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Who Actually “Carries” the Russian Language? A Critical Perspective on the Role and Concept of the ‘nositel’ jazyka’ in Russian as a Second/Foreign Language Pedagogy

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Introduction

When learning and engaging with languages, it seems unavoidable to be confronted with the term ‘native speaker’¹ (‘NS’) or its equivalents in other languages. Based on Noam Chomsky’s work *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (1965) and his generative grammar, which consider an idealized ‘NS’ as the model and source for obtaining linguistic data, the term ‘native speaker’ is often used to describe someone who has a “natural authority” in a particular language (Bonfiglio 2010: 1). To this day, the ‘NS’ represents an idealized idea of comprehensive linguistic competence (cf. Davies 1991: 20). In addition to authority, positive characteristics such as legitimacy, correctness, and authenticity are often attributed to the ‘NS’ (cf. Lowe/Pinner 2016; Stadler/Dreher 2023). However, this idealization also has negative consequences, as the simplified division of speakers into the binary categories of native/non-native degrades all those who do not belong to the ‘NS’ community (cf. Matsuda 2003: 15). This exclusionary factor is particularly evident in the professional discrimination of ‘non-native speaker’ (‘NNS’) teachers (cf. Ruecker/Ives 2015; Omer 2016). In this context, Holliday (2006) coined the term “native-speakerism”, which

1 In this extended abstract, ‘native speaker’ (‘NS’) and ‘non-native speaker’ (‘NNS’) as well as their Russian-language equivalents are placed in inverted commas to emphasize their ideological construction. I use these highly controversial terms for research purposes and to raise awareness of this problematic but still widely used dichotomy.

is a “pervasive ideology” and refers to the assumption that the best teacher is a ‘NS’. Faez (2011: 231) concludes that the “individual’s native or nonnative status is mistakenly perceived to be a strong determiner of their ability to perform well in various occupations and functions as a source of privilege for some and as a discriminating factor for others.” Moreover, the ‘NS’ also encompasses colonial and racist notions, as individuals who have a skin color that does not correspond to the idealized image of a monolingual “White” frequently face discrimination (cf. Ruecker/Ives 2015; Lowe/Pinner 2016).

Due to the strong idealization of the ‘NS’, its connotations, and the professional discrimination of predominantly non-L1² speakers of a language, the ‘NS’ concept has been widely criticized in recent decades (cf. Davies 1991; Kramsch 1997; Bonfiglio 2010). Kramsch (1997), for example, calls the ‘NS’ concept “artificial”, while Davies (1991) describes it as “uncertain” and “ambiguous”. Speaking of a “myth” (Davies 1991) and an “invention” (Bonfiglio 2010), linguists also point out that the so-called ‘mother tongue’ is not innate but a social construct, just like culture (cf. Davies 2003: 214). Furthermore, since the late 1980s, there have been attempts to deconstruct the “native speaker” ideal and substitute the term with less marked equivalents, such as “proficient speaker” (Paikeday 1985) or “L1/LX user” (Dewaele et al. 2022). This tendency has also been adopted in the *Companion Volume* (Council of Europe 2020) of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR), where the “native speaker” has been replaced by more objective terms, such as “speaker of the target language” or “proficient speaker”.

Despite this paradigm shift, the division between ‘NSs’ and ‘NNSs’ is still very much present in the professional and everyday lives of second and foreign language teachers. Moreover, both the concept and the role of the ‘NS’ have been studied primarily in the context of English as a Foreign and Second Language (EFL and ESL), World Englishes, and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). In other languages, the role of the ‘NS’ has received little attention. However, there is evidence that the concept of ‘nositel’ jazyka’ (‘NJ’a’) of the Russian language, which literally means ‘language carrier’, remains very traditional-minded and conservative in the literature on Russian as a foreign language (RFL) (cf. Kurz 2015; Charčenko 2015; Lovcevič/Gič 2018; Stadler/

2 L1 refers to the first language(s) a person has been exposed to from birth. It is a more neutral synonym for the problematic and controversial terms ‘native language’ or ‘mother tongue’.

Dreher 2023). Previous research has also shown that the ‘NJā’ includes ideological assumptions about language: in particular a strong adherence to the standard language norm and the view that people from the Russian Federation “have the right to determine how Russian is spoken and written in other countries” (Mustajoki 2020: 30).

For this reason, in this paper I focus on the concept and the role of the ‘NJā’ in RFL pedagogy. By analyzing selected literature on RFL teaching methodology and interviewing teachers of Russian, I aim to find out who is considered as ‘NJā’ and what role they play in RFL teaching.

