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## MACARONIC WRITING BY YOUNG BELARUSIAN POETS: THE ATTRACTIONS OF ENGLISH ‘BARBARISMS’

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ABSTRACT: The English language, for various reasons, is very attractive to many young Belarusian poets, who use it for adornment, humour, rhyme or even in acrostic verses. Occasional successes are greatly outnumbered by failures, due to errors in English grammar (something that is not confined to Belarusian poets) and, particularly, misunderstandings about the differences between English and Belarusian phonology. The hidden difficulties of the English language are frequently revealed in macaronic verse, at least to English readers.

The English language has proved to be an attractive, sometimes Siren, voice for many young Belarusian poets. Its importance, however, was not always officially recognized in Eastern Europe: in Soviet times several books, all, ironically, published in Miensk, debated future world language(s) without mentioning Chinese, Spanish or, indeed, English. Macaronic verse is described by V.P. Rahojsa in his *Litaraturaznaŭčy sloŭnik* (Literary dictionary) as the introduction of barbarisms for comic effect while subjecting them to the poet's native language (Rahojsa 2009, 51). In 18<sup>th</sup>-century England, incidentally, the word macaroni was used (apart from denoting pasta) to describe a dandy who imitated foreign fashions.

In what follows, the French, German and particularly Russian languages are mainly omitted, although Russian is, of course, ubiquitous in *trasianka* as well as being present, unconsciously, in the writing of a number of linguistically ‘impure’ poets; it is also a threat, in a way that West European languages are not.<sup>1</sup> Likewise mainly omitted are the, in any case, international language of

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<sup>1</sup> A notably bitter lament on the use of Russian is found in Taćciana Sapač's poem, ‘Tak, nievynosna żyć na hetaj ziamli, kali bez...’ (Yes, it is unbearable to live on this earth, when one lacks..., Sapač 1991, 17). See also Hanna Novik's poem ‘Uschodniaja Ukraina’ (Eastern Ukraine) where she describes how Russian grates upon her ear, as in Belarus, highlighting its alien nature by giving it a partially Latinized name: ‘Rosyjska mowa’ (Novik 2010, 100).

computers, and proper names (personal names and places, in particular), though these may be popular for poets using macaronic rhymes.

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The attractions of English should not be solely attributed to Shakespeare or American films, but partly to a humorous attitude, found in several countries, to semi-mythical officers of the British Empire. In Belarus, following the young English officer who discovers poetry and religion in Niakliajeŭ's splendid fantasy 'Indyja' (India, Niakliajeŭ 1996, 85–86), Anka Upala (b. 1981) described in one of her rare poems, 'Pravy bok' (The right side), an English officer with an absurd Scottish name (Maklkaddall) who keeps such a straight back that he does not notice that he has put thirty-eight spoons of sugar in his tea.<sup>2</sup> The aristocratic hero of the tragically short-lived Dzianis Chvastoŭski (1976–2001) in 'Niadoŭha dumaŭ Ted Makiena...' (Ted McKenna did not think for long...) may be assumed to be Scottish rather than English, as his speech is peppered with Gaelic words. McKenna's principle eccentricity appears to be welcoming rats into his castle with the words 'Come, come, come...', (Chvastoŭski 2006, 30) but he is later described as an indomitable fighter for the highlanders (Chvastoŭski 2006, 64). This poet, unlike it may be said some others, well understood the problems of foreign languages, as may be seen in the last four lines of his poem 'U soliezdabytnuju ŭ ŭšachtu...' (Into a salt mine...):

Няпростыя словы чужыя  
мазоляць нязвыклы язык:  
цікуе суседзкая шыя  
ангельскае мовы "азы"  
(Chvastoŭski 2006, 96).

Before completely leaving England, as opposed to its language, it is slightly shocking, albeit as part of a jokey dialogue, to find the resurrection of a hoary Dickensian cliché about London fogs in the work of Andrej Chadanovič (b. 1973), who in an untitled poem, 'Prosta sakavik halavakružny...' (March simply makes my head spin...), makes a rather weak rhyme of 'ў дзеўкі: Не халодна' and 'не ў туманы Лёндану' (Chadanovič 2004, 111).

<sup>2</sup> In the first line of the poem the name is divided by hyphens: (Upala 2012, 86).

