



**Accents of Russian in performative use:  
*ethnic styles, language attitudes,  
and identities of  
young non-native speakers***

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# Theoretical background

- The ethnical way of speaking, or a language with an accent, is often referred to as an 'ethnolect'. Since Labov's seminal works on AAVE (Labov 1972) and studies on Yiddish (Verschik 2007), or speech of Turkic speakers in Germany (Wiese 2009), the term has been used to describe different linguistic features and more or less stable codes of non-native or bilingual language speakers.
- More recent studies emphasized inadequate explanatory power, ethnisation of language (Jürgen 2017) and an 'outer' view on the data, due to the fact that 'ethnolects are perhaps as much produced by external observers <...> as they are by speaking ones' (Lo 2020: 79).
- Kern (2011: 5) analyses new linguistic practices among adolescents from the second generation of migrants and calls them 'ethnic styles of speaking' emphasizing the variability and linguistic resources that are available to the speakers. Benor (2010) also highlights the idea of multiple resources that make a speech more or less 'ethnical' and can be used consciously to express one's identity.

# Research data

- For the purpose of this study, we have chosen videos representing and discussing different non-native accents of Russian, created both by professional comedians and by amateurs and published on YouTube and TikTok.
- Those videos were analysed to reveal particular linguistic features ascribed to different ethnic accents; ethnic and linguistic categories used by the speakers; performative strategies and techniques employed by them.
- The second source of data were comments to the YouTube videos published by the viewers. For the videos with a big number of comments, we collected the first 300 of them (normally, they contain most recent and most popular ones); for the videos with a fewer than 300 comments, all of them were considered.
- From those texts, we selected those expressing attitudes to the performance of accents and linguistic stereotypes and used them to reveal typical audience reactions.

# Official level of performative use of non-native accents

- The Soviet tradition: depiction of non-native accents for comic purposes as a marginal phenomenon (characters in films 'Gentlemen of fortune' and 'Mimino'; Arkady Raikin's performances); unspecified and / or exaggerated accents, ungrammatical phrases (especially mixing of genders), breaking of communicative rules
- The 1990s and 2000s: majority making fun of minorities (*КВН, Наша Russia, Comedy Club*): overgeneralized non-native accents mixing up the real features of certain ethnolects, e.g. Chinese (*нащальника*) or Estonian (*каварил*) ethnolect features in 'Tajik' accent of *Rafshan* and *Dzhamshud* in *Наша Russia*.
- The 2010s: emergence of ethnic stand-up which first complied with the rules of the official shows but later started to challenge them and use accents as a tool to oppose racism

# Akim Karasaev, 'an oriental man in Kazakh khalat'

- Я не говорил, что буду показывать именно Кыргызстан, я был представителем из Бишкека, из Кыргызстана, который показывает собирательный образ восточного человека. Моей целью было вообще познакомить россиян с востоком, чтобы не думали, что мы гастарбайтеры. У многих из нас есть акцент, который веселит русских, так почему было не сыграть на нем? <...>. Акцент, возможно, смахивает на узбекский, может, на таджикский. <...> Нас очень часто путают с бурятами, калмыками, корейцами, таджиками. Разные национальности, но для россиян мы все одинаковые. Я часто рассказываю, чем они отличаются между собой, строю на этом свои шутки
- I never told it was Kyrgyzstan that I aimed to show, I was a representative of Bishkek, from Kyrgyzstan who showed a collective image of an oriental person. My goal was to acquaint Russians with the East in general, so that they would not think of us as gastarbeiters. Many of us have an accent which makes Russians laugh, why couldn't I play it? <...> The accent resembled probably Uzbek, or maybe Tajik. <...> We are very often confused with the Buryats, Kalmyks, Koreans, Tajiks. Different nationalities, but for Russians we are all the same. I often tell how they differ from each other, I build my jokes on this



# Rasul Chabdarov and his 'white alter ego'

(18+) Расул Чабдаров «ВОЛК-ПРИЗРАК» | OUTSIDE STAND UP



# Chabdarov: retelling his dialogue with a taxi driver

- *Они у себя в аулах на баранах ездят!*

(They ride sheep in their auls [the word of Turkic origin referring to villages in the Caucasus]!).

- ***На баранах?!*** *Всю жизнь же на ишаках было, блядь!*

(Sheep? For the whole life, they were donkeys, fucking shit!)

By directly addressing the issues of racism and xenophobia, Chabdarov 'turns the table' and transforms himself and his fellow 'non-Russians' from an object of mocking into a mocking subject, thus reclaiming his agentivity.

