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THE SYMBOLIC AND COMMUNICATIVE DIMENSIONS OF THE LINGUISTIC PRACTICES OF THE BELARUSIAN POLES

LANGUAGE IS TRADITIONALLY CONSIDERED as a basic reality connected with such terms as ethnos, ethnicity and nationality. The role and functions of language in forming and determining ethnicity vary a lot in different research traditions and schools. For primordialists, it is a natural basis for the formation of an ethnos, i.e. an “objective” and “natural” characteristic of its bearers. For constructivists, language is an “ethnic marker”. In the instrumentalist school, it is viewed as one of the main ethnicity translating channels and so on. But approaches notwithstanding, language is recognized as a major ethnos founding factor and a basis of ethnic identity which also performs a number of realizational functions and axiological connotations.

The contemporary social and humanities studies distinguish between the terms “ethnic identity” and “ethnicity”. While ethnic identity is subjective, the term “ethnicity”, on the contrary, includes objective features: the ethnic background of parents, place of birth, culture and so on. Ethnicity is a characteristic prescribed or constructed by society, whereas ethnic identity is formed as a result of social reality construction on the basis of ethnicity, but is not equal to it. And “ethnic identity” is considered to be a more plastic term than “ethnicity”.

We adhere to the approach according to which ethnic identity is not an unchangeable set of cultural traits but is rather formed in the process of social constructing. Language as a basis and criterion of ethnic identification can be reassessed from the point of view of the functions and role it plays in different ethnic groups. Looking at the role and functions of language in forming the ethnic identity of the Belarusian Poles, it is necessary to take into account both the peculiarities of the origin and history of this group and the socio-cultural conditions in present-day Belarus that impact the processes of transformation of its ethnic identity and linguistic practices. In this sense, it is hardly possible to study the state and transformation processes of the linguistic practices of the Belarusian Poles without a reference to the linguistic situation in Belarus, its dynamics and peculiarities.

This article is a result of a study on the community of the Belarusian Poles that was carried out by the Institute of Sociology of the Belarusian National Academy of Sciences in November-December 2008. Within the framework of the research, we looked at Poles (here and now, i.e. in Belarus and at

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present time) as a symbolic community which shares a basic characteristic – self-identification of individuals as “Poles”. And in this respect we were less interested in how this community appeared, was formed and changed over the centuries. The main research focus was placed on the questions of what it means to belong to this community for those who affiliate themselves with it, by means of what social and cultural mechanisms the community is reproduced, and what determines the wholeness and internal diversity of the community.

The empirical part of the research was realised by means of a purposeful selection and survey of adult population of Belarus who identify themselves as belonging to the Polish nationality. The survey was carried out in places “compactly inhabited” by Poles in Hrodna Voblasć (Region), in some towns in Brest, Viciebsk and Minsk Voblasćs which have the biggest populations of Polish nationality, as well as in the City of Minsk. Overall, 787 respondents were surveyed in the framework of the study.

At the initial stage of selecting respondents, the sampling was based on the “snowball” methodology.² The methodology of structured interview was used in the survey. The main thematic blocks of the interviews were about images and attitudes towards the Polish culture, history, language and traditions. They also dealt with finding out the criteria of respondents’ self-identification with the Belarusian Poles and the extent to which different types of social self-identification are reflected. The other thematic blocks were about religious and communicative practices. One of the study’s objectives was to identify the symbolic role and place of language in the structure of the ethnic identity of the Belarusian Poles. The study also aimed at analysing the real linguistic practices and communicative environments as factors in preserving and transforming the community of the Belarusian Poles.

Linguistic Situation in Belarus as a Factor in the Transformation of Communicative Practices of the Belarusian Poles

For centuries, the linguistic situation in Belarus has been characterized by the coexistence of different languages. Moreover, it was not only the prevalence and state of the languages that changed in different historical periods, but their status as well.³ Only in the past two decades, the legislative embodi-

² The *snowball* methodology is used to find respondents who are difficult to reach. The selection of respondents is done in the following way: initially, a group of qualifying respondents is formed; then during the interviews they are asked for other potential respondents (acquaintances, relatives, friends and partners of Polish nationality in our case) who are later also interviewed. Then the procedure goes on: the addresses of a third wave of respondents are found out and so on. The sampling is built gradually, stage after stage like in making snowballs.

³ For a detailed account of the linguistic situation in Belarus in different periods see: Bulyka, A. N., Krysin, L. P. (eds) (1999); Citarenka, L. H. (2009).

ment of the state language changed twice in Belarus. The most sensitive and topical issues in the linguistic sphere today have to do with the relationship and state of the Russian and Belarusian languages.

To describe the linguistic situation in communicative spaces in which there are two or more languages at the same time, an extensive categorical apparatus has been formed in social sciences and humanities (first and foremost in sociolinguistics). In the context of analysis of the language situation in Belarus, we are mostly interested in the concepts of bilingualism, multilingualism and diglossia. During their existence, these concepts have undergone significant changes, which in some sense reflect the overall change of linguistic processes in the world, but this is not the subject of our research.

The concept of diglossia was introduced into the scientific vocabulary by Charles Ferguson (Ferguson, 1959) in 1959 to determine the specific relationship between two or more versions of the same language which are used in a communication community. The most important feature of diglossia is the functional specialization of options when depending on the social situation, the individual uses various functional styles of one language or different languages. In his work (Ferguson, 1959), Ferguson points out the functional difference between diglossia and bilingualism. While in bilingualism the languages are functionally equal, in the case of diglossia there is a division into High and Low languages. The High language is used in non-domestic “high” (religion, book-writing culture, science, education) areas and communicative situations and is not used in everyday life. The Low language is used in daily communication and lower functional speech styles and genres of writing (home writing, “low” genres of literature). Later, the term diglossia began to be used for the study of multilingual communities.

Thus, the main difference of diglossia from multilingualism and bilingualism is that it has a social organization, where each of the languages has its own clearly defined, phenomenologically sanctioned and widely recognized functions.

Justyna Straczuk (Straczuk, 1999), who used the concept of diglossia to describe the linguistic situation in the Belarusian-Polish border area, notes that a clear separation of the functions of the languages is very important in the case of diglossia. One language is typical of the official sphere and religious life and is used to communicate with strangers and colleagues at work. The other is used in private, family and everyday communication. Without a separation of the functions of individual languages, diglossia disappears; because if in some area of life two languages are used, the language that enjoys greater prestige sooner or later prevails. This kind of separation, however, requires a wholeness of cultural organization. Therefore, diglossia is most common in the world of traditional culture, as in the modern world the boundaries between different spheres of life are increasingly blurred. In multilingual communities, the choice of the language to be used in a particular situation is not accidental. It is the community that establishes the usage zones of individual

languages and gives them some value – the status of low or high, intimate or formal language. Each member of a multilingual community learns from early childhood not just several languages, but also the principles of their use in specific situations. This requires communicative competence, i.e. knowledge of the rules of how to use different languages depending on a social context (Straczuk, 1999:10-18).