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English swear words are not uncommon in young Belarusian poetry, although most of even the boldest writers, for example, Siarhiej Prylucki (b. 1980), Vital Ryžkoŭ (b. 1986) and Maryja Martysievič (b. 1982), use ellipses as fig-leaves for their use of *mat*. Martysievič is also the author of an entertaining short essay on swearing in Belarusian, ‘Pašli mianie pa bielarusku: Karotki kurs ajčynnaha brydkasloŭja’ (Up yours: A short course in native bad language, Martysievič 2008, 56–63). But if the poets are inhibited in the use of Belarusian non-normative words in print, they appear to feel no such restraint when using English. In a lively poem with a title of mixed languages, ‘*Belarus – England, Вяршавя – Мінск*’, Martysievič describes an East European train journey by a drunken constable from Lancaster during which a fascinated local peasant pulls out the Englishman’s penis, resulting in predictable curses:

i – хоп! Выцягвае штыр  
у Джона спамяж ног.  
<ФОК – пужаецца Джон. – ФОК!  
(у перакладзе з ангельскай – фак>  
ЧАМУ ТАК???)>

(Martysievič 2011, 52).

Martysievič’s two spellings of the English expletive are notable for her English ‘translation’ into another Cyrillic rendition. The latter, moreover, throws considerable light on Belarusian (mis)understanding of English phonology, as also appears in the work of several other poets: Anatól Ivaščanka (b. 1981), for instance, ends his poem ‘Vierš niesvabody’ (A poem of unfreedom) with a macaronic rhyme made weak by the same discrepancy of sound:

хай так  
*what the fuck*  
(Ivaščanka 2013, 17).

A comparable rhyme is used by Prylucki in ‘Randevo z krajavidam I’ (Rendezvous with landscape 1) in which he rhymes ‘fuck’ with ‘смак’ (Prylucki, 2008, 31–32). Also similar is the phonetic half-rhyme in another poem by Ivaščanka, ‘Usio tak dobra...’ (Everything is so good...):

пісаць навобмацак  
*good luck*  
(Ivaščanka 2013, 93)

Nobody is to blame for the lack of convergence between English and Belarusian vowel sounds, but there would be less danger of incongruity if such macaronic pairings were not used as rhymes.

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In the immortal words of English poet Alexander Pope (1688–1744), ‘to err is human, to forgive, divine’ (Pope 1711, l. 430), but writers and others using foreign languages should be particularly careful to avoid errors.<sup>3</sup> When, for instance, Alieh Lojka (1931–2008) employed a somewhat inappropriate epigraph from Heinrich Heine in his poem, ‘Dzień narodzin’ (Birthday), the mistake of ‘bedeudet’ for ‘bedeuten’, only draws attention to the stylistic and semantic mismatch (Lojka 1988, 18). More recently Prylucki, appending an epigraph, apparently from the British band Morcheeba, wrote, ‘I think your fine’, which should have been ‘I think you’re fine’ (Prylucki 2008, 47). Apostrophes are a particular hazard, and not only for foreigners. Prylucki in ‘Utopija’ (Utopia) includes a macaronic line that contains a misplaced apostrophe common amongst English greengrocers: ‘і брашуркі для IDIOT’S’ (Prylucki 2008, 110).<sup>4</sup> Most use of English in Belarusian poetry is inoffensive, used for show (perhaps too subjective for analysis), scansion or rhyme, although for those readers who are unfamiliar with English, such interventions could be, to say the least, annoying.<sup>5</sup>

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One talented poet of a generally bright disposition, Таццяна Барысіук (b. 1971), declared in an acrostic poem (of which more later): ‘Яна любіла / сваю родную беларускую і англійскую мовы...’ (Barysiuk 2002, 155). Virgil famously declared that love conquers all (Virgil 1970, 536) but love is not enough, without knowledge and experience, to write verse in a foreign language, as is evident in Barysiuk’s ‘YOU’, where the footnoted Belarusian translation is far more fluent than the ill-advised original:

<sup>3</sup> Both the present writer, who in his youth confused two Russian poets called Svetlov, and the best English translator from Belarusian, who reportedly mistook the word *baby* meaning beans for a disrespectful reference to women (or vice versa), both appear to have escaped without needing divine forgiveness.

<sup>4</sup> The correct form is, of course, IDIOTS.

<sup>5</sup> In the middle of the nineteenth century and earlier it was not uncommon for intellectually ambitious English books to include words, phrases and quotations in Greek – a distinct inconvenience for those readers who had learned only Latin, or no classical language at all.

YOU

I like to look into your eyes  
And see your wonder-soul.  
There is a contradiction of feeling and mind,  
When I stay alone.

And I am sad, that my light spring  
Is early going out.  
But deep in heart I always bring  
Pipe-dreams and hope – about  
You...

(Barysiuk 2002, 86)<sup>6</sup>

Barysiuk's 'ENGLISH' is in an even more distorted form of the eponymous language, where the acrostic form further distorts its linguistic norms: ENGLISH (acrostic).

