

# The language question debate 16<sup>th</sup> century Ruthenian lands

(Latin, Polish Church Slavonic)

Caterina Squillace

The Ruthenian language question, as other similar debates over "national" linguistic tools during the age of Reformation and Counter-Reformation, certainly shows, though indirectly, some of the typical characters of Italian Renaissance debate known as "Questionedella lingua". It is also, however, a stage in the long-lasting discussion over languages intended for sacral or missionary purposes which represents a peculiarity of Western and Eastern Church.

In articulating its policy toward the use of various languages, the Church employed the concepts of sacred and apostolic languages. In simplest terms, the Church encouraged the use of apostolic languages to spread the Word among the nations and to instruct the common people. The Latin church insisted that a sacral language should be employed in celebrating the solemn portions of the Mass.

When it comes to Eastern Orthodox Church five languages with different levels of *dignitas* played a role in the Ruthenian debates of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. They were Greek, Latin, Slavonic, Polish and Ruthenian ("ruski"/"ruskij").

Riccardo Picchio, one of the greatest specialists on the subject (Professor in Rome and at Yale) has shown that Church doctrine on the use of sacred and apostolic language provided the terms of discussion for the first Slavic language question, which grew out of the Cyrillo-Methodian mission in the ninth century. According to Picchio, we should distinguish between at least two stages in the earliest controversies:

- 1) the affirmation of the legitimacy of Church Slavonic as an apostolic language in Moravia under the Latin church, and
- 2) a defense of Church Slavonic as a sacral language alongside Hebrew, Latin, and Greek in the First Bulgarian Empire.<sup>1</sup>

The debate often took the form of a treatise or a grammar, as proved by the works that appeared in

---

1 Riccardo Picchio, *Studi sulla questione della lingua presso gli Slavi*, Rome, 1972

the Ruthenian lands in the XVI and especially in the XVII centuries.

In one of the most important works of that age, the *Explanatory Treatise on the Letters*, the prime source for a study of the linguistic controversies in the Balkans in the fourteenth century, Constantine Kostenecki reaffirmed the dignity of Slavonic as a "supranational" sacred language and rejected attempts to substitute local, "national" variants.<sup>2</sup>

The Ruthenian language question grew out at a time of intense confessional competition throughout the Polish Commonwealth, especially in the Grand Duchy and the Ruthenian lands, during the Counter-Reformation. The heterodox were the first to see the eastern territories as a field for missionary activity, and they added devotional works in the Lithuanian and Ruthenian vulgar tongues to the range of Polish confessional literature.

The militant spirit of the post-Tridentine church in Poland is evident in the statement of the Polish Jesuit, Piotr Skarga. One of his polemical work by marks the explicit point of departure for many, if not all, aspects of the Ruthenian language question. As part of his agitation for a church union of the Othodox Ruthenians with Rome,

Among many other works, Skarga published a pamphlet entitled *On the Unity of the Church of God under One Shepherd and on the Greek Apostasy from that Unity* (Vilnius, 1577; revised version, Cracow 1590) in which he expressed opinions on the use of both the Church Slavonic language and the Ruthenian vulgar tongue. In his view, Church Slavonic lacked the dignitas to accomplish elevated cultural functions; without a fixed grammatical and lexical norm, the language was unsuited for scholarly purposes. According to Skarga, only Latin and, at least theoretically, Greek, with their well-established traditions and fixed norms, had the full dignitas of cultural language.

According to Skarga, Church Slavonic lacked not only the qualities which would lend it full dignitas, but also the requisite for use in less dignified, propagandists which would lend it full dignitas, but also the requisite for use in less dignified, propagandists modes of expression- namely, intelligibility:

*"And now hardly anyone understands it [Church Slavonic] perfectly. For there is not a nation on earth which speaks it the way it is found in the books. And it does not have its rules, grammars, and lexicons for the pur-pose of interpretation, nor can it anymore. Wherefore, when your priests (popi) wish to understand something in Slavonic, they must have recourse to Polish for interpretation"*<sup>3</sup>

Skarga did, however, recognize the benefits of a well-defined use of the Ruthenian vulgar tongue alongside Polish, and saw one of the failures of Jesuit activities in the Ruthenian lands precisely in the

---

2 Harvey Goldblatt, *Orthography Treatise on the Letters* (Ph.D. diss., Slavonic Language Question in Constantine Kosteneöki's Skazànie izbjavljénno. Yale 1977)

3 Piotr Skarga, *O jednosci Kosciota Bozego pod jednym Pasterzem i o greckim jednosci odstępieniu* (Vilnius)

unwillingness to make use of Ruthenian for propagandists purposes:

*"Had we been alert, we could long ago have had Ruthenian schools and have looked through all the Ruthenian writings and have had our Catholics trained in their Slavonic tongue. We should also have translated into Polish or Ruthenian works for the Ruthenian people which serve that they might more quickly see the truth. It would also have been good to send scholars to the leading noblemen of the Ruthenian rite and indicate to them their errors and their peril"*<sup>4</sup>

Skarga referred to Polish and Ruthenian, as languages suitable for missionary activities, on more or less equal terms. His statements on the Ruthenian language are in accord with his views on the Polish language.<sup>15</sup> For him, only Greek and Latin had sufficient dignitas to be used for sacred and scholarly purposes. Other languages, such as Church Slavonic, Polish, and Ruthenian, lacked a fixed norm and could not be used for elevated purposes. Skarga advocated the use of Polish and Ruthenian as "apostolic" languages. Church Slavonic, it would seem, in its lack of both dignitas and intelligibility, was unsuited for any cultural use.

Skarga's charges that Church Slavonic lacked dignitas due to the absence of a well-established grammatical and rhetorical norm were answered in two ways.

One point of view is represented by Ivan Vyshens'kyj (ca. 1550-ca. 1620), a Ruthenian monk who was active at Mt. Athos. He argued that Church Slavonic was "more honoured before God than Greek or Latin" precisely because it lacked the "pagan deceits" of grammar and rhetoric. For him, as for participants in earlier discussions on the Slavonic language, the divine origin of the Slavonic language had established its dignitas.

"For I will tell you a great secret, that the devil is so envious of the Slavonic language that he is barely alive for his anger. He would gladly destroy it completely and has directed his entire struggle to this end, to make it the object of disgust and hatred. . . . And it is for this reason that the devil wages this battle against the Slavonic language: because it is more fructiferous than all languages and more beloved of God, since it leads to God through simple, diligent reading, without any sort of guile, without pagan deceits and handbooks, i.e., grammars, rhetorics, dialectics, and other vainglorious perfidies, proper to the devil; it builds simplicity and humility.

. . . Know, thus, that the Slavonic language is more honored before God than Greek or Latin"<sup>5</sup>

(Cited according to Ivan Vishen'skiy (Vyshens'kyj), *Sochinenija*, ed. LP. Eremin, Moscow and Leningrad 1955)

Other Ruthenian scholars, many educated in Catholic and heterodox schools, were able to respond to Skarga's challenge on its own terms. In general, the Ruthenian language question was characterized by an attempt to defend the dignitas of Slavonic by virtue of its grammaticality. Skarga's charges

4 Piotr Skarga, *ibidem*

5 Ivan Vishen'skiy (Vyshens'kyj), *Sochinenija*, ed. LP. Eremin, Moscow and Leningrad 1955

were soon answered by a series of Slavonic grammatical and lexical works and by the founding of Orthodox schools. Among the grammars and lexicons produced by this new cultural activity were a *Khramatykasloveno ska jazyka*, containing a reprint of the work *Osobmt iestii slova* (Vilnius, 1586); Adelphotes. *Hrammatika dobrohlaholivaho ellinoslovenskaho jazyka* (Lviv, 1591); Lavrentij Zyzanij's *Leksis* and *Hrammatika Slovenska* (Vilnius, 1596); Smotryc'kyj's own *Hrammatiky Slavénskyja právylnoe Syntagma* (Vevis, 1619); and Pamv, 1619); Pamvo Berynda's *Leksykon slavenoroskij I imen' T"lkovanie* (Kiev, 1627)

A particularly important role was played by Meletij Smotryc'kyj<sup>6</sup>, whose participation in the Ruthenian language question can be seen as part of his general concern for the "spiritual good" of the Ruthenian nation; it was closely linked to his activities in pedagogy and book production. Smotryc'kyj sought to provide the Ruthenian nation with the proper cultural equipment to compete more successfully with the other nations of the Polish Commonwealth. Essential to the nation's spiritual well-being, in his view, were a flourishing noble class, schools, monasteries, printing presses, teachers, and preachers, as well as well-edited books for use in the liturgy and in person.

Smotryc'kyj's *Hrammatiky Slavénskyja právylnoe Syntagma* (Vevis, 1619) can serve as a point of departure for a study of his opinions on the language question. It contains his most explicit and direct response to Skarga's charges. There Smotryc'kyj assigned to Slavonic a level of dignitas equal to that of Greek and Latin by claiming (and then providing) for it the same sort of fixed grammatical norm possessed by the classical languages.