It should be pointed out that such functionalization of linguistic relations can serve the purposes of social adjustment in a foreign language environment while preserving the language of an ethnic group by distinguishing and fixing the specific areas of its use.

Applying the concept of diglossia to describe the linguistic situation in Belarus, we can identify the specific dynamics of its development, especially in recent years. Let us note some contextual characteristics that influence the pace and content of this dynamics. The first important characteristic of the linguistic situation in Belarus is its quite intensive (and almost uninterrupted for the last centuries) development and a “becoming” nature. The second characteristic is that there are two legally equal languages: Russian and Belarusian. The third characteristic has to do not so much with objectively set but rather subjectively shared aspects. It is the high degree of the ideological coloration of individual or different social groups’ attitudes to various aspects of the linguistic situation in Belarus.

So, let us consider the linguistic situation in Belarus in terms of diglossia. The situation of diglossia, apart from the limited and socially determined difference in how languages are used in various social situations, also foresees different channels to transmit languages. The Low language is the language of family, neighbourhood, closest surrounding and is the first one to be learnt in the process of socialization. The High language is predominantly transmitted via special social institutes (school and, possibly, church). Some researchers consider Belarus as a classic example of diglossia. They refer to the widespread use of “trasianka” as the language of everyday communication (according to the classical definitions of diglossia – a Low language) and the consolidation of the standardized Russian and Belarusian languages as High languages used in the official discourse, media, literature, etc. In general, this approach to the linguistic situation in Belarus could be accepted. But a more detailed analysis shows that this “diglossia” breaks down into a number of other “diglossias”, which can be important within different socio-cultural groups and in their interaction.

This primarily concerns the situation of the existence of the two state languages, Russian and Belarusian. Despite the fact that the Russian and Belarusian languages have equal formal and legal statuses, they differ a lot in terms of the spheres and intensity of use. We will not analyse individual linguistic practices here, but will only note that Belarusian is now almost entirely excluded from official proceedings (including legal proceedings), science and education (it is studied as one of the subjects, but education in

Belarusian is becoming less common in high schools and universities). Thus, the major channels of High language (nationwide) transmit Russian. Even if the recently announced government policies to extend the use of the Belarusian language are implemented, rapid and large-scale changes can hardly be expected.

At the same time, for some social and cultural groups – primarily, the representatives of the movement for national rebirth, political opposition and cultural underground – Belarusian is the High language. Russian is rejected by them on ideological, cultural and historical and aesthetic grounds. Throughout the whole period of the sovereign development of Belarus, there has been explicit confrontation on the issue of the national language and only recently its radicalism started to subside. An additional demarcation line has to do with the existence of different variants of the Belarusian language which are recognized by different social actors. These variants are “*taraskievica*” and “*narkamaŭka*”⁴ and each of them can perform the role of the High language for different social groups.

The widespread use of local dialects (“*trasianka*”) has also started to be comprehended and reassessed in the Belarusian culture. “*Trasianka*” is becoming an object of research and cultural stylization while its cultural role and functions are being reassessed, which entails a change of “marking” in the symbolic status: from a “semi-literate”, domestic language with low social prestige to a “live language” which preserves the “secrets of Belarusianism”.⁵

⁴ Several variants of literary writing in Belarusian are used today. The one that is studied in schools and universities is based on the rules established in 1957 by a Decree of the Council of Ministers of the BSSR. This Decree amended the rules established in 1933 by a Decree of the Sovnarkom of the BSSR, which, in its turn, nullified the norms of the Belarusian Grammar for Schools published in 1918 in Vilnia by B. Taras'kievič. But in those days the Soviet rule was in effect not on all the Belarusian territories and the population of the territories where it was not continued to use the grammar by B. Taras'kievič. The variant that was adopted by the Decree of the Sovnarkom was dubbed “*narkamaŭka*” by its opponents and their own – “*taras'kievica*”. In the 1980s, with the beginning of the renaissance of the Belarusian culture in the BSSR, underground and oppositional publishers started to use “*taras'kievica*”. Since that time different groups of experts have worked “in parallel” to reform these two variants of the literary Belarusian language. In 1993, the Council of Ministers set up the State Commission on Revising the Writing headed by Nil Hilievič, but it was dissolved just a year later. The Academy of Sciences and the Ministry of Education were ordered to “prepare for publication, until the end of 1995, a new edition of the ‘Rules of the Belarusian Orthography and Punctuation’ with applying the rules of the orthoepy”. In 2003, a group of scholars at the Institute of Linguistics of the National Academy of Sciences headed by its director Aliaksandr Padlužny finalized a draft. It was not published and officially approved and stayed only within the expert community. But some of its elements started to be used by a pro-government newspaper – “*Zviazda*”. Work on draft amendments continued and The New Rules of Orthography and Punctuation were introduced on 1 September 2010. At the same time, the representatives of civil society widely discussed ways to modernize “*taras'kievica*” and in 2005 a working group made up of Juraś Bušliakoŭ, Vincuk Viačorka, Zmicier Sańko and Zmicier Saŭka presented the book “Belarusian Classical Writing: Collection of Rules: Modern normalization”. This variant started to be used by the newspaper *Naša Niva*, journal “*Arche*”, Belarusian service of the “Radio Liberty” and some other mass media.

⁵ One of the best examples of cultural stylization in this sense is the project *People's Album*. And

Another functional sphere of the High language in different societies and cultures is religion. And even in this sphere, which is one of the most conservative in terms of social and linguistic dynamics, Belarus is at a transformational stage. Belarus is a multi-confessional country with a domination of Christian beliefs: Orthodoxy, Catholicism and various branches of Protestantism. In parallel to the changes of the levels and characteristics of the religiosity of Belarusian citizens, changes of the linguistic aspects of the religious practices of different churches have lately taken place. The Orthodox Church is most “sustainable” against the influence of time. The absolute majority of services in the Orthodox Church (which the majority of Belarusians affiliate themselves with) is in the Old Slavic language which can be considered as the High language for this confession (the sphere of its use is strictly limited to clergy training and church services). Until recently, the Catholic Church was an institute where Polish was transmitted as the High language for the Belarusian Catholics. But in recent years, services in Catholic Churches have mostly switched over to Belarusian, though part of them are still in Polish and Latin. Considering the fact that conducting cult practices in national languages is a general trend of the internal policies of the Catholic Church, it can be expected that the Polish language will be more and more forced out of this sphere. Protestant Churches predominantly use Russian or Belarusian as the languages of service and religious communication.⁶

Thus, the linguistic situation in Belarus differs not only by the objectively observed diversity of languages and dialects but also by the differentiation of various social groups and subjects on the basis of their attitude to the linguistic issue. For the majority of the population, the attitude to the linguistic processes in Belarus and individual motivation for using a language are determined by practical reasons. And in the present situation, their choices are almost automatically in favour of Russian (according to the 2009 census, about 70% of the population of Belarus named Russian as their main home language).⁷ But for some social groups, the issue of the status and use of a language is determined by pragmatism of a different sort. It is the confrontation and communication between these groups that form the problem field in which the linguistic issue becomes one of the aspects of a solution to the problem of self-identification of Belarus as an independent state, formation of the Belarusian nation and the geopolitical choice of Belarus.

