

Language Contacts on the Russian-Chinese Border: the ‘Second Birth’ of Russian-Chinese Trade Pidgin

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State borders can be seen as both physical and symbolic barriers, prohibiting any uncontrolled transition between neighboring countries. At the same time the very fact of a border's existence inevitably provokes various language and cultural contacts on near-boundary territories. These contacts may induce serious changes in local communities' verbal behaviour, even resulting in the appearance of new hybrid linguistic systems like pidgin and Creole languages.

For a long period in history the border between the Russian Empire and China was a place of constant and intensive cultural and language contacts that gave birth to a trade pidgin, the so-called Kiakhta language, or Russian-Chinese Pidgin. At the end of the 1930s the border between China and the USSR was closed, many Chinese were deported from the border regions, and any contact became impossible (Perekhval'skaia 2007). Russian-Chinese Pidgin passed out of use and was soon forgotten.

After Perestroika in the Soviet Union trade on the Russian-Chinese border started again, with a great deal of seasonal migration between the two countries (Sharmashkeeva 2007). In communicating with each other Russian and Chinese speakers use different language forms, some of which resemble those typical of the Russian-Chinese Pidgin of the past. What is more, the language attitudes of speakers and the sociolinguistic situation in border regions now and in the past are similar in some ways, giving the researcher a rare chance to witness the ‘second birth’ of a pidgin. This possibility of the ‘second birth’ implies many serious theoretical questions concerning the nature and origin of pidgin languages, rather a moot point for modern creolistics (see, e.g.: Holm 1989; Holm 2000; Mühlhäusler 1986; Romaine 1989; Sebba 1997; Thomason 2001; Thomason and Kaufman 1988).

In this article I will deal first with the history of Russian-based pidgins, describe several grammatical features of Russian-Chinese Pidgin (as reflected in different written sources) and then turn to the modern situation in the Russian-Chinese border region. This part of the article is based on the preliminary results of field research conducted in the Zabaikalskiĭ region of Russia (formerly the Chita region and the Buriato-Aginskiĭ autonomous region) and the Chinese city of Manzhouli in 2006-2008.¹

Russian-Based Pidgin Languages

With a history such as that of Russia, we can suppose that there were many situations favourable to the rise of contact languages. However, in fact only three Russian-based pidgins can be documented (Belikov and Golovko 1994). The first one is known by the name of Russenorsk. It was used in Norway during trading contacts between Norwegian and Russian sailors. The earliest cases of using this language can be traced in documents dating from the end of the seventeenth century. In the nineteenth century, after the legalisation of the trade, Russenorsk became widely spread in the European north. It was spoken not only by Russians and Norwegians but also by Finns and, possibly, by British sailors in Arkhangelsk (Broch 1996). According to

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some theories Russenorsk was not ‘invented’ by Russians in Norway but was preceded by some more ancient contact language, presumably with a substantial Finno-Ugric component (Broch and Jahr 1984; Davydov et al. 1987; Perekhval’skaia 1987).

In the 1920s Russenorsk was discovered by linguists – Olaf Broch published his collection of texts in Russenorsk and its first linguistic description (Broch 1927; Broch 1930). Structurally Russenorsk does not look like a typical pidgin. It has two source languages and not one – Norwegian provided almost 50 percent of its vocabulary, and Russian – thirty percent; there are also many doublets (Russian and Norwegian words used quasi-synonymously). From this we can conclude that the languages came into contact on ‘equal terms’, which means that both sides tried to modify their verbal behaviour and did not treat the other as inferior. At the same time contacts were brief and limited, usually not going beyond naming goods and prices. Unsurprisingly, Russenorsk grammar is rather restricted. There was only one multifunctional preposition **på**, almost no auxiliary affixes, and the possessive pronouns **moja** and **tvoja** were used instead of personal pronouns (Russenorsk shares this feature with Russian-Chinese pidgin, a fact that gave rise to much speculation about their possible common origin; see Kozinskiĭ 1974).

Taïmyr Pidgin, called *Ruskaia Govorka* by its users, was spoken on the Taïmyr peninsula by aboriginal people – Dolgans and Nganasans – when communicating with Russians and Yakuts, and also in contacts between these two ethnic groups themselves. The period of its widest use was from the end of the nineteenth century until the 1930s. Then Taïmyr Pidgin gradually fell out of use because of the constant expansion of Russian. In the 1980s it was studied by Evgeniĭ Khelinskiĭ (Khelinskiĭ 1987), who interviewed several speakers of the language. Even at the beginning of the new century, when Dieter Stern carried out his field work in Taïmyr (Stern 2005b) it was still possible to find someone who remembered this pidgin.