English became a ray of light.  
Is the first line of the poem before  
Now sun and son are sense of life.  
**G**od, keep me from vital finish!  
Lead me to sky, let fly be high! –  
**I**n order to be, but not to make image.  
Somebody then will say: <She had liked  
**H**er native Byelorussian and English...>

(Barysiuk 2002, 155)<sup>7</sup>

\* \* \*

Acrostics are challenging in any language, but macaronic rhyming is probably equally hazardous. Andrej Chadanovič, a master of inventive and amusing rhymes, produces in 'Kali razhuliajecca...' (When the weather clears...),<sup>8</sup> one linking 'аборт' with 'word', where the phonetic difference between English and Belarusian is disregarded (Chadanovič 2004, 39). He also, in 'Uschvaliavana, ščyra j intymna rodnaj krainie ŭ jakašci himnu' (Excitedly, sincerely and intimately to my native land as a sort of hymn), produces a typical Slav rendition of a common German word:

<sup>6</sup> 'Ты // Я люблю глядзець у твае вочы / і бачыць тваю цудоўную душу. / Пачуцці супярэчаць думкам, / калі я застаюся адна // І я сумная, што мая светлая вясна / рана адыходзіць. / Але ў глыбіні сэрца я заўсёды нясу / нязбыгныя мары і надзею – / па цябе...': Barysiuk 2002, 86.

<sup>7</sup> 'Англійская мова // Англійская мова стала промнем святла. / Цяпер сонца і сын – сэнс майго жыцця. / Божа, барані мяне ад смерці! / Вядзі мяне да нябёсаў, хай палёт будзе высокім! – / дзеля таго, каб быць, а не здавацца! / Нехта пасля скажа: <Яна любіла / сваю родную беларускую і анлііскую мовы...>': Barysiuk 2002, 155).

<sup>8</sup> The title of the poem very probably refers to Boris Pasternak's last verse cycle.

І не хаваў галавы ў капюшон.  
 Мудраму Дантэ  
 і мужнаму Данку  
 шчыра падзякуем мы:  
 <Данке шон!>  
 (Chadanovič 2004, 75)

Chadanovič produces some uncharacteristically loose rhymes in ‘Rastvo na „Rastvora-Betonnym”’ (The birth of Christ on a ‘mixed concrete node’), for example in the following stanza:

Слота вечная наша,  
 звяклы голад і холад.  
 Вецер *made in Russia*,  
 вецер *made in Poland*.  
 (Chadanovič 2004, 85)

In the same poem moreover he again ignores English phonology rhyming ‘узоры’ with ‘I’m sorry’ (Chadanovič 2004, 86).<sup>9</sup> No rhyme, however, is apparent in an otherwise rhymed poem, ‘razmovy z ekermanam’ (conversations with eckermann) when he makes a version of one of Edgar Allan Poe’s most famous lines, ‘Quoth the Raven, „Nevermore”’: ‘nevermore крумкач nevermore’ (Chadanovič 2004, 126). Both bold and successful is a highly referential poem, ‘apranuty ў рыmskuju tohu...’ (clad in a roman toga...), where in the last stanza English words from various titles are translated or transliterated and mingled, and the title of the last line is a modified version of ‘Don’t cry for me, Argentina’:

Тут будуць канторы і кантары  
 вэлкам ту страчаны рай  
 ня плач пра мяне май кантры  
 доўнт край фо мі родны край  
 (Chadanovič 2004, 98)

Many of Chadanovič’s macaronic rhymes are very witty: in ‘Biessañ u noč Valþurhii’ (Insomnia on Walpurgis night), for instance, he rhymes ‘ушчэнт’ with ‘гэпі-энд’, the latter a naturalized ‘barbarism’ (Chadanovič 2004, 51). In ‘Tramvaj „Žadañnie”’ (The tram of ‘desire’) ‘бадай’ is rhymed with ‘must die’ as well as ‘самурай’ and ‘банзай’ (Chadanovič 2004, 67). Another rhyme with a deliciously broad time gap is found in ‘Pašliamova’ (Afterword): ‘палеаліт’ with ‘delete’ (Chadanovič 2004, 68). A last example of Chadanovič’s ebullient

<sup>9</sup> A comparable loose rhyme is used by Ivaščanka in his poem ‘Demijurh’: ‘да зораў’ with ‘I’m sorry’: Ivaščanka 2006, 61.

ludic writing, clearly and very probably deliberately ignoring the pronunciation of the first syllable of the name of his country, is the first line from ‘Vieršy pad epihrafam’ (Poem beneath an epigraph): ‘to belarus or not to belarus’ (Chadano-  
vič 2003, 62).