We deal with the characteristics of socio-political and cultural aspects of the linguistic situation in Belarus so thoroughly (though, the description

one of the best recent materials on this topic is the discussion “Trasianka: a border area between cultures or hidden Belarusianism?” held by the expert community *Nashe Mnenie (Babkoŭ et al., 2010)*.

⁶ However paradoxical it might sound, but the only socio-cultural groups for which Belarusian is institutionally recognized as the High language – in the terminology of diglossia – are Belarusian Catholics and Protestants of certain branches.

⁷ The National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Belarus. Census 2009. Table 5.9. Population according to the nationality and language spoken at home. URL (Accessed 14.02.2011) http://belstat.gov.by/homep/ru/perepic/2009/vihod_tables/5.9-0.pdf

here is, of course, quite lapidary and one has to write a whole book to systematically review this situation) in order to identify the field in which the linguistic practices of the Belarusian Poles as an ethnic group originate and transform. Being inhabitants and citizens of Belarus, the Belarusian Poles are part of the historical processes of socio-political changes, which also impacts the process of transformation of the basics and contents of the ethnic identity.

Analysing the linguistic practices of the Belarusian Poles, different angles of the problem have to be taken into account: the current state and development prospects of these practices, the symbolic and axiological role of a language as a component of ethnic identity and the functional specialization of using different languages.

The Choice of the Mother Tongue as a Basis for Differentiating the Community of the Belarusian Poles

It is the mother tongue that is traditionally considered as the most powerful factor influencing and forming ethnic self-identification. But it should be noted that the term “mother tongue” itself has quite a number of meanings. At least three most widespread definitions can be singled out. Firstly, it is the mother tongue as the language of ethnic self-identification (the language of an ethnic/national community which a person affiliates him-/herself with and that connects the person with the ancestors and their culture and history). Secondly, it is the mother tongue as the language learnt in childhood (which a person learns in early childhood without any special education, just being in a language environment). Thirdly, it is the mother tongue as the first language functionally (which a person thinks in without any additional self-control and in which he/she easily expresses thoughts orally or in writing).

However, these are theoretical definitions used in the scientific language where they are all the time specified. The spectrum of meanings in which common people use the term “mother tongue” is significantly wider. We assume that for the Belarusian Poles who took part in the study, the choice of the mother tongue is based not so much on ascriptive factors and characteristics, but is rather a conscious choice which to a different extent reflects the socio-cultural identification of the respondents. Nonetheless, the answer to this question can depend on various conditions and attitudes. It can be assumed that the choice of a particular language as the mother tongue (in the case of the study) can be based on:

1. Ethnic identification (if one is a Pole by nationality, then Polish is his/her mother tongue);
2. The first language learnt in childhood;

3. Family tradition (the family considers ... as the mother tongue) or communicative practices in the family (the family speak ...);
4. Functionally the first language (it is easier to talk and think in ...) or real language practice (mainly speak ...);
5. Socio-cultural choice (conscious affiliation with a certain culture and tradition and in this sense – with a language, the real linguistic practice notwithstanding).

The data gathered during the survey does not allow to identify for sure what exactly the respondents' choice is based on in each particular case. We can only deliberate a bit on this topic on basis of the empirical data that can be gathered during the standardized interview.

About a third of the Belarusian Poles chose Belarusian as their mother tongue and almost the same number chose Russian (Table 1). The “Polish speaking” group is almost two times smaller than the two aforementioned – only 17,7% name Polish as their mother tongue. The groups that chose “other” or “difficult to say” responses, despite being small, are of particular interest. As our analysis has shown, “trasianka” or language combinations (Belarusian and Polish, Russian and Polish) are mostly named as “other” language. The group of those who were unable to unequivocally choose the mother tongue is interesting in the sense that such “difficulties of choice” can be evidence of a reflective attitude to determining the mother tongue in the conditions of “bordering” national and ethnic identity (however, it can as well be caused by totally opposite reasons – lack of significance and comprehension of this question).

Table 1
Choice of the mother tongue⁸

<i>What language do you consider as your mother tongue?</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>
Belarusian	252	32,2
Polish	138	17,7
Russian	269	34,4
Other	52	6,7
Difficult to say	70	9,0
Total	781	100,0

⁸ Here and throughout the text percentage is calculated out of the number of the responses.

Let us compare the data from the study and the information acquired during the census (Table 2). According to the latest census (2009), the share of the Poles who chose Polish as their mother tongue is significantly smaller than what our study revealed. The results of the census also differ considerably from the previous studies. We can assume, with a big degree of certainty, that this is due to the wording of the question in the census list 2009 which specifies the term “mother tongue” as the language learnt first in early childhood. This definition had essentially influenced the results (the change is noticed in relation not only to Polish but also to Belarusian). At the same time, the data from 1999, when the question about the mother tongue was asked without additional interpretation, is similar to the data we acquired during the sociological study.

Table 2

Dynamics of the number of the Belarusian Poles and their choices of the mother tongue (according to the censuses)

<i>Year of census</i>	1979	1989	1999	2009
Number of population (in thousands)	9532	10152	10045	9504
Number of Poles (in thousands)	403	418	396	295
Share of Poles in the overall population	4,2%	4,1%	3,9%	3,1%
Share of Poles who named Polish as their mother tongue	7,8%	13,3%	16,5%	5,4%
Share of Poles who named Belarusian as their mother tongue	74,0%	63,9%	67,1%	58,2%
Share of Poles who named Russian as their mother tongue	18,1%	22,6%	16,2%	33,9%

Source:

Data from 1979, 1989 and 1999 are given according to the Ministry of Statistics and Analysis of the Republic of Belarus (2001).

Data from 2009 – The National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Belarus. Census 2009. Table 5.8. population according to national and mother tongues. URL (accessed 14.02.2011) http://belstat.gov.by/homep/ru/perepic/2009/vihod_tables/5.8-0.pdf

We will try to analyse a connection between the choice of the mother tongue and real communicative practices. Taking into consideration the diversity of the communicative practices of the Belarusian Poles, the study fixed the predominant use of a particular language in different communicative spheres: at home and work, among friends and in public places. Besides, it

was separately fixed in what language a respondent “most often thinks”. This gives an idea about the “closest”, “naturally spoken” or, to use the regular terminology, “functionally the first” language.