Taïmyr Pidgin grammar was rather elaborate for this kind of language. Some of its features, such as the wide use of postpositions and a complicated system of personal pronouns with forms of dual number and inclusive and exclusive forms (Khelinskiĭ 1994), can be explained by a local substratum – they are typical for Nganasan, one of the Samoyedic languages.

Compared with these two pidgins, Russian-Chinese Pidgin was much more widespread. At the end of the nineteenth century it was spoken by no less than one million people in the area around the border with China (Belikov 1994), a length of more than 3,000 kilometres. Its history dates from the beginning of the eighteenth century. After the Treaty of Kiakhta (1727) all trade between the two countries had to be carried out in Kiakhta, the small city founded for this purpose (for more information on Russian-Chinese trade see Foust 1969). This centralisation of contacts resulted in a constantly growing number of Chinese merchants residing in Kiakhta and trying to speak Russian. There is even some evidence, although rather dubious (see Stern 2005a), that the Chinese authorities made these merchants take an examination in the Russian language. Chinese speakers’ ‘imperfect’ Russian (an ‘interlanguage’ in the terms of second language acquisition theory)² and oversimplified and ungrammatical forms of foreigner talk used by Russian native speakers eventually gave birth to a new pidgin, first called Kiakhta language, or Russian-Chinese language. It was documented by several travellers and amateur

² See Mather 2006 on theoretical approaches towards relations between second-language acquisition and creolisation.

linguists who were amused by this ‘broken’ and extremely ‘funny’ language (Cherepanov 1853; Maksimov 1864).

Then, after the liberalisation of Russia-Chinese trade in 1860, this contact language spread along the border, becoming the main medium of communication with Russians not only for Chinese people working in Russia but also for many aboriginal people of Siberia and the Far East (Belikov 1994; Perekhval’skaia 2006). Its function as a lingua franca made possible the development of rather stable forms. The most famous examples of Russian-Chinese Pidgin can be found in the books *Dersu Usala* (made into a film by Akira Kurosawa in 1975) and *Po Ussuriïskomu kraiu* by Vladimir Arsen’ev, the Russian traveller, ethnographer, and writer (Arsen’ev 1978).

The first linguistic descriptions of the pidgin appeared at the end of nineteenth century (Aleksandrov 1884; Schuhardt 1884). Some new language material was gathered by Soviet linguists in the 1930s (Vrubel’ 1931; Shprintsin 1968), and nineteenth-century sources were analysed in several Western publications (Neumann 1966; Nichols 1980). The most recent recordings of Russian-Chinese Pidgin date from 1990 (Belikov and Perekhval’skaia manuscript).

It should be stressed that, unlike Russenorsk, Russian-Chinese Pidgin can be called a ‘typical pidgin’ with one main source language (which was Russian). Only a small amount of pidgin vocabulary was taken from Chinese and some aboriginal languages like Tungus or Udege. Communication, we can assume, was asymmetrical: non-Russian speakers tried to speak Russian, and very few Russians made the effort to learn some Chinese, let alone minority languages.

Russian-Chinese Pidgin as a Grammar System

We now turn to specific grammatical features of Russian-Chinese Pidgin. A thorough analysis goes beyond the scope of this article; my purpose here is to show using several examples that this language variant is not just ‘broken Russian’, a collection of mistakes, but a unique linguistic system independent of its source languages.

Like most pidgins, Russian-Chinese Pidgin lacks many morphological categories³ – there are no such things as cases, numbers or gender for nouns, pronouns and adjectives or tenses, persons and numbers for verbs. Usually a pidgin has to make do with just one word form or several forms that can vary without any relation to meaning. Such phrases as ‘I want drink’, ‘I wants drink’, or ‘Me want drink’ can be equally correct. The most frequent verb form in Russian-Chinese Pidgin is the **imperative**, which is interesting because in spite of its important role in communication, imperative formation rules in some cases are rather complicated in Russian. The most probable suggestion is that imperatives prevailed in the speech forms addressed by Russian speakers to their Chinese interlocutors.