Methods and Materials

In order to critically examine the role and concept of the ‘NJā’ in RFL pedagogy, I conducted two studies. First, I used Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the representation of the ‘NJā’ in five selected books on RFL teaching methodology, published between 2009 and 2019 (Krjučkova/Mošćinskaja 2009; Lebedinskij/Gerbik 2011; Bykova 2014; Šibko 2014; Akišina/Kagan 2019). This method is particularly suited to this research, as CDA seeks to uncover power structures, to question the previously unquestioned, and to critique hegemonic discourses that produce inequalities. In doing so, I answer the questions of whether and how the ‘NJā’ is represented in the selected literature, what (general and linguistic) qualities are attributed to this person and who belongs to the ‘NS’ community. Secondly, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 RFL teachers to explore their attitudes and assumptions about the ‘NJā’. One of the novelties of my project is that the interviewees were L1- and non-L1-speakers of Russian and that they were born or lived in several different countries (e.g., Austria, Canada, Germany, Italy, Russia, Switzerland etc.).

The interviews took place either online via Zoom or in person between March 2022 and April 2024 and lasted approximately 60 minutes ($\bar{x}$ = 58.60 minutes). They were transcribed using *sonix.ai* automated transcription software and then manually corrected using *f4transkript*. The transcriptions were then integrated into MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software and coded according to the interview questions and research literature.

Results and Conclusion

The results of the CDA show that in the literature analyzed, the ‘NJa’ is described as a reference norm and linguistic model for learners (cf. Šibko 2014). He³ is defined as the ultimate goal of learning Russian. However, this goal will always remain unattainable, because the ability to communicate at the level of the ‘NJa’ is either considered highly unlikely or denied altogether. Since the ‘NJa’ is seen as an unattainable ideal, the literature on RFL teaching methodology emphasizes the shortcomings of learners, especially in the areas of phonetics and linguistic competence (Lebedinskij/Gerbik 2011; Bykova 2014).

Despite the idealization of the ‘NJa’ in the analyzed literature, there are also critical passages that discuss the heterogeneity of the ‘NS’ (Lebedinskij/Gerbik 2011) and relativize the idealized image of the omniscient ‘NJa’, since only “educated native speakers” (*obrazovannye nositeli jazyka*) are able to achieve the highest levels of language proficiency (Krjučkova/Moščinskaja 2009; Akišina/Kagan 2019). The CDA also makes it clear that the Russian language is seen as monocentric since it is primarily associated with the Russian Federation as the target language country and with Russian culture, thus closely linking language with nation and culture. This is also reflected in the common collocation *nositel' jazyka i kul'tury*. Finally, the notion of authenticity is central in the literature analyzed when it comes to the text or materials used in the classroom. It is claimed that only texts or materials created by and for the ‘NJa’ are authentic or that only the latter will behave authentically or create a natural and linguistically representative environment in the classroom (Bykova 2014; Šibko 2014).

The interviews with RFL teachers partly reflect the image of the ‘NJa’ described in the literature. The RFL teachers often have an essentialist view of the language and the notion of ‘NJa’, defining the latter as someone who is born with the language and has not consciously learnt it. The teachers see advantages in both the ‘NS’ and the ‘NNS’ for teaching Russian. While the former would be more competent due to their supposedly perfect pronunciation and rich lexical repertoire, the latter would be better able to recognize and understand learners’ difficulties and be a good role model for them. However, they emphasize that it is not enough to be a ‘NS’ and to only have the perfect

3 The ‘NS’ is generally perceived as a male person (cf. Moussu/Llurda 2008: 324).

language skills; teachers must also have a pedagogical education and a strong personality.

As in the literature, some teachers distinguish between different types of ‘NSs’ and consider people who are [ethnically, MK] “Russian” and from the Russian Federation as the most authentic language users. They also see this as one of the main advantages of being a ‘NJ’a’ and RFL teacher. The teachers’ essentialist view is also evident from when they speak about teaching (Russian) culture, since this ability and, for some, this right, is only attributed to ‘real’ ‘NJ’a’ from the Russian Federation. Finally, some of the RFL teachers who identified as L1 speakers of Russian but were not originally from Russia expressed feelings of linguistic insecurity and a desire for acceptance or even authentication by their Russian colleagues.

Regarding the initial question in the title of the present abstract, who actually ‘carries’ the Russian language, the results of the analysis suggest that the ‘NJ’a’ is primarily seen as a person who comes from the Russian Federation and thus represents both language and culture. However, the interviews with RFL teachers reveal that this conservative and norm-oriented view is not shared by everyone, as some of the teachers are critical of the ‘NJ’a’ concept and strongly reject the native speakerist assumption that the best teacher would be a ‘NS’. Linguistic competence, although important, is only one of many competences a teacher should have.

In the context of Russia’s ongoing war against Ukraine, some researchers call for a more pluricentric approach to the Russian language, which would help to de-ethnicize the language and free it from its close association with only one nation – Russia. Only then would Russian speakers in other countries, such as Estonia, Latvia or Ukraine, stop “being treated [...] as hostages of the neo-imperial ideology of the Russian World” (Kamusella 2018: 184), and Russian would finally be seen as a language that everyone can ‘carry’, regardless of their place of birth, ethnicity or culture with which they identify.

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