

Tatsiana Nazaranka

Belarusian: Mind the Gap between Taraškeviča and Narkamaŭka

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The process of standardization of any language is inseparably linked to the historical context in which it is embedded. This contribution therefore begins with an outline of the major historical stages that shaped the evolution of the Belarusian language. Before connecting these stages to the sociolinguistic dimension, key sociolinguistic terms are defined. The following section outlines the main milestones in the standardization of Belarusian, focusing on the emergence of the official standard (Narkamaŭka) and its alternative (Taraškeviča). The contribution demonstrates that the debate surrounding their relationship remains ongoing.

Historical Context

The roots of Belarusian statehood can be traced back to the tenth-twelfth centuries, when Belarusian lands were part of the Polotsk and Turov principalities; however, at that time, there was no Belarusian written language. In the next centuries, lands of modern Belarus belonged to larger political formations: the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and the Russian Empire (Plotnikaŭ/Antanjuk 2003: 10–13). The moment of relative sovereignty during World War I was merely symbolic, since the Belarusian Democratic Republic (BNR) existed only on paper (Gigin 2005: 141). The BNR was never recognized internationally (not even by Germany under whose auspices it was proclaimed) and was questioned even by its own lead-

ers.¹ In 1921, following the Treaty of Riga, the Belarusian lands were divided between the Second Polish Republic and the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR). The Treaty of Riga lost its force in 1939 with the beginning of World War II. After the war ended in 1945, the Belarusian lands were largely consolidated within the BSSR, with minor border adjustments completed by 1964 (Treščenok 2005: 253). The BSSR remained a constituent part of the USSR until its collapse in 1991. That year, the former Soviet republic gained independence and entered the international arena as the Republic of Belarus.

Theoretical Framework

Before relating the historical background to the process of standardization of the Belarusian language, the theoretical framework needs to be outlined.

Haugen's (1966) classic model describes the process of language standardization as follows: (1) *selection of norm*, (2) *codification of form*, (3) *elaboration of function*, and (4) *acceptance/implementation*. Kloss (1969) later reinterpreted Haugen's model as two complementary processes: *corpus planning* and *status planning*. Corpus planning – selection and codification – is usually carried out by linguists and writers, and status planning – elaboration and acceptance/implementation – is usually in the hands of states and institutions (Kloss 1969: 81).

The direction in which standardization develops may be *from above* or *from below*. Following Elspaß, *standardization from above* is a process “in which authorities successfully implement certain language varieties and variants to become ‘the standard’ in a nation-state” (Elspaß 2021: 93). It is “a case of top-down language planning, usually resulting in concrete prescription and proscription activities” (Rutten/Vosters 2021: 67). By contrast, *standardization*

1 Anton Lutskevich, head of the BPR government, wrote in his diary on 10 January 1919: «Яшчэ раніцай у газэты „Эхо“ з’явілася вестка, што ў Менску 2.1.19 савецкія ўласці апавястлі незалежнасць Савецкай Беларускай Рэспублікі. Гэта ўсіх нашых так наэлектрызавала, што ўсе як адзін гатовы ехаць у Менск і працаваць разам з бальшавікамі. Гэтае ж настраенне выявілася і на засяданні Рады» (“Earlier that morning, the newspaper *Echo* reported that on 2 January 1919, in Minsk, the Soviet authorities proclaimed the independence of the Soviet Belarusian Republic. This electrified all of us so much that we were ready to go to Minsk and work together with the Bolsheviks. The same mood was also evident at the meeting of the Rada”; Luckievič 1991).

from below happens without direct intervention from authorities. The basis for standardisation from below relies “on oral registers and the language use of members of the lower ranks of society in language history” (Elspaß 2021: 93).

The result of standardization is a *standard variety*, which, unlike a *non-standard variety*, meets four criteria: (1) it is codified in authoritative reference works, (2) it is formally taught, (3) it has official status, and (4) its norms are enforced by institutional actors such as teachers or administrative authorities (Ammon 2004: 32).