On the whole, imperative forms in Russian-Chinese Pidgin could be used for any purpose – to express not only imperatives but indicatives as well – and in any context – when speaking about the past, present or future. As markers of tense such adverbs as ‘**RAN’SHE**’ (before) and ‘**SEICHAS**’ / ‘**TEPER**’ (now) were used as in these examples:

Tut ran’she moia zhivi (Arsen’ev 1978)
here before my-*fem.sg* live-*imper.*
(I was living here formerly)

³ On the notion of ‘grammar simplicity’ in pidgins, see Siegel 2004.

Moia ran'she khorosho streliaĭ (Arsen'ev 1978)

my-*fem.sg* before well shoot-*imper.*

(I was a good shooter formerly)

Lan'se kakxozza zima ganiaĭ lepakhoza pomogaĭ (Belikov and Perekhval'skaia manuscript)

before kolkhoz winter-*Nom.sg.* send-*imper.* lespromkhoz help-*imper.*

(People from the kolkhoz were sent to help the lespromkhoz)

A shchasa toka kartoshka sadi, sio magazina kupi, a lan'she ne (Belikov and Perekhval'skaia manuscript)

and now only potato plant-*imper.* all shop buy-*imper.* but before no

(Now people are planting only potatoes and buying everything in the shop, which was not the case before)

At the same time Russian-Chinese Pidgin began to develop the auxiliary past-tense affix 'LA'. It emerges at the crossing between Russian and Chinese grammar. In Russian it is a past tense marker for feminine gender, while in Chinese [了] it also marks past action related to the present. The independent use of this enclitic in the pidgin can be demonstrated in the following examples where it is attached to forms not suitable for it in Russian grammar: imperative, past tense and even adjectival:

Libiatis'ka... Katora zhinisiala (Belikov and Perekhval'skaia manuscript)

children who marry-*imper.+past*

(children who get married)

Uot eta ush konchilala shchasa netu (Belikov and Perekhval'skaia manuscript)

here this already finish-*past+past* now no

(It's gone [about ginseng liquor], nothing more)

Periamo slovo, za moia fal'shivaĭla nitu (Cherepanov 1853)

right word, for my-*fem.sg* false+*past* no

(My word, I'm not lying)

But the most striking feature of Russian-Chinese Pidgin grammar is the expanded (compared to Russian grammar) use of the copula **EST'**. Its use in Russian (unlike many European languages) is rather restricted – most sentences demand no copula in the present tense. Moreover, phrases like 'Ty est' khoroshii' (You are good) sound very unnatural to a Russian ear and are treated as a stereotype of foreigners' speech, usually for comic effect. But in Russian-Chinese Pidgin this copula is widely used in the contexts where in 'normal Russian' it demands another form of subject or should be omitted, as in these examples:

Ivo dziania esi (Shprintsin 1968)

his money be-*3pers.sg.*

(He has money)

Moia glaza est' (Arsen'ev 1978)

my-*fem.sg.* eyes be-*3pers.sg.*

(I have eyes)

Ivo dumaĭ, nasha chushka est' (Arsen'ev 1978)
his think-*imperative* our pig be-3*pers.sg.*
(He [the tiger] will think we are pigs)

Moia dumaĭ, trubka tut blizko est' (Arsen'ev 1978)
my-*fem.sg* think- *imperative* pipe here near be-3*pers.sg.*
(I think the pipe is nearby here)

The first two examples can be easily explained if we consider the lack of morphological categories in pidgins. But the other two seem to be in conflict with the theoretical expectations. It is typical for pidgins (as well as for so-called simplified registers like baby talk or foreigner talk; see Ferguson 1996: 115–123) to omit copulas, and not to insert them. But in Russian it is sentences without copula that are normal, and the redundant copula becomes the marker of speech either produced by or addressed to a non-native speaker (Fedorova 2000).

