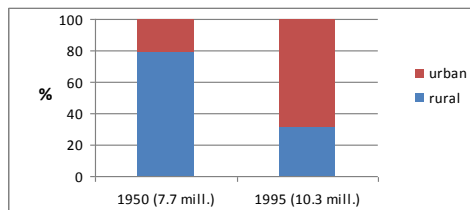


**The phenomenon:** For several decades, large sections of the Belarusian population have experienced intense contact with the Russian language. Starting in the Stalin era, and in particular during the 1960s and 1970s, political and socio-economic circumstances forced autochthonous speakers of Belarusian to turn from the Belarusian to the Russian language in order to have any prospects for professional and social advancement. Certainly, this pressure affected the urban population to a higher degree than the rural population – and the Belarusian towns experienced enormous growth, especially during the period of massive industrialisation in the 1960s and 1970s.



**Illustration 1:** The shift in the proportions of rural and urban population in Belarus

Nowadays, Belarus is considered Belarusian-Russian bilingual. As a matter of fact, this bilingualism is distinctively asymmetric in favour of Russian, which clearly dominates in public life, especially the media, but also in educational institutions. (Legally, both languages have the same status since President Lukašenka assumed office. For a few years immediately after the state gained independence Belarusian was the only official language – similar to Ukrainian, which is still the only official language in Ukraine today.)

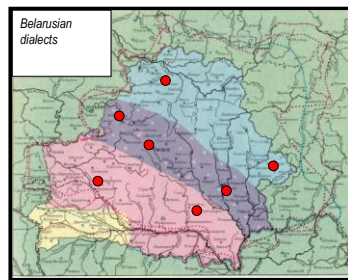
However, in recent decades, a kind of mixed Belarusian-Russian speech has spread all over the country, to a great extent unnoticed by linguists and the general public. Between the end of the 1980s and today it has only hesitantly received relevant attention and only since the 1990s from linguistics. For the general public, and particularly the elites, this mixed speech carries a negative connotation and has thus been labelled “trasyanka”. Originally, this expression was used to name a blend of hay and straw, i.e. a mixed, diluted fodder of poor quality. Apart from the metaphorical concept of a “bad mixture”, this term also correlates with the “odour” of a farmer who has been driven into town. The Belarusian-Russian mixed speech has thus also been stigmatised (especially by certain Belarusian nationalist circles) as a symptom of a lack of education and (linguistic) culture.

In an evolutionary perspective, at least for speakers of the first generation, the mixed Belarusian-Russian variety is mainly an approximation towards the Russian language on a Belarusian basis (strongly influenced by local dialects). (A similar mixing-phenomenon with Russian is Ukrainian “surzhyk”; an “older” variety with a Ukrainian basis can be distinguished from a “newer” one on a Russian basis since national independence.) Children of this first generation, who are adults today, experienced the mixed speech as a family language. Unlike their parents, however, at school and in higher educational institutions they were confronted with Russian to a considerably greater extent.

**Research questions and aims:** From the linguistic perspective, it is necessary to describe the essential features of trasyanka in contrast to the Belarusian standard language and the Belarusian dialects as well as in contrast to Russian on all layers of linguistic structure. Of particular interest is whether the mixing of Belarusian and Russian takes place spontaneously (code switching), or whether it is, at least partially, conventionalised (code mixing), which would involve establishing a new system of a sub-variety.

The sociological part of the study first uses quantitative methods to establish how far the mixed speech is “spread”. Not only socioeconomic criteria like age, gender and education of speakers of the mixed speech are considered, but also the functional contexts in which speakers opt for either a mixed or another form of speech (“pure” Belarusian or Russian). Finally, the question of the potential for identification that resides in the mixed speech in a society that is characterised by a certain socio-political Belarusian-Russian polarisation is investigated. The mixed speech might be related to a neutral cultural stance.

**Design of the project:** The collection of data is taking place in seven towns in Belarus. Apart from Minsk, they are small and medium-sized towns.



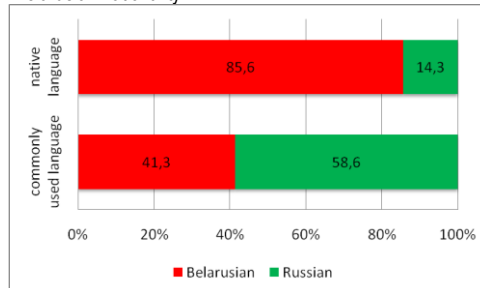
**Illustration 2:** Towns where data are being collected

In these places the following data are being collected: (A) a corpus of family conversations, since the mixed speech is most often encountered within families and among friends (ca. 120 informants whose social parameters are also recorded); (B) a collection of data based on a survey including questions on the respondents’ social background, their assessment of their own and their environment’s linguistic behaviour (their “opting” for a given language), language attitudes, questions on identity etc. (1400 respondents); (C) recordings of open interviews with informants (ca. 100 of the respondents in part B) who openly admit to usually practising mixed Belarusian-Russian speech. While (A) provides a database for linguistic analysis, as does (B) for quantitative sociological analysis, both disciplines involved profit from (C). Partly, the interviewees employ the mixed speech in the interviews, so these are objects of linguistic description in addition to (A). In the social scientific part, the data gathered in (B) is related to a qualitative analysis concerning the relevant subpopulation of “open trasyanka speakers”.