Based on the idea about the language that a person “thinks in” as the most “natural” for this person, it should be noted that the choice of the mother tongue is related to this type of linguistic practice in a contradictory way. While for the respondents who named Russian as their mother tongue in the majority of cases it is also Russian that is most natural in use, the choice of Polish and Belarusian as mother tongues is not based on a clear link (Table 3). Among those who chose Belarusian as the mother tongue, only slightly more than a half (58,3%) of the respondents name Belarusian as “functionally the first” language. For the Polish language, the extent of the “internal harmony” of its “adepts” is even smaller (38,4%). A conclusion about inequalities in the criteria of choosing the mother tongue in different groups lies on the surface. While for the Belarusian Poles who choose Russian as their mother tongue the choice is likely connected with the use of the language in real linguistic practices (or, at least, does not contradict it), the choice of Belarusian or Polish evidently has a wider spectrum of motivations.

Table 3

Connection between the languages that a respondent chooses as functionally the first and the mother tongue (%)

<i>What language do you most often think in?</i>	<i>What language do you consider as your mother tongue?</i>				
	Belarusian	Polish	Russian	Other	Difficult to say
Belarusian	58,3	11,6	0,7	13,5	8,8
Polish	4,4	38,4	2,2	11,5	4,4
Russian	32,9	44,9	96,7	53,8	86,8
Other	4,4	5,1	0,4	21,2	0

It can be assumed that the choice of Polish as the mother tongue is to a considerable extent connected with its significance for the respondents as a factor which unites the ethnic group and gives a feeling of individual affiliation with the group. This is also supported by the analysis of the responses to the question “What unites you individually with the people of your nationality?” The respondents were asked to assess “the commonality of language” as one of the uniting factors. For those who named Polish as the mother tongue, the intensity of this factor is next to maximal (Table 4).

Table 4

Significance of language commonality as a uniting feature and intensity of Belarusian self-identification among the representatives of “multilingual” groups

<i>What language do you consider as your mother tongue?</i>	<i>What unites you with the people of your nationality – option “language commonality”⁸</i>	<i>To what extent do the following words describe you – option “Belarusian”⁹</i>
Belarusian	3,6	0,47
Polish	4,49	0,07
Russian	3,34	0,23

As to the choice of Belarusian as the mother tongue, it is relevant to recall the processes of assimilation that are characteristic of the Belarusian-Polish border area. Iwona Kabzińska (Kabzińska, 1999) considers the linguistic assimilation among the Belarusian Poles as the beginning of assimilation in other directions, including national (Kabzińska, 1999:53). It is difficult to unequivocally say what is of primary and secondary role in this case. But the data from the study shows that the intensity of self-identification as Belarusian among the Belarusian Poles who named Belarusian as their mother tongue is significantly higher than in the other groups (Table 4).

There is no doubt that none of the aforementioned factors solely determines this or that choice of mother tongue. In each individual case this choice can be made non-reflectively and based on this or that “objective” or phenomenal preconditions. Or, it can result from a complex contamination of objective factors and subjective guidelines. For now we can only note that the choice of the mother tongue demonstrates the diversity of the community of the Belarusian Poles and make an assumption that this choice is connected with other aspects of ethnic identity and real social and cultural practices in which it is realized.

An essential aspect of language analysis as a factor of ethnic identity of the Belarusian Poles, which allows not only to fix the existing condition but

⁹ A 5-point scale was used in the question, where 1 stands for “does not unite at all” and 5 – “unites to a maximal extent”. Average results in each group are presented in the table.

¹⁰ The indexes of contrast are presented in the table for the named groups. The index of contrast for this question was calculated according to the formula: $(a+0,5*b-0,5*c-d+0*e)/N$, where: a – number of those who responded “This is exactly about me” to the question “To what extent do the following words describe you?”, b – number of those who responded “This is almost about me”, c – number of those who responded “This is rather about me”, d – number of those who responded “This is not at all about me”, e – number of those who found it difficult to respond, N – sampling volume (or sub-sampling). The values of the index are within the limits [-1;1].

also assess the prospects for transformation, is the analysis of the socio-demographic characteristics of the groups that differ according to the choice of the mother tongue.

Analysing these characteristics, the statistically essential differences are fixed along such characteristics as education, age and place of residence. To make it easier for perception, we will be using the terms “Polish speaking”, “Russian speaking” etc. meaning the choice of the mother tongue and not linguistic practices.

The group of the surveyed who chose Polish as the mother tongue have a higher level of education compared to the others. The least educated are those who chose Belarusian as the mother tongue. The “Russian speakers” more often than the others have vocational education.

The analysis of the places of residence reveals that those who named Russian as the mother tongue are mainly city dwellers (73,6%). Among those who consider Belarusian and Polish as the mother tongue more than 40% live in rural areas. In other words, we observe certain specificity connected with the type of the place of residence.

According to the age characteristics, the group that chose Polish as the mother tongue is older than the rest of the groups. The “Russian speakers” make up the youngest group (Table 5).

Table 5

Average age of the groups that chose different languages as mother tongues

<i>What language do you consider as your mother tongue?</i>	<i>Average age</i>
Belarusian	42,36
Polish	47,52
Russian	35,02
Other	42,38
Difficult to say	37,34

Thus, the groups of the Belarusian Poles who made a symbolic choice of the mother tongue in favour of Polish and Belarusian are quite close in terms of the socio-demographic characteristics, excluding the level of education (roughly speaking, it is the “older generation” of the Belarusian Poles, who reside mainly in rural areas, the more educated part of which identifies Polish as the mother tongue and the less educated part choose Belarusian). Those who chose Russian as the mother tongue represent the younger urban generation. These nominations are quite conditional (the young urban dwellers have “Polish and Belarusian speakers” and among the senior rural population

there are those who consider Russian as their mother tongue). However, they can be meaningful for making forecast of the dynamics of the linguistic processes in the community of the Belarusian Poles.

Let us try to analyse how the choice of the mother tongue is related to the other signs of belonging to an ethnic community.

The “Polish speaking” respondents demonstrate the highest interest to the history of Poland. The lowest interest to this topic was demonstrated by those who chose Russian as the mother tongue and those who found it difficult to answer (Table 6).

Table 6
Level of interest to the history of Poland (%)

<i>Are you interested in the history of Poland?</i>	<i>What language do you consider as your mother tongue?</i>				
	Belarusian	Polish	Russian	Other	Difficult to say
Yes	17,7	45,3	12,4	16,0	10,6
Rather yes	37,3	42,3	29,3	38,0	31,8
Rather no	37,8	8,8	44,4	38,0	40,9
No	7,2	3,6	13,9	8,0	16,7

The choice of the mother tongue is closely connected with the respondents' feeling of affiliation with the Poles who live on the territory of Belarus. Thus, those who chose Polish as their mother tongue demonstrate a higher level of subjective comprehension of their inclusion into the community of the Belarusian Poles. The least included are the “Russian speakers” and those who found it difficult to respond (Table 7).