Furthermore, the copula **EST'** can appear in contexts totally impossible in Russian – in combination with the verb:

Koni khodi est', tebe khodi est', koni khodi netu, tebe khodi netu (Arsen'ev 1978)
horse-*pl.* go-*imper.* be-3*pers.sg.* you-*Dat* go-*imper.* be-3*pers.sg.*, horse-*pl.* go-*imper.* no, you-*Dat* go-*imper.* no
(Where the horses will go you should go, where the horses won't go you should not go)

Nasha labodaĭ shibka daleka esi (Shprintsin 1968)
our work-*imper.* very far be-3*pers.sg.*
(We work very far away)

Tam pomiraĭ est' moia zhena i moi deti (Arsen'ev 1978)
here die-*imper.* be-3*pers.sg.* my-*fem.sg.* wife and my-*pl.* children
(There is the place where my wife and children died)

Moia khorosho ponimaĭ, tebe ubeĭ est' (Arsen'ev 1978)
my-*fem.sg.* well understand-*imper.* you-*Dat* kill-*imper.* be-3*pers.sg.*
(I understand pretty well it is you who killed [the deer])

Za moia Mikita skazyvaĭ budu, kako Dalaĭ pogovori esa (Cherepanov 1853)
for my-*fem.sg.* Mikita say-*imper.* +*future* how Dalay speak-*imper.* be-3*pers.sg.*
(I will tell Mikita what Dalay has said)

Moia gavali esi tibe shibuka lan'che perishola esi (Shprintsin 1968)
My-*fem.sg.* speak-*imper.* be-3*pers.sg.* you-*Dat* very before come-*past* be-3*pers.sg.*
(I told you to come much earlier)

Chetyre sontsa khodi, Daubikhe naidi est' (Arsen'ev 1978)
four sun go-*imper.* Daubikhe find-*imper.* be-3*pers.sg.*
(After four days [of travelling] you'll find Daubikhe)

Comparing these forms with the ones without the copula we can suppose that this combination of VERB+EST' started to function as a sort of aspect marker expressing the perfective.

Unfortunately for linguists, this very interesting language is now dead and forgotten. The most recent data on Russian-Chinese Pidgin was recorded in 1990 when by chance the Moscow linguists Vladimir Belikov and Elena Perekhal'skaia found in the Primorye region an old Chinese man called Diadia Vania who knew no Russian and used Russian-Chinese Pidgin for communicating with his family. But now, through an interesting twist of history, we have the same languages in contact on the same territories and under similar conditions. Let us now turn to the present-day situation and field data.

The Situation Today: Who Communicates, with Whom, and Where?

Having in mind Joshua Fishman's famous title (Fishman 1965), we can say that when describing a sociolinguistic situation one should ask oneself the following questions: who speaks, what language, with whom, when and where? Of course, from the linguist's point of view 'what language?' is a central question, but other ones often determine the answer, especially in language-contact situations.

There is a widespread opinion in modern Russia that a great part of Siberia and the Russian Far East has been invaded by the Chinese. The so-called 'yellow peril' (see Siegelbaum 1978 on the historical perspective of this phenomenon) is a popular topic for talk shows and political debates. In fact Chinese immigration is kept under strict control and legislation continues to become tougher all the time (Larin 2001). There are almost no illegal migrants from China in Chita or Blagoveshchensk. Those who come to work have working visas and pay fairly heavy customs duties and taxes. In fact, it is Russians who go to China ostensibly as tourists but in reality to conduct trading business there. As is common practice all over the world (Skeldon 1995) Chinese immigrants to Russia form close-knit communities (Diatlov 2008a; Diatlov 2008b) and occupy several business niches; in Russia (by Russia here I mean mainly border areas) they are employed in construction, market trade, small repair enterprises and agriculture. There are many joint Russian-Chinese enterprises and business relations are often based on family ties. Mixed marriages (not always registered officially) are not uncommon now – according to my informants, Chinese men are popular among Russian women because they 'work hard, earn money and do not drink'.

Here it is appropriate to note briefly the attitudes of Russians towards Chinese. Judging only by mass-media discourse, one could assume that these attitudes are rather hostile: the Chinese are depicted as a potential threat to Russian economics and culture (see Lukin 1998). This view is, at least partly, shared by some Russians but usually not those involved in close contact with Chinese. People see the Chinese as some sort of aliens with a different language, culture and way of life. Usually they describe the Chinese in negative terms – as dirty, uneducated, uncultured, primitive, etc. Even positive qualities usually attached to 'typical' Chinese (such as diligence or thrift) are often perceived as 'unnatural' for Russian culture – in one of my informant's words '*Normal'nyĭ chelovek tak vkalyvat' ne budet*' (No normal person would work that hard). At the same time those involved in constant and close contacts with the Chinese tend to give preference to positive stereotypes. They depict Chinese people as kind, loyal, hardworking, and 'unspoiled by civilisation' (meaning they are simple-minded people who can make do with just basic food, goods and facilities).