Teams of Belarusists (lead by Siarhej Zaprudski) and social scientists (lead by David Rotman) from the Belarusian State University Minsk are partnering the Slavic philologists and social scientists from Oldenburg University (see above). Five doctoral (PhD) theses are being prepared in direct connection with the project, two at the University of Oldenburg, two at the University of Minsk, and one at the University of Bamberg, where under the mentoring of Martin Haase the situation in Belarus is compared with the situation in Spanish Galicia, where forms of Galician-Castilian mixed speech can be observed.

**First results:** The first phase of the project concentrated on the collection and processing of data. Initial analyses are possible especially on the basis of the interviews (B). They are presented in the following, accompanied by a few linguistic comments.

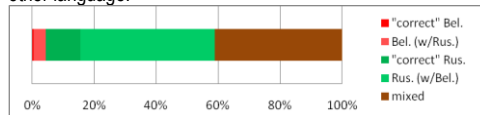
**Illustration 3:** The most recent CENSUS poll of 1999 showed the following results for Belarusian citizens with “Belarusian nationality”:



(a) Claiming a native language on the one hand and actual linguistic behaviour and linguistic competence on the other need not be equated. (b) Belarusian has a high symbolic value. It is problematic though that the poll did not enquire about the mixed speech.

**Illustration 4:** Language commonly made use of

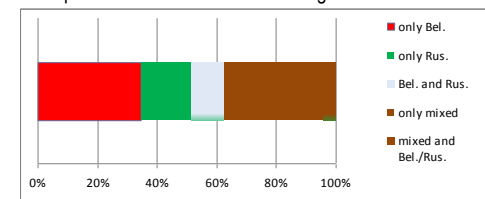
Our survey allows the “mixed speech” as a third option and also inquires to what extent speakers consider their own Belarusian or Russian as correct or slightly mixed with the other language.



**Mixed language and education? (a)** Of those who claimed to commonly make use of the “mixed speech”, 13% have a university degree and 38% have graduated from a university of applied sciences! **(b)** Of those respondents who have a university degree or a university of applied sciences degree, only 20% claim not to practise the “mixed speech” with anyone. The stereotype that the mixed speech is symptomatic of citizens with lower educational qualifications is not confirmed by the data.

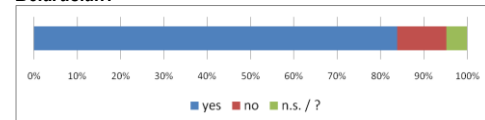
**Illustration 5: “Native language”**

Here, we offered the respondents the “mixed language” as a third option to allow for multi-referencing.

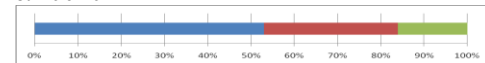


**Conclusions from illustrations 4 and 5:** (a) If the “mixed speech” is among the possible answers, a considerable proportion of the respondents admit to using it: for more than 40% it is the language of daily use, for over 30% the native language. (b) Those who speak of Belarusian or Russian as their language of daily use predominantly mention that in their speech this language (slightly) mixes with elements of the other. (c) Belarusian plays an even more peripheral role than indicated by the 1999 CENSUS poll. It is clearly referred to as native language by the respondents more frequently than Russian, but not more frequently than the “mixed speech”, which might be taken to suggest a high potential for identification of the latter

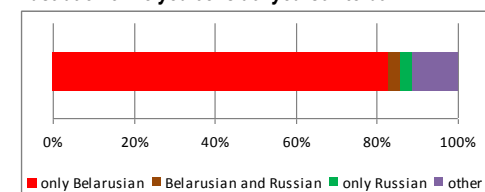
**Illustration 6: Can one be Belarusian without speaking Belarusian?**



**Illustration 7: Can one be Belarusian and Russian at the same time?**



**Illustration 8: Do you consider yourself to be ...?**



**Conclusions regarding illustrations 6 to 8:** (a) The vast majority of Belarusians think it is possible to be Belarusian without speaking the language. This is concordant with the respondents’ assessment of their own linguistic behaviour. (b) A large proportion also considers a bi-cultural identity to be possible, in which Belarusian as well as Russian culture serve identity development. (c) Contrary to (b), however, only a very small number of the respondents claim such a bi-cultural identity for themselves. The vast majority considers themselves exclusively Belarusian.

**Outlook:** We are observing the establishment of a mixed way of speaking as a discrete variety in all social strata of Belarus. At the moment, however, it cannot be predicted whether this is going to be an enduring state or whether it is more of a transitory phenomenon. Much will depend on the language politics of independent Belarus.

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