On metalinguistic awareness and self-identification of a dialect speaker

1. Introduction

The majority of the dialects of the contemporary European languages are to a certain extent destroyed under the influence of the Standard languages. Thus, the language competence of dialect speakers is an intriguing and promising object of research, since it hosts the elements that originally belonged to the two different language systems. This paper is a part of a wider study aiming to reveal some mechanisms and speech strategies of the contemporary dialect speakers, cf. for instance (Sai 2000, Sai, in print). The metalinguistic awareness of the dialect speakers would be the focus in the present paper: metalinguistic reports are analysed and compared with the results of the objective observation of the everyday speech practice in a dialect speaking village. The reasons why metalinguistic awareness may appear to be an important complement to the study of the speech processing are two-fold: on the one hand, metalinguistic awareness reflects to some extent the real mechanisms employed in speech processing; and the other way round, as we try to show below, metalinguistic awareness may partially influence the actual speech processing of a dialect speaker, on the other hand. It may be mentioned here that the role of the metalinguistic awareness, social evaluation, self-identification and the like has been usually claimed to be crucial in the sociolinguistic studies of the city vernaculars (Labov 1966, Labov 1970). These questions are, however, often neglected when studying social stratification in the dialect communities (Francis 1983, 66-78; Chambers/Trudgill 1980, 67-82).

2. General description of the data involved.

2.1. The data for the research reported here were obtained through the fieldwork in 1998 in several villages of the Belozersk district of the Vologda oblast in the North of Russia. Our first goal was to obtain texts of various genres: spontaneous speech of the village dwellers; their speech in the situation of interview with an investigator; reading aloud a written passage; the speech during special linguistic experiments (in particular, speakers were often asked to repeat their words, in which situation the speech is especially controlled by consciousness). The overall length of speech recordings is more than 50 hours. Besides this, informants were to answer the questions of a special metalinguistic questionnaire. Roughly, the questions of this questionnaire could be divided into two big groups, further referred to as “objective” and “subjective” questions correspondingly. The objective part contained the questions like “What’s the difference between your dialect and the Standard Russian (if you mention any)?”; “Do you think that the dwellers of your village speak similarly?”; “Have the dialect in your village changed for the past 10 (20, 30, 50) years?”; “Are there any differences in

1 the role metalinguistic awareness may have in shaping sociolinguistic and even cultural patterns of a dialect community has been discussed in the whorfian spirit in some recent studies, cf. for instance (Zhou/Fu, 1998).
2 We discuss a tricky question of the position of the folklore texts in the genre system of a dialect speaker elsewhere, see (Sai/Vol'skaja, in print).
the way people (you personally) speak in various situations?” and so on. The “subjective” part contained the questions like “What kind of speech do you personally like the best?”; “Do you consciously try to be more standard (more dialect) when you speak?”; “How do you evaluate your own (others’) speech?” and so on³. Some of this questions were simplified for the sake of mutual understanding; linguistic terms were avoided altogether. The data obtained through the metalinguistic questionnaire have already been analysed and partially reported by Pjotr Zubkov (Zubkov 2000a; 2000b).

2.2. The Belozersk dialect belongs to the Vologda subgroup of the Northern group of the Russian dialects; originally it was characterised by significant number of archaic features distinguishing it from the Standard Russian. In the fifties the dialect was thoroughly described in the frames of the then dominating dialectological approach, that is much efforts were made to reveal specific to the dialect grammatical patterns, but not the way they function in the speech processing (Buval’ceva 1955; 1958; Gorshkova 1958).

The dialectal features now are, however, partially destroyed or dissolved under the influence of the standardised language forms, so that the speech of the dwellers of the village is very heterogeneous: the forms belonging to the original dialect system and those coming from the Standard Russian coexist providing a big deal of variation. As attested in other dialect vs. standard language situations this variation may be described as two-dimensional continuum: 1) The degree of the standardness of speech varies socially, that is, from one speaker to another. As expected, the speech of the elder, less educated and basically bucolic population is generally nearer to the original dialect, than that of the younger and more mobile population, especially of those speakers who work in the educational system (there is a school and a kindergarten in one of the villages observed) or having some administrative duties. 2) The degree of the standardness of speech is situation-sensitive, that is, the more formal is the situation, the more standard is the speech. Elsewhere we discussed the nature of this variation in more detail (Sai 2000).

The total number of informants interviewed is 56. We tried to make this sample more or less representative, that is, to make it balanced for the age (the age of our informants ranged from 6 to 90 years), sex and social status.

3. Analysis of the data obtained. Answers to the “objective” questions.

The most general conclusion that may be made when analysing answers to this group of questions is that speakers of the dialect are usually unable to report explicitly the discrepancies between their dialect and (and what they think to be) Standard Russian, though generally they agree that this difference is rather salient and that the speech may give away Standard Russian speakers or even the dwellers of the neighbouring villages. The peculiarities of the dialect that were reported are either of phonetic or (more rarely) lexical nature, though the dialect abounds in specific morphological and syntactic features, too.