Chinese are often seen and pitied as the victims of Russian police and officials, making them ‘second-class people’. It is interesting to mention as well that positive attitudes towards Chinese are more typical for Russian women than men.

Most ‘visible’ contacts between Russian and Chinese speakers occur in the market place where Russian-speaking customers communicate with Chinese-speaking salesmen who usually have some knowledge of colloquial Russian. Communication of this type is open to any observer, spontaneous, informal, restricted to certain topics and presupposes no personal relations between interlocutors. The other type of communication can be found (with much more effort, I should say) in everyday conversations between Chinese and Russians involved in some constant business or personal relations. They may be spouses, business partners, each other’s employers or employees etc. The main difference is that they are not just strangers to each other; their communication is not accidental. We will now look at several examples in order to examine the impact that this difference makes on Russian speakers’ language forms.

What Language?

First, it should be noted that there are some words used both by Chinese and Russians when communicating with each other that are unknown outside the border area. The words of this type are called *iazyk chelnokov* (‘shuttles’ language’) or *zhargon chelnokov* (‘shuttles’ jargon’) by Russian speakers of the region (shuttle is a name for people doing business by transporting goods across the border and selling them for a higher price).

kapitana – chief

karifana, druga – to address a man

kunia – to address a woman (from Chinese 姑娘 *gūniang* ‘girl’, but normally not used as an address – see Tsze 2007)

russo-turisto – to address any Russian

super-mimumum – best price

pamagai(ka) – person helping a Russian tourist (or *kemel*, see below) with buying goods, packing, transporting etc. (from Russian imperative form *pomogai* ‘help’)

kemel – person paid to bring goods from China (from English *camel*)

kemelikha – she-*kemel*

kemelit’ – go to China as a *kemel*

Here we can see how these words are used in dialogues between Russian customers and Chinese salesmen:⁴

Ch[inese]: Oh, **russo-turisto** ! **Kunia**, shuba khochesh, obuv’ khochesh?

Vsio kachestvo.

Oh, russo-turisto. Kunia, fur-coat-*Nom.sg.* want-*2pers.sg.* shoes want-*2pers.sg.*?

All quality-*Nom.*

(Oh, Russian! Girl, do you want [to buy] a fur-coat, do you want to buy shoes?

Everything is high-quality)

⁴ All the following examples are taken from fieldwork data recorded by the author, Nadezhda Likhanova and Dina Sundueva in 2006–2008.

R: Shubu nado, a skol'ko stoit?

Fur-coat-*Acc.sg.* need-*Adv.*, and how much cost-*3pers.sg.*?
(I need a fur-coat, and what is the price?)

Ch: Tsena dogovolimsia, ustupliu super-minimum.

Price-*Nom.* Negotiate-*Fut.1pers.pl.*, take off-*Fut.1pers.sg.* super-minimum
(We'll negotiate the price, I'll give it for the minimal price)

Ch: Privet, karifana! Chio nada, pamagaika nada, net?

Hi, karifana! What need-*Adv.*, pamagajka-*Nom.sg.* need-*Adv.*, no?
(Hi, friend! What do you need, do you need helper?)

R: Net, nichego ne nado. Podskazhi tol'ko, gde zdes' možno pochifanit'?

No, nothing not need-*Adv.* Suggest-*imper.* Only where here possible *prefix-CHI*
FAN (from 吃飯 chīfàn 'eat')-*inf.*]?

(No, I need nothing. Just tell me where can I eat something?)

Ch: Pochifanit', «U Iury».

prefix-CHI FAN-*inf.*, at Iura-*Gen.sg.*

[You can] eat at 'Iura's place' [name of a café].

R: Druga, chego stoit?

Friend, what cost-*3pers.sg.*?
(Friend, how much is this?)

Ch: Pisiat.

fifty [piat'desiat]

(Fifty)

R: A super-minimum dash? Ustupi, a?

and super-minimum give-*2pers.sg.*? Take off-*imper.* ok?
(And will you give me the lowest price? Please, take off)

Ch: Sorok piat'.

forty five

(Forty five)

R: Davai sorok!

Give-*imper.* forty!

(Let it be forty)

Ch.: Ne. Sorok piat' super-minimum.

no forty five super-minimum

(No. forty five is the lowest price)

These examples also show that Chinese use the interlanguage forms of Russian available to them but Russians speak rather informal and colloquial language, using almost no foreigner-talk strategies. They do not simplify their speech and the only obvious result of the language-contact situation is their use of conventionalised Shuttles' language lexemes. Of course the same words can be used metaphorically when referring to a contact situation or even as in-group language play.

