

Summary

Komarovschina. The Language of the Belarusian-Polish-Lithuanian Borderland is a monograph about the dialectal language of a borderland area, its history, but also its people – the inhabitants of the village Komarovo and the surrounding towns and villages. Komarovschina was formerly known as the Starzeński Family estate around which the village of Komarovo was later established. The scope of my “Komarovschina” is slightly wider, as it also includes a number of neighbouring villages, and it is a symbolic name for the dialectal speech of Komarovo and the nearby areas, which were the subject of my research.

Since 2010 until the moment of the book’s creation, I conducted field research in Komarovschina (Komarovo village with the neighbouring villages: Bakshty, Bokhatsky, Borysy, Falevitsche, Grumbyenyenta, Jatsyny, Januvkovitsche, Konstantynovo (formerly known as Konstantynov), Kurkula, Nareyshe, Nietshky, Olshevo, Siomky, Stara Vies, Vyentshevitsche, Voroshilky). For the purposes of the present study, I recorded about 150 hours of interviews with over 100 people from 17 different towns and villages, which I next typed and analysed and which translated into over 500 pages of text. Selected autobiographical narratives form a separate part of the monograph, others are cited for the sake of characterization and description of particular linguistic aspects.

This publication examines the speech of the people of Komarovschina and serves as an attempt to describe its features and show various language phenomena present in their communication. Language is closely linked with the identity of a given speech community. Hence, I discuss the linguistic situation with reference to the self-determination of the inhabitants of the studied area. I try to present the image of my interlocutors’ identity from the perspective of the respondent, not the researcher, though considering my origin – coming from there – it is not easy.

In my *Komarovschina* I would like to emphasize that the studied area, diversified as it is in social, historical, cultural and linguistic terms, is still a compact and harmonious space, which is open to every person, regardless of their religion, nationality, cultural background or the language they speak. Here there is no hostility or problems of a national, religious or cultural nature, which is typical of every borderland. To quote the local inhabitants: “U kas”c”oł moža prys”c”i každy – choc” pravasłaŭny ty, choc” χto. I ja may’u pajs”c” i_ŭ_carkv’u, us”i roŭna [Everybody can come to church, be it an orthodox person or not. I as well can come to an orthodox church]” [FS Komarovo / 2017]. These words confirm Grzegorz Babinski’s idea that “transience and indeterminacy of the borderland and its communities give rise to greater openness and tolerance. Otherness, which is more common there, may even turn into alikeness, it allows us to perceive otherness as something ordinary” [Babiński 1997: 60].

Within the scope of my interests lies primarily the linguistic borderline, which I understand, similarly to Elżbieta Smułkowa, as “the spatial zone of direct contact and interpenetration of languages and dialects of various nations and / or ethnic groups, either neighbouring or living in the same territory” [Smułkowa 2002f: 89]. Still, understanding the concept of the linguistic borderline is impossible without the knowledge of the non-linguistic conditions, such as age, origin, social status of the interviewee, their education, religious beliefs, their sense of national identity, life experience, as well as external factors, such as changing country borders or state changes. Another vital aspect to conducting reliable research is the researcher’s long-term observation and returning to the sites of field research. Conducting research “from within” [Zielinska 2011: 279], according to the anthropological approach that also constitutes the methodological basis of my research, creates an opportunity for obtaining a reliable and accurate description of the reality of the borderland and of the borderland man. Only this approach allows the researcher to learn about the people of the borderland, their ways of thinking and categorising of the world; it even makes it possible to become part of this open and multifaceted, yet distant, “borderland world”.

The anthropological approach adopted by me for the sake of this monograph, which is also followed by many other researchers in this field (e.g. Engelking 2012a, Golachowska 2012, Smułkowa 2011, Straczuk 2006, Zielińska 2013), helps to see the borderland from the point of view of the interlocutor, and to understand its mechanisms and rules which give it sense and meaning, just like the people of the borderland see it. In a similar way to Anna Zielińska, who conducted her research on language and identity in the Lubuskie region [Zielińska 2013], the key aspect of my research is the man, language and language attitude of my respondents. The starting point of my field research was conducting spontaneous interviews with the inhabitants of the borderland, which made it possible for me to immerse in the psychological, individual human world (the so-called mental borderline¹).

In light of the above-mentioned statements, the main aim of my research is to characterize the primary language code, that is the Belarusian dialect, how it functions and how it is perceived by its users in their everyday communication. The key motivating factor behind this research is, first of all, the lack of studies examining the dialectal speech of this region, and secondly, the changes undergoing in the dialect of Komarovschina. The fact is that modern Belarusian dialect has departed from the speech of the older generation, which was characterized by relatively strong influences of the Polish language, in favour of a more contemporary speech influenced by Russian and Belarusian languages.