Milestones of Standardization

Building on the historical background outlined above, four key milestones can be identified in the process of the Belarusian language standardization:

1) The failed standardization from above in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania

Old Belarusian² had official status, and the district scribe was required to write exclusively in Old Belarusian, as stated in Article 1, Part 4 of the Statutes of 1566 and 1588 (Nacional’nyj pravovoj portal Respubliki Belarus’, n.d.). Moreover, Old Belarusian had a codifiable form suitable for drafting “textual products [...] confined to so-called higher registers” (Rutten/Vosters 2021: 66), such as these very Statutes. However, even if one accepts that Old Belarusian, while functioning primarily as a chancellery language (Martel 1935: 38–44), was also used by the educated elite, as suggested by Karskij (1893: 13), Žuraŭski (2024: 190), and Ragauskienė (2009), the fact remains that the vast majority of

2 Old Belarusian is considered here the most accurate equivalent of Ruthenian. This terminology is supported by Waring (1980: 132), who noted that the term *бѣлоросійскій язык* was used in the Grand Principality of Moscow to refer to the language of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The Polish linguist Samuel Linde, in his monograph on the Statute of 1588, explicitly identified this language as *Biało-Ruski* (Linde 1816: 13). Further support for this terminology comes from the archival materials from the Central State Historical Archives of Ukraine (fund 222, Collection of Documents of the Historical Society of Nestor the Chronicler), which contain copies of treaty articles of all Ukrainian hetmans, including Bohdan Khmelnytsky’s 1654 documents, explicitly marked as a copy made from *белорусского писма* (Central’nyj Deržavnyj istoryčnyj archiv Ukraïny, n. d.). The Belarusian basis of the chancellery language of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was also demonstrated by the Norwegian Slavist Stang (1935: 14–20). His conclusions were later reinforced by the American scholar Šerech, who emphasized that this language “was nourished, above all, by Central BR sources” (Šerech 1953: 59).

the population was illiterate, and their everyday speech was far removed from the language of the nobility. The failure to overcome these limitations suggests that the obstacle lay not in the language itself but in a weak national identity: there was no critical mass of speakers ready to claim Old Belarusian as their own and to promote its broader acceptance and implementation.

2) Standardization from below after the collapse of the Russian Empire

The moment when a window for standardization opened once again came in the early twentieth century. In 1918, Branislaŭ Taraškevič published *Belaruskaja gramatyka dlja škol* (Belarusian Grammar for Schools³), thereby carrying out not the first but the most widely recognized instance of corpus planning of his time. The selection of the norm was based on spoken speech (Taraškevič 1918: 3), while codification incorporated the variation of forms. However, the main obstacle to status planning was the lack of stable statehood. The acceptance of Taraškevič's codified form remained limited and, in Labov's terms, "below the level of social awareness" (Labov 1994: 78). This can be attributed, first, to the fact that until 1939 the western Belarusian lands were subjected to a policy of harsh Polonization, as evidenced by the near disappearance of Belarusian schooling (Szturm de Sztrem 1939: 319). Second, it was due to the way Taraškevič's *Grammar* was circulated: none of its editions indicate print runs, and while it was included in the list of recommended textbooks for Belarusian schools (Belaruskaja central'naja škol'naja rada 1924: 10), it was absent from the set of textbooks officially authorized by the Polish Ministry of Education (Siemakowicz 1999: 116).

3) Standardisation from above in BSSR

Unlike the western Belarusian lands, where the language lacked official recognition, in the eastern part within the BSSR Belarusian, it received the status of a state language, and the implementation of its norms became a governmental priority. This process did not rely on Taraškevič's *Grammar* editions, but rather on those produced by local linguists, most notably Lësik (1921, 1924). While following the general trajectory set by Taraškevič, Lësik's system introduced substantial divergences. Reflecting this development, the Polish Ministry's official list of authorized textbooks even included *Biellaruski pravapis pavodle*

3 Unless otherwise indicated, the translations are mine, T. N.

B. Taraškeviča i Ja. Lësika by Astroŭski (1930), highlighting the coexistence of parallel codification lines.

4) The Decree of 1933

The 1933 decree *On Changes and Simplification of Belarusian Pravapis* (Ab zmenach i spraščenni belaruskaha pravapisu 1933) was the first official document to codify the standard variety of Belarusian that came to be known in the 1990s as *Narkamaŭka* (Zaprudski 1999: 23). The scope of the decree extended beyond orthography (the literal meaning of *pravapis*) and covered morphology and punctuation, reflecting the broader meaning the term *pravapis* had at the time (Lësik 1924; Astroŭski 1930; Nekraševič/Ihnatoŭski 1927: 238). The decree did not target Taraškevič's original 1918 codification, but rather the diverse codification variants that had come into circulation during the early phase of Belarusian statehood.