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Anatol’ Ivaščanka has already been mentioned for phonetically inaccurate macaronic rhymes connected with English swear words. Some of his most elaborate rhymes, however, work very well. For instance in the following lines from his powerful poem ‘Adrynuty(ja)’ (The rejected):

Вось сімвал сцюдзёнага выраю,  
Заўважана слухна.  
*God, where are You?*  
(Ivaščanka 2013, 37)

Notably bold are the following lines from his ‘krylatyja vieršniki...’ (winged riders...):

у стосах траверы  
кудлатыя зверы  
very  
ы-ы-ы-ы  
(Ivaščanka 2013, 31)

\* \* \*

Siarhiej Prylucki, who has also been noted in connection with swear words, is the author of a book, *Dzievianostyja forever* (The nineties forever), which is saturated with English words and Anglo-American phenomena. The poet, however, does not always take English phonology into account, as, for instance, his rhyming of ‘сьпіч’ with ‘bitch’ (Prylucki 2008, 73), ‘Vogue’ with ‘Бор’, (Prylucki 2008, 114) or, more exotically, ‘terra’ with ‘цемры’ (Prylucki 2008, 82). Far more successful is a rhyme from his ‘Paślańnie da maladoha viertera’ (Epistle to the young werther), ‘эверэст’ with ‘best’ (Prylucki 2008, 7); in ‘Mroi, mroi...’ (Dreams, dreams...) ‘гул’ rhymes easily with ‘cool’ (Prylucki 2008, 9), as does ‘скэйтэр’ and ‘enter’ (Prylucki 2008, 53), and, indeed, at the end of ‘Chrystos – čyrvony nos’ (Red-nosed Christ), ‘i Маці Тваю’ with ‘happy birthday to you’ (Prylucki 2008, 87). Prylucki’s pleasure in rhyming English names such as Kipling and Iggy Pop, for instance, is clear and often inventive, but beyond the scope of the present article.

Taǎciana Nilava (b. 1984) has mixed fortunes in her poem ‘Prosta var’jaty – first level’ (Simply madmen – first level), rhyming in the first two lines two English words, ‘level’ with ‘devil’; towards the end ‘зопка Bera’ sits slightly awkwardly, but not disastrously, with ‘alter ego’. In lines 5–6, however, the repetition of the word ‘second’ does not reveal any particular meaning or even humour:

Шаты жыцця – гэта second.  
 Чыясць рука – hand second  
 (Nilava 2008, 21).

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Vika Trenas (b. 1984) and Džeci (pen-name of Viera Burlak, b. 1977) are amongst those Belarusian poets who have a generally solid knowledge of English, and to them belong several enterprising rhymes. In Džeci’s ‘Saniet z prycepkam’ (Sonnet with an appendage), for instance, ‘зьмест’ is successfully rhymed with ‘let’s have a rest’ (Džeci 2003, 46); Trenas at the end of ‘Byćcio’ (Existence) is safe when rhyming ‘галаву’ with ‘love you’, as she is in ‘HSYAOD’:

Пазбаўленыя не толькі пацыфісцкіх ідэй,  
 Дый у брудных лужынах хіба не нашыя цені  
 Яшчэ ўчора казалі: <Hope to see you again one day>?  
 (Trenas 2005, 61).

Even more ambitious is another verse from a series of poems by Džeci on the theme of Pan and Syrinx, ‘Pan hraje na hornie, bo syrynha pieratvarylasia ŭ katušku miednaha drotu (Meret Kejzi)’ (Pan plays the bugle, for syrx has turned into a coil of copper wire [Marat Kazey]) where some rhymes are of two English words, or two Belarusian words, but there are also a number of macaronic rhymes including: ‘дрэва’ with ‘forever’; ‘...ец’ with ‘skinheads’; and ‘недастаткова’ with ‘over and over’ (Džeci 2003, 20).

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Beyond rhyme, there are fewer dangers, as, for instance, in the following examples, where, as has been mentioned, display or scansion may be the motive: the adaptation of one word into another is found in two works of Chadanovič, ‘Good Porning’ and ‘Barmien siuita’; the latter is certainly a reference to Bizet’s opera, but may possibly also refer to *Carmen siuita* (1968) by Soviet composer Rodion Shchedrin (b. 1932). More common is the use of English for titles of



books or poems. There are many examples in Prylucki's *Dziewianostyja forever*, but also to be noted are Chvastoŭski's 'Marlboro' (Chvastoŭski 2006, 43), Ivaščanka's 'Let it be' (Ivaščanka 2013, 100), Chadanovič's 'first level' to 'fourth level' (Chadanovič 2004, 130–37), Martysievič's, 'Old School' (Martysievič 2011, 16) and 'Happy Easter' (Martysievič 2011, 43–44), and Trenas's 'Image' (Trenas 2005, 46). Džeci, untypically, comes a little unstuck in one of her relatively rare English titles, 'Klipmaking' substituting initial 'к' for 'c' (Džeci 2003, 28), and committing another peccadillo in 'over a head' for 'overhead' (Džeci 2003, 20).