# Comments to videos: main trends

- Some of the people who can identify with the depicted 'Easterners' accuse comedians in maintaining negative and / or false stereotypes:
  - *С акцентом переигрывает, я такой не встречал*  
(Overacts with an accent, I have never seen such a thing)
  - *Бесит он как будто все казахи так разговаривают какими то колхозниками выставляет казахов*  
(he annoys me as if all Kazakhs speak like that, exposes the Kazakhs as some collective farmers)
- Other commentators praise them for linguistic accuracy or justify their mocking by belonging to a minority group
  - *Он в точности копирует қазақша акцент*  
(He copies Kazakh [the word is written in the Kazakh language] accent exactly)
  - *Потому что Чебатков казах, про своих он может шутить*  
(Because Chebatkov is Kazakh, he can make jokes about his people)



# Grassroots level of performative use of non-native accents

- In comparison with the ‘official’ comedy where imitation of accents is usually integrated in more general comic framework focused on social and ethnic stereotypes, the sketches created by non-professionals pay more attention to the peculiarities of speech although stereotypes also play an important role.
- Instead of distorting words and exaggerating ‘wrong sounds’, which was typical for the *Наша Россия* actors, main strategies for imitating accents in the videos created by non-native Russian speakers is a pitch and an intonation, as well as a speech tempo, word order and specific discourse markers. More or less, even if exaggerated, they reflect real linguistic features of Russian as spoken by different non-native speakers.



# Using of and laughing at ethnic stereotypes

*– Давай азербайджанский начинай тогда*

(Come on, start with Azeri then)

*– Брааат! Первый мафия, первый мафия это азербайджанцы*

(Brother! The first [=most important] mafia, the first mafia are the Azeri)

*– А! Вы про этих что ли? Обезьяны, которые разговаривать умеют?*

(Oh, so you speak about them? Those monkeys who can speak?)

# Non-professional videos: main trends

- The set of portrayed vernaculars varies among the speakers. The selection of a represented variety reflects vloggers' backgrounds – their area of living, birthplace and other biographical details. There is a common set of accents typically represented in non-professional videos; it includes both minority languages of the Caucasus and foreign migrants' vernaculars. However, a particular speaker can choose only some specific varieties.
- The second point concerns the interaction between speakers from different minority groups. The important feature of such videos is their dialogical nature. In opposition to an imitation of dialog in stand-up comedy (where contributions of the audience can be very limited and designed and manipulated by the comedian), home stand-up videos are usually staged as a natural interaction between two or more speakers, one of whom plays a role of an imitator of accents.

# The audience's reaction: Insiders vs. outsiders

- Numerous approving comments to the non-professional videos appraise their linguistic correctness and stress the fact that commentators can relate to them as representing their own accents and experiences:

*Я сам осетин. :) Осетина чётко сделал, и Чеченца. Bravo! :)*

(I am Ossetic myself. :) You made Ossetic just fine, and Chechen as well. Bravo!)

- At the same time, if the speakers in the video are perceived by their non-native Russian audience as Russians and, therefore, outsiders, they can be heavily criticised for their poor performance of different accents (regardless their actual correctness):

*Я ожидал большего. В итоге стандартный русский который пытается делать акценты*

(I expected more. As a result, it's a typical Russian who tries to make accents)



# Request for representation and multilingual performance

- *Так передать казахский акцент, как будто на родину вернулся* 😊

(Convey the Kazakh accent so, as if I've returned to my homeland)

- *Ээ малаладес настроения паднял*

(Good boy, you improved my mood)

- *Ты дон тэк сэ мнэй нэ рэзгуэрыай дон*

(You shouldn't speak to me like that)

# Conclusions

- Mainstream TV stand-up comedy employ the stereotypes of broken ‘non-Russian’ speech; the artists do not claim reliable representation or authenticity. Non-professional videos pay more attention to actual linguistic features found in the speech of non-native Russian speakers. They represent both the linguistic experience of a performer, and the communication of people with different native languages between each other using Russian as a lingua franca.
- The reaction of the audience, however, is less focused on the differences between more and less realistic ways of accents representation by professional stand-up artists and by minority speakers themselves. Instead, the comments evaluate the ‘authenticity’ of speakers relying on the information about their ethnic origin.
- In terms of linguistic performance, unofficial videos create a colourful picture of communication between minorities in a modern super-diverse city. They mock and tease each other but identify themselves as members of the same group opposed to ‘Russians’.
- The new solidarity of different linguistic minorities is a sign of empowerment and agency aiming to overcome racism of Russian society. Asking for representation and providing it in a ‘non-serious’, comic form, they at the same time make a step to claim for having ‘a (socio)linguistic citizenship’ (Stroud, 2015; Rampton, Cooke & Holmes, 2018), to be a part of soundscape of a diverse multilingual city.

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**Thank you!**