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Methodology of Surzhyk

This paper was intentionally not proofread.

*...and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid
So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.*

Audre Lorde (1978)

Intro

SPEAKING AND WRITING normative English well seems to be crucial not only in the Anglophone countries, but also in other countries for those, who aspire to work academically. This paper aims to look carefully, how the Western and Anglophone-Centered knowledge production forces young scholars into reproducing imperial and colonial schemes while adjusting themselves to those rules, and what alternatives are there. Similar trajectories can be observed in other (post-)imperial contexts¹. (Minoritarian) languages have a political dimension, and there is a possible discrimination connected to it, linguisticism².

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I am going to argue for more linguistic inclusivity in academic writing. This paper is informed by decolonial thought (especially Anzaldúa 1987, Tlostanova 2020) and theories of translation, especially of Benjamin (Benjamin 1979). In doing so, I will refer to my biographical experiences as autoethnographic elements and to examples from academic and literary texts.

This paper aims a methodological intervention into linguisticism and structural monolingualism on multiple levels: first, for including non-monolingual, young, or first-generation scholars into academical debates, second, to challenge the colonialist norms and normalcies of academic knowledge production, and to make the gap between the “ivory towers” and social reality smaller, and third, to make recent knowledge production more fun and accessible.

If I could trust the space between the languages and cultures and borders, if this gap could become a speakable space inhabited by living creatures, by funny and authentic stories. Probably it might be not a text, accepted by a “blind” (what an ableist wording) peer-reviewed academical journal. But maybe such writing could heal the “pain of self-recognition” as Ruth Pierce has put it.

Voices of translated

In a few conferences, which I visited as a PhD student, it seemed to be a good tone to “regret” at the end, that the conference language was English, and to rhetorically ask, whether the discussions might have changed in case there would be multilingual language policy. In one conference touching on post-Soviet space, there was also a critical doubt voiced, that Russian might be even less appropriate colonial lingua franca for this context.

The issue of finding one’s *own voice* came up in two PhD seminars I’ve attended virtually recently: on De-bunking Method Centrism and Queer Autoethnography. In multiplicity of creative writing workshops and queer writing groups I’ve attended and hosted in the last years, this is something people end up talking about again and again: “*Giving voice to the marginalized*”, “*Raising the voice against injustice*”, “*Voicing the void*”.

Coming back to Spivak's classical question, "*Can the subaltern speak?*" (1988), there is no doubt that the marginalized subjects such as migrants, refugees, people of Color, Black persons, diasporic individuals, are able to speak, write, think, create art, produce knowledge. Yet it is not given that this knowledge is perceived as valuable and solid, and not as an empirical material which is lacking rigor.

What if the voice I could raise in English, feels bland and jejune? What if to raise my voice I ought to google two words from the sentence I intend to speak? What If to raise my voice I translate myself to sterile unrecognizability? What if to raise my voice I have to pay someone who proofreads my insufficient wording? The originality, freshness, speed, and connectedness to an emotion, with which I speak in my first language is different from stocking and slow expression in foreign languages, such as English.

A language is an emotional, a dialogical and bodily issue. It is not simply a system of signs as (post-)structuralists have worked out. Not just a communication means. A language is a heart and a stomach and a gesture and a heat and tremor and a song. A broken language is a dirty and sexy and tabooed matter.

Sarah Crawley speaks about the duality of "Me" and "I" in autoethnography:

In a Meadian sense, the Me and I in one's own internal conversation can offer points and counterpoints, reflecting on members' realities, taking evocation into account, reflecting on methodology and epistemology, and engaging theories of historicity without worrying about a hiccup of consciousness in the telling. (Crawley 2012, p. 145)

Referring to W.E.B Dubois' concept of "double consciousness" and Black Feminist Thought as well as feminist standpoint theories, Crawley highlights the benefits of autoethnographies, where knowledge is not divided into emotional and bodily and intellectual (Crawley 2012).

I would go further than Crawley and say that some of us have even more of these inner instances, than the two "Me" and "I". Several West-

ern psychological schools use this concept – such as of Jungian archetypes, Virginia Satir’s “multiple faces” and Paul Federn’s “ego states” have elaborated such concepts of multiple inner instances. Similar theories of multiple, collective and dialogical subjectivities can be found in decolonial thought such as in Gloria Anzaldúa and Maria Lugones. Madina Tlostanova underlines the necessity of pluriversal thinking in a decolonial frame (Tlostanova 2020).

Poetry between languages

Once, a friend has stated that they developed a new personality in English after their migration. Another migrant has described thinking in migrant-German as a freedom.

Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate. (Anzaldúa 1987)

Dragica Rajčić, a Croatian-Swiss poet, is an author who is reclaiming her “broken German” and writing ironical poetry with mistakes. Rajčić’s migrant poetry made me feel I existed. Paradoxically, it was not Anzaldúa, with whose texts I was already familiar, and was sure that it would be inappropriate to transfer a Chicana theory to the “white” Eastern European context. It was much later that I’ve encountered that Ewa Majewska did exactly this, while theorizing the “La Mestiza from Ukraine”. Majewska reads Anzaldúa in Poland and reflects on borderlands in Poland, Ukraine, and Belarus, and thinks of Eastern European inequalities in comparison to US and Mexican borderlands. *Borderlands/La Frontera* inspires her to think about multilingualism.

Therefore, translation becomes a process of understanding her whole “new language,” not just of translating among partial languages. The

foreignness is overcome because the sense of fragmentation is replaced with dignified integrity. (Majewska 2011, p. 35)

Poetry is a text form, where translanguality resides since long time and is used for enhancing metaphors and disrupt readers' habits, such as in Yoko Tawada's and Gloria Anzaldúa's poems.

But how could this premise be implemented in relation to non-monolingualism for academic writing? How can this complexity, unsettlement (Tlostanova 2020) and multiplicity be located in an academic text, which has to be formal, linear, non-ambiguous and communicate a clear message? One possible answer is: queer autoethnography.

Coming to terms with lack of terms

The border is inscribed in my речевой аппарат. I google the proper translation. Voice box, larynx, mechanical apparatus necessary for speech. If I pronounce the word "border", you will most likely recognize me as a "Russian", whom I am not.

This border is classed, is gendered, is ethnicized. The voice box with a strong rolling Rrrr in combination with certain habitus can provoke imaginations of a "Russian whore". In my case, struggle with "Eastern European femininity" was never a "universal sisterhood metaphor", it was mostly a stigma. Stigma my mother wore with shame walking back in the late nights after working as a waitress in a restaurant in small German city and being catcalled due to her yellow-bleached blond hair. Stigma I have encountered at the airport of Tel Aviv, while still carrying my old Ukrainian passport, which made the border officer immediately think that I entered the country with the idea of immigrating as a sex worker. At that time, I was working at the University in Berlin as a student tutor. But something in my appearance made the border officer doubt my intention to enter the promised land as a tourist.

The linguistic border of an accent is connected to sexualized stereotypes. The voice box is a Pandora box. Opening my mouth, I risk being stereotypized. In my box there is a [ɣ], fricative "g", typical to Belarusian, Ukrainian languages, and Southern Russian dialects.

“A polyglot capable of European languages”, if read with a Ukrainian eye. “A provincial, a proll, a peasant”, when read with a metropolitan Russian eye. “A person not capable of an own mother tongue”, when read with monolingualist eye. “An Eastern European foreigner”, if read with a Western eye. Bodies are taxonomized and divided into those speaking properly, and those who fail. Speaking bodies are connected to work, classes, possibilities, salaries, borders.

I was born into the unspeakability of Surzhyk, a Ukrainian-Russian mix. Surzhyk [ˈsurʒɪk] is mostly addressed in literature as a sociolect. I was socialized into broken migrant German: Migrantendeutsch. This is where I always come back to if I get emotional from my PhD research on queer post-Soviet diaspora. This is what I am thinking about while reading decolonial thinkers.

Surzhyk is my very personal standpoint, from where I can theorize and analyze the social reality. For about 10 years I am struggling with difficulties applying Western queer theories to post-Soviet contexts. Such trajectory always leads to self-colonizing sadness of: We have no own theories. But recently I understood I do not need the Western pseudo-universalist genealogies of queerness³. Surzhyk is my very first, very bodily, very localized queerness. There will be no home for me neither in Ukrainian, nor in Russian, nor in English or German. There will be no home anymore, especially after 2014, when the Ukrainian regions, where people speak Surzhyk, were colonized by Russia. There will be no home in Western-centering discourses, especially after I realized that it was not me incapable to integrate in Germany, but the very concept of integration an unrealistic Eurocentric imaginary.

I recall me being capable of speaking normative Russian in the school and switching the code in the breaks. I recall making jokes with the friends on this art of speaking “Sho⁴” instead of “Chto⁵”. I remember how I strategically started to say “Che⁶”, like my friend, who has lived for a year in Moscow, has been speaking. I was very talented for the normative Russian, which was taught to us in the beginning school. So, I thought until I moved to Germany, where in multiethnic Russophone circles I was repeatedly recognized as “hohlushka⁷”. Until

my lovers and friends from Russia started to correct my pronunciation. Until I heard my gay Russophone friends in Berlin making jokes about a “Galya” with a fricative “g”, constructing a provincial, dumb, superficial drag femininity, unconsciously connecting the language with social background.

Between a teenaged queer migrant, who was so much into writing, who had the feeling of losing the language, the main tool of interacting with the world and capturing beauty and pain, and an author, who inspires others to write exactly as they think, in a lived, contemporary, mixed, and weird language are 17 years. Are pages and pages and trains and buses and planes and universities and demonstrations, and blogs and letters and conversations and lost possibilities to speak up.