Table 7
Level of perception of affiliation with the Poles who reside on the territory of Belarus (%)

<i>Do you feel unity or commonality with the Poles who reside in Belarus?</i>	<i>What language do you consider as your mother tongue?</i>				
	Belarusian	Polish	Russian	Other	Difficult to say
Yes	26,2	58,7	28,6	26,0	14,3
Rather yes	36,5	23,2	25,7	26,0	20,0
Rather no	20,6	15,2	29,7	32,0	42,9
No	4,0	0,7	11,9	10,0	11,4
Difficult to say	12,7	2,2	4,1	6,0	11,4

The “Polish speakers” also have broader family and friendly relations with the Poles who live in Poland (Table 8). It should also be noted that they sustain these relations considerably more often, i.e. meet with friends and relatives who live in Poland.

Table 8

Existence of relatives and friends who live in Poland (%)

<i>Do you have friends and relatives who live in Poland?</i>	<i>What language do you consider as your mother tongue?</i>				
	Belarusian	Polish	Russian	Other	Difficult to say
Yes	71,8	90,6	68,4	82,7	47,1
No	28,2	9,4	31,6	17,3	52,9

Thus, the respondents who named Polish as their mother tongue demonstrate a greater degree of inclusion into the community of the Belarusian Poles as well as closer relations with the Poles who live in Poland. It can be said that this group is to the biggest extent included in the Polish culture and, potentially, can consolidate and transmit the values of this culture on the territory of Belarus. It is even more so since this group more than any other thinks that it is necessary to bring up children in the framework of the national culture. This is reflected on the levels of guidelines and activities, i.e. they more actively participate in the work of various national and cultural public associations.

Those who found it difficult to choose the mother tongue have connections with the Poles living in Poland less than the others. The “Russian speakers” – even those who have some contacts – keep in touch with them significantly more rarely. However, the desire to have an opportunity to travel to Poland more often is clearly expressed among the “Russian speakers”. But it is difficult to say for sure how this is related to the aspiration to become part of the Polish culture and values.

Statistically important differences between the groups regarding their attitude to Belarus were also discovered. Here we differentiate between two moments: attitude to the Belarusian citizenship and to Belarus as a country of residence. Thus, it is mostly those who chose Belarusian and Russian as their mother tongues who take pride in their Belarusian citizenship (Table 9). The least positive attitude to the Belarusian citizenship is shown by those who chose “It is difficult to say” (from the point of view of the socio-demographic characteristics, these people are quite well-educated and mostly urban residents; the average age of the group is 37). We have neither noticed a high level of inclusion among this group with regards to Polish culture.

Table 9

Attitude to the Belarusian citizenship among different groups (%)

<i>I am proud to be a citizen of Belarus</i>	<i>What language do you consider as your mother tongue?</i>				
	Belarusian	Polish	Russian	Other	Difficult to say
1 – absolutely disagree	0,8	3,7	6,0	–	–
2	5,9	9,0	5,3	2,9	23,5
3	15,6	23,1	24,1	11,4	32,4
4	32,1	33,6	26,6	51,4	29,4
5 – absolutely agree	45,6	30,6	38,0	34,3	14,7

We can note the same peculiarity in relation to Belarus as the country of residence. It is mostly those who chose Belarusian and Russian as the mother tongues who take pride in the country they live in. Respectively, those who chose the option “difficult to say” are “excluded”.

Thus, it is the “Polish speakers” who are most included in the Polish culture and community, and the “Russian speakers” who are the least included. The “Belarusian speakers” are, on the one hand, quite strongly involved in the Polish community, but at the same time more than the others take pride in their citizenship. The “Russian speakers” show a high level of attachment and pride of Belarus and simultaneously are quite excluded from the “Polishness”. A specific group is made up of the Belarusian Poles who could not make a choice regarding their mother tongue since they least of all comprehend both their inclusion in the community of the Belarusian Poles and attachment to Belarus. It can be suggested that quite an indifferent (or critical) attitude to its own ethnic, civil and territorial affiliation is characteristic of this group.

Another interesting aspect of the differences in the groups’ perceptions against the criteria of choosing the mother tongue has to do with the assessment of Belarusian and Polish cultures. Although the absolute majority of the Belarusian Poles mention closeness between Belarusian and Polish cultures,¹¹ the assessment of the extent of such closeness differs. Most intensively it is felt by those who name Polish as the mother tongue, whereas the “Russian speaking” Poles are more critical of this closeness. It is only the undecided ones in their mother tongue who consider these two cultures more separated from

¹¹ It is interesting what Belarusians would say regarding the closeness of Belarusian and Polish cultures.

each other (Table 10). One of the indirect factors here is the type of settlement – urban dwellers (who, as we remember, dominate among the “Russian speakers” and the “undecided”), living in conditions of larger cultural and habitual diversity, have more chances to compare and reasons to reflect on cultural differences than the rural population.

Table 10

<i>How close do you think Belarusian and Polish cultures are?</i>	<i>What language do you consider as your mother tongue?</i>				
	Belarusian	Polish	Russian	Other	Difficult to say
Very close	30,0	44,7	24,6	25,0	17,1
Quite close	62,3	44,5	62,3	65,4	58,6
Quite remote	3,7	3,6	4,5	3,8	10,0
They are completely different and have nothing in common	1,6	3,6	4,1	0	2,9
Difficult to say	2,4	3,6	4,5	5,8	11,4

Thus, the community of the Belarusian Poles is essentially differentiated – both in terms of choice of the native language and correlation of this choice with other aspects of ethnic identity. It can be said with a high degree of certainty that the Polish language is not the core factor in the formation of ethnic identity of the Belarusian Poles. The evidence of this is the comparatively low share of the Belarusian Poles who chose Polish as their mother tongue as well as the low significance of language commonalities as a ground for ethnic and national self-identification. Furthermore, the socio-demographic characteristics of the group that chooses Polish at least on a symbolic level show that this group is prone to be decreasing. On the one hand, this is because of the natural loss and, on the other, is a result of the migration processes. These tendencies were noticed before. Iwona Kabzińska (Kabzińska, 1999) notes that according to her research, the supporters of the statement that “speaking the Polish language makes one Polish” were mostly senior respondents (independent of their own level of command of Polish), while representatives of the younger and middle generations justified their identification with the Polish nationality without the knowledge of the Polish language (Kabzińska, 1999:51).

3. The Linguistic Practices of the Belarusian Poles: Diglossia and Communicative Environments

The choice of the mother tongue, as is said above, is to a considerable extent a symbolic act which can have different subjective grounds. In the same ambiguous manner, it can be connected with the real linguistic practices, i.e. with the languages people use in different communicative environments. The situation in present day Belarus is characterized by a high degree of mismatch between the choice of the mother tongue and the language spoken in practice. Thus, according to the data of the latest census, 53% of the population named Belarusian as the mother tongue and only 23% defined it as the language spoken at home, i.e. in the most common communicative environment (Table 11).