Nevertheless, sometimes Russian speakers have to make a linguistic compromise of a sort using forms they obviously do not like:

Ch: Zdlavstvuï, druga.

hello friend

(Hello, friend)

R: Zdravstvuï. Aromatizator dlia mashiny est'?

hello aromatizer-*Nom.sg.* for car-*Gen.sg.* be-*3pers.sg.*

(Hello. Do you have a car aromatizer?)

Ch: Ne poniatno, druga, tio nada. Koliosa esti, obogrev esti, tio nada?

no clear friend what need-*Adv.* wheel-*Nom.pl.* be-*3pers.sg.* heating-*Nom.sg.* be-*3pers.sg.* what need-*Adv.*?

(I do not understand, friend, what it is you need. I've got wheels, heating, what do you need?)

R: Ia govoriu aromatizator nado v mashinu, nu, voniuchku, ponimaesh?

I say-*1pers.sg.* aromatizer-*Nom.sg.* need-*Adv.* in car-*Acc.sg.* well stink-*Acc.sg.* understand-*2pers.sg.*?

(I say aromatizer for a car, well, *voniuchka* [stinky thing, also used for unpleasant person], do you understand?)

Ch: A, voniuchka esti, vsiaka razna. Smotli, vybilaĭ, druga. Kak ty skazal, tio nada?

oh stink-*Nom.sg.* be-*3pers.sg.* every different. look-*imper.* choose-*imper.* friend. how you say-*past* what need-*Adv.*

(Oh, *voniuchka*, I've got it, various kinds. Look, choose, friend. What did you say, what do you need?)

R: Pravil'no aromatizator, voniuchkoĭ my i cheloveka mozhem nazvat', a za eto i po morde mozhno poluchit'. Mimbio?

right-*Adv.* aromatizer stink-*Instr.sg.* we and man-*Acc.sg.* can-*1pers.pl.* call-*inf.* and for that and to mug-*Dat.sg.* possible get-*inf.* Mimbio? [from 明白 míngbai]

(Correct word is aromatizer, *voniuchka* we can call a man, and you can be beaten for that. Got it?)

Ch: A, poniatna, poniatna.

aha, clear-*Adv.* clear-*Adv.*

(Aha, I see, I see)

This type of speech behaviour is common for Russians speaking with foreigners, especially those not considered to be equal and 'western'. As my previous study on Russian foreigner talk in St. Petersburg shows (Fedorova 2006) using ungrammatical utterances (so-called 'broken language') in real communication with non-native speakers is not accepted practice (although these forms are numerous in stereotypes of this communication). But unlike the St. Petersburg situation, interethnic communication in the Russian-Chinese border region does provide 'broken language' on the part of native Russian speakers.⁵ Although rare, ungrammatical utterances can be found in spontaneous communication:

[talking about a mobile phone that is not working]

R: Novyĭ, megafon. Ne mogu, antenna ne rabotaĭ, meniaĭ.

New-*masc.sg.* Megafon [name of mobile company] not can-*1pers.sg.* antenna not work-*imperative* change-*imperative*

(It's new, 'Megafon'. The antenna won't work, change it [the mobile])

Ch: A-a, davaĭ ia delaĭ.

aha give-*imperative* I do-*Imperative*

⁵ At the same time Elena Oglezneva (Oglezneva 2007) who collected her data in the neighboring Amur region found no such examples. Whether this is due to the actual difference between the regions or just to her use of only 'open' communication on the marketplace is as yet unclear.

(Aha, let me repair it)

R: Ne-e, meniaĭ, drugoĭ.

no change-*imper.* another-*masc.sg.*

(No, change it, give me another)

Ch: Ne-e, eta kholoshyĭ.

no this-*fem.sg.* good-*masc.sg.*

(No, this one is good)

[Chinese shop owner and Russian salesgirl talking about long-distance calls bill]

Ch: Eto chio?

this what?

(What's this?)

R: A, eto ia, ia Oksana pozvoni

oh, this I I Oksana-*Nom.sg.* call-*imper.*

(That's me, I called Oksana)

But much more often, as in the second example, they appear in a kind of communication that we can call non-accidental or even professional:

Ch: Ty poekhala? Oh, ia mnogo raboty. Lena uekhala?

you *pref.-go-past?* oh I many work-*Gen.sg.*.. Lena-*Nom.sg.* *pref.-go-past.*

(Are you going? Oh, I've got a lot of work. Has Lena gone?)

