considered the “core vocabulary” (p. 193). This means that the authors cannot undertake a new data collection of Russenorsk, but have to rely on previous scholarship. The authors argue that Russenorsk was a high-prestige pidgin until the first Norwegian merchants started learning standard Russian in the mid-nineteenth century (p. 196).

The next two pidgins discussed concern contact varieties along the Chinese-Russian border. The authors distinguish them because of “different substrate effects”, but they formed part of a larger range of Sino-Russian pidgins (pp. 198–199). Kyakhta Pidgin Russian emerged in the late 1700s in the only trade zone where trade between China and Russia was legally permitted. The pidgin spread more widely along the border in the nineteenth century and was used until after the Revolution. Available sources are limited to some eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travelogues and concise scholarly reports. The authors use these to reconstruct the main phonological and morphological characteristics of the pidgin (pp. 204–211). Most notably, instead of inflectional endings, word order and analytic constructions are used to signal grammatical relations.

Ussuri Pidgin Russian was spoken in the Ussuri border region, with a Tungusic substrate, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Accounts of the pidgin have been given by ethnographers, most notably by Vladimir Klavdyevich Arsenyev (1872–1930), whose work reports the pidgin speech of his local (Nanai) guide Dersu Uzala, a native speaker of a Tungusic language. Arsenyev’s account may be a composition from memory, or even “composed for stylistic purposes” (p. 218), which makes it a problematic source. Nevertheless, the authors extract some iconic features of Dersu’s speech from this source. They admit that in the cases where Arsenyev renders Dersu’s direct speech in Ussuri Pidgin Russian, it contains stereotypical pidgin features. This raises questions about the linguistic accuracy of the source. Also, Arsenyev uses code-switching from pidgin into standard Russian as a literary device to establish Dersu as authentically indigenous. The authors are aware that all records of these “non-prestige varieties” are given by persons who themselves take a certain position towards the varieties and analyse them in relation to a standard language. This issue is addressed in chapter 6.

Chapter 6 (“Types of representation in written documentation”, pp. 233–274) finally puts the reliability of the data collected and discussed in the previous two chapters into the right perspective. The questions addressed in this chapter were kept burning in the reader’s mind while reading the previous 120 pages. How useful are these data really? Where sociolinguists have long focused on spoken data, historical linguists tend to look at written texts. This distinction is not absolute, but rather a continuum. The authors classify written texts according to how they represent speech; each type of written text needs to be analysed in its own way. “Speech-based” texts (i.e. based on actual utterances) that are “recorded” with minimal narratorial intervention provide most accurate data, especially if the record follows immediately on the speech event (pp. 236–238). Prose fiction, although most “speech-like”, is “constructed” through “narratorial intervention” (p. 237). The result is a “literary dialect” that is less authentic than recorded speech. The authors distinguish different text types based on Goffman’s (1981) notion of “participant framework”, but whether a text that claims to record something was actually a faithful recording or an invention remains “to be determined on a case-by-case basis” (p. 243). This is exactly the most crucial point in determining the usefulness of sources. There are no first-hand sources written by native speakers; only “constructed” and “reconstructed” dialogue (p. 244).

The authors argue that in the absence of better sources, literary texts can be used as a source of colloquial language data, provided they be analysed correctly. Although an author manipulates the readers’ attitudes towards the characters, he can still be expected to draw on personal knowledge of language use (p. 246). A “literary dialect” means that the author of a literary work seriously attempts to render a character’s speech by way of a regionally or socially non-standard variety. Although linguists have insisted for a long time that this kind of data cannot be authentic, the authors argue that “in the absence of other data” a literary dialect can be used “as a source of both linguistic and sociolinguistic data” (p. 249). They illustrate this with reference to Charles Dickens. Authors highlight or exaggerate certain features to create literary effects, so that the representation of the non-standard variety is not necessarily accurate and certainly incomplete (p. 253). Yet, when better sources are lacking, the authors suggest that a knowledge of literary devices can remedy this weakness (p. 256), using terms introduced by Sternberg (1981). These are “selective reproduction” (some features of the dialect are represented to create “social deixis”, p. 257), “explicit attribution” (dialect is translated by the narrator, p. 258) and “verbal transposition” (use of the standard language, but odd phrasing and stylization betray a dialect or foreign language behind it, to create a sense of estrangement, p. 259). All three modes occur in the works investigated for Odessan

Russian.<sup>3</sup> The authors argue for the importance, but also underline the limitations of the use of literary dialect.

Chapter 7 (“Indexicality and authenticity”, pp. 275–315) wraps the discussion up and puts the results in a broader methodological context aimed at the documentation of other languages. In a “sociolinguistically-informed reconstruction” (p. 275), what needs to be reconstructed is not just the linguistic system as such, but also its settings, speakers, contexts of variation, contact effects and social networks. A lengthy justification is again given of the validity and authenticity of the sources chosen (pp. 282–290). The sociolinguist’s notion of “authentic” speech is itself not neutral. The authors dismiss the reconstruction of “authentic speech” methodologically; instead, they speak of the “validity of the sources” (p. 284). The question is whether an author gives an accurate representation of actually uttered speech events. Only contemporary sources can convincingly do this; later sources are more likely to be stereotypical. In the case of literary sources, however, speech is created by the author without a real-world utterance. To remedy this very real drawback, the authors propose to select contemporary authors that were physically in Odessa and socially embedded in the social groups that used Odessan Russian. Stereotypical depictions of Jewishness had to be excluded. Among a number of contemporary Jewish Odessan authors, only Babel and Jabotinsky are deemed to represent valid sources; their background ensures that they spoke or at least passively knew Odessan Russian. Most importantly, their representations of the variety’s features coincide. The authors once again underline that their two main case studies (Odessan Russian and pidgins) not only provide relevant data as to these particular varieties, but the study as a whole also offers methodological insights into the use of various kinds of documentation and the sociolinguistic reconstruction of lesser-attested historical varieties.

In sum, the authors have embarked on a journey to delve into a subject that clearly deserves its book-length treatment. The discussion of concepts is often explained with reference to English or other languages. This makes the book accessible to non-Slavists, but also results in lengthy digressions; different parts of the book are likely interesting to different audiences. For the benefit of a wide academic readership, Cyrillic sources and data have been transliterated to the Latin alphabet.<sup>4</sup> The book is a significant contribution to the field of historical

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3 Overuse of the genitive case is an example of selective reproduction used by Babel (p. 261). Explicit attribution is used by Jabotinsky when his narrator explains the Odessan slang used by one of the characters (p. 263) or comments on the use of a converb instead of a past tense and the class differences this entails (p. 264). Verbal transposition surfaces when Yushkevich, although writing in Russian, evokes a Yiddish flavour through intonation and syntax (p. 266).

4 It must be said that there is a disturbing number of philological inaccuracies or slips of the pen, especially in transliteration, e.g. \**lebed’jem* for *lebedem* (p. 147), \**ružě* for *ruž’ě* (p. 149), \**sломmanoj* for *sломанной* (p. 149).

sociolinguistics, especially because of its application of innovative methodology that uses neglected data to reconstruct the conditions of use of otherwise inaccessible historical contact varieties. At the same time, the authors must have been aware that, when making extensive use of somewhat unconventional data, it is by necessity challenging to convince linguists of the validity of this approach. The future will show whether more researchers are sufficiently convinced to pick up on this and pursue a similar line of research for other languages and historical non-standard varieties. It is to be hoped that such uptake will result in a number of studies on other historical settings of language contact. The authors have rightly decided to anticipate this potential in the book's comprehensive title.

## References

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