Table 11

Distribution of the Belarusian and Russian languages
in the Republic of Belarus (according to the census 2009, %)

	Choice of the mother tongue		Language usually spoken at home		Another language which is freely spoken	
	Belaru- sian	Russian	Belaru- sian	Russian	Belaru- sian	Russian
All popula- tion	53,2	41,5	23,4	70,2	13,5	13,7
Belarusians	60,8	37,0	26,1	69,8	12,7	15,2
Poles	58,2	33,9	40,9	50,9	15,1	24,4

Source: The National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus. Census 2009. Table 5.11. Distribution of the Belarusian and Russian languages at national and regional level. URL (accessed 14.02.2011) http://belstat.gov.by/homep/ru/perepic/2009/vihod_tables/5.11-0.pdf

The analysis of the data from the study reveals that the use of a language by the Belarusian Poles in different communicative environments is also different in terms of intensity from the characteristics of choosing a certain language as the mother tongue (Table 12).

Table 12

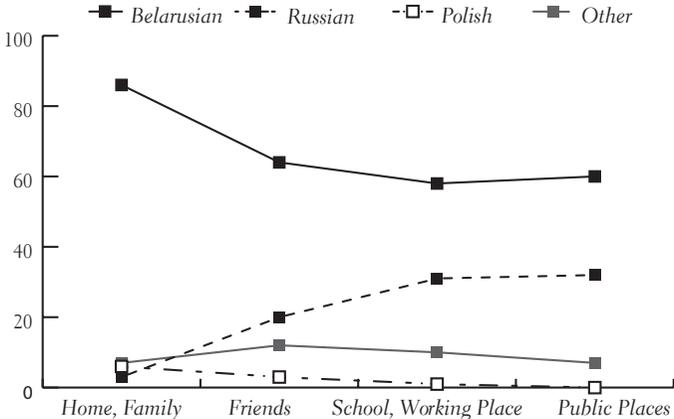
Connection between the use of a language in different communicative environments and the choice of the mother tongue (% according to columns)

In what language do you most often:	Think		Communicate			
	number	%	In the family, at home (%)	Among friends and acquaintances (%)	At work, school, etc. (%)	In the streets, transport and other public places (%)
Belarusian	180	23,0	22,1	15,6	13,3	15,2
Russian	494	63,1	55,8	64,5	75,3	76,3
Polish	79	10,1	13,0	9,5	4,2	2,6
Other	30	3,8	9,1	10,4	7,2	5,9

Apart from the dominating role of Russian in communicative practices (which is growing as the borders of the communicative environment widen and reaches its maximum in the most “public” and non-free spheres for individual choice – at work, school, in the streets, etc.), the distribution of the answers to these questions shows inequalities in the use of different languages in different communicative environments. Let us analyse the communicative practices in the groups for which different languages are “functionally the first”¹² (graphs 1-3)¹³.

Graph 1

The intensity of the use of different languages in the basic communicative environments in the group with Belarusian as functionally the first language (%)

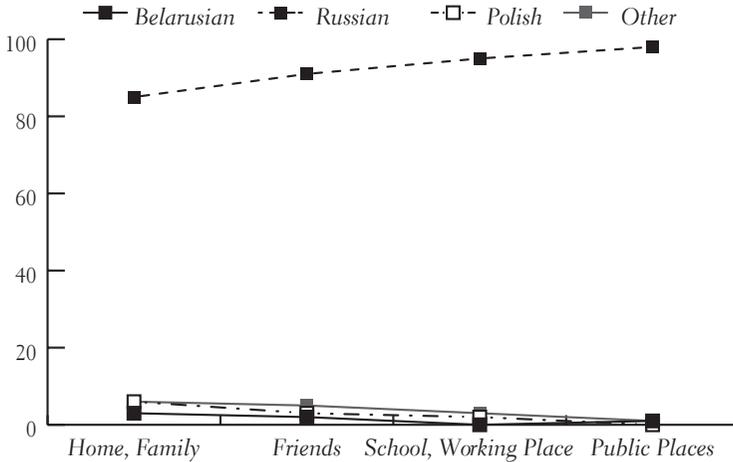


¹² We use this term with certain reservations, as its usual definition is the language in which a person not only thinks in a most natural way, but also expresses thoughts, which cannot be clearly identified using the applied methodology.

¹³ Only those who chose Belarusian, Russian and Polish as functionally the first languages will be included in further analysis. This is because the group of those who most often think in a “different language” is too small for analysis.

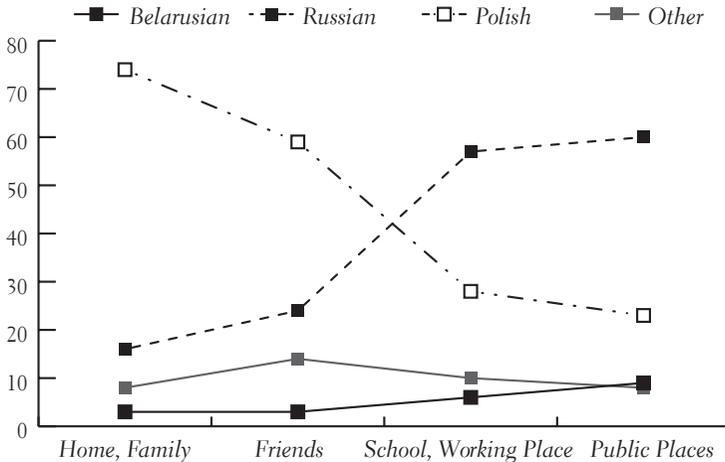
Graph 2

The intensity of the use of different languages in the basic communicative environments in the group with Russian as functionally the first language (%)



Graph 3

The intensity of the use of different languages in the basic communicative environments in the group with Polish as functionally the first language (%)



It is evident that in different communicative environments, on the one hand, Russian and, on the other hand, Belarusian and Polish are used in a “multivectoral” way. Russian “forces” the other two languages out and the more socially standardized a situation is, the more it is expressed.

A clear dependence of the use of a particular language in different communicative environments on the age of the respondents can be tracked (Table 13).

Table 13
Functionally the first language in different age groups (%)

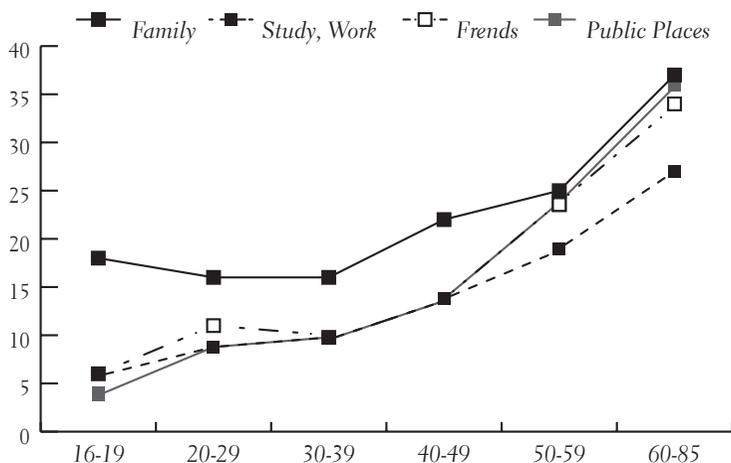
In what language do you think most often?	Age groups					
	16-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-85
Belarusian	14,1	18,2	15,8	25,2	29,5	37,8
Russian	80,0	75,7	73,4	59,1	57,9	29,4
Polish	4,7	5,4	6,3	10,1	8,4	26,9
Other	1,2	0,7	4,5	5,6	4,2	5,9

While in the oldest group the distribution of the three main languages (Belarusian, Russian and Polish) is almost equal, the role of Belarusian and Polish subsides catastrophically with age decreasing. And if Belarusian is functionally the first language for approximately one sixth of the youth (under 30), Polish is used as such by only 4-5% in this age group.