Between these two, there is a grief of never having owned a discourse, grief of never having been so entitled and sure in one’s language, as are those, who have more linear linguistic biographies. Grief of knowledge that for some listeners this “voice box” indicates dumbness, poverty, violence.

Methodology of Surzhyk

To make it clear, Surzhyk, is one of countless “mixed-languages”, a mix of Russian and Ukrainian, or Ukrainian with another language. It can have different percentages and forms, and probably if you are not speaking both languages, you might even not be able to identify that this is Surzhyk.

Its main linguistic characteristic is that it implies norm-breaking, non-obedience to or non-awareness of the rules of the Ukrainian and Russian standard languages, while its main social characteristic is low status for the language varieties as well as for their carriers. (Bernsand 2001, p. 40)

I have avoided speaking and writing in mixed languages in public for the most of my life, unconsciously knowing about that connection with “low status”. Being a PhD student, an “early career researcher” is something which is supposed to entitle me with a “higher status”.

What if instead of hiding my Surzhyk and reproducing the dichotomy of “high” and “low”, Surzhyk could become a *methodological tool* for exploring one’s own locality, positionality, and ability to see a problem from multiple points of view at the same time?

Maybe it is possible to think Surzhyk not only as a linguistic *positionality*, but as an epistemological and methodological idea, which could be used not only by those, whose first language is Surzhyk?

Methodology of Surzhyk invites us to embrace our mixed languages, to see the light through the cracks of being an outcast of a normative literary or linguistic context. Methodology of Surzhyk indulges the so-called ethnolects. Methodology of Surzhyk indicates an increased polyglottic, multilingual and transcultural complexity, which is already lived by so many people, but still must be proofread and straightened into the formal unambiguous styles of monolingualisms.

Methodology of Surzhyk addresses the void between the human language, in which we chat with friends and our loved ones, and the academic straightened language. It aims to encourage those, who are afraid to speak up in the seminars and ask their Western friends and lovers to proofread our manuscripts and even comments in a student forum.

Methodology of Surzhyk inspires those, who cannot speak neither their “mother tongue” nor the (post-)colonial or (post-)imperial “lingua francas” “properly” and have no feeling of discursive power in their daily language not only to speak up. It allows them to write poetry and academical essays. To write exactly from this shameful and insufficient, funny and awkward, homely and private language.

This paper is more a visionary dreaming up a way of queering – *surzhyking* the academic language, than a concrete direction for use. An obvious problem might be that if we really start writing in our mixed languages and sociolects, our texts may stay understandable only to small local groups of people from the same regions or with similar migration histories. So, for a coalitional understandability this project must be developed further. However, we know that Gloria Anzaldúa with her Spanglish is read and valued worldwide.

Plea for refusal

We are your linguistic nightmare, your linguistic aberration, your linguistic mestizaje, the subject of your burla. Because we speak with tongues of fire, we are culturally crucified.

Gloria Anzaldúa (1987/2012)

People do laugh on the mixed languages. Even the very anti-racist, anti-imperialist, the very reflecting people in their “home”-selves might find certain words, sounds or collocations funny. Methodology of Surzhyk could address this sense of humor and challenge the very necessity of language to be always earnest.

People think that accents are sexy and cute. Let us say our rude and uncomfortable decolonial critiques with our sexy accents. Let us make them remember us making fun of them and manipulating their imperialist desire modes. Let us refuse to be policed for not speaking properly, for not fitting into the clear categories of identity politics. Let us refuse to count our discriminations and their privileges. Let us laugh back in the sexiest way of our accents. Let us make them remember saying critical things with laughter.

Let us stop to translate ourselves, to distillate the theoretically valuable impactable bagasse of our rich multilinguistic transcultural selves. Let us work toward joy and liberation of claiming a discourse, of reclaiming a language(-combination), which is from now on, not only connected to grief of unspeakability.

In the project of autoethnographically queer writing, methodology of Surzhyk means the explicit breaking of the academical norms of written language. It is a critical political-linguistic intervention into the elitist, classist and ethnocentric monolingualism. Do not ask native speakers to proofread. Submit your manuscript as it is. Academia as a colonialist modernity institution must at least swallow it before it rejects our contribution.

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NOTES

1. This paper was written at the end of 2021. After February 2022, it seems even more on time to critically reflect on the post-Soviet contexts, where Russian language was still sometimes functioning as a common working language.
2. This term was coined by a Finnish linguist Tove Skutnabb-Kangas.
3. Although I've learned a lot through the Western queer theorists such as Jack Halberstam, Paul B. Preciado, José Esteban Muñoz, Elizabeth Freeman. I've learned the mere word queer in the Western University.
4. “What?” in Surzhyk, close to Ukrainian “Scho?”
5. “What?” in normative Russian
6. “What?” in middle-Russian dialect
7. A pejorative slang word for a Ukrainian, not an ethnonym, used mostly by Russians.