The answers informants gave to the first group of the questions are rather homogenous; there is a set of two or three features speakers often reported without visible effort, while other differences…

³ The most explicit forms of the so-called social evaluation tests has been sometimes claimed to be "the least fruitful method of investigation as far as details were concerned" (Petyt 1980, 145). Below we try, however, to show that the data obtained through the tests of this kind may shed some light on the questions of the real functioning of a complex multi-layered sociolinguistic system.
usually were not mentioned at all even after several minutes of reflection. It is curious that generally some informants were quite apt to create metalinguistic comments, for instance, to explain semantic or syntactic differences (sometimes rather subtle) of particular grammatical elements; as was said above, this is, however, not the case with the discrepancies between Standard Russian and the dialect.

These two or three features were often reported in a somewhat formulaic manner; for example, many informants said *my, vologodskie, okaem* ‘we, people from the Vologda region, *okaem* = preserve etymological *o* in the unstressed position (unlike Standard Russian)’. It may be mentioned, that *okan’e* is the basic feature that is usually associated with the Vologda dialects in the minds of the Russian speaking people in other regions.

The most peculiar observation that may be made in this part is that some informants reported so-called *tsokan’e* (that is, neutralisation of the two affricates *ts* and *tš* distinguished in Standard Russian) as being specific to their dialect. This feature is indeed a widespread phenomenon typical of many North Russian dialects; however, *none* (sic!) of the speakers of our villages has in fact this peculiarity of speech, nor was it typical of the local dialect on the former stages of its development according to the available sources (Buval’ceva 1955; Gorshkova 1958). The only possible explanation that may be made for all the mentioned data is that the source of the awareness of particular differences between the dialect and Standard Russian is in fact external. Indeed, it is quite possible that some of the village-dwellers have heard from somebody (TV? radio?) that people in the Northern part of Russia *tsokajut* (that is, have *tsokan’e*) and have taken it for granted with regard to themselves; it would be also quite clear in this case, why our informants were so eager to identify themselves as *vologodskie* when asked about distinctive features of their dialect.

The explanation proposed here is further supported by the fact that none of the informants has mentioned (nor has agreed when asked directly) that the speech of a particular village dweller, let alone his or her own speech, may differ depending on the situation of communication. The only exception is a young man who have spent several years in the Central Russia, and indicated that during these years his speech has changed considerably. This implies that awareness of the differences between Standard Russian and the dialect is by no means a result of individual reflection, that is, when existing in the dialect/standard language continuum speakers do not mention the heterogeneity of the speech production at all.

The conclusion suggested here provides an insight for the establishment of a plausible model of the speech competence of a dialect speaker. Indeed, whenever we deal with a sociolinguistic situation resulting from the interplay between two originally different language systems, we face an important question: whether (1) the language competence of the speakers hosts two (or more) relatively independent codes and the speech processing of a dialect speaker may be thus described in terms of code-switching (Saville-Troike 1982; Selting 1983), according to the Peter Auer and Aldo di Luzio's statement this approach has been generally the most commonly used one in the German dialectology (Auer/di Luzio 1988), or (2) there is one complex code and the speech processing may be then rather described in terms of language variables; the model was established by William Labov (Labov 1966) and has widely employed in various sociolinguistic studies ever since.

Traditionally, however, the ability to distinguish consciously two different codes is thought to be a requirement for the existence of two separate codes. This statement goes back to the seminal study of the speech in the city of Detroit headed by R.W.Shuy (Shuy et al. 1968), in which the distinction between conscious and unconscious indices was introduced. The former are those features of the speech that could be consciously drawn attention to, noticed by the speakers themselves and thus at least partially controlled; the functioning of the latter lies totally beyond the limits of consciousness. R.W.Shuy and his colleagues claimed that the notion of
code-switching is applicable only to the conscious indices, while the unconscious ones could only show gradient stratification. It was proposed above that in the community studied here speakers were not able to distinguish consciously particular dialect vs. standard features, that is, there are presumably no conscious indices in Shuy's terms; this observation implies that the labovian approach employing the notion of the unique language system with variable elements is the most plausible model to be used here\(^4\).

4. Analysis of the data obtained. Answers to the “subjective” questions.

4.1. The answers to the “subjective” question could be basically divided into two logically possible variants. Some speakers overtly acknowledged that they prefer the “town” speech, that is, Standard Russian. This preference could have been formulated in somewhat ephemeral terms (“the town speech sounds better, more exquisite, it is not that harsh as the speech here”). On the other hand, this preference could have had some more clear grounds, for instance, many speakers belonging to this group associated Standard Russian with higher culture and education thus preferring it to the local dialect.