R: Lena uekhala GAI.

Lena-*Nom.sg.* *pref.-go-past.* GAI

(Lena has gone to GAI [State Motor Vehicle Inspectorate])

R: Ty chto khochu?

you what want-*1pers.sg.?*

(What do you want?)

Ch: V Chite mnogo deneg goniaĭ govori.

In Chita-*Prep.sg.* many money-*Gen.pl.* drive-*imper.* say-*imper.*

(He said he sends a lot of money to Chita)

R: Kitaiĭ-chelovek?

China-*Nom.sg.* man-*Nom.sg.?*

(Is he Chinese?)

Ch: Ne-e, almian. Sagen.

no Armenian [in the apocopic form] Shagen

(No, Armenian. [His name is] Shagen)

R: Shagen? Kak ran'she? Ty mne rabota? Ia ne znaiu. Gde on kak est'?

Shagen? How before? You I-*Dat.* work-*Nom.sg.?* I no know-*1pers.sg.*.. Where he how be-*3pers.sg.?*

(Shagen? The same as before? Will you work for me? I don't know. Where is he?)

R: A-a, eto Chita firma! Da, ia pisala, tam bumaga ia est'.

Aha this Chita-*Nom.sg.* firm-*Nom.sg.*! yes I write-*past* there paper-*Nom.sg.* I be-*3pers.sg.*

(Aha, this is the firm from Chita! Yes, I wrote, I have paper there)

Ch: Takoï den'ga net.

such-*masc.sg.* money no
(There is no money there)

R: Tam gonial-gonial shchet v banke nepravil'no. On bumaga tebe pishi, Kha In shchet nepravil'no. [...] On mne bumaga daet. Potomu chto on govorit, esli ty tovar pokupaï, ty den'gi netu. Ia tebe shchet daet. Ia den'gi zaplati.

there drive-*past* drive-*past* bill-*Nom.sg.* in bank-*Prep.sg.* not right-*Adv.* he paper-*Nom.sg.* you-*Dat.* write-*imper.* Kha In bill-*Nom.sg.* not right-*Adv.* [...] He I-*Dat.* paper-*Nom.sg.* give-*3pers.sg.* Because he say-*3pers.sg.* if you goods-*Acc.sg.* buy-*imper.* you money-*Nom.pl.* no. I you-*Dat.* bill-*Acc.sg.* give-*3pers.sg.* I money-*Acc.pl.* pay-*imper.*

(The money was sent to the wrong bank account. He, Kha In, miswrote it when writing it in the receipt for you [...] He gave me the receipt. Because he says 'if you bought the goods you don't have the money. I'll give you the receipt. I'll pay')

Here we can see that Russian speakers' verbal behaviour varies during the conversation, moving from 'normal' to 'broken' language forms. And some of them are rather striking: imperative forms for all purposes, using nominative forms of nouns and pronouns instead of indirect cases, nouns used as adjectives (*Chita-firma*, *Kitaï-chelovek*), and even extended use of the copula 'EST'.

These forms resemble pidgin forms from the past. Of course we can not call them pidgins, at least not yet. Creating a new language demands more time but surely something is happening here and we should seize this opportunity to observe language contact in real time.

Is there any future for the 'Reborn Pidgin'?

Our last questions are somewhat speculative: Is there any future for these new language forms, some of which remind us of 'good old' Russian-Chinese Pidgin? Is it really possible to be eyewitnesses to a 'newborn' pidgin? When speaking of possible perspectives for this study, we should bear in mind that the social and political situation in the region can change radically at any time. Consequently I see three possible variants for the future. First, following some political decisions, all contacts may stop, resulting in the total disappearance of contact language forms. Second, if there are conditions for Chinese migrants to improve their language skills, including the provision of formal language instruction in Russian, we will confront something like a post-pidgin continuum with the contact idiom gradually coming closer to normative Russian. In this case, some conventionalised language forms may survive as regional language markers. Finally, we might really see a new pidgin born. Of course, this last possibility is the most appealing to any interested scholar, but the second one looks more realistic. In any event, the evidence from the very first studies of language contact, regardless of its results, cannot be overestimated.

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