The grammar itself was aimed at being a school textbook and Smotryc'kyj addressed himself in the preface to the "school teachers" 22 To justify the study of Church Slavonic, Smotryc'kyj first placed it on a level with the two sacred and classical languages of humanistic Europe. He then provided a curriculum for the young students of the Ruthenian schools. Studies were to begin with the use of a bukvar' based on the grammar, so students would become accustomed to the Slavonic forms in their earliest years. In the next stage, students would read the horologion and then the Psalter before beginning their actual study of the grammar. Additional readings might be drawn from the Proverbs of Solomon, or from the Wisdom of Solomon, or the Wisdom of Sirach, "or something else translated from the Greek into the pure Slavonic language."

A comparison between Western and eastern approach to education uncover parallels between Smotryc'kyj's suggestions and the programs of study in Protestant and Jesuit schools of the Latin West. For now, we note a functional equivalence between, on the one hand, the roles of Latin and the given local vulgar tongue in Western schools and, on the other hand, the roles of Church Slavonic and Ruthenian in Smotryc'kyj's program.

Smotryc'kyj created a clear hierarchy among these languages. For him, Greek, Latin, and Slavonic

---

6 See David A. Frick, "Meletij Smotryc'kyj and the Ruthenian language question", *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1-2, 1985

had full dignitas and formed a sort of trinity of sacral languages.<sup>26</sup> The most explicit statement on the composition of this trinity is to be found in the preface to the grammar, where Greek, Latin, and Slavonic are grouped as the languages that possess a fixed grammatical norm. Ruthenian and, as we shall see, Polish were to be used in interpretation and explanation for the benefit of the less learned.

According to Smotryc'kyj's view of the relative *dignitas* of these three languages, Church Slavonic possessed the expressive capabilities necessary to render adequately the theological concepts found in the Greek "original," whereas Polish did not:

"Therefore, many Latin words have been used (especially in the main chapter on the procession of the Holy and life-giving Spirit) for the explanation of the terms used by theologians, which could not be translated properly from Slavonic into Polish".

(Meletij Smotryc'kyj, *Threnos To lest Lament iedyney s. Powszechny Apostolskij Wschodniej Cerkwie . . . Pierwey z Graeckigo na Słowieski, a teraz z Słowieskiegona Polski przetozony . . .*, Vilnius, 1610)

Polish, though it lacks the dignity of a cultural language, nonetheless possesses the quality which makes it suitable for polemical purposes: we read in the preface that Threnos had been translated into Polish "for the easier understanding of all people." Of particular interest here is Smotryc'kyj's use of this linguistic hierarchy in a fictional account, the purpose of which was, perhaps, to render more genuinely "Orthodox" a work written in Polish with passages in Latin.

To sum up, in the context of the Ruthenian linguistic controversies at the age of the Counter-Reformation, scholars seem to agree that the new Ruthenian culture consisted of a symbiosis of Orthodox traditions with Latin learning. Many aspects of the debates of the 1610s and 1620s were put into practice by the next generation. The general outlines of Smotryc'kyj's cultural program for the Ruthenian nation are recognizable in the curriculum of the Kiev Mohyla Academy and in the types of books published in Kiev in the 1630s and 1640s.

The Ruthenian language question, moreover, was by no means of local interest only. Smotryc'kyj had envisaged a leading role for the Ruthenian nation in a cultural and spiritual revival of the other Orthodox Slavic nations. Although the Ruthenian culture elaborated in the debates of the early seventeenth century did not develop in the way the participants in the discussions might have envisaged or wished, it is certainly likely that some aspects of the Ruthenian debates provided models for other nations.

Several studies have documented the immense influence exerted throughout the seven-teenth and eighteenth centuries by Smotryc'kyj's grammar of Church Slavonic, and by the authority of Ruthenian scholars and books in general, among the Romanians and the Slavs of the Slavonic rite, including Uniates, Croatian glagoljasi, and all the Orthodox Slavs.<sup>7</sup>

7 On the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century among the South Slavs, and the Language Question among Eighteenth Centuries," in *Aspects, serbov v XVIII veke*, in *Slavjanskoe* 154-97; V.P. Gudkov, "Bor'ba koncepcij literaturnogo jazyka u serbov," 198-211; Lionello Costantini, "Note XVIII e il XIX secolo," in *Studi sulla* 163-224; Lionello Costantini, *Slavo di Vikentye LjuStina* (Florence, "Ricerche Slavistiche 14 (1966): Language Question from the Sixteenth 1:157-88.