Similar trends can also be observed in practicing a language in different communicative environments: the older the respondents are, the more they use Belarusian and Polish in different communicative environments. At the same time, the young age groups are prone to use predominantly Russian in virtually all socially standardized situations (least of all in families) (Graphs 4 – 6).

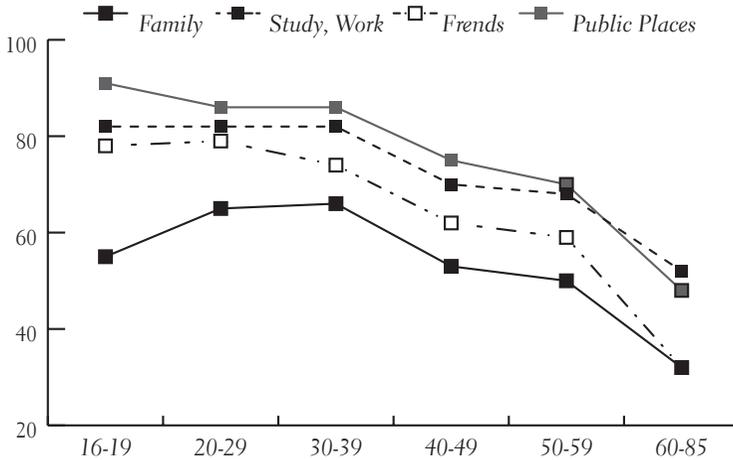
Graph 4

The use of Belarusian in different communicative environments depending on the age of the respondents (%)



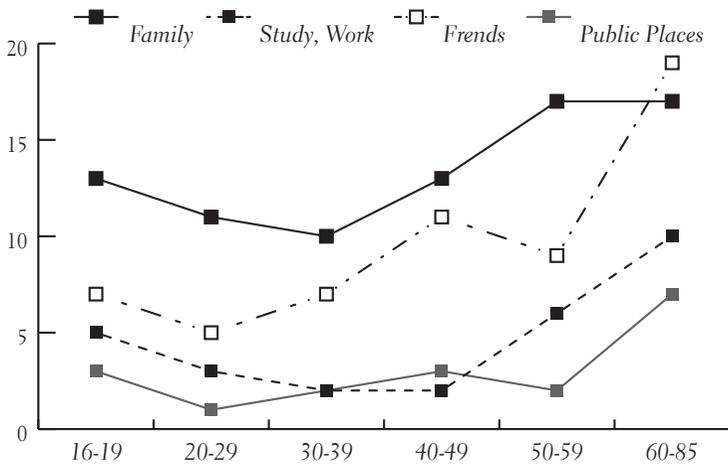
Graph 5

The use of Russian in different communicative environments depending on the age of the respondents (%)



Graph 6

The use of Polish in different communicative environments depending on the age of the respondents (%)

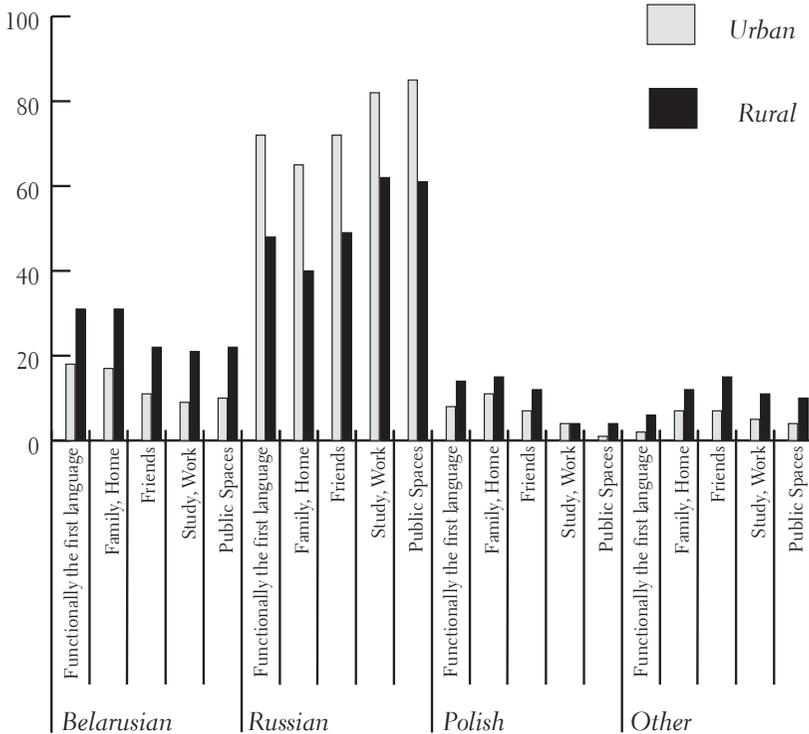


Another socio-demographic factor which in a similar way influences the choice of language in different communicative practices is the type of settlement (Graph 7). Russian is far more intensively used by urban dwellers in all

communicative environments. Furthermore, the same pattern works here – the wider an environment is, the more of the Russian language can be found there. And in rural areas, Belarusian and Polish as well as “other languages” (most often it is the very same “trasianka” or different mixtures of Polish, Russian and Belarusian) are used more actively.

Graph 7

The use of different languages in basic communicative environments depending of the type of settlement (%)



The low level of the use of Polish (as well as Belarusian) is often explained by a low level of its command by the people. But, as the data acquired during our study shows, more than two thirds of the respondents know at least oral Polish on an average or high level (Table 14). Only about 7% of the respondents do not speak Polish at all. The writing skills are somewhat lower: around 60% of the respondents assessed their reading abilities and about 40% evaluated their writing abilities in Polish as being of an average or higher than average level.

Table 14

The respondents' self-assessment of their knowledge of Polish (%)

<i>Please, assess how well you know Polish:</i>	<i>speaking</i>	<i>reading</i>	<i>writing</i>
Excellent	10,2	9,8	5,6
Good	26,9	23,7	14,9
Average	34,4	25,8	18,5
Lower than average	21,2	26,1	28,4
Do not know at all	7,3	14,6	32,6

It should be noted that age and the type of settlement impact the knowledge of Polish to a considerably lesser extent than its use. Even though the lower the age of the respondents, the worse they speak Polish, — it is not that significant. The difference between urban and rural areas is so small that it can be ignored (Table 15).