Another phenomenon is the mixing of languages in the titles of books and poems. Those of Prylucki's and Ivaščanka's first books and the poem by Martysievič about a drunken Englishman have already been encountered; also worth mentioning is Prylucki's 'Pub-scrolling у пошуку Гармоніі', a verse that, judging by its content, should probably have been 'Pub-crawling' (Prylucki 2008, 67). There is also a clear example of the mixing of languages in one word in Nilava's 'Ja vyklikaju mabiŭnych duchaŭ...' (I summon mobile spirits with a click): 'Пацлікай мяне' (Nilava 2008, 65), and within one poem by Valžyna Mort (b. 1981), a very talented poet who now lives and works in America, unfortunately writing verse in English rather than Belarusian, 'Mužčyny prycho-dziać, jak ličby ŭ kaliendary...' (Men come like numbers in a calendar...), where the last third of the poem is entirely in irreproachable English (Mort 2005, 38–39).

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Several young poets insert English words into poetic lines with no apparent purpose, apart possibly for scansion; sometimes they are in their natural form, sometimes in Belarusian transliteration. As a first example, a poem by Chadanovič already cited to show a fault in German, 'Uschvaliavana, ščyra j intymna rodnaj krainie ŭ jakaści himnu', gives in the following line a good illustration of such insertions: 'Людцы, даруйце, I'm sorry, сюзор'е' (Chadanovič 2004, 76). Trenas also inserts an English word, without obvious purpose in 'Zamova' (A spell): 'мене зламаныя пальцы нечы boyfriend цалуе' (Trenas 2005, 21). Ivaščanka in 'Efekt matyŭka' (The butterfly effect) writes: 'таро працяглага before' (Ivaščanka 2013, 79), and, similarly, in 'razarvać noč' (to rip night apart) offers 'гэты вар'яцкі puzzle...', (Ivaščanka 2006, 5) as well as in 'The song – son' (The song – dream; see below), we find 'на Reception' (Ivaščanka 2013, 102)'.

Prylucki, unsurprisingly, enjoys inserting English words and phrases into his verse as well as titles. For instance, in the third part of his 'Tabula rasa' we find the following strange line: 'ды які ўжо там нафіг *on duty today* якія граматыкі' (Prylucki 2008, 6). Where, however, in the title poem an English

cliché is rendered in Cyrillic, the effect is even more grotesque than in the previous example: ‘усё нармальна мама нармальна шоў маст гоў он’ (Pryluc-ki 2008, 17).

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In English, puns, known from the time of Chaucer,<sup>10</sup> popular in the Elizabethan age and in Shakespeare, are nowadays considered one of the lowest forms of wit. Rahojsa gives an example from Baradulin for *kalambur*, suggesting that such poems are built on homophonic or homonymic rhymes, his example being an early poem, ‘Balada ab klianach’ (A ballad of the village Klianany) with some elaborate rhymes such as ‘бліскавіца’ with ‘блізка віцца’ and ‘гне вам’ with ‘гневам’ (Baradulin 1961, 12). The plainest example of punning in young Belarusian poetry is the title ‘The song – сон’ mentioned above, which Ivaščanka presumably considers a homophonic pair. Barysiuk, in her already mentioned acrostic ‘English’, produces a pure pun with ‘sun and son’, but one whose effect is lost in the pidgin context. Ivaščanka’s may not be the only attempt at a macaronic pun, since some of the young poets’ excursions into English defy comprehension.

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To summarize, English may be an easy language with which to buy things or to explain simple ideas, but it is treacherous in pronunciation, spelling and various other ways. Nonetheless it seems to have a curious attraction for several of today’s most prominent young Belarusian poets, for rhyme, the most dangerous, to aid scansion, and, lastly, to add sometimes spurious glamour to lines, which could easily have done without such adornment. On the other hand, the English greengrocers who confuse their apostrophes are among other ungrammatical English people who might well consider all poetry to be spurious. In the case of today’s young Belarusian poets, however, they would certainly be wrong.

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