Thus, Taraškevica and Narkamaŭka represent a non-standard and a standard variety, respectively. The gap between them emerged during the shift from *standardization from below* to *standardization from above* in the Belarusian context. Unlike Narkamaŭka, Taraškevica did not receive institutional support, official recognition, or systematic enforcement.

Contemporary Implications

The historical period in which the shift from *standardization from below* to *standardization from above* conferred on the term Narkamaŭka an explicitly evaluative connotation portraying it as a “Russified” standard variety in contrast to Taraškevica. This interpretation has been supported by some scholars (Bieder 2000; Klimaŭ 2004; Bažutkina 2020). However, Ramza (2018), after re-examining the morphological oppositions identified by Klimaŭ (2004), concluded that there was no fundamental grammatical opposition between Taraškevica and Narkamaŭka; the differences between them were primarily orthographic.

The evident lack of scholarly consensus continues to fuel debates that have increasingly moved beyond academia.⁴ A typical example is the claim that,

4 Social media posts on Instagram often spread misleading information about the Taraškevica/Narkamaŭka distinction.

in feminine nouns with the suffixes *-аццѣ/-оццѣ*, the genitive plural ending *-яў* was replaced in 1933 with *-ей* as part of a deliberate Russification policy. Contrary to this claim, the *Pravapis* of 1934 (Aleksandrovič 1934), issued in direct response to the 1933 decree, allows in Rule 52 (*ibid.*: 30) both *-ей* and *-яў*. The use of ending *-ей/ ej* was a regular feature of the *Naša Niva* language (Lemcjuhova 2003–2007). The most recent official grammar of Belarusian even observes a trend toward broader use of *-яў* (Lukašanec 2007: 161).

As this latest official grammar of Belarusian is approaching its twentieth anniversary, it was decided to re-examine its conclusion on the basis of data collected after 2020. The material consisted of transcripts from ten episodes of the television quiz show *Svaimi Slovami* (ca. 30 minutes each), twenty episodes of the YouTube interview series *Surazmoŭcy* (ca. 15 minutes each), and selected Instagram posts⁵ with their accompanying comments from communities dedicated to the Belarusian language. All these sources share a common aim: the promotion and popularization of the Belarusian language and culture. The findings from the transcripts analysis indicate that, although feminine nouns with the suffix *-аццѣ/-оццѣ* are relatively infrequent, the genitive plural endings confirm the previously observed tendency toward the use of both *-ей* and *-яў* (*магчымасцей, постацяў, цікавасцяў, якасцяў, каштоўнасцяў, каштоўнасцей, цяжжасцей*), with a predominance of the latter. This example is one of many showing that attempts to identify a gap between Taraškevica and Narkamaŭka on morphological grounds prove to be unsustainable.

5 Comments on Instagram posts were later excluded from the analysis due to the risk that they were produced via machine translation or AI-assisted tools. The former concern arose from the decision of the Belarusian National Corpus developers to suspend work on its synchronic section because of uncertainty about the human origin of the online texts (Koščanka/Martysjuk 2024). The latter is supported by experiments with ChatGPT, which show poor performance in Belarusian and about Belarusian, including the Taraškevica/Narkamaŭka issue (Nazaranka 2025).

Summary

Taken together, the observations above provide a basis for summarizing the key dynamics that have shaped the standardization of the Belarusian language over the centuries. The missed opportunity for standardization from above in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, where Old Belarusian had official status, meant that the next window for standardization opened only after the collapse of the Russian Empire. By that time, the Old Belarusian written tradition had been interrupted for nearly two centuries. This interruption, combined with territorial fragmentation, unstable statehood, and widespread illiteracy among Belarusian speakers, prevented Old Belarusian from serving as a foundation for standardization from above. Corpus planning undertaken by Taraškevič was based on the speech of lower social strata and codified grammatical variation, thereby initiating standardization from below. With the acquisition of statehood and the recognition of Belarusian as an official language in the BSSR, standardization shifted its trajectory to a from-above model. This shift resulted in a gap between Taraškeviča and the standard variety codified in 1933, later referred to as Narkamaŭka. The ongoing lack of scholarly consensus on the Taraškeviča/Narkamaŭka issue continues to foster misinterpretations, not only within academia but also in social media and AI-generated outputs.

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