It is argued in some classical dialectological works that general prestigiousness of the standard language is universal (Trudgill 1974) and the mismatching phenomena are usually interpreted the cases of "covert prestige" (Chambers/Trudgill 1980, 98-100). We have, however, attested an opposite group of answers, that is, some informants claimed quite overtly that they generally prefer their dialect to the standardised forms of language. And again, along with rather impressionistic explanations in terms of “softer, nicer, etc. sound” of the dialect speech, some informants provided more rational grounds, basically in the frames of so-to-say “back-to-the-roots” ideology: “we must speak the way our ancestors did, we must preserve our distinctive culture, it is ridiculous to imitate the speech, which is generally alien for us, etc.” The distinction of the two groups of answers proposed in the preceding passages is of course not that strict. Many speakers seemed to be indecisive when answering the questions about their linguistic preferences. Curiously, sometimes the two tendencies were combined in the answers of the same speaker, which may be exemplified by the extraction from an interview with one of the informants: “Education and reading books makes your speech better”. However, several minutes later, when talking about those speakers who have the most beautiful speech, he said: “Well, there are no best speakers any more, these old uneducated women”, which implies that in this case “best speakers” refers to those who preserve traditional dialect untouched by the external influences. This peculiar coexistence of the two opposite tendencies is generally typical of the discussed sociolinguistic community; for more detailed discussion of this question see (Zubkov 2000a).

\(^4\) It may be added here that P.Auer proposed a classification of the dialect communities based on the patterns of the co-existence of the code-switching and code-shifting phenomena in a particular community (Auer 1984, 70-71). He argues that there are no dialect communities totally lacking code-switching phenomena though attests some lacking the code-switching ones altogether. However, if the hypothesis suggested here proves true, the community we study will pose a problem for this classification. This observation may be explained both by the fact that the Russian dialects are generally nearer to the standard language than the German ones and by the lower level of the metalinguistic awareness of the Russian dialect speakers.
It is important to mention that the existence of the two axes of prestige is cross-linguistically unexpected. Indeed, in the majority of the sociolinguistic studies of the dialects it is argued that the standard forms are perceived as prestigious. Even in some rare cases when dialect forms were found to be more prestigious than the standard ones the pattern is associated with general reversal of the prestige triggered by the gradual "standardising" of a dialect (Mattheier 1980); this reverse prestige axis is generally shared by the whole community and not only by some individual speakers as in the case we observe.

4.2. Comparing the overtly reported preferences of the informants with other components of their metalinguistic consciousness as well as with the results of the objective study of their speech one may draw some curious correlations. It was found that those speakers who claim that they prefer the “town” (that is, Standard) speech are also generally inclined to overestimate the standardness of their own speech. Besides this, it was found that these speakers tend to have strong correlation between characteristics of their speech and the parameters of the situation of communication: as found in innumerable sociolinguistic situations the more formal is the style, the higher is the proportion of standard variants conceived as prestigious.

The other quantitatively minor group of speakers who overtly reported the preference for the traditional dialect do not have properties described above: basically they do not overestimate the standardness of their own speech, nor does their speech have much style variation. The characteristic features of the two groups of speakers revealed are summed up in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>standard language-oriented speakers</th>
<th>dialect-oriented speakers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>overtly report preference for dialect speech</td>
<td>overtly report preference for the standard language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>overestimate the degree of standardness of their own speech</td>
<td>do not overestimate the degree of standardness of their own speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>show a big deal of style variation</td>
<td>do not show a big deal of style variation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3. The curious coexistence of the two axes of prestige claimed above triggers some peculiar phenomena observed in the speech of the speakers with reverse prestige axis. The first one to be mentioned here is not infrequent situation with partially reversed style-to-standardness correlation curves, that is the case when speakers used standard forms in more spontaneous style and the dialect ones in more informal situations. For instance, some speakers used the standard form za gribami ‘for mushrooms’ in spontaneous speech, but reported more archaic dialect form za gribam when asked directly to indicate the form they normally use. Another interesting phenomenon that can be conventionally called “reverse hypercorrection” is the case when speakers misuse particular dialect patterns, presumably trying to imitate the dialect speech; such etymologically illogical forms as bo’n an, do’la instead of ba’n an ‘banana’, da’la ‘she gave’ with erroneously overgeneralised okan’e could exemplify this tendency.

5. Conclusions

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5 Somewhat similar reversal of the usual pattern of the style differentiation is reported by Keith Petyt (Petyt 1980, 167). This reversal is, however, presumably caused by the reinterpretation of the dialect forms of a particular type as the correct ones; thus it is shared by the whole of the community.
It is argued here that the speakers of the observed dialect are basically unaware of the particular discrepancies between the dialect and the Standard Russian as well as of the variability of their own speech, which brings an argument for the claim that their speech competence must be generally described as a unique heterogeneous system with variable elements. In this respect the sociolinguistic situation in the villages at issue shares many phenomena generally typical of the situation of dialect/standard language continuum.

The basic peculiarity of the particular situation revealed here is that this continuum is structured along two axes of prestige opposed to each other, which is not generally a typical sociolinguistic pattern, especially for the cases of dialect/standard language continua. The interplay between the two contradictory axes triggers some peculiar sociolinguistic phenomena found in this speech community.

6. Literature


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6 It is still an open question whether the sociolinguistic phenomena revealed here are determined by the very type of the speech community; it may be that some particular patterns of the coexistence of the standard language and the dialect in the villages observed are triggered by the fact that the population of these villages is rather heterogeneous (the dwellers of the villages come from various regions and thus have slightly different dialect bases); besides this community has had very intensive contacts with the standard language in the past fifty years of its existence.