Table 15

The level of the knowledge of Polish depending on age and type of settlement¹⁴

<i>Type of linguistic practice</i>	<i>Age groups</i>						<i>Settlement type</i>	
	16-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-85	Urban area	Rural area
Speaking	2,87	3,03	2,91	3,11	3,18	3,52	3,09	3,10
Reading	2,53	2,78	2,64	2,87	3,04	3,26	2,86	2,81
Writing	2,09	2,27	2,11	2,26	2,46	2,71	2,28	2,34

At the same time, there is an obvious trend among the Belarusian Poles of broadening the sphere and enhancing the level of the use of Polish. Thus, almost half of the respondents expressed willingness to use Polish in communication on a more regular basis. About 60% of the surveyed would like to improve their knowledge of Polish. And even though the willingness to broaden the communication opportunities in Polish is to a higher degree

¹⁴ Average points (from 1 – “do not know at all” to 5 – “know excellently”) that assess the level of the knowledge of Polish in groups are presented in the Table.

characteristic of the oldest age groups, representatives of all the other groups also express such need. Regarding the willingness to improve the knowledge of Polish, it is most strongly expressed among the young Belarusian Poles (Table 16).

Table 16

Willingness to broaden the sphere of use and improve the level of the knowledge of Polish depending on age (%)

		<i>Age groups</i>					
		16-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-85
<i>Would you like to use Polish in communication more often?</i>	Yes	49,4	46,4	46,8	49,7	60,4	62,2
	No	25,9	25,4	24,9	26,4	19,8	22,5
	Difficult to say	24,7	28,2	28,3	23,9	19,8	15,3
<i>Would you like to improve your knowledge of Polish?</i>	Yes	70,5	68,7	64,8	57,6	60,6	42,4
	No	7,1	15,6	19,0	20,9	22,3	35,6
	Don't know	22,4	15,7	16,2	21,5	17,1	22,0

Apart from this, about a half (51,5%) of the representatives of the community of the Belarusian Poles who took part in the survey think that in all the places of residence in Belarus inhabited by Poles there should be an opportunity to get high school education in Polish. Another 20% think that it is enough to provide this opportunity only in the places where Poles make up the majority of the population.

Iwona Kabzińska (Kabzińska, 1999) points out in her study that the fact that many Poles do not speak Polish limits the transfer of the cultural heritage of this group. However, at the same time it stimulates the processes of establishing Polish schools and learning Polish (Kabzińska, 1999:52). It is difficult to say what kind of real power the identified willingness of the Belarusian Poles to broaden the sphere of the use of Polish has. It can possibly be just a sign of respect towards the national language, rather than a real need to learn and practice it. But even on this level, the willingness points at some potential for change of the role and place of the Polish language in the life of the Belarusian Poles and Belarusian culture.

Thus, on the basis of the analysis of the peculiarities of the choice and use of different languages by the respondents, the following characteristics of the linguistic practices of the Belarusian Poles can be distinguished:

The choice of the mother tongue

1. About a third of the surveyed Belarusian Poles choose Belarusian as their mother tongue, and virtually the same number choose Russian. The “Polish speaking” group is almost two times smaller than each of the aforementioned groups. Only 17,7% name Polish as their mother tongue. A special group is made up of those who chose the answers “other” and “difficult to say”. As the analysis reveals, “trasianka” or mixtures of languages (Belarusian and Polish, Russian and Polish) were most often named as “other” languages.
2. Among the socio-demographic peculiarities of the groups that chose a different language as the mother tongue, statistically significant differences were noticed against such characteristics as education, age and type of place of residence. The group of the surveyed who chose Polish as the mother tongue have, compared to the others, the highest level of education. The least educated group turned out to be the one that chose Belarusian as the mother tongue. The “Russian speakers” more often than the others have vocational education. Depending on the type of place of residence, those who chose Russian as their mother tongue are mainly urban dwellers. In the groups of those who consider Belarusian and Polish to be their native languages more than 40% live in rural areas. According to the age characteristics, the group that chose Polish as the mother tongue is older than the others. The youngest group is made up of the “Russian speakers”.
3. The analysis of the data shows that the respondents who named Polish as the mother tongue demonstrate both a higher degree of inclusion in the community of the Belarusian Poles and closer contacts with the Poles living in Poland. It can be said that this group is to a larger extent involved in the Polish culture and, potentially, can advance the values of this culture in Belarus.
4. The “Belarusian speakers” are, on the one hand, quite integrated in the community of the Belarusian Poles, and, on the other hand, are to the largest extent attached to Belarus as the country of residence and take pride in their Belarusian citizenship. The “Russian speakers” are highly attached to and proud of Belarus and simultaneously are to a significant extent excluded from the “Polishness”.

The linguistic practices of the Belarusian Poles

1. The use of languages by the Belarusian Poles in different communicative environments is determined, inter alia, by the linguistic

- situation in Belarus, which is characterized by a high level of mismatch between the choice of the mother tongue and the really practiced language.
2. A “multivectoral” use of, on the one hand, Russian and, on the other hand, Belarusian and Polish in different communicative situations is seen in the case of the Belarusian Poles. Russian performs the role of the language that “forces” the other two languages out. And the higher the social standardization of a situation, the more expressed this role is.
 3. Dependence of the use of a particular language on the age of the respondents can be tracked: the higher the age, the more the respondents use Belarusian and Polish in different communicative environments, while the younger age groups are predominantly prone to use Russian. The Russian language is more intensively used by the urban dwellers, whereas in rural areas Belarusian and Polish are more actively spoken.
 4. At the same time, the analysis of the data from the study shows that willingness to broaden the spheres of use and enhance the level of use of the Polish language is quite strongly expressed by the Belarusian Poles.

Concluding the analysis of the role and functions of language in the lives of the Belarusian Poles, we can make notice of the principle diversity of this community in all the dimensions related to the linguistic practices. However, the strongest trend is the continuing “Russification” of the Belarusian Poles (which is within the general framework of the linguistic situation in Belarus). This certainly impacts the processes of the transformation of ethnic identity.

In terms of diglossia, Russian can be seen as a High language, which is used in socially standardized situations – at work, in school and public places. In any way, it plays this role for the Belarusian Poles, for whom it is not functionally the first language. Russian forces the use of Belarusian and Polish out as the borders of the communicative environment widen and the degree of the standardization of a situation rises. The Polish language is mainly transmitted by the older generation of the Belarusian Poles and predominantly by the population of rural areas.

Nonetheless, the Belarusian Poles, independent of age and type of place of residence, preserve quite a strong willingness to broaden the sphere of use of Polish. This is reflected in the desire to use it in communication more often and in the aspiration to enhance their level of command of the language. The willingness by the Belarusian Poles to have more high schools teaching in Polish can be considered as a characteristic of the attitudes to the Polish language. Thus, despite the fact that the role of the national language as the

basis of the ethnic identity of the Belarusian Poles is not high, as well as its presence in the communicative practices, the Belarusian Poles remain willing to preserve and transmit the Polish language, at least on the declarative level.

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