The analysis of the collected material has demonstrated two linguistic trends in the territory of Komarovschina. On the one hand, the dialect is changing as the oldest generation of autochthonic users is passing away. On the other hand, we can observe a fast and unstoppable process of linguistic integration, which leads to “language mixing” via

¹ The problem of distinguishing the territorial (external) and mental (individual, psychological, internal) border(land) was the subject of the following publications: Antonina Kloskowska [Kloskowska 2005: 125]; Ewa Nowicka [Nowicka 1999: 14]; Elżbieta Smułkowa [Smułkowa 2002: 483]. A broad discussion of works on the borderland was provided by Anna Engelking, Ewa Golachowska and Anna Zielińska in the article “Identity, language and memory in the borderland situation. Introductory remarks” [Engelking, Golachowska, Zielinska 2008: 7-24].

overlapping language systems, and which is understandable to virtually every inhabitant of the borderland. The proximity of the Russian and Belarusian language systems and a greater prestige of the Russian language is not irrelevant. The build-up and coexistence of these elements blurred the differences between languages and cultures in the consciousness of the inhabitants, and created a sense of a “mixed up” and at the same time cohesive and integrated world.

After examining the material collected in field research and analysing the borderline which I know well and which is close to me, my conclusion is that over the course of several generations (in this case three generations – the oldest, middle-aged and the young) there have been significant changes concerning both the linguistic realm and the users’ sense of identity. I was observing how the modern world and various historical, political and economic events influenced human thinking and forced younger generations to revise and re-evaluate ideas and beliefs which were undisputed facts for the oldest generation. I would like very much for *Komarovschina* to be a starting point in the research on the dialect of the Miadiel region, which is diversified in terms of religion and language and constitutes a valuable source of information for linguists, historians, sociologists, anthropologists and other specialists in the field of the humanities.

This work consists of two main parts: *Historical, Cultural and Linguistic Aspects of Komarovschina* and *Komarovschina in the Eyes of its Inhabitants*. The first part is a theoretical study of a historical, cultural and linguistic nature and the second part consists of selected autobiographical narratives.

The theoretical part begins with an introduction, which presents the objectives of the work, the research methodology, the state of research on the Belarusian dialect based on the most important studies of both Polish and Belarusian researchers who contributed to the development of Belarusian dialectology and defines the basic concepts that are necessary to understand the essence of the subject matter.

The next step, and at the same time the next chapter, is a sketch of the historical background of the studied area. First, it provides a historical outline of individual villages and towns as part of my research, and they are later referred to the facts of general history. This is extremely important as it shows the relationship between this particular area and the widely discussed events in world historiography (e.g. the year 1939 in the eastern territories of the Second Polish Republic, The Second World War, or the post-war years characterised by the Sovietization of this territory). On the other hand, this approach allows us to understand the mechanisms lying behind the structure of this world and the nature of its people – heroes of the autobiographical narratives provided by the residents of Komarovo with its neighbouring villages.² The subchapter titled *Education in*

² At this point, I would like to say that I encountered great difficulties in getting hold of relevant literature allowing to describe some historical issues in more detail. The fact is that there is a lack of scientific studies on that topic. Therefore, I based my discussion and analysis on the available encyclopaedic sources and pieces of field research, and I used archival church documents as well as my interlocutors’ accounts. This may explain some emotions involved in descriptions of certain parts of this chapter.

the Komarovo region takes a significant place in my historical considerations in the book. The coexistence of languages and cultures in this area is explained by the development of education at different times and under different authorities; the chapter also familiarises the reader with the education of the native inhabitants and points at how their level of education might have affected the actual state of the primary language code.

The next stage of my discussion is a sociolinguistic characteristic of Komarovschina. Here I describe and present the interactions between the rural community and the language(s) of the studied area, with particular emphasis on the interviewer's attitude to their own national identity and to their attitude to the language(s) they use in contacts both within their local community and outside its borders.

Considering the fact that the basic means of communication between the inhabitants of Komarovschina is the Belarusian dialect, the last and most important chapter of the theoretical part was devoted to its speech. The central part of the discussion is occupied by locating the studied language on the map of Belarusian dialects. I provide the characteristics of the phonetic, morphological, syntactical and lexical aspects of the language, and I want to describe the way in which the selected linguistic phenomena function and coexist. My theoretical discussion ends with a conclusion in which I present my findings after the analysis of the material collected during field research.

The second part of the monograph – *Komarovschina in the Eyes of its Inhabitants* – consists of the interviewees' personal accounts. They are stories about the life of my interlocutors, their personal observations and experiences they learnt through their lives. All dialectal texts presented in this book reflect the local dialect of Belarus, which is spoken daily by the residents of Komarovo and other nearby villages. Because they relate to well-known historical facts and, thus, can be a rich source of information for researchers representing other scientific disciplines, I provide the simplified phonetic transcription, which is closest to the pronunciation of the real speakers – authors of the dialectal texts. The non-historical names that appear in the texts have been replaced by the symbols X and Y.

At the end of the book, the reader will find a table with a list of names of my interlocutors and the year of the interview, as well as the information about their place of birth, declared nationality, religious beliefs and education.

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